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THE HUMANIZATION OF THE RECENT SOVIET LATVIAN SHORT STORY

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If Soviet Latvian drama, by and large, has remained the stronghold of socialistic realism, the short story, especially in the last two years, is seemingly undergoing a process of transfiguration. Certain thematic displacements in the short story, which after all does not have the immediacy, directness, and propaganda impact of a theatrical performance, appear to be steadily gaining momentum. It would be precipitous to talk about a movement, but there seems to be motion. Naturally, amidst so much clamor for relevance, topicality, and literary orthodoxy, there are young writers who would do anything to avoid running the gauntlet of critics and censors. For example, Aivars Kalve¹ and Harijs Gāliņš² continue to exploit that amazingly bottomless gold mine — World War II that with its human tragedies, dramatic situations, extravagant black and white contrasts offers tempting goodies that no ambitious literary neophyte could resist. Who is not for motherhood? Who could question the denunciation of war, of man's inhumanity to man? This literature remains edifying and didactic, celebrating the simple man's virtues and vitality, and, quite accidentally, coalesces with the desired political ideology. Perhaps man's temptation to goodness is sometimes irresistible. Perhaps the little man, as well as the mighty, may suffer an occasional slip of magnanimity. But this relentless optimism is a flight from a dimension of human reality. Human suffering and anguish are something absolute, irreducible that cannot be justified or explained away by a theology or political creed. There is a kind of inhumanity in all those true and false prophets that exact human immolation as a necessary precondition to earn a blissful afterlife, to prepare the coming of a millenium.

But next to these inspiring paeans to the goodness of the simple man, a heterogeneous group of short story writers, with a different orientation, is making its entrance on the literary scene.

A seemingly common trait is the decreasing sociopolitical importance accorded to the milieu. If the milieu is ever a source of dramatic tension in these stories, it is downgraded to the function of inspiring disgust and scorn in the protagonist, who is invariably a man of sophistication and refinement. These exceptional characters enjoy no official social or political distinction, since their superiority is purely intellectual: they are dashing writers, talented journalists, devoted research scientists, doctors, artists, etc. This tendency toward the glorification of the noble maverick manifests itself most conspicuously in Alda Darbiņa's collection of short stories, "Twelve Photos" (*Divpadsmit Fotogrāfijas*). Darbiņa's heroines constantly seek their authentic destinies, seldom worrying about the emotional and moral contradictions where they find themselves trapped by their romantic vagaries. They are creatures on the run from stability, dreaming of a life that really could not possibly bestow the happiness they seem to desire. They accuse the older generation of mediocrity and materialism, of confining their aspirations to "new furniture next year."³ Philandering and hypocrisy are loudly denounced by Darbiņa's strong-willed women, while their own adulterous and promiscuous relations in the name of freedom become acts of assertive individuality. They prefer doubts and anguish to the faked strait-lacedness and truisms of their elders. "It is current to doubt and to seek," exclaims one of Darbiņa's protagonists in an explosion of pent-up energy that is bent on masochism and self-destruction. Behind this mindless, somewhat exhibitionist, self-centeredness, there is, however, the primal desperation of a human being who has had a vision of beauty and happiness and is unwilling to relinquish it. Arrogant in her disgust for the normal, proud of her griefs and emotional divagations, Darbiņa's heroine exultantly proclaims: "Love is dirty." The incompatible marriage partner who is too prosaic to share her chimeras is designated by the contemptible, anonymous "he". The ideal man, a kind of tramp who wants "no new furniture" and whose advice the heroine constantly seeks, turns out to be only a figment of her mind.

