

“Reversed” New Historicism and the Latvian Literature: Gundega Repše’s Novels

„Atvirkščias“ Naujasis istorizmas ir latvių literatūra:
Gundegos Repšės romanai

ILZE JANSONE

University of Latvia, Faculty of Humanities

<https://ror.org/05g3mes96>

Jansone.ilze@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7446-4558>

Abstract: The article¹ offers an interpretation of Latvian writer Gundega Repše’s novels within their historical context by exploring interpretative possibilities of New Historicism. As a literary theory, New Historicism is an open and opaque methodology, inviting a playful engagement with methods, agencies, and interpretative strategies, and encouraging critical thinking within a theoretical discourse. I also propose that Repše’s novels might be read as a literary practice of what might be called “reversed” New Historicism by which I mean a particular method of creative writing that reinforces the correlation between history and literature and rhizomatic thinking. It helps to reveal systems and assumptions of power and comment on them from below, this way shaping new ways of how we think of fiction, history and language. In my interpretation, I demonstrate that “reversed” New Historicism as a method of creative writing encourages to rethink the continuous presence of power structure that still exists in contemporary society. A network of memories, displayed through artistic language, helps to see the present-day situation and the continuity of the past more clearly.

Keywords: New Historicism, rhizome-like narrative, creative writing, Gundega Repše.

Received: 25/10/2024. **Accepted:** 26/11/2024.

Copyright © 2024 Ilze Jansone. Published by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

1 The article is part of the project “Narrative, Form and Voice: Embeddedness of Literature in Culture and Society” (VPP-LETONIKA-2022/3-0003), funded by State research programme “Letonika—Fostering a Latvian and European Society.”

Santrauka: Straipsnio autorė, išmėgindama interpretacines Naujojo istorizmo galimybes, latvių rašytojos Gundegos Repšės romanus siūlo žvalgyti neatsiejus nuo jų istorinio konteksto. Atvira ir miglota Naujojo istorizmo metodologija skatina žaismingai įsitraukti į šio teorinio diskurso metodų ir interpretacinių strategijų svarstymus bei mąstyti kritiškai. Repšės romanus autorė taip pat siūlo skaityti kaip literatūrinę taip vadinamo „atvirkščio“ Naujojo istorizmo praktiką, t. y. kaip tam tikrą kūrybinio rašymo metodą, įgalinantį istorijos, literatūros ir rizominio mąstymo koreliacijas. Tai leidžia atskleisti galios sistemas ir prielaidas ir komentuoti jas „iš apačios“, taip formuojant naujus fikcijos, istorijos ir kalbos apmąstymo būdus. Taip interpretuojant straipsnyje parodoma, jog „atvirkščias“ Naujasis istorizmas kaip kūrybinio rašymo metodas skatina permąstyti galios struktūros, tebeegzistuojančios šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje, buvimą. Atminčių tinklas, perteiktas menine kalba, leidžia aiškiau išvysti dabarties situaciją ir praeities tęstinumą.

Raktažodžiai: Naujasis istorizmas, rizominis pasakojimas, kūrybinis rašymas, Gundega Repšė.

New Historicism and “Reversed” New Historicism

In this article, I offer a reading of Gundega Repše's novels by exploring interpretative possibilities of New Historicism. While attempting to trace the strategies that allow Repše to merge language and memory, I employ some of the assumptions of New Historicism as a point of departure. I also propose that Repše's novels might be read as a literary practice of what might be called “reversed” New Historicism which I understand as a particular method of creative writing that reinforces the correlation between history and literature and helps to reveal systems of power and explicate them from below, thus offering the new way of how we think of fiction, history and language today.

As a literary approach, New Historicism seems particularly suitable for emphasizing a slight change of perspective. Being an open and opaque methodology, let us remember that its founders refused to define it as “a repeatable methodology or a literary critical program” (Gallagher, Greenblatt 2000: 19), it invites to play with methods, agencies and interpretative strategies and to think differently and in a more detailed way not only in the realm of literature but also in theory. New Historicism, which developed in the 1980s, focuses on the interplay between literature and historical contexts, by asserting that texts are embedded within the cultural, social, political, and economic conditions of the time and cannot be understood in isolation from these factors. The emphasis on

the co-constitutive relationship between texts and their historical circumstances, suggesting that literature both shapes and is shaped by its historical context is important for this article. Viewed by New Historicists as a discursive agency, literature, as Paul Fry suggests, becomes dangerous, because it “influences the course of history as much as history influences literature” (Fry 2021: 250). The interpretative framework provided by New Historicism, Fry continues, discloses the subversive and even rebellious potential of literature when in hands of interested parties.

