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HARMONIZER OF DISHARMONY: LATVIAN POET AND EDITOR MĀRIS ČAKLAIS

Rolfs Ekmanis

Like his counterparts in the Soviet Union – Paul-Erik Rummo and Mats Traat in Estonia; Evgenii Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesenskii in Russia; Vasyl Symonenko, Mykola Vinhranovsky, Vitali Korotych and Ivan Drach in Ukraine; Ramis Riskulov in Kirgyzstan; Fikret Hodzha in Azerbaijan; Olzhas Suleimenov in Kazakhstan; Grigore Vieru in Moldova; Ryhor Baradulin in Belorus; and Paruir Sevak and Razmik Davoian in Armenia, just to mention a few – Māris Čaklais belongs to the post-Stalinist generation of poets, whose works met with a tremendous response, especially, on the part of young readers who looked to poetry in the 1960s and after to give voice to their ideals, rebellion, and bravado.

Keywords: Čaklais; Latvia; Baltic region; literature; poetry; Soviet; post-communist transformation; national identity

Māris Čaklais was one of the most influential figures in Latvian letters from the 1960s until his death in 2003, i.e., under Soviet rule and during the first 12 years of Latvia's regained independence. W. B. Yeats wrote: 'The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work' (Yeats 2004). Čaklais, most certainly, chose perfection of his work, if not of his life, which was marked by several personal catastrophes. He created one of the greatest and most innovative bodies of Latvian poetry of the second half of the twentieth century. After World War II, 'a poet in Latvia' (like poets in the Soviet Union and Soviet dominated Eastern Europe), as stated by the Latvian writer and critic Guntis Berelis,

> has never been just a poet. Too often he had to take upon himself the ungrateful role of prophet, propagator, preacher. A poet had to be also a philosopher, a sociologist, a demographer, a historian, a keeper and reminder of cultural

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> heritage, an enlightener, a literary scholar, and God knows who else. Still in the first place, he was a prophet – beloved by the readers and hated by the rulers. (Ivaska & Rūmniece 2001, pp. 5–6)

Poetry especially was in a peculiar situation: 'On the one hand – it was a cage, where the real freethinking was allowed in strict dosages. On the other hand – the cage had golden bars: Latvian poetry had never experienced – and probably never will experience again – a wave of such unimaginable popularity' (Ivaska & Rūmniece 2001, pp. 5–6). Knuts Skujenieks, a poet, a critic and a translator-polyglot, who in 1961 was sentenced to seven years in a forced labor camp at Potma for 'anti-Soviet activities', later affirmed that, starting with the 1960s, the prophetic functions of a poet were essential:

> It was the time of prophecies and pseudo-prophecies, when open and hidden hereticism was introduced into the text, the context and subtext. It was the time of listening to poetry: the crowded squares, theatres and sports arenas made one think that those prophetic words might as well materialize. In spite of the pains of all kinds of censorship, it was the honeymoon of poets and the public. . . . Global tendencies, global talks, beautiful poetic aggressiveness. (Ivaska & Rūmniece 2001, p. 6)

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s the better poets could attract hundreds and even thousands of people to outdoor readings, even when these events were held in the rain. Culture had turned into a metaphor for freedom. A person who possessed this culture could, by listening to or reading poetry industriously and searching for subtexts, feel himself to be 'closer' to freedom, in contrast with the ordinary person, who existed only within the confines of Soviet life and could not lift himself above that which was dogmatic, stiff and absurd. It was an endless confrontation of culture and power and it made poetry not only a literary but also a social phenomenon.

While the hardened stance against literature in the second half of the 1940s (especially in the non-Russian Soviet republics) had caused many a writer to fall into apathy and silence, the atmosphere from the mid-1960s was relatively lively, even rebellious. Although official Party restrictions continued virtually to define the subject matter and style of writing, and the litany of praise for the Party and its leaders still impregnated the work of a great many poets and prose writers, a portion of the creative output produced in Latvia reveals that several writers found it possible to deal with subjects and themes in a manner that had been forbidden during the first two decades after World War II. These writers represented the 'New Wave' and Māris Čaklais was one of them.

In pre-Soviet times the icons of Latvian literary life (e.g., Jānis Rainis, Aspazija, Anna Brigadere, Fricis Bārda, Jānis Poruks, Edvarts Virza, Kārlis Skalbe and Aleksandrs Čaks) had mined the native poetry lode with admirable results. Now, after the darkest days of Moscow's cultural oppression, when, to quote Czeslaw Milosz, 'the world of Orwell ceased to be a literary fiction' (Hirsch 1997, p. 9), several gifted poets, all born in the 1930s, began to lead the way toward poetry's revival. The so-called 'great octet', consisting of Imants Auziņš, Vizma Belševica, Māris Čaklais, Laima Līvena, Vitauts Ļūdēns, Jānis Peters, Ojārs Vācietis and Imants Ziedonis, not

only showed that there was plenty of ore left to mine, but, simultaneously, became practically mythological figures, capable of ruling the hearts and minds of their readers and revered as voices of the people. They were as different as one could hope for, yet all were committed, nonetheless, to the common enterprise of reseeding poetry in Latvia. Like poets all over Eastern Europe, they defied categorization. They were what they were – poets; poets who knew one another and were familiar with one another's work and thinking. In Soviet-dominated eastern Europe, there existed a sense of spiritual solidarity among the most progressive poets.

Māris Čaklais worked on poetry throughout his life. As a matter of fact, there seems never to have been a time when he was not writing poems. He was still sorting and obsessively composing poems even in the face of terminal illness. His last finished poem, 'Mea culpa' (Čaklais 2004, p. 10), was written on the margins of a book of essays, entitled *Vārda laikabiedrs* (Contemporary of the Word, 2003), by his fellow poet Leons Briedis, in a Riga hospital's oncological ward only a few days before he died. Čaklais' contribution to Latvian literature did not end with poetry (his poetic output is incorporated into 17 books and five hardbound editions of selected verse): he has written two books of short prose pieces, four books of essays, three biographical books, a book of revealing reminiscences, and several volumes of children's verse and stories. In addition to being a prolific poet and writer, he was also a literary critic and historian, a writer of travel notes, a journalist and cultural polemicist, a skilled and sensitive translator of verse, an organizer of cultural events, the editor of literary periodicals, a supporter of young writers, and a promoter of intellectual and artistic activity who, even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, risked becoming a correspondent for Munich-based Radio Free Europe, for which he wrote, and eventually personally voiced, a large quantity of quality cultural reportage which was broadcast into Latvia. Many of these Radio Free Europe pieces were later published as a book, entitled *Impērijas pēdējās kapeikas* (The Empire's Last Kopecks, 1997). Čaklais' vitality was amazing. He organized and participated in hundreds of poetry readings before city and rural audiences, commented on the cultural scene, evaluated, analysed and informed.

Māris Čaklais was born into a working-class family in Saldus, a small historical market town in the region known as Kurzeme or Courland, between Latvia's capital city of Riga and the Baltic port Liepāja. According to archaeologists, this town on the river Ciecere grew out of a Curonian settlement that dates back to the second century BC. On the date of Čaklais' birth, 16 June 1940, the Soviet commissar of foreign affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, presented an ultimatum to Latvia's ambassador to Moscow and the following day the Red Army streamed into Latvia. At that time it was not known that the fate of Baltic independence had been sealed with the conclusion of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939 between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Its secret additional protocol determined zones of influence, whereby Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (also, the eastern part of Poland and Bessarabia) fell under the Soviet regime. The Latvian puppet government started to function on 22 June 1940, precisely one year before Germany attacked the USSR and pushed the Red Army out of Latvia. In the summer of 1944, when Čaklais was four years old, the Soviets began to reoccupy the Baltics and remained there formally until 1994.

Čaklais came of age during the darkest years of Stalinism and the somewhat more liberal Khrushchev years. His early childhood, first under the Russians followed by the Germans and then the Russians again, was spent in a war zone, a condition that tends to discourage an easy credence in universal laws. 'I had fired an automatic weapon, smoked real tobacco, seen German soldiers and experienced such things that, God forbid, a boy of my age shouldn't have' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 16), Čaklais later wrote in his reminiscences. A little over two years after the end of World War II, in the summer of 1948, when Čaklais was eight, Soviet security forces arrested his father right in the field where he was working. During his father's imprisonment, for approximately a year and a half, the family was compelled to hide in the forest to avoid being forcibly deported. Within a year of his father's arrest (25–29 March 1949), 42,133 Latvians, including about 10,000 children and more than 7,000 people over 60 years old, were exiled indefinitely to Siberia. Māris Čaklais remembers that upon returning to school, one third of his classmates had disappeared. 'They were not deported, they have only been displaced temporarily and will return' (Čaklais 2000d, pp. 22–23), the teacher had explained, attempting to console the remaining students. The following year, in order to escape from the heavy hand of the regime, the family moved secretly to the forested central part of Courland, near the town of Kuldiga, and moved into an empty farmhouse whose owners had been deported a year earlier.

Māris, a precocious child, learned to read at an early age and at the age of ten began keeping a diary in which some of his early literary talents were displayed. The holdings of the local school library could not satisfy his thirst for printed material, largely because a great many pre-Soviet Latvian publications were ordered to be removed from the shelves and either burned or sent to the paper mills. Fortunately, his neighbor's bookcases and attic were filled with exciting reading material, including prohibited journals dating back to the years of independence. Māris read indiscriminately, from Latvian folklore collections to pulp fiction. He was especially fascinated by historical novels; the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlof's prose works, which were rooted in legend and saga, including the Varmland trilogy; and the British novelist Edgar Wallace's popular detective and suspense stories.

