

## Benedikts Kalnačs

*Dr. habil. philol.*, literary scholar;

Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia

*Dr. habil. philol.*, literatūrzinātnieks;

Latvijas Universitātes Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts

E-mail / e-pasts: benedikts.kalnacs@lulfmi.lv

DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2024.0055.05

### **Local Identity and Comparative Aspects in Nineteenth-Century Latvian Literature**

### **Lokālā identitāte un salīdzināmie aspekti 19. gadsimta latviešu literatūrā**

#### **Keywords:**

national literatures,  
small literatures,  
romantic nationalism,  
nineteenth-century prose,  
literary landscapes,  
literatures of rural areas

#### **Atslēgvārdi:**

nacionālās literatūras,  
mazās literatūras,  
romantiskais nacionālisms,  
19. gadsimta proza,  
literārās ainavas,  
lauku teritoriju literatūras

Research for this article has been carried out within the project *Landscapes of Identities: History, Culture, and Environment* (No VPP-LETONIKA-2021/1-0008) financed by the Latvian Council of Science.

## Summary

In this article I trace various ways in which nineteenth-century Latvian literature had an impact on the formation of national identity and stimulated the rise of national consciousness of the Latvian population. Important in this process were comparative contexts, with a broadening of perspectives that significantly contributed to a more nuanced self-understanding of Latvians while also paying greater attention to local specifics. The main aspects discussed in this article refer to the historical conditions shaping the self-awareness of the Latvian population, including the generation of the New Latvians who promoted and implemented the ideas of romantic nationalism; the importance of literary tradition as an inspiration and source of late nineteenth-century Latvian literature; the ways local identity was established and defined in literary texts; and the search for aesthetic innovation in nineteenth-century prose.

## Kopsavilkums

Rakstā pievērsta uzmanību tiem dažādajiem aspektiem, kas ir svarīgi, izvērtējot latviešu literatūras ietekmi nācijas identitātes veidošanās un nacionālās apziņas nostiprināšanās gaitā. Šajā procesā nozīmīga bija salīdzināmo kontekstu izpratne, līdz ar perspektīvas paplašināšanos iezīmējoties niansētākai latviešu sabiedrības pašizpratnei un lielāku uzmanību pievēršot lokālo apstākļu specifikai. Svarīgākie jautājumi, kādi aplūkoti rakstā, ir saistīti ar vēsturisko apstākļu lomu latviešu sabiedrības identitātes veidošanā, pievēršot īpašu uzmanību jaunlatviešu paaudzei, kas pauda romantiskā nacionālisma idejas un praktiskos centienus; literāro tradīciju nozīmi kā 19. gadsimta beigu latviešu literatūras ierosmes avotam; lokālās identitātes nostiprināšanās un atklāsmes procesam literārajos darbos; kā arī estētisko meklējumu savdabībai deviņpadsimtā gadsimta latviešu prozā.

## Introduction

The nineteenth century was an important formative period of Latvian national identity marked by fundamental changes in political, economic, and cultural self-understanding. This process is dealt with by later literary histories that pay attention to literary developments following the emergence and further activities of the first ethnic Latvian authors who entered the literary field from the 1800s onward (Steinby et al. 2024: 139–212; Daija and Kalnačs 2022: 12–18). This early generation, and the subsequent ones, gradually challenged the politically and culturally dominating role of Baltic German intellectuals. Even if nineteenth-century developments have already been the focus of research, crucial questions in need of further discussion remain. What were the main goals set during this period, when romantic nationalism played the most significant role? How was the relationship with literary tradition perceived and defined? What were the main strategies relating to the experiences of the Latvian people? What kind of aesthetic innovations were especially important for writers and intellectuals of the time? These are the main points discussed in this article that sets out to explore nineteenth-century Latvian literature in the comparative contexts of its age.

## The concept of Latvians as a ‘peasant nation’ and its historical and cultural background

The task of strengthening the identity of the Latvian community was undertaken by the generation of the so-called New Latvians in the 1850s (Mintaurs 2022). In their understanding, the issues of mobility influenced all spheres of life (economic, cultural, and political), closely interlinked. The efforts of this generation culminated in the creation of the *Pēterburgas Avīzes* (St. Petersburg Newspaper, 1862–1865), the first Latvian periodical that promoted European ideas and tried to reach the core of the local population (Apals 2011). Facing the important issue of how to stimulate identity formation, the New Latvians gradually developed an understanding of the Latvians as a ‘peasant nation’. This requires a historical explanation.

The power balance in the eastern Baltic littoral was established toward the end of the twelfth century. The Northern Crusades brought Christian people of German origin into the area; during fierce battles they ended up subordinating the Proto-Latvians and the Estonians. The invaders not only converted the local people to Christianity, but successfully co-ordinated their efforts to become the largest land-holders in the area, seizing the lands of the local population and establishing political and economic structures that put them in positions of authority. A strongly

segregated class society formed, although “the colonizers never embarked on a program of the settlement of German peasants and assimilation of the natives. The conquerors did not intend a class of free peasantry to be a major component of the social structure.” (Kasekamp 2018: 28–29) The history of resistance later became one of the founding identity myths created in the Baltic area during the period of romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century.

