



The Image of Latgale in Latvian Literature of the Early 20th Century

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Introduction

The analysis of the texts about Latgale, one of Latvia's regions, reveals its cultural, ethnic specificity. The history of Latgale differs from that of other regions, Kurzeme or Vidzeme (A p i n e, V o l k o v s 1998, 120). Due to historical and cultural processes, Latgale was perceived as a specific region, was often neglected, did not receive proper attention. Its specificity was greatly influenced by history. Starting with the Truce of Altmark of 1629, Latgale was cut off from the rest of Latvia and followed a different course of development. A 300 year long period conditioned its ethnic diversity, different economic and cultural development, and that resulted in certain prejudices. These prejudices were an obstacle to studying Latgale's culture and uniting the nation during the first years of Latvia's independence (P u i s ā n s 1972, 167). In 1918, the Republic of Latvia consisting of Latgale, Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Zemgale and Sēlija was proclaimed. Interest in Latgale region and differences between Latgale and other regions of Latvia rose. Latgale's image formation in the early 20th century is relevant nowadays.

The aim of this study is to analyse the semantic and structural features of the image of Latgale on the basis of early 20th century Latvian literature from the centre-periphery perspective. The image of Latgale region was analysed and identity markers were identified.

Latgale in the Latvian press

Seeking to reveal the formation of Latgale's image in early 20th century Latvian literature it was decided to analyse the press of that period as an additional source and provide a wider context.

Review of the most popular periodicals of that time and the articles that deal with the identity formation showed that interest in Latgale started gradually growing in 1900, in 1907 the number of articles about Latgale rapidly increased. From 1900 to 1905 Latgale was mentioned only in relation to the history of Latvia,

emphasizing Latgale's (Inflantia's) specificity. At that time Latgalians were called Infantians or the Latvians of Vitebsk Province. In 1901 two periodicals, *Balss* ('Voice') and *Baltijas Vēstnesis* ('Baltic Messenger'), published article *Par Latviešu tautas spēku senākos laikos* ('On the Strength of the Latvian People in Old Times') which said that in the 11th century Russian rule was strong in Latgale, Russian culture had much influence, there were two Russian castles, in Koknese and Jersika. Starting from 1905, the articles about the history of Latgale and its present situation emphasised its cultural and economic backwardness. In 1905 *Apskats* ('Survey') published article *Vēl kāds vārds inflantiešu lietā* ('Another Word Concerning Infantians') stating that all regions where Latvians live must be united but Inflantia is still cut off. Inflantia's backwardness in all areas was described in several passages: inactive cultural life, no societies, commissions, theatre performances, art exhibitions, etc., Infantians live in isolation, like their ancestors, in their homesteads, newspapers from other regions of Latvia do not reach them, they know nothing about achievements in science, rural economy. That was the basis for the formation of Latgale's image at that time. In 1907 interest in Latgale and Latgalians grew, articles, where its positive image was presented, were published. Francis Trasuns was one of the most active cultural figures. His articles about Latgale were published in newspaper *Zemkopis* ('The Ploughman') where he informed Latvian readership about cultural events, economy, education, etc. there. He tried to change the image of Latgale and Latgalians saying that they live close to the central part of Latvia, share the same mentality and culture. F. Trasuns wrote in Latgalian, that was a rather doubtful decision since a language is a specific marker of regional identity. Articles written in Latgalian and published in the Latvian press were leading to isolation because not all Latvians knew Latgalian.

Thus, the image of Latgale was negative in the Latvian press of the early 20th century, Latgale was described as a backward region, attempts to change it were doubtful.

Latgale in Latvian fiction

Latvian fiction started showing interest in Latgale already in the early 20th century. Antons Austriņš was one of the first who wrote about Latgale. In 1909 he published stories where he claimed that the Latvian spirit will be reborn in the region. A little later Ādolfs Erss started writing about Latgale. Their opinion about Latgale differed from the official one, they were often reproached for writing about Latgale (S u d r a b k a l n s 1919; V i r z a 1930, 124; P a e g l e 1920, 59). They grounded their opinion on personal experiences: after the 1905 revolution they fled to Latgale, Austriņš in 1909, Erss in 1911, fearing repressions for having taken part in the revolution. They had a common friend, teacher A. Sestulis, who lived in Latgale, in Kokoreva, loved and knew Latgalian culture very well and became their guide, familiarised them with Latgale's beautiful nature, culture, people's character. Later the writers reflected on their experience in their sketches and

stories and created a positive image of Latgale. Being refugees and living with fake passports they felt safe in Latgale and regained inner harmony and peace.

