

Expressions of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Latvian Modernist Prose (1930s)

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Abstract Latvian literature of the interwar period, the 1920s - 1930s, developed concurrently with European literature, attempting to acquire new ideas and forms of expression and customize the “alien” impulses into “one’s own” cultural and literary space. In the 1930s, modernistic trends in Latvian literature coexisted with those antipodal literary tendencies which belonged to the national ideology-based literature of positivism. The paper is aimed at analysing the expressions of aesthetic cosmopolitanism in the Latvian literature of the 30s of the twentieth century focusing on the works by the representatives of the second generation of modernists for whom irony was one of the most important features of cosmopolitanism. The expressions of aesthetic cosmopolitanism incorporated in Latvian modernists’ prose works are traced via analysing cosmopolitan style. Among various dimensions of cosmopolitan style, the representation of detachment, treatment of the world as a source of pleasures, and cosmopolitan outlooks, experiences, values have been observed. Irony in Latvian modernists’ works of the 1930s is revealed via both allusions to untypical personalities of West European cosmopolitan writers and literary characters — strangers — who are striving to become cosmopolitan. Searching for an innovative form and style, modernists engaged in a “cosmopolitan conversation” with “cosmopolitan aesthetes” preventing the national literature from provincialism. The research has been carried out by applying cultural-historical method, content analysis and structural-semiotic method.

Key words cosmopolitanism; aesthetic; modernists; creativity; irony; global culture

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Introduction

Traditionally a cosmopolitan has been described as being “the citizen of the world”, however since its classic Greek origins through the Enlightenment till nowadays, it has been approached as the alternative to a nationalist and a manifestation of an individualist (Kacane, “Interpretations...”). In today’s world, every person is a cultural cosmopolitan to a greater or lesser extent as a cosmopolitan will includes engagement with cultural diversity and embracing cultural differences (Patell).

During the recent decades, the analysis of cultural globalization has been carried out most often within the sociological and anthropological discourse focusing on different cosmopolitan perspectives and undertaking the attempts of redefining cosmopolitanism (Hannerz). Based on such studies, the mixing of cultures is not a new phenomenon, on the contrary, it is a natural event and a rule (Beck), moreover in mixing and re-packing of cultures it is possible to see expressions of cosmopolitanism, “This might be a weak expression of cosmopolitanism but, depending on the degree of self-transformation that results, it may also take a stronger form. Recognition of the perspective of the other is the key to cosmopolitanism and it makes little sense speaking of cosmopolitanism if this is absent” (Delanty 220).

The idea of cosmopolitan interaction may include dialogic perspectives (Beck; Nava), a polylogue, or “a conversation across boundaries” (Appiah). Due to the imperfection of both individuals and nations, the engagement in “cosmopolitan conversations” is required since such “communications” not only test one’s own ideas, but also lead to openness and cultural shifts, “Being cosmopolitan doesn’t mean that you’re well-travelled, eat all kinds of different cuisines, or enjoy a variety of highbrow cultural forms: it means that you [...] see difference as an opportunity for personal growth” (Patell). The idea of “growth” refers also to the development of

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one's own culture and literature, which due to the lack of cultural contacts may fall into the prolonged period of stagnation.

Interaction and blending of cultures are not features typical only of today, but are characteristic also of previous centuries and decades, which reveal themselves in genetic or typological influences of cultural attributes and units, in borrowings and affinities, i.e. in "permutation of diversity" created in the result of seeking for innovative expression forms and styles.

In time, when national cultures, preserving their uniqueness and specific features, start voluntarily accepting "alien" borrowings, transnational or global cultural and art elements penetrate into "one's own" cultural space. Thereby, in the result of cultural cosmopolitanism, the development of culture, including literature, is enhanced. Society's orientation towards openness or a counter-reaction against the existing seclusion and monoculture is considered to be an imitative process "through which local cultures follow globally disseminated models of creativity and lifestyle practices, perceived as representing the forefronts of modernity" (Regev 30). Literature not only depicts cosmopolitan aspirations such as human's desire for travel and staying/living in a global community, but represents a variety of cosmopolitan impulses embedded in a literary text by the writers' cosmopolitan imagination.

