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## NATURE IN CONTEMPORARY LATVIAN POETRY: A CHANGING VISION\*

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The natural scene has been an object of contemplation or has served as a point of reference in Latvian lyric since its earliest beginnings. Nature is an integral part of the Latvian folk song, it has had an important place in written Latvian literature, where in this respect, some form of Romanticism appears never to have ended, and it plays a major role in Latvian present-day poetry, both in Latvia and outside it. The Latvian poets appear to draw their principal poetic inspiration from the objects and landscapes of nature; their poetry represents to a great extent variations on the theme of the communion of human soul and natural scene.

In the lyric of the younger poets outside Latvia this communion with nature has turned into a search for communion; one might say, the nature experience has changed from the romantic to the tragic. I have pointed out in another talk that this attitude is intimately bound up with the experience of the poet in exile: the contraries

"home — exile" have become restated as "countryside — city," and nature has to some degree become a symbol for the lost homeland.<sup>1</sup> A sense of rootlessness dominates the poets' experience and nothing reveals it more than their concept of nature or their attitude towards it. The four poets to be characterized and compared briefly in this light are Linards Tauns, Gunars Salins, Baiba Bičole and Astride Ivaška. Tauns and Salins are generally mentioned together as the first major representatives of Latvian modern poetry in exile. They emerged upon the scene of Latvian lyric in the late fifties, with a modernity and originality which made their work, one could almost say, dominate it for a decade. Their spell was finally broken by two poets of comparable originality and freshness of form and thought, when Bičole and Ivaška published their collections of poetry in the late sixties.

### Linards *Tauns*

"Once As I Entered Gardens"

Once as I entered gardens  
I remembered  
That I have drunk much wine from them  
And also sung of them,  
Mostly in the guise of dying blossoms and resurrected fruit.  
And the gardens sensed  
That I had come to them  
On a high holiday —  
And they greeted me,  
Unfurling flags  
And kissing my cheek.  
Gardens marched past me on parade,  
But I stood beneath  
Ever fresh,  
Ever shifting

Pollen winds.  
Suddenly the flags dipped,  
And they unveiled a monument to me.<sup>2</sup>

Taun's natural scene is very typically a garden, i.e., not nature in its most natural state, but a landscape created by human activity. The image of the garden, particularly that of an orchard or the vineyard recurs in his poems with great persistency. Often the image is unstressed, as when he sees girls bearing gifts from their gardens, or watches them there among carnations, but it also occurs in meaningful metaphors as in "the garden of summer," "the vineyards of summer," or "the vegetable gardens of the world." Almost always it is a garden of his imagination, or of his dreams or remembrances. In the above poem, too, the beginning lines:

Once as I entered gardens  
I remembered  
That I have drunk much wine from them...

with their mention of remembrance of the fact that he has drunk wine from them and that he has sung of them, make this not a real but an imagined, re-evoked entering. Now the poet sees the gardens marching past him, he is only a spectator and no part of the scene. We thus observe him twice removed from the heart of nature: first through the fact that the setting is a garden, secondly, in that it is a vision.

These two aspects guide us to the center of Taun's relationship to nature. It is nature lost; indeed, in his poems Taun repeatedly states this: he misses "the colors of the apple of nature's summer," the city has "robbed" him of nature, and he has lost "the rivers, and grass, his sisters."

This loss is complete and irrevocable. In this poem Taun remembers having sung of dying blossoms; elsewhere, his flowers lie on graves, are broken or dying, or they are the abstract "gladiolas of the mind," or "a garland about a sleepwalker's forehead." He sees them in surrealistic visions, as when sprouting in coffee-cups, or he connects forget-me-nots with cattle slaughterhouses. He also uses the image of the flower in combination with the image of the girl: his women are tulips or gladiolas; a girl walks through the city with "daffodils of a far-away garden" blossoming in her hair. Here, the garden is distant, the girl is pale, the circumstance that daffodils blossom in her hair and in the folds of her dress, makes it clear that this is again but a vision. The image of the flower in Taun's poetry is a symbol for either love or death, and a symbol of dead, rather than live nature.