Dr. Oļģerts Gailītis, in his collection of short stories, "Not without You" (*Bez Tevis Nevar*), is not less rhapsodic in his outpouring of scorn on the shoddy everyday world where the happy mediocre wallow in their ignorance. His protagonists, reflecting the author's own professional pursuits, are medical doctors and medical research scientists, people of superior intellect and noble predicaments, weighing issues of a higher moral order, such as euthanasia, conflicts with conventional

morality, etc. However mawkishly romantic the setting may be, in whatever extravagant fancies the somewhat intellectually constipated protagonist may indulge, the stories of Gailītis do descend to the human level with their revolt and indignation at the Sisyphean tasks of modern man. The exaltations and ravings, "the contraband with dreams," as one character puts it, are expressions of the despair of being imprisoned in the quotidian routine, of the abhorrence of feeling the proximity of the sickeningly sticky humanity of the crowd. "You don't know how loathsome it is to be reconciled so early with life and to accept solitude as a norm. — Reconciliation is never acceptable. It's a death sentence,"⁴ runs the dialogue of two intransigents.

Another writer in this pseudo-romantic vein is Skaidrīte Kaldupe with her recently published short stories, "The Forest of the Lielupe" (*Lielupes Sils*).⁵ The contrapuntal themes are orchestrated around the antithesis between the successful and the defeated, the affluent and the crippled dreamers. The settings and plots, replete with cliché situations, pathetic fallacies, nostalgia for past happiness, are calculated to move, to invite the reader to reject life's ignominy, since life can only be a process of losing one's faith and youthful ideals. The black and white contours are only occasionally blurred by a touch of irony or ambiguity, diminishing some of the romantic excesses.

The shadings from the edifying lucubrations of the ideologically impeccable to the romantic hero cult of these sentimental dissenters perhaps do not signify a great deal of humanization. Yet we must note the genuinely human concerns, on the part of the latter, over the loss of individuality in a state-organized, regimented society. Theirs is also the rejection of the existing social order as a corrupt influence that elicits vices like greed, ambitiousness, bourgeois respectability based on material possessions. They cannot conceal their abhorrence for the consumer-oriented society where, to paraphrase Descartes, "j'achète, donc je suis," (I buy, therefore I am), is the basis of the ontological argument. They refuse to fight for a place on the conveyor belt, to become interchangeable parts in a system that produces primarily material rewards. Perhaps even more iconoclastic is the instinctive awareness of these rebels that happiness, meaning of life cannot be found within the existing social order. The syndrome of the asocial hero partially disappears with writers like Luginska, Jakubāns, and Bels.

Rita Luginska, in her collection, "Don't Pass me by"⁶ (*Neej man garām*), treats simple everyday occurrences and their anonymous heroes and non-heroes with a great deal of sympathy, tact, and honesty. These are mostly tales of dashed hopes, humiliating compromises, pathetic struggles to glean crumbs of happiness. Luginska's empathic look switches from the mute despair of an old, widowed vendor, forsaken by her only son on her seventieth birthday, to the pitiful gaudiness and hollowness of the Soviet jet set literati who can only fake love with well-rehearsed gestures and phrases. Luginska's world is peopled with modern Sisyphuses who will never end futilely rolling uphill their stones. They lack, however, the magnanimity and the poignant awareness that characterize the personages of Camus, whose apotheosis in Soviet Latvia seems to be close at hand. Luginska approaches her subjects with a sincerity and honesty that are generally rare among so many Latvian writers.

Jakubāns' collection of a kind of prose ballads, "My White Guitar"⁷ (*Mana Baltā Gitāra*), intimates an inchoate sensibility that springs from the alienation of the young and the disenfranchised from the industrial technocratic societies. Jakubāns laments the old times, their sentimentality and gallantry that have disappeared with wars and revolutions like "les neiges d'antan." His favorite hero, a kind of Soviet hippie, sits aimlessly on a street corner in Riga, strumming his guitar and nonchalantly watching the hustle and bustle of the city crowd. At times, however, the truant's amicable smile turns into a sardonic grin, revealing the author's refusal to view life as anything but a gratuitous happenstance. In a park, two veterans, who have somehow managed to keep body and soul together, happen to meet and discover that during the war one had fought with the Germans, the other with the Russians. But the war has made no distinction between the victor and the vanquished, for, beyond their suffering of pain and anguish, war has no other meaning. They could have exchanged their roles, it would have made little difference. And while they reminisce, little boys in the nearby sandbox resume their war games.

