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## **Baltic Drama in the European Context: End of the 19th Century, Beginning of the 20th Century**

BENEDIKTS KALNAČS

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At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, processes in the development of the drama genre were taking place in the Baltic area; they reflect events elsewhere in Europe. For the first time Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian literature was contemporary and comparable in a broader cultural space, while preserving significant differences. The aim of this article is to look at the causes of these differences and to note their manifestations by analysing several significant preconditions of the development of Baltic drama.

One of the main characteristics of drama in the Baltic area at the turn of the century is its short historical experience. The beginning of drama and theatre in Latvia and Estonia is the late 60s and early 70s when the first plays by Ādolfs Alunāns were staged in Riga, and in Estonia Lydia Koidula prepared productions of her dramatic work with Tartu amateurs where the story motifs make use of localisations of German sources. Koidula's first play *The Cousin from Saaremaa* came about by modifying the German author Theodor Körner's farce *The Cousin from Bremen* (Nirk 1970: 94; Rāhesoo 1999: 26).

In this early stage, drama cannot be separated from the processes of creating the theatre, and an essential task of the theatre, besides entertainment, is educating the public. What seems to be the paradox of the generally naive and sentimental plots being used quite frequently for serious purposes can be explained by the relationship of theatre and drama to the national movement which was active in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The motif of several plays of this period is a society which is increasingly polarised according to

nationality. An example is Alunāns' drama written in 1888 *Who Were Those Who Sang* with the contrast of Latvian peasants and Baltic Germans which is exacerbated by the love story used in the plot of a Latvian girl Skaidrīte and the estate owner, Count Konrad. The combination of 19<sup>th</sup> century realities and folklore material used in the work are characteristic of the national movement ideas of the period: "nationalism has meant the mobilization of the past and of traditions for the sake of future and modernity" (Toraine 1995: 137). In the history of Lithuanian drama, a similar role is played by the romantic dramas of Aleksandras Fromas-Gužutis. "They feature motifs of love for the homeland, heroism, nobility of spirit, strong passion and tragic love" (Vanagas 1997: 88). The amateur theatre movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is significant not only for its work with play texts, but also because its activities served as a means for organising legal gatherings to discuss social and national ideas.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has a special significance in Lithuania where due to the special repressions of the tsarist regime, the establishment of a more or less professional theatre was hindered. Instead, since approximately 1885, a significant role is played by the so-called "secret Lithuanian evenings". "In an artistic sense they are naïve, primitive, amateur concerts (choir, dances, recitations, "live pictures", performances), but from a political aspect these modest peasant performances are extremely significant" (Aleksaite 2002: 186).

A second tendency is linked to a much deeper and more thorough acquaintance with the Western European cultural strata. This process follows with no displacement in time, because Baltic drama, just as culture in general, attempts in an extremely short period of time to compress together potentially extensive strata of earlier aesthetic experience. Skaidrīte Lasmane stresses that "duplication of the new testifies to the density and intensiveness of change, to a radical acceleration in development" (Lasmane 1999: 175). Furthermore, these are not insoluble contradictions with the earlier process of forming a national awareness, because the ideology of nationalism and a national state is initially a conviction of the limited circles of

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<sup>1</sup> Under the watchful eyes of the tsarist bureaucracy and Baltic German oligarchy the national movement could not take political forms but had to channel itself into cultural activities. At the same time these activities provided new forms of social intercourse and solidarity for the emerging nation. — Rāhesoo J. *Estonian Theatre*, p. 26.

intellectuals under whose influence “an ethnically or territorially related group of people are united by a national idea” (Bula 2000: 350).

One of the central influences in the process of the emergence of a new aesthetic awareness in the Baltic area at the turn of the century was still that of the German culture. One of the pivotal points in the Europeanization of Baltic culture was the translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s dramatic poem *Faust* by Rainis published in 1898. This publication is outstanding from the aspect of the inheritance of world culture values, enriching the resources of the Latvian language as it draws nearer to the means of expression of another language, and also as a significant impulse of modernising and Europeanising culture. This work of Goethe’s is one of those texts which in contrast to the previous stable system of opposition in Baltic culture, raises the idea of a changing world. “...at a time, when that which is new is not doubted as a value, when nothing remains and must not remain the same, change itself, movement, circulation is recognised as being eternal — the magnificent circles of development” (Lasmane 1999: 176). But no lesser a role can be attributed to this titanic work in the crafting of Rainis’ dramatic realisations and skills.

