

“Provincializing” world literature: The role of translations in shaping 19th-century Latvian culture

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The concept of world literature is traditionally applied to the process in which literary texts cross national borders through translation, being and becoming available in major languages, thus gaining recognition on a larger scale as a desired added value (Damrosch 2009, 497). For so-called small literatures, translations into major languages become one of the principal markers in their attempts to “catch up” with other cultures while concomitantly trying to overcome their supposed marginality and “belated modernity” (Jusdanis 1991), caused by their belonging to areas that might be labelled as “semi-peripheral” (Wallerstein 2004) on the world literary map.

The aim of this article is to argue that the idea of world literature might be substantially extended by delving into the process of how literary texts of so-called large cultures are modified and provided with new meanings through their translation and reception. In our approach, we draw on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of “provincializing Europe”, which for him means to discuss “how universalistic thought was always and already modified by particular histories” (2008, xiv). Most importantly, in the process of the domestication of foreign texts, smaller cultures create specific and dynamic literary systems which, enriched by their own contribution, best respond to the preferences and needs of a particular society. By focusing on the 19th-century Latvian public sphere, we examine what additional facets major literary achievements can acquire by their transfer into other cultures, and, specifically, what impact they have on the development of Latvian letters. In a yet another important turn, we argue the importance of popular culture in shaping the horizon of expectations of the reading public, thereby leading to unexpected outcomes with important consequences for literature. The dominant trends of the long 19th century are productive for such an investigation as they reveal very complex paths toward the discovery of a new literary potential by an emerging culture. Eventually this not only contributes to the “world republic of letters”, but also shapes it through the process of cultural transfer, providing both prestigious and lesser-known texts of source cultures with additional meanings.

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In order to trace these issues, we explore different patterns of how literary translations into the Latvian language worked throughout the 19th century. The main body of the paper is organized into three parts. Initially we focus on the early decades of the 19th century, tracing the transformations in the traditional role played by Baltic German intellectuals and *literati*, who had been the first interpreters of foreign texts for Latvian audiences. Especially important at that time were discussions on the role the local population and Latvian language can achieve in a society that are accompanied by an introduction of new types of literary texts. In the next step, we take a closer look at the rising agency of ethnic Latvians while following the translation trends of the mid-19th century that include the spread of popular literature linked to the so-called reading revolution. This period also reveals tensions in the literary field caused by the appearance of yet another type of actors, the first generation of university educated ethnic Latvians, who for economic and intellectual competition argue with the Baltic Germans. In a parallel move, this process stimulates attempts to translate major European literary achievements. In the third part, the historical understanding is concluded by a discussion of the situation during the *fin de siècle*, when Latvian culture experiences a booming development, stimulated by social mobility, economic transformations, the rise of periodicals, widespread discussions on literary matters, and a significant improvement in terms of the quantity and quality of translations. In the final theoretical considerations, we summarize the above trends in order to discover a more general pattern of 19th-century cultural dynamics and make the case for the importance of small literatures in stimulating the diversity of world literature, not only through their own direct contributions, but also in ways that provide new contexts for the reception of a variety of translated texts (Glesener and Kohns 2022, 30). Following in the footsteps of Edward Said's concept of "traveling theories" (1983, 226–247), we propose to describe this process in terms of "traveling literatures" that as a consequence broaden the traditional idea of world literature through provincializing it. Our aim in the conclusion is also to provide a tentative pattern of literary systems characteristic of small cultures.

THE ROLE OF BALTIC GERMANS IN SHAPING EARLY 19TH-CENTURY LATVIAN LITERARY CULTURE

In the wake of the liberal reforms carried out by Tsar Alexander I in the first quarter of the 19th century, serfdom was abandoned in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire with a predominantly Latvian-speaking population, in 1817 in Courland and in 1819 in Livland (which also included a considerable proportion of Estonians). These developments further stimulated a discussion on the role of Latvians in the community, still forcefully segregated into different classes, an issue already voiced in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789 by representatives of the radical wing of the Enlightenment in the Baltic provinces, such as Garlieb Merkel (1769–1850) and others (Taterka 1998). Taking into account that Baltic Germans represented the socially dominant class, it is not at all surprising that the first debates on the Latvians took place under the auspices of the *Literärisch-Praktische Bürgerverbindung zu Riga* (Riga Literary-Practical Citizens' Association) that was

