

Contemporary Russian Literature in Latvia: Children's Literature

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Abstract. Throughout the 20th century, Russian children's literature in Latvia was a unique phenomenon. Against the background of the general trends of Soviet children's literature, Latvian children's literature (in both Latvian and Russian) developed in a space that was less constrained in respect of ideological censorship. 21st century children's literature in Latvia is developing both taking into account the previous history and current trends. The article is devoted to the specific features of children's literature in Russian, taking into account the general status of the Russian language as a foreign language and general trends in the socio-cultural space of Latvia. The study considers two main issues. First, it is a sociological analysis of the situation: an assortment of children's books, the specifics of the school programme, awareness of contemporary Latvian and Russian children's literature. On the other hand, the corpus of texts of contemporary children's literature is studied, and an overview of the oeuvre of contemporary Latvian authors is presented. The material for literary analysis was the book by Vladimir Novikov, "The Mischief of the Obedient Martins". In the course of the analysis, the specifics of the traditional children's story, the cultural and historical context of the cross-border identity of the author and his potential readers, the specifics of the contemporary narrative, the identification of the concept "one's own – other's" were revealed.

Keywords: children's literature; the Russian language; illustrations; narration.

Introduction

The present study aims to consider the specifics of contemporary Russophone children's literature in Latvia. This particular study is part of a scientific project for the study of Russophone literature in Latvia, and its overarching objective is to consider the

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phenomenon of Russophone literature in Latvia as an original phenomenon associated with Russian literature as a single corpus on the one hand and acquiring sociocultural, linguistic and ideological independence on the other.

In Latvian Rusistics, a stable tradition has developed in assessing and analysing Russian-Latvian ties in literature, literary processes in the first half of the 20th century, and the cultural model of Russian emigration in Latvia. The innovation of this study is the appeal to the current process, which determined the methodological approach. The corpus of modern Russophone literature in Latvia is not homogeneous, and most of the texts are aimed at a mass audience (this is especially true for the prose). In addition, the potential addressee and the potential publisher, which most often turns out to be from Russia, are ambiguously determined.

The present study focuses on the specifics of children's literature, which determined the choice of the research strategy based on an interdisciplinary approach. The basis of the strategy is a structural-semiotic approach, which treats children's literature as a single text in a semiotic sense and considers each work as a text-based on a structured system of semiotic units, by means of which the author's picture of the world is modelled. The semiotic approach makes it possible to consider signs of different types, particularly illustrations, as an essential component of children's literature. The analysis includes elements of the formal method (in this case, it is appropriate to talk about certain modelling of the text) methods of sociolinguistics (language of children's literature, binary code with an orientation to adult and children readers).

Children's literature has always been an independent component of the national literary process. Literary critic Miron Petrovsky in the introduction to the monograph "Books of Our Childhood" has defined this position of children's literature as follows, "Having absorbed fragments, debris and whole constructions of the myth of antiquity, having enriched with centuries-old development experience (first – folklore, later on – literary), a fairy tale read by the modern children has become something like an "age myth" – a transmitter of initial norms and institutions of the national culture. The fairy tale transforms the child of the family – of this father and this mother – into a child of culture, a child of the people; as child of humanity. Into a "social human", according to modern terminology. Thus, the role of children's books goes far beyond the limits of children's literature and reading as such" (Petrovsky, 2008, p. 4).

In the 20th century in the USSR, children's literature acquired its specific status, as Ilya Kukulín and Maria Maiofis (2008) note, "the position of children's literature and children's reading under the Soviet rule was deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, children's literature was part of the general propaganda system; special images, slogans and literary texts published in huge circulations were addressed to children. On the other hand, it was children's literature that at the same time was one of the freest spheres of literature and presented the greatest opportunities for creativity" (Kukulín et al., 2008, p. 215).

Undoubtedly, children's literature has its specificity, which has been dictated, first of all, by the specificity of the readership; therefore, the didactic component in the works aimed at children is very significant. Children's literature also has a dual purpose. It is aimed at

both education and entertainment, which creates a special ideology and specific poetics of children's literature. In addition, children's texts form a general cultural basis. Instead of the lost traditional values, a new figurative, plot, ideological precedent is being created, which, in turn, does not arise from scratch but rather transforms and continues traditions. Thanks to children's literature, a single cultural space for several generations is emerging.