Modernist literature originated in great metropolises (places for cultural and literary experimentation) and by the production of diverse multifaceted creative forms it has been defined as cosmopolitan (Marshik 12). There are two basic streams of cosmopolitanism: geographical cosmopolitanism (international travel) and the aesthetic cosmopolitanism of impressionism and decadence (Walkowitz). The concept "aesthetic cosmopolitanism", which falls into a broader discourse of a cultural cosmopolitanism and is treated as "the realm of practices and products involving creative labour" (Regev 28) (i.e. literary imagination), more and more frequently is being analysed within the frame of the Cosmopolitan theory. According to the Cosmopolitan theory, aesthetic cosmopolitanism pays attention to the cosmopolitan style, narrative forms, and a concept of a "stranger", i.e. types and variants of cosmopolitans. Cosmopolitan style may include such dimensions as representation of new locations (cosmopolitan geographies), depictions of international and metropolitan settings, cosmopolitan circles and groups, imagined conditions of national and transnational affiliation, as well as detachment from social concerns, treatment of the world as a source of pleasures (Bohemianism), and cosmopolitan outlooks, experiences, values.

The issue of cosmopolitanism has been one of the concerns in Victorian studies, specifically related to the late Victorian literature where on the threshold of

Modernism literary Aestheticism originated. The basic entity characterizing Aestheticism is a complete detachment of art from life. The subjective interpretation of art as a world view marked the shift in artistic landmarks and manifested itself as a protest against the objective perception of art dictated by positivism. A typical feature of literary aestheticism is searches for ways of making the form and style of expression more emphatic as well as “seeking signs of beauty” (Ellmann 151-152). Aestheticism as “an affirmation of a sensuous life” includes such values as negation, irony and cosmopolitan detachment that are instrumental defensive forms of aesthetic subjectivity (Eastham, “Aesthetic...” 214). Moreover, “Aestheticism was the site of a conflict between an ideal of sensuous aesthetic embodiment and the striving for irony, cosmopolitan detachment, and abstraction [...]” (Eastham, “Aesthetic...” 80).

1.

In the 20s - 30s of the twentieth century, there developed a trans-national or cosmopolite type of writers in the world. These writers, who represented a geographical cosmopolitanism, travelled more than the previous generations had done and described everything they had seen in their works, trying to embrace the whole world. The aesthetic cosmopolitanism, in turn, began as a phenomenon of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century and was related to the tradition of Modernism (Tabūns), when influences of writers-modernists started to widely circulate among other national literatures and became cosmopolitan borrowings.

The change of a European cultural paradigm on the turn of the century made an essential impact on Latvian writers' artistic consciousness and features of their creative seeking. Among the numerous and diverse literary impulse givers, creative work and personalities of cosmopolitan writers (O. Wilde, G. D'Annunzio a.o.) became an integral part in writings of both the representatives of Latvian early modernistic (decadence) literature (the beginning of the twentieth century) and the younger generation modernists (1930s) as well. If Latvian early modernists projected the synthesis of decadence, symbolism, modernism and other modern phenomena, as well as brought to the foreground human's (artist's in particular) individuality and inner freedom within the context of art autonomy, then the next generation of modernists continued their seeking in the field of style, composition and content, reflecting also their aspirations after cosmopolitan spirit.

After the proclamation of national independence (1918), building up of international contacts and moving towards European culture were high priorities of the independent state. Active literary experiments and attempts to get rid of heaviness

dominating in literature of that time enhanced the enrichment of Latvian literature, and this, in turn, helped to identify what was specifically national. This period “opened the door to foreign ideas, so that by exploring and fighting against them to uncover the secrets of art trade, mission and opportunities” (Eglītis, “Pēdējais...” 65), as well as to learn “a more exquisite taste, simplicity and melodiousness” (Ādamsons, “Jaunākā...” 527). In the 1930s, modernistic trends in Latvian literary situation coexisted with those antipodal literary tendencies which belonged to the national ideology-based literature of positivism where emphasis on Latvian values was placed, and coincided with the period of Kārlis Ulmanis’ authoritarian regime (1934 - 1940) in the history of Latvia.