Harold Aram Veesper has offered a few key assumptions about New Historicism. Two of them are important for this article. First, Veesper explains that no discourse could give access to stable truths; therefore, there is no discourse that could reveal inalterable human nature. Secondly, the acts of critique and oppositions risk “falling prey to the practice it exposes,” because these acts use tools which they condemn (Veeser 1989: xi). For this reason, it is worthwhile to assess the applicability of “reversed” New Historicism as a method of creative writing in the analysis of contemporary novels. Especially in the fiction, in order to create a dramatic conflict, the author tends to give life to “bad” and “good” characters, etc. In retrospective, such a black-and-white way of thinking may lead to misinterpretations of history, which oppose original and objective historical fiction. In other words, this reminds of a “trap” Catherine Greenblatt has mentioned, i.e., that one who tries to think within the framework of New Historicism, should “be suspicious of liberatory narratives: everything is, on some level, caught up in the circulations of power in a given time period” (Felluga 2015: 198).

Michel Foucault pointed out that the problem of the intellectual is to change not what is in people’s heads, but “the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” (Foucault 2015: 133). As we shall see later, it is echoed in the series *We. The XX Century* initiated by Repše. The truth is already power (Foucault 2015: 133), therefore, we could ask if and how “reversed” New Historicism could be useful for telling “different truths” about history by the means of literature. Probably one way to look at it would be a possibility of being suspicious of liberatory narratives and look to the structures of power (and truth) from below. Below, which is the opposite of the “history of victors,” an alternative history lies, which “resents transcripts that are not only ‘hidden’ but also crooked, misquoted, gibbous, and defaced” (Veeser 1991: 3–4). As a process,

history (as well as literature) lacks a linear structure. Because of the lack of a strong theory standpoint and its concentration on historiographical particularity, New Historicism has been compared to a concept of rhizome (Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 3–25), which I find useful in my interpretation of Repše's novels.

Rhizome is a biological term which Deleuze and Guattari used in their interpretation of Kafka's story and later developed in their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The term designates not just subterranean stems of plants but any assemblage that does not conform to the metaphor of the root-book and, instead, is "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a general and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by circulation of states" (Felluga 2015: 270). Among the six characteristic traits of rhizome as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (connection, heterogeneity of coding, multiplicity in determination, a-signifying ruptures of segmentation, cartographic production, and 'decalcomania' (Young, Genosko, and Watson 2013: 262)), I find the heterogeneity of coding and 'decalcomania' central to my analysis. As I will show in my interpretation, these concepts help to validate "reversed" New Historicism in Repše's novels, especially in *Boggen*. Besides, as the rhizome "emphasizes the capricious, undifferentiated and 'nomadic' character of life and language" (Stivale 2011: 148), it helps to trace the indeterminacy of history and language in the novels more effectively.

History can be presented as a rhizome through literature and *vice versa*; hence, the main question when reading Repše's works is what insights can one gain when reading the fiction on history that merges history and literature and constructs a literary work as a reaction to modern political and economic circumstances with the aim to criticize them or to change the perspective of the history that is happening now? I propose to address this question with intended subjectivity, trying to ground "reversed" New Historicism as a method of creative writing that develops a narrative, told from the "individual below," from the rhizomatic perspective in polyphonic text. To answer this question, I analyze the two novels of a Latvian writer Repše within the context of her other works. Acting as a loop, which recreates memory and historical events and provides explanations of sociocultural and psychological characteristics of the society, her novels open a rich field for discussions about poetic language of historical representations and its role in reinterpreting the past. Gallagher and Greenblatt describe New Historicism as being "not the path to transhistorical

truth, whether psychoanalytic or deconstructive, or purely formal but the key to particular historically embedded social and psychological circumstances” (Gallagher, Greenblatt 2000: 7). These circumstances reveal the history of an individual within the context of history of the nation or the state, yet the individual history, being multiple in determination and dimension, connects with other individual histories from below, and is told through literature, thus helping to put back the stories of others on the map. Applying “reversed” New Historicism, I read Repše’s novels *Boggen* and *Thumbelina* as polyphonic, where I treat polyphony, as “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984: 6). These voices are possible because of the dialogic nature of the novel (as, for example, in Dostoyevsky’s case). It means that any unit of discourse (words, sentence, etc.) is directed at two different goals and is meaningful in two different dimensions (Hirshkop 2021: 76). Keeping this in mind, the relationship between the author and their characters are different, compared to a “typical novel,” where the characters are usually dominated by the story and the author. Within a polyphonic text, the words, speeches and ideas of the characters are interindividual and intersubjective, and exist in a “dialogic communion *between* consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984: 88). It means that ideas are live events, and that their task is not to illuminate or explain the represented/author’s world. Rather, these ideas or words enter into the novel’s world as an image of a human being, as “one orientation among other orientations,” and they are played out “at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984: 88). Exactly because of their polyphonic nature, ideas can be reconstructed even if one of the voices (or words, or sentences) is heard; therefore, for Mikhail Bakhtin, “there is nothing that is entirely dead: every meaning will celebrate its revival” (Etkind 2013: 73).