founded in 1802 after the prototype of the Hamburg Patriotic Society (Hollander 1927, 2). In 1815, the Courland Society for Literature and Art was founded with the intention of creating a local forum for the discussion of current scientific and social problems. The Society also discussed what kind of future prospects should be put forward for the free Latvians and Estonians (Stradiņš 2009, 372). The activities mentioned signal the rising interest in the Latvian population and an effort to predict ways in which a future integration of Society in the provinces might take place. It became increasingly obvious that these developments had to include activities promoting the use of the Latvian language, which had become one of the aspirations of the newly-created institutions. In contrast to an earlier stage of the development of Latvian secular literature linked to private initiatives, the beginning of the 19th century was clearly marked by the coordinated efforts of Baltic German societies that took an active role in publishing and distributing Latvian books, calendars, and periodicals.

In 1817, the Courland Society for Literature and Art “in a widely-attended meeting came to the conclusion that knowledge should be presented to Latvians in the coating of religion, that the supplements to calendars should be supplied by pastors, that a newspaper should be published in Latvian with the purpose of educating the people” (Apinis 1977, 111).¹ In 1819 the Society organized a discussion on the Germanisation of Latvians which acquired the appellation of “the Jelgava Debates” (Biemann 1905, 61–71; Šķiņķe 1996, 85–90). This marked the beginning of a transition to an intense exchange of opinions about the future of the Latvians. The discussion had been sparked by the notes accompanying Karl Gottlob Sonntag’s theses about taking notice of the Latvian people and elevating them. In 1817 these had been complemented by the secretary of the Society, Magnus Georg von Paucker, writing that there are two ways

of making Latvians happy. Either you have to climb right down to them, talk to them in their own language to win their trust – then you have to pass over to them that whole mass of knowledge that we have accumulated over the centuries, or else we have to try to turn them into Germans, our brothers, by building schools where they can learn German. Won’t we ourselves benefit from that – seeing that their political chains will soon fall? The political victory of our predecessors should be concluded with a moral victory and we should give the Latvians the benefits that they have been deprived of for so long. (As quoted in Šķiņķe 1996, 85)

In the context of this variety of opinions, it is important to notice a considerable diversification of the literary production of Baltic Germans in the following decade with regard to newly attempted translations into the Latvian language. An especially fascinating case is provided by the pastor Karl Hugenberger, who compiled an anthology of his poetry translations under the title *Derrigs laika kaweklis* (Useful pastime I–II, 1826–1827). This anthology was significant as an attempt at the emancipation of Latvian literary culture and its liberation from moral didacticism. Among the translations accomplished by Hugenberger, there were renderings of poetry by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, challenging the limits of understanding of what was suitable for Latvian readers and just as importantly, the terms

of the proposed conversation. To grasp the full meaning of this move, it is important to contrast Hugenberg's efforts with two Latvian translations of Schiller's *An die Freude* (1786), already accomplished during the 1800s by Karl Gotthard Elverfeld and Alexander Johann Stender. Both Elverfeld and Stender still explicitly used Schiller's complex poem to extract a moral lesson for the Latvian peasants (Grudule 2006, 24–26). Hugenberg, in his turn, attempted primarily to demonstrate the potential of the Latvian language as an important precondition of its development. At the same time, he was also interested in the appreciation of the aesthetic value of literature. Hugenberg's anthology can still be primarily seen in dialogue with his Baltic German compatriots; however, from a historical perspective his effort marked a new step toward the reception of world literature.

Despite the fact that Hugenberg's poetic achievements were not fully appreciated at the time, and his translations did not acquire lasting popularity among wider circles of the reading public, which might also be due to the limits of the underdeveloped Latvian language at the period, this was an extremely important step in substantially widening the spectrum of literary texts available in Latvian and, in addition, it served as a role model for the young generation of authors who became active in the 1850s. Finding himself at the crossroads between the institutional undertakings of Baltic German societies and individual activities, Hugenberg's efforts, on the one hand, can be interpreted within the context of the literary praxis of the late popular Enlightenment in the Baltics, while, on the other, they testify to the growing possibilities of provincializing world literature; the poems of Goethe and Schiller in his translations acquire a different functionality if compared to the source culture. These early efforts in shaping a complex literary system in the Latvian language by going beyond religious and practical texts and paying greater attention to the aesthetic qualities of literature were undertaken by those Baltic Germans, who not only were contemporaries of Goethe, but, like Hugenberg, had the opportunity of meeting the great poet and promoter of "world literature".

