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## Postmodern Emancipation from Meaning in the Discourse of Post-Socialist Latvian Literature

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Let me begin with an example from contemporary Latvian literature. In 1996, the annual prize for the best debut in poetry was awarded to a young and promising poet Kristīne Sadovska for her book *Jukusi saulespuķe* ('A Crazy Sunflower'). However, Kristīne Sadovska's poetry called forth not only songs of praise, but also severe criticism. She was blamed for creating poetic chaos, for playing with indeterminacies and aesthetic impurities, for an eclectic mixing of styles and focusing on fragmentary, disconnected, flat and one-dimensional images, which only refer to themselves, for blending cultural and stylistic levels and dissipating the meaningfulness of language. The scholar and literary critic Anda Kubuliņa wrote: "Poetry belongs to the high genres which never give up their dignity".

The straightforward rejection of Kristīne Sadovska's poetry by the critic is due to the fact that in this specific case the principles of poetry and the principles of evaluation belong to different aesthetic paradigms. The young poet derives her vision of the world from postmodern relativism, anti-systemism, eclecticism and disregard for hierarchy. The experienced critic in her turn insists that poetry should not only adhere to the elitism and essentialism of modernist "high art", but also strive for literary "graces" and "correctness" of style.

This is only one of the countless examples testifying to the fact that Latvian poets, writers, artists and critics are suffering from a disunion caused by diversities of aesthetic and ethic convictions.

The lines of demarcation are well defined — postmodern disregard for meaning can mainly be attributed to the young generation whereas modernist essentialism and concern with originality are the properties of the middle-aged and the elderly. I do not intend to utter battle cries for either side, but rather to address the features that characterize post-socialist Latvian literature at the turn of the millennium.

The point of departure of my paper is a self-evident statement that since the beginning of the 1990s Latvian culture has been experiencing a shift to postmodernism. I would like to develop this statement by drawing attention to some aspects of how this shift manifests itself in poetic texts. I am going to focus on the texts of pop songs — a marginal genre which has traditionally been deprived of theoretical exploration.

Under the Soviet regime, Latvian pop music used to be quite “academic”. I am positive that people of my age and those who are older remember Soviet popstars dressed up in dinner-jackets and ties standing stiff and upright in front of the audience. Sometimes their songs served as a vehicle for Soviet ideology, sometimes as a vehicle for hidden protest against it, but they were always impregnated with meaning.

Songs written by the patriarch of Latvian pop music Raimonds Pauls were no exception to this rule. Moreover, in the 1970s and the 1980s Raimonds Pauls used to collaborate with the strongest and most talented Latvian poets — Imants Ziedonis, Jānis Peters, Māra Zālīte. The artistic value of their song-texts was so high that these texts could be separated (and often were separated) from the music and enjoyed as original, stylistically refined and meaningful poetry. It was only natural for audiences to expect something new both in style and subject matter.

In the 1990s the content-related problems have acquired a new shape. Alongside with the former practice of writing meaningful song-texts the recent history of popular music is marked by a trend towards evacuation of meaning. The aesthetic hooliganism of Roberts Gobziņš serves as the most convincing testimony to it. Gobziņš is in his mid-thirties now. Despite very limited professional training and lack of academic education he has become a cult figure among teenagers and those who feel at home in the

ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and virtual reality.

Gobziņš' aesthetic activities encompass manipulations with already recorded songs. Modernist popular music can be understood as an attempt to fashion new and distinct forms out of previous styles. Gobziņš does not strive for innovation. He randomly picks Western pop songs and pastes them together with his own texts. When doing this, Gobziņš neither transmits the original meaning, nor does he create a new, completely different meaning which quite often was the case with songs by Raimonds Pauls. For instance, the Latvian text of Pauls' pop song "Dāvāja Māriņa meitenei mūziņu" ('Mara Gave a Lifetime to a Girl') enunciated flat truths about human fate and the heritage of the previous generations. The corresponding Russian text of the same song "Milion alikh roz" ('A Million of Bright Red Roses') was written as an equally flat enunciation of passionate love manifesting itself through millions of bright red roses.

Substituting Latvian texts by English texts, Gobziņš imitates the sound pattern and the syntactic pattern of the original. This kind of mimetic exercise has been well known in European literature since the time of neoclassicism when literature was conceived to be primarily a set of skills which must be perfected by a long period of study and practice. In his *Dichtkunst* the 17<sup>th</sup>-century literary scholar Martin Opitz offered a whole range of techniques which might be helpful in acquiring the skills of a poet. One of these techniques is a deliberate imitation of the syntactic and metric structure of the prior literary model. This kind of technique lies at the basis of parody which imitates the distinctive style of a particular author or genre and applies imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject.