The relationship of Rainis’ first drama *Fire and Night* to the structure, motifs and characters of *Faust* is stressed repeatedly in literary theory (Hausmanis 1999). Rainis, as one of the most prominent authors of Baltic drama at the turn of the century is closely linked to the cultural experience of Europe and the whole world. Both in poetry and plays, Rainis frequently recreates “old songs” into “new sounds”. The swift changes in aesthetic currents, which are reflected in European literature of the time, gain more visible manifestations in Rainis’ creative work only during World War I, when in a number of his texts a potential similarity can be seen with the expressionist tendencies of art at the time (Kalnačs 2001). In general, in Latvian as well as Estonian and Lithuanian drama, the tradition of classical philosophical tragedy becomes current in the second decade of the century (and often even later). This can be seen in a number of examples, including the work of Vydūnas and Vincas Krėvė.

At the same time, traditional story motifs remain important. At the turn of the century the social contrasts and typically shown individuals in rural settings, which are already apparent in the dramas of Alunāns

and Koidula, are joined by a detailed presentation of personal experiences in the social environment. A typical example in Latvian drama are the plays of Rudolfs Blaumanis, where the starting points can be found in the works of authors from the realism period of German literature — Ludwig Anzengruber and Peter Rosegger. In Estonian literature, Eduard Vilde's dramas are notable, and in Lithuanian writing the work of Antanas Vilkutaitis, especially his best comedy *America in the Bathhouse*. The city also becomes a significant setting in reflecting the trends of German naturalism in the 1890's, and a notable display of current social conflict is Aspazija's drama *Lost Rights*, written by one of most outstanding Latvian romantic female poets.

It is notable that the strong weight of tradition can also be seen in the productions of German theatres functioning in the Baltic area. For example, an analysis by Tiina Aunin shows that the most often performed author at the German theatre in Tallinn was Friedrich Schiller, followed by Gotthold Efraim Lessing and only in the third place in terms of number of productions was Gerhard Hauptmann, the most popular representative of German modernist drama at the turn of the century (Aunin 2002: 382).

On the other hand, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the wish to reveal the potential of symbolism in literature can also be seen both in the key texts of writers (the *Dzelme* group in Latvia, New Estonia — *Noor-Eesti*, the Lithuanian writers and theorists Juozapas Albinas Herbačiauskas and Sofija Čiurlionienė–Kymantaitė), in the sources of opinions (a significant role in the emerging symbolic drama is played by the opinions of Friedrich Nietzsche, Henrik Ibsen, Stanisław Przybyszewski), and in literary works. Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš' drama *Tragedy*, which contrasts an artist's ideal existence with his everyday circumstances, is written at the beginning of the century as well as Edvards Vulfs' one-act plays and Čiurlionienė–Kymantaitė's symbolic plays. Oskar Luts' one-act plays, such as *The Spirit of Lake Ūlemiste* and other works are written in the second decade.

The contrast of two trends in the turn of the century European culture was especially escalated by the brand new concept of utilitarianism manifested in the accentuation of the usable value and ease of perception of a work of art. The German critic Julius Meier-Graefe stressed that attempts to subject a work of art to everyday values, in essence, transform its deeper meaning. "In these days, the

pure work of art has been brought into immediate contact with everyday life; an attempt has been made to transform it utterly, to make it the medium of the aesthetic aspirations of the house, whereas this function belongs properly to the house itself and the utilitarian objects in it. We have tried to popularize the highest expression of art, something only significant when applied to the loftiest purposes, something, the enjoyment of which without a certain solemnity is inconceivable, or, at least, only to be attained in moments of peculiar detachment. We have succeeded merely in vulgarizing it.” (Meier-Graefe 2000: 530). The processes which Meier-Graefe applies firstly to the visual sculptural arts emerge in the theatre and drama as well as a wish to polish the set constructions of a well-made-play, to improve the technical possibilities of the stage and to use them for commercial purposes, by attracting as broad an audience as possible.

Polarisation in the higher and lower (popular) genres of art is promoted by an individual’s contradictory reaction to the urban and industrial environment which becomes the determining factor at the turn of the century. An exhaustive analysis of current processes was provided already at the turn of the century by the German sociologist Georg Simmel, who pointed out that the individual’s reaction to the new reality is twofold. On the one hand, the industrial manufacturing rhythm dictated by modern technology downgrades the possibilities of personal expression and renders individuals similar, makes them into machines whose movements are regulated by qualities of the outside world. On the other hand, the potential for independence of action for the individual, which in the welter of the modern city has seemingly lost its individuality, in comparison with the former small local environment has paradoxically become much larger. In a situation where he is not constantly hounded by many curious pairs of eyes, the behaviour and choices of the individual are potentially much more determined by his own will (Simmel 2000). These dilemmas of choice also influence the action models of the individual as a perceiver of art. On the one hand, he becomes a consumer incapable of resisting primitive offers; on the other hand, a deeper perception of art is often a means of filling personal spiritual space. In this sense, art strives to verify its independence and opposes society’s tendency to render its usage totalitarian.