MID-19TH CENTURY TRANSLATIONS INTO LATVIAN AND THE FIRST TENSIONS BETWEEN POPULAR LITERATURE AND ELITE CULTURE

Alongside significant new trends that have to be mainly attributed to economic history, Latvian cultural developments in the mid-19th century were closely linked to the changes in reading and writing practices. The transformations in reading habits can be compared to the processes that characterize German-speaking countries from the last quarter of the 18th century on, and have been designated as the "reading revolution" (Engelsing 1978), characterized by a move from the tradition of intensive reading of a limited number of texts to that of extensive reading. In the Latvian case a substantial democratization of reading as well as the growing importance of secular texts were especially important, as was the impact of popular literature.

In the mid-19th century, the perception of reading among the Latvians changed significantly; following an initial period when reading became the daily habit of a relatively small group of people, the so-called *Vielleser*, or avid readers, the number

of people, who at least to a certain degree developed an interest in literature, grew rapidly and exponentially. This process was influenced by the practice of reading aloud at Latvian homes with people simultaneously being involved in some household practices. Most importantly, reading as a part of religious experience or as a utilitarian pastime gave way to a new concept of reading, consisting to a considerable extent of entertainment and pleasure that also explains the impact of popular stories in the still predominantly rural Latvian society.

An interesting and characteristic case is provided by a localized story, *Genovefa*, by Ansis Leitāns published in 1845 that acquired widespread popularity in a Latvian version. This example demonstrates the role of avid readers and their translation choices; it also reveals unexpected facets of the impact of popular literature. Based on Medieval Latin narrative, later transferred to other cultural milieus in the 17th century, the tale of Genovefa became part of the so-called Blue Library intended for French popular audiences. Leitāns's use of an early 19th-century German source, a book by Christoph Schmid, a German Catholic priest, published in 1810, was affected by the 18th-century interest in "Robinsonade" motifs, inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Somewhat earlier, in 1824, Defoe's novel had been adapted into Latvian by the pastor Christoph Reinhold Girgensohn, using a German source text, *Robinson der Jüngere* (1779), by Joachim Heinrich Campe that added a didactic aspect of ethical evaluation. Schmid's story intertwined a strong emphasis on the moral aspects, sentimental affection and twisted plot, and due to this combination, it became so popular that it has been described as one of the first Latvian bestsellers (Limane 1985, 144). While the aesthetic ambitions of mid-19th-century popular fiction were rather modest, its role in creating a modern reading public was crucial, and there was a rapid expansion of readers after the publication of *Genovefa* (Johansons 1953, 65).

For our purposes in this paper, it is especially important to notice the echo made by acquaintance with this text in memories of the next generation of Latvian authors. For example, one of the two authors of the first Latvian novel, *Mērnīeku laiki* (The times of the surveyors, 1879), Matīss Kaudzīte, after a vivid description of the impact made by Leitāns's book, refers to it as a role model for literary experience: "Now and again a new or different book would arrive at home, similar to *Genovefa*, which we all then read, one after the other, with great enthusiasm for the 'true' events taking place in the stories" (1924, 67). While working on their own novel later, the brothers Matīss and Reinis Kaudzītes tried to incorporate characteristic devices of popular literature, such as a complex and intriguing plot, into their literary effort, thus also blurring the borders between popular and elite culture (Klaustiņš 1926). Importantly enough, *Genovefa* was being read in accordance with religious reading habits: just like sermons and the Bible, it was read out loud. Their experience of listening to such performative events in its turn motivated Latvian authors of the second half of the 19th century to make widespread use of various rhetorical devices referring to popular literature but already employed for different purposes.

The above observations illustrate that, while the social and educational basis of the Latvian population in the middle of the 19th century remained relatively lim-

ited, through the process of reception and interpretation of certain highly popular stories, their role in Latvian society was different from that acquired in the source culture. These texts stimulated the process of self-evaluation in the wider circles of readership throughout the 19th century. Therefore, the passive role traditionally ascribed to popular forms of art was often revised in the name of social progress and, somewhat later, national mobilization. The attempts of the first generation of Latvian authors active in the 1840s and early 1850s, while mostly following Baltic German literary practices established during the period of the popular Enlightenment, reveal conscious attempts of transferring knowledge to their readership by using the tools at their disposal, and gradually even showing some interest in translating elite works of world literature (Apinis and Silabriede 1987). At the same time, despite the elitist rejection of popular literature, the latter remained a rich depository of beloved and recognizable imagery, which could be recycled and enriched with new meanings.

