

GENDER AND THE IMAGE OF RIGA CITY

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The study is rooted in the assumption that writing remains the primary medium in anthropological communication. The article focuses on three significant narratives of the Riga-focused text: “Encomium to the Renowned Riga the Metropolis of Livonia by Basilius Plinius a Livonian from Riga” (1595), “Riga, or a Song About Riga and its Life” (1860) by M. Reinbergs and E. Dinsbergs, and Part One, “Patriots” (1912) of A. Deglavs’s historical novel “Riga”, which outline the cultural and historical background of Riga as a future university city and the capital of the Latvian state. Mythological folklore, the Riga motif in the epic poem “Bearslayer”, and contemporary Latvian poetry have been actuated from the aspect of the origins and perception of the image of Riga. In the thematic framework of the Riga city imagery, it is the linguistic aspect that plays the key role (instead of gender as a concept related to the gender-difference-based social organisation or gender equality policy, first associated with in contemporary social sciences). In the texts examined, Riga has been presented in a figurative sense, thereby highlighting more vividly the city’s imaginary identity, which is the feminine gender personification of Riga. On the one hand, Riga is shown as a city destined to be the focus for national aspirations of the Latvian people. On the other hand, since its origins, Riga has been and remains a multi-ethnic city, a home to people of German, Russian, Jewish, Lithuanian, Estonian, and other ethnic backgrounds. In general, Riga has been marked off as a wholly ambiguous and contradictory intertextual cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: university, community, Latvia, multi-ethnic city, language, imaginary identity, gender personification.

ГЕНДЕР И ОБРАЗ РИГИ

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Исследование основано на предположении о том, что письмо остаётся основным средством антропологической коммуникации. Статья посвящена рассмотрению трёх важных нарративов о рижском тексте: «Хвала славной Риге – матери городов ливонских Базилия Плиния Ливонского из Риги» (1595), «Рига, или песня о Риге и её жизни» (1860) М. Рейнбергса и Э. Динсбергса, а также первая часть – «Патриоты» (1912) – исторического романа А. Деглава «Рига», в которой рассказывается о культурно-историческом становлении Риги как будущего университетского города и столицы Латвийского государства. Мифологический фольклор, рижский мотив в поэме «Медведеубийца» и современная латышская поэзия были исследованы с точки зре-

ния анализа происхождения и восприятия образа Риги. Автор показывает, что в тематических рамках рижской образности ключевую роль играет именно лингвистический аспект. Гендер рассматривается как понятие, связанное не с основанной на гендерных различиях социальной организацией или политикой гендерного равенства, а, прежде всего, в связи с современными социальными науками. В рассмотренных текстах Рига представлена в образном смысле, что более ярко подчёркивает воображаемую идентичность города, которая является женской гендерной персонификацией. С одной стороны, Рига показана как город, предназначенный быть центром национальных устремлений латышского народа. С другой стороны, с момента своего возникновения Рига была и остаётся многонациональным городом, в котором проживают немцы, русские, евреи, литовцы, эстонцы и представители других национальностей. В общем автор отмечает, что Рига предстаёт как совершенно неоднозначное и противоречивое интертекстуальное культурное явление.

Ключевые слова: университет, сообщество, Латвия, многонациональный город, язык, воображаемая идентичность, гендерная персонификация.

The present-day Riga – the capital city of Latvia and one of European Capitals of Culture¹ – is inscribed in the cultural and socio-political history of many nations and a number of countries, while holding a special place in the formation of the Latvian national cultural identity and statehood. It was already in the Middle Ages that Riga came to the fore as the most important city in the region, earning the title of the metropolis of Livonia (*metropolis Livoniae*). However, it developed into a university city as late as in 1920s, which was considerably later in comparison with other universities in the immediate and more remote neighbourhood (Krakow in 1364; Rostock in 1419; Uppsala in 1477; Königsberg in 1544; Vilnius in 1579, restored in 1919; Tartu 1632, restored in 1802; Turku in 1640; Lviv in 1661; Lund 1668; Moscow in 1775; St. Petersburg in 1819). This article's perspective of Riga as a university city will focus on the foundation and growth of the University of Latvia by providing an insight into Riga-related texts of the highest cultural and historical importance that have been produced before the establishment of the university. It is noteworthy that the University of Latvia is the first national higher education institution with Latvian as the language of instruction and established with the aim of creating a national educated class and foster a multifaceted intellectual and spiritual life and environment in the Latvian language.

