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Oriental Attributes in Early Modernist Latvian Literature

Latvian culture identity is a formation of many segments that at different stages of history have determined an attitude towards the perception of other nations' cultures. This kind of multilayered identity was conditioned by the complex historical processes in the territory of this country and the fact that different parts of the territory of Latvia belonged to different state formations; the greatest influence on the formation of Latvian identity was left by Germany and Russian Empire as well as Poland and Sweden[1]. The influence of these states and their cultures greatly determined the formation of Latvian identity, world perception, and self-representation model. Until the 1860s Latvian had had a rather poor understanding of national identity because serfdom set limitations to the intellectual and social geography boundaries for peasants. In the second half of the 19th century, reacting to the strict policy of Russification, German priests and writers developed a lively interest in the language and culture of local Latvian peasants. The number of the educated Latvians was growing. Dorpat (Tartu, Estonia) University became one of the first higher education acquisition centres for Latvians. The university was dominated by German academic traditions. Thus, the German component historically became one of the major components of Latvian culture identity.

At the same time Riga in the late 19th century developed into a significant industrial centre of the Russian Empire. Riga was the third largest industrial city according to the number of workers in the Russian Empire (after Moscow and St.Petersburg) as well as the fourth largest city according to the produced commodities. Development of industry facilitated substantial changes also in the social structure. After the abolition of serfdom and other agrarian and urban reforms in the 1870-80s, the migration of rural population from the countryside to towns grew along with the ratio and the social role of intelligentsia and workers. Universities of the Russian Empire in St.Petersburg and Moscow became a new vector of higher education acquisition for Latvians. Hence, the Slavic component became a part of Latvian culture identity along with the German one.

Latvian poet Knuts Skujenieks in his characteristics of the specific formation of Latvian culture identity points out that Latvia has been the crossroad not only of the Baltic region but the whole East Europe: *Since the 14th century Latvia has formed a borderline between the occidental Hanseatic league and the oriental Golden Orda, the actual border between the east and the west, yet in the broader sense it was a watershed of the land-tillers' and cattle-breeders' psychology. [..] Psychologically this watershed between the east and the west is running through Latvia also now, in modern culture.*[2]

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Latvian state did not yet exist (it was formed in 1918) but Latvians had developed a strong awareness of national identity. Against the background of these cultural-anthropological processes, rapid development of the spiritual and material culture took place in the territory of Latvia. In the last decades of the 19th century Latvian culture identity was dominated by the German culture component, whereas at the beginning of the 20th century an impressive transculturation campaign was initiated on behalf of Russian Empire. Russian and German components in the formation of Latvian culture identity affected not just exporting Russian or German culture phenomena. Russian and German were mediating languages for familiarization with the phenomena of other cultures in Latvia. Rather often the same culture phenomenon was exported via both channels simultaneously and it is possible to talk

about such culture communication phenomena as “Ibsen/Hamsun/Wilde/Poe in Latvia” with the German and the Russian identity. This is conditioned by the fact that translations of these foreign literary icons brought along with them not only the text but also its resonance from Germany of Russia that was often rather different or even contradictory.

The oriental component and the related colonial context was not very widely represented in the informational space of the early twentieth-century Latvia. In the first decade of the 20th century in periodicals that were the major source of information of those times there was little information on lands and countries that were colonies of the developed western states. The notion of colony in the Latvian language at that moment was attributed to a different economic and geographical phenomenon – Latvians who made settlements or so-called colonies in diverse regions of Russia, as the territory of Latvia at that time was a part of Russian Empire and in underpopulated areas Latvian peasants were offered on favourable terms land for settlement and cultivation. Similar colonies or settlements at the turn of centuries appeared also on other continents and states, e.g. USA or Brasil. However, Latvians at that time were also aware of colonies in the sense of the Western world. Historical memory related the notion of colony to the time from 1642 to 1682 when the Duke of Courland and Zemgale, Jēkabs Ketlers had achieved the economic flourishing of his duchy and the duchy had two colonies – Gambia and Tobago. The condition of Courland grew worse after the Second Northern War (1656-1661).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the information in Latvian periodicals on lands in Asia and Africa was very scarce, mythologized and was usually published in the section of travel sketches (often these were reprintings from German periodicals) that were often produced in epistolary form, e.g. „Vēstules no Mandžūrijas” (Letters from Manchuria). Information on Asian geography and history were very episodic, they did not provide a systematized picture, instead these were stories excerpted from the context, e.g. „Apdzīvots krāteris Japānā” (Populated crater in Japan, 1903), „Koreja un korejieši” (Korea and its people, 1903), „Japāņu elki” (Japanese idols, 1901), „Stāsti iz Mandžūrijas. Kādas kundzes piedzīvojumi” (Stories from Manchuria. Adventures of a Lady, 1901), „Maroka” (Marocco, 1902), „Nīlas upes iespaids uz Ēģipti un tās zemkopību” (The impact of the river Nile on Egypt and its agriculture, 1902) etc.

