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The two volumes of *No More Amber: The Baltic Literary Review* came to me as someone with very little knowledge of Baltic literature, for this reason much of it was a revelation to me and, it must be said, a very educational experience. This review, therefore, is written very much in that vein.

No More Amber is a periodical aimed at raising awareness of Baltic literature (defined in this case as Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia). It comprises editorial teams in each of the represented Baltic nations who compile selections of works from a range of writers, twenty three authors in each volume, short interviews and a brief biography of each as well as the occasional short introduction from an editor. Part of the mission also involves questioning just what exactly *Baltic* might mean, in part by challenging the over-used stereotypes of the region (hence the title). As Adam Cullen, one of the Estonian translators, in a conversation with this reviewer, commented regarding the aim of the publication,

The title kind of says it all – souvenir shops in these parts are flooded with amber, though no one here has had much of an interest in it since probably the late Iron Age.

We believe that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have so much more to offer English-speaking audiences in terms of our culture, and that literature offers a unique window into what life here is really about¹.

Of course, the subject of regional literature is itself a complex one. How do we define a regional literary identity? Is there such a thing? How does the identity translate to other schools of literature? As Arne Koch considers in *Between National Fantasies and Regional Realities*, the very term “regional” suggests a spatial dimension and the question of how to define a “region”. However, there are other considerations linked to factors of time, political identity and location and self-identity of the author (Koch 2006: 6). For instance, is Joseph Conrad a Polish writer when he is predominantly known for writing in English as naturalised British citizen (Twardowski 2020)? Is émigré literature part of a regional tradition if it is written abroad? How does the status of diaspora relate to a regional literature if the notion of region is purely based on geographical distinctions? Likewise, how much local colour is required to give a work a status of “regional” and to what extent does the incursions of external influences and globalisation affect a notion of a regional character (see: Griswold 2008: 1–35; Wan 2020: 10)?

While these questions are very much part of *No More Amber*, the current format of the publication does not give space to scholarly discussion and academic writing. Instead, it seeks to demonstrate the diversity and breadth of the region’s twentieth and twenty-first century literary output and to popularise it on an international level. These aims are apparent through not only the wide range of texts presented in each volume, ranging from poetry to short stories and fragments of novels, but in that all texts are in English translation (with no original language versions), many of them (over ninety percent according to one member of the publishing team) having been specially commissioned translations for *No More Amber*.

The layout of the journal itself is quite intriguing, adding to the feeling of exploration a reader might experience. The content list of authors is on the rear outside cover, leaving the inside for short authors’ biographies. The inside of the front cover also has a list of questions (What motivates them to write? Is location something which affects their writing? What is their definition of *Baltic*? Will national literature exist in 100 years?) which form an interview with each author (in the case of deceased writers, these are taken from previously published interviews or writings). This creates a kind of conversation amongst the authors and

¹ Mr Cullen’s comments are taken from a conversation with myself on Messenger 17.08.23. They are reproduced with his knowledge and permission.

promotes another intention of *No More Amber*, to act as a meeting point for wider, cross-cultural discussions amongst those involved in the Baltic literary scenes. As Adam Cullen points out,

Although the distances here are small, all three cultures tend to focus either on themselves, Western Europe, or places farther afield. NMA also serves as a platform for Baltic writers to interact, share ideas, and perhaps be inspired when they return to their native languages and continue practicing their art (Cullen 2023).