It is also characteristic that in our cited poem the poet is completely passive. He says he entered the gardens, but this action is subordinate to the main verb, to the act of remembering, a passive act or an act of the mind. His activity, drinking and singing, lies in the past. The gardens act, they greet him, kiss him, march past him, the winds scatter pollen upon him. All motion is downwards, acting upon the poet; indeed, the last line, "and they unveiled a monument to me," makes us see the poet as a statue, stone like, inert, or — even more likely — in death.

The idea of death in this poem is fortified by the image of resurrected fruit, for any resurrection follows death, and the vision of fruit in Taun's poetry seems to turn inexorably to a vision of dying, directly or indirectly. Fruit and skulls revolve like suns about him at the marketplace ("or is it a funeral?" he wonders). In another poem, the peace he believes he will find in a distant valley, and his existence there in the form of a cluster of grapes unmistakably symbolize death.

This turning of fruit to an image of death can even be followed up chronologically. In Taun's earlier poems fruit, in particular the apple, are often like prisms or seen as shedding light through which the poet sees days gone by and the landscapes of his childhood. Later, fruit become more and more abstractions: Taun sings of spears "dripping with the blood of fruit and streets," or he metaphorically combines fruit and innocence, ancient apricots and statues. In the end, fruit exist only "in a still-life, where it can't be eaten;"<sup>3</sup> the death of nature is complete. Nature is still, dead: a child draws a boat and fish on a sidewalk and the poet exclaims: "Ah, then that's a river!" To paint a still-life with words, the poet has to take hues from people's faces, for the apples which used to shed light over him are now lost; he has to substitute street lamps for sunflowers; he has to find the colors within himself. Outside his imagination, all contact with nature has disappeared.

Despite fitful gleams of a happy state, despite individual lines in which Taun celebrates the city and feels welcomed by it or in which he feels himself a happy part of this world, Taun essentially stands apart from it, only wishing to fuse with nature, only searching for his place in the world, but having no control over his fate. Death alone will deliver him. Then, the city's stones will "burgeon fields of wheat" through him: nature, unattainable in life, will be his monument in death.

*Gunars Salinš*

"Spring in the City"

On a day that drizzled  
warm and mild,  
I felt — — on my chin,  
I felt — — on my cheek,  
not a beard  
but the first grass sprouting.  
— — Then it's found the proper spot! — — I fretted, and tried  
to avoid the passers-by.

Then, just as I was about to pass underground,  
very gently someone took me by the arm:  
"How foolish you are!  
Where else should the grass in the city sprout, when it must  
— — on stone?"

A glance: on his cheek  
also flourished  
mild grass  
and the first anemones budded...

It was spring in the city.<sup>4</sup>

In the poetry of Gunars Salinš too, we find search for nature, and the contrast between a natural scene and the city, between the past and the life of the present. Fundamentally, he experiences his uprootedness as deeply and with as much anguish as Tauns. He, too, escapes into visions. But what is a wish or an abstract or imagined recapturing in Tauns' work, assumes the value of reality in the verse of Salinš. The poem cited is on one level unreal, absurd — indeed, how can grass sprout on a chin, on a cheek. Still, as in most poems by Salinš, his visions not only spring from a real scene but become one with reality. In Tauns' poem, a day remembered, in Salinš a real day, drizzling warm and mild. In Tauns, the artificial scene of the garden, in Salinš, the image of young grass; there, the image of death, here, the assurance of life and birth there, the complete remoteness and inactivity of the poet, here, the poet becoming one with nature and partaking in an act of nature. The chasm between city and nature is closed; the city has not "robbed" Salinš of nature, it cannot rob him, because he bears the seeds of nature within him. There *is* spring in the city. The verse of Tauns proves his statement that he "entered the city to pursue reflections." The lyric of Salinš shows the vigor which comes from direct contact with anything alive: "Changed into micro-beings I laugh in all corners of the world" he exclaims in another poem, even as he realizes: "I have to make do with myself alone."