Latvian periodicals that were under censorship at that time demonstrate a trend of relating orientalism geographically to that understanding of orientalism exported from the Asiatic part of the Russian Empire as it was easier to travel around; much information about it was republished from Russian periodicals. However, the oriental text of Latvian fiction is represented in the same way as in the translations of West European fiction that appeared at that time en masse. Even in case of borrowings of orientalism related elements from Russian Empire, they could have arrived in Latvian literature by way of culture export from western culture that was considered to be the open, global culture of opportunities. It is accounted for by the attitude of Latvian culture identity of those times towards Russian Empire in general and its oriental culture segment in particular. So a supposition was formed that its actualization would not give a feeling to Latvian literati about entering the world culture space.

From the transculturation perspective the beginning of the 20th century in Latvia was a very intense process of familiarizing with cultures of other nations. Studies of the samples of western culture became a kind of a norm that was even more significant than going deeper into the national culture. It is related to the desire of correlating their intellectual and creative potencies with the western culture potential and filling in the missing components with borrowings, adaptation, stylization, imitation. These processes

are especially obvious in literature and architecture. They fall into the time of genesis of modernism and the representation of its early form in Europe and with a slight displacement in time also in Latvia.

Probably not all [in their texts] mentioned artists had been studied by [Latvian] authors or even read. Their mention was needed as a sign of recognition, belonging to a certain culture layer. [3]

The issue of nationalism in this period is complicated by the rise of two new tendencies, both of which are strongly present in modernist literature: transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Transnationalism may be defined as extending beyond national boundaries, or cutting across boundary lines, as modernism certainly did. Cosmopolitanism, often linked with decadence and used as a term of derision by conservatives in the period (much as 'liberalism' is used in America today), similarly denotes a lack of regard for international boundaries. It can also describe city with a highly diverse ethnic makeup or cosmopolitan outlook: a 'cosmopolis' or world city[4].

At the beginning of the 20th century early modernism in Latvian literature was formed as a symbiosis by bringing together the experience of diverse literary trends of the second half of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century that were present in European literature, in comparatively small proportions integrating in it also national components and individual artistic styles. *Diverse vectors of literary impulses that were simultaneously crossing in the artistic views of Latvian writers form an expression rooted both in the preceding tradition and new opinions. To characterize the processes in Latvian literary space at the beginning of the 20th century, it would be more precise to map 'coexistence' of literary trends and types instead of detecting a dominant trend. This coexistence was manifested as overlapping of the poetics of different trends in a writer's oeuvre or as a simultaneous existence of culture types in Latvian literature on the whole, as the literary trends that had successively appeared in European culture space in the late 19th century in Latvia appeared almost all at once.*[5]

Literary texts by early modernists in Latvia were produced in the first decade of the 20th century. They synthesize features of decadence, aestheticism, symbolism, and art nouveau that were well known in West European literature. At that time in Latvian writers' works appeared exotic motifs or the oriental text as a poetic means never used before in Latvian literature. Despite the brightness and expressivity of this poetic strategy, it was used rather rarely as orientalist epistemology in the early twentieth-century Latvian culture was not very intense. Use of oriental imagery (flowers, birds, jewels, animals, opium, water pipes, carpets, etc.) was not a conceptual trend but rather an episodic decorative element of modernist work of art associated with the western style of art.

The oriental component in Latvian culture and literature of the early 20th century is a rather marginal phenomenon. Yet when its individual structures appeared in Latvian authors' texts, they were related to borrowings initiated by careful familiarization with Western and Russian literature samples and their accumulation. At that time Oscar Wilde's fairy-tales were translated into Latvian; this urged many Latvian authors to take up the genre of literary fairy-tale and also use oriental colouring (e.g. Kārlis Skalbe). Oriental text is not to be related to the colonies of France, Britain, etc. at that time but mainly to orientalism as a characteristic component of Western culture that was borrowed not in order to demonstrate the understanding of the oriental culture but to stylize the specificity of the western poetics. Motifs of flowers and plants constitute a significant segment of the oriental text in Latvian early modernist texts. Latvian writers most often depicted roses, lilies, yet exotic flowers appeared as well that were not grown even in the

hothouses of German landlords, e.g. orchids. It seems that orchids, like cyclamens, freesias, narcissi, irises, mimosas, used as literary images were known by the writers only indirectly and their function was to extend the field of meanings of an image by their 'otherness' and produce an strong poetic effect. Association of exotic flower motifs with the image of woman was characteristic of art nouveau iconography popular in Riga in the first decade of the 20th century. Under the impact of the decorative style of art nouveau woman was characterized as a flower, her figure and clothing with the characteristic S silhouette of art nouveau was perceived as a complement in parties held in modern salons[6]. This artistic principle is illustrated by the comparison of two Latvian writers' biographical and artistic episodes.

Vilis Plūdonis (1874-1940) in 1911 published a poetry text in prose „Fantāzija par puķēm. Moderna cilvēka dvēseles lāsts" (Fantasy of flowers. The curse of modern human's soul) that is set in a hothouse of flowers and orchids. Plūdonis depicts two gardeners' different attitudes to orchids. One of them calls orchids in human names, feeling respect to their beauty; another recognizes them by numbers given to each plant.