The main building of the University of Latvia is located in the historical centre of Riga², and, since its founding, has been an integral highlight in the city's

¹ Since 1985, when Athens was chosen the first European Capital of Culture, an international panel of experts appointed by the European Commission is designating annually, on a competitive basis, the European cities which would hold the title of cultural capital for a year. Riga was designated one of the European Capitals of Culture for 2014.

² As concerns architecture and the visual image of the newly-established university, it should be recalled that the main building (the former Riga Polytechnic, one of the first technical higher schools in Tsarist Russia) was built in the 1860s according to the project of architect Gustav Hilbig (1822–1887) inspired by the Renaissance and Byzantine styles, in the best traditions of the day for the construction of higher education institutions.

visual image, and an acknowledgement that is extending across borders, since universities, just like cities, from their very origins, have been and remain transnational bodies, a living link between countries, nations and cities. The establishment of universities is not a matter of one or a couple of days, and the formation of the University of Latvia has been a rather complicated process. To put it briefly, there were three key stages in the proceedings: first, on 8 February 1919 the Government of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic signed a decree on the establishment of the Higher School of Latvia; second, on 28 September 1919, the Higher School of Latvia was officially inaugurated on the orders of the Latvian Provisional Government; third, on 28 March 1923, the Statute of the Higher School was signed into law by the Saeima (the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia), naming the institution the University of Latvia. As we may well know, universities often bear the name of a city, for example Novgorod University, Moscow University, and the like. Riga is an exception in this respect, having no university that would be named after its host city³. That is, in 1919 the newly founded Higher School of Latvia was named after the just established sovereign state, not the city of Riga, where it was actually located, and the name of Latvia, not Riga, was also retained when the school was granted the status of university.

Nowadays gender has become the object of global interdisciplinary research, and it is also challenging in several aspects in relation to the city as a literary and conceptual character. As it is widely known, in the anglophone linguistic space, the category of gender acquires its meaning in the frame of the “sex – gender” opposition and highlights the distinction between the person’s biological self (sex) and the socially constructed roles and functions (gender). At the same time, it should be noted that, over time, the sex / gender distinction has proved itself to be quite an unstable analytical category; therefore, “multilingual awareness and a critical attitude are needed when theory dependent on these terms is applied in non-Anglophone contexts to non-English texts” [Cimdiņa, Økland 2017, 9]. The authors underline that “in literature, it is not possible to distinguish a ‘sex’ foundation from the gendered, metaphorical or symbolic caption of it” [Cimdiņa, Økland 2017, 17]. A pivotal turn in the concept in the direction of social constructivism was sparked by the work of American post-structuralist Judith Butler titled “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” (1990), which earned her not only ardent followers of her theoretical postulates but also serious opponents, who, while not denying the importance of cultural-social determination, accentuate the problems of the theoretical background of “gender” and a linguistic barrier in intercultural communication.

