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ON ALLEGORY: VIZMA BELŠEVICA'S POEM "THE NOTATIONS OF HENRICUS DE LETTIS IN THE MARGINS OF THE LIVONIAN CHRONICLE"

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The above poem appeared in Vizma Belševica's fourth collection of verse *Gadu gredzeni (Annual Rings)* published in Riga in 1969. At that time the author was 38 and had achieved prominence not only in her native country but to a degree also as an "All-Soviet" author, as her second volume, *Zemes siltums (The Warmth of the Earth)*, only a year after its original in the Latvian, appeared in a Russian translation (1960). From 1955 to 1961 Belševica attended the Maxim Gorki Institute in Moscow where — together with such notables as Andrei Voznesenski — she was enrolled as a student in the Advanced Seminar in Literature. In the course of the last decade she has been occasionally reprimanded in the Soviet Latvian press for certain "unhealthy, pseudo-modernistic tendencies." [1](#)

The "Livonian Chronicle," mentioned in the title of the poem, is known in its original Latin as *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*. It is judged to have been written between 1225 and 1227 and describes mainly the progress of the German conquest of Livonia between 1180 and 1227. As can be deduced from the text, at the time of the writing of the chronicle the author, the so called "Henricus de Lettis," an ordained priest, was serving as the official secretary of bishop Albert of Riga and produced the annals presumably at his request. The oldest manuscript of the chronicle, surviving now only in photographic copies at Marburg, is the 14th century Codex Zamoyski of Warsaw. It is mostly from this manuscript [2](#) that translations have been made in German, [3](#) Latvian, [4](#) Russian, [5](#) and English. [6](#)

Vizma Belševica's "[The Notations of Henricus de Lettis in the Margins of the Livonian Chronicle](#)" is only one of the many historical poems that have come out of Riga in the course of the last few years. This surge has been generally welcomed by the leading literary critics in Riga as an "expansion of the patriotic historical dimension" [7](#) of Soviet poetry. The author of this formula, Vitolds Valeinis, observes further that, "Poetry of the past (with a few exceptions) does not become submerged in the past, it rises above it, grows into the present as an integral part of the cultural life of the nation..." [8](#) In other words, the historical poetry produced by the Soviet author is not of the variety of historical realism. "Poetry cannot really fulfill its function in shaping the present and pointing toward the future, unless it finds its footing in the vast substructure of democratic and socialistic treasures of the past," [9](#) asserts Valeinis. Thus the Soviet poet is expected to approach history not in the spirit of a poetical adventure whose outcome is left open, but strictly as a search for those "democratic and socialistic treasures" that would be of value in "shaping the present and pointing toward the future." Such an insistence on a specific extra-artistic intention in the poet's treatment of historical material suggests that, following the dictate, the author will be writing what can be broadly considered allegorical poetry.

The interpretation of allegorical poetry can be a very demanding game. One of its expert players, Angus Fletcher, points out its basic rules as follows:

Since allegorical works present an aesthetic surface which implies an authoritative, thematic, "correct" reading, and which attempts to eliminate other possible readings, they deliberately restrict the freedom of the reader. [10](#)

He is in grim agreement with the observation by Northrop Frye that the whole technique of the author of an allegory "tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed." [11](#)

I cannot promise to play the game in this rigorous manner in analyzing the poem by Vizma Belševica. Nor do I think it is necessary since Belševica's work can hardly be regarded an allegory in the classical sense of the word. I can only attempt to trace some of its possible meanings relying on Belševica's most obvious indications of how a commentary on her should proceed, namely, her quotations from the Chronicle. I hope this will enable us not only to surmise some of her extra-artistic

intentions but also to savor more fully the purely poetic qualities of her work. In fact, the first part of my paper will touch *primarily* on its artistic and psychological aspects.

Instead of trying to sketch the general framework of Belševica's poem, let me start out with specifics, such as the nationality of the historical Henricus, the author of the chronicle on which the poem is supposed to be based.