But in books it was written that in other parts of the world there are even more beautiful, more admirable flowers. [..] seafarers having arrived from foreign lands told strange things about their odour and the unseen beauty of colours[7].

For the modern individual depicted in the story orchids *were the most beautiful of all ever seen before.*

The gardener told that their homeland was the distant tropical land.

Therefore they needed more warmth than others in winter.

I once asked the gardener what were those beautiful orchids in the farthest corner next to the stately Australian palm called.

„Odontologlossum Vanilla aromatica", he replied indifferently and added:

„There is a number over there".

This orchid department is my favourite one.

Everything here is more luxurious, charming, attractive. [8]

Plūdonis used the image of orchid (also Australian palm, azalea, magnolia, camellia, gloxinia, rose) to emphasize the sensitivity of one gardener above the other's indifference. Though the contemporary critics pointed out just the erotic connotation of floral imagery, this text represents a metaphor of two human types: people with intense spiritual life and those whose life is a mechanical performance of duties without thinking about their sense. In criticism the use of exotic flowers was not perceived as a specific semantic means.

Writer Jānis Akuraters (1876-1937) in his poetry used flower images both with decorous and symbolic meaning, e.g. Syrian roses, lilies, chrysanthemums in the collection of poems "Astras" (Asters 1909). In 1913 he went to Paris. This was Akuraters' first trip the Western Europe. Passing through Belgium, in Gent he went to a show of orchids and afterwards wrote enraptured to his wife:

I was also in Gent, in the world exhibition where I wanted to die – those wonderful orchids that were abundant there in all glory – they enraptured me more than all the people in the whole world. Language is so poor if you need to express the splendour and scent of these flowers. I started believing that flowers have a heart and soul and that they feel more and in a more divine way than we humans. That Odontoglossum Grande *and above all that* Cattlea Sapho.[9]

The image of orchid appears also in one of poems inspired by this trip. Its title is "Orchid" and the flower in the poem is a metaphor of a dancing woman:

At midnight in a fiery dance	*Tur pusnaktī tad uguņdejā*
Among the guests slowly arises	*Starp viesiem lēnām paceļas*
Gigantic orchid as a wonder	*Kā brīnums milzu orhideja,*
With its flesh pale petals.	*Ziedlapās miesas bālganās.* [10]

Plūdonis' poetry text in prose and Akuraters' biographical episode and poetry text invite the conclusion that both authors probably used oriental images with the air they had acquired in western culture as they had not seen them in real life.

Transculturation of oriental components from western culture space to Latvian writers, architects, and artists creates the sense of a certain joining with European culture space and tending to become a part of it.

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[1] Livonian confederation that contained the territories of Latvia and Estonia existed from 1228 to 1560. After the Livonian War (1558-1583) the major part of the territory of Livonia was ceded under the control of Poland-Lithuania. After Polish-Swedish war (1600-1629) the largest part of Pārdaugava duchy including Riga was ceded to Sweden. Sweden ruled over Vidzeme (Livland) until the beginning of the 18th century when after the Great Northern War it was ceded to Russian Empire.
The territory of Latvia started to be incorporated into Russian Empire with the Great Northern War (1700-1721) between Russia and Sweden, after which Vidzeme that belonged to Sweden was ceded to Russia. The eastern part of Latvia (Latgale) was incorporated into Russia after the second division of Poland in 1772. In 1795 the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale was incorporated into the Russian Empire.

[2] From: Ankrava, Sigma. Postkoloniālisma sindroms un identitāte Latvijā (2002). http://www.tautasforums.lv/?p=1272 [last viewed 14.08.2011.]

[3] Vāvere, Vera. Haralds Eldgasts un viņa romāns. No*: Haralds Eldgasts*. *Zvaigžņotās naktis*. *Vienas dvēseles stāsts*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1999, 293. lpp.

[4] Hanna, Julian. Nationalism. Key concepts in modernist literature. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, P. 29.

[5] Burima, Maija. Modernisma veidošanas latviešu literatūras telpā. In: *Modernisma koncepti 20. gadsimta sākuma latviešu literatūrā*. [Concepts of Modernism in Latvian Literature at the beginning of the 20th century]. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts, 2011, 53.-54. lpp.

[6] Ratniece, Sandra. Latvijas kultūrvide 20. gs. sākumā un jūgendstils. Latviešu un cittautu literatūra: no romantisma līdz modernismam II. Zinātnisko rakstu krājums. Rīga: 2011, 72. lpp.

[7] Plūdonis, Vilis. Fantāzija par puķēm. Moderna cilvēka dvēseles lāsts. Rīga: Saulit-Melder, 1911, 6. lpp.

[8] Plūdonis, Vilis. Fantāzija par puķēm. Moderna cilvēka dvēseles lāsts. Rīga: Saulit-Melder, 1911, 16.-18. lpp.

[9] Rakstniecības un mūzikas muzejs Rīgā, J. Akuratera fonds, RTMM, 369875; K4/31.

[10] Akuraters, Jānis. Orhideja. Dienu prieks. Rīga: Jānis Roze, 1921.