

Soviet Critic as a Decoder: Rethinking Situation in Latvia in the Thaw

Abstract: The article is based on a presumption that literary reception is involved in the process of communication where writers act as encoders of messages, while literary critics and readers are decoders. This scheme helps clarify the complex literary climate in Latvia in the Thaw period. In the Soviet Union, both the encoder and the decoder were bound to a high degree by the regulations, which have been laid down in the constitution and worked out in detail by the party or its direct subordinates. In the 1950's, the Latvian literature presented a contradictory picture: on the one hand, many critics followed the official party line, on the other hand, literature was developing (to some extent) in a spontaneous manner. Therefore, critics felt compelled to react to literary practice by adapting theory to the reality of literary scene. During the Thaw time, it was still difficult to be independent in one's own public thinking, however, the public opinion on literature was shaping optimistically. The goals of writers and of literature most often mentioned were as follows: to fight for the ultimate victory of communism, to present reality according to the Soviet interpretation, and to improve artistic standards.

Key words: Soviet critics, Soviet Latvian literature, Thaw.

The novelette, which gave a name to the post-Stalin period, was Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw...* In this work, Ehrenburg provided a concise guide to the themes and theses of post-Stalin literature; as a matter of fact, his work sums up the main points of "de-Stalinization" in credible artistic form so neatly that one is obliged to assume a degree of political guidance, direct or indirect, in its writing. The argument of *The Thaw...* runs as follows: 1) Soviet life has become cold and rigid; let us warm up one another, 2) Soviet political and industrial heroes are often tyrants indifferent to the public weal; let us expose them, 3) people are important, and they exist as individuals; let us cherish each one, 4) emotions are

real and cannot always be neatly catalogued and contained in rational categories; let us feel them: love, pity, fear, envy. It is a fine argument, indeed, but it is so well organized that one can sense in it remnants of ice under the “thaw”¹. These four values – sincerity, striving for truth, importance of a man as a human being and his emotions – are the main things that the Soviet critics in Latvia were also searching in literature and writing about in their articles. In this article, I would like to show how the literary climate was changing in Latvia in the Thaw period. This was a time when theoretical and practical bases have been formed for such outstanding critics as Vytautas Kubilius in Lithuania and other literary professionals in Lithuania and Latvia, who played an important role later. This was a very fruitful and interesting period which resulted in a professional and meaningful literary criticism in the post-thaw period, as well as in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

Literary reception as a communication process

Indeed, Soviet literature is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. It can be examined not only as an aesthetic, but also as a sociological phenomenon having broad cultural, national, and ideological implications. It has much in common with an attitude, which is deeply rooted in a personal history and gives a concrete opinion on a specific issue. The process of literary reception has also some parallels with the communication process.

There are three levels in the communication process. First, there is a communicator (encoder), then comes the process of communication, and the last one is the receiver (decoder), the individual who receives and interprets the message. In the process of communication the encoders are persons who convert a point-of-view (an idea, theory, or doctrine) into one communicable form. In the case of printed word, the encoders are poets, novelists, in other words, – all writers². In semiotics, the process of creating a message for transmission by the addresser to the addressee is called encoding. The act of interpreting the message by the addressee is called decoding. Thus, it has been established that

1 Edward J. Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 119.

2 Gunārs Irbe, *The Formation of Public Opinion in Soviet Latvia*, Bonn: Baltisches Forschungsinstitut, 1964 (Commentationes Balticae X/XI, 5), p. 242.

in the Soviet Union the encoder of a message was bound to a high degree by the regulations which have been laid down in the constitution and worked out in detail by the party or its direct subordinates (Glavlit, Writers Union). The decoder had the same regulations as well. In a closed society communication means become propaganda instruments for authorities – they may not fulfil the central functions just like they can in an open society – to mirror the present.

Official reception of literature in mass media within the communist censorship in Soviet Latvia is well described by some functionary before the Latvian journalist congress in 1959:

Today the press, radio, and television have become the main weapons of the Party and the Government. Their duty and responsibility is to educate a man communistically. These are the means of mobilizing the masses for carrying out the objectives set by the party and government.³

Therefore, to a great extent those decoders were more restricted in their form of expression than the encoders, especially, the poets whose command of Aesopian allowed manipulating with imaginary contents of the chief mediator's message. Literature was discussed in almost every paper, to begin with the central newspaper *Fight* (*Cīņa*) and to end with regional publications. Latvian cultural publications have always been socially and politically oriented. The articles on literature, art, and culture offered a basis for discussion in Aesopian on generally topical matters. This kind of publications had a great impact on the people's opinion as they were read not only by cultural experts, but also by community on the whole.