“Reversed” New Historicism in the Novels of Gundega Repše

Gundega Repše (b. 1960) is a well-known Latvian prose writer who has been publishing since 1979. She is the author of ten novels, six short story collections and more than fifteen works in documental prose. Repše has been one of the first Latvian writers calling for the new interpretation of the past. One of Repše’s

borderworks is her novel *Marked by Fire* (*Ugunszīme*, 1990), dedicated to the post-war Latvian intellectuals whose lives were destroyed by the Soviet regime. The novel that describes not a historically objective experience, is probably the first attempt to archetypically understand the Soviet occupation within the context of the grassroots perspective and with a gaze into the future. In another work, Repše rethinks and rewrites history from the individual point of view, showing how historical changes have affected families, their lives, intellectuals and other personalities, who were marginalized by the Soviet regime.

In 2011, Repše initiated a collection of short-stories *We. The XX Century*, in which twelve Latvian female writers dedicated a story to one period in the history of twentieth-century Latvia. The idea has developed into a series of novels. Repše explained the necessity of such series: "The historical novel series was born as a response to the general; gloomy and nihilistic atmosphere' that was felt in society and by cultural officials in 2010. The denial of Latvian literature, the statements that it is based only on translations and the pessimistic mood in literary circles have given birth to the will to prove otherwise" (Delfi TV 2017: n.p.). Thus, the very idea was to react upon the cultural circumstances and hope to change them with the help of literature. One can say that *We. The XX Century* was an attempt to reinterpret history from below, from its fragmentation, and not from the perspective of "grand" or academic history: "The series of novels seems to redeem almost all the reproaches that people feel towards historians, politicians, the unexamined past, the confusion and stress of the present" (Jundze 2017: 3). By that, Repše defines the aim of such literature as an ambitious claim to react to modern political and cultural circumstances and to change them, while trying to rewrite history in order to change the position of power.

Repše has demonstrated that history is a process, that history is something that happens from below, to the people every day, and that it is not a time period or a cut off from an endless stream. Furthermore, she does not use historical events as a background for her narrative, rather, she merges those events and the narrative in the realm of poetic (as well as symbolic) language. This convergence continually reveals new perspectives, while sharply focusing on two central questions: How does literature interact with history? How does an individual acquire agency and create history (or in Repše's case, herstory)?

The History of Possibilities: *Boggen* (2016)

Novel *Boggen* (*Bogene*, 2016) is dedicated to the history of Lester's family during the interwar period in sovereign Latvia before the Soviet occupation, throughout World War II and deportations. Although the Lesters is a rich family, the novel emphasizes the marginalized voices of victims of the Soviet regime (on the deportation train, in the cell, etc.). *Boggen* is written from various perspectives of time and narrators, mixing men's and women's voices. The novel, committed to the individual worldviews, values and experiences, separates single voices of people who undergo the transition from freedom to totalitarianism.

The novel tells the tragic history of the individuals who have been part of Latvian society before World War II. *Boggen* also chronicles the Lesters facing the Soviet occupation and the so-called Horrible Year (from June 1940 to July 1941). On June 14, 1941, the mass deportation took place, during which more than 15,400 Latvian citizens were arrested and deported to the imprisonment in Siberia. People and entire social groups that were considered potentially hostile to the Soviet occupation authorities were "neutralized" according to formal criteria (social affiliation, past political and professional activity, etc.) (Bleiere 2023: n.p.).

The narrative is told from various perspectives: Bertha, the mother of Lesters, Lote, her daughter, Maximillian, Lote's cousin, and his mother Rosemarie. Even though the characters act in the historical time, they are endowed with the new meaning, sometimes a retrospective one (from the author's point of view), as if trying to show the possible directions of a character's life (as in Dorothea's case): What would they have done during the fifty years of Soviet occupation? Yet the characters are not "types"; rather, they are given limited and dimensional personal histories as possibilities. The characters are not pinned to the map of history. They are blurry and contradictory, thus, open to various possibilities, because their fate is uncertain. For instance, Lote finds herself among others in a cattle wagon of the train heading to Siberia. She is raped almost every day, and in these horrifying moments, she sees herself only as a piece of meat; yet, the train never reaches the station in the novel. The readers are left ignorant about Lote's survival and her life in Siberia.

On the train, there is also a young mother, Antonia, who tries to kill her baby (later, Lote calls the baby a *boggen*). She commits suicide, leaving the baby

to Lote. The reader knows nothing about Antonia's past and is a witness only of the end of her life. Antonia's life before the Horrible Year stays a riddle, leaving a lot of space for imagination.