Neither does Judith Butler herself rely on a strict “sex – gender” differentiation today and she concludes that “‘Gender’ is now the name for a set of debates on how to think about the biological, chromosomal, psychological, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of a lived bodily reality” [Butler 2014, 378]. Theoretical discussions on the epistemological content of gender and its interpretations are still under way and are often presented in the form of an open question: “Might

³ In 1990, Riga Polytechnical Institute was renamed into Riga Technical University and, in 2002, the Latvian Academy of Medicine was restructured into Riga Stradiņš University. However, these two, due to their specialisation in one specific discipline, are not universities of the classical type.

gender be an epistemological fig leaf?” [Fraisie 2014, 974]. Latvian linguists emphasise, too, that gender in the present-day English language functions as a poly-semantic category – the notions of “sex” and “gender” are used interchangeably or as partial synonyms, thus the correct translation depends on the contextual meaning; in other words, “translation is connected to an appropriate interpretation on the concept *gender*” [Rudevska, Roziņa, Karapetjana 2018, 117]. In view of the above, it should be noted that, in projecting the image of Riga, the choice has been made in favour of the usage of “gender” which translates into Latvian as “dzimums”, in French as “le sexe”, “différence des sexes” or “genre”, in German as “Geschlecht”, in Russian as “пол”, in Norwegian as “kjønn”, and likewise, that is, without opposing “sex” to “gender” and differentiating between the meanings.

It should be noted that in the thematic framework of the Riga city imagery in the Latvian literature and culture it is the linguistic aspect that plays the key role (instead of gender as a concept related to the gender-difference-based social organisation or gender equality policy, first associated with in contemporary social sciences). Namely, the category of gender carries a strong lexico-grammatical load in the Latvian language and both nouns ‘a city’ and ‘a university’ are feminine in Latvian. The names of cities, too, are feminine in Latvian (with few exceptions), including the Riga city, which symbolically associates with the feminine identity. Consequently, when rendering names of cities from other languages into Latvian, they usually acquire the grammatical features of the feminine gender. For instance, masculine names of Russian cities – Novgorod, St. Petersburg and the like – acquire the ending ‘-a’ and are used in the feminine gender. This may seem an insignificant detail; nevertheless, it sets a certain predisposition to how the overall image of one city or another is perceived and personified depending on the lexico-grammatical structure of the language.

One of the most readable and, so to speak, socially responsible contemporary Latvian poets, Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013), in his poem “You won’t envy me” exclaims with a protective sentiment:

“And one evening – I see – Riga / is shedding tears, so blue and sad, so feminine /
that one feels like wrapping it in a soft shawl” [Ziedonis 1981, 74].

Although Ziedonis is in no way a Riga poet or a representative of the so-called urban poetry, but quite the contrary, the quote from his poetry has not been chosen at random. A part of Ziedonis’s poetry reveals quite vibrantly a significant facet of the Riga motif in the Latvian literary tradition, rooted in the early stages of the Latvian nation-building movement in the 1860s–80s. Namely, the city is seen as the opposite of the vitality, solidity and life order of the rural environment. Ziedonis seldom visits Riga in his poetry, and on those occasions in all its totality, instead of specific artefacts or processes, and usually through texts prompted by unfulfilled yearning or psychological discomfort, like, for instance, a poem titled “When I see these young, handsome faces”:

“I don’t want anything anymore – neither to write poetry /
nor to smell the dead air of Riga” [Ziedonis 1981, 49].

Ziedonis was born and grew up in the region of Kurzeme, and arrived in Riga to take up studies in philology at the University of Latvia; having spent most of his life in Riga, he expresses his dislike for the city (maybe flirting slightly with the subject) in his literary journalism, too:

“I am not interested in the tumult of Riga; even in philosophical terms the city seems a major, fatal error in the development of humanity that can perhaps be rectified over a millennium only. <...> the majority of people have found refuge in the city driven by their existential failures. <...> Latvia is so small that to live in Riga and to be a countryside man – it is even normal. Most of us here, in Riga, are people from the countryside. I represent the rural ideology in everything – in economic policy and parties’ policy alike” [Ziedonis 1999, 443–444].

