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Nostalgia and National Identity: Idea of Revisiting the Past in Latvian Fiction

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Abstract: One of the most popular themes in Latvian literature which has regularly arisen at different stages of its development since the 19th century is the idea of returning to the roots, the depiction of a mythological world scene when people lived according to the rhythms of nature, in full harmony with themselves and the world. Ancient times are depicted as a time when Latvians felt free living at their farms and followed the rules of the mythical time. This peculiar feature which we analyse on the basis of literary works, describes vividly the nation's collective consciousness, desires, and needs. The need for emphasizing the idealised ancient times in the nation's consciousness is related to the most significant transitional stages in the development of the country, which are characterised by the increased attention to the issues of national identity. During difficult stages in history, nostalgia is a security mechanism which looks for stability in the past which we do not have in the present. The aim of the paper is to see how the nostalgic reflection on the idealized ancient times in the Latvian literature is related to the pivotal stages in the country's history when special attention was paid to the national awareness and identity issues.

Keywords: national identity, cultural memory, history of Latvian literature, nostalgia.

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Introduction

Today, Humanities and Social Sciences pay special attention to the study of the past and its reflection in collective and individual memory making it a special endeavour that is located at the intersection of various sciences. The appeal of the Humanities to various modes of memory and analysis of the perception of the past is largely due to French history and sociology, including the Annales school, classic works by M. Halbwachs (1980, 1992), modern ideas by P. Nora (1989), etc., who have done much to interpret central concepts in the study of collective memory. Nostalgia may be considered as one of the modes of memory. The significance of the concept of nostalgia is determined by the fact that it can become an effective explanatory resource for understanding the features of mass consciousness and national identity.

In the framework of the research, we will turn to the study of the Latvian literary texts and look for nostalgic reflections on the past, or images of the past with a nostalgic connotation in them. The aim of the paper is to see how the nostalgic reflection on the idealized ancient times in the Latvian literature is related to the pivotal stages in the country's history when special attention was paid to the national awareness and identity issues. The paper will also analyse various means of artistic

expression, how nostalgic reflections are expressed in fiction at various stages of its development from the 19th century up to the present day.

Introduction of the article shall formulate research aim and tasks, define research object, indicate the extent of research on the subject, research methods, relevance and (or) novelty.

1. Theoretical background: cultural memory and nostalgia

In the research, we use theoretical concepts of a cultural or, in other words, social memory. One of the most significant concepts has been taken from the book by J. Assmann (2012) “Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination”. It states that a cultural memory plays an important role in the formation and reproduction of the collective identity of human communities of different historical types – from a tribal group to a nation. Interpretations of the cultural memory and the corresponding forms of its representation help a social group to form a self-image through a collective awareness of its own past and support a sense of unity and self-being in the group (Assmann 2012). According to J. Assmann’s theory (1988), cultural memory is a form of collective memory, which is based on the so-called memory figures (Erinnerungsfiguren), or important events of the past which are maintained and preserved in the process of development of a certain culture. This process is maintained through mechanisms of mentioning, quoting, and rethinking reflected in narratives, rituals, monuments, etc.

The idea of the American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels (1987) that literature is part of the culture has also been extremely important when analysing literary texts. The literary text was considered the evidence of the century which reflects major ideas of its time. Korolova, Badins, Romanovska (2016) write that “fiction is an indicator and creator of spiritual search. Depicting their characters’ life process in a peculiar historical period, writers reproduce not only their own subjective but also a nation’s collective understanding of time portrayed from a contemporary perspective, subordinating narrative to certain artistic conceptions. In this respect, fiction becomes an extremely important research object” (Korolova et al. 2016).

The findings of the researchers who study nostalgia have also contributed to the theoretical basis of the study. Nostalgia is closely related to the concepts of the social, collective, or cultural memory, which explain how memories are produced, modified, assimilated, and legitimized within a particular socio-cultural community (Pickering, Keightley 2006). Over time, the community, under the influence of various cultural and historical processes, selects the most important events that construct its collective identity. These events are regularly mentioned in the collective memory, this way forming the practice of re-remembering. Nostalgia is one of the types of *re-remembering*.

