

# Modernism in Soviet Latvia: Leons Briedis and Fernando Pessoa in translation

[Modernismo na Letónia Soviética:  
Leons Briedis e Fernando Pessoa em tradução]

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## Keywords

Soviet coloniality, Fernando Pessoa, Leons Briedis Translation, Modernism.

## Abstract

The paper examines the sporadic presence of modernist poetry within the ecosystem of Soviet literature during the occupation of Latvia, focusing specifically on the translations produced by the poet Leons Briedis (1949-2020) in the 1980s. Briedis was one of the most prolific translators of Portuguese-language poetry into Latvian, including the works of Fernando Pessoa, and his contribution to the reception of literary modernism was substantial. A critical analysis of both his translations and their reception reveals a central paradox of Soviet literary culture: while modernist poetics were permitted to penetrate the Iron Curtain through translation, similar aesthetic practices were simultaneously restricted in local literary production. In this context, translations of Portuguese poetry became both foreign and local, at once submitting to and resisting the contradictory forms of coloniality embedded within Soviet cultural policy.

## Palavras-chave

Colonialidade soviética, Fernando Pessoa, Tradução de Leons Briedis, Modernismo.

## Resumo

O artigo examina a presença esporádica da poesia modernista no ecossistema da literatura soviética durante a ocupação da Letónia, centrando-se especificamente nas traduções produzidas pelo poeta Leons Briedis (1949-2020) na década de 1980. Briedis foi um dos mais prolíficos tradutores de poesia de língua portuguesa para letão, incluindo a obra de Fernando Pessoa, e o seu contributo para a recepção do modernismo literário foi substancial. Uma análise crítica das suas traduções e da respectiva recepção revela um paradoxo central da cultura literária soviética: embora as poéticas modernistas fossem autorizadas a atravessar a Cortina de Ferro por meio da tradução, práticas estéticas semelhantes eram simultaneamente restritas na produção literária local. Neste contexto, as traduções de poesia portuguesa tornavam-se simultaneamente estrangeiras e locais, submetendo-se e resistindo, ao mesmo tempo, às formas contraditórias de colonialidade inscritas na política cultural soviética.

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Public discussions in Latvia oftentimes focus on multinational geopolitical tensions and global economic inequalities, with less attention being devoted to the political dimensions of artistic or literary spaces. However, Russia's hybrid war is fought across a variety of digital and intellectual environments, including a variety of creative industries. For example, Russia's return to the International Art Exhibition of *La Biennale di Venezia*, in 2026, marks the country's efforts to spread its so-called soft power through "de-politicized" cultural influence. Meanwhile, different forms of local cultural production, including original writing—and especially translation in formerly-occupied territories—, can be viewed as forms of resistance and protest against Russia's imperialistic momentum, exemplified by the surge of translations of Ukrainian poetry and fiction into Latvian.<sup>1</sup>

Estonian scholar Epp Annus writes: "Russia's twenty-first-century military aggression has inspired calls for rethinking the Soviet era and its aftermath—for drawing attention to decolonizing efforts within the (former) USSR and to Russia's colonial practices and imperial aspirations" (ANNUS, 2025). The re-evaluation of current events necessitates a re-consideration of similar processes in the past. Taking this renewed interest in the coloniality imposed by the USSR as a jumping-off point, the article aims to critically engage with the history of translation in Soviet Latvia and develop an analysis of cultural transmission / transformation.

As the dynamics of repression and resistance are present in the letters of the Latvian SSR, the article draws attention to both instances of censorship or omission presumably in the name of adhering to Marxist-Leninist dogma and instances of creative additions or omission done for other reasons (such as subversion or obstruction). Applying postcolonial / decolonial modes of reading to the literary history of the Baltic countries, the article focuses on the representation of modernism and World literature in Latvian poetry, specifically emphasizing the work by Leons Briedis, a well-known poet, translator, essayist, critic and editor. Briedis knew that translation can be viewed as a way to construct worldviews and was therefore conscientious about how and whom he translated. One of his life-long passions was Portuguese literature, with Fernando Pessoa at its centre.