Baltic Germans, who were in the position of authority in economic and cultural terms, kept their dominating role despite later changes in political realities. The medieval state of Livonia disintegrated, and political power was taken first by the Swedish king in the seventeenth century, and subsequently by the Russian emperor in the eighteenth century. The Russian rulers employed the Baltic German upper class in high-ranking positions in the state administration. The Baltic Germans’ attitude to the local population was that of providing it with some level of education recognized as sufficient while applying it; in postcolonial terms, the locals were considered equal but not quite. After the Reformation, the Baltic Germans undertook the translation and publication of religious books (the first book in Latvian was printed in 1525) and later introduced the main genres of European literature into Latvian literature. Another manifestation of this patronizing approach was the so-called Popular Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Grudule 2005; Daija 2013).

The social division in society was usually referred to as the relationship between the ‘Germans’ and the ‘non-Germans’ (*undeutsche*). This ethnic marker was also an economic one, with ‘non-Germans,’ predominantly Latvians, being relegated to the socially lower ‘peasant class’. The nineteenth-century generation of the New Latvians initiated a radical change in the perception of the existing relations. Criticising the situation where Latvians were mostly offered texts from popular culture, they emphasized the creation of a Latvian elite culture instead (Ijabs 2013). This was an important idea in the process of promoting cultural nationalism as a tool for social and economic mobility (Leerssen 2018).

Importantly, the path that the educated Latvians took, inspired to a considerable extent by the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (himself active in Riga between 1764 and 1769), was necessarily different from the development Herder envisaged for his own nation. David Damrosch emphasizes that Herder “began to seek the unity of German culture in its language and its literature, particularly literature of *das Volk* – the people as the whole, not simply the peasantry or commoners. What distinguished true *Volks poesie* for Herder was not a specific class origin, but rather its embodiment of a people’s aspirations, their culture, their landscape and environment.” (Damrosch 2020: 17–18) In German contexts, this meant expanding elite culture by incorporating

poetry of the common people into the story of a nation. The enrichment of culture was thus started from above. In the Latvian case, the situation was different, since in the 1850s an elite culture was still to be created. Thus, what mattered was the creation of national identity and culture through measures that would speak to broad segments of the population belonging to different social classes, but mostly representing the peasant community. As the New Latvians undertook their effort of promoting economic and cultural mobility it was clear that peasants provided the majority of those they intended to address. This particularity explains why for the New Latvians, who challenged the patronizing role of the Baltic Germans, the concept of an imagined 'peasant nation' became a crucial intellectual tool indicating the resistance from below and set to replace the diminishing attitude toward of the Latvians as belonging to a 'peasant class'. Interested in raising the quality of life in all its aspects, the movement of the New Latvians responded to the challenges of contemporary life including legal issues linked to the acquisition of farms as properties, when, after the abolishment of serfdom, it even became possible; this stimulated the necessity of dealing with certain social and economic questions and created attitudes that had remained underdeveloped (Veisbergs 2022: 49). The swiftly elaborated concept of the 'peasant nation' brought together tradition and change.

By focusing on one example of early twentieth-century literature we may notice that these issues were still highly relevant at that point. In his play *Ugunī* (In the Fire, 1904), Rūdolfs Blaumanis devoted considerable attention to the potential social mobility of his characters who represented both the peasant community and the servants of the landlord's manor. While those opposed to any significant changes still considered humility as an integral part of their peasant *class* identity, persons in favour of progress openly declared their belonging to a rising *nation* (Blaumanis 1958: 237; 247; my emphasis, BK). There were numerous such literary equivalents in the process of identity construction initiated by the generation of New Latvians who recognized the social basis for creating a new national consciousness in the local peasant community.

## **The role of literary tradition**

The peasant community addressed by the New Latvians had to be gradually better educated and helped to overcome their relatively limited extent of knowledge. While recognizing the importance of broadening the informative basis as well as promoting the necessity of reading secular literature, even if this included stories that belonged to so-called popular culture, one of the main aims of Latvian intellectual circles was the promotion of elite literature. The way toward the creation of an elite Latvian culture proceeded along three

different yet mutually complementary paths. The first was linked to translations of major works of world literature into Latvian. As with virtually every cultural domain, this had previously been an exclusive area of Baltic German activities. Although Latvians were considered to be unable to deal with more complex issues, in the first half of the nineteenth century some Baltic Germans started to experiment with translations into Latvian of a handful of major authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Heinrich Heine. For them this was predominantly a leisure activity among the more practical tasks regarding peasant education.