Māris did not become a member of the Pioneers, a Soviet youth organization for children aged nine to 14, in spite of the pressure to join. At the age of 12, he compiled his own handwritten journal *Spēriens pa galvu* (A Kick in the Head). Amidst the usual childish nonsense, there were some passages showing disrespect for officially approved views. When his worried parents discovered it hidden under a drain-pipe, the boy was scolded and the 'dangerous' journal was immediately destroyed.

When Stalin's death was announced on 5 March 1953, Čaklais recalled that at his school only one person expressed sadness – his pregnant USSR Constitution teacher had tears in her eyes. When Lavrentii Beria, the head of the Soviet secret police, was shot as an 'imperialist agent' after Stalin's death, Čaklais secretly penned an appropriate ditty which he later incorporated into his poem '53. gada pavasaris' (Spring of 1953), written in 1988 (Čaklais 1989b, p. 13).

In 1958, Čaklais enrolled at the Latvian State University's Department of History and Philology. When he later wrote his reminiscences, Čaklais praised several of his professors, mainly linguists and literary scholars – Arturs Ozols (who lectured on the history of Latvian language); Marta Rudzīte (comparative linguistics); Vitolds Valeinis

and Vilnis Eihvalds (both specialists in Latvian literature); and Andrei Sinyavski (Russian poetry of the 1920s and 1930s), who was tried and sentenced in February 1966 along with Yuli Daniel for 'anti-Soviet activities', i.e. 'secretly sending foreign publishing houses dirty libels against their country, against the Party and against the Soviet system' (as stated in the government newspaper *Izvestiya*) (Čaklais 2000d, p. 37).

During his first year, Čaklais discovered that students, especially those studying humanities, were rather negative about the entrenched literary and political values. By the end of 1958, several underground literary publications, written on a typewriter, were circulated among students, e.g., *Sirds uz trotuāra* (A Heart on the Pavement – named after the 1928 poetry collection of Aleksandrs Čaks), *Pūt un palaid* (Find Out and Divulge) and *Steidzies lēnām* (Hurry Up Slowly). Māris Čaklais had been one of the contributors to *Sirds uz trotuāra*. The university officials were outraged by such uninhibited behavior and the publications soon came to the attention of the KGB. On 29 March 1959, the Communist Party organization of the Latvian State University passed a resolution which, in part, stated that

> the first-year students of the Department of History and Philology succeeded in compiling and circulating the ideologically harmful journal *Sirds uz trotuāra* only because of the lack of vigilance by the [University's] Komsomol [Russian abbreviation for Young Communist League] organization. Its members, instead of condemning this publication, decided to practice the politics of noninterference. (Čaklais 2000d, p. 41)

At a closed plenary session of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, 7–8 July 1959, the First Secretary, Jānis Kalnbērziņš, expressed his indignation:

> In December 1958, students of the Latvian State University's History and Philology Department circulated a typewritten journal *Sirds uz trotuāra* filled with anti-Soviet views. And in July of last year, students travelling from Riga to Kazakhstan were singing 'Dievs, svētī Latviju!' [God Bless Latvia!], the national anthem of bourgeois Latvia.

And Jānis Jurgens, the Rector of the Latvian State University, stated: '. . . it is very unfortunate that these recent high school graduates and now first-year university students, who compiled and contributed to *Sirds uz trotuāra*, were given space to print their extremely discourteous rubbish in No. 6 of the journal *Liesma* [The Flame, 1958]' (Čaklais 2000d, pp. 40–3). Several students were expelled from the university for their contributions, while others were questioned by members of the security forces.

Čaklais was still a student when, at the beginning of the 1960s, he started working for the newspapers *Jaunais Inženieris* (The Young Engineer) and *Padomju Jaunatne* (Soviet Youth). He also participated in putting together the multivolume *Latviešu dzejas antoloģija* (Anthology of Latvian Poetry), published between 1970 and 1979. When Čaklais submitted to this anthology several pages with selected poems by Zinaīda Lazda and Veronika Strēlerte together with some short introductory words, the editors reprimanded him for attempting to include 'non-persons' (writers who had left their country shortly before the return of the Soviet troops, at the end of 1944,

were officially considered non-persons). Strēlerte had escaped to Sweden, Lazda to West Germany; later she moved to the USA.

Māris Čaklais made his literary debut on 26 March 1960 with the poem 'Marts' (The Month of March). It was printed in the most authoritative Latvian literary/cultural weekly *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art), which was published by the Soviet Latvian Writers' Union. Other poems followed in periodical publications.

Čaklais' early multicolored poetic world, constantly moving and changing, is very personal, and basically restrained and meditative in tone. He prefers a whispered word and his voice is almost never loud. He avoids commenting directly on topical social or political issues. Nevertheless, his poetic output was frequently considered incompatible with the Soviet order, which considered apolitical verse political, simply because it was not pro-Soviet. The early 1960s in Latvia were characterized by a tense political situation. For example, in 1962, a number of Latvians, mainly members of the intelligentsia, were tried and sentenced to labor camps for various 'anti-Soviet' activities. Among them were the young poet Knuts Skujenieks, a graduate from the Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow, and Viktors Kalniņš, a recent recipient of the equivalent of an MA in history from Moscow University. Čaklais recalled that there were rumors of other young literati, including himself, following in their footsteps. In 1963, Čaklais' poetry was publicly denounced by high Communist Party officials as 'confusing', 'imprecise', 'formalistic', 'decadent', 'unreliable', 'imbued with moods unacceptable by the Soviet people', etc. From that time, his official status rose and fell repeatedly until the era of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the 1980s. For example, although Čaklais was able to publish a large amount of work, he was plagued with detrimental opposition to his art – the writer and editor Ignats Muižnieks, who represented the Stalinist Old Guard, published an editorial in *Literatūra un Māksla*, entitled 'Augstu turēt partejiskuma karogu!' (Hold High the Banner of the Party Spirit!) (Čaklais 2000d, p. 52) which chided Čaklais and others for having published ideologically improper works:

> How can the builders of communism benefit from Vizma Belševica's poetry cycle 'Siržu seifi' [The Safes of Hearts; published in *Karogs*, February 1963], which is almost totally irrelevant to our present life? It is dominated by obscure poetic images, aestheticism, and subjectivity. The poems have nothing to do with our society. Moreover, some of the verses have even sunk into decadence. . . . Likewise, Māris Čaklais's cycle of poems, 'No studentu piezīmēm' [From Students' Notes – *Karogs*, March 1963], is formalistic and some verses manifest decadent spirit. The poet's sickeningly overpolished poetic images, such as those of his decadent cats, and the worship of his own sensations, have nothing in common with the work and the social tasks of the Soviet people and their beautiful spiritual world. Also, Māris Čaklais's poem 'Seši metri ceļa' [Six Meters of Road, *Zvaigzne*, 1962, No. 24] is unacceptable for the Soviet people. Unfortunately, both poets, although talented lyricists, have forgotten the most important guidelines for Soviet poets, they have neglected Party spirit and have deviated from the magnificent tasks of the nation.

Later in that year, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR, Augusts Voss, referred to Čaklais as a 'young man who has

composed harmful, highly offensive poems and who nevertheless prefers to call himself a writer' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 52). Not surprisingly, the manuscript of Čaklais' first poetry book *Gribu pamosties dzīvs* (I Want to Wake Up Alive) was returned by the State publishing house Liesma (The Flame) with a note stating, 'only one poem is acceptable and possibly a couple more – if appropriately changed' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 42). These and similar attacks helped Čaklais's poetry win ever-widening notice.

In 1964, Čaklais graduated from the Latvian State University with a degree in journalism, philology and history, and accepted a position at *Literatūra un Māksla*, where he worked until 1966, when he started working for Liesma. He returned three years later to *Literatūra un Māksla*, where he held various positions until the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in the fall of 1991. Also, in 1964, at the age of 24 and even before the publication of his first poetry book, Čaklais became the youngest member of the Soviet Latvian Writers' Union.

Nineteen sixty-eight, the year of the 'Prague Spring', gave more hope for a change on the Latvian literary scene. Young intellectuals tried to reform the system by demanding the 'renewal of Leninist norms', i.e., quoting and referring to passages from Lenin's speeches and writings, although in the fall Aleksandr Dubček's 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia had been defeated by Warsaw Pact forces. The Latvian creative intelligentsia met in December, and some participants dared to call openly for an end to state controls on literature. Of course, this attempt was futile and resulted in the most outspoken challengers being silenced.

Following the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet cultural ideologues immediately set out to tighten the screws. For example, the main overseer of the arts in Latvia at that time, Jurijs Rubenis, stressed in *Literatūra un Māksla* (14 December 1968) that 'cultural workers' must use more forcefully the 'Party spirit of Soviet art', the most reliable weapon in the struggle against the various manifestations of bourgeois ideology, against attempts to demoralize Soviet society from within and to break its monolithic unity. After disclosing some tendencies that 'alarm the Soviet Latvian reader' in prose and poetry, Rubenis singled out seven authors, including Māris Čaklais, who in their writings had deviated from the correct ideological tracks, largely because of 'inadequate Marxist–Leninist armament' and 'distorted Communist *Weltanschauung*'.

Čaklais was one of those writers who refused to be limited to the narrow frontiers of his homeland and took every opportunity to travel within the Soviet empire in order to establish contact with cultural figures. Initially, in the 1960s, he managed to travel to Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Moldova and Armenia. As the authorities became progressively more lax, it was possible to voyage further – to Eastern European countries and eventually to countries outside the Soviet orbit. Simultaneously, he became more and more interested in translating the poetry of these newly accessible lands, which was frequently written by the many new acquaintances that he met there, into Latvian.