1. Children's literature in Latvia

The history of children's literature in Latvia also has its specific features. In the 19th-century, it developed precisely as Latvian literature, i.e. literature in the Latvian language, and at the initial stage was represented mainly by the literature of memoirs. The natural character of development is violated by the interference of the ideological component (meaning the period of Soviet occupation and the impact of the guidelines of the Soviet doctrine in relation to children's literature). Soviet children's literature had a pronounced ideological and didactic character, although the didacticism of Soviet children's literature was significantly different from the didactic prose of the 19th century. In Soviet children's literature, the adventurous nature of the plot structure becomes a mandatory element.

On the one hand, one of the obligatory elements references to the past, which included two mandatory elements: the presence of oppressors and the presence of heroes who are fighting against the oppressors. The obligatory appeal to the past also gives rise to another element that can be defined as a connection between generations – positive examples, examples to follow are drawn from real life. On the other hand, the genre of fiction is becoming popular, an appeal to the future, which fully corresponded to the general historical concept. The problem of the specificity of children's literature in Latvia was considered in the joint article by researchers from Daugavpils University, "Russian Children's Literature of Latvia":

Latvian children's literature of the Soviet period is a very distinctive phenomenon. On the one hand, the existing Soviet ideological dictate undoubtedly influenced the general trends in the formation of children's literature, which was represented by an indispensable set of ethical clichés, characteristics of characters, and moral accents. On the other hand, one could feel a special position of the Baltic region on the general ideological map of the USSR. The literary process in Latvia stands apart in relation to the general trends in Soviet literature. And it is more related to children's literature. The phenomenality of Latvian children's literature, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, is determined by a lesser censorship dictate. Paradoxically, but exactly in children's literature the topics that were severely censored in Soviet children's literature turned out to be possible. (Vasiljeva et al., 2019, p. 556)

In the 21st century, new trends are emerging in the development of children's literature that is also characteristic of the general context of children's world literature and is inherent only in the regional model of children's literature in Latvia.

Thus, in her research, S. Tihonova identifies the main trends in the development of modern Russian children's literature: a shift away from lyrics, the transformation of the fairy tale genre, a change in the function of the type of a character, the relationship of the "author" and the "character" in a work of art, as well as a change in the language, which is manifested in blurring the boundaries between literary and spoken language and in the active use of colloquial speech in a literary work (Tihonova, 2015, pp. 122–124).

In her monograph, devoted to contemporary Latvian literature for children, Rudite Rinkevica notes:

Traditionally for Latvian children's literature addressing the mentioned age group, the artistic time-space is revealed as being rather typical but rendered by different expressive means that entail the depiction of urban space (mostly Riga), rural space, European space and artistic time, contemporary object, mental, or linguistic signs of the epoch. The existence of child in the real or imaginary space and time makes his or her individual and subjective experience. Forms of rendering the artistic world categories of time and space are individually marked for each writer as well. (Rinkevica, 2018, p. 6)

It is interesting to look at the context of contemporary Latvian literature, which has significantly changed its vector. Whereas throughout the 20th century, Latvian children's literature developed within the framework of social literature: a school story, a children's detective story, in the late 20th century – early 21st century, a kind of new hybrid genre emerges – social fiction, which combines the features of a traditional social story (display of the modern world, reality), but at the same time expands the character system with fantastic creatures. In the interim, the detective story genre continues to develop actively ("Mākslas dektektīvi" ("Art Detectives") by L. Pastore, stories by M. Rungulis). Children's play poetry is gaining great popularity (Karlis Verdins). At the time of the formation of Latvian literature in the 19th century, children's literature was mainly presented by the genre of memories. The traditional Latvian way of life was recreated from the end of the 20th century, and especially in the 21st century, Latvian children's literature turned out to be open to the Western European and American traditions of children's literature. In the above-mentioned monograph, R. Rinkevica (2018) emphasizes the common European tradition. Simultaneously with the development of Latvian children's literature, the interest in the research of this issue is also emerging (Okuneva, 2014, pp. 209–218; Stikane, 2005, p. 12). Since 2017, a monthly newspaper, "KonTeksts" of the Latvian Writers' Union, has been published in Latvia, with a whole spread dedicated to the latest editions in children's literature in Latvia.

Since the restoration of Latvia's independence, Russian literature has become the literature of the diaspora. The school curriculum and out-of-class reading materials are built to take into account the contemporary Latvian literature trends. The Russian-speaking readership maintains a connection with the literature of the home country, and the majority of Russian-speaking writers in Latvia work with Russian publishing houses. Regarding children's reading in Russian, preferences are given to the children's literature of the Soviet

period (Latvian reader is hardly acquainted with the Russian modern children's literature). That is what leads to minimization of children's literature in the Russian language written in Latvia. The example below is one of the few related to professional literature.

