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"MY AGE-OLD, HIDDEN VOICE": THE POETRY OF BAIBA BIČOLE

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"The body is the great poem."
Wallace Stevens

During the second half of the fifties, Latvian poetry in exile took a new turn. If up till then the poetic traditions established in independent Latvia had continued almost unbroken, there emerged now a new school of poets who were in tune with their time as much as with their tradition (although to the older generations it did not seem so at first). This was truly the exile generation of poets, born after 1920 and reaching artistic maturity on foreign soil. It made itself heard the world over, but its most influential representatives lived in or near New York City, which also gave them their name, the "Hell's Kitchen" school of poetry. Its first major work was the collection of poems "Tavern of Mists" (1957) by Gunars Saliņš, who has remained at its forefront.¹

Baiba Bičole is a member of this school. Although her first collection of poetry, *Atrita*, was published only in 1966, she was well known through periodicals. *Atrita* was awarded the biennial Zinaīda Lazda Prize for Poetry in 1967. The title is as original as the poetic vision she achieves already in her first collection: it means something that was lost but has been found again — the German *Wiedergefundenes* is an approximation. The word *atrīta* itself had fallen into obsolescence and was rediscovered by the poet.

Her second collection deepens her vision, yet continues it to such extent that both books can be read as one continuous poem. The fact that in the second collection she dispenses with section headings and titles (in most cases), contributes to this effect. *Ceļos* (1969) is an ambiguous title that suggests three meanings: "Kneeling," "I Arise," "On the Road."

A few words about the poet. She was born 1931 in Riga, but both her parents come from South Latvian (Zemgale) stock. Both are literary people — her father a literary historian, still active in the U.S.A., her mother published verse in her youth and later critical essays. Baiba Bičole has studied English and Art History. She is married to the Latvian painter and graphic artist Ilmārs Rumpēters and lives with her three children in Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

Let us first look at three short poems from her second collection *Ceļos* ²:

"Sleep pounces on me
and with a heavy mouth
sucks me dry of the day that has passed,

but on its finger glitters a ring
with tomorrow's eye —
in the colors of the dream's wound
I will try to feel out the future."

(p. 12)

Night in January

III

"The sun has been eaten up,
a piece bitten out of the moon,
a season of famine runs
empty-handed,
dry-wombed,

across ruddy fields."

(p. 78)

"Streets splash through me
with red, golden waves,
in my arms, legs, and lap
rivers widen,
within me I rock
houses,
towers,
floods,
you."

(p. 137)

The shortness and conciseness of these poems is quite typical of Bičole, although she does have longer, balladesque works. Quite evident is also the visionary quality of her poetry — all three poems are accounts of visionary states of mind, be it the moment of falling asleep, a night in January, or one of the moods of love. The imagery, on the other hand, is concrete and bound to physical reality — the "heavy mouth" of sleep, the "wound of the dream," the "piece bitten out of the moon," the season that is "empty-handed, dry-wombed." Not only are the images bound to physical reality, they are bound to the physical reality of man — his body. Thus Bičole's poetry is rooted not so much in nature as in her own body to which she listens intently:

"Gently a bell stirs within me,
in languid waves
it sways my flesh,
— I am an ear,
listening I open
as wide as the room,"

(*Ceļos*, p. 5)

The poem is "Childbirth," and we will return to it later. The mention of flesh, bones, and parts of the body abound in her poetry. But the body is not only present, it is acted upon by the world, and this action is often violent and cruel (we may remember how the "Theater of cruelty" enhances bodily presence):

"The limbs are ripped
in black and red strips,
cloth tears like flesh
and flesh like cloth,
dissolving
into nakedness."

(*Ceļos*, p. 43)

Or in another poem:

"the days and nights
drive nails,
my flesh turns to iron
flowering with rust,"

(*Ceļos*, p. 57)

These images spring from a level of consciousness on which the world is experienced as the passion of the body — passion meaning both ecstasy and pain, and often both simultaneously, as in "Childbirth," "I am torn open jubilantly." This, the opening poem of her second collection, certainly is unique in Latvian poetry. It is explicit without being naturalistic or even realistic. It speaks of the unborn child as a bell beginning to sway and lapping up the mother's "age-old, hidden voice" until it parts from her and begins to ring with a voice of its own. The voice of the poet Baiba Bičole speaks of the elemental, age-old things of life. Such a voice will speak to us once awhile in poetry or art — as in the organic shapes of the sculpture of Arp and Brancusi, or Henry Moore's female figures. We might also add examples from painting. But poetry is generally a more intellectualized art and springs less often than visual art from these deepest levels of consciousness. I am not speaking here of the dream images of surrealism, rather of images issuing from a pre-intellectual level of experience. A level on which a poet neither organizes life, nor is he overwhelmed by the sheer marvel and bulk of it. On this level life is passion and the world a cross on which the body is crucified. There are several references to a cross in Bičole's poetry, some of them erotic:

"As if crucified
one in the other,
we will live forever."

