

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 18, No.1 - Spring 1972

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

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LATVIAN LITERATURE IN EXILE: THE RECYCLING OF SIGNS

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Latvian bibliophilia, or perhaps bibliomania, evidenced by the fact that we have the highest per capita rate of books published, must have some relation to our cyclopean literary productivity. In 1965 a survey of the Latvian literary harvest estimated that about 100 collections of poems and 350 volumes of novels, short stories, essays, and plays had been published in exile since 1945. If we add five more years of undoubtedly equal literary activity, the task of surveying faithfully and justly Latvian literature in exile would require a Gargantuan appetite for letters and a Sisyphian patience for winnowing out what sometimes defies one's capacity for critical forbearance.

As expected, exile occasioned prodigious amounts of ink spillage by those who felt it their duty to commit themselves through their lucubrations to the redress of our national wrongs, but it has also inspired some of the best writing in Latvian literature. Of unequalled beauty and intensity of feeling are the prophetic pre-exile lines by Andrējs Eglītis, the dean of our national bards: "God, Thy earth is aflame — in fires of hatred and sin!" Much of the poetry of the first decade of exile is infused with pathetic lament about the loss of our land and with hope and determination to reach "the shores of Courland, burning in blood, agony, and flames," — to quote Veronika Strēlerte whose polished prewar verse had leaned toward refined insular intellectualism. Our most prominent playwright, Mārtiņš Zīverts, turned out some of his best plays, experimental yet classically taut in form, drawing for plots on the tragedies and tragicomic coincidences of war and exile. In prose fiction, next to war novels and patriotic memoirs, the first decade spawned a series of works devoted to the spectacle of *Tatters in the Wind*, to borrow the title of a popular novel by Ģirts Salnājs about refugee life.

With the dissipation of hope for an early return to Latvia and with further emigration to more distant lands, new thematic shifts take hold, indicating awareness of the new environment. Our poets like Zinaīda Lazda, Kārlis Abele, Andrējs Eglītis, Dzintars Freimanis contemplate with a feeling of unreality, as if before stage sets, the strange *paysages* of foreign lands whose natural beauty has only the catalytic function of summoning memories of the homeland. In potboiler prose, pseudo-sociological observations are popular as the customs and the people of the host country are viewed with incomprehension, indignation, or ridicule, from the biased vantage point of self-congratulating cultural superiority. At the end of the first decade, our critic Jānis Bičolis¹ contentedly concludes that, apart from tentative stylistic, and hopefully inconsequential, innovations by poets like Velta Sniķere, Dzintars Sodums, Andrējs Pablo Mierkalns, most of our writers have recognized our literary heritage, which is rich enough to accommodate all artistic temperaments and would render any experimentation with new forms gratuitous. The old tree of Latvian literary traditions, as he put it, although mutilated by war and exile, will produce new vigorous shoots. He judges existentialism and surrealism wrecked ships, of little interest to a serious writer who needs a more solid boat — to continue his metaphor — to regain the shores of the abandoned land. And that was the truth — unfortunately.

If the political dimension of exile first enlarged the committed writer's vision, later it acted as a stranglehold. As an emotional state, exile cannot become endemic. Because of its initial intensity, it is likely to deteriorate fast. And only a lucid recognition of the fact that what is left of the incipient poignancy of shock and outrage is only perhaps a dull ache can rescue the committed writer from being trapped in the fixation of ideological orthodoxy and values that may turn out to be less than infallible and incorruptible.