Another character in the novel, Bertha kills the Soviet soldier with an oven hook and flees to Riga, where she hopes to meet her friend. Instead, she is arrested and ends up in the “corner house,” or the KGB headquarters. She is lost to the history and her fate is unknown to the reader. Bertha's sister (as it turns out later, they are not biological sisters after all), Dorothea, is ill and spends most of the time in bed reading. Her character is revealed through the conversations with her son Maximillian. Her son when talking to Lote characterizes Dorothea in a laconic way: “Mother would sooner forgive the vilest crime than accept that somebody might not be the same as all the others. She is a gossip who cannot stand loneliness. She covers up her helplessness with a coat of chatter” (Repše 2020: 107). Dorothea is an ambiguous character, unable to move, she keeps reading Jānis Sudrabkalns, a poet who during the war shifted his convictions quickly, embracing the Soviet ideology and praising it in his poems. Thus, indirectly, Dorothea's character also indicates another possibility for the members of Lester's family in history: a collaboration, or, more likely, a silent support of the regime.

As literary scholar Ieva Kalniņa points out in her review of *Boggen*: “The main focus of Repše's narrative/novel is not historical events, but their influence on human thought and action, reflections on the regime, man, the universe evoked by specific situations” (Kalniņa, 2016: 53). The novel's universe is undefined and vague, especially because of the multiplicity of fates of its characters. Their fates are interconnected and multiple in their determination and directions; thus, partly forming the structure of the rhizome.

The title itself seems to point to this historical network of possibilities. *Bogene* is an unusual word in Latvian, probably derived from the Slavic word *bog* (бог, god) and making it feminine—*bogene*, “a semi-Slavic word for a female house spirit” (Simsone 2016: n.p.). On the other hand, *bogene* may be something else — a being or something that guards women against masculine history, helping them from the past (or below), from the position of the rhizome, because, as the author reveals, the word *bogene* simply came to her and only then she started searching for its meaning. *Bogene* is a house spirit, and in the novel, it is a toad (important symbolic animal in Latvian folk beliefs) and an oven hook (Repše, 2024).

A toad is a symbolic and chthonic animal in Latvian traditional oral culture (see Barovskis 2015: 19, 30, 63). In the novel, it acquires a powerful metaphorical meaning, revealing itself at the intersection of poetic language, literary imagination and reinterpretation of historical narratives. Poetically described as a mediator between the physical reality and the mythological reality, in Repše's novel, a toad invites to think of a rhizome. It becomes an entanglement of roots, which creates the new meaning from below; however, it is not fixed as a reference point: this symbol comes from "behind," it draws a map where the history happens and is cancelled simultaneously; it also brings the meaning from the past, but emerges on the surface of the novel as a sign, as a hope and as a defender. As a representative of the chthonic world, a toad embodies life and birth. In the novel, a toad is the first animal Bertha sees, when she marries and becomes the daughter-in-law in the Lesters' house.

In the novel, using the means of intertextuality and the fusion of different levels, Repše interweaves Bertha's life with the traditional imagery, immersing the experience of the individual into the historical experience of the nation. *Bogene* provides Bertha with ancient force/power, the intensity of which helps her to act and make decisions during the dark times. Guarded by *bogene*, Bertha manages to stand against the power of authorities, who come to her in the guise of a Soviet soldier. This competition of two different powers functions also as a metaphor, reminding the reader that the ancient time has been ongoing and has been happening event today, that it continues shaping our historical context, opening a range of perspectives, which help to think about re-evaluation of the history. For instance, a further interpretation is possible based on the meaning that has been attributed to the toad in folk imagination. The toad is a quest of another world, which returns in cycles in the moments of rebirth and initiation. The image of a toad in traditional oral narratives has been connected to esoteric knowledge and ability to see the world in its fullness (Barovskis 2012: 401–413).

Besides, in German, the word *Bogene* means a "loop, a roundabout way," this meaning is also present in a Latvian dialect word (Repše 2024). This perspective links contemporary viewpoint to the historical events, while simultaneously highlighting that those events remain unresolved and have been inadequately explained in certain respects. The historical novels serve "not only as texts that offer new interpretations of history or shape national memory; they function as works that articulate insights about their own era through the lens of history"

(Kalniņa 2016: 53). Acting as a loop, Repše's novel also constitutes a trap. Although it announces that the story is about the Lester's family, being a loop, it provides not only the interpretation of historical events, it also includes the story about our modern time—it neither reveals the "historical truth," nor it fully reveals the fates of the characters. Rather, *Boggen* invites the readers to think of the time as a round, where the liberation or emancipation of the characters—or of what they symbolize—have not happened yet. They remain subject to the forces of memories and the interpretations of those memories, and are entrapped in their own past.

