

Walking through the text: The representation of mobility in late 19th-century Latvian fiction

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In 1879, the storyline of the first original Latvian novel, *Mērnīeku laiki* (The times of the surveyors) by Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte, begins with a walk through the countryside. An aging woman, Annuža, accompanies a small orphan girl as they stroll toward a parish school which the little one is about to enter. This walk and its context provide a useful background for the reflection of bygone years that is further developed in their conversation with the teacher where some important events of the recent decades are touched upon retrospectively. In its turn the next chapter introduces the main plot line that follows those earlier events which are picked up once again at the moment when the peasant family to which Annuža belongs slowly wends its way towards its new household. The opening chapters of the novel thus directly link future prospects with a recollection of past experiences, employing the rhythm of walking through the countryside as the narrative basis. The two walks are also crucial for the framing of the plot as they span two different moments in time. Many social and economic transformations happen in the course of the action, while in reality they do not bring any major changes into the lives of some characters. This is the principal tension of the novel that is built on the reflection of different roles played by various social and ethnic groups amidst the change. 19th-century Latvian literature traces this complexity from various angles with some characters fluctuating among several identities and quite often finding themselves somewhere in-between, thus making these cases especially fascinating.

The surveyors' times in the title of the Kaudzītes's novel refer to the 1850s, when there are major transformations taking place in the rural region of Piebalga (today's northeast Latvia). The previous borders are being radically redrawn as peasants are provided an opportunity to start the long process of buying out farmsteads for themselves from the local landlords. This is accompanied by a radical change in morals as for some people any means to acquire better parts of the land now appear to be ac-

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ceptable. But in fact these tensions mark only the initial step in the steady flow of major shifts in society and are accompanied by distortion and reassessment of the ways of belonging to the local environment. The social transformations steadily advance during the second half of the 19th century, and, as the literature of the period makes an attempt to register the rapidity and inevitability of the respective changes by delving into the rising conflicts, it consciously or unconsciously also strives to slow down the pace of this development. A literal manifestation of such an approach is the focus on minute details of the surrounding milieu which can be appreciated only at a close distance. On the one hand, this demonstrates a heightened intensity in the reception of the local environment while, on the other, it displays an inevitable alienation that is becoming more and more obvious and painful. The causes and effects of these trends are the focus of this investigation.

In the main body of the article, I first introduce some contextual aspects that reflect on a methodological approach as well. In the following discussion, the focus is on two characteristic trends in late 19th-century Latvian fiction. First, I scrutinize the representation of microstructures of specific localities, such as peasant farmstead and landlord's manor, in novellas by Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908), one of the most highly respected realist authors. Then I move on to discuss how larger patterns of social transformation are dealt with and represented in a novel by another important Latvian writer, Andrievs Niedra (1871–1942). The article concludes with a brief reflection on the retrospective representation of spatiality and sense of place in *fin-de-siècle* Latvian literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article approaches late 19th-century Latvian fiction from a historical and comparative perspective. One of its important aspects is the role of 19th-century nation-building and romantic nationalism that affected many parts of the continent (Leerssen 2018). On the one hand, this is the age of consolidation of large empires that use fictional works to cement the identities of their citizens and establish borders, with their power also being extended into ruling colonial possessions in adjacent territories and/or overseas (Hobsbawm 1987; Moretti 1998). At the same time, romantic nationalism also inspires numerous stateless peoples, especially in East-Central Europe, to strive for the strengthening of their status and building national identities of their own (Leerssen 2006). Social and national aspects are closely linked in the revolutionary years of 1848 to 1851 as well as in subsequent periods (Neubauer 2004). Especially important in this context is the fact that some of the European empires are complex and multi-national as are the Austro-Hungarian and Russian ones. There are ethnic groups, such as the Ruthenians/Ukrainians, that are living under difficult conditions and split between the two empires, in both cases being subject to several layers of social as well as economic and linguistic discrimination. The effort to establish their belonging in this case cannot be described as a straightforward move toward the formation of national self-consciousness. Rather it is a complex identity search taking place

on the crossroads between traditional and modern societies, the accustomed environment and social mobility, taking into account various ethnic perspectives as well (Hrytsak 2018).