The concept of nostalgia has a long and complex history. The idea of nostalgia was first introduced into culture by Homer in *Odyssey* (ca. 800

B.C.). After him, this idea was not highlighted for about 2,500 years. Only in 1688, a medical student of the University of Basel, Johannes Hofer, decided to do his Ph.D. thesis on nostalgia. He coined a new term by combining two Greek words: *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (suffering) and used it to describe a potentially fatal form of homesickness common among Swiss mercenary soldiers who served far away from home (Jing 2006). Psychological manifestations of nostalgia were also associated with anxiety and melancholy, and nostalgia itself was considered a cause of physical illness. During the 17th–18th centuries, cases of nostalgia were diagnosed in all European armies; these cases were considered to be an important indicator of the moral and psychological spirit of soldiers and officers. Gradually, the association of nostalgia with illnesses which occur in the army environment disappeared. Nevertheless, during the 19th century, nostalgia was still considered a disease. However, gradually there happened a shift from a physiological to an emotional sphere in the meaning of nostalgia. Psychotherapy considered nostalgia to be a subconscious desire to return to an earlier stage of life and identified it as a form of repressive compulsive disorder. Nostalgia was soon regarded as one of the types of depression referred to like the feeling of loss and grief associated with homesickness. In the 20th century, longing after something was considered to be one of the most important features of nostalgia. Modern definitions for nostalgia have a value-neutral nature.

Researchers usually associate a nostalgia phenomenon with the memory activity and, therefore, attribute it to such cultural and literary phenomena when a person, recalling a phenomenon, assigns its positive features. For example, Hepper et al. (2012) believe that people conceptualise nostalgia primarily in terms of positive, social, and past-oriented features. In addition, nostalgic feelings arise when the remembrance of one event occurs (Rosch 1978; Wildschut, Sedikides et al. 2006) across the lifespan. Dictionaries define nostalgia as a yearning for the return of past circumstances, events, etc. (*Collins English Dictionary* 2009), a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*), a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time (*Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*), and a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). Nostalgic emotions are usually associated with the memories of a person (for example, childhood memories) and include descriptions of keepsakes and familiar sensory cues (e.g., sounds, smells, colours, etc.) (Hepper et al. 2012, Reid et al. 2015). Central features of nostalgia included (a) fond, rose-coloured, memories of one's childhood or close relationships, (b) keepsakes or sensory cues, as well as (c) positive feelings, and, to a lesser degree, negative feelings such as longing and wanting to return to the past. Peripheral features included warmth or comfort, daydreaming, change, calm, regret, success, and lethargy (Sedikides, Wildschut 2017). The specific features of nostalgia highlighted by researchers are most commonly found in the texts on an autobiographical dimension.

However, the phenomenon of nostalgia can also be interpreted in a broader sense: firstly, as a personality's aspiration for something in the past and, secondly, as an emotional construct that idealizes a past period or phenomenon. Both insights are complementary and equally important for the research.

2. Nostalgic texts in Latvian literature

One of the most popular themes in Latvian literature which has regularly arisen at different stages of its development since the 19th century is the idea of revisiting the past, the depiction of a mythological world scene when people lived according to the rhythms of nature, in full harmony with themselves and the world. Ancient (pagan) times are depicted as a time when Latvians felt free living at their farms and followed the rules of the mythical time.

Nostalgia for the harmonious, idealized past began to enter Latvian culture at the time when Latvians did not yet have an opportunity to publicly express their ideas and publish their works. For example, the longing for the bright past was created by German enlighteners who tried to provide their views on the development of Latvian culture and to present it to peasants. Garlibs Merkelis in his works *Vidzemes senatne* (1798–1799) and *Vanems Imanta* (1802) made an important contribution to the reproduction of the mythological past of the Latvian people. These works, written in German, became popular, raised national awareness, and influenced the formation of Latvian literature. In these works, G. Merkelis described ancient Latvian history using fictional mythological motives. Later, his very bright, positive but fictional images rooted in Latvian culture and national consciousness (Johansons 1975: 225).