Our prodigal son and prodigy, Alberts Bels, treats a wide spectrum of subjects in his collection, "Me, myself in the Plain" (*"Es pats" līdzenumā*). His wit and irony, coupled with compassion and humility, excel in stories about the everyday banalities, little intrigues, ill-concealed jealousies of the urban wage earner, that grotesque creature debased by efficiency demands, pathetically struggling to assert his human dignity against the invisible monster of bureaucracy and technocracy. The story, "The Resurrection of a Clerk," is reminiscent of Maupassant's "En Famille" for its plot. A little clerk suffers a heart attack, slips into coma, and when he awakens he finds himself dressed in black on a table in his empty apartment. In the meantime the bureaucratic machinery has been set in motion. It is impossible for him to prove that he is alive, since all the certificates testify to his death. He has lost his job, another tenant is moving into his apartment, his wife has left him, taking along his possessions, and at the end, as he helplessly stands on a street, an April shower starts to loosen his paper burial suit. "I moved my hands and the sleeves came off. It's a good thing that at least for the time being the upper portion of my trousers, still protected by the corners of the jacket, girdled my loins. But soon it began to fall off too. Naked like a newborn child — a thought occurred to me. And everything will have to be started anew."⁸ The Sisyphus image reappears again in the pathetic lament of a surveyor, a kind of comic restatement of Camus' famous description of modern man. "There is rhythm, there is monotony. In the morning, coffee, sandwich; during the day, office, projects, blueprints; in the evening, concerts, TV. If I make my wife happy one extra time, I'm tired the next day. If I yell at my boss, I'm reprimanded for lack of courtesy. If I root for a football team in the stadium, I'm hoarse the following week. It seems to me that I'm not a man, but a well-calibrated test tube which can receive in the morning only a specific amount of life's liquid

and no more. Every hour of the day takes away a drop, I cannot use up more, because I live according to schedule. In the evening I'm empty, and everything must be started anew." (p. 8).

The Bels protagonist, living, as Camus put it, outside the realm of grace, is quite consciously confronting that most disturbing dimension of life — the absurd which manifests itself most conspicuously in the never ending toil of a Sisyphian punishment. In his indignation, in his need to affirm his existence, to transcend his mortality, the Bels protagonist accuses the order of things, the Gods. But the Gods, the state, the party, the system, ambivalently solicitous about his physical well-being and cruelly indifferent to his aspirations, remain stolidly distant and unmoved by the complaints of the forsaken creature.

The Sisyphus image seems to resurface in the works of certain authors with increasing frequency, reaffirming the eternal polyvalent human values of the myth, ambiguous, susceptible of ever renewed, ever changing interpretations. The matrix of these stories suggests a grotesque and tragic human spectacle where compassion and insidiousness, meaning and gratuitousness coalesce to form human destinies.

Perhaps the intimations of a nascent sensibility, as I see them, are just an ephemeral will-o'-the-wisp, a product of my imagination issuing forth from the pleasure of suspended deprivation, like that of a child, as Yeats put it, who with his nose pressed against the sweetshop window is suddenly given a cake. Perhaps. But even if it were a will-o'-the-wisp, the pleasure of contemplating it was real.

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- 2 Harijs Gāliņš, *Nāves Ūtrupe* (Rīga: Liesma, 1968).
- 3 Alda Darbiņa, *Divpadsmit Fotogrāfijas* (Rīga: Liesma, 1968), p. 5.
- 4 Oļģerts Gailītis, *Bez Tevis Nevar* (Rīga: Liesma, 1968), p. 115.
- 5 (Rīga: Liesma, 1969).
- 6 (Rīga: Liesma, 1969).
- 7 (Rīga: Liesma, 1968).
- 8 Alberts Bels, "*Es Pats*" *Līdzenumā* (Rīga: Liesma, 1968), p. 31.