In the 1850s, however, the situation changed radically when there appeared a volume called *Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas* (Little Songs Translated for the Latvian Language, 1856) by Juris Alunāns, one of the first representatives of the generation of New Latvians. The publication of this volume is traditionally considered the starting point of a “genuine” Latvian national literature (Mintaurs 2022: 110). This opinion underlines that the volume was not just another example of a literary text created by ethnic Latvians, but a radical challenge to Baltic German dominance. The primary aim of the volume was to stimulate intellectual activity. Even though the first edition contained only one original poem, Alunāns’s declared aim was to show that it was possible to express in Latvian the same thoughts that earlier were familiar only from foreign languages and literatures.

The moment of this publication coincided with the echo of the mid-century revolutions that rolled across Europe, even if there was not a direct political resonance of these events among broader circles of the Latvian community. Nevertheless, the European context is important for explaining the radicalism of Alunāns as well as that of the whole generation of the New Latvians, who fiercely opposed Baltic German dominance and revolutionized the Latvian elite. It also points to some particularities in the rise of Latvian culture.

It is interesting to compare the Latvian and Danish contexts at approximately the same time. Writing about the main currents in nineteenth-century European literatures in the early 1870s, Georg Brandes characterized the situation in Danish literature as inconsistent with the spirit of the age: “The problem with Danish literature of the period, according to Brandes, was that the wave of action from the French Revolution never quite made it to the European periphery of Denmark; instead the romantic reaction reached its shores, never left and wound up as a replica of itself. [...] Literatures of small nations such as the Danish are incomplete because some currents never reach them while others linger too long.” (Ringgaard and Rosendahl Tomsen 2018: 3). Employing the metaphor of the wave, and a related concept of the current that towered prominently in the title of his book, *Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century European Literatures*, Brandes spoke of the ebb and flow of

cultural development. We may notice that the rise of Latvian elite culture in its turn coincided with another ebb of social activism in mid-nineteenth century Europe that heightened its social engagement. One clear indication of this trend was the choice of the translated authors, as Alunāns included numerous contemporary German revolutionary poets alongside more moderate writers.

At the same time, it must also be said that social radicalism in Latvian intellectual circles often co-existed with rather modest literary aspirations. Among other examples this is proved by the activities of the important economist Krišjānis Valdemārs, who strongly encouraged Latvians to take more initiative in practical matters. The Latvian peasant community considered him as the main representative of their needs (Ķikuts 2016: 44). He was also one of the most vocal supporters of the rights of Latvian peasants, capable of promoting these rights among the upper strata of the imperial Russian government (Valdemārs 1936). When using literature as a tool to foster his aspirations, however, Valdemārs's approach was far less radical and less ambitious as documented by the publication of his volume *300 stāsti* (300 Stories, 1853), consisting of small, partly localized stories of anecdotal as well as practical content. Importantly, however, Valdemārs supplemented his volume with a bibliography of valuable publications that he felt should be read to broaden the scope of people's knowledge (Apīnis 1991: 156).

The second path in the ongoing process of the creation of a Latvian elite culture from rather humble origins was that of collecting and publishing folklore material, the idea being conceived along the lines proposed by Johann Gottfried Herder. Strongly advocated by the generation of the New Latvians and later institutionally supported by the Riga Latvian Society, this task was undertaken by enthusiasts who supervised the collection of folk poetry and fairy tales. This was accomplished in a most exemplary way by the mathematician and folklorist, Krišjānis Barons, who curated folksong collections and edited the material he had at his disposal in the six volumes of *Latvju Dainas* (Latvian Folksongs, 1894–1915). The process of song collecting, the elaboration of editorial principles as well as the role of folk poetry in national identity formation was widely debated in the Latvian language press (Bula 2000).

The event that represented the peak of activities aimed at highlighting the importance of the traditional way of life, and at the same time demonstrating how different sectors of the Latvian community could work together toward reaching common aims was the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, held in Riga in 1896 as part of the All-Russian X Archaeological Congress. The exhibition was entirely an undertaking of the Latvian community, with leading intellectuals spending considerable time on collecting the material that represented different areas of activity of the Latvian community. This event to a certain extent provided a summary of the

economic and cultural developments carried out throughout the nineteenth century, with a special emphasis on the great achievements of the 'peasant nation': "The self-assured farmholders were an important addressee for the Latvian national movement and the nascent national culture. With the passage of time, they became a certain idealised image of 'the new age farmer', symbolising the achievements of Latvians in the latter half of the 19th century. [...] This agenda of the political demands of the national movement embedded the image of the 'Latvian-peasant'." (Ķikuts 2016: 25; 75)

The third path of strengthening the cultural self-awareness of the Latvian nation was linked to the description of local surroundings and rural daily habits that was a characteristic feature of the early prose texts that were written by ethnic Latvian authors. Functioning alongside the translated popular fiction which from the 1840s onward flooded the literary scene with publications of adventure stories (Daija, Kalnačs 2018), these detailed observations of everyday life provided a sound basis for the growing evaluation of personal experience as an important source of knowledge. Texts of a shorter nature, such as the stories by pastor Juris Neikens in the 1860s, were in most cases printed in local newspapers, thus securing a direct link to the intended audiences. Similar closeness to the surrounding reality was also important for other authors such as Ansis Lerhis-Puškaitis and Krišjānis Barons, whose texts might be classified as examples of ethnographic realism based on the local vernacular tradition (Pērle-Sīle 2022: 135–141).