The Confluence of Voices: *Thumbelina* (2000)

Repše's novel *Thumbelina* is an example of deep and inverted polyphony, or "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 1984: 6). *Thumbelina* is a combination of various diaries, written by women in different times and contexts. The novel is also supplemented with the music score by Shubert and Listz (Viennese evenings) and Stella's (one of the authors of the diaries) interviews with her grandmother Amelia. These chapters of the book interest me the most, because they reveal the historical events and the tragic history of deportations during World War II. Amelia tells about her life in Siberia, the everyday problems, such as famine, hygiene, etc., and also about her job and love life. In all these dialogues, the fate and history of Stella's family has been revealed: Amelia has been married before the Soviet occupation but has separated from her husband. She has a son from this marriage, who after the Soviet occupation moved to Israel and married a Jewish woman. The father of Amelia's daughter, Stella's mother, is a Russian man from Siberia—he died in an accident.

By reconstructing Amelia's life, the author rewrites the history as equivocal reality, which becomes also a part of Stella's life, and not only metaphorically. Stella is the heiress of her family history, which she observes developing in her mind and which shapes her attitude towards world and life. Additionally, in one episode, Amelia's narrative history is quite literally unveiled as a text. She tells that in the first year in Siberia, she lived with the Russian family, getting food and shelter in exchange of a golden bracelet. The Russian wife was a very good person, but her husband, when his wife was giving soup to Amelia, would

always raise his hand and shout: “*Hvatit*” (“Enough” in Russian): “I still have this word in my head; I’m serving the soup to myself, but a voice in my head says—*hvatit*” (Repše 2000: 115). This seemingly insignificant detail shows that trauma may take the form of language and be unconsciously present for a long time, sometimes even for the rest of one’s life.

Viviana, Stella’s mother, is a writer “with a black snake grinding flour on her desk” (Repše 2000: 26). Once again, this paraphrase comes from the Latvian ethnic oral culture, which in the novel, establishes a connection between the image of the mother and the realm of mythology. It further invites the reader to re-evaluate not only the representation of the grandmother but also her role as a writer. The serpent is also a chthonic animal; besides, in mythological beliefs, it is forbidden to kill a serpent, “because they protect the house and bring good fortune; if they are supplied with milk, they bring health and prosperity. In fairy tales, the toad may replace the serpent in this role” (Lurker 2005: 8460). With this metaphor, Stella’s mother is revealed as a primordial and ambivalent, and also as a person who sees “deeper” (because she writes), who can merge the past, the present and the future and erase any questions about the periodization of the family (or national) history. The process of writing is not fixed in time or place, it transcends human limits, being an ever-changing and present process. Through writing and language, individual’s life becomes a web rather than a line segment.

The title of the novel, *Thumbelina*, is a reference to the fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen (*Tommelise*, first published in 1835). In the fairy tale, Thumbelina is rescued by the swallow that later finds the writer who can write down the story of Thumbelina. In Repše’s novel, Stella writes letters or talks to a Bird. This way, the two perspectives are brought together by using poetic language—a “bird’s eye view,” and a more limited but, at the same time, detailed and specific view from below by vulnerable and insignificant Thumbelina. The title also encapsulates the central inquiry of the text: as Thumbelina investigates her family history, she seeks to comprehend her identity, uncover her roots, and determine its origins. Is she a taproot, strongly and vertically rooted in the ground, or is she a rhizome-like, with a root system that grows in various directions and constructs various herstories: one of her mother, one of her grandmother, and one of herself?

The herstories are cartographic, they bifurcate into various ways, multiplying dimensionally. Having a rhizomatic structure, herstories may point to some

aspects of Thumbelina's identity; however, they cannot pinpoint one place or one point. Her identity is unstable and blurred, it has a potential to change, depending the dimension it takes. In the novel, Thumbelina is probably used as a symbol of a small nation (Latvians). By retelling some of the darkest pages of Latvian history from Amelia's perspective, Stella understands her place in the world. She presents the past events in a different light—as specific part of a person's life, which still affects Stella and the world she lives in.

"Reversed" New Historicism: Language and Literature

In *Boggen*, the historical loop is represented in terms of memory and time. As the title and the narrative of the novel indicate, the text recreates the history of Latvia not by simply retelling the historical events but by exploring them endlessly. Using the culturally and intellectually loaded metaphors that stir imagination found in folk beliefs and fill it with the new, subjective meaning, while preserving the traditional (such as serpent and toad), Repše *creates* history, which is not retrospective. To her, history is a process that is directly connected to modern Latvian context.

The symbol of the toad comes from the ancient past, thus showing that there is some mythological layer that never fades. *Boggen* is not a chain of historical events, instead, it offers a deep historical understanding through the memories of individuals, which, altogether, form the collective memory and provide the change in perspective of present-day time. In the current context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is crucial for the people of Latvia to reevaluate the Soviet occupation and its lasting impact. The division in the society has been profoundly influenced by differing historical perceptions among various groups. Fostering a more personal and nuanced understanding of history is essential for enabling the opposing societal groups to engage in constructive dialogue about contemporary issues.