The cultural development of Latgale was specific in the late 19th century, many Latgalians studied in St. Petersburg. In 1904 the ban of 1865 on the use of the Latin alphabet was lifted and many books in Latgalian were published. The Latgalian intelligentsia insisted that Inflantians, the Latvians living in Vitebsk Province, should be called Latvians and the Latvian language should be used. Latvians living in Latgale were called Latgalians (S a l c e v i č a 2005, 13).

Austriņš and Erss described Latgale in the context of Latvia. They travelled in Latgale and saw its rebirth, familiarized themselves with its values, identity. Austriņš linked Latgale's rebirth to the rebirth of the Latvian nation. In 1909, when he visited the region for the first time, he paid special attention to its specificity, met with cultural figures from Latgale, collected articles from newspapers about Latgale, recorded its dialect, place names, proper names. In 1919 his sketches *Māras zemē* ('In the Land of Māra') and in 1931 *Neievērotie* ('The Unnoticed') were published. Ā. Erss also actively spoke about Latgale's rebirth. He chose Latgale as the setting for his stories *Latgales stāsti* ('Latgalian Stories') published in 1926, *Vecā Latgale* ('The Old Latgale') published in 1931, novel *Muižnieki* (L a n d l o r d s 1931). Other writers disapproved their writing about Latgale, it was deeply rooted in Latvians' consciousness that it is a backward, underdeveloped province.

Erss, contrary to Austriņš, did not idealize Latgale, did not poeticize its nature and Saint Māra, yet his love for this land and its past is evident. Austriņš wrote about Latgale of that time when he was travelling in it and emphasized its specificity, Erss – about Latgale's history, its past, the lives of knights and monks, their fate and love stories. He was fascinated by its castles and manor houses, unusual, miraculous phenomena. The influence of Edgar Allan Poe is evident, mysticism and mysteriousness were mixed with realistic, precise descriptions.

The narrator plays a very important role in the works by Austriņš and Erss. Although the writers loved Latgale very much, the narrator was an outsider in a strange land. Austriņš' stories were travel sketches, he revealed Latgale's specificity through visual material. Austriņš and Erss wanted to immerse in Latgale, understand it but they were strangers in a mysterious land. Since the writers looked at Latgale from a traveller's, visitor's, point of view they focused on similar aspects: religion (the Roman Catholic Church), values of the past, mysterious nature, etc. There was much realism and little spirituality and idealism in Erss' works so characteristic of Austriņš' works.

Austriņš and Erss depicted Latgale as a mysterious land. In Austriņš' works, its secret lies in its culture, nature, people. The protagonist, while travelling without any particular destination, reflects on his experiences, describes churches, people, groves, lakes, etc. Travelling is not a storyline, it is an opportunity to observe life, places, secrets. The protagonist is interested in everything, reflects on places, their

descriptions are mythologized. Travelling by boat, horse drawn carriage, walking he tries to understand Latgale's uniqueness, mystic features, disclose universal human values.

Erss linked Latgale's mysteries to mystic, unexplainable events. He would often tell tales and legends that create the atmosphere of the past even when the story is not set at that time. Sometimes he would tell a tale or a legend and explain how it was in reality. That shows that Latgalians liked mysticism and created legends – it was so in the Middle Ages and remained till the beginning of the 20th century. Austrīņš and Erss showed that the past is alive among Latgalians. Austrīņš tried to prove that Latgale is a special land, its old values are the basis of spiritual rebirth, a wonderland of lakes (A u s t r i ņ š 1922, 8), where time has stopped, the Golden Age is still the present age. Austrīņš wrote that the past is alive among Latgalians, they have a strong connection with nature, care about it, feel the spirit of the Earth.

