

# A WIFE WHO WRITES: AESTHETIC AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SELF-REFLECTION IN WOMEN'S DIARIES



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**SUMMARY.** The focus of the article<sup>1</sup> is to look at diaries kept by women before WWII who were wives of popular and/or important men of the time. The two authors and their diaries I use for a case study have in common the fact that the husbands were in some way ideological leaders of their time while the diaries show differences in structure, regularity, and message. Marija Eglīte (1878–1926) was the wife and a muse of the poet Viktors Eglītis, who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century aggressively introduced modernist and decadent poetics to Latvia. Lidija Gulbe (1899–?), the wife of the poet Fridrihs Gulbis, was also a modernist but part of a later sort of modernism that formed in the 1920s and 1930s, when a group of young artists and writers established a society and a journal entitled *Green Crow* (*Zaļā Vārna*). The time period which is essential because of great social and political changes (modernization, Europeanization, WWI, the establishment of an independent state, etc.) is mostly reflected through the eyes and autobiographical narratives written by males but most of the women's diaries as testimonies are not yet transcribed and published, although there are some important initiatives and situation changes coming about in Latvia.

**KEYWORDS:** autobiographical writing, women's writing, diary, Latvian culture, Marija Eglīte, Lidija Gulbe.

The focus of my research I have started very recently is to look at diaries kept by women before WWII who were wives of popular or important men of the time. Keeping in mind this fact, these women have an extra role in the eyes of society and sometimes they are expected to act in a certain manner. The act of writing and the texts produced are also performative indicators of these restrictions. But at the same time the act of diary-writing enables them to be simultaneously desiring and performing in many other ways. These lives are seen to offer challenges to patriarchal structures and modes of expression. The life-writing potential of the diary has also been identified as a site for specifically female rebellion as Felicity Nussbaum describes diaries as 'sites of resistance' within power relations (Nussbaum 1988: 149), and non-fictional women's diaries have been studied intensely as a

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means of recovering marginalized lives. As stated by Valentine Raoul, torn between writing their lives and living their lives as women, diary writing can be engaged in regularly or irregularly, over a long or short period; it is an activity that can be fitted (though not always without difficulty) into the odd spare moment, or made room for at the end of a tiring day. Any event or non-event may be considered worthy of comment (Raoul 1989: 58).

Catherine Delafield, who has examined the appearance of the fictional diaries of women in the nineteenth-century novel, has made the very simple but also ample conclusion, namely, that the diary as a document is a great source of information about women of the era (Delafield 2016: 5). However, if we look at Latvian women's diaries as documents, especially those very few written and surviving from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first three decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, we see that not much scholarly work focuses on these diaries. Although some women's diaries have been used as an inspiration for semi-documentary fiction, the main problem is that compared to diaries written by men there are not many diaries of women left to get an insight into the self-reflection of a woman of that time, and I think this causes a problem of reliability for them as a historical source. The time period which is essential because of great social and political changes (modernization, Europeanization, WWI, the establishment of an independent state, etc.) is mostly reflected through the eyes and autobiographical narratives written by males but most of the women's diaries as testimonies are not yet transcribed and published, although there are some important initiatives and situation changes coming about in Latvia.

These unique historical testimonies bring to mind and are closely related to the Autobiography Collection<sup>2</sup> at the Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF), which is made up of writings people have produced during various periods to document their own lives and the times in which they live. The Autobiography Collection was started in early 2018 with the aim of preserving and documenting the tradition of writing about one's own life in Latvia. Part of the diaries in our collection is written by women at different times and under different social and educational circumstances. Several diaries in my research come from other collections in the Latvian State Historical Archive, Literature and Music Museum, and some regional museums.

When we think about autobiographical writings and especially diaries written by women at that time, we probably think about a young girl who is writing about her dreams and friends, or a young woman who reflects on her love affairs and/or broken heart. Or maybe we think about an old lady who writes her memoirs. The writing wife is not a very typical diarist at that time and this fact is one of

<sup>2</sup> Access to the internet under: <<http://garamantas.lv/en/repository/1115628/Autobiografiskas-kolekcijas>>.

the reasons there are not many diaries left. It is worth mentioning that girls were encouraged to keep a diary only during the period of transition during which they moved from the status of child to that of wife, especially at the schools which were meant only for girls at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Once they were married, writing about themselves was mostly perceived as an unjustifiable self-indulgence, a theft of time which should be more profitably spent (on others). Secrecy becomes suspect, as a wife should have no secrets from her husband (Raoul 1989: 59).