The novel *Boggen* has an epigraph from St. Augustine's *Confessions*: "Great is the power of memory, a fearful thing, O my God, a deep and boundless manifoldness; and this thing is the mind, and this am I myself. What am I then, O my God? What nature am I? ... and where shall I find Thee? If I find Thee without my memory, then do I not retain Thee in my memory. And how shall I find Thee, if I remember Thee not?" (Augustine 1999: 131–132). Memory,

or occasionally, memories, is interwoven throughout the text. First, memory is addressed directly, and in a subtle way, it reminds the reader of the narrative's central theme. For example, when on the train, Lote recalls her mother's advice: "If you are afraid and feeling weak, don't try to call up memories, girl. ... Don't think about your mother, don't think about home—that will weaken you, you'll be vulnerable. Exist only in each given moment. Memories make you human" (Repše 2020: 21). Secondly, the novel's structure resembles memory itself: it shifts from one member of the Lester family to another, disrupting the chronological flow and shifting like a thought, thus immersing the reader in the text and showing the ambiguity and diversity of the process, which constructs an individual and may also be called his(her)story.

Thirdly, it is important to recall Augustine's perspective, as cited by Repše, which associates memory not only with love but also with the knowledge and learning—the elements that depend on signs, language, persons, and text, all of which are meticulously preserved in *Boggen*. For Augustine, memory underpins the soul's development in the world; it shapes our identity and influences our perception of reality. Indeed, the capacity to remember equates to self-recognition, and, in a sense, memory constitutes personal identity—a "place" where one experiences oneself through the coincidences and possibilities of the history as a never-ending process. As *Boggen* reveals, memory is inherently subjective and interpretive. Consequently, the novel leaves the readers contemplating, whether memory constitutes history and pondering, which memories have the potential to become historical narratives.

On the other hand, memories are also rhizomatic. Memory is always an interpretation; therefore, it is connected to an individual worldview, systems of sense and meaning. Memories may also be contradictory, and are, of course, multiple in determination. Unclear, yet very strong and even affirmative, memories call into question "grand" historical narratives, by emphasizing the individual value. They also demonstrate doubt towards what the "universal truth" (or the truth as power) is.

Memories not only recount multiple perspectives on World War II, they also retrospectively establish a comprehensive foundation for the environment in which the characters of the novel develop. This environment has a significant influence on their strength, weakness, or superficiality, as exemplified by Dorothea. Dorothea, with her precise, yet alarming resemblance to many of her

contemporaries, epitomizes the life driven by appearances and societal status in the interwar period, when Latvia was an independent state. Her subsequent downfall, illness, and decisions, driven by weakness, mirror the madness that can afflict those without firm roots during the moments of extreme crisis. Dorothea is not ready to accept her memories or embrace them. This fear of memories is not unusual; it is natural for individuals to be apprehensive of their past. The author, therefore, wields an almost mythical power, using literature to navigate the vibrant and often harsh flow of memory and present it to society: "while the multiplicity of memory may indeed appear terrifying to the individual—threatening personal identity and amplifying the uncertainty of experience—it is precisely this unsettling multiplicity that characterises modern society's relationship with the past" (Kaprāns 2016: 132).

The novel *Thumbelina* shows that the concept about the world where "grand" narratives of history dominate is problematic. It risks creating a delusion of a total "experience of the humankind" that is being shared by all involved sides on equal terms. Repše brings forward a more nuanced approach, according to which history is a story of the individual, and the world is constructed through the lens of the individual. Stella lives in an unstable and changing world, shaped and destabilized by the history of her mother and grandmother, which makes an inevitable part of Stella's personality. Thus, the deeper meaning of Amelia's rehabilitation after her return from Siberia is not an abstract integration into politically changed society. The deeper meaning for Amelia consists of the unforgettable *hvatit*, of her visits to the dentist, because "all my teeth were covered in metal" (Repše 2000: 133). The deeper understanding about the world for Stella is gained by answering the question: "What is my name? Stella, Vivienne... Amelia, perhaps?" (Repše 2000: 169).

The complex historical interweaving of roots results in Stella embodying the characteristics of a rhizome. The polyphonic voices in *Thumbelina* animate memories by imbuing them with meaning—Stella imparts the meaning to her grandmother's memories through her own perspective. By extracting a single voice from herstory, she reveals the possibility to distill an entire concept, thereby fostering a rhizomatic formation that persistently re-evaluates power structures. The herstory expands into the past by shaping itself, constructing Stella's world and endowing her existence with meaning—not in the "whole" or in the world but in herself, in her inner and personal world.

The structure of the novel—the score of Shubert and List, letters, diaries, interviews, and dialogues—displays the use of poetic language as history. These are the flashbacks from different times, expressed by different means, but still constituting the unclear whole. Even though the Liszt’s notes have a specific and personal meaning, given by the characters and the author, the readers must find their meaning using their own experience. Because of the novel’s structure, its references to ancient mythologies and narrative framework that is designed as an interconnected network of meanings, as well as imagined dialogues to the Bird, the novel develops a narrative, which seems to confirm that there is no such thing as the history of Latvia. There are histories and herstories, and none of them is complete, because history is also constructed by the narrative—Gundega Repše, the author, and I, the reader, we are both constructing herstory (each of our own) in the text, which is being created or with which I am interacting.