However, Roberts Gobziņš does not aim at parody. He does not aim at anything except the imitation of the vocal pattern of the original text. By doing this, he denies the communicative possibilities of language and admits the fact that poetic text is not convertible. In terms of semiotics, his texts function as a free play with signifiers which have lost all stable meaning. If any meaning appears, Gobziņš would not try to avoid it but he also would not try to maintain it. For instance, the famous song by N. Tennant

“Go West” in Gobziņš’ Latvian translation sounds like “Dod ēst” which means “Give me something to eat”. The phrase “I saw you dancing” is reproduced like “Man saujā benzins” which means “I have petrol in my palm”. “You’re in the army now” translates as “Kur indiāņi nav” which means “Where there are no Indians”, while “Please, believe me” is converted into “Bīstams dzīvnieks” — “A dangerous animal”.

It might be interesting to note that Gobiņš is not the first in the history of Latvian literature to make such experiments. In her comprehensive article about the most weird Latvian poet Jānis Steiks who lived and worked at the turn of the 19th and 20th century the literary scholar doctor Janīna Kursīte observes that Steiks was obsessed with searching for a similarity of sounds in different languages in order to detect a common meaning and establish fantastic etymologies. According to Steiks, there is a sole source of all the names — the Latvian language. For instance, New York is pronounced in Latvian as Ņujorka. Consequently, it comes from “nu, Jurka” which means “well, George”. Warsaw (Varšava) comes from “var šaut” (“you can shoot”), Odessa (Odesa) — from “o, desa!” (“oh, sausage!”). At first sight the experiments of Roberts Gobziņš seem to be very much like those of Jānis Steiks. However, Gobziņš does not take an interest in fantastic etymologies, he imitates sounds and sound structures just for the sake of imitation.

This is quite different also from the avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century, when the same technique was utilized to create a unique, incomparable, new work of art. I would rather associate Gobziņš with a trend of contemporary performing art which is signified by the verb “to lipsync” (lip+to synchronize). To lipsync means to move one’s lips silently in order to imitate singing to the accompaniment of a recorded song. Gobziņš goes still further, not only moving his lips, but also filling the space with the sound of his own text which has preserved the appearance of the original. From the modernist perspective, the linguistic manipulation carried out by Gobziņš demonstrates how loyalty to the letter (the sound image of the text) kills the spirit of the text.

The French playwright of the absurd Eugène Ionesco considered it to be the tragedy of language that words were meaning-

less and that all communication among human beings was impossible, since words could not reveal fully and precisely the personal associations resulting from the experience of each individual. By the end of the 20th century, this tragedy has turned into a comedy: from the perspective of postmodernism there is nothing to reveal. The world is essentially meaningless. Therefore Robert Gobziņš and other activists of Latvian popular culture like Ufo, Fredis, Loks, Švāns, willingly accept the real world just as an extension or the act of fiction-making.

You might ask me the question why I have chosen a minor figure who indulges in assassinating art in the modernist sense of the word as the topic of my paper. In order to appreciate the aesthetic activities of Gobziņš one needs neither deep knowledge and experience, nor taste. The only thing one should have is a perfect knowledge of Western pop songs and the clichés of mass culture, as well as an awareness of the poststructuralist idea that man is governed by language, not the other way round. My answer would be that in the first place, the song-texts written by Gobziņš can serve as a most eloquent sign of the fact that after roaming through the Western countries the spectre of postmodernism has reached Latvia. However, as an aesthetic style postmodernism could not have been possible without postmodernity as a political and cultural reality.

Secondly, from the perspective of postmodernism the binary oppositions between the high and the low, between literature and non-literature have been undermined. Consequently, there is no reason to qualify the aesthetic activities of Roberts Gobziņš as second-hand commodities and keep them in the periphery of critical thought.

Last but not least, emancipation from meaning in song-texts by Roberts Gobziņš is an ambivalent phenomenon. Certainly, it is a manifestation of postmodern indifference. But it is also a kind of challenge and protest against traditionally meaningful metanarratives which have been brought to a compromise by the social authorities of post-colonial and post-socialist Latvia. So why not play with texts whose meaning is missing? It is less hypocritical than to indulge in ideological illusions which are aimed only at maintaining economic and political hegemony.