Austrīņš used the opposition nature-civilization in his sketches, that was characteristic of the intelligentsia of that time. He clearly preferred the world of nature and incorporated mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction. Nature is serene, people live in harmony with the environment. The descriptions of nature, landscapes, lakes, rivers were important to Erss. In general, the mysteries of lakes, waters are part of Latgale's image, Latgale is called the land of blue lakes. The image of a lake is of a universal and ontological character, with ambivalent features. Special attention was given to Lake Rāzna, which is very mystic, the rhythmic flow of its waters felt while boating for longer time is similar to the rhythm of life. Latgalians followed the rhythm of nature fully relying on it.

Both writers gave special attention to religion, the Catholic faith of Latgalians. Erss described it from a historical perspective, focused on the history of the Catholic faith in Latgale, whereas Austrīņš emphasized the cult of Māra¹ (the region is called the Land of Māra). Māra is a symbol of spiritual rebirth, where Christian and pagan elements mix.

Latgalians living in the land of Māra are special in Austrīņš and Erss works, they feel the soul of their land, know legends, are hospitable and welcoming, sincere and kind. Latgale is a multiethnic region. Austrīņš' revealed its ethnic diversity in the descriptions of marketplaces and their visitors, fugitives from Kurzeme, Russian, Polish, Jewish people. Austrīņš emphasised that Latgalians have no prejudice against other nationalities, he described their status in society, explained how Latgale became ethnically diverse. Although they were in the market for various reasons, they were grouped by their ethnic background. Erss described multiethnic towns and villages, daily life, culture, wrote about the influence of ethnicity, faith, historical events on image formation. There is no negative attitude towards any ethnic group in towns, villages, settlements in Erss' works, he wrote about historical events that caused ethnic and religious diversity in Latgale. He described people who belonged to various ethnic groups, what role that ethnic

¹ In Austrīņš' texts, Saint Māra is a syncretic deity, the highest-ranking goddess in Latvian mythology and the Virgin Mary in Christianity in one.

group played in the history of Latgale, for example, Russians – bureaucrats, they forced Latgalians to convert to the Orthodox Church from Catholicism, Polish – victims, like Latgalians, they were forced either to flee to Poland or live under Russian rule, similar descriptions of Germans, Lithuanians, Jews can be found. Thus, they were not individualized. Speaking about the main characters, individual traits predominate, here their ethnic background is not important, sometimes not mentioned at all.

The descriptions of public spaces, marketplaces, churches, and private spaces, people's homes, also create the image of Latgale.

Dark, poor homes of Latgalians were contrasted with spacious, affluent homes of people in Vidzeme or Kurzeme. In *Austriņš' Māras zemē*, a fugitive from Kurzeme was surprised by Latgalians' poverty (A u s t r i ņ š 1922, 89). *Austriņš* described households in Vidzeme with irony, contrasted them with those in Latgale, where each household item creates an aura. Latgalians do not care much about things, their homes are cosy and reflect their inner world.

Latgalians demonstrated their faith through Catholic symbols, by putting up a wayside shrine with a crucifix or an icon by the house, decorating a home altar, writing the inscription +K+M+B² on the door.

Both Erss and *Austriņš* focused on Latgale's past, Erss on the history of Latgale, *Austriņš* on myths. The history of Latgale was complicated and contributed to building its unattractive image. Latgalians' life was influenced by the mythical, cyclical flow of time, they distanced themselves from historical events and continued living like their forefathers even when the world was falling apart after the 1905 revolution (A u s t r i ņ š 1922, 60). Latgalians lived by cyclical rather than by linear time, relied on the cycle of nature, the day-night cycle, the seasonal cycle.

A garden by the house is a significant element of Latgale' landscape. That was highlighted several times: the house stood bare or there was a richer house surrounded by the garden. In early 20th century Latvian literature, there was always a garden by a house, that was a trait of harmonious life: a garden protects a house from winds and storms, adds cosiness, shows its owner's attachment to old traditions and values. A garden is completely de-semanticised in *Austriņš*' stories, indicates the owner's financial situation and that Kurzeme's traditions are followed.

Latgalians preserved values, mysteries, traditions as well as household items that were passed from generation to generation. Their homes were modest, people were kind and hospitable.

Prior to *Austriņš* and Erss, Latgalian writers F. Kemps, F. Trasuns, A. Jūrdžs, etc. wrote about Latgale and its rebirth which started in the early 20th century. They looked at Latgale from an insider's perspective and therefore did not notice the region's specificity. They focused on a dramatic plot and dynamic action and

² *Christus Mansionem Benedicat* (Latin) 'May Christ bless this home'

paid little attention to nature descriptions but described daily life in detail in their works. Their texts written in the Latgalian language helped them reveal ethnic mentality at the lexico-semantic level.