During the time of national positivism, cosmopolitanism was characterized as a widespread phenomenon in Europe and was assessed as a threat to Latvian national values and to the development of national self-confidence. The national political ideology, based on preserving Latvianness as the basic national value (“Not to become russianised, not to become germanised, but remain the Latvians” (Zanders 6)), determined the multiple interpretation of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. During the authoritarian regime, a cosmopolite was defined as “a citizen of the universe”, “representative of the past time”, “spiritual tramp and good-for-nothing”, and “a human unwanted in life”, while the “orientation” to the East or to the West, in literature too, was considered “an illness which our intellectuals should recover from” (Brastiņš 40). The importance of preserving Latvianness in the native country and also while staying/living in an alien cultural space was emphasized in a political as well as cultural and literary discourse. In some discussions, especially when re-evaluating the nineteenth century “cosmopolites” (e.g. K. Valdemārs), education was considered an opportunity for cancelling the negative marking, namely, a dividing line was drawn between an educated and uneducated cosmopolite, underlining that an educated cosmopolite is aware of the necessity for the interaction and development of culture in the society.

Clashes of opinion between the traditionalists and the cosmopolites could be observed even among the circles of close colleagues, which the analysis of periodicals, critique and private correspondence testifies to. Thus, for instance, unlike many of her contemporaries, the writer, translator and thinker Zenta Mauriņa (1897 - 1978) did not live only in the world of Latvian culture and was considered a cosmopolite both in Latvia of the 1930s and later in emigration. In the Soviet cultural space, she was fiercely criticized as being a “petty bourgeois cosmopolite” (Krauliņš 1072). The writer and painter Anšlāvs Eglītis (1906 - 1993), representative of the second generation of writers-modernists, is also characterized as a cosmopolite,

however this is not so much due to the geographical cosmopolitanism (he was a refugee from 1944), but rather due to his personality and his world outlook, which has undoubtedly made an impact on his creative work too:

He is an Englishman as to his clothes: nothing too elegant, nothing that would be too small or uncrumpled. He is a Greek as to his revelry — everything in moderation. He is a Frenchman as to showing off in the society: *galanto, non-chalante, esprit*. And he is a Latvian by his internal structure — persistent and composed.” (Zirnītis 26).

The more rapid and stronger the economic development of the state is, bringing to the foreground the dominant of utilitarianism and practicality, the more active the polemics with it is. Despite the serious conflict between the conservative views of that period society and avant-garde seeking of Modernism art, the 30s of the twentieth century in Latvian literature are a productive period when creativity, diversity, irony, and striving for freedom in art indicate to the presence of expressions of cosmopolitanism.

2.

The creative work of the younger and talented generation of Latvian modernists excels in the elegance of its “texture”, where the fluency of the plot obeys the subtle touch of writer’s hand.

As a counter-reaction to a literary positivism and to a precise depiction of life in art, under the influence of foreign writers, in Latvia thrive irony, playful scepticism and an elegant style. Dissociating themselves from art as performing the function of implementing political and social ideas, the younger literary generation is united in demonstrating certain anarchism, searches for a peculiar artistic expression and ways of imparting aestheticism to art, which are able to “derange the traditional, the generally accepted and create an effect of surprise, or even shock the society to some extent” (Smilktīņa, “Īsās...” 132). “Art for art’s sake” and the idea about art as a creator of aesthetic delight, the same as at the beginning of the century, become important for the young modernists, often called hooligans and pessimists in literature. By employing the means of the “universal language” of Modernism and “cosmopolitan art” they reveal an individualized world perception.

Detaching themselves from specific time, they devote their works to the portrayal of the irrationally mysterious or Bohemian world, thus continuing the literary tradition of early modernists with a differently marked and nuanced stylistics —

individually original manner of writing full of easiness, wit and elegance, having elements of a delicately hidden irony. The creative work of these writers exhibits not only a specifically shaped artistic space typical of Modernism aesthetics, but also a human who is “quite an ambitious and simultaneously estranged personality” (Smilktiņa 239).