Even though at one point in the chronicle the author identifies himself as "Henricus de Lettis" (XVI, 3), it remains uncertain whether this prepositional construction denotes the author's national origin or merely an identification with the Latvians (that is Latgallians) as their parish priest. The opinion of historians, who, of course, have sifted numerous other clues in the text, remains sharply divided. Some are thoroughly convinced that he was a Latvian, "possibly a son of a converted Latvian nobleman,"¹² others are equally convinced he was a pure German. And the battle lines between the opposing scholars are not drawn along their national boundaries: there are both Latvians and Germans on either side of the argument.¹³

In the title of her poem Belševica apparently identifies Henricus as a Latvian, but the wording is left rather awkward and ambiguous. In the poem itself, in the light of the juxtaposed passages quoted from the chronicle, Henricus could rather be identified as a Liv, a native of the Finno-Ugric tribe that inhabited the very shoreline of the Gulf of Riga and was the first one in the Baltic area to be attacked by the invading Germans.

The trochaic quatrains in which Henricus laments about the "father's head," the "mother's breast" and the "sister's screams" are preceded by excerpts from Chapter X of the chronicle in which, following an unsuccessful insurrection by the Livs, the Germans wage a revengeful counterattack on them. It is in this battle that the Germans kill Ako, the leader of the Livs, who, as the chronicle tells us, "had been the author of all the treachery and of all the evil."¹⁴ Ako's head presented as a token of victory to bishop Albert — is it then meant by Belševica to be the head of Henricus' own father? That is what the author leads us to accept as one of her poetical contentions. Once we do accept it, the psychological dimensions of the poem expand considerably. We are let in on the secret that Henricus feels as an accomplice not only in the bloody subjugation of his countrymen in general but also in the slaughter of his own parents. Only alerted to the patricidal aspect of Henricus' sense of guilt, can we fully appreciate the complexity of his torment. Yet Belševica goes on to sculpture Henricus as a man who, instead of collapsing under the weight of his personal guilt, assumes the proportions of a chastizing prophet of his people. To consider the poetic implications of this: if we did not know of the kinship of Henricus to Ako, the lines

Yet this night in honey scarlet
father's head will soak

might be glossed over simply as a figure of speech, meaning that the heads of Livonian fathers — any Livonian fathers — will fall. As it turns out, Belševica is not using "father's head" as a synecdoche but in the very concrete sense of the word.

By the way, it is in the same stark concreteness that Belševica has Henricus refer to the "grave of fire." At a glance, that too may be judged as an example of rhetorical ornament. Again that is not the case. The "grave of fire" is evoked in the notations after Henricus has confessed that in his dreams "Courish boats sail down to Riga." This is unmistakably in reference to the unsuccessful attempt by the Kurs (Couronians) in 1210 to capture Riga, described at length in Chapter XIV of the chronicle. After a fierce battle, the Kurs, as the chronicle informs us, "withdrew from the city, collected their dead, and returned to the ships. After crossing the Dwina (Dauguva), they rested for three days while *cremating their dead and mourning over them.*"¹⁵ Turning now to the corresponding part in Henricus' notations:

And in a grave of fire we shall go silent.
And the clenched jaws will bitter ashen dust
Become

we realize that those lines are not meant to be read metaphorically. They represent factualities. And that is one of the main strengths of Belševica's poem. It is as though she had adhered to Ezra Pound's precept that "the natural object is the most *adequate* symbol. The more naked it is, the more inclusive it becomes."¹⁶

With sagaciously worked-in particulars and with the individuation of Henricus as a complex and unique person, Belševica frees the surface of her poem of what Angus Fletcher calls "the usual allegorical intentions."¹⁷ Where this is achieved, the "literal surface tends to be taken in a completely literal way... and becomes sufficient unto itself..."¹⁸ When conceived and executed in this fashion, allegory can perhaps mercifully be regarded as a legitimate form of art and no longer merely as "something obvious and old-fashioned, like Sunday-school religion," a phrase Edwin Honig uses in poking fun at the arch enemies of allegory in his book called *Dark Conceit: the Making of Allegory*.¹⁹