The thematic and ideological evolutions of Mārtiņš Zīverts may offer a case in point. One of Zīverts's masterpieces dating from the early years of exile is *Kāds Kura Nav* (Somebody who is not). The action is set in desolate DP barracks. Two exiles, an engineer who hopes to break out of the refugee's imprisonment in hopelessness and misery with his invention, and a young widow whose husband has apparently disappeared during the war, are ready to celebrate the arrival of good news, when an invalid, assigned to the same room, joins their company. The invalid is the epitome of dispossession and

disenfranchisement. Ever since a shrapnel obliterated his facial features and wiped out his memory, the amnesiac returnee, without a country or family, in his frantic search of himself, finds only the blank walls of his anonymous personality. Through coincidences, the young widow discovers that the invalid is her husband. Although it would not be difficult for her to flee with the man she loves now, she sacrifices the prospects of a happier future and accepts her fate as the invalid's wife in order to rescue him from the utter loneliness of a man who has no past. The play is a moving drama of sacrifice and duty, fraught with emotional intensity and authenticity.

Some ten years later, Zīverts is seemingly still obsessed with plots that involve lost spouses, love affairs struck up through circumstance and convenience and providential encounters that disrupt the symbiosis. The new play, *Meli, Meklē Meli* (Lies Lay for Liars) is based on a similar dramatic situation, but while 'Somebody who is not' is a tragedy, 'Lies Lay for Liars' is its parody. The love triangle is grotesquely misshaped: the paramour is a ridiculous immigrant parvenu, the wife a frivolous scatterbrain, and the returning husband an alcoholic who, for a while, would be quite willing to exchange his claims on his wife for 400 bottles of gin. At the end, though, magnanimity and hope prevail, as the husband breaks his addiction to lead a life of creativity as a painter. Zīverts considers this his best play, and perhaps it would be no critical crime to concur, for the play is delightful because of its lighthearted laughter and levity mixed with a good dose of sobering irony. The gloomy tragedy of exile on various levels in the first play is transformed into a farce of ludicrous legal, moot and confused identities in the second play.

If Zīverts's work evinces sometimes viable reorientations, Latvian drama in general is steadily declining in quality and productivity. More than fifteen years ago, Mārtiņš Zīverts declared that the Latvian theater is practically dead, partly because the playwright in exile is jobless. The dearth of professionally trained actors, financial restrictions, lack of facilities, and countless other incommensurabilities can amply suggest reasons for the scarcity of dramatic works. Bourgeois realism, in some form or other, which presupposes a philosophical and aesthetic outlook hardly tenable in our days, still holds sway over most of our authors. The ponderous tragedies, moralizing dramas, vacuous comedies manufactured by our professional playwrights and self-inflated promoters of Latvian culture are sadly lacking in originality and contemporary relevance. Of mentionable merit, however, are two plays by Anšlāvs Eglītis.

Ferdinands un Sibila (Ferdinand and Sibyl) is a fantasy play without a real plot. The action consists of a quarrel between two teenagers in front of a shop window. Ferdinand has become disenchanted with his girl friend Sibyl and has seemingly fallen in love with the shop window's mannequin, Julia, with whom he can converse when nobody sees them. The play flouts every rule of logic and stage realism. The dialog is jerky, nervous, sometimes primitive and quite frequently contradicts the action on stage or pokes fun at itself through puns, word games, funny Americanisms that have crept into Latvian, and blatant illogic. Fantasy, a bit wild and sometimes strained, intermingles with stark realism, maintaining a certain ambiguity of meaning, oscillating from the grotesque to the pathetic, sad and sarcastic, pleasant and abrasive.

In a way, a sequel to "Ferdinand and Sibyl" is Eglītis's *Cilvēks Grib Sēlēt* (Man Wants to Play), the title being a take-off on one of Zīverts's plays, "Man Wants to Live." It is a play of the self-conscious stage, reflecting upon itself, upon playwriting, staging, acting, in addition to emitting comments of considerable causticity on the Latvian American. Rolands Mūrs, a theater man of the old guard, is in the process of preparing a production of "Ferdinand and Sibyl," painting stage sets, recruiting actors, readying everything with feverish exaltation for the most significant event in the history of Latvian theater. In the final scene, deserted by his actors who cannot share his enthusiasm and devotion, he grabs a sword and in a gesture of defiance and anger, stabs in his imagination the traitors. Vowing to persevere in his efforts to give the most magnificent production, be it a one-man show, Rolands Mūrs proclaims the final victory, but his shouts echo madness and grotesqueness, mixing pity and ridicule. In a way, the play may be prophetic concerning the prospects of the Latvian theater in exile.