While working at Liesma's department of translated literature, Čaklais was instrumental in establishing the series 'PSRS tautu dzeja' (Poetry of the Peoples of the USSR). Each little book represented a single poet, e.g.: Fikret Hodža (Azerbaijan); Ramis Riskulov (Kirgyzstan); Paul Erik Rummo (Estonia); Vitali Korotich and Ivan Drach (both from Ukraine); Paruir Sevak (Armenia); Andrei Voznesenskii, Robert

Rozhdestvenskii and Evgenii Evtushenko (Russia). Čaklais, himself, had translated Sevak and Drach. His translations of Drach were later included in two outstanding collections of Ukrainian poetry – *Vētrā iesākta dziesma* (A Song Begun During a Storm, 1963) and *Iet bērni pa Kijevu* (Children Strolling Throughout Kiev, 1984). During Gorbachev's *perestroika*, Drach became the leader of the Ukrainian Popular Front (RUH), which stood up for independence from Moscow.

Čaklais was translating, compulsively, different authors from many points in Europe – Reiner Maria Rilke, Bertold Brecht, Johanness Bobrovski, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Walter Neumann from Germany; Johen Kelter from Switzerland; Guillaume Apollinare, Blaise Cendrars, Tristan Tzara and Paul Eluard from France; Marcelijus Martinaitis from Lithuania; Miklos Radnoti from Hungary; Laco Novomeski from Slovakia; Nikola Furnadjiev and Stefan Canev from Bulgaria; Viktor Teleuke, Grigore Vieru and Arhip Chibtaru from Moldava; Vitali Korotich, Zahar Goncharuk and Roman Lubkivski from Ukraine; Velimir Khlebnikov, Innokentii Annenskii, Bella Akhmadulina, Sergei Kirsanov, Viktor Sosnora, David Samoilov, Ksenya Nekrasova and Junna Morits from Russia; Gevorg Emin, Paruir Sevak, Gegam Sarian, Maro Makarian, Razmik Davoian and Arevshat Avakian from Armenia; and Nazim Hikmet from Turkey.

Although fidelity and complete identicality between the original and the translation is nearly an impossible task to achieve, most of Čaklais' elegant interpretations are worthy of the original. He knew very well that as a practicing translator he must confront equivalence, culture, 'foreignizing' and 'domesticating', and the ideas that get lost in translation. A good example is the bilingual *Lirika* (Lyrics, 2000), by Rilke.

Čaklais was very much captivated by Latvian writers, especially poets, who wrote during the independence period between the two World Wars because 'they were so different from the "Soviet" poets'. Also, he revered the Russian avant-garde writers of the early twentieth century – Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam, Gumilev and, especially, Marina Tsvetaeva – the most strikingly prophetic voice among the extraordinary generation which was born around the 1890s. However, when he offered to translate for publication Tsvetaeva's prose work *Moi Pushkin* (My Pushkin, 1937), presenting the ancestry and birth of the poet in quasi-autobiographical settings, permission was not granted by the authorities, because, officially, this work was regarded as 'useless' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 237). Another of Čaklais' literary idols was Hemingway, mainly because of the strength exhibited in Hemingway's works. The unofficially popular writer Albert Camus was also admired by Čaklais. In fact Camus' likenesses were copied out of books and decorated the walls of many Riga intellectuals. Camus' essays and his novel *L'Etranger* were circulated from hand to hand.

In the late 1960s, Čaklais committed himself to editing a collection of poems by the Estonian Mats Traat – all but six of these poems had been printed in Estonian journals. However, according to Soviet rules and regulations, all works of literature could be translated into Latvian only if they had already appeared in Russian. Traat's Latvian edition was already in print when the censors discovered that the included poems had not been first published in Russian. As a result, all copies had to be destroyed – ground up in a paper mill; and its editor, Māris Čaklais, was severely reprimanded (Čaklais 2000d, pp. 97–100).

Čaklais had to endure more serious consequences after it was discovered that the excellent anthology of French poetry *Es tevi turpinu* (*Je te continue* – I Am Continuing You, 1970) contained poems that had not been first translated into Russian. Some of those Čaklais had himself translated into Latvian. The compiler and main translator of this anthology was Maija Silmale (1924–1973), a specialist and translator of French literature who had earlier been sentenced to five years (1951–1956) in Soviet labor camps as the leader of the 'French Group' – about a dozen intellectuals who periodically gathered in private apartments to discuss mainly French authors (e.g., Martin Guerre, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Gide), in addition to various other world personages (e.g., Michelangelo, Lev Tolstoi, the Russian painter Mikhail Vrubel, Mahatma Gandhi). The French poetry anthology, which was printed in 16,000 copies and sold out almost immediately, was highly praised by the French, for example: 'The Introduction [by Silmale] and the rich selection of poems, which were chosen strictly because of their artistic value without granting preference to any specific literary current, demonstrate both a very high competence and excellent taste' (*Le Monde*, 26 March 1971). The French reviewer additionally expressed admiration for the avant-garde illustrations by Kurts Fridrihsons, also a veteran of labor camps because of his Francophilism. Maija Silmale died of cancer a couple of years after the anthology was published (Čaklais 2000d, pp. 112–21). Māris Čaklais was dismissed from the state publishing house and was notified that his submitted manuscripts for two poetry books were not passed by the Soviet censorship office, *Glavlit* (Russian acronym from *Glavnoe upravlenie literatury* or Main Management of Literature). Also, at this time, Čaklais' friend and fellow poet, Uldis Leinerts, was beaten to death (5 May 1969) by three Russian soldiers on the street near the Riga Castle. He was 33 (Čaklais 2000d, p. 101).

Although unapproved gatherings were prohibited, in the late 1960s and early 1970s there were several small groups of intellectuals who dared to meet without official permission. One such semi-secret group of writers, artists, and actors was 'Nāc ceturtdien!' (Come on Thursday!). These gatherings consisted of readings of poetry and fragments of new plays, music and dancing until the morning hours, drinking, and wandering the streets of Riga, which they adored without reservation. It was something comparable to the 'Order of Toledo' in Spain. It was at one of these gatherings that Čaklais met his second wife, Valda, who later died in a car accident (1973). Their toddler son, Ingmar, was seriously injured. This 'black' or 'gloomy' year found expression in the poetry he wrote in the 1970s.

The 1970s was a time when in the world at large any discussion concerning Soviet literature inevitably brought up the names of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Sinyavskii, Vladimir Voinovich, Viktor Nekrasov, Iosif Brodsky, Tomas Venclova, and other writers who were critical of the Soviet regime. During this time, the Party expressed a special dismay, not only with the reluctance of writers, poets, critics, and literary scholars to participate in the 'unmasking process of bourgeois ideology, anticommunism and antisovietism' (Ekmanis 1978, p. 301), but also with writings which 'play on the national sentiments of the people and their respect for the past, thus impregnating the consciousness of Soviet people with alien views and moods' (*Padomju Jaunatne 1971*, pp. 1–2). Kārlis Krauliņš, a spokesman for the strong-arm ideology of the bureaucratic-dogmatic school, urged writers to fight against

'modernism' and in defense of socialist realism, 'the only truly creative method', and warned against the baneful influences of bourgeois aestheticists. He visualized Māris Čaklais as an 'excessively frivolous and playful' poet:

> first he plays with words and soon does the same with ideas, with life's contradictions, with the very essence of life. Poetic philosophizing had led Čaklais to the shores of life's dialectical ocean into which he wishes to plunge at breakneck speed without having mastered the art of swimming. This was dangerous and should not be permitted because he might drown, i.e., frolic away from socialist realism into formalism and romanticism. (Krauliņš 1974, p. 135)

After Čaklais lost his job at the publishing house, he returned to *Literatūra un Māksla*, first as a member of its editorial board, then as its poetry editor (1973–1981). In April 1987 – during the dramatic and turbulent years of the gradual demise of the Soviet empire – he became the editor-in-chief of this important cultural weekly and almost immediately began to display a considerable political daring, for example, by printing on its cover (21 August 1987) a full-page photograph of the Liberty Monument in Riga, which was erected during Latvia's independence. The monument's image was forbidden by the authorities from any kind of printed matter. In the same issue, Čaklais reprinted a hitherto forbidden poem in prose, 'Piemini Latviju!' (Remember Latvia!), by Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, the dean of Latvian exile writers. Because of these transgressions, Čaklais was given a dressing down by the Second Secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, Vitalii Sobolev (Čaklais 2000d, p. 46).

In the 1980s, government controls were gradually relaxed. Although Čaklais continued to be an embarrassment to the regime, his popularity, charm, charisma, vivacity, enthusiasm and brilliance helped him to manipulate and sometimes contain the local cultural overseers. In 1980, he won one of the major prizes at the Lermontov Poetry Translation Contest and, in the same year, was awarded the Latvian Komsomol prize. In 1985, which was the beginning of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost'* (re-structuring and openness), he received the title *LPSR Nopelniem bagātais kultūras darbinieks* (Honored Cultural Worker of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic). In 1986, he became a member of the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) organization (until then, forbidden in the USSR) and from 1990 to 1992 he served as the President of the Latvian PEN Centre.