And yet a "dark conceit" it remains because, to quote once more from Fletcher, "as they (the allegorical works) go along, they are usually saying one thing in order to mean something beyond that one thing."²⁰ And we have to agree that according to this criterion of "double-talk,"

An allegorical mode of expression characterizes a quite extraordinary variety of literary kinds: chivalric or picaresque romances and their modern equivalent, the "western," Utopian political satires, quasi-philosophical anatomies, personal attacks in epigrammatic form, pastorals of all sorts,

apocalyptic visions, encyclopedic epics..., naturalistic muckraking novels whose aim it is to propagandize social change, imaginary voyages..., detective stories..., fairy tales..., debate poems..." [21](#)

When we add to this list, as Fletcher does, medieval morality plays along with the surrealist drama of Ionesco and Becket and the "epic theater" of Brecht, metaphysical verse along with certain Imagist poems, one may seriously wonder whether there is anything of importance in the entire literature that could be regarded as "non-allegorical." I venture that there might be, as in those instances where, carried forth by the inner requirements of the subject matter, the author himself is no longer sure as to what his novel, or drama, or poem is supposed to "mean." The whole work then becomes not an extended sign, that is "an exact reference to something definite," but rather an extended symbol, "an exact reference to something indefinite," as the terms "sign" and "symbol" are defined by William Tindall. [22](#) This may happen even to an author who consciously — and conscientiously — sets out to write an allegory: like the "sorcerer's apprentice," he may be overpowered by the elements released, so that the intended or the obligatory accomplishment may finally become drowned or appear utterly insignificant in the floods of the unintended byproducts.

Did something like that happen to Belševica?

We can only attempt to discern her allegorical intentions from the work itself, particularly by noticing what liberties the author has taken in dealing with the historical facts.

We observed already that, as implied by the context, Henricus appears to be a Liv, yet explicitly, in the notations, he makes himself a spokesman for the Latvians. It occurs to me that this is not the first time in our poetry that a Liv has been Latvianized and turned into a national hero. We seem to have a special predilection for that. [23](#) This observation could have been inserted here merely as an amusing literary footnote if not for the fact that in the entire Chronicle, with one notable exception, there appear no Latgallians who would have stood up against the Germans and thus could have inspired Belševica. [24](#) Actually the Latvians of Latgale peacefully accepted Christianity from the Germans and from there on both faithfully and fiercely fought on their side to settle accounts with their historic enemies, the Estonians, as well as with other neighboring tribes and with the Russians. In the light of the historical records, it makes good sense that Henricus, such as Belševica depicts him, comes from the spiteful Livs rather than the diplomatically subservient Latgallians. Not that the Livs would have entirely lacked collaborators. On the contrary, quite a number of them, most notoriously under the leadership of their convert-king Kaupo, became the most dependable comrades-in-arms of the Germans. Therefore it rings with full historical authenticity that the Henricus of Belševica's poem curses "his" people as a "traitorous nation," as a "cur-like nation," as a "servile and slavish nation." Henricus suffers deeply as a patriot, yet his patriotism may be seen as serving Belševica a broader purpose: with that Henricus can be made a life-size opponent of the German feudalists of the 13th century. Otherwise he might have remained just an allegorical puppet.

Belševica has indeed put the historical Henricus in a Procrustean bed to make him a patriot of this kind. [25](#) But her end product has turned out to be acceptable even to the Soviet censors. They must have recognized Henricus as an early protagonist in the historical cause against the feudal oppressors. The censors might have also been impressed by the fact that Henricus' brand of "patriotism" actually cuts across the national boundaries, including not only the Livs and the Latvians, but the Estonians as well. That fits the Marxist ideology perfectly.