The perception of the feminine nature of Riga is also present in the Latvian folklore and mythology. Just like the mythical past of many other cities, also the origins of Riga, its strength and weakness are related to a woman. Historical Latvian legends about the Great Northern War in Latvia tell us that “In the days of yore, there were no troops that could take Riga. The city was ruled by a woman, she was a witch. Russians sought many times to conquer Riga: they dug tunnels under the walls and tried to approach the city aboveground, everything to no avail” [Ancelāne 1988, 352]. When finally a cannonball launched by Tsar Peter killed the witch, Riga surrendered at once. Since then, “the witch emerges from the River Daugava on each New Year’s night, asking “Is Riga ready?” The other voice responds “Not yet.” Should the voice say “It’s ready!”, Riga would sink with all its people” [Ancelāne 1988, 354]. Another version of the legend echoes in Latvian popular beliefs: “Each Midsummer night a voice is said to be calling “Is Riga ready?” The answer goes “No!” Should anyone reply “Yes!”, Riga would sink” [Šmits 1940, 1544].

This motif of the historical legend is developed by Rainis (1865–1929), the most distinguished Latvian poet and playwright according to many experts, in his lesser-known play, “The Witch of Riga” (1928). One of the many versions of the legend mentions, so to speak, the ethnic background of the Riga witch – she was Polish; as stated in another version, she was a Swedish princess, but in Rainis’s drama the witch is a Latvian girl, Dedze, who arrives in Riga to accomplish her mission of saving the city. Unexpectedly, Dedze falls in love with her antagonist, the manly and dashing Tsar Peter; she comes to know the earthly love, hatred, suffering, sacrifice and other human passions and dies in the finale of the drama from a silver bullet sent by Tsar Peter’s troops. The girl turns into a mythical creature and sinks beneath the waves along with a message that Riga is not ready. Rainis portrays Dedze not only as the defender of the city but also as the embodiment of the idea of rebirth and eternal development, as personification of the ever-changing nature of Riga. In the Latvian oral lore, the poetic structure of the image of Riga brings to light three elements: the female origin; multi-ethnicity; and the dichotomy of “our own” and “alien”, which are also present in the outlines of the image of Riga in later centuries up to the present time.

Before the Latvian written culture was formed, the image of the city was captured by Riga’s Neo-Latin poets, the so-called Riga Humanists, and especially

colourfully, in “Encomium to the Renowned Riga the Metropolis of Livonia by Basilius Plinius a Livonian from Riga”. Presumably, “Encomium inclytae civitatis Rigae, metropolis Livoniae” (first edition in 1595, in Leipzig),⁴ a poem in Latin by the Baltic German poet, Basilius Plinius, is the text best known in international academic research. Although, by its character, Plinius’s text, covering over 1700 lines, is a literary work, not a piece of research, it has also been noted as a significant contribution to the history of Latvian historic sciences. The historian of Latvian science, Jānis Stradiņš, writes that “Plinius’s verses about nature, the city, the people are like small poetic treatises created well before the birth of the official science in Riga” [Stradiņš 1980, 69]. In his “poetic thesis”, Plinius not only portrays the Riga of his time, but also refers to historical events in a more distant past, which he could not have witnessed, for instance, the arrival of the first German settlers to Latvia in the 13th century; he also assigned the honour of the founder of Riga to Bishop Albert. Thus Plinius’s name has been associated with the creation of a historiographical legend of the origins of Riga, while in the present-day historiography, that role of Bishop Albert is questioned. As seen in his verse, Plinius uses the feminine personal pronoun “her”; he personifies Riga as a bride and rejoices in its status as a city attractive for and coveted by overseas suitors:

“Beholding the beautiful town, the bishop christens her Riga, / blesses her and bids her flourish and perdure. / Suitors salute the bright queen of this blessed land, Livonia, / sought as a bride by the men of many kingdoms” [Plinius 1997, 359].