What has perhaps rendered the works of most of our writers susceptible of nonconfidence is their blind trust in a preordained meaning or words. The notion that the name is inextricably bound to its object by an immediate and natural relationship is of course ancient. In this system of logocentric metaphysics, "écrire c'est dévoiler la syntaxe du monde," as the French critic, Jean Paris,² put it, since the world is like a text, like "the infinite book of secrecy" of which Shakespeare speaks. Words participate in the consecration of a certain order of things. To quote Jean Paris again, "l'organisation du langage demeure isomorphe à celle de la société et réciproquement."³ Thus, with the crumbling of the reality of a world that is now stripped of transcendence and riddled with doubts and suspicions, its signs can only appear ambiguous and incoherent. Throughout literary histories, accompanying convulsions of an age, linguistic crises have been caused by the rupture between the sign and what it denotes. Rabelais, to coincide with recent critical opinion, led an early assault on language. Beckett's semantic slaughter, among other linguistic assassinations, is a more recent example. Corroded by political slogans, advertising jingles, academic jargon, social prattle, the word hovers in the twilight zone between bothersome noise and an assertion of one's existence. The writer who has not fallen prey to literary psittacism is sailing between the Scylla of uncompromising, therefore impotent, silence and the Charybdis of accepting to use tools whose imperfections will inevitably taint the work.

In our prose fiction, the old guard, the urban and the urbane, the bucolic and the naive, the patriotic and the cosmopolitan, continue to keep watch over time-honored literary traditions and attitudes that derive their essence from a kind of literary Euclidean geometry, from true-false syllogistic paradigms, from an elevated concept of the functions of the writer, from the inviolability of language. Their works are generally well read and appreciated, i. e. condemned to the success of mediocrity

and mediocre success. As entertaining and engaging as their prose may be for its elegant polish, caustic wit, or smart-alecky condescension, one cannot escape the impression that a pall of monotony, of *déjà vu*, of lethal sterility is draped over their productions. The first signs of a displacement along the fault of literary generations came in the late 50's with the works of Modris Zebriņš, Dzintars Sodums, and Guntis Zariņš.

Tālvāldis Ķīķauka first gained acceptance as a sharptongued satirist. Next, with his absorbing tale, *Leonards*, he ventured into fantasy eschewing reality in favor of a richer experience through imagination and wild adventure. In his latest work, *Putni* (Birds), he achieves a most original fusion of the satirist and the fantast, evoking an eerie feeling of nightmarish drollery and incisive immediacy. His main characters are members of a family whose name is Bird, and in a way each member represents a human archetype. The characters are caught up in an absurdist collage of picaresque events that upon closer inspection reveals itself as the very image of human existence. The erotic suggestions, the scatological mischief, the sarcastic digs at the ossified bourgeois, the obsession with Kafkasque scenes of drowning, the hallucinogenic description of a universal grinder that can reduce everything, including punishable and innocent humans, to a homogeneous mass of primary matter — these are the ingredients of a kind of underground metaphysics of an iconoclast. Ķīķauka's style is disquietingly amorphous. Weird surrealistic juxtapositions of images that may simultaneously be grotesque and beautiful are interspersed with platitudes, nonsensical phrases, malapropisms, anachronisms, inventory-like enumerations. In defiance of standard syntax, with the excitement of a child flattening his sand castle, Ķīķauka twists, truncates, chops up his sentences, naughtily playing with solecisms and linguistic improprieties. It is not, perhaps, Ķīķauska's gratuitous joy to wreak semantic havoc, but rather a deep-seated malaise of existence that is reflected in the malaise of language. When the allegedly absolute veracity of slogans, borrowed *idées fixes*, and ready-made attitudes loses its hypnotic grip, heresy and sin, linguistic and ideological, have the charm of freedom and authenticity. If affinities have any merit, it may be suggested that we are perhaps witnessing the making of a Latvian Ionesco.