The steady expansion of popular literature occurred simultaneously with the extension of an educated middle class that rose with the attempts of young and university-trained Latvian intellectuals at creating elite culture, a tendency that in the 19th century became noticeable in the whole of East Central Europe and was linked to the rise of a nationalist agenda (Leerssen 2018, 183–214). In the Latvian context this task was undertaken by representatives of the so-called movement of New Latvians, who made an explicit effort to move away from the dominant tradition of Baltic German writing in the Latvian language. It is significant to scrutinize their aims in order to answer the important question in the processes of cultural transfer, namely, “which individuals (scholars, publishers, sovereigns, etc.) or institutions (academies, publishing houses, universities, etc.) decided that certain texts should be made accessible in their own language, and what were the underlying interests (academic, educational, political, commercial, etc.)?” (Stockhorst 2010, 23). The strategic orientation of New Latvians toward separation of elite and popular culture, and preference for the former, might be seen as a strong ideological message of the newly educated group ready to speak in the name of the social as well as cultural aspirations of their nation. As Ivars Ijabs puts it,

they started to develop their own anti-German nationalism, which, on the one hand, often imitated German models, but on the other – challenged the supposed universalism of German culture. These attempts to build a German-type high culture on the basis of an “inferior”, colonized culture provoked loud complaints about hybridity and harmfulness, voiced by Baltic Germans, who increasingly asserted their colonizer identity and cultural superiority. (2014, 90)

The most characteristic example in this process was provided by a collection of world poetry, *Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas* (Little songs translated for the Latvian language, 1856) by Juris Alunāns, notable as a turning point in the development of Latvian national literature as well as for its stormy reception. In the introduction to the book, Alunāns himself formulated his task as follows: “By translating these little songs, [...] I wanted to show how powerful and pleasant the Latvian language is” (1981, 7). Featuring translations of some of Goethe’s (and in a later expanded edition also Schiller’s) poems alongside authors of the *Vormärz* period in Germa-

ny, this publication became a kind of political manifesto as the nurturing of literature in the Latvian language was considered not only an aesthetic problem, but also a political one. Therefore this small volume, distributed at the time in about 500 copies, became a significant milestone and an object of severe criticism from the conservative wing of Baltic Germans. This exacerbated reaction also signalled an important transformation of the addressee of this publication as Alunāns did not rely on the former elite but rather was speaking to the educated part of his own compatriots. It was this change in the direction of literary communication and the functionality of literary texts that was most important in the broader context of ideological and economic aspirations of the New Latvians.

Following in the footsteps of Alunāns, the literary experience and taste of the Latvian public gradually developed, and by the 1890s had already changed significantly with the educated elites seeking new reference points in their cultural activities. At the same time, however, the blend of idealism and melodramatic imagination, characteristic of popular literature, maintained its appeal to a wide range of the reading public and was accordingly made use of by numerous important writers.

THE EXPANSION OF TRANSLATIONS DURING THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

The translator of *Genovefa*, Ansis Leitāns, was the first ethnic Latvian to become a newspaper editor when *Mājas Viesis* (Home guest) began publication in 1856. At the time, it was only the third newspaper published in Latvian, but during the second half of the 19th century the numbers were steadily on the rise. A significant turning point was the publication of the first literary periodicals that started in the 1880s. They not only stimulated the creation of new texts, but also served as avenues for literary discussions on the topical issues of the late 19th century.

Among the most widely discussed topics there was once again that of the future prospects of Latvian literature. Stimulated by the interest in folklore gathering, initially envisaged by Baltic Germans and later taken over by the Riga Latvian Society, established in 1868, one of the current trends had become that of employing patterns of folk poetry in literature. This move can partially be explained as an effort to establish a narrative of national history, with epic poetry being considered to be one of the main preconditions for the qualifications of Latvians as a culture-nation. Especially instrumental in this process was Jēkabs Lautenbahs, a Latvian language teacher at the University of Tartu (now Estonia), who provided specific examples related to folk poetry in his poem *Zalkša līgava* (Zalktis's bride, 1880) and, eventually, in the attempt at a large-scale epic in his *Niedrīšu Vidvuds* (Vidvuds of Niedrīši, 1891). Lautenbahs was even more vocal in polemical treatises directed against his opponents. The most characteristic in this regard was his dispute with the young Latvian teacher soon to become one of the leading literary historians, Teodors Zeiferts. Their exchange of opinions in 1888, subsequently familiar as a discussion on "the poet and his time", was explicitly about the contemporariness of the folklore use, and, even more so, about the necessity for a poet to follow literary trends of his own period more closely. Heading in this direction, Zeiferts involved, and somewhat later significantly developed, ideas first expressed by such major European critics as Hippolyte

Taine and Georg Brandes. Entering the 1890s, Latvian literary circles were fully aware of the necessity to intervene in the debates regarding relevant social and aesthetic issues. The study of literatures in major European languages and translation of their most important achievements, both in the sense of “classics” and of “masterpieces” (Damrosch 2003, 15) became a precondition for being able to develop the quality of literary production.