When singing praises to Riga, Plinius employs vivid poetic hyperbolas and admires his own daring to extol the city, since only a divine talent would be given the gift to express its grandeur. He imagines that, looking at the beauty of the newly-built Riga, “Even Vergil would have to retreat into stony silence” [Plinius 1997, 359]. The emotional appeal of Plinius’s narrative is related to the historical triumphal campaign of Germans, who conquered Riga and built it to create the metropolis of Livonia. Nevertheless, the “poet humanist” [Laizāns 2017, 377] also maintains his outlook on local people, who experience quite the opposite feelings with respect to that:

“The natives are at a loss, seeing the rude guest / force his will upon them with the lifted sword. / Broken in repeated battles their spirits sag, / they let fall their crude arms, beg for mercy, / admit defeat and accept the victors as their masters” [Plinius 1997, 357].

Wars and the hard work of building the stone Riga and wise administration of the city, as the poet sees it, is in all respects a men’s business, and thus we can say

⁴ Being first partly translated into Latvian only in 1924, the work has had little effect on the concept of Riga in Latvian literature and culture. However, four centuries on, at the end of the 20th century, Plinius’s opus saw a representational multilingual edition – a facsimile of the original publication was issued together with translations in four languages: Latvian, German, Russian, and English (in Riga, 1997).

that Plinius's Riga has a hard, serious and stern man's face. On the other hand, "Encomium" is an over created during the time of his studies at the Wittenberg University, a poem that lacks nothing of youthful enthusiasm and boyish bashfulness. While the poet, as mentioned earlier, conveys the image of Riga through the metaphor of a beautiful maiden coveted by foreign suitors, his work also contains an array of flattering verses concerning female Rigans. As if not being sure about the appropriateness of the topic he writes about, the poet asks the reader "But would I be wise even to hint at that beauty/ that makes our maidens the envy of the world?" [Plinius 1997, 377], and he explains his choice by the fact that

"Riga can offer, even from lowest classes, /
any girl to exceed in beauty the fabled Helen" [Plinius 1997, 377].

Moreover, the poet emphasises that "not only outer beauty gives charm to the maidens" [Plinius 1997, 380] and that even Minerva and Ariadne themselves could envy the women of Riga for their virtue and industriousness, their handicraft, their skills in embroidery and weaving. Plinius's poem reveals quite vividly the features of the cult of woman, especially a young and innocent woman, characteristic of patriarchal culture. Plinius perceives Riga, the metropolis of Livonia, as the city of his homeland:

"Riga, heart of my homeland, capital, apple of my eye, /
you whose name is graven deeply in my breast" [Plinius 1997, 346].

– and it is a narrative created in a deeply patriotic spirit. Obviously, he sees Riga as a German city and would never contemplate the slightest prospect of the city being transformed into the centre of Latvian culture and education and the capital of the Latvian state four centuries later. A pledge of love for Riga is a considerably later phenomenon in Latvian poetry, and it is related to the name of Aleksandrs Čaks (1901–1950), the most brilliant representative of Latvian urban poetry, who gave his first collection a noteworthy title – "Heart on the Pavement" (1928). It is the heart on the pavement of the poet's native city, while other Latvian authors who explored the Riga theme before him had arrived in the city from Latvia's provinces and their work gave largely an outsider's perspective of the city and its life.

A newcomer's perspective of the city is also presented in the humorous and vivacious poetic composition titled "Riga, or a Song About Riga and its Life" – one of the most distinctive texts in the Latvian literature with an exceptional history and path to the reader.⁵ This text should be mentioned as an explicit monu-

⁵ It is based on a poetic composition "Riga" by Mārcis Reinbergs (1826–1861), a young poet who arrived in Riga from Valmiera (published in serial instalments in a Riga newspaper "Mājas Viesis" in 1860). The poem got its second breath in 1865, when its new edition, revised by Ernests Dinsbergs (1816–1902), was published in a separate book under an apt title, "Riga, or a Song About Riga and its Life"; it saw numerous reprints and turned into folklore. Had Dinsbergs not saved the work of his untimely deceased brother in-pen from oblivion, the poem, most probably, would have remained on the dusty newspaper pages for ever.

ment of the literary culture of the so-called Old Latvians, in contrast to the New Latvians ideological position. Old Latvians unlike New Latvians “wanted to promote the welfare and culture of the people through a tranquil evolution, carefully avoiding conflicts with Baltic Germans, and this had a psychological rather than political character” [Johansons 1953, 91–92].