Literary climate and the role of a critic

The situation in the literary climate changed after the death of Stalin and, in particular, after the Twentieth Party Congress at which the “personality cult” of Stalin was denounced. A number of writers liberated from the dangers of Stalinist repression began publishing works in which they presented a picture of

3 Pēteris Pizāns, “Pirmajam žurnālistu kongresam sanākot” [On the Eve of the First Journalists Convention], *Literatūra un Māksla*, 1959, Nr. 10.

reality, contrary to the criteria established for the literature of socialist realism. However, since there has been no official rejection of the old theoretical premise of Soviet literature, and since socialist realism still continued being the “official method” approved by the Party, a disparity has developed between the theoretical premises of literature and their practical implementation.

On the one hand, Soviet leaders persisted in maintaining that socialist realism should remain the guiding norm of Soviet literature; on the other hand, they did not prevent writers and theoreticians from discussing and examining what socialist realism actually means and how it should be implemented.

From this point-of-view we can say that in the days of Stalin the life of literary scholars and critics appeared to be less complicated because everyone knew how “good” literature was to be written and what socialist realism was all about. In the Thaw, everyone proclaims that socialist realism still is the basic method of Soviet literature so far, yet none is able to define its meaning properly.

In 1953 and 1954, the Soviet Latvian literature presented a contradictory, almost puzzling picture. On the one hand, the official and strict party line, fixed in 1946, was vigorously followed by the main part of critics and literary politicians of the Soviet Latvian Writers’ Union. On the other hand, particularly in the first half of 1954, change in Moscow’s literary climate reflected itself in Riga, displayed mainly in the discussions of current conditions of artistic life among creative artists and in the growing uneasiness among the local Communist leaders about the feebleness and uniformity of recent works in the Soviet Latvian literature⁴.

The thaw time literature, instead of following theoretical guidelines, is developing (to some extent) in a spontaneous manner. Thus, literary critics and theoreticians felt compelled to react to literary practice by adapting theory to the realities of literary scene. Writers strive for creative freedom. Literary critics, who often are members of editorial boards of literary journals and publishing houses, and thus the guardians of ideological purity, endeavour to streamline the creative activity of writers, leading them in the required direction. As Rimvydas ilbajoris has said, “the standards of Soviet criticism were established, under which the literary critic was obliged to function as ‘a representative of

4 Rolfis Ekmanis, *Latvian Literature under the Soviets: 1940–1975*, Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1978, p. 185.

the established social, not artistic norms”⁵. This argument is true, though we can speak about two types of soviet critics: those who tried to decode only the degree to which a writer uses social formulas and those who tried to speak about the emotional and artistic quality of literary texts. Turning into active literary critics, theorists of literature endeavour to influence the literary process in two ways: firstly, by shaping public opinion; secondly, by forcing the writers to create works of literature which would serve best the ideological and political objectives of the Communist Party and Soviet state.

A typical question of the Thaw time critics was “Is the ideological content more important than the artistic value?”. The first sign of a change in a literary climate became discernible in the spring of 1954 when Kārlis Ozoliņš who was the Chairman of Presidium of the Latvian SSR asked in a lengthy article entitled “On Certain Problems of the Development of the Soviet Latvian Literature and Literary Criticism”⁶ for more human implementation of party directives and did not hesitate to describe most of recent Latvian literary produce as disagreeable “assembly-line literature”. He challenged political authorities to judge literary merit by accusing forthright and biting the entire community of Soviet Latvian literary critics of discussing only the ideological content of literature and completely ignoring its artistic value.

Poet as a critic

Speaking about Latvian literary critics at that time, there should be highlighted one interesting fact: those critics who were the first to discuss and complain in sharply written articles and literary discussions about de-spiritualization and de-humanization of the Soviet Latvian literature were the poets themselves. Poets at that time were very much involved in literary criticism and forming a public opinion about literature. They were not afraid to speak about the matters they were worried and disappointed more than the literary scholars. For example, a young

5 Rimvydas Šilbajoris, “Socialist Realism and the Politics of Literature”, in: *Mind Against the Wall: Essays on Lithuanian Culture Under Soviet Occupation*, ed. by Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Chicago: Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, 1983.

6 *LPSR ZA Valodas un Literatūras institūta raksti* [Proceedings of the Language and Literature Institute of the Latvian S.S.R. Academy of Sciences], IV, Riga, 1954.