The situation in the Baltic area in this sense differs considerably from that in Western Europe. Elsewhere a stable cultural paradigm

exists which in the experience of previous centuries is balanced with the material aspirations of humanity; at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, when under the influence of industrialisation the process of manufacturing material values swiftly accelerates, art strives to occupy an independent, autonomous position, and in the quest for new expression it often turns to primitive, non-industrialised cultures and their experience. In the Baltic area there is no ready, accepted social space and stable structures which art can oppose. In the situation in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania at the turn of the century, art still fulfils the function of creator of society and nation. Baltic art reacts to social events in ways as different as the philosophical drama of Rainis or August Kitzberg's social drama *Caught in the Whirlwind*, which reflects the events of the 1905 uprising. In this context it attracts the greatest attention because the audience does not differentiate whether the essence concerns the transformation of the concept of classical art or a new radical aesthetical quest.

“The recently emancipated Estonian peasants and urban working classes avidly took to the forms of European “high culture” which were being hurriedly introduced by the tiny group of nationally-minded intellectuals” (Rähesoo 2000: 105–106). Although contradictions surface amongst the new intellectuals themselves, and the socially more radical artists are in opposition to the activists of the original period of national awareness creation, their aims are essentially related. The situation changes only partially when the younger generation announces its sovereignty at the beginning of the century. Although on the one hand, as stressed by Jaak Rähesoo, “with the Young Estonia movement and its stress on change on novelty we have a typically Modernist situation where only a small elite is able to keep with the accelerated pace” (Rähesoo 2000: 111), change and development are concepts which the audience have already become accustomed to with the swift influx of classical literature into the Baltic area. Here we can remember the effect of *Faust* translated by Rainis. And like Rainis, the young Estonian and Latvian writers of the next generation in their personal destinies (repressions, fleeing as refugees) still feel a close link to the social processes, and in Lithuanian culture this is further accentuated by the lengthy struggle against a ban on printing.

The specifics of the Baltic area at the turn of the century create a situation where the elsewhere polarised stress upon the useable value

of art and the fight for cultural autonomy, which it is contrasted with, are not radically set apart. An aesthetic compactness emerges that forms a characteristic feature of the whole region. This aspect is especially pointed out in recent research where the genesis of European modernism is looked at in a broader geographical context. On the one hand the fact that cultural globalisation at the beginning of the modernism period significantly expanded the experience of European writing and culture, is stressed (Brettell 1999; Rähesoo 2000:113). On the other hand, the specific characteristics of the formation of new cultures creates preconditions for the manifestation of a much more gradual and more moderate modernism, when very differing influences come together.

One of the essential examples of Baltic drama at the turn of the century from this point of view is the Estonian author August Kitzberg's drama *Werewolf* (1912). In the play where the action takes place in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an Estonian peasant homestead and its surroundings, all four previously mentioned trends of development are apparent. Firstly, it is a sentimental romanticised love story between three people who have grown up in the same family — the Tammar farm owner's son and two foster daughters, one of whom, Mari, is industrious, obedient and virtuous, while the other, Tiina, the daughter of a werewolf sentenced to death, is passionate and unpredictable. As responsibility, to which he is urged by the family, and emotions, which bind the young man to Tiina, collide, a tragic conflict is unavoidable. Secondly, the philosophical aspect of the play is closely linked to its fabric of folkloric ideas, and pagan perception of a human's ability to change into a different being — a werewolf — as a threat to a stable, established order and identity. Thirdly, the social motifs in the play are notable as descriptive of the repressed peasant environment which dominated at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which indirectly from the author's point of view are contrasted with the still current social and national contradictions of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And finally, the reproaches directed at Tiina, that just as her mother she is serving the dark forces, are typical of the contrast of standardised thinking and a unique personality which is significant in art at the beginning of the century. In Kitzberg's drama, the sovereignty of a personality is one of the highest values, and at the same time it needs to be viewed within the context of other processes and artistic and social ideas.



Several of Rainis' plays are suitable for a similar analysis on several different levels, especially the drama *Blow, wind!*, also written in 1912.

The Estonian literary expert Epp Annus stresses that the nationally oriented intellectual circles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "established the mythical space of a nation, a lost period of perfection in the past" (Annus 2000:117). At the same time one of the cultural dilemmas of Europe at the turn of the century according to Meier-Graefe is the disappearance of the mystical dimension of art, losing its religious roots, which leads to the profanation of art (Meier-Graefe 2000: 54–55).

In the Baltic culture, as several different processes take place almost simultaneously and the conceptions of several generations are fused together, the search for the mystical, irrational layer of revelation takes place simultaneously in the consciousness of the individual and the newly created spiritual space of the nation. This could be one of the most significant starting points in reviewing the specific artistic features of drama in the Baltic area at the turn of the century.

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