To a considerable extent, a similar diversity is characteristic of 19th-century identity formation in the Baltic provinces of the Russian empire (Daija and Kalnačs 2022a; Kasekamp 2018; Kalnačs et al. 2017). Until about 1850, the Latvians were still almost unanimously defined not by their national belonging, but were simply characterized as peasants, a socially subjugated group dependent on the local German landowners while also being subaltern subjects of Russian imperial rule. The situation gradually changed in the second half of the century with Latvians acquiring agency and moving toward social and national self-awareness. Already in the 1850s, the generation of intellectuals referred to as New Latvians laid the foundations for the creation of Latvian high culture that was considered an important precondition to boost self-confidence and aspire to social mobility (Ijabs 2014). Despite these top-down efforts, on the level of everyday experience social divisions between the landlords and peasants remained as well as the growing inequality among the Latvians caused by the economic changes due to the possibility of acquiring their own property after the abolishment of serfdom. This segregation among the Latvians is one of the principal themes in the Kaudzītes's novel. At the same time, there were numerous cases that displayed identities in-between as many of the educated Latvians had acquired their knowledge through German culture and language, which at times they continued to use in mutual communication and literary texts. The growing number of translations testifies to the necessity of creating an appropriate context for new aesthetic endeavours (Daija and Kalnačs 2022b). The protest of the generation of New Latvians against German cultural superiority had been ideologically motivated, but in practice things remained much more complex as the examples of late 19th-century fiction and authors' positions demonstrate.

The case studies that follow have also been inspired by and carried out taking into account the perspective of the so-called spatial turn in the humanities with a particular concentration on the representation of place (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 211–243). Latvian literature of the 1880s and 1890s pays great attention to social and economic transformations often approached through minute description of changing everyday milieus. The authors often adhere to traditional localities with important aspects of wider temporal and spatial changes being reflected through scrupulous observation of the transformation of place. This becomes obvious through the interpretation of particular details as well as in more dynamic ways, such as the estrangement of principal characters from ordinary living conditions, and border crossings between different semantic fields (Mahler 2015, 24). The authors' position can at times be characterized as an in-between one as they delve into the inevitable changes and their impact on the mobility of individual characters and society-at-large, while at the same time they reflect the difficulties to adapt.

THE PEASANTS' FARMSTEAD, THE LANDLORD'S MANOR, AND THE CHANGING SENSE OF PLACE IN LATVIAN LITERATURE

Major social shifts in late 19th-century Latvian society that are comparable to other East-Central European territories find their representation in Latvian literature of the 1890s that pays great attention to social and economic transformations often expressed through the description of characteristic details of the changing environment. A particular aspect of this process is one that links authors' experience to the increasingly multicultural as well as socially differentiated milieus.

Characteristically, Rūdolf Blaumanis started his literary career writing in German, and later kept the practice of translating his main works from one language into another, thus enlarging the scope of his potential readership, even though the German language versions of his texts only reached international audiences considerably later (Blaumanis 2017). Nevertheless, Blaumanis's literary output reflects his multicultural environment and points toward the diverse readership he was eager to address (Kalnačs and Füllmann 2016).

In order to trace the spatial relations between rural landscapes, peasant homestead and landlord's manor, I will concentrate on two of Blaumanis's novellas both published in 1898, *Salna pavasari* (Spring frost) and *Andriksons*. Whereas in most of his work the narrative unfolds from the inside of a peasant farmstead (the departure point usually being a room or the courtyard), the two texts mentioned take a different perspective. They either at first portray the farmstead as seen from a certain distance, or abandon its description almost altogether. Thus the traditional daily habits are challenged and, instead of the careful depiction of daily routines, narrative turning points provide an important aspect of the perception and interpretation of the place.

The novella *Salna pavasari* begins on a spring morning when a young lad, Andrs, is working in the field. He is anxiously waiting for the breakfast that is supposed to be brought by a young girl, Liena, whom he is fond of. In a beautifully conceived visual image, the narrative follows her appearance as she walks down the hillside towards the boy. The surrounding landscape in one of fresh green, and the joyful dialogues between Andrs and Liena match the pastoral mood of the 19th-century rural milieu seen through the eyes of a young would-be couple, their relationship partly immersed in the melodramatic imagination of popular literature of the period. In his novella, however, Blaumanis radically challenges this mode of representation. As the girl leaves the field at the end of the episode, the second part of the novella is told in a much gloomier mood.

