

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 16, No.3 - Fall 1970

Editors of this issue: Antanas Klimas, Ignas K. Skrupskelis

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CONTEMPORARY THEMES IN THE LITERATURE OF SOVIET LATVIA

ARVĪDS ZIEDONIS, Jr.*
Muhlenberg College

Twenty-five years ago, the Latvian exiles severed their ties with their homeland and also with the further development of literature in Soviet Latvia. Two separate literary trends developed, and up to this time the Latvians abroad generally know little of the literature in Soviet Latvia today.

Only during the last few years several articles and poems from Soviet Latvia have been published in western Latvian magazines,¹ and it is also possible to subscribe to the most popular magazines and newspapers of Soviet Latvia.² Since April of this year, a Latvian bookstore in New York offers even a limited amount of several publications (books, magazines, newspapers) of the late sixties from Soviet Latvia.

An especially noteworthy development in the academic field is the newly organized Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, in which academicians abroad representing all three Baltic countries participate by doing research and publishing articles on this subject.³

It would, of course, be very desirable that the Latvians in the homeland could acquaint themselves with the best works of Latvian authors abroad, but up to this time this cultural exchange has been very limited. According to Prof. Rolfs Ekmanis,

Only in rare instances are the literature-politicians giving permission to touch upon the literature by authors in political exile. In this regard, it seems that Latvians have the greatest difficulties. At any rate, the "coefficient" of liberty is much higher among Estonians and Lithuanians.⁴

I have chosen this theme regarding the literature in Soviet Latvia today in order to acquaint Latvian and Lithuanian academicians, as well as others who are interested in the life of Soviet Latvia today, with the aspirations and problems of the people and the ways these are expressed by prose writers, poets and literary critics.

Up to 1953, due to strict censorship, writers, poets and literary critics across the Soviet Union had to toe the line of Socialist Realism or refrain from expressing themselves at all. Following Stalin's degradation, the thaw became noticeable in Soviet Latvia at the end of the 1950's. As a result, a good number of intellectuals in the field of literature started to abandon Socialist Realism, which had demanded of them a pedantic pedagogical approach in every creative work, saturated with empty, irrelevant phrases and mottoes, with artificial dialogues and stereotype, artistically weak characters of heroes that consistently excelled in controlling their feelings and emotions with an iron will and reason so as not to make any mistakes and to fight bravely all enemies, which were described as weak, passionate and stupid. Just as unrealistic had been the descriptions of the people's meager but happy lives in a productive socialist society.

Such deliberately one-sided characterizations and narrow, colorless descriptions of life by the adherents of Socialist Realism had created especially in the young generation a sense of indignation and protest; therefore, in Soviet Russia proper as well as in all of the other Socialist republics the young intellectuals demanded of themselves and of the public a more critical attitude against any old and previously enforced statements, attitudes. They called their people to a deeper understanding of truth, compassion, frankness, honesty, emphasizing especially the need for personal responsibility and self-examination in search for the inner life—of heart and soul—the spiritual life.

These young intellectuals experimented with new ways of expression in order to present life more realistically, with all of its difficulties and possibilities, in greater depth and breadth. Among the Latvian poets, especially Imants Ziedonis, Māris Čaklais, Ojārs Vācietis and others expressed their convictions at times in angry, even vulgar language; for instance, in his poem *Par to, ko cilvēks cilvēkam* ("What one, man to another") is capable of doing, Imants Ziedonis exclaims in disgust:

...Cilvēks var cilvēku graužt
Dēļ maizes, dēļ slavas, dēļ lupatām.
Līdz saules rietam no tās dienas,
kad saule aust,
Pa zobam, pa stundai, pa drupatām...

Cilvēks var norīt otru kā pitons
Atbilstoši savas rīkles platumam...[5](#)

...One man can gnaw another,
For bread, for fame, for rags.
Till sunset from the time of dawn,
A tooth, hour, crumb at a time...

One man can gulp down another
like a python
According to the width of his throat.

On the other hand, these young poets were also capable of expressing their emotions with deep feeling and lyricism.

Since the summer of 1968, acting on the directions from the party, some of the dogmatic literary critics have increasingly turned against the searching young individuals, criticizing and ridiculing their "intellectual" prose and poetry. In this vein, Ingrida Sokolova claims in her article of April 4, 1970, that these "negative phenomena hinder the growth of individual writers as well as the enrichment of literature in general"[6](#)

The beginning of this phenomenon obviously can be traced back to the end of the 1950's and the first half of the 1960's in the "rew prose" with its moods, situations, heroes. Sickly reflective intelligent boys suffered from doubts, deplored life, turned hither and yon in search for who knows what, and in experiences of love, or, more correctly, - they played on feelings of love. All of them lived in some kind of isolation from society; therefore, social conclusions did not interest them at all.[7](#)

Likewise, with increased emphasis J. Rubenis, secretary of the central committee advised writers and literary critics that they should adhere to Socialist Realism, which would give them a chance to devote themselves entirely to their professions:

The Latvian artist today is not threatened by unemployment; he does not feel the disrupting influence of business, which turns art into a commercial venture. Not as a tiny windblown grain of sand, not as a mere woodchip sinking into the ocean depths, but rather as a mighty and free master of life today is the Soviet Latvian cultural worker. And his course is unwavering, regulated precisely by the Marxist-Leninist ideological compass..[8](#)

In his review of literary contributions to the science of Leninism, J. Barkāns, however, has come to the conclusion that the Latvian writers and critics have left this important task to the Soviet Russian authors since the latter have had long practice in this field of research. His findings J. Barkāns explains as follows:

In collections which have been dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of V. I. Lenin, as well as in all of the other previously published collections, none of our authors are represented. There are only individual articles, as we have seen (Barkāns quotes names such as J. Asars, A. Upitis, K. Krauliņš, P. Zeilis, L. Bersons and M. Smulovičs—ranging since the 1920's). But we have no complex research, not to mention volumes of scientific research, dissertations and books. Such do not exist.[9](#)

As an excuse, J. Barkāns has heard that everything or almost everything has already been said in the central collections; therefore, it would suffice to have merely translations from Russian so that there would be no repetition. He himself guessed that "perhaps we can blame the usual provincial modesty or even a sort 'reverence' toward the central theoreticians?"[10](#) Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that Socialist Latvian writers and critics have neither produced books nor given reviews of scientific publications on Leninism.

Unfortunately, during the latter years there has been a marked reduction in the publication of novels, especially objective novels. Among the long prose published in 1968, only one work has gained recognition — the novel *Visaugstākais amats* ("The Highest Position), by Visvaldis Lāms, through its "realistic interpretation of life in Socialist Latvia and its marked independence of thought."[11](#) According to the literary critic Laimonis Purs, unfortunately such partial paralysis of writers of novels and long stories is progressing, which is indicated by their dangerous lack of productivity also for 1970, as Purs explains this in his article of March 14, 1970:

This year, *Liesma* [the sole official publishing house in Riga] may be lucky to publish perhaps only one novel (at best two) about the joys and problems of our present-day life, and the same is called somewhat impolitely *Kailums* (*Nakedness*).[12](#)

What is happening to Latvian writers of long prose? They seek to excuse themselves with a lack of free time because many of them have taken on other bread-winning jobs, and they say, "A good poem can be written even on a trolley bus; for a novel, however, are needed a desk and a little time."[13](#) But Laimonis Purs ventures to say that these are not the real reasons; the problem lies deeper — prose writers seem willing to sacrifice quantity for the sake of quality. Of course, there is no shortage of works by "graphomaniacs" who are able to turn out great quantities of empty works, for they do not seem to be concerned whether or not anything important is clearly expressed in a literary work, as long as it deals with man and society, discussed from the sociological, historical and philosophical viewpoints. Purs compares this literature with

lindenblossom honey which is sweet and, in small quantities, even healthy, but it definitely is not man's basic diet. Such literary works unavoidably turn out to be "resounding emptiness."[14](#)

Purs feels that at this particular time, poetry excels prose by reason of its form and its ability to convey its message. Accordingly, many words of praise have been said of the poetry of today, and most of the poetry deserves it, indeed:

During the 1960's, poetry has examined a very wide range of territories and, within limits, has even controlled them. Poetry books are sold "under the counter," they are read avidly, many poetry evenings have been overcrowded, and poetry and the poets are discussed extensively. Poetry on the universal theme of love has overcome the dark monotony of hatred and apathy. "Love, people, love!" appeal the poets.[15](#)

With only a handful of words the poets are able to stress that without love man cannot live, without love everything is insignificant, and without love people do not take a stand in life. In prose, the theme of love has up to now been approached mainly from the Socialist Realism point of view, stressing morality and ethics for overcoming all temptations of love (sexual as well as spiritual). For this reason, especially long prose has many difficulties to overcome even in its approach to the theme of love, as Purs points out:

No matter how bright the poet's launched rocket of love, the prose writer's approach in defense of love is necessarily that of a footsoldier, with particular problems: he must determine where to place the machine gun of morality and the mine thrower of ethics, which part of the territory to put under the cross-fire of society's automat, which tree of prejudice to cut down in order to clear the view and which to leave in order to conceal the view. The prose writer must include with his theme of love many other themes; therefore, he will advance cautiously, even hesitate. At times he will become a pioneer who, as is known, makes a mistake only once in his lifetime..[16](#)

The most discouraging and worst reason, perhaps, is the fact that due to all kinds of conditions a literary work frequently ages prematurely and is thus excluded from the ranks of truly valuable literary contributions.[17](#)

It is generally agreed that the main theme in prose should be "man in contemporary society — contemporary man." Some critics advocate that this does not mean that the hero of a novel must be a director, chairman of a kolhoz, an academician or a general—all of whom have shared the limelight up to now. Other persons, too, should be worthy of such recognition, not for the sake of their particular kind of work but rather for their individuality: each person as an individual, with a particular outlook on life, on his contemporary world, and how he accepts or shapes events of his time.[18](#) Moreover, it is felt that a prose writer should try to interpret people and events with depth, in wholeness and truth, rather than just give an outsider's description of them.

