

A TOPOGRAPHY OF EXILE: NARRATIVE FORMS AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENTS IN PROSE

Works of Four Latvian Writers

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The first two decades of Latvian exile following World War II saw prodigious amounts of émigré writing. Some of this writing was produced by those who felt that a deep hurt, anger, and anguish alone can invest a piece of writing with authentic literary values. Others assumed that it was their duty to bear witness to the political wrongs perpetrated on the Latvian people. Popular tastes and aspirations derived much satisfaction from these patriotic and nostalgic potboilers that depicted the past in a glow of idealized and sentimentalized incandescence. But exile also inspired some of the best writing in Latvian literature infused with pathetic lament about the loss of the native land. With the dissipation of hope for an early return and with further emigration to more distant lands, new thematic shifts are in evidence, indicating awareness of the new environment. Some writers contemplate with a feeling of unreality, as if before stage sets, the strange landscapes of foreign lands whose natural beauty only has the catalytic function of summoning memories of the homeland.

Pseudo-sociological observations are also popular as the customs and the people of the host country are viewed with incomprehension or ridicule. And still today, after more than twenty-five years of exile, these attitudes and topics persist. Keeping watch over well-established literary traditions, the old guard, seemingly oblivious of postwar re-orientations in world literature, continue to turn out entertaining stories rewarded with the success of mediocrity.

In the meantime, however, another generation of writers has come of age. This is perhaps the last generation of Latvian émigré literature, since the hothouse cultivation of Latvian tradition and the language in an alien environment can only be short-lived. And already this one is a kind of hybrid generation, between the alienation of the exile and the assimilation of the immigrant, cursed and blessed to live with special privileges and irreconcilable contradictions. Although these younger writers left no literary fortunes in Latvia, their Latvian cultural heritage is rich. Their allegiance to a particular national **modus vivendi**, however, is tainted since during their formative years they have also been cross-fertilized by other cultures. Having escaped the typical refugee mentalities and refusing to become assimilated, they had to invent their own system of values. In the historical perspective, these writers will merit the distinction of being the last members of a moribund lineage. But more importantly, they have earned their **droit de cité** for infusing their distinct ethnic particularity with sensibilities that transcend the national scope and acquire universal significance.

Four Latvian prose writers in exile, Andrejs Īrbe, Talivaldis Kikauka, Ilze Šķipsna, and Benita Veisberga, could be cited as some of the best representatives of this lost tribe. Although they do not form a homogeneous literary coterie, it is possible to define affinities among them in terms of their refusal to conform to typical literary molds and to curry favor with the conservative middle-class reader. Characteristically of modern prose forms in general, these Latvian writers disown the traditional concepts of plot, character, and causality. Human experience disintegrates into fragments of perception which are not fitted together by the author to form a well-delineated plot for the entertainment of the reader to facilitate eupesia. Sometimes the reader himself must try to work out his own version with optional episodes whose causal connections and chronological sequence are left in doubt. The experience of the world does not lend itself **a priori** to value judgments and escapes the logical order that reason attempts to impose. The well-rounded classical characters have also disappeared from this prose. The reader is seldom presented with a full-length portrait of a personage, and psychological probing never succeed in explicating fully human behavior. The reader is confronted with a world whose topography has lost its former anthropomorphic character.

The confidence that the older generation of writers had in the preordained meaning of words has also been eroded. To restate a truism, words participate in the consecration of a certain order of things. Thus, with the crumbling of the reality of a world that is now stripped of transcendence and riddled with doubts and suspicions, its signs can only appear ambiguous and incoherent. Corroded by political slogans, advertising jingles, academic jargon, social prattle, the word hovers in a twilight zone, being, on one hand, rejected as bothersome noise and, on the other hand, needed as a means of asserting one's existence.

The evolution of the styles of the four Latvian prose writers suggests their increasing concerns with language. Irbe's language has exceptional lyric qualities and yet it is strangely nervous and stark, stripped of eloquence and conventional metaphor. Škipsna, on the other hand, is obsessively prolix, as if her female protagonists were trying to drown out the anguish of being in a torrent of words. Syntactical convolutions, parenthetical interpolations, breathless accumulations of words make her sentences labyrinths where the reader wanders, perplexed and disoriented, with a feeling that the world has lost its semantic security.