The three paths toward the creation of an elite Latvian culture to a considerable extent converged on the point of recognizing the importance of the representation of the daily habits of the local population. Even if the translation attempts of foreign literary texts were not necessarily linked to life in the countryside, the collected folksongs as well as the Latvian prose of the 1860s significantly strengthened the perception of Latvians as a 'peasant nation,' thus making their perception foundational for the identity formation of the Latvian community.

## **The search for difference and identity**

The consolidation of Latvian self-awareness would not have become possible without the development of the public sphere. An important role in the formation of an imagined national community was played by the local press throughout the nineteenth century. The first long term periodical issued in the Latvian language, *Latviešu Avīzes* (Latvian Newspaper, 1822–1915), was printed in Jelgava (Mitau), and initially edited by Baltic German intellectuals (Zelče 2009). Only decades later did Ansis Leitāns, an ethnic Latvian and a translator of nineteenth-century popular fiction, become the editor of



the newly established newspaper *Mājas Viesis* (Home Guest, from 1856). Permission for its publication was granted by the tsarist authorities recognizing the importance of providing the local population with officially sanctioned news of the military conflict raging between the Russian and the Ottoman empires. This echoed the concept already established by *Latviešu Avīzes*, which combined global information with local news and curiosities. Despite occasional sensationalism, local news raised a better awareness of readers' own milieu, including their immediate surroundings. The generation of the New Latvians continued along the same road when starting up *Pēterburgas Avīzes*. Being more focused on social criticism, this newspaper at times provided an even closer link between international developments and daily issues, introducing contemporary European social and political ideas and discussing their relevance to the Latvian population.

In spite of being published in the imperial capital to avoid the harsh censorship in Riga, *Pēterburgas Avīzes* relied on the rural Latvian population as its primary readership. With the foundation of the Riga Latvian Society in the late 1860s, this organization carried the same idea further. The importance of the countryside was clearly evident in the newspaper established by the society, *Baltijas Vēstnesis* (The Baltic Herald), promoting the ideology of romantic nationalism and oriented toward the creation of a civic society (Hanovs 2003). Characteristically, members of the society's council throughout the nineteenth century consisted mainly of recent newcomers to the city who still had strong roots in rural areas (Volfarte 2009: 95–108). These young and middle-aged men promoted the social and economic aspects of Latvian mobility while also being interested in cultural nationalism, including celebration of various aspects of the traditional rural milieu.

This widespread interest in the countryside explains the great attention paid to it in Latvian literature. Understanding the importance of relying on their traditional readership, authors in search of appropriate topics were looking for the representation of local peasants. Importantly, this orientation toward the countryside served as a stabilizing factor in a quickly changing and developing world. It also served the purpose of slowing down the movement of time and providing a sense of stability to the Latvian community (Kalnačs 2023). Although the city of Riga, and to a lesser extent other towns, played a considerable role in the experience of the new generation of authors, the countryside remained their preferred object of representation.

Another important aspect of literary history in the making was that of the presence of specific genres. Most accounts of the development of eighteenth- and especially nineteenth-century European literature discuss the importance of the genre of the novel in shaping identity formation. The rise of the novel initiated by new economic trends and growing self-awareness of individuals living in Western

European societies (Watt 1985) became a crucial factor in showing how the life trajectories of the protagonists match the rising ideology of empires (Moretti 1998) as well as involve global dimensions. Even though the latter might largely remain in disguise, it provided foundations for conflicts evolving in specific locations. Edward Said states: "Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it." (Said 1994: 69) In addition, imperial novels coming from different traditions preserved ideological particularities, as Said aptly notes regarding the differences between French and English novels: "[T]he nineteenth-century English novels stress the continuing existence (as opposed to revolutionary overturning) of England." (Said 1994: 74)

This description of the crucial role played by the genre of the novel in Western European cultures is important when discussing the relative absence of this genre in some cultures without an imperial background. On the one hand, it is obvious that throughout the nineteenth century the tradition of the novel was significant in shaping the ideology of many rising national communities leading to the subsequent formation of the nation states (Kaljundi, Laanes and Pikkanen 2015); on the other, the sentiment of otherness was often expressed by relying on local sources and storytelling traditions that were embodied in other genres. For example, this was the case in the wake of the Irish literary revival where "key phases in the development of the nation can be read off from the technical and stylistic progression of the short story, which maps on to the transition from colonialism to independence" (Head 2016: 8).