It is fascinating to trace the growing number of translations from European literatures as well as the contexts in which these efforts were published. Once again, following the pattern already introduced by the first translations of Goethe and Schiller in the early 19th century, there was the practice of several translations of one and the same text of major literary quality being provided (Volkova 2008, 426–427). However, matching the significant transformations in the literary field as well as the growing demands of readers, these parallel translations, accomplished by the principal literary figures of the time, including Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Rainis, Aspazija, and Jānis Poruks, signal the growing complexity of literary communication. On the one hand, they are to be seen as a mutual intellectual challenge stimulating the new generation of Latvian writers, while on the other, their renderings of world literature try to reach much broader public circles than envisaged by Hugenberg, or expected by Alunāns. The Latvian readers of the late 19th century were keen to appreciate the aesthetic quality of German authors, while at the same time evaluating the potential relevance of their ideas in contemporary society.

Another remarkable feature in this period is the multicultural nature of Latvian literature. All the major literary figures mentioned above were fluent in German, the language in which they exchanged letters and wrote some of their early texts. The most characteristic case was possibly that of Blaumanis, who started his literary career writing in German and later kept the practice of translating his principal works from one language into another, thus enlarging the scope of the potential readership even though the German language versions of his texts only reached international audiences much later (2017). Nevertheless, Blaumanis’s literary output manifestly testifies to the multicultural environment of Riga as the largest city in the Baltic provinces and points to the diverse readership the authors were eager to address.

A major step toward appropriating elite literature for the Latvian readers was made with the publication in 1897 of the widely discussed translation of Goethe’s *Faust* by Rainis and Aspazija. The corresponding debates refer back to the problems raised earlier while posing a question as to whether the Latvians are ready to understand such complex works of art. In the context of the time, these discussions obviously pointed to the necessity of the reception of world literature as a contribution not only to the intellectual capacity, but also to the aesthetic refinement of Latvian society. Rainis himself later made good use of the knowledge that he acquired by translating the poetry and dramas of Goethe, Schiller, and other major authors in creating texts that follow established literary models, while at the same time challenging the expectations of his readers, often portraying the protagonists of his plays against the backdrop of world-scale conflicts. Characteristic in this regard is the biblical plot of his tragedy *Jāzeps un viņa brāļi* (Joseph and his brothers, 1919) almost immedi-

ately translated into German and published in 1921, and thus possibly even noticed by Thomas Mann while he was envisaging his world-famous novel (Füllmann 2021, 45–46).

Whereas the discussions with regard to the translation of *Faust* still predominantly circled around either linguistic aspects or the social relevance of the content, this obviously did not seem sufficient to the next generation of Latvian authors, who in the first decade of the 20th century consciously moved toward modernist experiments. Besides the French and Scandinavian authors most often praised by this generation, one major figure linking different generations was Friedrich Nietzsche, who was already familiar in the 1890s, but whose works were made more widely available through the 1908 Latvian translation of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus spoke Zarathustra*, 1883–1885). Its translator Vilis Plūdons was also a modernist poet, schoolteacher, and author of textbooks, and thus an exemplary case of the polyliterariness and polyfunctionality of authors representing a small literature (Glesener 2021, 60). The diversity of approaches was at the same time still mirrored by the continued and innovative application of the patterns of popular literature in fin-de-siècle Latvian literary culture.

CONCLUSION: LITERARY SYSTEMS OF SMALL CULTURES AND THEIR POTENTIAL IN SHAPING THE NOTION OF WORLD LITERATURE

The above aspects allow us to argue that 19th-century Latvian literature, following the terms elaborated in a related context by Marco Juvan, endeavor on the one hand to place world literature in the emerging national literary system, while they try on the other to incorporate domestic literature within already elaborated literary models (2012, 28). This also corresponds to the ideas of Dionýz Ďurišin who argues that “the interliterary process starts with national literatures and proceeds from them to world literature in a series of intermediate stages” (Domínguez, Saussy, and Villanueva 2015, 32). A retrospective evaluation of the research material dealt with in the present article allows us to distinguish several important aspects which impact Latvian literary culture in the process of its systemic formation.

