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AIRY CAGES: THE POETRY OF ALDONA GUSTAS

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We are all exiles from a certain land — a land of eternal summers in which nature is alive with kindred spirits, in which all things glow with the freshness of dawn. An angel with a flaming sword guards the gates of this land, the land of our childhood. Some poets among us have retained the ability to remember this land more clearly and vividly than the rest of us. By their words they can once more call it into being in our minds; their poems touch in us that first strata of impressions and experiences when the world was new. One such poet is Aldona Gustas, who while writing in German attempts to recapture the essence of her Lithuanian childhood, especially in her volume of poetry entitled "Airy Cages" (*Luftkäfige: eine litauische Kindheit*).

Aldona Gustas spent her earliest childhood in the village of Karceviškiai, Lithuania, where she was born in 1932. Later, she and her family lived for a time in Vilnius. At the age of nine Gustas fled Russian-occupied Lithuania with her mother; her father was deported to Siberia. Since 1941 Gustas has resided in Berlin. In addition to physical exile, Gustas also suffered cultural and linguistic isolation — she grew up in Berlin having little contact with other Lithuanians, so that today a language barrier separates her from her native land.

Between 1962 and 1980 Gustas has published eleven books of poetry and has contributed to numerous anthologies.¹ Many of her books have appeared in exclusive, bibliophile editions, each volume numbered and signed by the poet. Some of the earlier books of poetry were illustrated by different artists, however the last four publications have included original lithographs by Gustas herself. During the 1970's she created an important artistic forum in West Berlin, the "Berliner Malerpoeten," a group of individuals who, like Gustas herself, work with both verbal and visual media. Among the members are Günter Grass, Günter Bruno Fuchs, and Wolfdietrich Schnurre. Gustas has organized exhibits of works by this group and has edited an illustrated anthology.²

In a period of German literature that has emphasized social relevance and ideological commitment Aldona Gustas has maintained a very personal, lyrical voice. Karl Krolow, prominent critic and fellow-poet, has referred to her as an "Einzelgänger" — a "lone wolf" on the German literary scene.³ Perhaps because she does not espouse any fashionable causes her poetry has not captured the attention of a wide public. Reviewers of her books have repeatedly noted Gustas' Lithuanian origins and she herself has stressed the importance of this heritage for her creativity; nonetheless, she remains relatively unknown to Lithuanian readers as well.⁴ Like a number of other poets of Lithuanian origin — Mickiewicz, Baltrušaitis, Milosz — she writes about her native land in the language of another culture.

The principal theme of Gustas' poetry is love — not in a platonic, idealized sense, but as the concrete, sensual togetherness of physical beings. "Word-Erotics," the title of one of her books, is an apt description of her poetry. In some of her poems the eroticism is playful and whimsical, masquerading in fantasy images of clouds, swans, sea gulls, flowers, swimming fish and stars. In other poems, however, eroticism is expressed in a direct, laconic manner: "don't come to me/ with cosmic thoughts/ speak of something ordinary/ that stays/ at least for a while/ which is given/ so as to prove our existence/ with sperm" (*Eine Welle, eine Muschel oder Venus persönlich*). A similar tension is evoked by fluctuations of mood from an exuberant, permissive self-indulgence, to a shy, almost awkward, tenderness. Gustas is a feminist poet in a broad sense of the word — social and political reforms do not concern her directly, but rather the full acceptance of the female self. Her verses speak directly to and about women: "like a woman/ born of another woman/ I spoke always/ from woman to woman" (*Eine Welle, eine Muschel ..*). There is an androgynous quality about her verses, a quality evident

especially in her lithographs, where delicate female figures, often with bird-like limbs, hover in space. The intensely personal subject-matter of her poetry separates Gustas from those contemporary German poets who follow Brecht's commitment to social concerns and from those who, like Heissenbüttel, experiment with language. Gustas' verses are neither abstract nor highly intellectual. Instead, they concentrate on subjective sensations and on her interaction with the concrete objects of her surroundings. While she delights in the sounds of language, in play with words, and in paradoxical formulations, her primary impulse is to communicate, to reach out and to be understood.

Scattered throughout her poetry Gustas has made direct references to Lithuanian "dainos" and folktales, to the landscape of her childhood. More than those references, however, her tendency to mythologize her present urban surroundings, to turn them back into nature, identifies her as an East European for German readers, in spite of the forty years that she has spent on German soil. It has become almost a convention of German literature to regard the Baltic area, especially Lithuania, as a region where a pre-Christian world view, where ancient nature-myths and folklore continue to survive into the twentieth century. With a wave of her lyrical wand Gustas changes West Berlin into a fairytale landscape — "no/ I dwell in a city/ that grows in the forest" (*Worterotik*, p. 24). Here nature spirits lurk behind each tree, the moon strums a guitar, and blue blossoms grow in underground garages. In the final poem of the volume "A Wave, a Seashell or Venus in Person" (*Eine Welle, eine Muschel. . .*) the poet uses folkloric language and imagery to create a humorously surrealistic vision of herself on a donkey cart on West Berlin's main boulevard, the Kurfürstendamm. Six female companions slide from her hair and amuse themselves with incongruous activities, such as the planting of geraniums in garbage containers. Gustas has preserved the ability to view her urban world with the myth-making fantasy of a child. The result is a "folk surrealism" reminiscent of Chagall.