This part starts with Liena's entry into the yard of the farmstead, traditionally a place of relatively safe and ordered routines. However, she is at once confronted with an unexpected situation as the old neighbour Mālnieks, a very rich man, has come to ask for her hand. The familiar rooms into which Liena now enters appear to her as totally different and uncanny, and her bodily response is that of an almost total stiffness. Characteristically, "the layout of the rooms or the relations between the interior and exterior often determine the plot" (Tally 2019, 97). The lively outdoor encounter with Andrs is replaced by an unconscious submission to the oppressive lure not only of the old man but of his wealth. Mālnieks's well-calculated and

at the same time menacingly monotonous talk becomes the main instrument in his strategy to confuse Liena's mind. The large room where the two are left alone loudly echoes his seductive phrasing. The whole scene leads to Liena losing her healthy judgement and common sense, and this change of mind takes the most important turn in her move toward the window through which she observes Mālnieks's nearby property, metaphorically represented by the red roof of his house that stands for his wealth and power. The scene is resolved swiftly, and, when slightly later Andrs enters the house, Mālnieks and Liena are being congratulated by the rest of the household members. The sudden reversal in fortunes testifies to the troubled times and leads to a different appreciation of familiar spaces.

In the novella *Andriksons*, Blaumanis challenges the traditional ways of portraying a rural community in a different manner. Once again, the reader is removed from the relative safety of a traditional peasant homestead as the opening scene takes place in the landlord's manor. Andriksons, one of the peasants who rents a small piece of land from the nobleman, has come to the manor to explain why he has cut down some of the trees on his land that according to the law belong to the manor. However, as the peasant explains to the young and only recently settled landlord, he considers the trees a heritage that his father had preserved for him. The conversation turns into a heated dispute, and at the end the peasant leaves the manor in a rage (Kalnačs 2022b, 67–73).

The author carefully builds up this scene also from the spatial point of view by positioning both men in a liminal situation. The landlord usually talks to peasants in the hallway; however, having heard from his late father that Andriksons is one of the most educated among his class, he allows the conversation to take place in the antechamber of his workroom. Thus to a certain extent the landlord signals a potentially respectful conversation, while at the same time he restricts the possibility for the peasant to stay on an equal footing, since the landlord keeps himself at a safe distance by staying behind a large table. This arrangement contributes to the uncertainty of the peasant who in this situation feels that he is considered and treated like being almost the same but not quite (Füllmann 2021, 92). In an apt description by the humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, important for building up spatial structures is “the posture and structure of the human body, and the relations (whether close or distant) between human beings. Man, out of his intimate experience with his body and with other people, organizes space so that it conforms with and caters to his biological needs and social relations” (1977, 34).

In his novella, Blaumanis pays attention both to socially determined stereotypes as well as to features of individual character. It is one of Blaumanis's great contributions to 19th-century Latvian literature that he is able to provide an insight into the landlord's mode of thinking. The landlord belongs to the social strata usually perceived only from a distance; by delving into his response, Blaumanis deepens the psychological insights the novella provides considerably. The anger of the landlord gradually rises as he starts to appreciate the self-confidence of the peasant. However, the socially structured difference in their roles that is underlined by the landlord's familiarity with and possession of the location also fosters his awareness of power. The anxiety

of the peasant, on the other hand, is exacerbated through his estrangement from the location in which he temporarily finds himself.

The subsequent events of the second part of the novella unfold after the excited and disappointed peasant leaves the manor. He only collects himself in the nearby forest that is also the property of the landlord. Following an external impulse, in a rebellious act Andriksons sets fire to the forest. As he sees the flames spreading rapidly, however, he immediately recognizes the potential scale of the disaster, and puts every effort in trying to find other people who could come to his aid and fight the fire.