After Latvia regained independence in August 1991 and *Literatūra un Māksla* was reorganized under the new title *Literatūra un Māksla Latvijā* (Literature and Art in Latvia), Čaklais became its co-editor. From November 2000 until his death three years later, he was editor-in-chief of the Latvian literary 'thick journal', the monthly *Karogs* (The Banner), where he published an impressive roster of authors, always reading and approving each manuscript personally. He was elected Honorary Member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences (1997), awarded the highest Latvian state decoration – *Triju Zvaigžņu Ordenis* (The Order of the Three Stars, 2000), became a laureate of the state Poetry Prize (2000), and the recipient of the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen Prize and the German Johann Gottfried Herder Award for his literary accomplishment (2002), among other conferred honorifics.

Poetry collections of Čaklais' own works have been published in German, English, Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian, Armenian, Uzbek, Tajik, and nine books of poems in Russian.

Māris Čaklais has written five poetry books for children – *Bimm bamm* (1973); *Minkuparks* (Kitten Park, 1978); *Ķocis* (Plaited Basket, 1984); *Aprīļa pilieni* (April Drops, 1990); *Uzraksti uz sētas* (Fence Graffiti, 1999) – and two story books: *Divi dzīvi zaldātiņi un citas pasakas* (Two Live Soldiers and Other Fairy Tales, 1996) and *Jautrā govs, skumjā govs* (Jolly Cow, Sad Cow, 2002). In *Divi dzīvi zaldātiņi* (Čaklais 2006), which actually was written for both children and adults, Čaklais uses Latvian folksong and folktale formulas, as well as borrowings from Hans Christian Andersen and Kārlis Skalbe (the Latvian master of fairy tales), and inserts quotations from the Bible and even lines from the jargon of Soviet labor camp inmates. Children would enjoy the story, but would miss the social and political context.

Māris Čaklais is a true lyricist who usually writes in deceptively casual free verse not governed by established canons. Most of his works are characterized by extreme compression, pervasive word play, the appearance of spontaneity, and dynamic play of semiotic and expressive rhythmic 'destiny'. Language to him is all it has ever been and is capable of becoming. He easily mixes the literary with the quotidian, e.g., a sunset and a dead seagull, both possessing equal poetic function. The beautiful and the ugly are equally dear to him, as is the idea that he can hide beauty in the seemingly ugly and non-poetic, e.g., a snail. His poems contain conscious grammatical inaccuracies, slang words and dialectical expressions. They range in length from usually a few lines to more than 20 pages, while the lines themselves vary greatly in length.

As observed by his fellow poet and critic Astride Ivask, 'keeping up with him [Čaklais] is like following a fleetfooted guide on an intermittent path through rough terrain. A broken proverb here, a hidden allusion to folk belief there, an inverted quotation from a Latvian classic, a reference to current problems in any of a dozen areas, echoes of foreign writers and lands – all this makes for richly textured poetry, easily the richest by a Latvian poet today' (*World Literature Today* 1983, pp. 325–6). When each poetry book is read separately, one is struck by a lack of smooth edges. Instead there are found sharp corners, certain disorder, a lack of unity or organization. However, by immersing oneself into his poetic output *in toto*, the opposite impression emerges – the sharp edges and the seeming disharmony vanish and to the perceptive reader it becomes clear that through disharmony the poet moves along the path toward harmony. By showing the chaotic world as it is – with all its entanglements, contradictions, with its absurdity and senselessness – and largely ignoring various symbols of sublimity, he attempts to 'harmonize disharmony', as stated so appropriately by the poetry critic Ruta Veidemane (Veidemane 1982, p.149). This is manifested in both the content and the form of his verses, or, to use Čaklais' own term, 'poetic texture.' His poetic images, sometimes even entire poems, cannot be explained separately. They become meaningful only when viewed in totality. The key words of the poem are frequently surrounded by others that, although significant for the texture, may disorient the reader. And it cannot be denied that Čaklais expects his reader to be as quick of mind and movement as he is himself. Thus, there are those who consider him a difficult poet.

Čaklais' first manuscript for a poetry book, entitled *Gribu pamosties* (I Want to Wake Up) was denied a printing by the censors. He first published a book of poetry when he was 25, and chose the unpretentious title *Pirmdiena* (Monday, 1965). A new working week commonly starts with Monday and Čaklais' *Monday* was as auspicious for the young poet himself as it was for Latvian literature – it was the beginning of a brilliant and unique working and poetic life. Within this little book in soft covers, comprising 34 poems and carrying a price of six kopecks, one instantly recognized a responsible mode of writing and a poetry that, for all its unexpected turns, startling juxtapositions and mysteries, was found to make a deep and striking kind of sense. Many themes can be traced through most of the 16 poetry books that followed. To be sure, the meditating lyricist realizes that 'there are many things I don't know yet/ because life is infinity' (Čaklais 1965, p. 26). Almost never does Čaklais mount the judge's platform, approaching his themes, instead, with calm tranquility, focusing on nuances and playing with metaphors. As stated by Berelis, 'sometimes his world becomes hermetic and almost inaccessible, wrapped in impenetrable layers of metaphors and sometimes it opens in surprising simplicity and sentiment' (Ivaska & Rūmniece 2001, p. 8). There are a number of poems prompted by nature. The reality of grass, trees and birds is particularly attractive to the poet. He juxtaposes observations of the natural world with reflections on his own life and emotions. Emphatic are the elusive, subtle moments of change, between the vanishing of the old and the arrival of the new, between the 'serene and translucent' fall night and the harsh winter: 'They say/About birds staying on/That no more than one out of ten will survive./Night, do not tell us about the winter' (Čaklais 1965, p. 31).

Another theme, found in almost every book, is first introduced here, in *Pirmdiena* – the complex relationship between the poet and the history of Latvia, both ancient and more recent, and, for that matter, the entire Baltic region, which has never ceased to be invaded, partitioned, dismembered, oppressed, brutalized and culturally dominated, largely because of its geographical location at the crossroads between East and West. Like a sentinel, the poet watches over his country's forests, its entire land and its people. In the spirit of European romanticism, Čaklais finds a deep source of poetic inspiration in history and the rich corpus of Latvian folk poetry (*dainas*), dating for the most part from the years of serfdom, which Latvians endured for many centuries. While history, as historians practice it, looks for reasons, Čaklais' interest is in the human colors and scents of the past.

Latvian poets have had a peculiarly strong sense of the worth of tradition. Čaklais was no exception. He feels a deep affinity, not only for his poetic contemporaries, but even more so for his literary elders. 'To bring the dead to life is no great magic', declared Robert Graves, because 'Few are wholly dead:/Blow on a dead man's embers/And a live flame will start' (Graves 1958, p. 126). In *Pirmdiena*, Čaklais blows embers on the poet and dramatist Jānis Rainis (1965–1929), who, having been arrested (1897) and exiled to Slobodsk in the Ural mountains (1899–1903) as dangerous to imperial Russia, was forced to flee after the 1905 revolution to Switzerland, where he stayed until 1920, wrote his major works, and became the ideologist of an autonomous Latvian state. Another writer, to whose works Čaklais is attentive, is Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908), who in his dramas, novellas and poems liked to explore the conflict of moral values within the human soul. Čaklais expresses

equally sympathetic understanding of foreign poets as well. In this collection, Čaklais has included poems on several Lithuanians and the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (1902–1963).

Typical of Čaklais is his attempt to broaden the geographical scope and deepen the historical resonance of his lyrics. A good example is the poem 'Monkadas karnevāla naktī' (The Night of Moncado Carnival) about M-26-7 in reference to Castro's failed attack at Moncado Barracks in Santiago de Cuba in order to topple Batista's government (26 July 1953). The Cuban Revolution at that time was viewed by many non-Russians within the USSR sympathetically as a struggle of a small nation to determine its own fate. There is also a poem about James Meredith, the first black student (and a US Air Force veteran) to enroll at the University of Mississippi in 1963, and one about Adolf Eichmann, the SS officer responsible for the murder of Jews in the death camps of Europe during World War II. However, it is no surprise that some of these early works are plagued by something unrealized, something elusive or intangible.

The second collection of poems, *Kājāmgājējs un mūžība* (Pedestrian and Eternity, 1967), can be characterized as a poetic meditation about the vagueness of place and the passage of time – the ravages it wreaks, the changes it dictates in individual lives. Time becomes wonderfully distorted, accelerated, then miraculously frozen. Comparing two seemingly different quantities – an ordinary pedestrian and the metaphysical concept of eternity – the poet concludes that eternity is to be found within the depth of the pedestrian's 'I': 'And then suddenly we look –/A solitary pedestrian/Walks minding his own business/And conversing with eternity' (Čaklais 1979, p. 31). Another similar image that dominates his entire poetic *oeuvre*: 'I am rich. To me belongs everything/That has happened to me' (Čaklais 1991, p. 16). Only the visible world together with moments that have affected the poet himself deserve to be turned into poetry. Thus he turns himself into 'a gatherer of moments', of deeply personal experiences. (About 15 years later Čaklais rephrases himself: 'I am rich – to me belongs everything/that has not happened to me . . . half-perceived, half-torn, vaguely grasped,/shamelessly like a rising sun') (Čaklais 1982, p. 37).

Abstract ideas, ideology or philosophy, Čaklais does not consider personal experience. He becomes the *genius loci* by being attentive to the peremptory radiance of the natural world. No plant or bird or tree is too small or inconsequential not to be worthy of having poetry bend low before it. He sings about flax, nettles, thistles, daisies, raspberry canes, meadowsweets, valerians, sorrels, redcurrants, dills, caraway seeds, sunflowers and so on. In the poem 'Dārzā' (In the Garden), one's existence is compared to a garden 'Where each leaf is significant/In each leaf there is life. Each has its own grid/no leaf is the same and no life' (Čaklais 2000c, pp. 21–2). In many poems, Čaklais expresses hunger for life which, to him, is an absolute value, the most precious of valuables. All of his poetry seems to be inspired by an insatiable will to live – 'you can never get enough of this world'.