In the Latvian case, an important role in the last decades of the nineteenth century was played by literary magazines which turned out to be the most significant forum for the publication of literary texts. These magazines were primarily interested in shorter forms, especially poetry and the novella. The most important among late nineteenth and early twentieth-century magazines was *Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts* (Home Guest's Monthly, 1895–1905), edited by an intellectual couple, Hermīne and Pēteris Zālīte (Ābele 2022: 192–196). Almost all the principal Latvian writers were among the contributors to this monthly, these including Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Aspazija, Rainis, and Jānis Poruks. None of them was the creator of large-scale prose texts, with Poruks coming closest to the form of the novel, even if his more prolific prose texts drew less attention than his poetry and short stories (Kalnačs et al 2017).

The biographies of these writers reveal that they had a wide range of experience of living in different cities. Poruks, for example, studied in Dresden in the early 1890s, and, while being there, wrote and published a German-language essay on the religious philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and Leo Tolstoy (Poruck 1894). The range of travel and experience of Latvian intellectuals expanded considerably after the unsuccessful 1905 Revolution in the Russian Empire, when many of them became refugees

escaping from the dangers of political persecution to neighbouring Finland and moving further to other Scandinavian countries.

However, in every turn-of-the-century city they lived in, including Riga, the Latvians formed only a relatively small segment of the overall population. In rural areas, conversely, Latvians remained the majority, providing authors with rich opportunities to detail the conditions of daily life. The interest in rural conditions was preserved throughout the development of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Latvian public sphere. This sense of belonging to the 'peasant nation' that survived even under the growing impact of migration to the city is aptly demonstrated by the persisting orientation toward the country in Latvian literature. By adapting short narrative forms, such as story or novella, writers found an approach that best suited the description of the particularities of daily life in rural areas and matched readers' expectations.

### **Modern-day conflicts in traditional milieus**

Significantly enough, the representation of country life could be complemented with topical issues of a gradually changing society that also attracted the interest of many Latvians already living in steadily expanding urban areas. Literary texts reveal that the attitude of authors toward city life remained rather cautious. This is arguably the case with both realist as well as early modernist writers. Even though the city experience to a considerable extent determined writers' worldview, they tended to transfer features characteristic of modern relationships to rural areas where a more traditional way of life remained present. This created a fascinating mixture of different viewpoints and complex stories, providing the narrative basis of *fin-de-siècle* fiction that reveals a tension between tradition and innovation, also mirrored by the choice and description of places, and the discussion of their role in the identity formation of local inhabitants.

In literary texts, Riga and other urban places are often characterized by chaotic displacements without the principal characters being able to get a sense of clearly identifiable locations, instead of the more familiar experience of the countryside. However, regardless of the chosen location, the intensity of temporal change is implicitly shown in the spatial perception of the surrounding world that reveals a gradual loss of the sense of place. Thus, the depiction of rural conditions becomes illuminated by the reflection of the complex experience the authors have gathered in the city. While social transformations steadily advanced during the second half of the nineteenth century, the literature of the period, as it tried to register the rapidity and inevitability of the respective changes by delving into the looming conflicts, consciously or unconsciously strived to slow down the pace of this development.

A literal manifestation of such an approach was the focus on minute details of the surrounding milieus which can be appreciated only up close. On the one hand, this demonstrated a heightened intensity in the reception of the local environment while, on the other, such an approach displayed the inevitable alienation becoming more and more obvious and painful. This aspect had a significant impact on narrative developments.

Fredric Jameson's discussion of the two driving forces of realist prose, the narrative impulse, on the one hand, and affect, or the body's presence, on the other, is helpful here. The principal difference between the two modes is marked as the antinomy between telling and showing. If compared to prose texts dominated by narrative, the interest in affect reveals, according to Jameson, a shift toward bodily experience; instead of naming and describing certain emotions, the reader becomes immersed in the direct reality experience of a literary character (Jameson 2013: 29–31). Historically, this largely coincides with the application of so-called 'free indirect discourse', for the first time given that name in an 1887 article but present in literary texts already earlier in the century. This stylistic device was well-suited to the representation of the tensions of modern socialization showing both emotions and distance "by leaving the individual voice a certain amount of freedom, while permeating it with the impersonal stance of the narrator" (Moretti 2004: 56).

We can also trace the transformation of the narrative impulse into the representation of bodily presence by briefly exploring three examples of Latvian prose from the 1870s to the 1890s. The social context remains intact in all chosen cases, but the position of the narrator changes, providing a more complex representation of the individual perception.