2. Vladimir Novikov: an attempt to create new children's literature

Contemporary children's literature in Latvia is developing primarily as literature in the Latvian language (original and translated literature); children's literature in Russian is a background phenomenon represented by a small number of publications. Nevertheless, the book market in Latvia is rich in children's literature in Russian, written and published by Russian publishing houses, which also considers the demand for children's literature in certain regions of Latvia and corresponds to the publishing monopoly of Russia. Original children's publications in Russian are mainly represented by the poetry of regional poets. Children's prose is sparse. In this respect, one of the indicative names is the name of the writer Vladimir Novikov. V. Novikov is the publisher of the children's magazine in Russian "Matroskin", as well as the direct promoter of the work of the famous children's writer Eduard Uspensky (in 2014 Novikov published the translation of the story by Uspensky "Uncle Fyodor, the Dog and the Cat" into Latvian and illustrated this edition himself). Novikov manifests himself as a creator and founder of relevant organisations such as children's literature in Latvia. Thus, in 2017 he created the Latvian Association of Russian-language Children's Writers "Sailboat", which includes the poet Karen Markaryan, the artist and author of fairy tales Victoria Matison, Evgeniya Ruzina, Evgeniya Vaganova, in 2020 Viktor Barabanov's book "Гном гномик и его друзья" ("The Dwarf and his Friends") was published. Nevertheless, V. Novikov's social, literary, and translation activities are among the most significant phenomena of contemporary children's literature in the Russian language in Latvia.

The creative and social activities of the Latvian Association of Russian-language Children's Writers are focused on the problem of readers' interest. The starting point is the proposition that the children's readership has lost interest in the book, and above all, in the printed book. Aware of the decline of readership interest in general, the members of the association emphasize the fixation of the younger generation on electronic art and information sources.

Against the background of the general trends of the Association members (the majority of the authors are more active in other areas of culture – painting, journalism), the work of Vladimir Novikov is the most model and is represented by a number of works for children and adolescents of different ages. He works in both prose and poetry. He has his literary page on the Internet, and his books are published as a joint project of the publishing house "Rīdzene 1" and the society "Books for Children". One of these books, "The Mischief of the Obedient Martins", published in Riga in 2019, served as material for researching the specificity of V. Novikov's creative work.

The book design, in which illustrations play an important role, deserves special attention and a separate commentary.

The formation and development of illustrations for children's books falls on the period of the so-called golden age of world children's literature (XIX century), which gave the world a new phenomenon – authorized, that is, approved by the author, illustrations. No less interesting are the author's illustrations, when writers themselves illustrate their books (E. Lear, B. Potter, A. de Saint Exupery, M. Sendak, T. Jansson, R. Briggs, M. Inkpen, E. Brown, V. Golyavkin, V. Suteev etc.). (Charskaja-Bojko, Ivankiva, 2014, p. 222)

Illustrating children's books is one of the iconic traditions of children's literature in Latvia. An indicative aspect is the author's design of books when illustrations are a component of the artistic model of the book, and the author's influence on the reader is not limited only to the verbal series but is also associated with a certain visualization. As noted by the British researcher Maria Nikolaeva, "emotions are by definition not verbal, and language can never adequately convey them. Images can greatly expand the meaning expressed in words that roughly convey an elusive and indefinable feeling" (Nikolaeva, 2014, p. 87). In his interviews and the texts on his home page, V. Novikov emphasizes the special role of illustration in the publication of children's books. From the point of view of V. Novikov, it is the illustration that becomes a kind of a marker of a printed book, in contrast to an electronic one.

In addition, the illustrations affect the specific consciousness of the little reader, using the play of the imagination. The author himself and his wife Alla Novikova are announced as the illustrators of the book. Moreover, the presence of two illustrators becomes noticeable. On the cover and in the text itself, the illustrations of two types (even two thematic groups) are presented, which in many respects are discordant with each other. The cover has a colour design, illustrations in the text are black and white, and they are divided into two groups. The first group, made in the mixed tradition of comics and the design of children's books with "live pictures" (Suteyev in the Russian tradition, Staraste in the Latvian one), can be defined as plot-related. The second group can be defined as landscape sketches – stylized as sheets of a notebook with fairly homotypic pictures of nature at different times of the year. These sketches are not related to the narrative, and it is they that cause a sense of dissonance and inconsistency with the main text. Perhaps this is the author's intention as a kind of lyrical digression, but such a penetration into the text can negatively affect the reader's interest, in other words, reduce it. The reference to the plot of the story can be associated with one of the main adult characters of the book – the summer resident: the artist Uncle Vova, whom all the time is busy drawing landscapes of Zveiniekciems, which little Martins cannot understand. Having analyzed the visual range of the book, including the printwork and graphics of the text, we can say that the author takes into account the general regulatory requirements for children's text stipulated in a number of scientific works,

A child always unconsciously visually evaluates graphics of the text. Bulky paragraphs, the lack of dialogues frighten pre-school children who are just learning to read, and children of younger and sometimes middle-school age, who still have little command of the reading technique.