To better understand what was the public opinion or image of a diary written by a married woman at the time between WWI and WWII or how this opinion was formed, I studied the press and periodicals of that time and discovered some predictable but still interesting nuances. The diary of a married woman was seen as a potential sensation. It was assumed that if a husband found it, it would cause a scandal. There are several reports in the press that someone, usually a wealthy and well-known man, has found his wife's diary, read it, and was so shocked that he asked for a divorce immediately. These articles also include passages from real diaries. The content of a diary is always the same: the wife has been cheating on her husband for a long time, describing her lovers in a subtle and adorable manner in her diary, and expressing her displeasure with her husband. The moral, also spoken of by the headlines of the above-mentioned articles, was that married women should hide their diaries very carefully, it being better not to write them at all. Marriage inevitably provides both a framework for and a change of lifestyle, therefore it is important to analyze different and individual periods of life revealed in the diaries, e.g., the passage from a just-married wife who complains about her solitude and depression after marriage to the last notes in a diary written by a dying wife: from the young girl adjusting to the role of woman and wife to an experienced and wise wife of a politician.

There are two authors of diaries I have recently studied which have something in common but mainly they are different in their structure, regularity, and message. The authors of both diaries are united by the fact that their husbands were some sort of ideological leaders of their time. The husbands of both women were writers, which of course makes sense as for them writing was something natural and necessary, and I could not find any proof that they assumed that diary writing was not appropriate for women or especially for their wives. It is also worth mentioning that the diaries of both wives were not kept in separate and independent collections but were included in the collections of their husbands in archives and museums.

In the case of Marija Eglite who was the wife and a muse of the poet Viktors Eglitis, the diary is part of their communication both before and during their marriage. Viktors Eglitis was influenced by Russian symbolism and wanted to represent

the decadent movement in Latvia. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century he aggressively introduced modernist poetics to the country. A group of young Latvian writers gathered around Viktors Eglītis searching for new ways in art. Thus, Marija Eglīte is an eyewitness to the boom of modernism and decadence in Latvian culture after 1905.

Lidija Gulbe, the wife of the poet Fridrihs Gulbis, was part of a later modernism which formed in the 1920s and 1930s, when a group of young artists and writers established a society and a journal called the *Green Crow* (ZaļāVārna). These facts strongly influenced the events around them, their day-to-day activities, the people that circulated within their homes and lives, and the first impressions of their children. At the same time, for both women this was an impulse to do something creative by themselves alone: Marija translated some poetry and prose from French to Latvian; Lidija, as I recently discovered, published some nice and sentimental poems in the press.

In the Eglītis family, there was a setting for everyone to write a diary, and it was thought that diary writing brought harmony to the family. But the most diligent diary writer besides her husband Viktors Eglītis and the eldest son Anšlavs who later became one of the most popular Latvian writers, was Marija Stalbova-Eglīte, who wrote her diary on a fairly regular basis from 1906 until her early death in 1926 (about ten diaries).

As well as the recording of daily life in order to ‘authorize self-representation’, Delafield shows how the diary was being used as a performative text to reveal the women’s secret self (Delafield 2016: 36), a self not constrained by patriarchal society’s expectations of women. In her diary, Marija Eglite wrote in 1911, “I could have been one of the smartest women of my time if I could have been more educated.” Marija Eglīte was neither a writer nor a musician nor an artist at a professional level; on the other hand, in the diary, she identifies herself as a creative personality, and mentions significant translations of works by French authors she has done (e.g., *Alfred de Musset*, Barbey d’Aurevilly). Marija Eglīte is an example and her diary is documentary testimony to a particular case of a young woman who, as one of the rare members of her gender, graduated from the prestigious Lomonosov Gymnasium (1901) in Riga and worked as one of the few professional female teachers at several gymnasiums and as such earned high respect and adoration.