Nostalgia for the lost harmonious past is especially vividly realized in the middle of the 19th century – the second half of the 19th century when Latvian national literature began to appear. That time coincided with the beginning of the formation of national consciousness when the search for Latvian identity became important. The first Latvian intellectuals (New Latvians), who had just received an education, considered it important to develop Latvian national culture, literary language, collect folklore material, and create a national literature. As a result, the New-Latvians movement had been established. Changes in the social and cultural situation determined its formation: 1) activities of national movements in Europe and creation of new states; 2) socio-economic reforms in Russia, which gave peasants the opportunity to rent or buy land, improved the education system, and provided peasants with more rights; 3) first activities of the Latvian intelligentsia aimed at the formation of unity between peasants and intelligentsia.

The New-Latvians movement emerged as a protest against the dominance of German and Russian cultures at that time. As a result, the interaction, dialogue, and contradictions of the three cultures provided an opportunity for highlighting and development of Latvian national values.

The ideas of New Latvians were implemented in literature as attempts to restore or re-create the code of Latvianness and this way prove to the Latvians that they can and should be proud of their agricultural culture. The use of the Latvian language and care for it, as well as collecting Latvian folklore were the key issues the New Latvians emphasized in their activities. During the time of formation of national awareness and national literature, there is a search for baselines in the past, such as collection and re-evaluation of folklore and mythology. In this process, the New Latvians faced a problem that Latvian folklore and mythology were preserved in a very fragmented way and were not collected or analysed. Therefore, the New Latvians both initiated collecting folklore, and, when describing the life in the past in their literary texts, re-created many things in a new way, and thus, poetic mythology appeared, which today is often perceived as Latvian people's authentic folklore and mythology. Literature written by the New Latvians and ideas about the past included into it had one common goal – to raise the people's self-awareness and create their national identity. As a result, the myth of the lost Paradise had been formed. In researchers' opinion (Bankauskaitė, Vaišvilaitė 2019), it is a very common symbol of the homeland image. The literary critic Guntis Berelis writes: "Literature has created a myth about the lost Paradise – a fabulous, bright, full of heroes, and, most importantly, a freedom history, which was lost and which must be returned." (Berelis 1999: 21). As a result, a trend of national romanticism in literature emerged.

A poet Auseklis (real name Mikelis Krogzemis) is one of the most distinguished authors of that period. In his poetry, he created the happy past of the Latvian people, when they used to live in harmony with nature and mythological characters, used to work happily in the fields, and used to sing a lot. Pictures of the happy past brightly appear in Auseklis's most famous poem "Gaismas pils" (1873). The Castle became a historical metaphor for the Latvian people. The poem is based on an old legend about the castle of light in which the ancient Latvians used to live happily, but which fell fighting against the conquerors, but it would rise again only when people regain their freedom. The vibes of the poem are optimistic: it is obvious that Latvian people will regain their freedom and they will live happily ever after. The idea of the lost Paradise also appeared in the works of other authors of that time. For example, in Andrejs Pumpurs's epic "Lacplesis" (1888), in accordance with the rules of national romanticism, there is also a three-part picture of the world – a happy past – a disharmonious, unfree present – a harmonious future (the return of the lost Paradise). The motive of a happy past and a happy future, in this case, is also a way of raising national awareness. Works written by the New Latvians are considered to be an important conceptual axis, which formed a national identity and became a source of inspiration, images, and themes for the authors of later times.

The motive of the lost Paradise and nostalgia for the happy past also appeared in Latvian literature later – in the first decades of the 20th century. It was implemented by many authors in different contexts.