The two volumes of *No More Amber* follow different themes. Volume 1 is very much a general introduction to the regional literature and is sometimes used to introduce a presumed new reader to some of the more noted authors (many, but not all, are prize-winning writers) in national canons. For instance, one of the Latvian contributions presents (with an editorial introduction) a selection of poetry from a post-war artistic circle known as “Hell’s Kitchen”, named after the area of New York in which they were based (the selected authors are Baiba Bičole, Linards Tauns and Gunars Saliņš)². This particular selection emphasizes the point that a regional literature might not be solely based in a geographical location and émigré (or exile) literature has an important role in shaping and defining an identity of national literature. The subject of identity is the basis of Volume 2, although the concept of identity is open, be it national, sexual, gender or whatever other category the editorial team wish to explore. The Lithuanian short story writer Bitė Vilimaitė explores father-son relationships in *The Cloak* and *Miracles Don’t Happen*, while the Lithuanian poet Rima Juškūnė writes of Polish-Lithuanian relationships in her poem *Relations Between Nations*. The Latvian Aivars Eipurs in selected minimas from *It’s Latvia – Anyway* engages in a self-examination of Latvian self-identity by presenting snapshots of life which not only, presumably, represent his image of regional life. Many of these, such as moonshine, mushrooming, resistance to Soviet rule, working abroad etc. might also resonate with those readers familiar with other North European and Slavic cultures. Identity is not just explored through the works themselves, but sometimes through an exploration of the identity of the author themselves. One intriguing example is the Estonian poet Natalja Nekramatnaja who, whilst writing in first person of the experience of a woman in the wartime and modern society, as a mother, a daughter and (later) orphan, is somewhat of an enigma. The biography points out that nobody actually knows who this poet is or even if they exist. Is the poetic narrator the same person as the poet or a concept?

² For more information on the Hell’s Kitchen Collective, see: Silapētere (2019).

Within both volumes, similar themes appear which show the work as both regional (cultural markers, post-WW2 and post Soviet society), and, to a point, universal. These include: national and regional identity in relationship to neighbours, family, retrospective views of childhood recollections, women in society and married life. Readers would find many of the texts useful in comparison with other regional/national literature as well as simply interesting and enjoyable works in their own right. A further benefit of the journal's format is the wide variety and bite-sized samples of different works where nothing is too long to be boring and the reader can quickly find something else. This however may have another effect in that some of the fragments from novels or longer stories might leave the reader hanging, which might be the idea. The excerpt of the Latvian story *Lichen* by Inga Žolude (Vol. 2) finishes at a tantalising point where the reader (well, this reader) is eager to find out the ending. Hopefully a complete English translation is available elsewhere.

Presumably the more knowledgeable reader of Baltic literature will be aware of a number of the authors, the material and themes. However, as a reader unfamiliar with the subject, this reviewer found the experience interesting and intriguing, as if visiting the countries themselves for the first time and exploring not only the literature itself but the culture beneath it (or within it). This might range from the different themes within the literature (regional tropes, history, everyday life, post-Soviet society) to googling the unfamiliar and pondering translations. An example of the latter was the opening line of the translation of Kairi Look's children's novel *Piia Biscuit and the Bandits*, which refers to "Pancake Day", a particularly British term for Shrove Tuesday. My first thought was, being familiar with Polish "Fat Thursday" and doughnuts, whether Estonians actually eat pancakes on that day or, indeed, celebrated it on a Tuesday. Thus, I found out about the cream buns consumed on *Vastlapäev*. Interestingly, despite having been translated into several languages (including Finnish, German and Polish), the two novels of the adventures of Piia Biscuit (Piia Präänik) are yet to be published fully in English, another important factor in *No More Amber*, that of introducing English speaking readers to previously inaccessible works.

No More Amber is a very accessible introduction for new readers to Baltic literature and, I assume, of great interest to those more familiar with the literary output of the region, particularly those who may have an interest in translation (and the works read well in English). While Balticists may lament the absence of the texts in their original languages, it would probably make the volumes rather unwieldy, considering the number of texts and authors, and, this reviewer suspects, the accessibility to new readers from out outside Baltic studies is of greater importance

to the publishers. The publishing and editorial information also includes a number of useful addresses of cultural and writers' organisations which may prove of use to those who wish to explore further. If the first two volumes of *No More Amber* are any indication, the journal will prove a very useful addition to literary studies and general readers. At present the third volume is awaiting production but, as of August 2023, there is no definite publication date.

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 Gunars Salinš (Latvia)
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 Velta Snikere (Latvia)
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