The diversity of the two poets becomes clear if we compare even a few of their image patterns. Tauns dreams of man-created gardens, Salinš sees himself in meadows with grass and hay; he fashions a world to his liking, his natural landscape is almost primeval, almost undisturbed by human hand. It is a live landscape, with grass growing, with honey dripping from flowers and tulip bulbs, with cows grazing in meadows and with peasant women gathering hay. These are imagined nature idylls, true, but they come alive before our eyes through the strength and reality of the poet's imagination. Nature lost becomes nature resurrected.

What Tauns yearns for, Salinš completes. For instance, in one poem Tauns calls out to other poets, his brothers, to "parade with pumpkins in the streets of New York and London" and to "carry the gentle soul of hills into the streets of a stone city," but he does this in the last lines of the poem, it is a cry of anguish, a dream unfulfilled. Salinš has a poem which begins, rather than ends with a similar idea: a forest should be planted in New York City. And he goes on to describe in detail the way the poets will accomplish this, with such power of imagination that a landscape of trees, berries, woodcutters, farm animals, and birds arises before our eyes. His is a call to action, a dream turned life.

All in the poetry of Salinš is action, all is alive. When he writes of gardens he sees himself watering them; characteristically, water, especially as rain or as flowing motion, is an important element in his lyric. Salinš walks barefoot through rain puddles, or he runs through the rain in Greenwich Village, or he imagines wine raining over him. This recurring image of life and movement is reinforced by related images, as when people "flow" through streets, or in his frequent use of the verb "to row." Tauns stands still, at most, he floats or allows himself to be carried; Salinš moves with a purpose: people row themselves into the sky on neon rainbows, the poet finds that he is unable to die — he can only "continue rowing," or he burrows into earth to the roots of flowers. (By contrast, Tauns, after crying out that the city has robbed him of nature, feels that he must cling to the earth, with his palms, his mouth, his body — he should do it, but cannot.)

The only consistently reappearing animal image in Tauns' world are fish, mute, often dead. Salinš reinforces the sense of a true though recreated nature idyll in his work with his images of birds, butterflies, and especially the bee: a lover of flowers should turn into a bee; bees, bearing pollen, are "the beginning of wine;" candles are bees "bearing honey from summers to come." The gentle and birth-granting bee is akin to the images of meadows and blossoming flowers and adds to the poet's landscapes of nature in its most natural state, landscapes "where honey and milk flow." It is an imagined landscape, but after the almost nightmarish evocative search for a hold and for nature which one encounters in Tauns' poetry, Salinš

takes the next step: in his poetry he does flee from the city to farmland, he achieves a mystical return to nature in a pastoral world bursting with vitality and beauty.

## *Baiba Bičole*

"In Spring"

With a slow and hot mouth  
the sun hovers about me,  
about me dances a lilac bush,  
a rosy apple-tree, flaming tulips,  
about me bees fall humming.<sup>5</sup>

In his later poetry Salinš dreams of a complete fusion of himself and nature, he himself becomes the earth, meadows, and lakes. This is a metamorphosis which finds a parallel in the natural experience in Baiba Bičole. If for Tauns nature is a vision and unreal, if for Salinš it is a vision which assumes the force of reality, Bičole is one with nature, completely enveloped by it. Still, I would call her basic experience also a vision, also tragic. In it, Tauns' passive surrender to the world — in the case of Bičole, surrender to nature's elements — combines with Salinš' vivid nature experience — in Bičole, nature in its most primeval aspect. Nature is no friend to man in her world. Bičole's natural scene is violent and raging, her sensation a mysterious union with nature, again conjured up by imagination; in other words, still a search.