This approach also had various individual psychological, and political and social reasons. For example, Antons Austrins in his prose especially warmly depicted one Latvian region – Latgale. It should be noted that Latgale was seen as an economically underdeveloped and uneducated province in the public discourse of that time. A. Romanovska (2019) points out that A. Austrins associated this region with the possibility of reviving the national idea. It preserved the untouched past; people here lived in harmony with the nature and cyclical run of time. In Latgale you could also find ancient tools and musical instruments that still worked well. Nature there was beautiful and unspoilt, people knew legends and told them, observed traditions, and preserved their mythology. A. Austrins's personal experience largely determined his attitude towards Latgale. For a long time, he was a political refugee who the authorities persecuted for his participation in the 1905 revolution. He had to hide and travel without his passport. He found a safe refuge in Latgale. However, not only the abovementioned facts of his biography determined the writer's attitude towards Latgale. These were also the general trends of the society's development: industrialization, urbanization, a political situation in Latvia (a lack of freedom). A. Austrins created nostalgia for the harmonious past using the image of Latgale and he associated it with the origins of the national identity. In the short story of the collection *Viena diena klānos*, A. Austrins asks: "Where does this magic power of Latgale come from, and what is really this long-suffering land? Neither the soaked road, nor the yellowing birch, nor even my quiet companion, who, maybe, solved this mystery, but did not give me the answer" (1922: 112). Openly acknowledging Latgale's special status, A. Austrins emphasized that it is impossible to explain the special aura of the region, but it is clearly linked to the idea that Latgale has maintained the ancient spirit. This way, in A. Austrins's works about Latgale, myths about the lost Paradise acquire both time and space dimensions.

A special literary trend – the so-called positivism emerged in the 1930s in Latvia. It was not related to the positivism trend in philosophy of the 19th century. Nevertheless, it enlivened the idea that the basis of Latvian identity lay in its peasant culture, as it was there where eternal values were born. Positivism was also characterized by the definition of positive ethical and ideological values, in contrast to negativism generated by modernism which was dominant at that time in the intellectual society. Historians of literature think that the emergence of this movement might be related to the peculiarities of the national policy implemented by Karlis Ulmanis, head of the state at that time. At the end of the 1930s, the Latvian economy was booming, as Latvia successfully exported its agricultural produce. At that time, Latvian values were officially emphasized at the level of state policy, for example, there was the assimilation of surnames and toponyms in favour of the Latvian ones (Autoritārais Kārļa Ulmaņa režīms), etc. A historian Vita Zelce believes that K. Ulmanis's times in Latvian collective memory today symbolize "the lost Paradise". Thus, the phenomenon of multi-

layered nostalgia developed in Latvian culture, when one period of time actualized nostalgic memories of the earlier time, and at the same time, itself became the object of nostalgic reflection at a later time.

Such well-known Latvian writers and poets as Edvards Virza, Janis Veselis, Janis Grins, Janis Medenis, etc. express the values of positivism in Latvian literature. E. Virza's poem "Straumeni" (1933) written in prose is one of the most famous works of that time. The focus of this work is on rural farm life, shown in a cyclical time perspective over the four seasons. The four parts of the poem are named respectively: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The rhythm of the seasons and the relevant work on the farm form the plot of the poem. Every day here is compared to the eternal. The ordinary farm work here is done daily without any pathos, and it is repeated each and every year. This is how the image of an eternally unchanging, harmonious rural life is created, every element of which has its order and function. Spiritual life is closely connected with farm work, as people here believe in God; this life is impossible without faith. The cyclical flow of life also determines the fact that even death is not perceived as a tragedy – it is an integral part of life which is necessary to ensure the eternal harmony.

In the second half of the 20th century, nostalgia for the past was extremely vividly expressed in the literature of the Latvian Diaspora in exile. The existence abroad caused the idealization of the past and Latvian culture in general. However, literature in exile with its own peculiar features is a special subject for study. Therefore, we will not address this topic within the framework of our research.

The ideology of Soviet Latvia, as well as other Soviet republics, determined the fact that national features were not mentioned in the public discourse, including literary works. Nostalgia for the ancient past of the people, which is associated with the formation of national identity at that stage was not possible.

In the 1990s of the 20th century, when the Latvian statehood was regained, the past became relevant again. However, at that time, not mythological past became socially important, but the previous stage of existence of the Latvian state in the period 1920s–1930s of the 20th century. The so-called "Ulmanis's times" (the time when the country was ruled by K. Ulmanis) became one of the most important baselines in the development of the national state. It symbolized the freedom of people and the economic boom, which society wanted to achieve again in the near future. Melanija Vanaga's books *Dziesmu vara* (1996), *Iedzivoju pasaki* (1997), and *Saules gadi un noriets* (1998) represent this opinion.

