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**Reflections of the Roman History
in the Latvian Culture of the 20th Century:
Interactions of Ideology and Aesthetics**

The development of Latvian national culture in the middle of the 19th century was determined by two main dimensions. The first one was the awareness of the unique national features of Latvian culture, which encouraged interest in folklore and history, and the other one was the sense of affiliation to the common European cultural space. Even the earliest collections of Latvian poetry include also translations from ancient languages with an aim to show the richness and potential of the Latvian language. The realism trend in Latvian literature makes extensive use of Biblical imagery and stories, and the Bible is also a source of everyday wisdom. Romanticist literature, meanwhile, uses not only the Bible but also Greek myths and Roman history to speak about eternal and existential matters through ancient images and characters. Although never becoming the central trend, interest in the Mediterranean material has always been present in Latvian culture throughout all its stages, and some of the characters of antiquity have even assumed specifically Latvian features.

In scholarly aspect, Mediterranean-Baltic contacts become important with the development of the first generation of Latvian philologists in the late 19th century.

Today, Mediterranean studies are widely represented at Latvian universities – Latvia's Culture Academy offers Spanish and Italian studies, the University of Latvia has its Jewish studies center and *Lettorato Italiano*. The University of Latvia, Department of Classical Philology, as well as its Hellenic studies center, led by Professor Ilze Rumniece, have been especially active in promoting Mediterranean culture, as they organize *Antiquitas Viva* and Hellenic studies conferences and publish books on regular basis. The latest book was dedicated to Rome. These activities undoubtedly have great future potential as Mediterranean cultures become increasingly familiar in the Baltic through various contacts, and their motifs are used widely in the latest Latvian literature and art (two novels set both in modern and ancient Italy), both Latvian and foreign plays see fresh theatrical interpretations with Caligula and Joseph and his brethren populating the stages of theaters in Latvian capital Riga.

In this paper I would like to speak in more detail about one example that represents some essential features in Latvian 20th century culture – the image of Spartacus in Latvian literature and theater.

In the 20th century culture Spartacus is a sign in which topical issues of the century have been expressed transformed into the material of the ancient culture. For many centuries nobody took interest into this Thracian rebel, but from the second half of the 19th century until now Spartacus has been one of the most often used images. Countless novels, several films, organizations and enterprises bear the name of this leader of slaves' uprising.

The hidden potential of this powerful image has been at least partly revealed also in Latvian literature and theater – the motif of Spartacus led uprising of slaves has been used in Latvian literature on several occasions, but tragedy “Spartacus” by Latvian writer Andrejs Upīts, written in 1944, takes a special place among these works.

Andrejs Upīts (1877—1970)

As an author, the outstanding Latvian prose-writer and playwright Andrejs Upīts has grown in the tradition of 19th century realism, later creatively seeking ways to the modernist novel. Upīts' realism borders with naturalism, he made use also of impressionist methods and symbolism. One of the most important turning points in his creative life was encounter with Marxism, which became the basic platform of his later writing and world-view. From this perspective Upīts strived to give in his works panoramic, big-scale descriptions of the social conflicts of his time. This approach became the source of both his strength and weakness.

In 1940 Upīts became collaborator and functionary of the newly installed Soviet regime in Latvia, and the fate of many Latvian writers suddenly depended on his benevolence. During the years of the World War II Upīts lived in Russia, where he wrote his last important works – “The Green Land”, an epic novel about the historical and social processes in Latvian countryside, and tragedy “Spartacus”. After the war Upīts turned mainly to the literary history and criticism and became part of the establishment of the Soviet occupation power, which in his creative writing brought about an inevitable decline that could be characterized as “The Sunless Eclipse”, a title Upīts chose for his strongly critical book on Latvian writers in exile.

Spartacus in Latvian Literature and Theatre

I.