The emphasis must be on personal integrity and personal responsibility: "Where is it going to lead us when the young generation will replace the longing for education with the temptation not to seek knowledge?" or "Having overcome the curse of capitalism, which is unemployment, is it not absurd that idleness is prevalent and is becoming more and more obvious?" or „Drinking often interferes with good work habits, resulting in wastefulness." To such recklessness with human resources is added today the danger of irresponsible use of scientific knowledge, threatening natural resources through pollution, extinction and willful destruction by wars. And, as the Soviet Russian poet Voznesensky emphasized the problems of mechanization and dehumanization, also Purs warns that in our atom age intentional or unintentional stupidity can have devastating results for all mankind. It is for these reasons that writers and poets must again become the spokesmen of their time as they reexamine themselves and others, as they search for answers to today's complex problems.[19](#)

In answer to Laimonis Purs' concerns about the shortage of long prose, Latvian literary critic Valentīna Eisule gives the following encouragement about prose, especially Russian and Lithuanian prose:

Our own literary standard bearer right now is poetry, but in Russian and also Lithuanian literature to the foreground has come prose. Our prose writers, too, are working. New works are coming, and the temporary abatement perhaps has already become the crossroad from which is beginning a new rise.[20](#)

In this historically important time, when most intellectual authors are concerned with the welfare of their people, even their naked existence, and beyond that, the existence of mankind, there are still many dogmatic writers who contentedly adhere to the officially accepted themes of revolutionary vigilance and its aims. Most of them are still trying to exhaust the Second World War theme, but these works are artistically weak. An exception of this theme is the recent novel *Velnakaula dvīni* ("Devilbone's Twins"), by Egons Līvs, which has evoked favorable criticism even abroad; and Alberts Jansons, first secretary of the Latvian S.S.R., declared in his address to the cultural plenum in Riga on March 5, 1970, that this work has received wide acclaim and has influenced the theater, movies, radio and television toward further creative search with "something that is lacking in most of our prose—a philosophical approach to life, the ability to see man in greater depth and with the characterization of the people to show the nation."[21](#)

Among Latvian intellectuals there exists a deep national feeling for the people's language, traditions and culture. Many try to bridge the past and the present, describing with admiration the heroic struggles of freedom fighters in antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as during the two world wars with the conviction that this heroic spirit is still very much alive today, and will preserve their national identity for the future.

The fact that this national identity is threatened in many subtle ways has been brought out in an article by Dr. M. E. Straumanis in 1968, in which he states the following:

The percentage of non-Latvians in Latvia has increased to a great extent and it is still increasing. In addition, Latvians eagerly seek higher education, which many also attain and then they have the option to get well-paid positions also in other Soviet republics. It is noteworthy that, contrary to former times, Latvians no longer feel attached to the soil, and they leave the farm life whenever they have the chance...[22](#)

In order to keep the farm population from diminishing, great emphasis is placed on literary themes dealing with farm life, and writers have been encouraged by the Socialist Latvian government to devote themselves to this subject.[23](#) On the other hand, it is agreed that an author must be thoroughly acquainted with his subject, he must "live it" in order to be able to interpret it.[24](#)

There is great interest also in Western literature, and in their reviews literary critics often quote world famous writers, especially Hemingway, Paustovski, Maupassant, Updyke, Steinbeck, as well as Chehov, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and the Latvian classics R. Blaumanis, J. Poruks, A. Brigadere and J. Rainis, especially the latter with a much deeper interpretation than previously. Some of the stories and short stories of western authors have recently been published in the leading Latvian literary magazine *Literatūra un Māksla* ("Literature and Art").

Due to the literary difficulties of long prose and also due to the influence of western short story writers, the most popular literary prose genre in Latvia today is short prose—short stories and miniatures, which are brisk and melodic, and in which content and form create their appropriate synthesis and become indivisible parts in the wholeness of their message. At the same time, much is left up to the reader's own imagination for his active participation and further development of thought because this kind of short prose, as has been said by K. Paustovsky, discards everything superfluous and demands the greatest concentration of thought in pregnant images.[25](#) Dzidra Kalniņa, literary critic, emphasizes that for this very reason a casual reader often misses the central idea of this short prose:

There are writers who have found a way to discuss complicated problems in such simple (attention!) form that the reader fools himself if he accepts the simple as something quite common and ordinary: "Well, it was a pretty nice little story, nothing special about it!"[26](#)

The most famous Latvian writer of miniature prose is the poet Imants Ziedonis. Literary critic Tamāra Zālīte describes his "fragments" or "miniatures" as a fluid interchange of basic images, which entwine, cross over from one into another, creating from the concrete something abstract and vice versa. These miniatures differ from the usual short stories in that they are actually closer to poetry than to prose:

In the center is not an event or a character, as it is customary in a story, but an image or a succession of images, which is similar to poetry; and, likewise, these images are not connected formally and logically, but through association, rhythm and music. Ziedonis' images are concrete, visual and common: a pitcher, a cow, a river, a ball of yarn, or a very common activity, such as a man performing some farm chores. He describes a vivid picture which is plainly understood and can almost be touched; however, associative dimensions, motion and inner dynamic are created when these images are confronted and associated in surprising comparisons, where they seem to appear in a new light and a new union; also they are in a rhythmic musical harmony rich with intonations. These rhythms, these intonations unite not in symphonic completeness but polyphonically independently, supplementing each other: They are lyrical, ironic, playful.[27](#)

In the miniatures, dialogue and action supersede each other. Miniatures contain the main themes of concern to Latvian authors in the homeland today, as is evident from the following excerpts of Ziedonis' miniature about the restlessness of stones:

...Milzīgi akmeņu gājieni iet uz Vecākiem un pa Tallinas šoseju uz Skulti, Tuju un Ķurmgragu. Sabrien jūrā un zilām akmeņu acīm skatās saule... Akmeni atstāj krāces un cauri mežiem pāri laukiem dodas uz lielceļiem... Es saku [savam akmenim] : — Tev nekur nav jāiet. Tu esi akmens sava vietā. Nevieni akmens nav tik skaistā vietā. . . Tūkstošiem laukakmeņu stāv rindā pie juvelieru darbnīcu durvīm. Viņi dzirdējuši, ka arī pulksteņos un gredzenos esot akmeņi. Muļķīgie pelēči prasa pulksteņu dimantiem: nu kā jūs tur ietikāt, ko? Vai jums ir pazišanās tajā pulkstenī? . . Skaistie ežmalu un birtalu akmeņi liek frizētavā krāsot savas sūnas un iznāk no frizētavas nofrizēti un vienādi. . . Es saku savējam: ...Redzi, drīz tev visapkārt ziedēs rudzi. Tos te sēj kopš mūžības... Nepacietīgi dīdas pulkstenis uz manas rokas... aģitē viens no asītes dimantiem. Viņš saka: — Mēs — smalkie... man ir kauns, ka mēs esam tik smalki... šodien, kad betonējam pamatus, utt... Es attaisu pulksteņa vāciņu, gribu ko teikt, bet aģitējošais dimants izlec no pulksteņa un ielec cementa javā. Ielēca cementā, bet vajadzēja palīdzēt rādīt laiku. Es nezinu, vai tur javā viņš ir vairāk vērts par mazo grants akmentiņu... Jūs dimanti, pulksteņa zobratīšos, — jūs esat laika ass. Jūs esat neaizvietojami. Stāviet stingri un pārliecināti. Laiks nedrīkst uztraukties... Pieceļas sliekšanās un aiziet no durvju priekšas. Un piecalas kaimiņu sliekšanās un arī aiziet... Es eju līdzi un ieeju akmenkaleja *dārza*... Un saka visu sliekšņu akmeņkalis: — Vajag paaugstināt ja ne pašus sliekšņus, tad sliekšņu prasīgumu. Sliekšanās šodien nav vairs tikai funkcionāls celtnes atribūts. Sliekšanās ir mājas rentgens, mājas maģiskā acs. Sevišķi es to saku jums — ideju nesēju namu sliekšņiem, akadēmiju un cietumu sliekšņiem. Celieties, ejiet atpakaļ un esiet augstāki! ...Es eju blakus sliekšņiem atpakaļ uz savu māju...

(Trans.)

...Great numbers of stones walk in procession to Vecaki and along the Tallin highway to Skulte, Tūja and Ķurmgrags [summer resorts along the Gulf of Riga at the Baltic Seashore]. They wade into the sea and with their blue stone eyes look at the sun... [Other] stones leave the rapids and through woods and across fields go to the highways. . . I say [to my stone] : "You don't have to go anywhere. You are a stone in his right place. No other stone is in such a beautiful place... Thousands of fieldstones stand in line at the door of the jeweler's workshop. They have heard that in watches and rings there are also supposed to be stones. These foolish gray [fieldstones] ask the watch diamonds: "Well, how did you manage to get in there? Do you have any connections in that watch?.. The beautiful fieldstones from boundaries and birchgroves let their moss be dyed at the barbershop, and they exit from the barbershop slick and looking all alike. . . I say to my own: "...Look, soon all around you will bloom the rye. It has been sowed here since eternity. . . The watch moves restlessly on my arm... one of the diamonds of its axis is agitating. He says: "We—the refined. . . I am ashamed that we are so refined. . . today, when the foundations are being laid, etc. ...I open the lid of the watch and want to say something, but the agitating diamond jumps from the watch and jumps right into the cement grout. He jumped into the cement when he should have helped to indicate the time. I don't know whether in the grout he is any better than a tiny gravel. ...You, diamonds, in the gear-wheels of the watch, — you are the axis of time. You are irreplaceable. Stand strong and convinced. Time must not get excited. ...A threshold rises and leaves his door. And a neighboring threshold also rises and leaves. . . I go with them and enter the garden of stone-cutter. ...And thus says the stone-cutter of all thresholds: "There must be raised, if not the thresholds themselves, then their demands. A threshold today is no longer just a functional attribute of a