The cited poem is one of the gentler lyrics of Bičole. Here, the sun, the lilac bush, the apple-tree, the tulips and the bees are natural heralds of spring. But the slow and hot mouth of the sun, the fact that the poet sees herself surrounded, suggest a second, frightening and almost morbid reading: one senses that the poet will be swallowed up, this moment of spring will be her death, slow and torturing. Nature seems to demand complete surrender from Bičole. When rain falls, she becomes a smooth pebble, carried by a laughing river; when she tells of swimming in calm waters she yields to them as full of pleasure as Salinš does in a poem, but he returns to the beach, whereas Bičole slides into the waters lazily and surrenders herself to them, the last lines of the poem telling not of a return but only of the rising warm and calm waters. Winds, fires rage in her poems, aromas intoxicate her. In a night in January she hears all storms: the thunder of summer, the storms of autumn, and the north wind, and a night turned insane looks through her doors and windows asking of her some warmth, some light, a night which is "panting with desire." Again we feel she will surrender. With nature the poet becomes transported into another sphere of existence and absorbed into something fearsome.

In the context of this analysis and in the movement: loss of nature (Tauns) — recreation of nature (Salinš), Baiba Bičole appears to have reached the point of no return. In her experience of nature she evokes natural forces which she can no longer control, and she becomes dissolved into the natural scene.

## *Astride Ivaska*

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In the spring night I toss my blanket aside  
and listen for rabbits snuffling in the garden.  
This morning the first turtle-dove cooed,  
but the winds turned easterly once more.  
In the spring night I'm all ear, wondering  
how far to the next poet's house.<sup>6</sup>

The poetry of Astride Ivaska marks a new beginning. The circle is complete, for in a broader context, we may discern a movement from the reality of nature in earlier Latvian poetry to its loss, to its resurrection, to man's dissolution into it, and now, once more, to man and nature in a normal and evenly balanced relationship. In the verse of Ivaska, nature again exists independently and needs only to be savored and interpreted, its landscape in harmony with the inner landscape of the human soul.

The above poem expresses once more a oneness with reality. The spring night is real, as are the rabbits in the garden, as are the turtle-dove and the winds. The objects of nature are no longer symbols but exist and act as what they are. A deep

experience of nature leads to contemplation, a feeling of longing, a feeling of loneliness, maybe, or a wish to communicate the thoughts that a spring night brings. Man and nature stand side by side, none the master of the other. Elsewhere, Ivaska walks through a dark park and through a grove of young pine trees and "the world has a fresh taste again," the poet's heavy thoughts have disappeared. Or, she feels love on a spring night, or walks under waterfalls, in forests, in the hills. Nature is solace to her; if it does hold a spell over her, it is a spell of peace, a communion into which she enters with calm as she enters the "clear depths of snowy mountains." Even Ivaska's language reflects this calmness: she adorns her verse less, she is quiet in her choice of words and reduces her statements to a low emphasis. Man has become reintegrated as a part of nature.

Is the outlook on nature as seen in the above poets wholly determined by their differences of personality and by the diverse surroundings in which they write? Or, if we do detect a development, is it of a purely literary nature, where periods of turbulent feeling often alternate with periods of calm contemplation? Or has nature indeed symbolized the lost homeland of our poets and do they now begin to see nature for what it is, having accepted their exile as reality and having opened their eyes to the natural world around them?

A poem, Astride Ivaska writes,

may mean all and nothing,  
all and nothing,  
each is free to read it  
in his own way.

\* Paper read at the Conference on Baltic Literatures, Ohio State University, January 31 - February 1, 1970.

1 "Svešatnes motīvs mūsdienu dzejā" (The Exile Motif in Latvian Lyric Poetry), Published in *Laiks*, June 28, July 2, July 5, 1969.

2 *Mūžīgais makonis* (Ziemeļblāzma, 1958), p. 90. All quotations are from this collection and from *Laulības ar pilsetu* (Upeskalns, 1964), which was published posthumously.

The four poems quoted in full in this paper were translated by Baiba Kaugara.

3 The meaning of this line is even more emphatic in Latvian, where still-life is called still or silent nature.

4 *Melnā saule* (Gramatu Draugs, 1967), p. 9. Other quotations also from *Mīklas krogs* (Gramatu Draugs, 1957).

5 *Celos* (Gramatu Draugs, 1969), p. 80. References also to *Atrīta* (Upeskalns, 1966).

6 *Ķiemas tiesa* (Upeskalns, 1968), p. 12. See also *Ezera kristības* (Upeskalns, 1966).