poet, Ojārs Vācietis, who later in the sixties became known as the “Latvian Ev-tushenko”, in the session of discussion held by the Soviet Latvian Writers’ Union on December 20, 1956, referred to the “demand for sincerity”⁷ as having “extreme importance” for Latvian literature. Ojārs Vācietis is the leader of the so-called Thaw-time generation poets in Latvia, a highly appreciated new talent both in occupied Latvia and in the Latvian exile press of Western Europe. “It is obvious from the very first pages that a genuine poet stands before us”, the review says in the literary magazine *Flag* in Soviet Latvia after publishing the first collection by Vācietis in 1956. After the second collection of poems by Vācietis titled *In Firei*, Arvīds Grigulis, a “red” professor of the University of Latvia, poet and literary scholar, assesses in 1958 that Vācietis is an outstanding talent whose further development will certainly have an impact upon the development of the whole Latvian poetry. Meanwhile, on the other side of the iron curtain, in New York, a Latvian poet Gunārs Saliņš forecasts in the exile magazine *Tilts* (*The Bridge*) in 1959 that Vācietis – a talented poet cherished by the Soviet rule has prospects to evolve as a great communist poet. With times changing, just a Bolshevik or a poet having Pasternak’s fate may come out of him. Saliņš points to the illusion of the new Soviet poet that a reliable member of the party is free to speak about everything and forecasts that “as long as Khrushchev knows how to maintain this illusion”⁸, the talent of Vācietis will truly serve the communist power.

With each new collection of poems by Vācietis the number of unfavourable reviews increases in the Soviet press. Many attack the poet by pointing to the linguistic laxity, poetry vagueness, and non-party attitude.

The steadiest attacks towards the ideological ambiguities of Vācietis came from the power functionaries, whereas objections made by literary critics and literati were mostly attributed to the artistic individualities of the poetry. As the first among the defenders the poets of the so-called Thaw-period should be mentioned for whom Vācietis has always been a “flag”-leader during those years, to use the expression of poet Imants Ziedonis who was one of them (one should also mention here Jānis Peters, Māris Čaklais, Vizma Belševica).

During the Soviet time, a writer, especially a poet, was the voice of the people. Some poets, such as Ojārs Vācietis or Imants Ziedonis, had a status

7 *Literatūra un Māksla*, 1956 12 29.

8 Gunārs Saliņš, “Riga Poet Cherished by the Soviet Rule”, *Tilts* [*The Bridge*], 1959, Nr. 31, p. 39.

similar to a movie star's in the West. During the last years of the Soviet Empire, the situation started changing, to become more like it is in all the pluralistic Western democracies. The Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky, has said that poetry concerns only 1% of people. Maybe that is the way it will always be – except in totalitarian situations where a poet becomes a prophet.

Searching for the Values of Literature

As we know, one of the landmarks of the Thaw time is refusal of the personality cult. Among his many statements in the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, Khrushchev directed a special message to Soviet writers and artists: “Our country’s literature and arts can and must strive to become the best in the world not only in richness of contents, but also in artistic power and skill”. These and other statements encouraged the Soviet cultural intelligentsia to believe that the way was open to a greater creative and intellectual freedom without bureaucratic interference. The Latvian literary atmosphere was stirred likewise by the literary currents in the centre, as a result of which many Latvian authors became “ideologically confused”. This is not to say that such horrific conditions will automatically result in good poetry. In fact, mostly the opposite is the case. In the words of Evgeny Dobrenko, “author is turning into a self-censor is the real history of soviet literature”⁹.

But we also may ask: what about a writer’s inner voice? Will it encourage independent thought? Not, indeed, because the writer senses that such an independent thought will be of no lasting value. The “objective conditions” that may stimulate such work have disappeared. Czesław Miłosz has quoted the remarks of a young Polish poet:

My own stream of thought has so many tributaries that I barely succeed in damning off one, when a second, third and fourth overflows. I get halfway through a phrase, and already I submit it to Marxist criticism. I imagine what X or Y will say about it, and I change the ending.¹⁰

9 Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and aesthetic origins of Soviet literary culture*, translated by Jesse M. Savage, California: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 18.

10 Flagg Taylor, “Czesław Miłosz: On the Imagination of Twentieth-Century Man”, *East European Politics and Societies*, t. 19, Nr. 1, p. 28.

We can find today the same ideas in some interviews and memoir books written by or about Soviet time Latvian writers trying to explain the reasons of their Soviet writing style.

The second question put is the question of national literature. As early as in 1954 and 1955, demands for revising the theory of national literature as socialist in contents and national in form were voiced. This trend continued throughout 1956 and in 1957. As a result of these discussions, some Latvian critics began to advocate a sort of literary nationalism, demanding that national types be created in literature, the folk-idiom and classical heritage of one's country be utilized in creating new works, and that the national language be universally respected.

Certainly, writers and literary scholars could not tell the whole truth, but at least they were not obliged to view each other in telling out-and-out lies.

Writers and some critics asked for the literary heritage left by the pre-Soviet authors. They based their claims on Lenin's thesis that a socialist culture could not be built up without assimilating the collected knowledge of humanity. As we know, frequently a reference to the "Leninist principle" was aimed at protecting the author against being called to account.

The turning point came when the Soviet press made public a major document on literature and the arts – the article comprised of three Khrushchev's speeches, where the future development for Soviet multinational literature was depicted. Writers and critics were again exposed to increasing bureaucratic pressures.

