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## Latvian Postmodern Poetry: Signs of Time

AUSMA CIMDIŅA

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This time is an automatic door, it shouldn't be  
touched

Klāvs Elsbergs

Time is one of the most important dimensions of life and literature, even though contemporary interpretations of art have left this principle of classification in the background. It should be mentioned that G. E. Lessing, when dealing with issues of morphology of art placed literature among the arts of time, in contrast with the arts of space (for example, visual arts and architecture) creating their images from material substances and being static. Contemporary interpretations of literature have been concerned with the materiality and spatiality of the text, but that does not erase the classical perception of literature's special ties with time — literature as the most striking embodiment of the spirit of time, as a dynamic art, its subject being action in time. Thus discussions about time in literature in many ways turn into discussions about literature' nature itself.

Time is one of the most important structures used by literary critics for the interpretation and systematization of the literary process. It comprises the notions of linear, cyclic, historical, subjective, psychological, biological time, defining periods in the development of national literature within the framework of wider literary processes. Following the historic principles of dividing Latvian literature into periods (defining critical socio-historical events as turning points in the development of literature), we can say that the turn of the 1980s and 1990s brought new times into our literature. This period is justly characterized as a period of

transition and change in all spheres of life, including literature. What is the essence and the perspective of these changes? What has happened and is still happening with us during these last ten years? Has literature seen any changes at all, maybe we ourselves have changed and have become able to look at literature in a novel way and to see in it what has not been seen and noticed previously? This has also been the time of the post-modern apocalypse or awareness in Latvian literature. It coincides with the time of crisis in poetry. What is the basis for this statement? In the process of consolidation of the nation and also cultural life, poetry has always been of special importance for Latvians. During the period of the Soviet totalitarian regime and the ideological censorship, poetry for Latvians, starting from the 1960s and the 1970s, was something more than mere poetry. Even though it could use only the language of hints, subtexts and evasions, poetry, being a freethinker, tended to be history and sociology, demography, ecology and religion, at the same time. People perceived the poet as a prophet and a witness of the truth, therefore poetry had a wide response in the society and was indeed very influential and popular. Latvians, being a relatively small nation — two million people —, in a few days after publication bought the whole copy run (up to 35 thousand copies) of poetry collections, turning them into a commodity in short supply. The nominees for the prestigious Nobel Prize have been chosen from among poets — Imants Ziedonis and Vizma Belševica have shared this honour. Considering the relations between poetry and politics, one should not dismiss the fact that Latvian Popular Front was organized by the Latvian Writers' Union, and its leader was the future ambassador of Latvia to Russia, the poet Jānis Peters.

Elements testifying to the awareness of post-modern poetics and worldview can be found already in the Latvian poetry of the 60s. It could be seen in the increased use of free verse, the enlargement of lexical means of poetry (especially by introducing the so called profane layers of vocabulary), as well as in a creative opening and dismantling of traditional genres. The most radical expression of this is to be found in the book of poetry in prose, *Epiphanies* (1974), by Imants Ziedonis:

Body is the name of a genre. Oh, body, which is the genre you inhabit? Are you a play, a poem or a novel? [...] My body is a poem. My body is a tragedy and a comedy at the same time. The tongue talks about everything it should have kept silent about, but my heart takes offence, grinding its teeth. [...] My wife is being played aloud. She is like a boat, like a bobbin, like a lobe. My daughters are like triolets, my sons like crowns of sonnets. And they will love girls, exquisite as *terzinas*, sturdy as epic songs. And I say it again: body is not only a body. Body is the name of a genre.

In the 1970s Latvian poetry witnesses also of an intonation and motive that is very typical of postmodernity — the epistemological insecurity. It was voiced quite openly in the works of Klāvs Elsbergs, a tragically deceased poet. We can say without exaggeration that solidarity and humanism of Latvian postmodern poetry concentrated around his texts. The awareness of time is like a red thread (borrowing this metaphor from the seventeenth-century English navy) that flows through the end-of-the-century Latvian modern poetry. Elsbergs (who was also a translator of French poets — Apollinaire and others) became a representative of the generation of postmodern poets, as he in his poetry collection *Joy amongst Grief* (1986) confessed:

all I can offer to you  
is naked and emptied  
nothing\*

Not only young poets, but also the poets of the older generation responded to this offer, to this fragile, unbalanced world awareness.

Talking about the distinctive features of Latvian postmodern poetry, one should bear in mind that Latvian poetry is a new phenomenon in the world literary universe. Even though the first samples of Latvian secular poetry appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century, treatises on the history of Latvian literature usually state that the beginning of Latvian national poetry goes

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\* This and other poetry samples have been translated by Ingūna Beķere.

back to 1856 when a student of Tartu University and a polyglot, Juris Alunāns, published in Tartu a verse collection, *Little Songs*. That was the time when Europe and the world were about to enjoy Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857); yet Latvian individual (professional) poetry, on the contrary, only took its first steps. It should be stressed that Latvian poetry today lives a full life — as to its ideas, emotions and forms of expressions. In my opinion, it is far riper than its criticism and interpretations. In the preface to his *Little Songs*, Juris Alunāns emphasized that the aim of his work was to show “the beauty and strength of the Latvian language”. A whole generation of national-romantic poets followed his call. They set the tone in Latvian literature up to the 1890s, when Veidenbaums, Aspazija and Poruks brought currents of modernism into Latvian literature.