Ķīķauka is not an isolated case. Benita Veisberga has also helped with her novel, *Es, Tavs Maigais Jērs* (I, Your Gentle Lamb), explode some of the sacrosanct myths concerning literary language. Veisberga engages the reader's complicity with her disarming candidness that strips from her viable vernacular all graceful amenities and rhetorical ornament, all elegant gesture and gallant pose. The language, stark and simple, arrested by frequent punctuation stops, limited by syntactical fragmentation, disconnected, without causal conjunctions, suggests an experience that oscillates between dazed incomprehension of the world that has no a priori meaning and inarticulate desire for a life of fulfillment. The writer's perspective coincides with that of a human being who is in the process of living his life and faces an undetermined future, not knowing how the episode will end. It is the individual reader's task to assign value and meaning to a human experience that the author refuses to interpret for the reader. The work may suffer from lack of clarity and purposefulness, but its freedom from traditional literary contrivance can only accrue its relevance. The work carries no inspirational message to the Latvian exile, and, apart from some vague intimations about a once abandoned land, its only ethnical characteristic is the language.

At the forefront of our prose writers, Ilze Šķipsna and Andrējs Irbe are absorbed in psychological probing into the labile, multifaceted, mostly "pre-cogito" states of the ego. Though dissimilar in their idiosyncratic ways of expression, both writers disintegrate human experience into fragments of perceptions. Disjointed, floating in the eerie unreality of the outside world around them, these patches of intense feeling never fit together and always escape value judgment by the rational mind, the organizing principle. Especially with Šķipsna, reality immaterialized is thus reduced to tropisms, to involuntary contractions from horror and anguish, to dilations in a sudden rush of joy and compassion. The protagonist ego seems to overpower other characters making them appear as mere extensions or echoes of the central consciousness. Needless to say, in these novels of subtle psychological symbolism it would be futile and inappropriate to search for a well-delineated plot. At best, if the plot is not obscured in the torrent of words, as if to drown out the anguish of being, the reader is asked to work out his own version with optional episodes of multiple exposure. No specifically ethnic peculiarities, save, of course, the language which both writers use with exceptional mastery, identify these novels, since their scope transcends national dimensions to reach out to man, the modern man in exile everywhere.

As another facet of literary transformations, one must mention *Ķēvēs Dēls Kurbads*, punningly translated as 'The Mayor's (not Maire's) Son Kurbads.' The author, Jānis Turbads, again a punning pseudonym, designates his work as a fairy tale, which of course it is not. It is a kind of Latvian version of *Simplizissimus*, a *Bildungsroman*, of *Ubu Roi*, the indictment of the bourgeois and his culture, and of *Hair*, the epitome of modern iconoclasm and irreverence. It is an anti-fairy tale, a parody of the making of a mythological figure, a spoof spewing out light-hearted black humor, affectionate blasphemy on axiomatic truths, on tenets of humanism, poking fun at venerated mythological and historical figures, identifiable and thinly disguised contemporary patriots, soldiers, writers, intellectuals, politicians, bureaucrats. Puns, deliberate anachronisms and absurd incongruities, mixing sweet fantasy and nightmare, eschatology and scatology could consign this piece to the yet unknown regions of authentically Latvian anti-literature. From the point of view of artistic merit, the work is perhaps lightweight, but the future historians of Latvian literature may judge it a milestone along the road of evolution of our national letters.