Therefore it is most surprising that Belševica's poem has stirred strange suspicions among some of her fellow poets in Riga. For example, Mirdza Kempe, a People's Poetess and a recent recipient of the Lenin Prize, in an extremely long tirade whose primary target is obviously another poem by Belševica, charges at the Henricus' poem with the following lines:

Are we able to read only the Livonian Henricus,
To sow double-meanings into ancient history,
To delight the petit bourgeois? [26](#)

As is true of all good allegories (and the Soviet theoreticians would agree with that), the relevance of Belševica's poem need not be limited to its historical setting, but whether or not its less pleasant revelations apply to the present day Soviet regime and its people, that certainly depends on the eye of the beholder. [27](#)

Among the elements that lend Belševica's story its remarkable contemporaneity is the conspiratorial urgency with which her Henricus engages the reader. In this, Belševica's conception differs strikingly from the ways in which similar historical material has been treated by most other Latvian poets. Whereas the traditional heroic epics or ballads, no matter how splendidly written, tend to present the past as something memorable and yet remote and unredeemable, Belševica's poem renders history with the immediacy of a news broadcast on a current political — and personal — crisis.

In both the complexity of his motivation and the sense of his historical mission, in Latvian literature Belševica's Henricus seems most akin to the heroes of the historical dramas of Janis Rainis, the Master of "dark conceit" in Latvian letters.

1. Arbusov, Leonid and Bauer, Albert. *Scriptores Reman Germanicarum*. Hannover, 1955.
2. Belševica, Vizma. *Gadu gredzeni*. Riga, 1969.
3. Bilmanis, Alfreds. *A History of Latvia*. Princeton, 1951.
4. Bilkins, Vilis. *Mīts un patiesība*. Uppsala, 1958.
5. Brundage, James A. *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. Madison, 1961.
6. Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory—The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca, 1964.
7. Honig, Edwin. *Dark Conceit: the Making of Allegory*. Cambridge, 1960.
8. Kripens, J. *Indriķa Livonijas Chronika*. Riga, 1936.
9. Latviešu literatūras darbinieki. Biografiska vardnīca. Riga, 1965.
10. *Latvijas PSR Mazā Enciklopēdija I*. Riga, 1967.
11. Švabe, Arveds, "Latviešu Indriķis un viņa chronika," *Straumes un avoti*, II. Nebraska, 1963.
12. Tindall, William York. *The Literary Symbol*. New York, 1955.
13. Valeinis, V. "Dzejas gultne padziļinās," *Literatūra un Māksla*, Nr. 11 (1270), 1969.
14. Wain, John, "The Prophet Ezra v. 'The Egotistical Sublime'." *Encounter*, August 1967, pp. 63-70.

1 *Latviešu literatūras darbinieki*. Biografiska vardnīca. Riga, 1965, p. 37.

2 The definitive edition of the manuscript is presently considered to be that by Leonid Arbusow and Albert Bauer in *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, Hannover, 1955.

3 J. G. Arndt, *Der Liefelaendischen Chronik*. Halle, 1747. A. Hansen, *Scriptores Rerum Livonicarum*. Riga und Leipzig, 1853. H. Hildebrand, *Die Chronik Heinrichs von Lettland*. Berlin, 1865. E. Pabst, *Heinrichs von Lettland Livlaendische Chronik*. Reval, 1867.

4 J. Kripēns, *Indriķa Livonijas Chronika*, Riga, 1936.

5 S. Anninskiy, *Genrich Latvieskiy, Chronika Livonii*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1938.

6 J. A. Brundage, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. Madison, 1961.

7 V. Valeinis, "Dzejas gultne padziļinās," *Literatūra un Māksla*, Nr. 11 (1270), 1969.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory—The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ithaca, 1964, p. 305.