But the most brazen iconoclasts are Kikauka and Veisberga. Especially in his latest work, Kikauka's style is disquietingly amorphous. Weird surrealistic juxtapositions of images that may be simultaneously grotesque and beautiful are interspersed with platitudes, nonsensical phrases, malapropisms, anachronisms, inventory-like enumerations. In defiance of standard syntax, with the excitement of a child flattening his sand castle, Kikauka twists and truncates his sentences, naughtily playing with solecisms and linguistic improprieties. It is not, perhaps, Kikauka's gratuitous joy to wreak semantic havoc, but rather a deep-seated malaise of existence that is reflected in the malaise of language. When the allegedly absolute veracity of slogans, borrowed ideas fixes, and ready-made attitudes loses its hypnotic grip, heresy and sin, linguistic and ideological, have the charm of freedom and authenticity. If affinities have any merit, it may be suggested that we are perhaps witnessing the making of a Latvian Ionesco.

Veisberga has also helped explode some of the sacrosanct myths concerning literary language. She engages the reader's complicity with her disarming candidness that strips from her viable vernacular all graceful amenities and rhetorical ornament, all elegant gesture and gallant pose. Her language, stark and simple, arrested by frequent punctuation stops, limited by syntactical fragmentation, disconnected, without causal conjunctions, suggests an experience that oscillated between dazed incomprehension of the world that has no a priori meaning and inarticulate desire for a life of fulfillment. The writer's perspective coincides with that of a human being who is in the process of living his life and faces an undetermined future. It is the individual reader's task to assign value and meaning to a human experience that the author refuses to interpret for the reader. Her work, at first sight, may suffer from lack of clarity and purposefulness, but its freedom from traditional literary contrivance can only accrue its relevance.

The characteristics of these four Latvian writers are, of course, shared by many other European and American writers. But whatever affinities with contemporary trends in world literature may be evoked, it is evident that national consciousness is the matrix of their work, even if all outward signs of specific ethnicity, save the language, have disappeared. The experience of exile has left its indelible imprint. Yet this national trauma strives to acquire universal significance whereby exile is no longer a localized political predicament but a dimension of the human condition. Modern man, to borrow Camus' image, is a king exiled in his own kingdom where everything that exalts life at the same time accrues its absurdity. He is banished from a paradise which should have existed if this world had been meant for man. Running multidirectionally from the inner labyrinths of Škipsna's intellectualism to the openness of Veisberga's ingenuousness, from Kikauka's acid sarcasm that mixes with romantic fantasy to Irbe's lyric apocalypticism, the inner topography of exile may vary from author to author. Yet the image of this paradise lost, to be cherished or to be forgotten, haunts their imagination.

The most conspicuous facet of Škipsna's writing is the presence of a central hypersensitive consciousness. The plots of her novels are open-ended. Her first novel, **Aiz Septītā Tilta** (Beyond the Seventh Bridge), can be construed as a diary of a dual consciousness. Two girl friends, Edite and Solvita, whose mutual acquaintance dates from their early school years in Latvia, happen to meet after many years of separation. Their dispositions, life styles, and ambitions are both contrastingly different and, in a way, complementary. Edite, an introvert bent on meditation, both disapproves of and feels drawn to Solvita, an extrovert, dynamic, restless, given to action and interaction with other people.

Edite is a consciousness fully absorbed in itself, secreting its own reality that negates the outer world as a logical, self-sufficient continuum. With the determination of a fanatic anti-hedonist, she will pursue the sublimation of her inner and outer exile. Expelled from the secure, serene, and beautiful place of refuge that was her childhood in Latvia, "you have always convinced yourself," Solvita reminds her, "that you will nowhere ever feel like at home, as you did when you were a child, and to feel any other way is not worth it." ¹ There are epiphanic moments when suddenly idyllic scenes from Latvia, triggered by some Proustian associations, surge to consciousness. Nostalgic moods are evoked by these involuntary recollections that are like the somniferous vapors of the past that tempt Gide's Theseus in the Cretan labyrinth to surrender to tradition. But Edite refuses to be mesmerized and immobilized by the past. She has little pity for her mother who is "a monument to the happy times before the war and reproach to all that came after it." (p. 31) With the same gesture of defiance and spite, Edite has declared to herself that, after her rapturous love affair that was ended by a tragedy, she will never be in love again. Exultantly she avows the gratuitousness which she has reached in her pursuit of perfection of her inner exile: "Everything in my life has been arranged so that now I had the time to think and remember and also not to remember, I had no real or imagined necessity that would force me to act like a fully wound-up top... Nothing depended on

my life, nobody needed me, and I had no burning desires, unquenchable longings, or insurmountable passions... I could sharpen my consciousness like a knife... I needed no intoxication to make life bearable." (p. 28)