This extraordinary woman’s craving for education, art, and human understanding; her tremendous work in self-education; and the search for her creative personality are also part of one of the most intense stages of Latvian cultural history. Life had placed Marija in the role of wife, mother, family caregiver, but she broke out of the narrow frames, expanding her soul’s experience to world culture. A gifted musician, a pianist, she resigned her chances of developing at the best schools of music in Russia, but chose to become a spouse and an inspiration for her husband,

the writer Viktors Eglītis, for whom marriage to this woman became the greatest benefit of his life.

Marija left about ten diaries written between 1907 and 1926, a span of almost 20 years. Marija's diary is the personal record of a woman whose life paths crossed and encountered many prominent figures in Latvian culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She met them in everyday life, her records are unpretentious, but as they are more attractive, they open up the life scene, interests, and moods of the creative intelligentsia of that era. She is also a smart and talented woman, especially in the eyes of the men around her; this accounts for the fact that Marija Eglīte was often referred to as a muse. It is undeniable that compared to Lidija, who had more of an image of the older sister, there was a sensual and also sexual current that connected Marija to several friends of her husband. One of the aspects I am interested in is how this femininity is represented. Of course, there are many ways to represent it and Marija's diaries are a rich source to analyze them. She describes these relationships for more than ten years in her diary. In the relationship with her husband Marija was an eternal schoolgirl loved by the teacher; he sometimes even adored her, but never allowed her to feel completely equal. On the other hand, in her relationship with other men who were composers or poets, she was the person who formed their personality, gave them her wisdom, and inspired their faith in themselves.

As Mary Jane Moffatt claims in the introduction to "Revelations," an anthology of extracts from women's diaries of various countries and periods, the central conflict expressed by the female diarist is that between Love (the family, self-abnegation, reproduction) and Work (the outside world, self-affirmation, production). See Raoul 1989: 5. In Marija's as well as in Lidija's diaries, the two main topics are the inner spiritual life they have always been trying to improve, and love. Marija writes:

The only thing I want to gain is a lot of knowledge, the depth of the spirit, the depth of the soul, its firm and definite nature. I read and think, I terribly love and start to understand art (I could not understand painting and sculpture quite well before) and I try to make every act of spirit and soul my own, turn it into flesh so that I become harmonious throughout my being. ... But I am too close to life and everyday life. (March 16, 1916)

And a few days later,

I would not even fall in love with a man who stands far beyond any art. I have always loved the spirit more than a body. By loving the spirit and the soul, all things will become "pleasing" as the Bible says. (March 22, 1916)

After the wedding, being a married wife, and later also a mother, she finds it very important to feel feminine. Viktors Eglītis, an adherent of modern ideas and

decadent passion, encouraged and advocated free relations in marriage. He was fascinated by different women and was constantly telling his wife about his adventures. Marija's diary shows her trying to accept this; there are moments in her life where her desire to feel admiration from other men besides her husband is one of the main themes in her diary. She has close relationships with some friends of her husband. However, the older and weaker Marija becomes because of her progressing tuberculosis, the more jealous she is. In the diary we can trace both Marija's inner struggle with jealousy and the self-denial of being too weak to destroy those feelings. Marija thinks a lot about her imperfection, that she is stuck in everyday life, and is unable to match the erudition of Viktors Eglītis, the creative spirit, and cannot become a true muse and inspirer. This lack of consciousness was reinforced by V. Eglītis' constant encouragement to raise her cultural horizon. One evening both read a Russian writer's work. Marija did not read to the end because she was busy translating the work of the French writer Barbey d'Aureville, which the husband complained about in the second morning, leaving her to think: "... I do not have a real culture, nor do I have my own individuality" (November 15, 1920).

Resentment caused by a husband was particularly painful at times when Marija dared to complain and disclose some of her harsh thoughts about his passion for other women. There was no place for jealousy in their relationship. A truly dramatic episode was described on August 5, 1920; she called it the most terrible moment in her life. Viktors hurt her deeply by accusing her of being a philistine who has not learned anything and then saying she is not noble enough to be part of his life. She runs to the forest and hides there for many hours without reacting to the screams of Viktors and both sons who are searching for her. She does not know how to go on living, but she does not want to die either, though "today, it seemed that death would be an easy solution". She always looks for her guilt for her husband's intolerance and high demands:

Sometimes the question comes to mind: am I worthy as a wife, am I worthy at all? Now it turns out that I am not worthy enough for him, but I still believe that I will be a princess from the Cinderella tale. And if someone has big goals, then they also have the ability to reach them. But maybe it is only my selfishness and pride to think this way.