(*Atrita*, p. 59)

It might be an interesting task to compare the mingling of erotic and religious elements in the poetry of Baiba Bičole and Anna Akhmatova.

We may also see the four elements, earth, water, air, fire as a cross on which the body is crucified. It is very tempting to analyze Bičole's poetry from the point of view of the four elements; although full justice cannot be done here, I will

succumb to the temptation.

Water certainly predominates in frequency (in this and all following instances, frequency was analyzed on the basis of *Ce/os* only). But nearly as many times as water in all its metamorphoses, we find flux and flowing. The world itself is experienced as a Heraclitean flux, a flowing and surging of forces. Not a new idea, but a plausible one, if we recall the ratio of water and land on our planet. Water almost universally represents the feminine principle in mythical thought. It is not surprising, then, that for Bičole it has a powerful erotic connotation — desire is often likened to the sea; there are several poems in which one of the lovers is a fisherman, the other his catch:

"With the secretly knowing
smile of a fisherwoman on my lips,
I dance at night
bringing in the nets,
growing heavy with you."

(*Ce/os*, p. 136)

The dance recurs as a poetic image mirroring the ritual of physical love. In the following example the flux of the world is experienced in the union of lovers:

UPRISING

"All of me rises up —
I tear open my skin,
doors and walls,
I flow in a shoreless flood —
the sobbing of your sea."

(*Atrita*, p. 51)

The flood of the world flows through the lovers' bodies and unites them with the whole universe. The body itself, although seen as a flow, is usually separated from the flux of the world:

"Locked in a red drop,
I seep into myself."

(*Ce/os*, p. 64)

Only by breaking out of the body, by spilling over into the world, can the poet become one with it. Thus the spilling of blood and the opening of arteries become "obsessive" images in Bičole's poetry. Red, the color of blood, is an "obsessive" color — we find it no less than 30 times in *Ce/os*. It is mentioned even more frequently than the blood of the universe — water. But this breaking out of one's individuality, this opening of the arteries, is very close to an ultimate submersion in the greater flux, which is death: the "Liebestod" of the German romanticists. Death is indeed seen as the final spilling of life:

"Those palms as well
in which we hide,
will spill us
and not scoop us up anymore."

(*Atrita*, p. 92)

Yet the image of the opening hand is used quite frequently to express sexual submission, which becomes thus synonymous with crossing over into the timeless flux of the universe, bringing us to the equation of sexual love and death. The tightly closed hand again stands for a firm grip on time and reality:

"In my tightly closed fist
I hold trembling time —
already the waters steam underfoot,
already mist drips on lids and hair,
already in the warm vapors
my body moves languidly,

— my palms spill over
and the waters rise."

(*Ce/os*, p. 19)

Thus death and love are of the same essence, death being more concentrated, more powerful. The ecstasy of love creates the death wish — the wish to merge with the universe. The lovers are seen thus:

"— we hold in our arms
the turning of the earth."

The image brings to mind Dylan Thomas's lines:

"But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages."

(*Deaths and Entrances*, p. 36)

Another short poem expresses the cosmic, even mystical aspect of love:

"You will not let me go anymore —
in the very center of your embrace,
in the deepest core
suns rise and set,
days and nights
arise and leave,
earths and seas follow each other,
seasons, years,
centuries —
all of this remains, locked in your embrace,
in the deepest center of your embrace
even as I remain."

(*Ce/os*, p. 135)

Of the other elements in Bičole's poetry, fire and air seem to belong together in images of burning and rising to the sky as smoke. They express a release and return to a cosmic consciousness through erotic love. Here she is in agreement with Taoist thought for which fire and light represent masculine polarity. Thus images of burning express a longing for the ecstasy of sexual union which for her becomes an extatic communion with the timeless essence of the universe. The following typically visionary poem may stand for the whole group of poems about burning. It has the familiar features of 1) violent action, 2) the wish to die and be reborn as part of a greater wholeness, 3) a balladesque progression.