In poetry, while our national bards continue to trumpet their parts from the well-known score, a new generation of poets is coming to the fore, striving for uncompromising sincerity, shunning pose and gesture, and strangling rhetoric. Divorced from direct political involvement and overt didacticism, their verse is overwhelming with rich imagery. The newcomers like Gunārs Saliņš, Baiba Bičole, Astride Ivaska, Linards Tauns, Rita Gāle, Aina Kraujiete, and others, have no particular

reverence for time-honored devices, letting their poetic substance find its appropriate mold, preferring most frequently the irregular line, short and concentrated, without rhyme, 'ce bijou d'un sou' as Verlaine so contemptuously put it.

Astride Ivaska's latest collection of poems, *Ziemas Tiesa* (Winter's Share), opens most significantly with a poem, in a captivating typographical arrangement, about curtains, a forgotten dear memento from Riga, now hung before the window in a new home. The curtains from the homeland depict a hunting scene with familiar and exotic game, and through them the poetess looks out on the world: the familiar front yard and everyday commonplace objects like flower pots and the street in a land that she cannot call hers. This poem both sets the tone of the collection and epitomizes Ivaska's poetic idiosyncrasies. The impressions from the outer world as they filter through the dear souvenir from Latvia evoke nostalgic and meditative moods that are imbued with warmth and intimacy of a very personal presence which is so closely felt because it is self-effacing, sincere, and humble.

Gunārs Saliņš is a member of the Latvian cenacle, Hell's Kitchen, named after a section of Manhattan. His poetry is crisscrossed with harmonious incongruities and cacophonous harmonies. An urban poet whose natural habitat is the American megapolis, as if through some compulsive atavism, Saliņš invests the city scene with bucolic signs of vernal regeneration and rejoicing. Echoes from Latvian rural sonorities fuse with New York's din and bustle. Like in a Bartok string quartet, where typical Hungarian airs appear modified and distorted as vague reminiscences, Saliņš's jagged rhythms, ironic refrains are sometimes suggestive imitations of folk song patterns. An irreverent, blasphemous tra-la-la, jingling, hollow-sounding internal rhymes, half-rhymes, assonances, awkward rhymes, colloquialisms, slang are facets of Saliņš's search for authenticity and of his vibrant sensibility probing the ontological vacuum of modern man.

Baiba Bičole, o poetess of nature with a very personal, original idiom, tends toward a kind of 'elementalism' that finds expression in an ecstasy of discovering primeval forces of nature and in a visceral joy of experiencing oneness with what is not mind. Her exaltation over a union with the physical world intimates ancient fertility rites. Typical of Latvian poetry in exile, her lines are short, rhymeless, most frequently without interrupting divisions into stanzas, since the intensity of feeling, unwary of syntactical niceties, must gush forth in one breath. The cascading line arrangements, as if the poem tended to escape the word, make the eye hurry to the next line. The magic of the word can only be briefly sustained lest it prolonged diffuse into hollow oratory.

The three poets, not necessarily the most typical representatives of the new era, exemplify facets of certain incipient attitudes like the deflation of poetic arrogance, the existential anguish in a world that refuses to yield meaning, and the circumspection toward language and intellectualism.

It would be inaccurate to insist on a very sharp cleavage between literary generations because every re-orientation willy-nilly takes its bearings from some reference point in the evanescent literary milieu. And so it seems permissible to view the present state of Latvian literature in exile as a transitional period: the exit of the old guard representing the era of the unresolved national trauma and the ushering in of harbingers of a looming evolution from adherence to pre-fabricated values to groping for certainties in a labyrinth of modern ambiguities. The disengagement from the persistent literary modes may first appear to come through a destructive and disarticulating process, especially in the area of language. Yet, perhaps from this recycling of signs, our language will accede to a new level of expressiveness and our literature, no longer a typical exile literature, will preserve viability.

1 "Latviešu Trimdas Literatūras 10 Gadi," *Latviešu Trimdas Desmit Gadi* (Astras Apgāds, 1954), p. 144.

2 *Rabelais au Futur* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 172.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 50.