An official spokesman in the field of Soviet literature Aleksei Surkov stated that the year 1957 will go down in history of literature as a year of fierce and furious battles with revisionist elements. In the history of Latvian literature similar terms can be used to characterize the period up till approximately the Twenty-second Communist Party congress, held in the spring of 1961. Most of the critical writings and proceedings of the various writers' meetings during this period were carried out under the banner of defending socialist realism and combating revisionism.

As early as in 1958, but especially after the Third Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1959, Soviet writers and critics split into two distinct groups: the doctrinaire defenders of ideological firmness and timeserving, and the proponents of moderation.

Several writers and critics of younger generation continued the struggle for more creative freedom and for Latvian national culture – demands which, as a

rule, were closely connected with one another. It was obvious that a drive towards orthodoxy met with resistance, as reflected in some more heretical statements and demands. After the Fourth Congress of Soviet Latvian Writers a semi-liberalized climate prevailed. This was evidenced by a number of some young Latvians who expressed a yearning for a new era of truthfulness, for recognition of existing evil, for moral responsibility, and frequently by-passing *partiinost*, as interpreted by orthodox party critics. They simply demanded aesthetics in literature and the arts. Ojārs Vācietis and an author of the younger generation, Bruno Saulītis, expressed this demand most vividly. They sarcastically attacked those “vulgar-ians” who recognized poetry only if it served as an illustration for some official holiday or a governmental campaign. Vācietis made his position more definite in his issue “A Few Observations About Well-Known Truths”. He took his cue from Aleksandr Tvardovskii and, after quoting Tvardovskii’s complaint that “in the name of content we tend to forgive a work of literature all its other sins, including the most serious one”¹¹, Vācietis ardently defended individualistic aestheticism in Soviet Latvian letters and went as far as to accuse Latvian critics and writers of violating the principle that “art above all must be art”. He has characterized the literary situation in Latvia as a “hellish confusion”, because:

we suppose literary work to be ideological solely because of its contents, though the idea stands, so to say, completely naked, without any emotional or aesthetic clothes. [...] on the other hand, we classify most of ideological work to be non-ideological, because a poor thing, though from the literary point-of-view a genuine masterpiece, lacks some necessary surface attributes.¹²

In conclusion, Vācietis has expressed a hope that the era in literature when nothing else but the so-called topical themes determined the value of a work of art will soon sink to the past. We have been awaiting this era now but it did not come as fast and easy as we would like to.

Despite the search for new formulas and attempts to extent the interpretation of various dogmas on the part of some writers, the majority of articles which appeared in Soviet Latvian literary publications expressed the orthodox view.

11 Ojārs Vācietis, “Dažas piezīmes par zināmām patiesībām” [A Few Observations About Well-Known Truths], *Literatūra un Māksla*, 1959 02 28.

12 *Ibid.*

Concluding, there are three main aspects of the Thaw time situation and questions “how to be a good writer” and “how to be a good critic”. First, it was still difficult to be independent in one’s own public thinking, however, the public opinion on literature was shaping optimistically. Second, the goals of writers and of literature most often mentioned were as follows: to fight for the ultimate victory of communism and progressive ideology, to present reality according to the Soviet interpretation, and to improve artistic standards. Third, naturally, writers, literary scholars, and critics had no chance to tell the whole truth, but at least they were not obliged to view each other in telling out-and-out lies.

Sovietmečio kritikas kaip iškoduotojas: „atlydžio“ Latvijoje permąstymas

Santrauka

Straipsnis remiasi prielaida, kad literatūros suvokimas yra susijęs su komunikacijos procesu, kuriame rašytojai veikia kaip pranešimo užkoduotojai, o literatūros kritikai ir skaitytojai – kaip iškoduotojai. Ši schema padeda aiškinantis sudėtingą literatūrinį klimatą Latvijoje „atlydžio“ metais. Sovietų sąjungoje tiek užkoduotojus, tiek iškoduotojus varžė daugybė valdžios nurodymų. Padėtis 6-ojo dešimtmečio latvių literatūroje klostėsi prieštaringai: viena vertus, daugelis kritikų laikėsi oficialiosios ideologijos, kita vertus – literatūra plėtojosi palyginti spontaniškai. Todėl kritikai buvo priversti reaguoti į literatūros praktiką ir adaptuoti savo teorines kalbas. „Atlydžio“ laikotarpiu tebebuvo sunku viešumoje dėstyti savarankišką nuomonę, nors bendra opinija apie literatūrą formavosi optimistiškai. Dažniausiai minėti šie rašytojo ir literatūros tikslai: kovoti už galutinę komunizmo pergalę, pagal sovietinį požiūrį pateikti tikrovę, gerinti meninius standartus.

Raktažodžiai: sovietmečio kritikas, latvių sovietmečio literatūra, „atlydis“