### **The *samizdat* as a contextual condition for interest in translation**

"Samizdat" (from the Russian sam "self" and izdatel'stvo "publishing") refers to the clandestine production and circulation of texts outside official Soviet censorship. Because publishing houses, journals, and printing presses were controlled by the state, works that challenged ideological orthodoxy—or simply failed to conform to aesthetic or political expectations—were often denied publication. In response, writers,

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<sup>1</sup> In 2026, the The Annual Latvian Literature Award (LALIGABA) for best published translation in both prose and poetry categories was given to books by Ukrainian authors.

translators, and readers developed informal networks through which poems, essays, novels, philosophical texts, and political commentary were copied by hand or typed on carbon paper and passed from person to person. Samizdat functioned not only as a mode of resistance to censorship, but also as an alternative literary public sphere that enabled intellectual exchange across national and linguistic borders. In Latvia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union, samizdat became especially significant during the post-Stalin decades, when unofficial culture increasingly intersected with translation, allowing readers access to foreign authors, dissident thought, and aesthetic movements unavailable through official channels.

Leons Briedis grew up and started working as a poet during a time when the *samizdats*, the various forms of illegal, hand-written or hand-typed literature, circulated with great abundance. The inner ecosystem of Soviet letters has never been foreign to parody, political satire, oppositional verse and humorous provocation—this is a long-standing tradition that has roots as far back as tsarist Russia. However, as the USSR transitioned from the Stalinist regime to the so-called Era of Stagnation, and especially during the 1970's and 1980's, there was a kind of awakening in Latvian literature—and it occurred in conjunction with the spread of *samizdat* on the one hand, and the semi-legal spread of translation on the other.

A radical example of locally written illegal *samizdat* would be the pornographic poem “The Power of Love” (“Milas spēks”), supposedly written as early as 1947 by satirist Valdis Artavs (1928), currently 97 years old.<sup>2</sup> A text existing only as a hand-written manuscript that was memorized and drunkenly performed in late night parties throughout the 1960's and 1970's. The long and vulgar poem allows us to reevaluate the history of the literary underground in the Soviet era by drawing parallels with other traditions of naughty poetry, be it Romanticist England or 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris (see: DARNTON, 2010), though Artavs and his contemporaries would have most likely been more familiar with the clandestine practices of Russian satirists and / or modernists.

If it is true that he drew inspiration from Russian satire, “The Power of Love” can be seen as a case of cultural translation within the Soviet Union that not only helps to better grasp the social dimension of the literary climate during a time of oppression in Latvia, but is also as an indicator of the atmosphere in Russian letters in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is revealed as a time and place where the interest in the foreign, as well as the will to oppose power, contributes to punctures in the Iron Curtain. The emergence of this unofficial, hand-written tradition of original (and translated) poetry is oftentimes an ideological challenge to the *status quo*—even if it is not explicitly “against” the Soviet regime, what mattered more is that it is “non-Soviet”.

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<sup>2</sup> Artavs revealed his authorship in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is therefore natural that some of the most important literature of the 1980's was written either in relation with the work of translating, or in some conjunction with books, collections, periodicals, publications or poems from other languages. Several poets whose work was in many ways shaped by the reading of Western authors (or oppositional Russian writers) evoked a type of poetic wave that was never explicitly anti-Soviet as much as it was non-Soviet. Translations played an important role in the formation of the much-needed alternative to the propaganda-laden prose of socialist realism. During Briedis's early years as a writer, there was a "boom" of high-quality literary translations of poetry from various authors—and it helped usher in a modernistic view on aesthetics.

### Leons Briedis and modernism in Soviet Latvia

Briedis was one of the most prolific authors of his generation, and he was also one of the most important translators of Portuguese poetry, which included the works of Fernando Pessoa. His contribution to the representation of modernist writing during the late stages of the Soviet occupation of Latvia is an example of how poets who were not necessarily anti-Soviet, but were rather non-Soviet, were forced to turn to translation as an alternative channel of self-expression. "Briedis represents the galaxy of great poets who emerged during the Soviet era," fellow poet Aivars Eipurs writes, "these poets were often unable to publish their best poems due to censorship; they had to earn a living by translating" (EIPURS, 2015).