However great part of the author's life was spent in the modernist era. Generally being rooted in the tradition of the 19th century realism Upīts did not avoid the conceptualization of realism – when writers, using their predecessors' experience, strived for a deeper representation of metaphysical and symbolic existence. The conceptualization of Upīts' writing found its expression in ideological discourse, where he used mainly historical material. But in selection of this material, especially in the few cases when he tapped into the heritage of the ancient world, historical elements intersected with the paradigm of mythical perception of the world. In these points of intersection the writer's style essentially changed showing a peculiar interaction of realism and romanticism. Andrejs Upīts, however, was not a pioneer in this respect, for this tendency appeared already in the literature of the second half of the 19th century, in the works of those authors who influenced the Latvian writer. What were the new opportunities for the perception of the ancient culture offered by this interplay of romanticism and realism? Using a somewhat rough terminology we can say that for the first time in European literature there appeared a sort of 'slave literature'. In the Roman manuals on economic activities we can read about slaves that there were three kinds of working tools: silent, partly vocal and talking, i.e., slaves. It is true that slaves were sometimes important characters in comedies, but their presence created a comic effect that was not far from absurd. Speaking about tragic characters Aristotle argued that women were not particularly well suited for the roles of tragic heroines, and that slaves were totally inappropriate for tragic characters. However, it is interesting that Aristotle mentions such a possibility at all.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the phenomenon of the ancient slavery became interesting and useful as a material for embodiment of topical ideas. The most important texts which attracted Upīts' attention were novel "Spartacus" by R. Giovagnoli and Gustav Flaubert's "Salambo". Upīts was especially impressed by the epic and colorful scenes of the mercenaries' mutiny depicted in Flaubert's novel. His conviction that this novel is historically precise and realistic, however, seems to be rather unfounded. The main characters of the novel – Mato, Salambo and Spendius, the organizer of the uprising – do not act as historical personages but rather are driven by uncontrollable and primitive impulses. The historical background, therefore,

becomes only a decorative set were these impulses can be best expressed in accordance with the author's idea.

Giovagnoli's novel is written in a different key. It is characterized by romantic flair and trust in the humane and humanity. The rebellion of slaves in the ancient Rome has been associatively identified with the struggle for Italy's unification and against the foreign oppressors. Therefore Rome loses its historical concreteness and acquires features of Italy. Both Spartacus and Cesar have been depicted as equal prophets of the future. It is also significant that Giuseppe Garibaldi wrote an introduction for this novel. For Giovagnoli Spartacus was the only logical choice to be picked from the Roman heritage – although in Italy Spartacus was a foreigner, in the light of the 19th century Italy's ideology of unification and liberation he was the best suited to symbolize the dreams and aspirations of a nation that struggles against foreign oppressors. Moreover, Spartacus's story took on mythic dimensions as it was interpreted in the perspective of the 19th century when ideological manipulations with masses became more and more important and the proletariat, concentrated in the big cities, strived to assert itself in the historical processes. Spartacus thus became the modern time Prometheus. The heroic but sidelined and lonely demigod, transformed into the image of Spartacus, continued his mission of enforcing justice, discrediting the powerful and redistributing goods. By virtue of these mythic transformations Spartacus secured long and prolific life in 20th century literature, art and also ideology, including countless novels and the famous Hollywood epic.

The tragedy "Spartacus", the last work in his trilogy of historical tragedies is a peculiar synthesis of Upīts' artistic and theoretic explorations. The main idea of this quest was to find the most precise artistic concept for depiction of historical process in literature, especially trying to show the role of masses, for, looking at history from Marxist perspective Upīts believed that masses were the main driving force of history. Upīts wrote several theoretical articles on this issue (the most important of them are "The Realistic Tragedy" (1924) and "The Problem of Depiction of Masses in Literature" (1926)). These works reveal the main principles the writer used as a basis for his concept of the historical tragedy. To make the masses a character in the tragedy was a daring and innovative but at the same time dangerous and risky idea, because a work of this genre demands an unusual character with a strong individuality. The ideas Upīts defined in his theoretical writing were not so easy to embody in his plays. The writer devoted six years to writing "Spartacus", gathering

material, studying the history of Rome and slavery. The tragedy itself was written in a very short time, and drew controversial reviews. It even prompted a wide public debate in Moscow. The final verdict of the Soviet establishment, however, was favorable, and Upītis' "Spartacus" was even declared a substantially new step in the history of Latvian drama. However, in the actual text, the author had considerably strayed from the 'principles of realistic tragedy he had himself devised. Discrepancies with the conceptual setup can be seen in all the most important aspects – historical 'accuracy, the central hero, the hero and masses.

Upītis' tragedy "Spartacus" can be considered historical only insofar as the author has used the historical fact of the slaves' uprising, but all the plot of the tragedy, although it has historical persons acting in it, is neither real nor realistic. The main lines of interaction between characters – Spartacus and Cathilina, Spartacus and Cesar – have been developed in a romanticist manner.

Upītis' own comments on some of the dubious fragments of his tragedy show that either the writer's knowledge about the history of Rome was very vague or he had unconventional understanding of the term "historical fact".