building. A threshold is the x-ray of the home, its magic eye. I say this especially to you—thresholds of buildings of ideology, thresholds of the academies and of prisons. Rise, return to your places and be higher [nobler]! ...I walk alongside the thresholds on my way back home...[28](#)

As Imants Ziedonis has expressed this in his collection of poems *Es ieeju sevī* ("I go Into Myself") (1968), likewise in this miniature about the restlessness, demands or conformity of the stones he emphasizes the need for self-examination, for outer control, inner restlessness in search for clarity and lucidity of mind, for honesty, for spiritual values, especially by those who are responsible for the conditions of the people now and in the future.

In another miniature, using the image of a full glass running over, Ziedonis speaks through several images: yeast, man, a mountain, the sea. "Es biju raugs, un es satiku raugu, un mēs nezinājām, ko lai viens ar otru darām, jo mums bija vajadzīgi milti. Es zināju, ka raugu neviens neēd..." ("I was yeast, and I met yeast, and we did not know, what to do with each other, for we needed flour. I knew that no one eats yeast...")[29](#) Man shapes the world, but the world also changes him. The writer must speak to his time... In another miniature, two young people walk hand in hand, or are they really balls of yarn?:

...Iet garam cilvēki pa pāriem, abi it kā vienādi, bet, ja labi ieskatās, — iet garām divi kamoli — viens ir liels un otrs maziņš, iet garam partidamies, un to sauc visādi — par upurēšanos, izdabāšanu, saprašanu, draudzību vai mīlestību. . .

...People are passing by in pairs; it seems they are both alike, but, at second glance, — two balls of yarn are walking by — one is large and the other small, they walk by winding and unwinding, which is called by many names — sacrifice, servility, understanding, friendship or love...[30](#)

Such miniatures are written also by well-known poets of other Soviet republics; for instance Akhmedkhan Abu-Bakar, a young Soviet Darghinian author from the Caucasus mountains, has expressed the innate longing of man for light in one of his miniatures, which in its entirety consists of only one sentence:

The little boy woke his mother up in the middle of the night and demanded: "Light the sun, mummy, so that the day will break!"[31](#)

In Lithuania, perhaps the most competent author on metaphors is Albinas Bernotas, whose *Karšti lapai* ("Hot Leaves") (1968), is characterized by Rimvydas Šilbajoris as follows:

His poems... begin with the exciting discovery that any phenomenon can be given a figurative name, that there can be a way to recognize reality as a system of metaphors. Bernotas may start out, for instance, by noticing that roundness is an attribute of both a dinner plate and the face of a clock. Any relationship between two such objects will suggest a new meaning for the word "mealttime": it is a metaphor for life in that we do consume the days and hours set before us. The ticking of the seconds, even, will be echoed in the clatter of knives and forks. A midnight banquet thus becomes a name for insomnia; the very darkness of the night resembles warm black bread held between the two white hands of day. The "idea" which emerges from all this is sudden and ironical: death is when we choke on our last bit of worry.[32](#)

Andrei Voznesensky's small volume of poetry *The Shadow of Sound*, whose first 10,000 copies went on sale in Moscow in April 1970 and which were sold out in a frenzied response by the people within two hours, has been called by Soviet author Valentin Katayev "a depot of metaphors."[33](#) In his unfettered, experimental way, Voznesensky even cast picture poems by arranging words in the shapes of their subjects. His "seagull" poem speaks of light and freedom: "I love to enter the aureole of light/where there are no boundaries..." ending with "chaika plavki boga" ("The seagull is the bikini of God") arranged in the form of a seagull with spread wings.[34](#)

Among American writers, John Updyke's "Archangel" and "Lifeguard" from *Pigeonfeathers and Other Stories* seem to be similar to Ziedonis' miniatures in structure and conception, but not in essence.[35](#)

The objective of all of these poets and writers is to ignite the truth and then to let it grow in the minds of the readers. The reader has to see the truth and to live it himself. What the authors really try to bring out is a particular feeling about life, a mood, an interpretation, a common concern of contemporary life. This objective has been achieved also in short stories with sudden moments of understanding of inter-connected thought, which reveals the poet's active world-changing strength, his creative outlook on life,[36](#) and such short stories in Soviet Latvia are *Es pats līdzenumā* ("I Myself on the Plain"), by Alberts Bels; short stories by Aivars Kalndruva; and Imants Ziedonis' story *Kurzemīte* ("Little Kurzeme"), which has created great interest among its readers.[37](#)