In the untitled poem that starts with the lines 'Uz zemeslodes, zem saules/mūs trīsarpus miljardu. Tajos/latviešu pusotra miljona tikai. Tas ir kā/pusotra piliena jūrā' (On the Planet Earth, under the sun/there are three and a half billion of us. Among them,/Latvians only a million and a half. That's like/a drop and a half in the sea) (Čaklais 1991, p. 37), Čaklais skillfully crossbreeds folk poetry, i.e., the old and

the new. Thematically, he does not hide the fact that his main preoccupation is for the land where he began his life.

'In order to live I must become a participant' – this line from Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the author of *Le petit prince*, used as an epigraph of Čaklais' next poetry collection, *Lapas balss* (Voice of a Leaf, 1969), can be applied to his subsequent book, *Zāļu diena* (Midsummer Night's Eve, 1972), as well. The poet and his lyrical 'I' are shown as part of the present time, of nature and also of history. 'All palpable creatures/into which God has breathed life/are my joys'. In the following poem (translated by Ruth Speirs), quoted in full from *Zāļu diena*, the poet applies his habitual quick and precise brushstrokes (Čaklais 1987, p. 53):

How good that there are hands. To feel
that joy is not a flat expanse. To fondle
those knotted roots, the deeply furrowed face
of tree stumps, and to rescue
the ant imprisoned in the birch-tree's sap.

How good it is to have succeeded
in being born a human being. Not a stone,
or beast. But how convince oneself
that it is good when, once again, the bird
returns and words have lost their power,

defiance nullified by helplessness.

At times, the seemingly naive and joyful optimist harmoniously coexists with an ironic and skeptical intellectual who appears to be more interested in the crushed, smothered, and suppressed, for example, the tiny acorn, and not in such 'trifles of the universe' as the 'big and distant stars': 'The earth has no hands/but wants to caress,/ oak's each acorn/it exhales love'. He wants to see what is hidden away, to hear what is hard to perceive, to understand what is difficult to comprehend – '. . . and now I understand the beginning of sand/the meaning of the wind' (Veidemane 1982, p. 152). The poet celebrates life quietly, pensively and refuses to sing 'at the top of his voice': '. . . give me/the gift of a whispered word,/something insignificant/as insignificant as/the voice of a leaf which/holds onto a naked branch in December' (Čaklais 1991, p. 39).

Of all the traditional poetic images, Čaklais is obsessed with birds – they glide and fly again and again through his verse; for example, 'birds in early spring' (translated by Ieva Lešinska) (Čaklais 2000a, p. 4):

this morning
I think only of birds
where
in what celestial cavities
clinging
to what
songliness

early spring

is wreaking havoc
a new time
with gestures
defying translation

early spring
has no need for birds

whereas birds have need of
early spring

Within various systems of symbolism a bird is most frequently close to the stars and commonly used as a synonym, not an antonym. For Čaklais – directly or indirectly – stars and birds are often placed in opposition. Because 'the presence of birds is so large', the stars must move, or: 'Birds foamlike in the skies/splash near the sun./Beware the approach/of stars cold and hard' (Čaklais 1976, p. 32). To the poet the yearning for heights, or the temptation to have wings and fly, cannot be separated from the fragile, sacred, pulsing bird that one can take gently in the hands and caress. The image of fish circling in water is a sign with some kind of a mythical role ('. . . the muteness of fish is unbearable . . ./how impossible to carry an untold ocean inside') (Čaklais 1991, p. 48). For Čaklais, the color white, as a rule, has negative qualities. Snow, for example, symbolizes oblivion or death: 'All truth has snowed over/covered by white injustice' (Veidemane 1982, p. 153).

In both *Lapas balss* and *Zāļu diena*, several poems have been inspired by historical events: from Pompeii and the burning of 'witches' in the seventeenth century to the tragic fate of Latvian Rifle Regiment soldiers who fought on the side of the Reds during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Of one such poem – 'Piemiņas diena: Poēma ar prozu un Rekviemu' (A Day of Commemoration: A Poem With Prose and a Requiem) – the censors allowed only the inclusion of fragments. It was published in full for the first time in 2000. Other poems are populated by Auseklis (an outstanding poet of the National Awakening in the second half of the nineteenth century); the self-made painter Voldemārs Irbīte, who perished in the last days of World War II; the German poets Johannes Bobrowski and Hans Magnus Enzensberger; and the Moldovan Grigore Vieru. Of the several longer poems 'Dolce Maria' (a mixture of prose and verse sections) stands out: 'Where do we pray to our God,/we twentieth century unbelieving/believers?' The poet's conclusion: 'Not *dolce vita*/not *c'est la vie*,/not *Oh, my God!*,/will save the world./Peace, that comes after/prodding unrest./God, who wavers/in the eyes of unbelievers./Wakefulness, that holds/bird in flight./Humanity that turns aside/buckshot from the elk' (Cedriņš 1984, pp. 112–19). The impressive final poem of *Zāļu diena*, quoted in full (as translated by Inara Cedriņš), is a good sample of Čaklais' imagistic brevity and the musicality of his lines (Cedriņš 1984, p. 112). It seems to be more akin to the plastic arts:

In the window,
fire maiden.
In the oven –
warm bread.

Fire and bread,
child, in your language –
that is my homeland
on a May morning.

'I draw all pain
through a thornbush,
through a burred bush;
I draw all pain
through stone'.

And become rich as bread.
And become clean as fire.
And become pliant as language.

The next three volumes, *Sastrēgumstunda* (Rush Hour, 1974), *Cilvēks, uzarta zeme* (A Man, Ploughed Earth, 1976), and *Strautuguns* (Brookfire,1978) which the poet regards as a 'trilogy', were published after the tragic death of his second wife Valda, an actress of the Latvian Academic Drama Theatre. For the poet, her death was a crisis with the dull pain of unhappiness: '. . . a bird, the black one, with a shadow like a broom . . ., has emptied you and then left'. Or: 'Now and then a mute pain/a bird flies in,/with emaciated wings,/hoping to extinguish joy'. Another prominent theme in this trilogy is a concordance between generations and the regeneration of life. Often he uses the symbol of fire as a purifier. It is associated with his other ethical ideal – light that follows darkness and symbolizes life and the maturing of the lyrical 'I'. The main theme of the trilogy's first part is clearly formulated by its title *Sastrēgumstunda* (Rush Hour) (Čaklais 1974, p. 150):

Motor to motor, snout to snout
rumor to rumor, hip to hip
radio wave devours another wave
water faucet drips drop by drop
wall to wall, iceberg to iceberg
the road back – blocked off by sand
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
the rushhour brushes against man
like a lynx with pulled in nails
man, you are stuck in this rigmarole
are you prepared for this hour?

After surface details, the poet gazes into the well of the image to find its larger, more evasive subject. He writes about isolation and loneliness in a world that is too crowded. He searches for the meaning of life during the rush hour, i.e., the hour of obstruction and destruction of the individual. The rush hour forces one to forget what should not be forgotten (Čaklais 1974, p. 149):

. . . to live means to recall,
to recall where the other has a scar,
to recall that storm behind the window

that was aimed at you,
to recall the centuries of losses,
to recall when all have begun to forage . . .

The poem 'Apmātība' (Bewitched) consists of a dialogue between Don Quixote and the Silver Woman who wants to exchange her eternally imperishable beauty for life: 'I don't want to remain silver,/Tear me out, caress me out, make me alive and desirable . . . turn my container into skin' (Čaklais 1974, pp. 10–11).

Love, for Čaklais, is 'earth-like' and the color of it is green: 'The hot rain of your body/bubbling, foams the heavens green'. Women in his poems are real and obtainable. And in some works we find various aspects and degrees of erotica, e.g.: 'Give me your silver knife, for here/is the tree of the night . . ./let's peel the midnight fruit together/ . . . explore it with our lips, teeth, fingers, fantasy/let us split it open and squeeze out, squeeze out/every last drop that we can possibly squeeze and, fully/satiated and sticking to one another, let's awaken' (Čaklais 1974, p. 34).

The line 'the earth exudes something/which without doubt is Their breath' (Čaklais 1974, pp. 140–41) reverberates a totally different love – a love for the departed ones, whom the poet respects and admires – the organizers of the First Song Festival in Riga (1873), the 1905 revolutionaries against the tsarist regime, e.g., Juris Zinbergs, who was first hanged and then cut into pieces by the Cossack Black Hundreds; the Latvian nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, as well as cultural figures of other lands (the Russian nineteenth-century poet and publisher Nikolai Nekrasov; the Hungarian dramatist and writer Frenc Molnar; the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, in addition to Abkhazians, Armenians and Crimean Tatars). Despite their backdrop of history, some of Čaklais' poems are immersed in the present, concretely, the danger of the Soviet policy of Russification in the non-Russian regions. A good example is the poem 'Lībieši', which is the Latvian name for the almost extinct, Finno-Ugric-speaking minority in Latvia. Currently there are about 300 persons who call themselves Livs, though only about a dozen of the old people still speak Liv as their first language. To Čaklais every Liv word is sacred.