Aspiration for what is extravagant is a typical feature of literary characters created by young Latvian modernists. “[A] Latvian-cosmopolite, exposed to the influences of the world around him, is treated as a “self-made” man and is described with irony in Latvian writers’ works of this genre in the 1930s, as for example, Jūlijs Pīpkalējs in A. Eglītis’ work “Vāravs”” (Kacane, “Interpretations...” 200). The protagonist of A. Eglītis’ story “Vāravs” (1936; first published in the magazine *Daugava*, 1934) is a young and ambitious poet who pursues a goal of his life to transform from an unimportant common man into a widely popular poet, from a simple city snob into an aristocrat. He takes the opportunity provided by his working place to attend all Riga cinemas free of charge, and while watching films, travels in his imagination, merging with the heroes from the refined and rich world he sees on the screen, and feels a burning desire to withdraw from both his dull past and mundaneness of the full-of-care present. When he imitates the film heroes’ weary indifference and elegant posture, a “cosmopolite’s smirk” appears on his face. Just the desire to adopt a relaxed posture and a face expression, in which the author ironically emphasizes “cosmopolite’s spleen”, indicate to imitation or to a “nice cosmopolite” wearing a mask. Consequently, cosmopolitanism is related to “aristocratism”, elegance, dandyism and freedom, towards which the representatives from a creative world strive in their imagination. Spleen, ennui, and melancholia embody seeking for distraction in elegance. The list of cosmopolites’ or “universal people’s” desires mentioned also in the Latvian periodicals of the 1930s includes several cross-national features: “English coat”, “German tongue”, “French manners”, “Slavic scope”, which testify not only to individual, but symbolically also cultural strivings to universalism (Kacane, “Interpretations...”).

In the consciousness of the representatives of cosmopolitan aestheticism as well as in the artistic world of writers-romanticists, irony most frequently is related to brain games, where speaking ironically about the real world the reality of the ideal world is emphasized. Modern intellectuals cannot perceive irony unequivocally as an absolute negation of a definite situation, but as creative seeking for a new reality. In a literary work, irony replaces finiteness with the infiniteness, since it is “the only sign of the infinity of ‘the divine’ and finite world (Fedorov 109). According to Friedrich Schlegel, irony is a form of parody, since irony combines two prime origin

sources — both the negation and creation of a new world —, which simultaneously are the principal features of a paradox:

At negating the established general truth, a paradox opposes to it a different—new—truth; it puts a stamp of relativity on the object; a paradox demonstrates diverse levels of cognition, different stages in understanding the truth (Fedorov 106).

For the protagonists of literary works created by Latvian authors — artists and “queer people” entailed with art world —, beauty, relish and a pose are part and parcel of their life, and in literary works this is manifested through multiform and multi-plural depictions of domestic and art objects and their integration into the rhythmic frame, thereby making them means of expressing irony and satire. The list of interests — dances, songs, flowers, books, temples, wines — of the hero in the story “Seši Brīnumi” [The Six Miracles] by Eriks Ādamsons (1907 - 1946) reminds of inconsistently rich interests of both the eccentric aesthete Jean des Esseintes in the novel *À Rebours* (1884) by the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848 - 1907) and Dorian Gray in the novel *The Picture of Doran Gray* (1890/1891) by the Irish-born British writer Oscar Wilde’s (1854 - 1900). E. Ādamons’ character Emīls Aivars, the protagonist of the story “Dzeltenā roze” [The Yellow Rose] — an aesthete and seeker for love —, who, strolling through city streets, wanders into the magnificently rich space of a church, is also fascinated by the unseen beauty of different visible things. However, quite frequently the breathtaking beauty and frightening ugliness and mystery get synthesized in young modernists’ works with the aim to demonstrate the inconstancy of human consciousness and chaos of the epoch.

In works by Latvian authors, the objects of a domestic space most often are revealed within the context of social caricature. In the descriptions of spatial structures given by E. Ādamsons and A. Eglītis, things and objects succeed in long lists, thus testifying to the density of a material world so typical of a poetic perception. For instance, in E. Ādamsons’ and A. Eglītis’ works, protagonists’ inner feelings and emotional experience are disclosed through the descriptions of spaces and attributes in them, and the protagonist’s portrayal is ironical and full of banter. Consequently, the Latvian authors create both the images of a person — aesthete who is an estranged personality and the spatial structures which are chaotic or full of material maze, revealing the oddity of human mind in a modern epoch. Bohemianism and Epicureanism, being the expressions of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, are also revealed via the spatial structures that characterize Bohemian way of life. The space of a

tavern is a peculiar underground/death island, where among the decadent attributes — the mist of intoxicating tobacco smoke and drinks — not only strangled street-walkers and stabbed cocaine users can be found, this place is regularly attended by the beauty seekers and worshippers as well.