From the beginning of the 1990s Latvian literature has seen a number of pioneering prose works. The most original and striking among them, unsurpassed, is *Dukts* by Aivars Ozoliņš (published for the first time in the 1990 in literary monthly *Karogs*). Their task, even *mission* has been to change the ideas about literature, its essence, its origin and functions in the contemporary world. This generation has been extremely interested in the dynamics of relationship and zones of contact between author-text-reader-reality. The strength and weakness of such texts is that they can be reduced to the environment that produced them — language, literature and literary circles; they are not bothered by problems of social reality (unless we consider the relationship between language (textuality) and real-life reality a social problem). *Dukts* begins with a mark of punctuation — a comma, not a word of the truth, but a mark of punctuation before the word.

In 1997, during the opening of the traditional Poetry day festival, Uldis Bērziņš's speech (published in the leading Latvian daily newspaper *Diena*) was merciless but life-asserting:

What is the word that we, poets, mutter and stutter to our audience and our readers? We are not gods, our word is not the word of the truth, most probably it is the word of doubt — about ourselves, about others... there is something else apart from truth and wisdom. Is it higher? Lower? It is other. It is poetry.

At the same time quite a number of writers and readers (especially representatives of the older generation), speaking about social functions of literature would agree with Miervaldis Birze who, interviewed on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, said, that “a writer of a small nation should be to a certain extent biased towards his nation. His duty is not to be a “pure” artist, but to work on behalf of his nation.” Comparing these two ways of thinking, it becomes quite clear that the understanding about what exactly is meant by “acting on behalf of the nation” has changed significantly. Probably Birze did not think that a writer of a small nation should close his mind to the postmodern reality and write only on social issues and during turning periods in history drop his pen and take up a bayonet.

We have been informed in Latvia (see *Karogs* 1997, 9) that Estonian literary critics are trying to identify changes that have taken place during the last decade, and, for example, Tiit Hennoste is offering the following periods of classification of contemporary Estonian literature: 1986–1990, a break in poetry, a collapse of the previous cultural paradigm; 1991–1995 — a period of chaos and elimination of “white areas”; 1995–1996 — the beginning of stabilization and establishing of a new hierarchy. According to Hennoste, one of the peculiarities of the new cultural paradigm is the fact that at the end of the 1980es modernism enters Estonian literature for the fourth time. I have not encountered a publication attempting to create a new division into periods of contemporary Latvian literature, but I have the feeling that the succession of the poetic processes would be very similar in Latvia. And yet these statements are very general (they are not dealing with concrete texts), they probably reflect periods of critical thought, attempts to approach *new* literature, not literature itself.

Claims of time and literature are mutual — literature is asked to embody the spirit of time, to be an artistic testimony of time, mirror time, etc., but time (contemporaries) are asked to accept and recognize literature as its ally. Experience shows that those writers and works that were not accepted by their contemporaries, even being really superb, as to the quality are covered by the dust of the ages and it is very difficult or even impossible for the coming generations to bring them back to life. Considering tendencies in

contemporary Latvian poetry and literature in general, Rein Veidemann's statement concerning the new developments in contemporary Estonian literature seems to be quite symptomatic: "It is strange that Estonian poetry has not hailed the coming of the new times, as Estonian literature usually has done during historical turning points in the past" (*Karogs*, 1996, 1). Veidemann concludes: "None of the literary forms or genres has coherently responded to these great changes". This generalization again seems to be very apt and there is a temptation to apply it to Latvian literature as well. At the same time it needs a clarification. What does it mean for literature to provide a coherent response to time? Does that mean that we should hail the coming of the changes and the "new era"? K. Skujenieks reacts to this question, concluding with a calm and good-natured irony: "the poet and the state are of different worlds. They are not necessarily antagonistic: it is as simple as that — each of them has got cares of its own." (*Karogs*, 1997, 7).

There is another very important aspect in this statement by Veidemann: "as it has been (hailing the coming of the new times) recorded in the history of literature." Knowing that theoretical (maybe, literary-historical) thinking is rather inert, as compared with the spontaneity of the creative thought, it seems that one of the anxieties of contemporary poetry and its claims derives from the inadequacy of literary history in recording it, as it underestimates the suggestive power of the relationship between time and literature. S. Hawking, a theoretician and historian of time (*A Brief History of Time*, 1988) stresses that there are two existing theories describing the Universe; one — suited for large-scale structures (theory of relativity), and the other — suited to very small scales, not observable with the naked eye (quantum mechanics), but these two theories are incompatible, they both cannot be true at the same time. Talking about the initial stage of recent Latvian poetry, the ideologically-biased critics have accused it of marginality and attempts to avoid essential issues. On my part, I feel that theory, in this case, is incompatible with many concrete texts, created and published during the period.