The authors of the first Latvian novel, *Mērnieku laiki* (The Surveyors' Times, 1879), the brothers Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte, who preferred calling their text 'a story', were able to provide a productive combination of various literary traditions. They made good use of the melodramatic imagination widespread in popular literature of the time (Čakare 2011; cf Brooks 1995) while mixing it with deep irony that included a parody of various aspects of elite literary traditions also observable in the text of the novel (Zariņš 2011). Their uncompromising attitude helped them to keep a clear sight of the surrounding realities and avoid the prevailing idealist expectations nurtured by popular literature (Kalnačs 2024). The principal value of the novel was its fascinating and strikingly in-depth analysis of the swiftly changing economic conditions of the 1860s and 1870s linked to the process of Latvian farmers buying out their houses from their landlords. The authors were critical of such traditional features of the peasant character as superstition, timidity, and trickery (Čakars 1980: 463), but they also dissected the rising impact of the struggle for

possessions and the growing predominance of material values as antithetic to the established life order. The authors, who came from the same milieu as their characters, remained omnipresent as narrators, thus also sharing their opinion of the moral value of the activities and choices of their protagonists. This form of presentation was then gradually challenged by the next generations of Latvian writers.

Apsīšu Jēkabs, the most popular storyteller of the 1880s, to a considerable extent continued writing along the lines established by the Brothers Kaudzītes, at times featuring ethnographic descriptions that are even reminiscent of the practices of the authors active in the 1860s. Apsīšu Jēkabs is also a strong religious believer, and the preservation of moral values is one of the important aspects of his literary texts that make his later work already appear old-fashioned. But during the most active phase of his writing in the mid-1880s, Apsīšu Jēkabs differed from earlier authors by explicitly pronouncing the problematic position of his narrator. While still looking for inspiration in the life of the peasant community, at the same time he was recognising his own growing alienation from the traditional milieu, quite exemplary in the introductory part of his story *Laimes spoks* (The Ghost of Happiness, 1885): “I compared myself with them and found a difference, a wide, unbridgeable gap. I felt like a bird dislodged from the nest of other brothers and wandering in a foreign land, like a stranger among my brothers... Wasn’t I a stranger to these honest, calm, thoughtful faces, in which I could read faith, trust, peace like in open books?! Habit, virtue, judgement, yes, even thoughts, things inherited from paternal grandparents, how faithfully they were received, how faithfully kept, how faithfully they will also be handed down to their children.” (Apsīšu 1958: 171–172) It is the distance of perception that also allows the narrator to observe the inevitable transformations of traditional morality, and to look for new ways to cope with changing realities.

A radical new step was taken in the novellas by Rūdolfs Blaumanis, written in the 1890s, where the reflection of the narrator was not only incorporated in the narrative, but became transparent through the bodily perception of characters as well as through the juxtaposition of their different experience, without the author’s intention to offer an unequivocal solution. A characteristic example is Blaumanis’s novella *Baltais* (The White One, 1896) published in the monthly *Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts* in September, 1896, when it directly coincided with the Latvian Ethnographic exhibition still being held in Riga at that time. The two central characters of the novella are its narrator, the painter Jānis Kalnroze (whose prototype was the already well-known Latvian artist Janis Rozentāls), who visits his childhood home after completing his studies at the St. Petersburg Academy of Art and is already enjoying his first success, and the country lad he meets, whose name is also Jānis. Through the encounter and confrontation of the two characters, Blaumanis provides an

insight into their different world perception. Despite his artistic achievements, Blaumanis's narrator Kalnroze painfully reflects on the distance that already separates him from the rural community that provided the background for the formation of his personality. One of the most important scenes in the novella is that of Kalnroze painting a portrait of the country lad that brings on a physical awareness of the inequality of their encounter.

The growing predominance of bodily perception developed in late nineteenth-century Latvian prose, and especially in the novellas by Rūdolfs Blaumanis, corresponds to the ideas Erich Auerbach advanced in his investigations of different facets of realist representations. In *Mimesis*, this first comes to the fore regarding one of the specific features of Bible narrative (as opposed to the descriptive approach of the Homeric epics), an overwhelming suspense caused by the insecurity of the protagonists who experience painful and unpredictable happenings unfolding directly before their eyes. The contradictory multiplicity of events becomes part of their bodily experience, while at the same time representing universal human histories (Auerbach 2003: 7–23). Auerbach discovers and follows similar symptoms at later stages of literary history in a broad international perspective. The kind of existential experience to which he refers was also made use of by late nineteenth-century Latvian prose that, by locating events in a familiar peasant homestead, paid tribute to earlier narrative practices while also being able to benefit from the complexity of the representation of the everyday. Thus this prose still relied on storytelling traditions well-known to the Latvian readership, while simultaneously transforming the perception of the traditional milieu.