Similarly to *Salna pavasari*, the two-part structure of *Andriksons* follows the course of the conflict by focusing on the representation of space. In both novellas, the narrative also “makes place, establishing relations among places and assigning various levels of significance to different spaces and places” (Tally 2019, 5). Thus it is the situation indoors that becomes unpleasant to the characters, Liena and Andriksons, respectively. For Liena, the borders between familiarity/unfamiliarity shift, since it is a well-known location that can become estranged from the character’s reception. In the latter case, the conflict escalates, when after leaving the manor Andriksons returns to the more familiar space of the forest where he even recollects some of his own childhood experience. At the same time, due to the extreme excitement he falls short of recognizing the traditional value of a familiar place that has been turned into a metaphorical opponent following the disagreement between him and the landlord. The feeling of liminality has even been aggravated in the process of border crossing from the manor to the forest as the experience in the former also influences the perception of the latter. Andriksons’s feelings clearly point to the bodily experience of the place linked to the aspects of mobility as exemplified in his desperate run through the burning forest with the narrative extending its scope beyond the limits of purely visual impression (Hones 2017, 107). The familiar once again turns into the uncanny.

MACROSTRUCTURES: THE COMPLEX BALTIC LANDSCAPES OF THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

While Blaumanis’s novellas display a fine-tuned sense of a particular place and show the changing relationships between the characters and their immediate environment, other late 19th-century Latvian authors were looking for possibilities to expand the scope of their representation. Various impulses are provided by the attempts to make use of the novel genre that scholarship has identified as especially important in relation to the experience of modernity, and instrumental in the process of consolidation of 19th-century visions of nationality and statehood (Watt 1957; Moretti 1998). From the perspective of spatiality, it is important “to think of novels as geographers in their own right, who generate geographies from within” (Brosseau 2017, 10). Andrievs Niedra, one of the most prominent Latvian writers of the late 19th century, attempts to explore the possibilities of the novel genre underrepresented in Latvian fiction (Kalnačs 2022a). In his classic study, *Latvian literature*, Andrejs Johansons points out that “Niedra’s shorter works of prose can be seen as studies for a large style composition” (1953, 217). Niedra’s novels provide a net of internally linked images

of social and historical mobility, but arguably the greatest achievement is his first novel, *Līduma dūmos* (The smoke of land clearing, 1899; Kalnačs 2015).

A number of themes explored there show an apt use of imaginative geographies (Said 1978). Mostly set in a rural landscape, *Līduma dūmos* covers many different locations including a peasant farmstead, different manors, a pastor's house, a church interior and a mill as well as displaying elaborate plans for the building of a glass factory. Literary critic Guntis Berelis points out that 19th-century Latvian literature usually focuses on a relatively restricted and closed space with its borders being drawn by a peasant farmstead, a church, a school, and a cemetery (1999). Niedra's novel includes many of these locations. However, the innovative strength of the narrative is determined by clearly foregrounding the tension among these different (and significantly expanded) places and the subjectivity of their reception.

The plot of the novel is kept together by following the interrelated histories of three brothers – an engineer, a novice priest, and a peasant – who are also involved in an existential struggle with the still dominant Baltic German nobility. Niedra pays attention to the attempts of the emerging Latvian middle class to position itself through an implementation of new spiritual ideals as well as an economic program introduced in the novel. The author also references so-called identities-in-between in the process of interaction among different social and ethnic groups in society (Daija and Kalnačs, 2020). Various border crossings are made painful due to the inability to fit into and to adapt to new locations, especially taking into account the role still played by the long-established Baltic German elite. In the upwardly mobile population, a growing estrangement from seemingly familiar places is dominant in the narrative.

Niedra's novel starts with a sermon given by a novice priest, Kārlis Strautmalis, awaiting his ordination. He is well aware of the potentially provocative nature of the speech he delivers which not only brings a reaction from conservative circles but, rather unexpectedly, initiates an internal split in his personality. The subsequent nervous strolling in the neighbourhood of the pastor's house reveals a complexity of feelings difficult to restrain. Another principal character, engineer Vilis Strautmalis, is much more intransigent than his brother as he pursues greater economic gains that would allow Latvians to establish themselves not only through the relentless work of tending the land, characteristic of his parents' generation, but also by way of industrial opportunities. In his attempts to promote the development of local business he is ready to take both mental and physical risks. The latter ones are exemplified by his adventurous walk through the swamp in order to explore the possibilities to drain the territory, and thus to adapt it to useful economic activity. In this process, the familiar landscape acquires threatening features and poses a challenge to the individual.