The tragedy is full of anachronisms. In a text that was supposed to be written in a realistic manner the words of Cathilina, a Roman patrician, "I am also a slave of the Roman society" are just out of place. In his essay "Realistic Tragedy" Upītis wrote: "all the eternal issues are fantasies of romantics and idealists". However, in order to create conflicts in his tragedy "Spartacus", Upītis had to use basically eternal issues of relations between man and power, ignoring at the same time all historical terms and conditions (e.g., Spartacus' relationships with Cathilina and Cesar). Generally, Upītis' understanding of tragedy was radically different from the conventional principles of the genre. He believed that the original source of the genre – the Greek tragedy "can not... move and convince deeply". According to Upītis, the main purpose of a realistic tragedy is to show masses as the real historical heroes "who in their class, social, political and ideological struggle put forward men of genius to express clearly their unconscious minds, to channel their instincts into precisely defined routes". In "Spartacus" Upītis, however, was considerably far from these principles, he himself had defined. It can be explained by two possible reasons. The first and the foremost – the genre of tragedy itself can not be subjected to these principles, a dramatic text is not suitable for the depiction of masses, for it is dominated by dialogue and monologue, which allows to show individual characters

and their relations, but not masses and historical processes. The other possible reason could be Giovagnoli's influence – many characters and story lines have been directly borrowed from his novel, bringing into the tragedy also its romantic atmosphere. Spartacus could not become the genius who would express and channel somebody's unconscious thoughts into "precisely defined route", for he had no idea about this "defined route". In the tragedy Cesar describes Spartacus precisely saying that his dreams about freedom are abstract. Therefore many phrases Upītis has put into Spartacus' mouth sound like pure rhetoric that has basically no connection with the real events. The masses of slaves in Upītis' tragedy are also only a motley and disorganized crowd of people. The end of "Spartacus" is especially conspicuous, for it shows neither any hope nor social optimism.

Therefore, irrespective of the author's intentions, the tragedy acquires some truly existential aspects, i.e., the same aspects that could be seen in Upītis' first efforts in using historical material in the genre of short story. Some critics, who have held Upītis' work in high regard, argued that the writer "emphasized in the character of the famous warrior aspects which relate to the liberation of masses from Hitlerism." Such parallels, however, would not be very complimenting to the fighters against Nazism, for Spartacus' army in the tragedy is just a disorganized and chaotic crowd. It is true that from the perspective of the 20th century, and especially from the point of view of the Communist doctrine, that was so popular in the middle of the century, we can see some signs of social optimism in Upītis' tragedy, but, if we stick to the text, the darkness of the finale can best be expressed by Giovagnoli's words "the goal itself is only a fruit of a heated fantasy, that the humankind will never attain". The last remark: "...rattle of weapons. A flash of lightning, then black darkness".

II.

Although the tragedy "Spartacus" by A.Upītis has been staged only three times, generally it has seen a rich theatrical life. It is also significantly that all three productions have occurred in similar circumstances – all three times the play was staged in the period of the Soviet occupation in Latvia, when artistic freedom was subjected to various restrictions and esthetics to the doctrine of socialist realism, however ideological circumstances during each staging – in 1945, 1970 and in 1977 – were different. The year of 1945, although it brought the renewed Soviet occupation, had its positive aspects, too – the war had ended and ideological dogmas were only in

developing stages. In the 1970s, although the control of the ruling regime was strict and ruthless, art itself had contributed to gradual disintegration of the ruling doctrine of socialist realism, critics and art theoreticians were extolling the doctrine speaking about its inexhaustible potential, but the works of art and literature themselves were no longer neither particularly socialist nor realistic. And even the ideologically correct, albeit undeniably talented, writing of such dedicated Marxist and collaborationist as Andrejs Upīts assumed completely different meaning in theatrical productions. As an important historical figure and contributor to the historical progress from the Marxist point of view, Spartacus was included in the Communist iconography from the very beginning of the Soviet regime, with numerous collective farms, factories and movie theaters being named after the leader of the uprising of slaves (there was a movie theater *Spartaks* in Riga, too), and songs, etc. Spartacus' name was tied especially with sports education – a sports club in Russia is still bearing his name, and nation-wide sports games, Olympics of Soviet kind, were called *Spartakiad*, and were essential part of the Soviet sports scene. But speaking about the Latvian Spartacus on stage, there were, as I said already, three productions of the play at three various theaters:

1945, the Daile Theater, Riga

1970, Liepaja Theater

1977, A.Upits' Drama Theater (presently, the National Theater).