"I shoot out of the smokestack
in the glowing stigmata of sparks,
burning, burning clothes!

Gentle comes the wind,
picks off the reddish stings,
turns me into rosy smoke.

Amidst dissolving breezes,
I mingle with a band of airy vagabonds,
we dance away."

(*Atrita*, p. 105)

Fire, just as water, can liberate the living essence of the body. We find a sizable group of images of burned or singed clothes and skin that peels off and frees the body.

Transitory stages in which one element dissolves into another abound in Bičole's poetry: smoke as matter dissolved in air; haze, mist, fog, vapor, and steam as water dissolved in air. The image of dissolving or yielding is another one of the "obsessive" images. Be it rising up into the air, melting, or falling asleep — all these images have erotic connotations. Wind, the apotheosis of air, is one of the central images (twenty-six instances in *Ce/os*, the four large groups of imagery attributable to the four elements balance each other numerically to a surprising degree). Wind is movement, and movement is life. We are reminded of the Biblical "the quick and the dead." The poetry of Bičole is itself quick and alive to the point of being an apotheosis of life. There is movement in nearly every verse, mostly swift, even turbulent and violent movement. It is in connection with this that criticism may be leveled against her poetic method which sometimes does not allow the reader to grasp an image before catapulting him into the next. A more relaxed pacing would permit the reader to adjust his psychological time to the movement in the poem. Her poems are often reminiscent of baroque paintings — whirling, slanting, crisscrossing movement and explosions of light. The role of light as a poetic image cannot be discussed here for reasons of space, although it would be revealing of the mystical element in her poetry.

Under the swift swirls of the wind and the slow coursing of water, the earth lies dark and quiet as repository of the mystery of fertility. Bičole's poetic thinking moves around fertility just as did the thinking of her Latvian peasant ancestors. The idea of the fertility of the earth became all important for man when he changed from hunter and gatherer of food to tiller of the soil. The two Baltic nations are not only among the oldest agricultural people of Europe, but have also preserved in their folklore traces of the ancient rituals. The farther back in time we go, the more powerful the idea of fertility becomes, until we reach a stage where almost every ritual is a fertility ritual. For if fertility failed, death lay waiting. Death was the only alternative to fertility, and life the symbolic distance between the two. If man is attuned to the earth (nowadays we speak of ecology), the magic of fertility will touch him also:

"you tear open your dry glove
and stretch forth green fingers
with seeds."

(*Atrita*, p. 14)

Modern man has separated himself from the earth by abusing it, he has broken the magic circle of nature, and a feeling of estrangement is his reward. By tampering with the earth's fertility, he has become spiritually sterile himself, and now it is the turn of the earth to deny him:

"but the earth
under the chastity belt of asphalt

rejects him,"

(*Ceļos*, p. 28)

As a poet, Bičole moves in an older order of being where organic life and man are not separated by the chastity belt of technological progress; where the earth is not repressed. An order in which body and soul are not separated by the chastity belt of a narrow religious conscience; where the body is not repressed. Rather, where the body and the senses become the cardinal means of experiencing both the world in time and its timeless essence. Therefore it is a liberating experience to read Bičole's poetry, to listen to her "age-old, hidden voice" saying that man *is* his body and that the body is a revelation. That the body is an ancient, powerful, awesome presence, capable of connecting us, in the act of love,

with the very heart of the universe. Thus her powerful eroticism is not a cerebral, personal eroticism merely meant to gratify the ego, but rather a celebration of the passion and mystery of the flesh which brings man as close to the essence of life as it does to death. Her poetry gives us both a vision of the swift and joyful motion of the world and glimpses of the darkness at its core. It may well be that this is the very essence of woman — to be like Eurydike, part of life and of death, and to call Orpheus back in the act of love to the regions of darkness and rebirth.

1. See also A. Ivaška, "Gunars Saliņš: Poet of the Two Suns" (*Books Abroad*, 43:1) and "Pokarinés latvių poezijos keliai" (*Metmenys*, 14).
2. Baiba Bičole, *Atrīta*, The River Hill Press, Shippenville, Pa. 1966; *Ceļos*, Grāmatu draugs, New York 1969. All translations by A. I.