What is stated above indicates that Soviet coloniality is always already contradictory—it allows modernist poetics to puncture the Iron curtain through translations but forbids it in local contexts at the same time. This way, the translations of modernist verse, including the work of Pessoa, become both foreign and local—simultaneously yielding to and resisting the colonial matrix. On the one hand, the official stance was that Russian is to become the locus of World literature—a grand linguistic ruler into which all classical pieces of literary masterworks should be translated. On the other hand, state committees, mainly the semiofficially called *Glavlit*, deterred or eschewed any "dangerous" content that represented some form of otherness. This was, as John Baer points out, a contradiction between "xenophobia and internationalism" that sat at the very heart of the Soviet system (BAER, 2011: 9)

The poetry in occupied republics, including Latvia, suffered from hypocrisies as well. As many poets turned to translation to bypass the attention that would otherwise get them in trouble, their tactics created a kind of double consciousness. In fact, double standards were present in almost all fields of literary work. For example, many members of the Latvian Writer's Union, the organization at the basis of local literary life, were rarely in agreement on even the slightest of matters. An organization that takes on authors that were willing to collaborate, regularly went through inner conflicts—either because of misunderstandings, or sometimes, because of real

and genuine “oppositional practices” (EVERSONE, 2023). While the Latvian Writer’s Union oversaw the official agenda of original literature, translations were under less suspicion. The fact was, for some, a kind of opening to “smuggle in” modernism.

“Modernism”, the conglomeration of movements that was in official publications described as the product of Western capitalism (KRAULIŅŠ, 1971: 127-128)—and therefore was considered unwanted, rotten, empty —, was for many writers a haven of experimentation and freedom. It is widespread in Latvia and officially encouraged, after the Second World War, to disown and belittle modernist poetics, regardless of definition, and to celebrate instead the victory and splendour of socialist realism which had, according to the politico-mythological narrative of the time, defeated Western degradation and is leading the way to socialist utopia.

“The twin sister of the decay of the realist tradition is the glorification of modernism of all kinds and the aversion to it,” says one V. KALPIŅŠ (1958: 4). Such notions continue to appear in the press until the 1970’s: “Socialist realism has fundamental disagreements with modernism, irreconcilable contradictions. [...] History shows that socialist realism conquers modernism, that socialist humanism crushes the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois misanthropy born in the swamp of today’s rotting capitalism” (KRAULIŅŠ, 1971: 127-128). This is in itself a contorted proposition seeing as many modernist writers had Marxist backgrounds. For example Latvian scholar Sigita IGNATJEVA has researched the epithets associated with modernism in Latvian periodicals, and found that, when talking about authors or groups that do not blend well with local ideology, the modernism is usually “parasitic” or, in milder cases, “complex”; whereas when talking about contexts closer to home, the modernism discussed is “humane” (2022). Many authors who were also translators had saw modernism as a way to aesthetical alternatives to socialist realism, hence—translation became similar to smuggling.

The moment Leons Briedis was a student in the State University of Latvia, the USSR was “[t]esting the borders of the allowable ‘inner opposition’” within its domain” (MINTAURS, 2023: 72). Many of the post-thaw hippies, the Latvian flowerchildren, the Beatniks, the children of the night and day (see: KURSĪTE, 2010: 14) were very much willing to set new limits for what was considered “allowable”. One turning point, for both intelligentsia and outsiders, was the events of 1968-1969—the so-called Prague Spring, and its subsequent suppression. As attempts at political liberalization as well as efforts of mass protest in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic took place in 1968, Latvian writers became divided and found themselves on different sides of a discussion about what is permissible and what is not. For example, in August 1968, when the Soviet Union and three other Warsaw Pact members invaded the country in response to the protests, one soldier riding tanks into Czechoslovakia was poet Juris Kunnošs (1948-1999). He would later go on to become an original voice in the Latvian poetry and reflect on his experience during the military manoeuvres (KUNNOŠS, 1988: 18-19). The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviets in

1968 became a point of disillusionment for many. Certain poets who weren't already opposed the regime, became detached from it and gradually changed their tone in writing.