The production in the Daile Theater was the first play the company staged in the post-war season and became significant as a fusion of two esthetic systems – the officially approved tradition of realism, represented by the text of the play, and the tradition of conceptual theater of form developed by Eduards Smilgis, the founder and chief director of the Daile Theater, despite the fact that in the Soviet Union the only officially recognized theatrical tradition was the Stanislavsky's method.

The manifesto issued by the founders of the Daile Theater read:

- A theater is a temple of art for esthetes where the spiritual energy of mankind is being released.
- Rational elements must be ignored and artists must strive for emotional experience

- [Emotional] experience can be achieved by working on sight and hearing, which in turn can be achieved only through artistic form.
- The main element of a theatrical performance is actors' gestures.

The text of *Spartacus* contains lots of rhetoric and its crowd scenes suited well for this non-realistic theatrical tradition. Although critical reviews of that time do not make a particularly reliable source, they create an overall impression of an impassioned, dynamic and optimistic performance in which characters were not shown as having individual features but rather as typical models embodying historical conflicts and injustices. The production features lots of music, color and light, and represented a sort of an operatic esthetics. Since at that time standards for a socialist theater had not yet developed in Latvia, critics, although cautiously, acknowledged that the production of *Spartacus* was a fertile combination of the experience gained in the theater company's long-time development and the new endeavors in the direction of a healthy realism. Later, though, the theater had to suffer a lot for its experience gained in its long-time development as reproaches for formalism were inevitable. Arturs Filipsons who played the central character, had a prominent role in ensuring the success of the production, as he was an actor of towering stature, loud and expressive voice, and precise gestures. His on-stage presence created a compositional center, and his ability to play a leader who at the same time was a deep-thinking man could not leave the audience unimpressed. Filipsons was the leading actor of the troupe and a heartthrob, however today we can see in his image how the ideal of male good-looks have changed in the course of time, as it is quite obvious that Filipsons did not match the modern-day ideal of youth and slimness. Maybe he was the same type Kirk Douglas represented in the Hollywood film *Spartacus*.

In later productions of Uptis' tragedy we see a quite different visual version of *Spartacus*, and also in the latest film about the slave leader shot in 2004, *Spartacus* is a youthful and slender man.

The production of "Spartacus" in the theater of the western Latvian city of Liepaja in 1970 did not create a theatrical sensation and the staging did not draw much attention from critics, although it is possible to reconstruct some characteristic features from the reviews of that time. The keynote of the production was detachment and realism that could be in a way called literary theater, when the source text is made the central element of the staging. Efforts to create authentic environment dominated

the stage design, and costumes were stylization of ancient Roman clothing. The staging clearly depicted various social groups, changes in their behavior in the course of the play, the growing self-confidence of slaves and changes in their stature, conduct and manner of speech. The scenes of the staging were reminiscent of some antique reliefs. The message of the staging was that this is history, that these are events of a distant past, which can be interesting and enlightening also in modern times.

The third and most important production of “Spartacus” eliminated any historical distance. Actors were playing in a uniform manner. The text of the tragedy was only one of the elements of the performance whose objective was to speak to the audience about current problems of the day. The message that was impossible to express directly could be brought home through the pseudo-historical text of the Soviet literary classic. Thus the homage to the classic was turned into a message to the contemporary audience.

Critical reviews of that time describe a scene in which Spartacus, played by actor of the Drama Theater Rolands Zagorskis, climbs scaffolding and, hanging upside down, speaks about freedom. That was a degradation of the central character nearly impossible for a Soviet-time theater. At any rate such behavior had nothing to do with pomposity or the stature of a hero-leader. The director defined the idea of the staging in the following way: It is necessary to rouse the desire for a dream-goal in the audience, to find for just ten seconds a Joan of Arc or a Spartacus sitting in the audience, to kindle faith, activity and willingness to do something good for their people. Later in retrospect, the director said: “ “Spartacus” was my longing for a hero and also for clarity and faith. Because I must have known unconsciously that the time in which we were living was rather senseless.” The stage design by Juris Toropins played an important role and was conceived as an abstract arena depicting life and existence as a cruel sports competition.

Andrejs Upīts’ Spartacus has not been staged in Latvian theaters since 1977. Does it mean that the potential of this text in the era of democratic freedoms and postmodern esthetics have been exhausted? Who knows? In 2004 a new version of Spartacus was shot in Hollywood based on the same novel that inspired the Spartacus flick of 1960. But Latvian theatrical stages are now populated by other characters of antiquity – the latest being Caligula by Albert Camus. As a literary character Caligula also has its Latvian biography, but this is a different story.

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