Of the greatest artistic value among all genres of literature in Soviet Latvia today is poetry. Especially since 1967, its quality has improved considerably. Among the most outstanding poets in Soviet Latvia are Ojārs Vācietis, Imants Ziedonis, Māris Čaklais, Vizma Belševica, Imants Auziņš, Bruno Saulītis, Nora Kalna and many others, even beginners Aivars Neibārts, Ansis Epnars and representatives of the young generation, such as Māra Cielēna, who is only fifteen years old and whose poems were published for the first time in *Literatūra un Māksla* this January. Due to their undeniable talent and great popularity, Alberts Jansons, in his address, honored Imants Ziedonis as being able to create "significant works which are enthusiastically received by the readers"; and Ojars Vācietis, that his poetry, although now somewhat calmer, has become "deeper and wiser, rooted in the spiritual life of the people."[38](#)

Poets, like prose writers, mainly speak of life in contemporary society, with its aspirations and problems, of love for nature, of farm life, of erotic love, of the need for trust, truth, honesty and responsibility, of cautiousness and courage at the appropriate time. They criticize sharply the negative aspects of bureaucracy with its wastefulness, hypocrisy, oppression and narrowmindedness, which is characteristic of its advocates, the "deadly people," who endanger their own countrymen. The poets call for compassion and respect toward each man as an individual who is worthy and important in his own right.

They defend national traditions and classical literature and art, and they emphasize the wisdom of antiquity and the courage of freedom fighters as well as those of recent wars. They deal with themes of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment and freedom. In many poems the poets express ardent love for their country; with deep concern they condemn evil forces from without and warn against the danger of internal strife from within, as well as against the exodus of intellectuals who seek better positions elsewhere in other republics and who thus abandon their real purpose; however, in spite of these adversities, the poets cling to the belief in a better future for their country and its people. The difficult situation of today and its trials are the crucible in which man, in his nakedness, becomes genuine. Of relevance are the wars in Vietnam and in other parts of the world today, which bring back memories of senseless destruction and which create feelings of anxiety and a certain apathy in the face of the absurd, when the world seems again a powder keg. Love, life and the spirit seem the only salvation from death and destruction. This touches upon the question or assurance of immortality of the soul, over which, in a Faustian spirit, "God and the devil are bargaining."[39](#) Religious themes touch upon Latvian mythological and Christian beliefs.

Many of these main themes are echoed also in the poetry of Soviet Lithuania, especially by Albinas Bernotas, who, like the Soviet Latvian poets, is deeply concerned with the theme of time: timelessness, time for life and death, time of decision, time for national identity, for survival.[40](#) All of these main themes usually are clad in the symbolism of metaphor, like yeast in flour, for, as Ziedonis says, "No one eats pure yeast."[41](#)

With this sense of urgency, the highest demand of the poets is freedom of thought, freedom of expression for the sake of communication, as an essential requirement to their being spokesmen of the time. In 1967, Ojārs Vācietis advocated in the annual collection *Dzejas Diena* ("Poetry Day") the necessity of search and experimentation:

Poetry is popular here. Poetry cannot and must not be self-satisfied. Today search and experimentation decide everything, and I, for my part, justify mistakes in search and experimentation, rather than the production of infallible, onesided verse.[42](#)

During the next year, in 1968, a great number of collections of poetry in minibooks appeared, in which the poets demanded freedom of expression; otherwise restlessness would rage inwardly like the sea. "Why are we not allowed?" asked Nora Kalna in her poem "Jūrai" ("To the Sea"):

Jūra, tu drīksti	Sea, you're allowed
paliikt, tāda kā esi,	to stay as you are,
jūra, tu drīksti	Sea, you're allowed
vienmēr "tu pati" būt...	always to be yourself...
Jūra, tu drīksti	Sea, you're allowed
sadauzīt vecus vrakus,	to break up old wrecks,
uz grimušu kugu mastiem	On masts of sunken ships,
zaļģanas aļģes sēt.	to sow green algae.
Jūra, tu drīksti,	Sea, you're allowed
ja vairs citādi nespēj,	—if you're otherwise—rage:
trakot:	Sea, you're allowed!
Jūra, tu drīksti!	Why aren't we? 43
Kāpēc nedrīkstam mēs?	

Today, the poets have found their forms of expression to communicate ideas to the people through symbolism and metaphor; at times, however, their language is direct and naked as reality itself, as is evident from the poem "Atgriešanās" ("Return") by Imants Auziņš:

...Mēs esam uzveikusi	...We've overcome
To veco baili, —	The old fear, —
Un jūtam: visistāki	And feel: Naked
Esam kaili...	We are true. 44

Armands Melnalksnis, one of the young authors, calls his people to inner unity and mutual harmony in their struggle for survival in his poem "Berze" ("Friction"):

Neuzticība
kā smilšu graudi
neuzkrītoši iekrit starp mums,—
pec tam ierodas Berze
ar saviem bezmaksas pakalpojumiem.