Younger schoolchildren are attracted by a book with an abundance of dialogues (they are more interesting and can be read faster), as well as texts with many question and exclamation marks (they promise emotionally rich content) and with more full points than commas (short sentences are more easily perceived by a poorly reading child). Such aspects of text graphics must be taken into account by the author when writing his work. (Zylevich, 2012, p. 66)

The very title of the book “The Mischief of the Obedient Martins” contains several semiotic aspects. In the cover design, the name of the main character is highlighted in a different colour and in large font, which already attracts attention. The name of the main character Martins is a primordially Latvian male name, quite problematic for Russian pronunciation, and it is also symbolic for the Latvian culture since, in the first half of November (to be more precise, November 10), Latvia celebrates Martins' Day (St. Martin's Day). In the traditional Latvian calendar, Martins' Day marks the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, the end of the threshing season and preparation for cold weather. This holiday is traditionally celebrated with songs, dances and rich treats. It is also customary to wear masks during the holiday. Thus, the name Martins is always associated in Latvia with fertility, rich harvest, fair, folk festivities, cheerful and bright holidays. It can be assumed that the author has deliberately chosen such a name for the main character of the children's book, clearly insisting on an integration approach in which Russian-Latvian cultural interaction is important. The title also emphasizes the opposition “mischief – obedience”. The opposition itself can be characterized as traditional for children's literature, where it reflects the principle of the relationship between the child and the adult world: the adult world as a norm declares the correct behaviour of the child, based on the fulfilment of general norms put forward by the world of adults; the children's world builds its model of behaviour on the principle of violation of these norms. The author's position in relation to this opposition depends on the type of artistic consciousness to which the author belongs (for didactic literature, the aspect of obedience turns out to be unconditional, the game model of consciousness proclaims a model of violation of laws as a natural behaviour). For children's literature in Latvia in the second half of the 20th century (especially its Latvian component), the opposition “mischief – obedience” becomes especially significant and acquires its connotations. Significantly that this tradition is directly influenced by children's literature of Northern Europe and, first of all, by the works by Astrid Lindgren. A. Lindgren's books have had a considerable number of issues both in Russian and Latvian, and not only works about Pippi Longstocking and the trilogy about Karlsson have been published, but also her other works: this is how the cycle about Emil has acquired special significance in the cultural space of Latvia. The work of many Latvian children's writers has been shaped under the influence of the Swedish writer. A striking example of this influence can be seen in the work by the Latvian children's writer Vija Upmale. Undoubtedly, V. Novikov's book about Martins evokes an association with V. Upmale's popular story “Merry Troubles” (1975). In the 70–90s, Riga Film Studio played a special role in the formation of the children's model of culture, making original films based on the works of children's classics. Thus, in 1985 the film “Emil's Mischief” (directed by

V. Brasla) was released. The accentuation of mischiefs, adversity as manifestations of children's play, fun, unites all these works.

The linguistic aspect is given special attention in the book. At the beginning of the text, typical Latvian toponyms and names are deliberately and frequently used: Zveinikciems, Mezavilki, Bruninieku, etc. The author consciously chooses compound words difficult to pronounce (and difficult to read) in Russian. With all the playful nature of the narration, the linguistic moments in the books are assigned a pronounced didactic function: for most words, a translation and explanation of the word are offered in the form of a footnote. The author sets himself a rather complicated goal – to teach the Latvian language through a Russian book, or to learn some part of the Latvian language vocabulary. Although the author's other task is certainly notable, too, i.e. to present Latvia in the book as an exotic, original country deserving adventure. However, the Latvian cultural markers are gradually being lost, remaining only in the names of children (there are brightly marked Russian and Latvian names) and toponyms. It remains unclear what language children and adults communicate in with each other. The world of the book is a conflict-free world; at least, there are no ethnic conflicts in it.

To a certain extent, the author is demonstratively attentive to the issues of country studies, which is confirmed by the idea of his peculiar naive didacticism: Novikov tries to do his best to present Latvia as a country with a special cultural model. At the same time, the political context was not left aside in the book. For example, when little Martins, throwing pebbles into the sea, fantasizes that the president's ship from Riga will arrive in the village, the ship will start sinking due to the pebble thrown into it, the boy will save the president, and while his guards and the guards of his escort will be getting dry, he will show the president his toys (the author uses deliberately the Russian homonym "наряд" which means both the guards and the attire).