The technically dazzling long poem 'Nerudas nāve' (The Death of Neruda), about the Nobel Prize winner from Chile, is more a reflection on time and art, man and humanity, the dialectics of a hero and society, the ethics of heroism and the meaning of sacrifice: 'A man's voice . . . forever realizes/it is too soon./But it steals/ . . . understood by all –/the lonely,/lonely man's voice'. This voice 'has been drawn from the voice of the people,/created by fate, but also/of fated creation' (Čaklais 1976, pp. 96–7).

Just like Joseph Brodsky, Allen Ginsburg and some other well-known poets, Čaklais wanted to be a universal poet, someone at home everywhere. For the most part, he succeeded. In the trilogy's travel poems, he displays the ability to see analogies where others do not suspect them, by depicting, through his uncontainable imagination, his experiences and momentary impressions in such far-flung locales as the Scandinavian lands, Spain, North Africa and India. In these elegant and spare poems, he is informed by history, myth and classical heritage. He is not making *pro forma* obeisance to Ithaca, for example, the birthplace of Odysseus, or to Dionysus or Bacchus, or Phoenix and others. Although these escapes proved beneficial, his poetic

inspiration remained deeply Latvian. Although he is captivated by Spanish and Moroccan music, when the music stops, the wind carries to him '. . . music without words,/music from Latvia'. He compares himself with a snail that carries on its back the houses of Riga, the swings and sandboxes of its parks and '. . . even the pigeons with their despicable tails' (Čaklais 1978, pp. 34–35).

In the next three collections – *Pulksteņu ezers* (Lake of Clocks, 1979), *Kurzemes klade* (Courland Notebook. 1982), and *Cilvēksauciena attālumā* (Within Calling Distance of a Human Being, 1984), the poet seems to be more overtly preoccupied with space, light, and time. Here, a haunted sense of the way time mocks human aspirations dominates his poems. In his world nothing is static. Everything is in constant flux: '. . . a new year has arrived and nothing is as it used to be' (Čaklais 1982, p. 9). He is more interested in nuances than in contrasts, in the process of change or the moment of change. He does not try to shock or to unbalance. Only in his historical poems do we find sharper, more dissonant words and images, for example, when he writes about tragedies, disasters, life ravaged by wars or about cultural figures of the past. In a number of poems Čaklais seeks to return to his roots by evoking the nature of his native region, the province of Courland or Kurzeme, thus the name *Kurzemes klade*.

Life and hope in the future, as well as death and destruction, are the central themes of *Cilvēksauciena attālumā*. A good example is the 27-page-long narrative poem 'Māte, es nākšu' (Mother, I Will Come). It deals with an actual event during and after the abortive 1905 Revolution in Latvia, then a province of the Tsarist empire. A German estate owner, Baron Silvio von Bredrich, finds, tortures and finally kills the Latvian peasant revolutionary Rūdolfs Miezis for taking part in the burning of a few German landowners' estates. In the late 1930s, von Bredrich moved to Germany, where he peacefully worked on his memoirs and, later, even received an award from the Konrad Adenauer government. The poet changes perspectives and meter, uses dialogue and prose quotations from actual documents. Although he is on the revolutionary's side, he regrets that valuable art works had also perished. The poem's climax consists of two monologues: one by the peasant and the other by the Baron. While the peasant visualizes the future in the rustling trees of a cherry orchard, the Baron uses cherry tree branches to strike the peasant on the bottom of his feet. The poem ends with a line from a Lutheran pastor's report on the 1905 Revolution in Latvia: 'The future is unpredictable and a new flare-up is not impossible' (Čaklais 1984, pp. 88–114). According to the poet's own statements, his historical poems often allude to the time in which they were written, i.e., Soviet rule in the Baltics. In several of his 'historical' poems, Čaklais seems to long for the time when people lived within a distance of a 'human call' and knew that they would get immediate help against wolves and attackers.

One-third of the poems in *Cilvēksauciena attālumā* are inspired by his travels – in Serbia, Tajikistan, Armenia and Canada. All are intimate and meditative. Several of these are dedicated to Armenia and Armenians, especially literary figures, e.g., Jegishi Charents, Paruir Sevak, David Hovhanness. Čaklais' deep interest in Armenia goes back to 1968, when, in the editorial office of the literary journal *Karogs*, Čaklais was introduced to the Armenian writer Aleksandr Topchian. Eventually, Čaklais, as one of the chief promoters of cultural relations between Armenians and Latvians (in part,

because of his numerous translations of Armenian poets into Latvian), was bestowed the title 'Friend of the Armenian People'. Only two people before had been given this ceremonial tribute – the Norwegian polar explorer Fritjof Nansen and the Russian symbolist poet Valerii Bryusov.

Many of Čaklais' lyric poems were set to music and quite a few became texts for rock-n-roll and popular songs, such as those composed by Ēriks Ķiģelis, Valdis Zilvers and Imants Kalniņš (who was the guru of the first generation of Latvian flower children). In 1998, Čaklais wrote a documentary prose work about Kalniņš – *Im.Ka.: Imants Kalniņš laikā un telpā* (Im.Ka.: Imants Kalniņš in Time and Space) (Čaklais 1998). Two years earlier, he had included all his poems set to music in a separate volume, *Viņi dejoja vienu vasaru* (They Danced One Summer, 1996) (Čaklais 1996). The songs themselves, and the author's detailed comments accompanying each, inform the reader about the stifling and depressing atmosphere during the Brezhnev years ('the years of stagnation'), followed by equally gloomy, although short, periods under Andropov and Chernenko. In the early the 1980s, Čaklais closely collaborated with the very popular and dissenting singing group 'Līvi'. After a television performance (1 April 1981), the group was harshly criticized because the selection of songs, including those with Čaklais's lyrics, 'undermined state authority', 'belittled the working class', 'retreated from socialist realism', 'miseducated the young generation', 'advocated misuse of state property', and 'scared children' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 270). In spite of this, both 'Līvi' and Čaklais' song-like poems gained immense popularity. In the second half of the 1980s, the rock group 'Autobuss debesīs' (A Bus in the Sky) selected a number of Čaklais' poems to put to music and in the yearly contest, *Mikrofons 1987*, a song with Čaklais' lyrics won the first prize. Many of these songs were committed to memory and, to this day, thousands of Latvians can sing or recite them by heart. Also, the internationally known contemporary Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks, whose programmatic music often is associated with the mutual relationship between nature and man, the beauty of life and the threatening ecological and moral destruction of these values, had chosen a number of Čaklais' poems for his haunting compositions, e.g., 'Mūsu māšu vārdi' (Our Mothers' Names) for a male chorus *a capella* (1977); 'Baltais fragments' (White Fragment) for male chorus (1978); and 'Ugunssargi' (Fire Watch) for a mixed chorus *a capella* (1982).

In the mid-1980s, Latvia (together with Estonia and Lithuania) began to re-emerge as independent states. Such cultural events as the Latvian Language Festival, commemorative festivities in honor of Krišjānis Barons, Kārlis Skalbe and other national writers, and Baltic ecological protests quickly gave way to even more political happenings. A small group of dissidents started questioning the basic tenets of Soviet society. In 1987, large demonstrations in Riga were timed to coincide with fateful dates of Latvian political-national history, e.g., mass deportations which occurred on 13–14 June 1941; the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939; also, Latvia's Independence Day on 18 November 1918. The practice of marking the dark events of the Soviet period of Latvian history with huge public gatherings continued into 1988. A significant role in these gatherings was played by the Latvian Writers Union (now without the word 'Soviet'). The straightforward and frequently anti-Soviet speeches of the 1–2 June 1988 plenum of the Writers Union

and other creative unions (architects, designers, cinematographers, painters and sculptors, theatre workers, journalists, etc.) were published in the weekly *Literatūra un Māksla*, edited by Māris Čaklais, in four successive issues from 10 June to 8 July. Aleksandrs Čaks' formerly prohibited book-size poem *Mūžības skartie* (Touched by Eternity) was republished; the powerful Popular Front movement, led by the poet Jānis Peters, was established; and on 5–6 June 1989 the first large-scale conference of Latvian writers (from Sweden, England, Germany, Canada, USA) and writers from Soviet Latvia took place in Sweden, at Stockholm University. In his reminiscences, Čaklais agreed wholeheartedly with Jānis Peters, who, unable to attend the conference, sent an Open Letter to the participants in Stockholm:

> . . . For 45 years we have cherished the simple words 'One Nation' – the central theme of this conference. Now the idea of one nation is becoming a reality. . . . Writers have done much toward accomplishing this. Writers on both sides of the curtain have made strenuous efforts to affirm the right of these two words, they have carried these two words like a burning candle in the severe northern storm. Never again shall we part. Awakening. Rebirth. Revolution. These words must be much more than just superficial articulations. They must be lifted above the church steeples of Riga and become our trenchant objective. (Čaklais 2000d, p. 307)

A year later on 4 May 1990, Latvia's Supreme Soviet issued a Declaration of Independence and in August 1991 independent Latvia was reestablished. Immediately after the Stockholm Conference, in July, Čaklais, together with two other Latvian writers (Māra Zālīte and Alberts Bels), attended a meeting in Los Angeles, organized by the Latvian Writers' Association (LaRA) in exile. There, when asked about the meaning of Socialist Realism, the official Soviet creative method, he replied: 'For decades, the literary officials tried to bend and stretch this term hoping it would become a part of our consciousness, but with no success. As writers, we should and must fight with the windmill, but it would be absurd to struggle with a heap of garbage'. And Čaklais' view about the term 'Latvian *Soviet* literature' (Čaklais 2000d, p. 278):

> I could never become accustomed to the term 'soviet' – can soviets [i.e., councils] have their own literature? There can be only one Latvian literature, the one that is written in the Latvian language. And this commanding notion, although so viciously attacked by the [Soviet] officialdom, has never dimmed in the nation's conscience.