Distrust
like grains of sand
slyly fall among us, —
then follows Friction
with its gratuitous services.[45](#)

Disunity among the people can be disastrous since it destroys not only outwardly but inwardly, and man falls prey to baseness. Imants Auziņš warns against this danger in his poem "Smeldzes dziesma" ("Song of Smarting Pain"):

Paies laiks. Un paies laiks, un sacīs:
"Viņiem bija tikai vergu dziesmas,

Sāji joki, asarainas žēlas."

Time will pass. Time will pass, and they will say:
All they had was servile songs,
Feeble jokes, and tearful wailing.[46](#)

To overcome such influences from hatred and distrust, man must with the eyes of a child see the world anew with wonder and awe, with joy in the little things of everyday life, as Aivars Neibārts exuberantly declares it in "Pelēks akmens" ("Grey Stone") from his first collection of poems *Mācos lasīt* ("I Learn to Read"):

...Sarti riti, zala zāle, zila debess —
soļoju pa varavīkšnaino ikdienu
un novācu no ceļa
krāsu naidniekus,
kuri aizsargā nevis smadzenes,
bet — pelēcību.

Rosy dawn, green grass, blue sky —
I march on the rainbow of everyday life
and pick off the road
enemies of color,
who guard not mental activity
but — greyness.[47](#)

The Lithuanian author Kazys Saja recognized in his outstanding play *Mamutų medžioklė* (The Mammoth Hunt) the danger in man's estrangement from nature, which is befalling his „rapidly technologized people”,[48](#); and similarly the Russian poet Voznesensky describes the helpless agony of the soul in a technologized society anywhere on earth in "Monolog bitnika" ("The Betnik's monologue"):

Duša moja, moi zvereniš
Mēž gorodskix kulis
Ščenkom s obrivkom verevki
Ti nosišsja i škulis!

My soul, my little beast,
behind the city scenes
you scamper about and scowl
like a puppy with a broken leash!...[49](#)

Imants Ziedonis, too, discusses this theme in his poem "Pasaule ir loti dziļa" ("The World is Very Deep"), where man's spitefulness and hope intermingle, but in which the synthesis is more positive that man can find refreshment for his soul in the beauty and freedom of nature as long as through inner harmony man is also responsible to himself and to society:

...Varbūt tur lejā uz akmeņiem,
Mašīnas kur ārdās,
Mana dvēsele ka bezdelīgu bērns,
Izsviests no ligzdas, spārdās...

...Es zinu, kur ir mana dvēsele.
Es zinu, bet atpakaļ neeju,
Es sēžu ar draugiem pie galda
Un vīnu glāzēs leju...

...Bet dvēsele man ir, es zinu,
Es tikai pakal tai neeju...

...Lai paliek mana dvēsele
Tur tajā tālajā pļavā.
Lai dzīvo ar bērziem un zaķiem
Nodabā savā.

Lai dzīvo kā ezis, kā spāre,
Ka stirnubuks brīva dabā!
Lai dzīvo bez manis viena,
Tā būs labāk.

Lai nomirst bez manis viena
Uz celma vai dzērveņu ciņā,
Tāpat kā es nomiršu viens —
Bez viņas...

Perhaps there below on the stones
Where the machines are raging
My soul, like a baby swallow
Thrown from its nest, is kicking...

...I know where I left my soul,
I know, but I don't go back,

I sit at the table with friends
And fill our glasses with wine...

...But I have a soul, I know,
I just don't go after her...

...Let my soul remain
There in that far-away meadow.
Let her live with birches and hares
All by herself.

Let her live like a hedge-hog, a dragon-fly,
Like a young deer in free nature!
Let her live without me, alone,
It will be better so.

Let her die without me, alone,
On a tree stump or cranberry branch,
Just as I shall die by myself —
Without her...[50](#)

The theme of life and death is discussed quite often, especially lately, in the spirit of acceptance and resignation, as a continuation of life in immortality, as final maturity and a way to ultimate freedom. In the spirit of the ancient Latvian beliefs on after-life, Vizma Belševica sees death as a change-over, as a "coming out of one's shell" into a life without walls:

...Tikai sliekšnis nodeldēts, kam jāpārkāpj, lai iesākas
Pasaule bez sienām. Zeme, kas nav istaba.
Reizi mūžā katram jāšķīlas no olas.
Putniem tas ir zināms. Visiem. Visiem. Vistai pat...
Tas ir zināms putnam. Dzejniekam. Un vārdam.
Spriedums, pat visaugstākais spriedums, — tā ir brīvība,
Ko vairs nevar zaudēt. Āra elpas skārtajam
Atskatīties nevajag uz savām sienām — dzīvību.
Putni mirst un dzejnieki. Bet ne cirvja asmens
Nevar izcirst vārdu, kas pirms nāves pasacīts.
Vārdu, ja tas izlējies, neviens vairs nevar sasmelt.
Kā bezdelīgu debesīs, to nevienam nesadzīt.