In fact, after 1968, several students were expelled from the Latvian State University, including a young Leons Briedis. The official reason is anti-Soviet activity, but the real specific story behind his expulsion is unknown at this time. The official reason is anti-Soviet activity, but the real specific story behind his expulsion remains largely untold, but it has been speculated that his fellow course-mate Viesturs VECGRĀVIS (1948) had decided to share information (perhaps about Briedis as well) to the authorities in exchange for favourable attitude for himself. This is evidenced by the fact that after half a year, both tried to resume their studies at the university, Vecgrāvis succeeded, while Leons Briedis was unsuccessful and left for Moldova. "It's possible, but I don't know, that Vecgrāvis succeeded because he promised services," literary critic and fellow university mate Silvija Radzobe (1950-2020) stated in an interview in 2019 (RADOVICS & DOMBURS). It is assumed that Vecgrāvis became an informant for the Committee for State Security (KGB) in 1972 and is currently working on his memoir that elaborates on the experience.

Despite being banned from receiving higher education, in 1972 Leons Briedis goes on to enrol in the Department of Spanish Language and Literature at the University of Chişinău in the Moldavian SSR. He was once again forced to leave his studies in 1974 he due to his links to democratically minded intelligentsia in Romania. From 1977 to 1979 he was at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow where he studied the theory of translation and Africanistics. Upon returning, Briedis experienced pressure from the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party and the KGB of the Latvian SSR—for a short period, he was prohibited to publish his works, to travel abroad or to take up an employment in publishing houses, schools, editorial offices, i.e., institutions of ideological character.

But the fallout of the Prague Spring coincided with another vital contra-point in Latvian poetry—the release of poet and translator Knuts SKUJENIEKS (1936-2022). In 1962, earlier than Leons Briedis, Knuts Skujenieks was similarly convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and failure to report dangerous state crimes, and he spent seven years in prison in a camp in Mordovia. During the tumultuous events of the late 1960s, this poet and translator spent time writing and translating (whenever he had the chance within a labour camp)—and when he returned in 1969, Skujenieks brought with him a fine collection of poems and translations—as well as experience-based knowledge—that would change the flow of the production of Latvian poetry.

### **Leons Briedis and the “school” of Latvian poetry translation**

Knuts Skujenieks helped establish the so-called Latvian “school” of poetry translation, and for many is considered its founder (BALODE, 2013: 162-170). This “school”

emerged as a unique phenomenon in the general context of Soviet coloniality, differing from the Russian-speaking translation tradition of that time and fostering a special attitude towards the original and thus, at least in certain aspects, resisting the oppressors. The best Latvian translators in the second half of the twentieth century stand out with their active tendency to translate directly from the languages of the original, rejecting interlinear translations and so-called bridge languages. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the “school” is choosing authors from periods, places and traditions that somehow enrich the local discourse (SKUJENIEKS, 2006: 285).

Leons Briedis was both a close friend of Skujenieks, as well as his pupil when it came to translation. It was due to Skujenieks’s insistence and his well-articulated argumentation that several of his peers started studying foreign languages and translating literature from the original. Latvian translators in the 1970s, following Skujenieks’s impetus, took on themselves the learning of Romanian, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Estonian, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, Icelandic, Spanish etc.

Amongst the newly learned translators was Briedis, and one of his passions was the literature of Portugal. Alongside writing and publishing more than 30 books of original work, poetry, prose, children’s literature, philosophical texts, essays, and criticism, Briedis wrote translations of Romanian, Spanish, Latin, Italian, Catalan, French, Japanese, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Portuguese poetry.

In 1983, Briedis published and wrote the forward to the collection “Lost Garden”—a selection of Fernando Pessoa’s poems in Latvian, which was divided into sections corresponding to different heteronyms of the modernist poet. There is no mention of modernism (a concept well known to cosmopolitical Latvian readers at the time, as well as already well connected to Pessoa) in the introduction, but Briedis does give a detailed overview of Pessoa’s life and the role of writing within it, calling him “a human of an explicitly metaphysical type” (BRIEDIS, 1983: 13).

Pessoa occupied a peculiar position within Soviet literary circulation. Unlike openly dissident Eastern European writers, he could be presented as a distant and metaphysical Western poet rather than an explicitly political author. This relative cultural neutrality made his publication possible within Soviet Latvia. Yet precisely this apparent harmlessness enabled the circulation of literary devices associated with modernism and generally viewed with suspicion in Soviet aesthetics: fragmentation, depersonalization, irony, self-reflexivity, and stylistic plurality. Translation thus became a mechanism through which formally disruptive poetics could enter Latvian literary space under the cover of foreignness.