Similar collisions occur throughout the whole of her twenty-three-year cohabitation with her husband.

Only two of Lidija Gulbe's diaries survived and are available in the archives. Basically, Lidija writes about everyday events, and the description of public life and people around her is one of her central themes. Her family apartment was as an informal gathering place for young writers and artists at that time and Lidija was a friendly hostess. Lidija's diary shows that she becomes a trusted person, a friend

who can help solve some emotional or practical problems. For example, there is a lively description of how one of the male artists asks her to help to find a doctor who would do an abortion on his girlfriend because he isn't interested in marrying her. But Lidija tries to solve the case differently by making the young man change his thoughts both about the young woman and the need for an abortion. So Lidija is perceived as a woman who can solve things which need to have feminine experience, knowledge, and contacts.

Not surprisingly, both women in their diaries very much appreciate their moments of being alone. At such moments, life is often associated with life before marriage, happily promising a sense of unpredictability, or the opportunity to listen more deeply to your heart. As Lidija writes:

Evening. I'm at home. How nice. Such a silence and I feel like in the old sweet days in my red-brown room. Much time has passed since those days. I began to long for loneliness, I want to have peace for my painful soul. Now there is a little time for me, because I don't own myself anymore, but the small ones take part in my life. Days are passing in a hurry. I'd like to stop and think, but the machine is turning. I would like to yell, but the sound is shattered in the narrow space. It seems to me that my soul is shattered in small pieces and each piece lives and searches for something and creates pain, longing, love, and hate. How good, how good it is to be alone with my broken soul again. (Gulbe 1932)

The same feeling of not owning herself any more appears in Marija's diary as well.

The diaries of wives are more like "journals in time," which is one of the most popular kinds of diary. Both diaries question the intimacy encouraged by common diary writing and reading practices by revealing the performance of a private life. It mostly contains their personal views of her family relations, especially of interest are the dialogues that the wife describes between her husband and herself, her strivings to be the perfect mother, castigating herself in her diary for chastising her children. The women also describe their dreams and intellectual or physical desires. Taking into account the sociopolitical and cultural changes which influenced Latvian society and especially women, these diaries provide an opportunity not only to study women and men in a new light revealing patriarchal society's expectations of women but also to study gender relation through female writing which records daily life in order to 'authorize self-representation'.

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Eva Eglāja-Kristšone

RAŠANTI ŽMONA: ESTETINIAI IR SOCIALINIAI SAVISTABOS ASPEKTAI MOTERŲ  
DIENORAŠČIUOSE

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje susitelkiama į moterų – to meto žymių vyrų žmonių – dienoraščius, rašytus prieš Antrąjį pasaulinį karą. Atliekama dviejų autorių, tuometės Latvijos visuomeninių lyderių žmonių, dienoraščių analizė, nes tiek jų struktūra, tiek rašymo regularumas ir turinys skiriasi. Marija Eglīte (1878–1926) buvo poeto Viktoro Eglīčio, žinomo modernizmo ir dekadentinės poetikos pradininko Latvijoje, žmona bei mūza. Lidija Gulbe (1899–?) – poeto Fridriho Gulbio, kiek vėlyvesnio modernisto, žmona. XX amžiaus trečiame dešimtmetyje grupė jaunų menininkų ir rašytojų įkūrė bendriją ir žurnalą, pavadintą „Žalia varna“ (lat. *Zalā Vārna*). Jų gyventas laikas buvo svarbus dėl socialinių ir politinių permąstymų (modernizacija, europeizacija, Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, nepriklausomos valstybės įkūrimas ir kt.), tai atsispindi autobiografiniuose vyrų pasakojimuose, bet moterų dienoraščiai iki šiol nėra publikuoti. Tačiau paminėtina, kad šiuo metu jau atsiranda iniciatyvų ir padėtis Latvijoje keičiasi.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: autobiografinis rašymas, moterų rašymas, dienoraštis, latvių kultūra, Marija Eglīte, Lidija Gulbe.