...Only the threshold is worn, which must be passed over to begin
A world without walls, a land which is not a room.
Once in a lifetime each must hatch from the egg.
Birds know this. All of them. Even the hen...
This know the birds. The poet. And the word.
Judgment, even the highest judgment — is freedom,
Which cannot be taken away. Those touched by outside breath
Must not look back on their walls — on life.
Birds die and poets. But not even the blade of the ax
Can chop up the word, which is said before death.
A word that is spilled no one can scoop up.
Like a swallow in the sky, no one can restrict it.[51](#)

Such acceptance and resignation are found also in "Jaungada dzejolis" ("New Year's Poem") by Māris Čaklais, who interprets with great feeling of comfort and symbolic significance the snowfall on New Year's Eve, which has officially replaced Christmas Eve observances:

Jā, tai mūžīgā pilsētā snieg,
snieg pār Tālavas tālajiem siliem
Un arī par Slīteres Zilajiem,
pār jūras svīpēlēm dziļumiem
klusī, balti un dziļi snieg.

Svece eglē nodegs līdz saknei,
un es teikšu tai svecei paldies.
Jo man liekas, ka katru aku,
katru sakni un rētu un akmeni
šonakt noglāsta neesošs dievs.

Cik tas labi, ka vēlreiz mēs ticam
sneegam, kurš tā kā rītausma aust.
Cik tas labi — ar visu kad ticies,
vari sudraba birzi vēl iziet
un ne zariņa nenolauzt...

Yes, over the eternal city it snows,
it snows over Talava's far-away pines,
and over the blue ridges of Slītere,
over the lead-gray depths of the sea
quietly, deeply and white it snows.

On the fir-tree the candle will burn to its core,
And I shall give to that candle my thanks
For it seems to me that tonight each well
each root and each scar and each stone
is comforted by the non-existing god.

How well it is that once more we believe
in snow, which breaks forth like the dawn of day.
How well it is — having lived it all,
You can still walk through the silvery grove
and not break a single branch...[52](#)

The whiteness of the snow reminds the poet of man's purity of soul, and it seems to him that in the mystery of this night everything is comforted by the "non-existing god." In his satirical poem on the words of the well-known hymn "Pie rokas ņem un vadi" ("O take my hand, dear Father" — "So nimm denn meine Hände"), Ojārs Vācietis, too, expresses this deep longing of all mankind:

Kungs, Tā ir liela laime — Ticēt kaut kam.	Lord, It is a great blessing To believe in something 53
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The silvery grove in folk songs like "Caur sidraba birzi gāju..." ("Through the Silvery Grove I Went...") refers to the ancient mythological groves for worship because silver and gold are the colors of the absolute, and they are connected with belief in immortality and after-life, with an attitude of reverence and longing for purity of soul. Thus, peace and resignation, thought of life and death, and comfort in the hope for eternal justice reign in the eternal city of Riga as well as over the far-away pine forests of Tālava, where in the Middle Ages secure stood a lofty castle...

Imants Auziņš, in his poem "Atgriešanās" (Return), signifying return to awareness and new responsibility, declares his belief in three words:

Ko darīt ar mulsušu gaitu,
Kad pagurt sāk dzīvība?
Savu lūgšanu skaitu:
Dzimtene.
Mīla.
Brīvība.

What is left when the way is confusing,
When the strength of life ebbs away?
I say my prayer:
My homeland.
Love.
Freedom. [54](#)

A heart filled with love for the homeland and its people gives man new strength and hope for spring of life, renewal, even though this new joy may be costly, as Bruno Saulītis states in "Tu atceries" ("Remember"):

Vairs ziemas nav. Daudz dienu naks un ies,
Aizvienam augstāk tavi putni skries,
Bet tos, kas pavasari nesot krita,
Tu atceries.

Higher and higher will ascend the birds,
Winter is gone. The days will come and go,
But those that, bringing spring, have fallen
Remember. [55](#)

With the spirit of Aivars Neibārts' words, who spoke of "the rainbow of everyday life," let us build a rainbow bridge of hope and communication across the wide ocean to show our concern for the courageous people at the Baltic Sea.

* Dr. Arvids Ziedonis, Jr., is Associate Professor of Foreign Languages and Director of Russian Studies at Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pa., and editor of the *Bulletin of Baltic Studies*.

1 Magazines such as *Jaunā Gaita*, *Tilts*, *Treji Vārti*; also *Books Abroad*. *Jaunā Gaita* seems to be the most active Latvian magazine in this respect.

2 *Literatūra un Māksla*, *Karogs* and *Zvaigzne* are literary magazines; also others are available.

3 Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, — membership fee is \$10, which includes four quarterly issues of the *Bulletin of Baltic Studies* (in February, May, August and November). All correspondence and manuscripts should be sent to: Editor, Bulletin of Baltic Studies, 471 Bay Ridge Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y. 11220.

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