The collection received mild reviews, with Rains REMASS writing that it seems to have been “a difficult task for the poet Leons Briedis to follow the author and immerse himself in the rather different poetics, thematic and lexical outlines of both Pessoa’s and the [...] poets he invented. Thematically and in terms of content, this has been solved, but in terms of stylistic and linguistic aspects, only partially. It is difficult to say what exactly is missing, but the impression remains that I. Briedis did not

really believe in the existence of the three “fictional” poets—at least not to the full extent that Pessoa himself believed in it” (REMASS, 1983: 139). However, Remass does, in passing, mention, that even though the poetics of Pessoa are somewhat foreign to Briedis himself, we may have counterparts in the form of other poets.

The question of whether Briedis sufficiently “believed” in Pessoa’s heteronyms is particularly revealing in the Soviet context. Heteronymism represented more than a literary technique: it implied a fragmented and internally plural conception of subjectivity fundamentally different from the unified ideological subject privileged by socialist realism. The coexistence of contradictory poetic selves within a single authorial project introduced a model of identity resistant to doctrinal coherence. Even when stripped of explicit political interpretation, Pessoa’s heteronymic structure carried implicit cultural and epistemological implications that exceeded acceptable Soviet literary norms.

In an interview, looking back on the translation scene of the late Soviet period, Knuts Skujenieks, speaking next to Leons Briedis, said: “Every author who entered the Latvian language changed the overall process a little, influenced someone” (BALODE, 2009). Briedis himself admits the following: “I have been most influenced by both those who were close to me in terms of poetics and those who are completely incompatible” (BALODE 2009). And it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Pessoa that Briedis published in 1983 had an impact on other local writers—even if the influence is not mentioned or described as the appropriation of modernist aesthetics. Briedis himself has stated:

There have also been cases, that I’ve not fully understood, when I feel what a certain work of mine means to others—I have not earned such recognition with my own poems as with Nichita Stănescu’s collection “Nothing is Other” (1977)—an entire generation that was 7-8 years younger than us was so unexpectedly fascinated by it: Klāvs Elsbergs, Egils Zirnis, Amanda Aizpuriete, Māris Melgalvs, Inese Zandere, Jānis Kākulis... They perceived this book as a book of the pathos of a generation; a kind of group of imitators even emerged. The same was true with Fernando Pessoa.

(BALODE, 2009)

These poets (KLĀVS ELSBERGS, EGILS ZIRNIS, AMANDA AIZPURIETE, MĀRIS MELGALVS, INESE ZANDERE) were amongst the many authors who would go on to write reviews of the modernist author or even stylize certain aspects of Pessoa’s work.

Consider, for example, the metatextual commentary of Klāvs Elsbergs—a trait comparable to the auto-thematic manoeuvres of Pessoa’s early verses. The poem “Autopsychography” by Pessoa, translated by Briedis and published in Latvia in ’83 reads:

Cik savādi dzejnieka ceļi!  
Viņš liekuļo mūžam un krāpj  
Un tēlo, cik sāpīgi viņam,

The poet is a man who feigns  
And feigns so thoroughly, at last  
He manages to feign as pain

Kad viņam patiešām sāp.

Bet tie, kuri izlasīt pūlas  
To, ko viņš gribējis paust,  
Ne abas šīs sāpes sajūt,  
Bet to, kuras viņiem nav.

Un tā, lūk, prātam par spīti,  
Bez apstājas griezdamās, čirkst  
Tā atspere uzvelkamā,  
Kas saucas – dzejnieka sirds.

(PESSOA, 1983: 43)

The pain he really feels,

And those who read what once he wrote  
Feel clearly, in the pain they read,  
Neither of the pains he felt,  
Only a pain they cannot sense.

And thus, around its jolting track  
There runs, to keep our reason busy,  
The circling clockwork train of ours  
That men agree to call a heart.