There are also other works by Repše that invite to reflect upon a “reversed” New Historicism; however, they remain outside the scope of this article. For instance, the trilogy *Substances* (2021), which, in addition to the novel *The Orphanage* (2008), also includes the novel’s antithesis, *Nice People* (2014), and the more philosophical work that deals with the issue of freedom, *Thin Air* (2019). The protagonists of the three books, however different, are parts of the same soul, which, nevertheless, manages to remain one, both as the heroes who act and as the creators. It is through literature and language that they reveal themselves as an inseparable whole.

Repše’s characters are individuals who are on the road to liberation and emancipation—not necessarily from the burden of history or from slavery. They are on the road to becoming a “free spirit,” meaning that a liberated person has become himself again thanks to the deep understanding of the history and the chain of meaningful truths, which this understanding offers. The creation of the text is not and cannot be static by definition, because it is constantly changing, is self-reflexive and determined by external and past circumstances. Yet at its center, the task of the writer (or the divine?) remains the same—to create [meaning] out of nothing, because history is “just” a memory. On the other hand, unlike the capacious metaphor of air, the understanding of history encapsulates the world picture in the text, at the same time, infinitely expanding the horizon of meaning.

Conclusion: "Reversed" New Historicism As a Fiction Writing Method?

In Repše's works, history reveals itself as a rhizome. It is a process in which the historical narratives shape (rather than reflect) an understanding of historical truth, bringing it to the present—as the basis of individual agency, where the worldview is shaped accordingly to the individual perspective. Doubted as a research method, "reversed" New Historicism, as I see it in Repše's novels, may be considered a creative writing method, which, using poetic language and everyday life experiences, reveal that the process by which historical experience forms the basis of identity and worldview is uncertain, unpredictable, and unstable. It defies generalization and cannot be detached from an individual experience. Repše brings the grand narratives of history back to individuals, who are subjects and not objects of those narratives. In this way, she reinvents the truths of history and shows significant turning points in history from below.

Central to my reading of Repše's novels is the question of an individual in the world order, of the deeply personal nature of history as both an ever-present memory and as a defining character trait. "Reversed" New Historicism, seen as a method of writing, creates space for a reassessment of history, rather than resolutely accepting it. By retelling events and linking them to memory, Repše creates continuity, for instance, she challenges the widely accepted interpretation of the Soviet period as a rupture. For Repše, it is not a rupture in the Latvian history, on the contrary, it has been and still is one of the factors that has created and continues to create the modern individual. As such, it contains a risk of subjectivity.

Although both novels deal with the Soviet occupation and the Horrible Year, there are significant differences in the structure and poetics of the narrative *Boggen* reflects on the deportation and the life before it, and the characters of the novel end up in the unknown—their fate remains unexplored. The novel does not resolve the question about whether the power that enslaved people has come to an end; rather, by using the memory network as an analogy, it encourages the modern reader to conceptualize (oppressive) power as dynamic, adaptive and continually present. If one reads *Boggen* only as a retrospective look at World War II, one falls into the trap. The title implies that power changes its forms and appearances, but it still implies that the individual must break free from

the various forms and expressions of (oppressive) power. It is the network of memories that helps us to see the present-day situation and the continuity.

Thumbelina, on the other hand, deals with the same historical events from the perspective of a survivor. Amelia has returned from the exile and talks about her ordinary life: hard work, minor and major tragedies, love and children. There is nothing special about these events: life goes on, and the only difference is that they take place in a forced exile, with a tragic starting point (a widow soon after her wedding, she loses everything and finds herself in Siberia). In *Thumbelina*, a human being is shown as a piece in a constantly changing puzzle. It keeps moving all the time, because the history is an ever-changing process, as not only events but also perceptions of them shift. However, the question emerges in the narrative of the novel: Is there a single puzzle of (Latvian) history? Or does it rather consist of an endless number of unrelated narratives? If so, these narratives exactly disclose the process which demonstrates the Nietzschean question of how one becomes who they are. At the same time, the answers remain open and invite to reflect upon our deeply-felt and inexplicable need for the “big picture,” for the grand narratives, in which one could situate one’s personal experience in order to make it easier to understand and endow with meaning. Both novels treat history as an ever present, endless, non-linear and changing process. The author achieves it not through the manifested statements but rather through poetic language. Repše’s writing style creates a seemingly documentary but yet literary space, in which history as a text is created through language. The urge for the grand narrative of the nation is probably rooted in the strive to understand great tragedies of Latvian history as a common ground and find a fitting explanation of problems that are being faced by the contemporary generation. However, Repše’s novels show that these attempts are futile and cannot replace the individual viewpoint and language that one uses to speak about the past events and their impact. Through poetic language, Repše reveals an alternative way that allows her to develop a careful and cautious thinking about history. What one needs is not a “big picture,” which often simplifies events, but a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of history.