Čaklais was rather well acquainted with Latvian literature in exile, although in Soviet Latvia it was kept under lock and key and made available only to screened Party individuals with special written permissions. However, according to Čaklais' reminiscences, a female librarian with whom he had attended university secretly allowed him to read these 'dangerous' literary works, written and published outside the USSR, including poetry books by Gunars Saliņš, Linards Tauns, Veronika Strēlerte, Zinaīda Lazda and others and the literary journals *Jaunā Gaita* (Toronto) and *Ceļa Zīmes* (London) (Čaklais 2000d, p. 278).

Although deeply involved in the dramatically changing political scene, Čaklais found time to write poetry. *Labrīt, Heraklīt!* (Good Morning, Heraclitus! 1989) is considered by some critics to be one of Čaklais' best poetry books, not only

content-wise, but also visually, thanks to the beautiful illustrations by Kurts Fridrihsons, a former inmate of Soviet labor camps (one poem in the book is dedicated to Fridrihsons). Although unexpected and mystifying shifts and gaps are to be found everywhere in Čaklais' poetry, here they are especially noticeable. Also noticeable is his knack for making fragments flow together as if they were a part of someone's interior conversation. And it is amazing, indeed, how he manages in poem after poem to make his voice intimate and distinctive. Although this book ends with the 13-page-long 'Gaviļu poēma' (The Poem of Rejoicing), dedicated to the Latvian folklore collector Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923), this book is his gloomiest, his most elegiac. As in his previous collections, the poet imbues the commonplace with the presence of eternity; for example, 'Vakars, migla' (Evening, Fog), translated by Ieva Lešinska (Čaklais 2002b, p. 27):

Evening, fog and shadows on the bridge.
Wordless stirring under the trees.
A mysterious relocation.
The dull plot of eternity.

Hamlet suffering as suffer he must,
Ophelia in her ninth floor nunnery,
Stars on a leave of absence again.

Just a scream. Perhaps an illusion.

Perhaps a moan of my own. Perhaps just the wind.

The sets never change.
Evening, fog, a man on the bridge.
Drowned in his very blood.

The poem 'Vientulība' (Loneliness, translated also by Ieva Lešinska) shows the graceful, compact quality and the idiosyncratic vocabulary that belongs to no one else but Čaklais (Čaklais 2002b, p. 28):

The old man inquires after his pigeons
you know they were blue gray
the old man stops each and every one
kind of silvery you know
the old man is not complaining he is merely asking
it's just that he wants to talk
the old man curls into himself and goes home
the old man himself is that home

and he does not have any pigeons
nor did he ever

Čaklais talks about time metaphorically: '. . . an old tale of a lizard is future; red-hot time hisses,/thrown into the deep; time pierces man like a lazer beam/and scorches and incinerates, but does not prevail.' By incorporating the image of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus into the poem, Čaklais attempts to give universal

definition to time, namely, that it is impossible to wade in the same river twice. Similarly, it is impossible to read the same poem twice in the same way. Each time it will be something else. First, the poet does not believe it: 'Heraclitus, I have been here, your theory is questionable'. But suddenly the wind starts blowing 'for no reason at all', birds cry out, bushes move and so does the calm water. Everything becomes dynamic, magic, and the poet has to confess: 'I have not been here, Heraclitus. Good morning!' (Čaklais 1989a, p. 116). The poet associates this constant metamorphosis with unexpected freedom and liberation – on an island of miracles between man's 'yes' and 'no', outside various dialectical schemes, simultaneously in a distant and a nearby place, maybe in politics and, more significantly, maybe in man himself. The greeting 'good morning' is used several times implying that a real change, real liberation can take place only when one is awake. The poet's friend Heraclitus confirms that those who are asleep live each in his or her isolated world, but those who are awake live all in the same world.

The unsuccessful *coup* or *putsch* in August 1991 and the official dissolution of the USSR in December transformed Latvians into 'masters of their own house'. These dates became immensely important, although not necessarily turning points, in the internal history of Latvian politics. The tasks associated with the 'elimination' of Soviet 'remnants' – the institutions, practices, and habits of mind of the 1945–1991 period – that had emerged during the *perestroika* period achieved even greater urgency after 1991. The fear of national extinction and the thought that 'Russification' was just around the corner were diminishing. Soviet KGB and Communist Party forces fled the country, and two years later, at the end of August 1994, the Soviet army formally withdrew. In the euphoric days of 1988–1990, these withdrawals would have seemed enough to guarantee living 'happily ever after', but in the tough reality of 1991–2003 it left even the most optimistic Latvians protesting, 'I never said that it would be easy'. Independence has, in fact, been a hard road. The problems involved in bringing Latvian society out of its Soviet bondage proved to be deeper and more complicated than anyone had expected. This is also reflected in Čaklais' poetic works of these years.

The next three poetry books – *Mīlnieks atgriežas noziegumvietā* (The Lover Returns to the Crime Scene, 1989), *Slepeni ugunskuri* (Secret Bonfires, 1992), and *Izgāja bulvārī brīvība* (Freedom Left for the Boulevard, 1994), printed by an émigré publishing house in Ithaca, New Jersey – are also deemed a trilogy by Čaklais. They are dedicated, in large part, to the time of upheaval and change, known as the 'Third Awakening' or 'National Renaissance', immediately before and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The poems express hope, illusions, and also disappointments. After regaining independence, it became clear that poet-prophets are essential and revered mainly in a totalitarian society. In post-Soviet Latvia's social hierarchy, the role of the poet suddenly came to be considerably humbler. In other words, the post-prophetic period had started. The poet's nimbus began to fade and the laurels and thorn wreaths of the previous era had to be put aside or in a museum. In this trilogy, Čaklais urges his fellow poets to rethink their mission and to look towards the future. Only then will Orpheus return with the magic of his music.

Previously, in *Kurzemes klade*, Čaklais sings about metaphysical freedom: 'This is how, most likely, freedom looks –/silence and wind' (Čaklais 1982, p. 15). In this new trilogy, freedom is becoming a reality. Especially in *Izgāja bulvārī brīvība*, the

gatherer of deeply personal experiences has turned into a gatherer of historical moments and, as such, he is one of the few Latvian writers who systematically recorded in his poems the dramatic years of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He lets the world flow into him and he himself walks straight into life. True, some texts are too politicized and have not succeeded in connecting eternal themes with topicality. However, Čaklais never neglects his poetic language. He coins new words and does not refrain from using vulgarisms, takes a stand against conventional language and comments ironically on 'Soviet trifles'. As usual, Čaklais displays a passion for juxtaposition and contraposition, for wonderfully concrete and sonorous images, for immaculately simple, stark and yet highly complex lines, for example, in 'Pilnīgi slepeni' (Strictly Confidential), quoted in full and translated by Ieva Lešinska (Čaklais 2002g, p. 25):

Don't betray your sources of inspiration
hold on to your codification
God has entrusted it only to you
to its usage you hold the clue

Passwords lead straight to hell
paths lead to an impasse
impasses swell into roads
whispers swell into roars

The world springs forth from a dewdrop
an impulse springs forth from your pulse
aspiration from trepidation
courage from vacillation

Say to all who dare inquire
that you don't know where you got the fire
Hands that ignite the sea
are warmed by a secret pyre

Among the 'historical moments' collected in his poems, we find the Russian occupation of the Baltic states in 1940, the Russo–Finnish War and the dark years of Stalinism following World War II. He calls these years the Medieval Age of the twentieth century. It was during this 'medieval' period that his father's birthplace had become 'a proving ground/in the hands/cruel, callous and hard' (Čaklais 1992, p. 13). The days of national awakening Čaklais depicts joyfully – how liberty went 'onto the boulevard . . . shot upwards with the flags/flowed into flower stems/all the way to their roots' (Čaklais 1994, p. 42), how all activities were accompanied by singing and music, by art and the written word. And he urges others to participate: 'tremble a little less and the sky will be higher for you'. Writing in 'freedom's waiting room', the poet exclaims: 'All my life I was getting ready to join the birds in the sky'.

However, frequently his joy and hope for solidarity – during moments when it was unclear whether Latvia would ever be able to see its freedom from oppression complete – are obscured by anxious concern: '. . . the sky is full of snow/the land full of worries/the new merciless times/have struck the hour of dawn'. This is an age

when '. . . old wounds heal slowly/old mirages have evaporated/. . . gradually new wounds are opening' (Čaklais 1994, pp. 109–10). To the poet it seems that the much cherished liberty 'did not know what to do/quite often still does not know'. Behind the euphoria, he discovers a less pompous reality. In one of his verses, we see an ordinary old woman sitting between the Latvian Liberty Monument and the statue of Lenin, '. . . surrounded by autumn leaves/cursing/and spitting sunflower seeds' (Čaklais 1994, p. 42).

Nineteen ninety-one, especially, was a year which surely will be etched into the collective memory of the Latvian people as one of struggle, fear, triumph, exhilaration and loss. In January of that year, Latvia was a country under siege, mourning the death of five of her sons, including the filmmaker and poet Andris Slapiņš, killed by Soviet Interior Ministry special forces. Yet her people were unified upon the barricades, determined not to let their patient drive for independence die.