While trying to convey the model of children's consciousness in the narrative to the greatest extent, the author fails to adhere to a single logical narrative model. Thus, in the nomination of the main character, the voice of the adult narrator himself begins to sound, and this adult lexical set is somewhat limited ("the boy", "the little boy"); it is intentionally literary vocabulary. Stylistic dissonance arises when the author tries to combine the correct, school-literary Russian language, the Latvian linguoculturological context and the child's model of consciousness into one narrative.

The storyline of the book is built as the summer adventures of little Martins, his friends who have come to have rest on the seaside with their parents in the summer. One event stands out in the storyline – this is Martins' attempt to correct the painting of the artist Uncle Vova and several situations associated with it. In building the storyline and outlining the character system, the author uses rather clichéd techniques.

The very beginning of V. Novikov's narration starts with the opposition of the world of children and the world of adults: "the boy Martins' mother Sandra rarely allows him to do something interesting. But how one can sit at home idle! And Martins very often does not ask for permission. So, anyone would understand: the mother is to blame herself if her son sometimes plays pranks." (Novikov, 2019, p. 5). In this opposition, the world of

childhood (Martins) is put under the sign of a play, whereas the world of adults (mother) is put under the sign of compliance with the norm, which in the narrative is coupled with the concept of the boring, the uninteresting.

Moreover, the actions of the mother are usually indicated by the verb “scolds”. Definitely, V. Novikov reproduces the image of the mother from the famous work by Uspensky about Prostakvashino, but mother Sandra is not as a model as Uspensky's mother, and her speech characteristics contribute to the creation of a kind of rejection. The attitude to the opposition “male-female” in its childish version of “girls-boys”, where girls are associated with such signs as deception, cunning, a desire to please adults, turns out to be just as clichéd.

Finally, through the development of the plot, the element mandatory for children's literature is missing, i.e. the main character should undergo some change discover something new for himself. No change-discovery happens to Martins. All plot-forming elements are constructed as enumerating; the absence of an episode would not violate the understanding of the general line. In some episodes, there is no such novelistic element as a surprise, the brightness of the event, and special linguistic characteristics. The plot of the book is rather a decent sketch for a story. At the same time, the number of characters is large; the declared events are numerous. The mother's departure to the maternity hospital for a little brother can be considered as some attempt to mark the beginning of a new period in Martins' life in the denouement. The issue of Martins' new status as an older brother has already been discussed in the book earlier (Martins thinks that his mother scolds him unfairly, but at the same time she carries a ruffian in her stomach who fights), then he is temporarily pushed into the background of the plot. However, in the final act, he returns (the author deliberately describes how painful it is to the mother, but the boy does not notice this and continues to talk about his affairs). Therefore, it is completely illogical to see the boy's tears after his mother left for the hospital, and the words of Aunt Layla combining a refined literary style and everyday lifestyle: “Don't worry, baby, the mother Sandra went to buy you a brother [...] Only a few days will pass – and you and your father are going to them meet. But now, hold on, boy, and let's go to have lunch [...]” (Novikov, 2019, p. 141).

Conclusion

Latvia's contemporary children's literature in the Russian language does not present a significant artistic phenomenon. On the one hand, the attempt of authors who have nominated themselves as children's writers to preserve the tradition of literature in Russian, particularly in the version of children's literature, is undoubtedly comprehensible. On the other hand, this option looks quite like an artificial and closed phenomenon, literary and colloquial form. However, the confirmed by the scarcity of readership demand. Russian-language writers of children's books in Latvia define the main tasks of their literary activity: the revival of the reader's interest in the book, namely in its printed version, and the preservation of the Russian language in its artistic, literary and colloquial form. However, the stated tasks exist outside the real situation. The return of readers' interest is

seen as a global issue, and its solution at the regional level is hardly possible. Nevertheless, the artistic level of the books offered is significantly lower than the level of modern and classical children's literature in Russia; therefore, the interest of the little reader in this situation is minimal.

With regard to the problem of preserving the Russian language, we can conclude that the excessive efforts of a number of Russian-language authors in Latvia lead to the opposite result – the language of their works is homotypic, not alive, devoid of elements of stylistic play. All this explains the readers' preferences, and the children's audience prefers the classics of children's literature. Contemporary children's literature is less popular because it is less familiar. However, on the other hand, Russian-speaking readers of Latvia develop an interest in contemporary Latvian literature for children and youth and European translated literature, which is evidence of a change in the cultural identity.

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