11 As quoted by Fletcher, op. cit., p. 304.

12 Alfreds Bilmanis, *A History of Latvia*, Princeton, 1951, p. 55.

13 For a chronological summary of the argument see Arbusow and Bauer, 1955, op. cit., p. VI.

Interestingly enough, the most nondescript description of Henricus' nationality that I have come across appears in the *Small Encyclopedia of Soviet Latvia*. It says that Henricus was "a Germanized Catholic clergyman" ("pārvācojies katolu garīdznieks" — *Latvijas PSR Maza Enciklopēdija*, I, Riga, 1967, p. 634). What is that supposed to mean genealogically speaking? Well, it does mean at least that the Soviet encyclopedia classifies Henricus as a "non-German." The question as to whether he is a Latvian is left open.

14 Brundage, op. cit., p. 59.

15 Brundage, op. cit., p. 98; italics mine.

16 John Wain, "The Prophet Ezra v. 'The Egotistical Sublime'," *Encounter*, August 1967, pp. 63-70.

17 Angus Fletcher, op. cit., p. 317.

18 Ibid., p. 317.

19 Cambridge, 1960, p. 3.

20 Angus Fletcher, op. cit., p. 4.

21 Ibid., p. 3.

22 William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol*, New York, 1955, p. 6.

23 Such was the fate, for example, of Ymaut, another Liv from the same chronicle (Chapter II, 4), who, rechristened Imants, was made the hero of a legend by the 18th century German author, a friend of the Latvians, Garlieb Merkel, and then later extolled as the symbol of the Latvian freedom fighters by the poet of the Age of National Awakening, Andrejs Pumpurs who wrote a poem called "Imants is not dead..."

24 The only possible candidate for this honor among the Latvians could be Visvaldis, the king of Jersika, whose wailings over the destruction of his castle and his people, as rendered in the Livonian Chronicle (III, 4), have inspired other Latvian poets, for example, Veronika Strēlerte. (Her poem "The Destruction of Jersika").

25 Some of contemporary German historians claim that the historical Henricus can be characterized by a "strongly marked sense of German nationalism" ("Stark ausgeprägtes deutsches Nationalgefuehl" — Arbusov and Bauer, Hannover, 1955, op. cit. p. VI) and even the most nationalistically-oriented Latvian historian Arveds Švabe ("Latviešu Indriķis un viņa chronika," *Straumes un avoti*, II, Nebraska, 1963, pp. 121-220) has never questioned Henricus' loyalty either to the Germans or the Roman Catholic Church. Švabe speaks of him as a "patriot" only in the sense that Henricus has evidenced deep sympathy and affection for the native inhabitants.

26 Mirdza Kempe, "Rīga neklausēs," ("Riga Will Not Keep Silent") *Cina*, 6.20.1969.

27 A few of the specifics that have found their way into the poem do appear slightly anachronistic, for example, when Henricus says, "O Christ, your kingdom shall come over us, One god and tongue." What universal tongue or language, we may wonder, was it supposed to have been in Bishop Albert's Livonia? The official language of Livonia became Latin which was used "in all official decrees, treaties, and state correspondence." (Alfreds Bilmanis, op. cit., p. 55) But Latin most certainly was not proposed as a conversational language even to the pilgrims themselves, let alone the native inhabitants. Nor is there any strong evidence that the latter would have generally been forced to learn the native tongue of their masters. This, as we know, became the policy of some of the later conquerors of Latvia.

And yet there is one passage toward the end of the Chronicle of Livonia where the Latvian warriors are, indeed, reported to have been taught to shout at least a few words in German. The episode described is a battle with the Lithuanians: "Since the road was narrow, because of the nearby forest, the Germans went first into the battle and all the Letts followed, shouting as they had been taught in the German language to seize, ravage, and kill." (Brundage, op. cit., p. 202-203, italics mine). As I read this I thought I heard Belševica exclaim, "So, there!" — as though it really mattered.