Čaklais' next poetry book, *Vientuļš riteņbraucējs* (A Lonely Bicycle Rider, 1997), is summarized on its back cover by the writer Imants Ziedonis as follows: 'I cannot think of a recent poetry book that so all-embracingly and on such a socially significant scale talks about Latvianness, about history, about human ideals and heedfulness, about tragic incapacitation and existential loneliness imposed from above'. Concrete events are still at the forefront. Next to visionary poems, there are also some edifying works. His Orpheus sings from the edge of an unfathomable abyss – if he did it from a safer place, his song would become trivial. However, something essential of Čaklais' poetic intelligence always makes itself beautifully audible. Openly and directly he talks about the people's unconcealed and exuberant hope for genuine freedom. 'Yes, that's how it really was./There was passion under every mound/And every handkerchief/Was full of knots' (Čaklais 1997b, p. 61). The sky, the wind and the spring represent freedom. So do pine trees, which have a direct association with Rainis' 'unbreakable pines'. In 'Smags vakars priekšpavasarī' (Thorny Evening Before the Spring), he synthesizes the novelist Aleksandrs Grīns' snowstorm of souls ('dvēseļu putenis') and Rainis' lonely mountain climber ('kalnā kāpējs') – both symbols of the nation's spiritual strength.

In the introductory poem, translated by Ieva Lešinska (Ivaska & Rūmniece 2001, p. 70) in a playfully light and, at the same time, intricate way, he rejects the existential feelings of loneliness and opposes it to life itself – instead of being lonely, one should become a part of his nation's fate, to take an open and active social stand.

A lone cyclist through the afternoon
past a freshly mown field and haystacks
a lone cyclist
past a lone tree left standing amidst the grasses
against a backdrop
of bushes
and snakeweed left unmown
a lone cyclist
a dog
upon seeing the cyclist
starts barking
so the dog's even more lonesome

after all
he didn't bark at the haystacks
so he's even more lonesome
than the cyclist

and they all make me happy
the lone cyclist
the lone dog
the lone tree

So you're even more lonesome?
inquires someone's voice

Isn't this Someone
even more lonesome
than the rest?

In almost every poetry collection (as well as in his essays) there is at least some mention of Rīga, the old Hanseatic port city on the Baltic Sea. Čaklais is mindful of the city's complex and glorious, yet often troubled, past. The poet suggests the unutterable thought of the sadness of the present under Soviet rule; for example, in 'Vecrīgas grafikas' (Engravings of Old Rīga, in *Zāļu diena*), he memorably evokes in verse his feelings for his beloved medieval town, but without sentimentalization. 'Rīga. Studiju gadi' (Rīga. University Days, in *Cilvēksauciena attālumā*) Čaklais calls 'a poem with a prologue in seven belated letters with insertions of premature poems', including a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer. The spirit of Riga is embodied in a ferryman or 'pārcēlējs' who has ferried the city through wars and danger, through 'incessant rain of blood and tears' so it could continue living. The long work ends on a hopeful note: 'And the grass will caress us/And sunlight will shine upon us' (Čaklais 1984, pp. 116–36).

The beautifully illustrated (by the Armenian artist Varuzh) quadrilingual volume (Latvian, German, Russian, English) *Desmit mīlas dziesmas Rīgai/Zehn Liebesgedichte an Riga/Desjat' pesen ljubvi Rige/Ten Love Songs to Riga* (2000), published on the occasion of Riga's 800 year jubilee, lays before the reader the poet's sensual love (Riga in Latvian is a feminine noun) for everything in the city – its art nouveau buildings, ancient warehouses with their winch-tops, church steeples ('Orgies of the Baroque, precision of the Gothic'), bridges, the Daugava that runs silvery in a great rush to get to the sea, melancholy fountains, the Liberty Monument and the many other monuments with 'birds atop', also, Riga's intellectual life – as if the city were a living character. Even when the poet casts eyes upon 'all those pylons, pilasters, telephone poles, antennae', he hears from them flute-like music. The names of the included poems, appropriately, have musical names, e.g., the serenade, scherzo, the lament, the hymn and others. Urban images are fleshed out in living form. The city dashes, darts, twirls, jumps and also weeps. Its towers waltz with its cellars while the canons built into the Swedish gate 'sing like a flute'. In Old Rīga ('930 km from Moscow, 938 from Berlin') the timeless and the transitory come together, various historical periods live their afterlife side by side: 'house to house, person to person, occupier to occupier, refugee to refugee, victor to victor, century to century . . .' (Čaklais 2000b, p. 36).

In writing love songs to Rīga, the city that for centuries has been a dynamic intersection of roads and cultures, a city coveted and conquered, treasured and protected, Čaklais is hardly unique – he joins a long list of poets, both Latvian and foreign, who have confessed their feelings for the city. The three translators for this volume have been well chosen: Lyudmila Azarova, a Latvian Russian poet who was born in Moscow and whose affection for Riga and knowledge of Latvian history and literature remain unmatched; Margita Gūtmane, a poet and essayist who spent most of her life in Germany and Sweden and now is living in Riga; and Ieva Lešinska, living once again in Latvia after a decade in the USA.

In *Mana mājas lapa tavai mājas lapai* (My Homepage for Your Homepage, 2000), Čaklais easily moves within a single poem from high seriousness to downright silliness. Most poems – almost all of them fit on a single page – with their vivid imagery, elusive, periphrastic and metaphorical language, a complete lack of punctuation and only rarely used upper-case letters convey a modernist shock. For example, 'priekšpēdējā brīvība' (next to last freedom, translated by Ieva Lešinska), quoted in full (Čaklais 2002e, p. 26):

go ahead press the buttons
distances undress

this is not a phone conversation
it is a phone conversation
a glass booth
receiver in the wind
words in the storm

there is and can be no mistake
the last of time pressed in a ball

odyssey
stop jangling obols in your pocket

this is not a phone conversation
it is a phone conversation

freedom at work
the next to last
freedom
at work

The poem 'pēdējā nodarbība – reklamēt dzīvi' (last activity to advertise life), also translated by Ieva Lešinska, reminds one of a bouquet of many-layered, splintered meanings, to be clasped but never fully understood (Čaklais 2002d, p. 24):

a room full of guidebooks the floor risen half a meter
I will never enter those meadows the sweet juice of promises splashed
sweetly
squeezed out with saliva flowing through nonexistent moustaches

the outdoors full of people balloons colorfully unimaginable

signs and premonitions prophecies crowding unendable
what to do with them all? Hang on what hook? Stay on what branch?

all avenues walked? all loves exhausted? horror chambers
expanded infinite? all niches busy? don't worry –
sacred is but the breakfast table love at eleven and evening peace
hand in hand

Also, asymmetrical and eccentric contradiction in language and sometimes darkly comic imagination characterize Čaklais' last poetry collection, *Pagaidu latvietis* (Temporary Latvian, 2002).

The best pages in Čaklais' travel notes, *Dzer avotu, ceļiniek* (Drink from the Spring, Wanderer, 1969), are those where he relates his encounters with writers in Lithuania, Armenia, Ukraine, Russia and East Germany. They are interspersed either with his own poems or with those by the poets mentioned. Čaklais' three books of essays – *Saule rakstāmgaldā* (Sun in the Desk Drawer, 1975), *Nozagtā gliemežnīca* (The Stolen Seashell, 1980), and *Profesionālis un ziedlapiņas* (The Professional and Petals, 1985) – consist of sensitive presentations of the work of his nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetic predecessors, Latvian contemporaries as well as foreign poets (Marina Tsvetaeva, Vladimir Mayakovskii, Bella Akhmadulina, Evgenii Evtushenko, Grigore Vieru, Paruir Sevak, Gevorg Emin and others). *Impērijas pēdējās kapeikas: Lūzumlaika dienasgrāmata 1991–1996* (Empire's Last Kopecks: Transitions' Diary, 1991–1996) is a collection of perceptive mini-essays devoted, for the most part, to cultural matters immediately before and after the disintegration of the USSR with frequent references to the Soviet era. Because a great many of these essays were written to be broadcast on Radio Free Europe, they are characterized by a comprehensive lucidity, e.g. the pieces on the poet, critic and editor of *World Literature Today* Ivar Ivask; the Nobel Prize winners Czeslaw Milosz, Octavio Paz and Derek Wallcott; the Turkmen writer Shirali Nurmuradov, the Abkhazian prose writer Dzhuma Ahuba and others (Čaklais 1997a).

Čaklais' first (and, unfortunately, his last) volume of memoirs, *Laiks iegravē sejas* (Time Engraves Faces, 2000), is mainly a lively, eloquent and touching account of his many friends and acquaintances in Latvian intellectual circles and not so much about his personal life (Čaklais 2000d).

Čaklais has written three book-length biographical portraits of well-known Latvians whose names appear in the titles: *Im.Ka.: Imants Kalniņš laikā un telpā* (Im.Ka.: Imants Kalniņš in Time and Space, 1998), about a composer; *Gaismas kungs jeb sāga par Gunaru Birkertu* (Master of Light or the Saga About Gunars Birkerts, 2002), about an architect; and *Izaicinājums: Pirmā Latvijas Valsts prezidente Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga* (Challenge: The First Woman President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe Freiberga, 2003). The last one was written when Čaklais was already seriously ill.

When Māris Čaklais died, he was eulogized by hundreds, including the President of Latvia, writers, publishers, and friends from many countries. An extraordinarily diverse cross-section of his peers praised his poetic genius, but even more his decency and his commitment to the exigencies of craft. Čaklais, as with any prolific poet, is occasionally careless, often exasperating, and almost always interesting. Some of his poems seem as fey and elusive as leprechauns in the thick forests of his native land. Irrefutably, the second half of the twentieth century fostered this formally outstanding

major poet who produced a highly variegated and intellectually complex body of work with lasting significance, literature that will be appreciated and enjoyed long after it was written.

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