The above representation of microstructures characteristic of specific localities, with the descriptions becoming more detailed, reflecting changes in everyday habits and routines but also delving deeper into bodily layers of the character's perception and experience, was one of the most characteristic trends of late nineteenth-century Latvian fiction. Another approach was taken by those authors who opted for the representation of macrostructures, larger patterns of the rural world, with the peasant farmstead, school, rural public house, church, and landlord's manor providing characteristic points of reference with particular emphasis put on the border crossing among different localities and semantic fields, emphasizing the growing difficulties of adapting to the ongoing changes. The latter approach significantly connected Latvian literature to the discussion of problems relevant to the problematics of contemporary society. It was, however, through the detailed elaboration of significant details of the immediate daily experience marking Latvians as a 'peasant nation' in shorter prose genres that allowed late nineteenth-century Latvian prose to fully reveal its creative potential and artistic maturity.

## Conclusion

From the 1850s onward, the swiftly developing Latvian society experienced significant political and economic changes that had a direct connection with transformations in the cultural milieu. Latvian intellectual circles saw the necessity of creating a Latvian elite culture as one of the most important tasks in mobilizing the Latvian community that would allow for the setting of common social and national goals. Recognizing the importance of the peasant class, one of the strategies of the movement of romantic nationalism was to define Latvians as a 'peasant nation'; thus at one and the same time recognizing the affiliation of a significant part of the Latvian population to rural areas, while also fostering their self-awareness toward the formation of a national identity and belonging. In this process, with regard to literary tradition it was important to raise awareness of folklore as well as the importance of early Latvian realist prose alongside the growing number of translations from world literature. This emphasis on rural areas was shared by other Eastern-Central and Northern European literatures as also indicated by the example of Danish literature. To catch up with Western European cultural patterns, one of the strategies in nineteenth-century Latvian literature was marked by the tendency not to make direct appropriation of certain well-known literary genres, such as the nineteenth-century novel, for the purposes of mobilizing national self-consciousness. In fact, as I demonstrated in this article, the choices of artistic expression were much more complex and defined by various factors such as historical particularities, literary tradition, the need to reflect on local specificity while proving one's own distinctiveness, as well as looking for artistic strategies relevant to fostering a dialogue with the intended readership. A characteristic parallel of the importance of the shorter literary genre is provided by the example of Irish literature. It was through recognizing its own particularities and potential strengths that Latvian literature of the second half of the nineteenth century was able to flourish in diverse forms, thus matching the complexity of European literary developments. One of the characteristic features of the period was a move away from the predominance of the narrative impulse of telling toward showing, thus focusing not only on minute observations of the surrounding reality, but also paying considerable attention to the bodily perception of the portrayed characters.

Nineteenth-century Latvian literature did not foster aesthetic interest only; cultural manifestations played a crucial role in constructing national identity. The importance of this self-positioning was due to historical heritage, with the rise of national consciousness taking place at a relatively late stage, and in ways characteristic of the development of rural areas. The Latvians shared the fate of other small nations in which identity was defined as mostly rural as late as the nineteenth

century; the peasant community becoming the forum where all the most important transformations of modernity could be observed in miniature.

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova argues that only well-developed societies can allow for and appreciate literature and art which has no clear-cut practical purpose (Casanova 2004). Late nineteenth-century Latvian culture found itself at a crossroads where it still anxiously participated in national and social debates, while at the same time swiftly recognizing the importance of aesthetic innovation. In Latvian contexts, the consolidation of imagined communities retained its relevance during this period even though the emerging trends of aesthetic self-sufficiency provided a new challenge to the authors, and a possibility to deal with poetic particularities of the representation of reality.

## Bibliography

Ābele, Kristiāna (2022). From the Basics of Visual Literacy to the First Momentum of National Art: Aesthetic Effects of Image Circulation in Latvian Society. Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (eds.). *A New History of Latvian Literature: The Long Nineteenth Century*. Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 173–213.

Apals, Gints (2011). "Pēterburgas Avīzes": latviešu pirmā saskare ar Eiropas politiskajām idejām. Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.

Apinis, Aleksejs (1991). *Grāmata un latviešu sabiedrība līdz 19. gadsimta vidum*. Rīga: Liesma.

Auerbach, Eric (2003). *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Apsīšu Jēkabs (1958). *Iz tautas bilžu galerijas*. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība.

Blaumanis, Rūdolfs (1958). Ugunī. Blaumanis, Rūdolfs. *Kopoti raksti*. Ed. by Kārlis Egle, vol. 5., pp. 175–255.

Brooks, Peter (1995). *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Bula, Dace (2000). *Dziedātājtauta: folklorā un nacionālā ideoloģijā*. Rīga: Zinātne.

Casanova, Pascale (2004). *The World Republic of Letters*. Transl. by M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.

Čakare, Valda (2011). Melodrama kā teatralizācijas veids brāļu Kaudzīšu romānā "Mērnietu laiki". Cimdiņa, Ausma; Lāms, Ojārs (ed.). *Piebalgas teksts. Brāļu Kaudzīšu romāns "Mērnietu laiki"*. Rīga: Zinātne, pp. 223–233.