But to maintain this privileged state of gratuitous freedom in exile, the world must be rejected as meaningless, and the price one pays for the privilege is a kind of reduction of being. In another moment of epiphany, as her hand happens to touch a stone protrusion in a wall, Edite feels her oneness with the world of things in total meaninglessness. "The stone's secret was that there was no secret... I suddenly felt that world as part of myself... Life was such a wonderful devastating absurdity. Nothing had meaning, or goal, or purpose - nothing needed meaning. Meaning was something men had invented, had harnessed themselves with, like with a yoke that never let them raise their heads freely, courageously, and joyously." (pp. 29-30)

The thought that life can be found unworthy of anguished probing for meaning is exhilarating and liberating. Yet these privileged moments of complete mastery over the world and of domination over her emotional frailties are short-lived, since only by herself, alone in her room, isolated from the outside world, could she celebrate her freedom. Her inner kingdom of perfect exile is constantly threatened from without. When her mother decides to move into her apartment, Edite, refusing to be entrapped by the past, makes the mistake of accepting Solvita's invitation to accompany her on a visit to the latter's in-laws a North Carolinian patrician family. There she is constantly exposed to the temptation to make an emotional engagement, to fill the vacuity of perfection with action and commitment. Many unpromised lands, choices not made, opportunities missed, lives not lived haunt her. After a series of incidents, Solvita and Edite recklessly drive away from the haunted manor. The final escape is described as two separate, yet almost identical, experiences. In the epilogue, an anonymous person reveals that the tombstone of the woman killed in the auto accident bears both names, Edite Solvita, the latter being her middle name. It appears that Solvita, Edite's potential self, has killed Edite. Only in the nothingness of death, the eternal opposite of thought and action, of consciousness and being, of the actual and the potential can be reconciled. The shape of Edite's tombstone, which used to be a road sign, resembles the geographic contours of Latvia. Since the body cannot be laid to rest in the native soil, at least the name is engraved in an object that symbolically represents Latvia. Edite - Solvita, the universal couple of human ambivalence and desire for harmony, has been united in death. The road sign has become a tombstone, thus completing the cycle of human existence.

The same cultivation of exile, dispossession, and non-attachment is continued in Škipsna's latest novel, **Neapsolitas Zemes** (The Unpromised Lands). The central character is Malva, an archeology student pursuing research in New York's museums. The novel starts with the statement: "He does not answer. He must have disappeared."² Nobody really knows much about this mysterious Latvian who has been sighted in the vicinity of archaeological excavations in Turkey. In New York, he is recuperating from illness, all the while remaining quite inaccessible, absent-minded, oblivious of his surroundings. Malva is haunted by the absent presence of this man, "who needs no longer a home and a quilt, he who wanders in ever higher and brighter places — not ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, but free from the unending fetters of necessity becomes more and more ethereal — more insubstantial and rarefied." (p. 29) Malva, however, has developed attachments, obligations, and a certain pattern of life. The business of living a life that has become more and more regular encroaches upon her freedom and taints her exile. She recognizes that her being in the "Free" world is a kind of encouragement to her cousin who remained in Soviet Latvia; "for her sake alone, life was worth living — indeed, even necessary. To be a confirmation of somebody's dream — that was enough to justify life." (p. 29) But along with meaning and purpose, Malva's life has also acquired rankling dependencies and responsibilities. And she is anxious to "finish the usual chores of living." (p. 69) Thus, looking for someone who could deliver a mantic message, one day she starts to pursue a man with a bizarre hat. But he has no secret to divulge, and at the end it is assumed that she, too, has disappeared.

The novel is again a kind of diary of a consciousness that searches for a higher level of life's experience, for a more authentic and intensified awareness of potentialities. Malva yearns for Gidean "disponibilité," availability to new adventures that await her in those lands not promised, lands of chance and gratuitous freedom. Thus, with Škipsna, exile with its uprootedness becomes a kind of privileged state which must be cultivated and guarded against the impurities that accumulate with that vegetative process others call living. It requires vigilance and a lot of courage to assimilate consciously and to cherish its elevated solitude. With Veisberga, on the other hand, the topography of exile extends downward to abysmal depths of loneliness.