“Song About Riga” depicts a sunny side of the peacetime Riga, and from their viewpoint, the Rigans are one friendly and peaceful community, there is no place in it for class or ethnic antagonism or clashes.⁶ In the context of the present-day ideas of urban space, this could be characterised as the embodiment of the concept of a happy city. The narrative of “Riga, or a Song About Riga and its Life” is structured as a stroll through the city. It starts with the visual description of the city and its people of both genders, and this outlook is characterised by a good-natured enthusiasm, although not lacking in a humorous and naughty undertone:

“Riga! Riga! That’s how some people keep calling out, / That’s where the fine gentlemen are driving around / Misses and ladies, all stately / Full and wide, pink and white <...>. What buildings, what garments! / What fathers, what mothers! / What carriages, what horses! / What shops, what markets!” [Dinsbergs, Reinbergs 1975, 11–13].

The authors’ perspective of Riga is a view from outside, as if they were trying to astonish the reader. Dinsbergs and Reinbergs also map out the topography of the Old Town of Riga in the mid-19th century – the names of its streets, parks (gardens), buildings, gates, islands and bridges, as well as other toponyms, including in the so-called Outer Riga (suburbs) and Jūrmala. The authors put their spotlight on public buildings and institutions – the City Hall, the police office, shops, markets, squares, the port, the railway station, hotels, pubs, schools, factories, the hospital, cemeteries, churches – and their specific functions; the reader is told about historic events and natural disasters, floods and fires, and the ways how the city people fought them by joint effort. Being part of the Russian Empire, Riga as portrayed by Dinsbergs and Reinbergs is:

“Built in ancient times, / Laid out in a royal fashion / So that we may live handsomely / And safely under the Russian eagle” [Dinsbergs, Reinbergs 1975, 14].

Similar to Plinius’s “Encomium”, in “A Song About Riga” too, a woman in the city streets is a rare phenomenon. However, Dinsbergs and Reinbergs present a more diverse image of a Riga woman in terms of typology: not only do the authors get an eyeful of dignified matrons, genteel ladies and virtuous maidens, they also hope for the reader’s understanding and tolerance in situations where the moral virtues of Rigans of both genders are questioned. When the description of the

⁶ It is a well-known fact that Riga has been a multi-ethnic city since olden times. According to the official statistics in 1867, about the time “A Song About Riga” was created, 23.6% of the residents of Riga were Latvians (in addition to 42.9 % Germans, 25.1% Russians, 5.15% Jews, about 2% Poles and also other smaller ethnic groups), and the authors have sought to capture the rich diversity of cultural features on the multi-ethnic scene of the city.

most noteworthy sites, objects and public activities in the city is all but exhausted, the authors warn the readers and ask them not to take amiss that they will also be briefly introduced to the light-minded and flighty Riga girls:

“I would also like to mention here / The light-minded nature of the Riga girls. / They chase after suitors, / Open their doors to boys at night, / Do whatever they can to reward them, / Satisfy their every whim” [Dinsbergs, Reinbergs 1975, 61].

The verse dedicated to the ‘light-minded’ Riga girls is not followed, as it might be imagined, by a stern reproach from the authors over the issue of sexual morals; instead, they offer fatherly advice on how to behave prudently so as to get a good husband, thereby gaining a sure foothold in life and, moreover, “happiness and respect” [Dinsbergs, Reinbergs 1975, 62].