The category "modern" (contemporary) exists in literature, though it is not present as an unmediated reference to topical events. Not all the texts published in Latvia today and yesterday

are modern. One of the outstanding thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century, Susan Sontag, has stated that “to be modern means to inherit the problems of modern civilisation. To be modern means to choose between understanding and not understanding”. The understanding of “modernity” by Sontag is very close to the way Michel Foucault has characterized an intellectual: He (an intellectual) is constantly on the move, he does not know where he will arrive and what he will think tomorrow, he is too careful (sensitive) in his relationships with the present.

Poetry among other arts reacts instantaneously, it is the first to welcome signs of time and even to voice premonitions. Care, sensitivity towards the present is one of the features of contemporary Latvian literature, especially of poetry. (I would like to mention it briefly, and again — I have not even started the grand narrative on time in contemporary Latvian literature.) Which of the several “present tenses” should I choose, since each one of us might be given another or a different present? Juris Kronbergs, a poet living in Stockholm, having chosen the plural form for the title of his poetry collection, *Present tenses* (1990), says that in contrast to daily newspapers there are many “unofficial present tenses”. In contrast to national awakening, poetry is not a formal event. The sensitivity of the relationship between time (the present) and literature can be most acutely felt in the works of Latvian poets-translators — Uldis Bērziņš, Juris Kronbergs, Edvīns Raups, Guntars Godiņš, Pēteris Brūvers, Māris Čaklais, Leons Briedis, and others. In their works the concepts of *word* and *time* keep re-appearing — in the titles of poetry collections and poems, in poems themselves, revealing the spatial and temporal infinity of word and time. For example, Uldis Bērziņš writes:

I know very well that truthfully the word  
As a sign on infinity.  
It's the truth,  
The merciless  
[. . .]  
But only in words, not in time.

Those Latvian poets who are open to the present, differentiate in their work between the concept of time and history. Even though the *persona* of Bērziņš' poetry states “not history, but myself, on



my own”, his poetry reflects the way history breaks into the lives of an individual and of a nation, shows history as a rupture in the peaceful flow of time, a taking over of time, a reminder of the great mysteries of history:

we have overtaken the history,  
a very short distance (the darkness of it!),  
we have overtaken the history.

Richness of time, the layers of different historical times and present events can be seen very vividly in the joint collection of two poets, Uldis Bērziņš and Juris Kronbergs, *Time* (1994). *Time* is not only a pretext for meditative reading, but also up to now the only worthy history of Latvia of the years 1989–1992. It is a risky and tricky period in our history. The poets fulfill their poetic-political mission by inserting into their text decades and centuries, speaking about threshold situations not only in the history of Latvia, but in the history of the European nations. *Time* was created between Riga and Stockholm, providing striking details, projecting events of the Latvian history and the way these have been reflected in the minds of a poet, an individual, the whole nation. Kronbergs and Bērziņš, with a certain degree of pathos, ask people to be in this time and to assess their relationship with time:

Remember this time!  
Mention this time!  
We have no more time like this,  
no more like us.

Latvian poetry is very much engaged with the relationships between the word and time, aware that poetry has lost its strength to unite the nation in the name of truth and that today a good poet might be synonymous with an “unpopular” one. Thus L. Briedis asks in his book *Unripe Freedom* (1995):

You  
 are my nation  
 you are a tombstone  
 over me  
 do you feel pain?  
 am I your pain?

It is significant that the new time in Latvian literature has presented itself as a phenomenon of residue, remains — as (post)modern, (post)soviet, (post)colonial, and other terms of post(times) hardly give grounds for optimism. The majority of poetic texts, touching upon the new Latvian reality, offer no pages of light. One of the most influential poetry critics, I. Čaklā, gave the following characterization of contemporary Latvian poetry: “Poetry reveals a rather grim perception of life, in various ways — starting with the tragic awareness of the life-cycle and social reality, and ending with a metaphysical grimness as the condition of human existence. We could even say that there is a certain regularity — the younger the poet, the more universal this tragic awareness.”

With regard to such issues as the writer and the word, the freedom of language and the art of language, the power of literature to influence and change the social reality, Latvian literature has come to a completely opposite understanding of the situation, if we compare it to the rise of national literature in the nineteenth century, when Alunāns with his *Little Songs* (translations and adaptations of German, Russian, Czech and other poetry) wanted to show that “Latvian language is so powerful and nice”. The witness of the third national awakening, our contemporary Latvian poet Guntars Godiņš (1992), writes:

The words won't save anyone  
 From drowning in the words.  
 I am drowning in these words.  
 [...]  
 The spring will come soon  
 And river banks will overflow  
 The repulsiveness of it —  
 There'll be only words,  
 Words, words, words, all around us.

It thus “cancels” Alunāns’ metaphor of the beautiful spring. Latvian contemporary poetry has marginalized itself and refuses to think in the framework and terms of the power discourse. Poetry asks questions, but nobody, including poetry itself, can offer answers to them.

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