Veisberga so far has published only one full-length novel, *Es, Tavs Maigais Jers* (I, Your Gentle Lamb), but one is almost tempted to pronounce her **coup d'essai** a coup de maître. In its bare outlines, the novel is based on a banal love story, simple and timeless, treating the full cycle of a passion, its inception, consummation, and final disintegration. In contrapuntal sequences, throughout this first-person confession, the inconstancy of human infatuation intertwines with the never-abating yearning for home. One of the leitmotifs that articulates the fragility of human passions is the cyclic appearance of butterflies. The narrator observes their intricate flights around flowers, their games in the spring air, and their agony in the winter rain. Finally, black flakes of charred paper from the neighbor's burning barrel, like dead butterflies of gloom, slowly flutter by the window and announce her abandonment. In contrast to the flighty brevity of the butterflies, a gaping abyss, the symbol of death and purposelessness, threatens to swallow up in its nothingness the naive refugee girl who sought to fill the void of exile with emotional attachments. Following a marriage that broke up, she feels lost on an endless plain, enveloped in opaque fog where the ominous whispers of the abyss echo: "In vain! You're just fooling around. Nobody needs your butterflies."³

Memory has stored recollections from childhood in Latvia that are filled with warmth, harmony, and a sense of belonging. The narrator remembers how she had desperately wished to repose in the Latvian soil, "not for patriotic reasons. Selfishly, for myself. Something like the desire to be near flowers, light. For the sake of belonging. .. But there is no home. Neither here, nor there. Home is lost." (pp. 55-56) A recollection of elegiac scenes from Latvia exuding rustic simplicity and vitality infuse her with a feeling of her linguistic estrangement. In a land where her language is foreign, her words have lost their real meaning: "Men, barefoot, on their native land. Why is it denied to me? I also want the strength that comes from the earth. I also want to be strong. No, I know in every soil there is strength... And in that soil my language has seeped in." (pp. 112-113)

The feeling of being disinherited intensifies the exile's rapturous expectations of being possessed by love. In the blessed moments of emotional fulfillment, the world is again harmonious and plentiful, and man is secure: "We walk, two specters, clinging together under huge trees. What is? All. Everything. Firs, needles', sky, earth. Your hands. I'm not falling. There is no abyss." (pp. 87-88)

This moment of happiness, however, when man and man and men and the world are in accord is only a self-Educated illusion. The abyss has never disappeared, and with the passing of the infatuation, the fall into the existential void of human life is imminent. Delivered of her illusions, the exile is awakened to human solidarity. She is now initiated into mankind whose reality consists in depravity and utter solitude. In a way, she has regained her sense of belonging. "I'm not alone, if I were alone, if I were an unfortunate exception, it would be better, more hopeful. Most of them are down. On their knees, crawling. Others have no roof over their heads, some are crying at the roadside, in the dust. Some have run out of tears. Millions lift their eyes upward, whisper: take back my life, put it out! Too heavy. Others are waiting for the bomb. What is God saying? He's silent. Turns away." (pp. 171-172) In the silence of a universe where the prayers and the lamentations of the tortured and the miserable echo in abysmal absence, the exile, the human prototype **par excellence**, must recognize that it is impossible to be man and at the same time to be saved from the human condition. Thus, with Veisberga, the inner topography of exile charts its downward course to encompass at its periphery all humanity. With Kikauka, on the other hand, exile leads to a total disintegration of all that is human.

The thematic focus of Kikauka's work frequently juxtaposes the satirist's concerns with acute social problems and the philosopher's preoccupations with human destinies. His novel, **Leonards**, deals with the imaginary adventures of a fantast, Leonards, but the work can also be construed as a bitter indictment of occidental civilization in general and American technocracy in particular. In search of a new reality, "better than the one I see around me," **4** Leonards, vaguely intimated to be a Latvian refugee, artist, lucid paranoiac, encounters Queen Calliope in her desert queendom of Elliopia, a Shangri-la with Disneyland settings, a land of enchantment and nightmarish horrors, beautiful and gaudy. Leonards is led through Elliopia's museum which exhibits man's past accomplishments and projects his progress toward inhumanity and madness. Horrified by man's future prospects, Leonards remains listless to Calliope's supplications, "I want to awaken you, Leonards, to humanity." (p. 199) As his own phantasmagoria, Elliopia is both Leonards's home and exile, revealing the inner contradictions and the ambiguities of the modern Ulysses, his lofty aspirations and innate skepticism. Soon Leonards is expelled from Elliopia. At the end, since the past has a "moldy smell" (p. 197) and the future is ugly and dreadful, Leonards chooses to slough off his human form and to turn into pure energy, thus giving final perfection in nothingness to his perpetual exile.