The national ideology of the New Latvians’ movement rebels against such a vision of a homely Riga, and the portrayal of the city changes radically in the literature of national romanticism. Riga emerges as a city of outlanders and an antagonistic force hostile to Latvian freedom aspirations; this is presented in the most striking manner in the verse of Pumpurs’s epic poem “Bearslayer”, which abounds in emotionally expressive turns of speech:

“The folk cursed Riga’s name, / And cried, by sorrow bound: / Oh, Riga, how much you / Poured out our brother’s blood! / Oh, Riga, how much too, / Caused bitter tears to flood! / O, Riga, how you spurned, / Laid waste the fields of grain! / O, Riga, how you burned – / Scarce homes and barns remain! / O, Riga, how you bore / Our plundered things away! / O, Riga, how you, more, / Made us with freedom pay!” [Pumpurs 2007, 155].

The current relevance of studies on “Riga”, a novel by Augusts Deglavs, is related to the novel expanding the horizons of national cultural identity and marking change in the literary paradigm: transition from Latvian mentality and the search for the meaning of a human life in mythical time and space or rural surroundings, to the city and a distinctly multi-ethnic environment. Having put a teenager, Pēteris Krauklītis, in the focus of his novel, the author shows us how, inspired by bright hopes for the future, young Latvian men leave their farms and despite great difficulties, reach the city:

“Air heavy as steel, gusts of gritty hail and rain washing away the remains of ice from the highway across Olaine plains between Jelgava and Riga. <...> Bells on cart shafts clang, horses snort, carriages rumble, sledge runners hiss and screech, the road being in a state that makes driving easy for neither carriage nor sled. In those days, no iron horse ran between Jelgava and Riga, but here and there in Kurzeme, Jews and journeymen were telling people of wondrous things – of one being able to drive in a fiery carriage from Riga to Düna, and from there to St. Petersburg. The highway connecting Riga and Jelgava was busy like a street <...>. Among those driving and walking, there was a boy, about fifteen years of age, thin-boned and of a smallish stature, but otherwise with a grown man’s gait. <...> It was quite a stretch he had covered; he had risen with roosters and followed the Bērzu muiža estate people

with their cartloads of grain to Jelgava, and from there, trudged ahead all the way on foot. His destination was Riga. <...> Pēteris felt as if Riga would be the promised land... When it has been reached, one will want for nothing” [Deglavs 1957, 7–11].

This is how the success story of Pēteris Krauklītis begins, and symbolically also the success story of the Latvian nation, looking from the perspective of the formation of a national state with Riga as its capital city. Although Deglavs’s novel has plenty of vivid characters and scenes, entanglements and emotional experiences in people’s private lives, the emphasis is laid on the ideological undercurrent of the epoch and the related depiction of public processes and events of cultural and historical significance. We may say that Deglavs’s “Riga” is a markedly masculine novel, built around an economically and socially active Latvian man. On the one hand, Deglavs portrays Riga as a city destined to be the focus for national aspirations of the Latvian people. On the other hand, he reminds us that Riga, since its origins, has been and remains a multi-ethnic city, and, whilst describing the formation of the Latvian nation in political terms, Deglavs also makes note of Germans, Russians, Jews, Lithuanians, Estonians, Hungarians, Gypsies, and people of other ethnic backgrounds. Although in its original sense identity means sameness, modern identity theories “emphasize identification as a dynamic, fluid, and unpredictable social process over identity as a fixed attribute or given social fact” [Haney 2018, 202], and Deglavs, being unaware of the existence of the theories, proves to be their adherent. With virtuosity, worthy of admiration, the author inhabits the linguistic space of the multicultural Riga at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the interaction of the Latvian, German and Russian languages that merge into a city slang on the basis of the Latvian language. In comparison with the above-explored texts, Deglavs offers a wealth of impulses not only for the understanding of the imaginary aggregate vision of Riga but also reveals the diversity of Riga’s social identities through the actions of the novel’s characters. When characterising the dramatis personae, that is, individual identities, Deglavs attaches importance to basic human values instead of gender or national identity. For the author, also the large collective identities (the German Riga and the Russian Riga) are not static and antagonistic, in evil selfishness, to everything Latvian; instead, they are historically determined and, if not fully acceptable, then at least understandable.

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