Oriental motifs, images and attributes are woven into the descriptions of the external image of a human and material world — human ears are transparent like Chinese porcelain (Eglītis, “Fortinbrass” 168), theatre director’s body drawn nearer to the Tatar khan and Turkish sultan is like “two pyramids”, the nose glitters like “a pearl in a shell” (Ibid. 180). In the arrangement of spatial structures, the writer, the same as representatives of British Aestheticism, uses several Oriental natural and every-day life elements — a reed curtain like a picture shows Chinese landscapes and dragons (Ibid. 155). The use of such comparisons testifies to the fact that modernists, striving to manifest their aesthetic cosmopolitanism, stray to the exotic ancient cultures (China, Japan) “whose impressionistic art is close and kindred to them” (Klaustiņš 444).

Thus, a literary cosmopolite is a wanderer experiencing perpetual haste in the result of “neurosis of the epoch” — cosmopolitanism. Latvian writers depict their characters as detached and anxious people in “cosmopolitan strivings” and being under the impact of fragmentariness and perpetual kaleidoscope.

Conclusion

In Latvia, under the influence of the ideology of positivism in the 1930s, the idea of cosmopolitanism is generally juxtaposed with the idea of national unity. Cultural cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan art — the modern artists and writers, as well as their literary works aiming at transforming the culture from traditional to anti-traditional, from national to modern and cosmopolitan, — have made a significant investment in the circulation of the idea of cosmopolitanism.

Although bearing the Gallic “trademark”, the “mobility” of Modernism ensured its cosmopolitan ethos. Striving towards cosmopolitanism by Latvian modernists of the 1930s was a manifestation of distancing from and reaction against provincialism and it was displayed by the attempts of “aesthetic inventiveness” and openness to foreign influences. The second generation of Latvian modernists, having a cosmopolitan outlook and being the developers of modern and psychological story and novella (and translators of works by well-known West European writers as well), focuses in their works on depicting a human of a transitional period, rendered by inherent contradictions or human’s “delicate ailments”. Striving and searching for an innovative form and style, modernists placed human’s impetuous-

ness and heightened emotionality within the frame of irony and wit, and engaged in a “cosmopolitan conversation” with “cosmopolite aesthetes” moving towards the aestheticization of art and representation of the spirit of Modernism, thus preventing the national literature from having an air of provincialism. By capturing a dialogic aspect, Latvian writers of the new modernist generation created a specific expression of Modernism: being themselves aesthetic cosmopolitans they ironically interpreted cosmopolitanism as “a neurosis of the epoch”. Thanks to the aesthetic game of young Latvian modernists, the borders of the artistic world got expanded, destroying the predictability and routine in literature of a national positivism period determined by the epoch.

Literary aspects of cosmopolitanism stimulated a self-reflexive exploration of not only an individual, but also of the collective and of the national consciousness revealing that cosmopolitanism and patriotism are not contradictory concepts and that one can be a cosmopolitan without disassociating oneself from the national. “Conversations across boundaries” and dialogism in motion make a cultural space “a changeable reality” since “any cultural space falls within a wider cultural context characterized by an informed choice of specific cultural values and models” (Kacane, “Reception...” 82). Thus, cosmopolitanism in this sense, is related to the capacity for cultural and literary self-transformation.

The Soviet occupation in 1940 and the beginning of World War II interrupted the efforts of Latvian modernists of the 1930s. In Latvia, during the period of Soviet ideological repressions, “cosmopolitans” were citizens who were ill-disposed towards the Soviet power — marginals, including representatives of intelligentsia of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” often called anti-patriotic and bourgeois aesthetes.¹ Some of them joined the alien power becoming the representatives of socialist realism, while others, like A. Eglītis, still continued developing the expression of Modernism in exile throughout the decades, thereby providing the opportunity to read and re-evaluate their works in their motherland after “the iron curtain” would fall and the independence of the country would be renewed. The re-evaluation of these writers’ life and creative work began due to the change of a cultural paradigm on the turn of the 1980s—1990s and after the renewal of independence of Latvian statehood, since these events initiated refocusing attention onto those writers and their artistic world, whose names had been forbidden and concealed in previous decades. Literary specialists and critics gave a special attention to Modernism as a trend in literature, free Latvia’s period (1918 - 1940) as well as to the analysis of the exiled

1 On the turn of the 1940s - 1950s, formalists and cosmopolitans faced persecution known under the name “a Cosmopolitans’ case.”

writers' life and literary heritage.

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