In his latest work, **Putni** (Birds), Kikauka returns from the flight into fantasy and philosophic contemplation to a more earthly satire of the Latvian immigrant society, complete with its parvenus, clowns, and hypocrites. These creatures have the characteristics of certain types of birds, which in turn may very well serve as human prototypes. A universal grinder, the invention of a resourceful Latvian immigrant, continues to reduce everything, objects, animals, humans, innocent and guilty, to a homogeneous mass of primary matter that can be used for tatooing, for the manufacture of chewing gum and plastic bombs to satisfy man's direst needs. Materialism has banished man from humanity. An authentic experience of exile is predicated on man's lucid self-awareness. Kikauka's mechanical homunculi bear little resemblance to their hapless predecessor, **homo sapiens**, with whose degeneration the human race returns to lower forms of being. Apocalyptic, but with more prophetic detachment, is also Irbe's vision of the world whose basic orientation seems to be derived from the experience of exile.

The ambience of Irbe's short stories is characterized by its enmity to man who, homeless, wanders in a world inimical to his presence and bent on his destruction. The prologue to the last collection of his short stories depicts a forsaken place where wild nature is effacing the last traces of the humans who once cultivated the garden and inhabited the house. The haunted place is forbidden. The gate is fastened by a rusty wire and the door is locked. The last footprints left in the ground are eroded away by rain, snow, wind. There must not have been any chroniclers who would have wanted to preserve the memory of this place from total oblivion, or rats may have eaten the pages that once recorded its existence.

The past is lost forever. The short stories are peopled with amnesiacs or modern Adam and Eve who have no memories and are not sure whether their paradise is where they are or where they are not. The man who, after twenty years or **Wanderjahre**, returns to his native village finds only strangers who are indifferent to his search for the past and his former acquaintances who are not interested in sharing his recollections. The world is unsafe for man. Conflagrations and earth subsidences devour humans and their dwellings. Gates close, bridges collapse, houses are on the verge of crumbling, and floods cut off escape routes. Precarious and cataclysmic, this world holds no promise for human aspirations, Irbe's personages are tense, without home or past, always in search of something, anxiously expecting a mantic revelation. In

the story, "The Mountain Fire," a girl, Rasma, roaming the mountain side, peers into the valley: "The Promised Land!.. The valley was not the promised land; the land is not promised to anybody. Who can promise? It was only a valley, there lived only men, lived and pined away — each in his own way."⁵ The trees around her are bemoaning their destiny "to be tied down to earth. To be uprooted means to die — with the roots in the air, like desperate tentacles looking for humidity and refreshment, but encountering only the cruelty of the sun and the winds. That was the destiny of trees. Rasma was free. She was not like a tree that has grown roots in the soil." (p. 22) But the freedom humans think they possess renders them vulnerable. Rasma notices a man climbing the mountain and finally reaching the summit. But as he stands there defiantly on the top, fire strikes him, and like a burning torch, devoured by flames he tumbles into the thicket below, setting the whole mountain side afire. Sometimes maniacs and arsonists wander around the world, thinking that they are the last survivors of the cataclysmic destruction. Victims are executed silently without explanation, for pity and justice are as accidental or predestined as hatred, boredom, and misery. In these unpromised lands, man has to learn to live with the lucid awareness of his perpetual exile.

Whatever idiosyncratic diversities the narrative forms of these four Latvian writers may display, their artistic sensibilities bear similar stigmata of exile. The subjective character of this traumatic experience has lent authenticity to their writing, blending form and content in remarkably original aesthetic configurations. On the other hand, removed from the confines of its political context, their exile extends its topography to reach out for universal significance and to partake of the human condition. As the last members of a small tribe doomed to extinction, they have imparted a vision of man that deserves to be rescued from oblivion.

1 Elze Šķipsna, *Aiz Septīta Tīlta*, Brooklyn: Gramatu Draugs, 1965, 19. This and the following quotations from the works discussed are my translations.

2 Ilze Šķipsna, *Neapsolītas Zemes*, Brooklyn: Gramatu Draugs, 1970, 7.

3 Benita Veisberga, *Ēs, Tavs Maigais Jers*, Minneapolis: Tilts, 1968, 43.

4 Talivaldis Kikauka, *Leonards*, Minneapolis: Tilts, 1967, 114.

5 Andrejs Irba, *Marisandra Kaza*, Vasteras, Sweden: Žiemeiblazma, 1966, 22.