Translated by Edouard Roditi<sup>3</sup>

Whether Elsbergs consciously intended a reference to Pessoa is ultimately less important than the literary conditions that made such self-reflexive gestures newly legible within Latvian poetry. The ironic theatricalization of the poetic self, the awareness of poetic “pose,” and the instability between sincerity and performance all resonate more strongly with modernist poetics than with the conventions of socialist realism. In this sense, Briedis’s translations of Pessoa may be understood not as isolated literary events, but as part of a broader reorientation of poetic language and sensibility during the late Soviet period.

Then, in 1989, six years later, Klāvs Elsbergs publishes his collection “Velci, tēti” (“Pull, dad”), wherein we find a self-referential poem that may not necessarily be considered a reference to Pessoa, but I would nevertheless venture to suggest that the ironic self-awareness found in Elsberg’s poem is far more closely related to modernist sensibility than to socialist realism. The Latvian original:

#### Dzejolis, kas adresātu nerasniegs

skaties un apskaud cik forši man ir  
es atšķiru to ko tu neatšķir

skaties un apskaud dzejnieka pozu  
kārtējo tramīgo metamorfozu

jo citkārt es nezinu kur man slēpties  
kā runāt ar ļaudīm un kā man ģērbties  
bet tad atkal nedomāju par to  
un gadās ka pasaku arī ne to

bet tā tam ir jābūt un forši man ir  
es atšķiru grāmatu  
spalvas tu šķir.

(ELSBERGS, 1989)

#### The poem that will not reach its addressee

look and envy how cool I am  
I distinguish what you do not distinguish

look and envy the poet’s poses  
the newest crazy metamorphosis

because otherwise I don’t know where to hide  
how to talk to people and how to dress  
but then again I don’t think about it  
and sometimes I say the wrong thing

but that’s how it must be and that’s cool  
I turn over a new page  
you turn over chunks of wool

(my English translation)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://disquiet.com/thirteen.html>

As Latvian literature formed new relations with World literature during the Stagnation Era in the Soviet Union, and as translated poetry and original writing became entwined in a productive symbiosis, several Latvian translators studied different languages to pay close attention to the cultural and contextual specificity of the source texts and therefore create high-quality renderings in the target discourse. The translations of Pessoa written by Leons Briedis may have, in turn, influenced local poetic practices. Even if the influence is unofficial, unrecognized or unnamed, it can be nevertheless framed as an indirect result of translation as suggested by both poets and translators alike. The cultivation of non-Soviet poetics—a loose, unwritten set of literary principles that call for distancing the thematic core of poetry from ideology in favour of a search for formal innovation, linguistic experimentation, stylization, surrealism, and self-reflexivity—is inextricably linked to and based on the work of such translators as Briedis who saw, in Pessoa and other modernists—the potential liberation from ideologically “flat” aesthetics.

## Conclusion

It cannot be said for certain whether Briedis’s translations had anything to do with the writing of any specific poem, but the argument here is rather that the translations of Briedis were symptomatic of a kind of broader resistance to Soviet coloniality that influenced writing on minute levels. The unmentioned, the unmentionable “modernism” that Briedis helped introduce to Latvian audiences is expressed in original writing in later generations. The evaluation of Briedis’s translations must encompass his considerable investment into introducing Latvian readers to the many different authors outside Pessoa and his heteronyms (for example, his 2001 anthology of 27 contemporary Portuguese poets), but as it pertains to Pessoa, the choice to avoid naming him a “modernist” is part of the colonial practice that would deter any attempt to equate modernist writing with artistic excellence.

In the meantime, Briedis’s and his colleagues’ translations nevertheless infused the “dangerous” literary devices into Latvian contexts with or without the conceptually sound contextualization. Upon receiving the lifetime achievement award, Ilmārs Šlāpins compared Leons Briedis to Don Quixote, calling him a “Knight of Literature” (ŠLĀPINS 2015). I would argue that while the idealistic dreams of Quixote were inevitably doomed to be forever impossible, the idealistic belief in the value of translating that Briedis exhibits bore fruit and was actualized, affirmed, and testified to by his readers and those he inspired. Translation, therefore, functioned not merely as cultural mediation, but as one of the principal mechanisms through which European modernism continued to develop—indirectly, unevenly, and often anonymously—within the constrained literary environment of Soviet Latvia.

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