First, we notice that cultural transfer into the Latvian language is initiated by ethnically unrelated Baltic German intellectuals, who in their pedagogical aims and aesthetic aspirations make use of the established models of German culture, while in this process they also adapt and expand well-established trends of the popular Enlightenment in order to reach 19th-century Latvian audiences.

Secondly, an important new facet is introduced by the translations of popular literature accomplished by the first ethnic authors, a trend that is stimulated by the changing habits of reading among the Latvians and helps to foster them further. While the reception contexts of popular literature are closely linked to everyday practices, characteristic of a particular milieu, their growing familiarity provides seemingly peripheral texts with considerable added value important for the further elaboration of an inclusive literary system. In a related development, original literary texts that mix the strategies of entertainment and serious purposes start to appear, thus signalling potential differentiation of the functionality of literature.

Thirdly, the aspirations to create a Latvian elite culture are gradually modelled on examples of world literature that include translations of literary classics, to be later joined by contemporary “masterpieces”. The publications of these texts often raise anxious debates in society, first of a political nature with Baltic Germans recognizing the danger to their patronizing attitude toward the Latvians, “not quite” prepared for “that whole mass of knowledge”, and later with regard to the social impact and aesthetic quality of translations. What is indisputable, however, is that canonical texts of world literature help Latvian writers to widen their own horizon of thought, while concomitantly adapting world literature for its reception and further elaboration within a specifically shaped literary system. Innovative aesthetic challenges that display a desire to follow potentially “universal” rules of art thus also become context-specific. Correspondingly, our analysis echoes related observations summarized by Stephanie Stockhorst: “In translation, texts do not just change their language, but first and foremost their cultural frame of reference. Thus significant transformations inevitably occur in the course of their de- and re-contextualisation” (2010, 23).

In addition, two aspects not further elaborated here should also be taken into account while outlining the newly emerging literary system: the importance of mutual translations among small languages advances significantly around the turn of the 20th century; and important achievements of Latvian culture, such as the attempts of Latvian writers in the German language, also provide locally manifest versions of transgressing the language borders that acquire the capacity to be transferred to other contexts, thus bringing into motion a reverse reception process.

It is through these latter cases that world literature, first being placed and elaborated into the literary system of the Baltic provinces, returns to the “world”. However, what is especially important to recognize here is the fact that cultural transfer is working in much more complex ways than texts simply moving from large literatures to smaller ones, and, in relatively rare cases, moving in the other direction. Provincializing world literature principally involves the diversity of reception working in various directions, complex “traveling literatures”, with every text that crosses language borders making itself present in various, often underrated and not sufficiently explored new contexts that eventually add innovative facets to both local and global literary developments. In this process each culture, however small it may be, creates its own literary system through which it also becomes an active agent in changing the content of the concept of world literature.

NOTES

¹ Translations from Latvian language sources here and elsewhere by Terēze Svilane.

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"Provincializing" world literature: The role of translations in shaping 19th-century Latvian culture

World literature. Translations. Cultural transfer. Baltic German literary activities. Reading revolution. Latvian culture. Popular culture. Elite literature. Literary system of small literatures.

The concept of world literature is traditionally applied to the process in which literary texts cross national borders in the process of translation, thus getting a desired added value to be recognized on a larger scale. While fully admitting the importance of translations from small literatures to the languages of more widespread communication, our aim in this article is to demonstrate that broad circulation of translated texts in smaller languages create fascinating patterns due to their specific interpretation in local contexts that expand reception perspectives and change the terms of interpretation of world literature. The complexity of these moves is traceable through the process in which translations of popular culture are integrated into 19th-century Latvian literary activities alongside recognized classics, explicitly setting an aim of fostering the creation of a national canon. On the other hand, elite works of European literature are "provincialized" in the process of domesticating them alongside other texts of lower literary quality. The translations from both elite and popular culture thus contribute to the rise of Latvian letters, expanding the limits of the potentially influential corpus of texts that can cross the borders of one national literature. With the use of specific examples, we follow the interplay of popular and elite translations that gradually transform 19th-century Latvian literature and create a comprehensive literary system representative of a small culture.

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