Čakars, Oto (1980). Pēcvārds. Kaudzītes Reinis; Kaudzītes Matīss. *Mērnietu laiki*. Rīga: Liesma, pp. 463–512.

Daija, Pauls (2013). *Apgaismība un kultūrpārnese. Latviešu laicīgās literatūras tapšana*. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts.

Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (2022). Introduction. Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (eds.). *A New History of Latvian Literature: The Long Nineteenth Century*. Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 9–24.



- Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (2018). Nineteenth-Century Sentimental and Popular Trends and their Transformation in Fin-de-siècle Latvian Literature. *Interlitteraria*, No. 23(1), pp. 162–172.
- Damrosch, David (2020). *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Grudule, Māra (2005). Zemnieku jeb tautas apgaismība Latvijā – jaunlatviešu kustības avots. Daukste-Silasproģe, Inguna (ed.). *Meklējumi un atradumi 2005*. Rīga: Zinātne, pp. 8–36.
- Hanovs, Deniss (2003). *Pilsonības nācija: "Baltijas Vēstnesis", 1868–1906*. Rīga: Elpa.
- Head, Dominic (2016). Introduction. Head, Dominic (ed.). *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–15.
- Ijabs, Ivars (2013). Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of Latvian National Movement. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, No. 42(1), pp. 88–107.
- Kaljundi, Linda; Laanes, Eneken; Pikkanen, Ilona (2015). *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.
- Jameson, Fredric (2013). *The Antinomies of Realism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Kalnačs, Benedikts; Daija, Pauls; Eglāja-Kristsone, Eva; Vērdušs, Kārlis (2017). *Fin-de-siècle literārā kultūra Latvijā: apceres par literatūras sociālo vēsturi*. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts.
- Kalnačs, Benedikts (2024). The Antinomies of Latvian Literary Realism. *Primerjalna Književnost*, No. 47(2), pp. 219–233.
- Kalnačs, Benedikts (2023). Walking through the text: The representation of mobility in late 19th-century Latvian fiction. *World Literature Studies*, No. 15(3), pp. 89–98.
- Kasekamp, Andres (2018). *A History of the Baltic States*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Ķikuts, Toms (2016). The Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896 – Witness to an Era. Stinkule, Sanita (ed.). *1896. Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition*. Rīga: Neputns, pp. 17–87.
- Leerssen, Joep (2018). *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History*. 3rd ed. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Mintauris, Mārtiņš (2022). The New Latvians: Strategies for Creating a National Identity. Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (eds.). *A New History of Latvian Literature: The Long Nineteenth Century*. Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 105–122.
- Moretti, Franco (1998). *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*. London and New York: Verso.
- Moretti, Franco (2004). Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History–3. *New Left Review*, No. 28, pp. 43–63.
- Poruck, Johannes (1894). *Die Religion der Zukunft: Eine Studie zur Prüfung der Ideen des Grafen Leo Tolstoi und Friedrich Nietzsche's*. Berlin: Friedrich Gottheiner.
- Ringgaard, Dan; Rosenthal Thomsen, Mats (2018). Introduction: Danish Literature as World Literature. Ringgaard, Dan; Rosenthal Thomsen, Mats (eds.). *Danish Literature as World Literature*. New York etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 1–10.
- Pērle-Sīle, Ginta (2022). Nineteenth-Century Literary Processes and Folklore. Daija, Pauls; Kalnačs, Benedikts (eds.). *A New History of Latvian Literature: The Long Nineteenth Century*. Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 123–148.

- Said, Edward (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Steinby, Liisa; Kalnačs, Benedikts; Oshukov, Mikhail; Parente-Čapková, Viola (eds.) (2024). *The Politics of Literary History: Literary Historiography in Russia, Latvia, the Czech Republic and Finland after 1990*. London: Palgrave.
- Valdemārs, Krišjānis (1937). Baltijas, īpaši Vidzemes zemnieku stāvoklis. *Krišjāņa Valdemāra Raksti*. Red. Edgars Ķiploks u.c. 2. sēj. Rīga: LU Studentu padomes grāmatnīcas apgāds, 29.–68. lpp.
- Veisbergs, Andrejs (2022). *Tulkojumi latviešu valodā. 16.–20. gadsimta ainava*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.
- Volfarte, Kristīne (2009). *Rīgas Latviešu biedrība un latviešu nacionālā kustība no 1868. līdz 1905. gadam*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.
- Watt, Ian (1985). *The Rise of the Novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Zariņš, Vilnis (2011). Pietuka Krustiņa "Augstās dziesmas" vadošās idejas un izteiksmes līdzekļi. Cimdiņa, Ausma; Lāms, Ojārs (ed.). *Piebalgas teksts. Brāļu Kaudzišu romāns "Mērnieku laiki"*. Rīga: Zinātne, pp. 144–160.
- Zelče, Vita (2009). *Latviešu avižniecība: laikraksti savā laikmetā un sabiedrībā 1822–1865*. Rīga: Zinātne.