Conclusions

The analysis of the formation of Latgale's image in early 20th century Latvian literature helped identify the main identity markers from the centre-periphery perspective. The most important markers are: a landscape, nature, lakes, faith differently viewed by the narrator in the works by Latvian writers Austrīņš and Erss. Latgalians' spirituality closely linked to faith and the cult of Saint Māra is another identity marker although church services cause confusion. The use of the Latgalian language (especially in Austrīņš' works) is also a significant identity marker, it adds unique colours to the description of places and people. The past, which was carried over into the present and the future, is an important part of Latgale's image. To sum up, the discussed identity markers were aimed at creating a positive image of Latgale.

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Latgalos paveiklas XX a. pirmo dešimtmečio latvių literatūroje

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinés sąvokos: *Latgala, regioninė tapatybė, centras, periferija, Austrinis, Ersas, latvių literatūra.*

Dėl įvairių kultūrinių ir istorinių įvykių Latgala Latvijos gyventojų sąmonėje suvokiama kaip ypatingas kultūrinis ir istorinis regionas, kuriam būdinga ryški regionalizacija. Latgalos tekstai priklauso latvių provincijos tekstams, todėl juose kuriamas savitas pasaulio modelis. Grožinės literatūros kūrėjai Latgala pradėjo domėtis jau pirmame XX a. dešimtmetyje. Pirmieji latvių autoriai, Latgalą pasirinkę savo prozos kūrinių veiksmo vieta, yra Antuanas Austrinis ir Adolfas Ersas. Jų noras savo kūriniuose vaizduoti Latgalą vertinamas labai kritiškai, nes Latgala Latvijos gyventojų laikyta neišsilavinusia provincija.

Pirmo XX a. dešimtmečio latvių literatūroje sukurto Latgalos paveikslo analizė, paremta požiūriu nuo centro link periferijos, leidžia nustatyti svarbiausius Latgalos regioninės tapatybės bruožus. Abiem Latgalą aprašiusiems latvių literatūros autoriams – Austriniui ir Ersui – svarbiausias Latgalos regioninės tapatybės bruožas yra regiono kraštovaizdis, kuriame didžiausias dėmesys skiriamas gamtos vaizdams, ypač ežerams. Neatskiriamas Latgalos ypatumas yra katalikų tikėjimas, kurio apraiškos pasakotojų vertinamos nevienareikšmiškai. Katalikų tikėjimas, ypač šventosios Maros kultas, rodo Latgalos gyventojų dvasingumą, o bažnyčioje matyti ritualai kelia baimę ir nesupratimą. Svarbi regioninės tapatybės dalis, ypač Austrinio kūriniuose, yra latgalių kalba, sukurianti nepakartojamos

erdvės koloritą ir charakterizuojanti Latgalos gyventojus. Laiko aspektu regioninė Latgalos tapatybė labiausiai susijusi su praeitimi, jos išgyvenimu dabartyje ir projekcija į ateitį. Tai rodo Latgalos kultūros ir regioninės tapatybės konservatyvumą. Apskritai visi Latgalos tapatybės bruožai kuria pozityvų, harmoningą Latgalos paveikslą, visiškai nesutampantį su oficialiu to meto diskursu.

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S u m m a r y

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Texts about Latgale, one of Latvia's regions, were analysed to reveal its specificity in the paper. The researcher sought to reveal the difference between Latgale and other regions, Kurzeme or Vidzeme, and identify the main identity markers. Due to various cultural and historical processes, Latgale did not always receive proper attention.

The image of Latgale in early 20th century Latvian literature was analysed and the main identity markers were identified from the centre-periphery perspective. The most important identity markers are: a landscape, nature, lakes, faith differently viewed by the narrator in the works by Austrīņš and Erss. Latgalians' spirituality closely linked to faith and the cult of Saint Māra is another identity marker although church services cause confusion. The use of the Latgalian language (especially in Austrīņš' works) is also a significant identity marker, it adds unique colours to the description of places and people. The past, which was carried over into the present and the future, is an important part of Latgale's image. To sum up, the discussed identity markers were aimed at creating a positive image of Latgale.

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