Individual memory constantly recreates the meaning of history, creating a map of the world’s meanings that navigate one through ethical challenges of everyday life, providing questions instead of prescriptions. Hence, the history is no longer a stream of events that sweeps one along; it is an individual who

makes history (as Berta does by killing the soldier of the Red Army) and who creates history through language (as Repše does in her novels). The freedom of memory achieved in this way provides a space for the freedom of creation and re-creation through personal understanding of the historical events and through poetic language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augustine 1999. *Confessions of St. Augustine*, transl. Edward B. Pusey, D. D. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.
- Bakhtin Mikhail 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barovskis Ingus 2015. *Htoniskā pasaule latviešu pasakās: laiks un telpa*: promocijas darbs, Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte.
- Barovskis, Ingus 2012. "Htoniskā pasaule. Laiks un telpa—dzīvība un nāve," in *Inkluzīvi*, red. Janīna Kursīte, Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 401–413.
- Bleiere Daina 2023. "1941. gada deportācijas Latvijā," *Latvijas Nacionālā enciklopēdija*, internet access <<https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/108548-1941-gada-14-j%C5%ABnija-deport%C4%81cija-Latvij%C4%81>> [Accessed on 06.06.2024.]
- Deleuze Gilles, Felix Guattari (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Delfi TV 2017. Gundega Repše: "Mēs. Latvija XX gadsimts ir atbilde nikulīgajai un nihilistiskajai atmosfērai," *Delfi TV*, Internet access: <<https://www.delfi.lv/video/56196292/delfi-tv-ar-jani-domburu/49460215/gundega-repse-mes-latvija-xx-gadsimts-ir-atbilde-nikuligajai-un-nihilistiskajai-atmosferai.>> [Accessed on 05.11.2024.]
- Etkind Alexander (2013). *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of Unburied*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Felluga Dino Franco 2015. *Critical Theory. The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault Michel 1977. *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon, transl. C. Gordon et. al., New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fry Paul 2012. *Theory of Literature*. Yale University Press, internet access <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npkg4.22>> [Accessed on 05.11.2024.]
- Gallagher Stephen, Greenblatt Catherine 2000. *Practicing New Historicism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hirshkop Ken (2021). *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Jundze Arno 2017. "Spītība un vērtību mērs," intervija ar Gundegu Repši, *konTEKSTS*, No. 1, 1–3. lpp.
- Kalniņa Ieva 2016. "Viņām ir bogene, tā viņas sargā," *Domuzīme*, No. 2, 53.
- Kaprāns Mārtiņš 2016. "Padomju laika biogrāfiskā atbrīvošanās: pagātnes pragmatiskā reprezentācija latviešu memuāros," in: *Atmiņu kopienas: atceres un aizmiršanas kultūra Latvijā*, red. Mārtiņš Kaprāns, Gustavs Strenga, Norberts Bekmans-Dīrkess, Rīga: Zelta grauds.

- Lurker Manfred 2005. "Snakes," in *Gale Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. in chief Lindsey Jones, New York: Thomson Gale, Vol. 12: 8460.
- Repše Gundega 2016. *Bogene*, Rīga: Dienas Grāmata.
- Repše Gundega 2020. *Boggen*, transl. Irene Ruff, Rīga: Dienas Grāmata.
- Repše Gundega 2000. *Īkstīte*, Rīga: Pētergailis.
- Repše Gundega 2024. E-mail to Ilze Jansone about novel *Bogene*. Personal archive.
- Rich Jennifer 2006. "The Part is the Whole: The Rhetoric of Historical Representation in New Historicist Criticism," in: *Entertext 6.3: October*, 91–110.
- Simsone Bārbala 2016. "Grāmatas *Bogene* recenzija. Laikmetu sliedes, spoguļa lauskas," *Diena*. 05.04.2016. Available online: <<https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/recenzijas/gramatas-bogene-recenzija.-laikmetu-sliedes-spagula-lauskas-14136072>> [Accessed on 05.06.2024.]
- Stivale Charles J., ed. 2011. *Gilles Deleuze. Key Concepts*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.
- Veese Harold Aram 1989. "Introduction," in *The New Historicism*, ed. Harold Aram Veese, London and New York: Routledge.
- Veese Harold Aram 1991. "Re-Membering a Deformed Past: (New) New Historicism," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Cultural Studies and New Historicism, Spring, 1991, 3–13, Internet access <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1315021>> [Accessed on 07.11.2024.] <https://doi.org/10.2307/1315021>
- Young Eugene B., Genosko Gary, Watson Janell 2013. *The Deleuze Guattari Dictionary*. London: Bloomsbury.