Another narrative juxtaposition is that between the largest city in the region, Riga, and the rural milieu where most of the events take place. In the novel Riga is shown as a divided and dividing location characterized by messy moves without the principal characters being able to get a sense of clearly identifiable places instead of the more familiar experience of walking in the countryside. Thus, the intensity of temporal

change toward the background of the transformations is implicitly shown in the spatial perception that reveals a gradual loss of the sense of place.

In *Liduma dūmos* Andrievs Niedra searches for ideas significant in the process of the development of Latvian national consciousness, looking for future philosophical, socio-political, and economic visions that are closely linked to psychological characterisations. The author's choice of the novel genre is significant because the novel not only pays attention to a variety of conflicts, but also implicitly allows for following the moves toward national, societal, and territorial consolidation. The imagined geographies are instrumental in the attempt to build up such a vision which, nevertheless, also remains haunted throughout the narrative.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING MOBILITY IN RETROSPECT

Late 19th-century Latvian literature devoted considerable attention to the representation of place that was taken up and transformed in the following decades. There are obvious links to earlier examples of Latvian prose in *Patrioti* (The patriots, 1912), the first attempt in Augusts Deglav's monumentally conceived novel cycle titled *Rīga* (Riga). The chronological starting point of the narrative is located in the 1860s, but contrary to the Kaudzītes's novel *Mērnīeku laiki* which tackles almost the same period, Deglav's work is conceptualized as a city text. Although Riga (as well as smaller cities) had previously remained relatively unexplored in Latvian literature, in 1912 *Patrioti* attempts to reconstruct its historical complexity. The tensions among the different social and ethnic groups in the city are also manifested in its real and imagined topography dominated by the opposition between the centre and the periphery. Looking at events through the eyes of the novel genre (Brosseau 2017, 17), the author expands the scope of the narrative in order to search for the roots of 19th-century social and ethnic conflicts in everyday scenes that establish individual identities in specific places, on the one hand, and retrospective generalizations, on the other.

Despite the conceptually introduced challenge to the established juxtaposition between the country and the city, *Patrioti* begins by an episode deeply rooted in narrative tradition. The protagonist of the novel, Pēteris Krauklītis, makes his way to Riga which he is going to explore. His walk is directed toward an unknown future, while at the same time the author is also looking back to the past fifty years interpreted in his novel in light of the steady rise of the social prospects of the Latvian population.

The case studies in this article testify to the different ways in which late 19th- and early 20th-century Latvian authors responded to the challenge of dealing with changing living conditions seen and interpreted from the perspectives of various characters. It is possible to argue that place has an impact on people's lives as well as on the way these lives are conceptualized and understood. Therefore, it is certainly important "to think about the complex and bidirectional relationship between place and writing in geopoetic terms: the place which informs writing and its interpretation, and writing as a practice that 'contains' the place, and that gives it form and meaning" (Brosseau 2017, 18). One possibility to experience place in ways similar to the reception of 19th-century characters, authors, and their audiences is to walk through the text at a pace characteristic of that age.

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Walking through the text: The representation of mobility in late 19th-century Latvian fiction

Cultural studies. Spatial turn. Place in literature. Sense of place. Literary geography. Geocriticism. Liminality. Contact zones. History of Latvian literature. Rūdolfs Blaumanis. Andrievs Niedra

This article builds on research prompted by studies of small literatures as well as the so-called spatial turn in cultural studies. Attention is focused on the representation of place in late 19th-century literature and its changing meanings in this period of radical social transformation. Through theoretical observations as well as case studies of Latvian literature that deal with two novellas by Rūdolfs Blaumanis and a novel by Andrievs Niedra, this investigation scrutinizes the transformations of the sense of place, the estrangement of a person from his or her environment linked to mobility as well as the manifestations of liminality, in particular those attributed to various contact zones. The aspects of bodily reception of place are also looked at as an important condition of individual existence in the world.

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