However, at the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st centuries, Latvian literature acquired completely new trends of development related to the ideas of postmodernism. The nostalgia dimension is both emphasized and questioned; it has become the object of the game. There are attempts to plunge into the deepest levels of human consciousness, to summarise individual ideas about the past, to show the meaning in the nonsense, and the absurd nature of the flow of time. The idea of a happy life of the Latvian people in the mythical past is emphasized through

irony. Arvis Kolmanis (2018) in his story “Balade par latviesu zemnieku” uses well-known clichés about the past of Latvian people, and creates reminiscences on the classical Latvian literature. The protagonist in the story is a farmer Antans, a person with the way of thinking and language peculiar to his social class. Initially, there is a relatively harmonious picture of the past of peasant life in the story. But suddenly the situation changes, everything turns into an absurd, which is characteristic of postmodernism literature. Antans goes up into the air and flies away. During the flight, he looks at the Latvian fields and continues to reflect on the life of Latvian peasants and his fate. At the end of the story, Antans falls down on the tower of the St. Peter’s Cathedral in Riga but dies in his flight. A metaphor of the fate and nature of a Latvian peasant is created in such an absurd and ironic mood. In this way, the irony about nostalgic literature which depicts a happy life of peasants in the past is created, and the myth about the lost Paradise is deconstructed. Yet, in a way, the nostalgia dimension is preserved here.

However, in modern Latvian literature, there are also texts (mainly poetry) where reflection on the past is manifested in a direct form, the same way it was done at the beginning of the 20th century. This kind of works appear as a protest against the peculiarities of the modern development trends; these are peripheral works of the official history of Latvian literature. However, they are really popular with the public because of their simple style of writing and universal human ideas expressed in them.

Conclusion

Nostalgic urge to return to the ancient times, to the once lost Paradise which we analyse on the basis of literary works, describes vividly the nation’s collective consciousness, desires, and needs. The need for emphasizing the idealised ancient times in the nation’s consciousness is related to the most significant transitional stages in the development of the country, which are characterised by the increased attention to the issues of national identity. During difficult stages in history, nostalgia is a security mechanism that looks for stability in the past which we do not have in the present.

Alongside reflection and images peculiar for fiction, nostalgia helps to expand horizons, and to remember other times. Nostalgia for harmonious ancient times promotes the establishment of national identity, enhances the connection with the early stages of society’s development, with its origins; it forms moral ideals, preserves moral values of the past, and ensures the continuity of traditions.

It is important that in Latvian literature there is an ongoing nostalgia for the non-existent, fictional past, for the “myth of Paradise”. The research addresses the works which describe special features of the development of Latvian literature and show an important mechanism for the formation of national identity. Autobiographical works which mainly depict the past experienced during the life of the character, and works of

Latvian exile literature, where nostalgia was caused by being outside the home remained out of the scope of the research. These works may become the object for future research related to the manifestations of nostalgia in Latvian literature.

In each time period, nostalgic reflections in Latvian literature have different stylistic features determined by both the development of literature and type of culture, and socio-cultural and political situation. Nostalgia acquired new ways of artistic expression at the end of the 20th century – in modern literature when nostalgia manifested itself through parody, irony, game, and deconstruction of myths.

Analysing development processes of Latvian literature which were largely determined by the history of Latvian people and special features in the development of their national awareness, it is possible to bring forward the thesis about Latvians being a nostalgic nation. Starting with the period of formation of national literature and up to the present day, there are literary works that emphasize the longing for the idealized past. Some of these works are considered to be the peaks of Latvian literature, others became part of the history of literature. However, they all prove the significance of a nostalgic code in the Latvian people's consciousness. This significance was determined by the events in the historical development of the Latvian nation, such as the years of dependence, when it was necessary to preserve the idea of a bright past of the people in the national consciousness. This idea became the basis for the nation's survival. The New Latvians movement that laid foundations for Latvian literature and in their works emphasized the myth of the lost Paradise was another important factor for the viability of nostalgic ideas in Latvian culture. Apparently, Mitchell's (1998) statement that the unity and identity of community is based on nostalgic constructions can be attributed to the Latvian nation.

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