Her own childhood, the source of her poetic creativity, is the subject of her eleventh book of poems "Airy Cages: A Lithuanian Childhood."-The twenty untitled poems in this volume are arranged in a general, biographical chronology and are illustrated with six original lithographs. Gustas begins with a straightforward, almost prosaic account of her birth:

I was born
on a March day in 1932
Karceviškiai was the town

during the delivery
my grandmother helped
my mother

while the women
attended to me
snow fell on the village

when my grandmother
finally wrapped me
in cloth
she thanked God

my sleeping mother
was breathing softly
covered deeply with snow
were the paths
and the sun looked down
without warmth
on my grandmother
and on me

The sentimentality and pathos that memories of childhood can arouse are kept in check by a narrative voice that appears to concentrate only on the outward events, on the plain facts. However, an emotional contrast emerges between the solicitous actions of the female figures and the coldness of the external world.

Several poems express the growing child's intimate relationship with her natural surroundings. She "breathes like a fish, glistens like a toad," identifies herself with "birches and amber animals." The river Šyša, endowed with female qualities, is like a benevolent fairy godmother who speaks to the child and bestows gifts on her:

the sun hung still as an apple
in the trees

I sat
beside the Šyša
balancing blackberries on my tongue

when I lay
down in the grass
flowers tattooed me

when I stayed by the river
until evening
Šyša bestowed on me
an elfendewed dress

a firgreen apron
and shoes of mist

The six original lithographs that Gustas created for this volume portray a pensive young girl who stands apart from the other human figures. Touchingly awkward, even amateurish, these lithographs succeed nonetheless remarkably well in conveying the atmosphere of childhood.

Earliest memories, complete absorption in the natural, rural surroundings, give way to school days in Vilnius, to the companionship of other children. The simple lucidity of the first poems yields place to more complex imagery and to budding eroticism:

School paths in a landscape
where children played under yellow-yolked suns
under apple-colored clouds

drafty hallways
breasts covered by braids
where the night slowly
forced itself into our longings

we were daughters and sons
from Poland and Lithuania
fished frogs in ponds
trapped birds in airy cages
taught them to sing our way
they taught us to fly

we dipped our fingers in the sun
painted the wind
our friendly playmate
who ran through the streets
showing his gentle eyes to all

I placed then every night
a moon on my pillow⁵
sucked on its coldness
rocked and fondled its body
until my cold hands
disappeared into pockets of dream

With the simplicity and directness of a folksong the poem evokes images from nature — sun, wind, moon, frogs, birds — to convey the carefree freedom of youth. But the recollection of childhood is a painful process — it revives images, rekindles suppressed emotions. The poet attempts to control these emotions by a simple narrating and naming, but she finally gives in to expressions of sorrow and loss. The poet seeks to bury these painful memories by placing the images of her childhood into a little coffin:

a little coffin
with a village pond
from my childhood

a little coffin
with frogs
from there

a little coffin
with white shoes

and a glass of milk
that tastes
like dainos

is appended to this poem

By means of folkloric repetitions and diminutives the poem suggests a ritual act, like the burial of talisman objects. The break with childhood, made final by war and exile, is expressed through the antithesis of summer and winter. Childhood is compressed into the images of a single summer:

before
the snow fell
I wore a dress
of raspberry velvet

before
the snow fell
beetles glowed in my hair
rainbow-colored

before
the snow fell
my shadow followed me
filled with flowers

before
the snow fell
I drummed children's songs
on cherry trees

before
the snow fell
I feed the summer
with clover

a summer
that now
pulses
in dissected butterflies
fades
in old photographs

No longer able to recall with detachment, the poet gives vent to the pain of loss through the repeated "before the snow fell." In the final stanza the active experience of loss is transmuted into a gentle nostalgia.

The passage of time that fades old photographs dims also memories of the past. For Gustas the memories of her childhood are "fenced in," they are separated from the living present by the triple barriers of time, of physical, and of cultural exile:

where thrushes
sing dainos
where folktales
flow into rivers
fenced in by memories
my parents' house
grows dim

where forests
softly flower
where fields
show clover shadows
fenced in by memories
my playmates
grow dim

where saints
remember me
where Lithuania
is a part of me
fenced in by memories
my childhood
grows dim

The image of a "fenced in" childhood is ambivalent: it suggests both the longing for something inaccessible as well as the limits which our childhood continues to impose on us. Those intangible, dim memories continue to define our spiritual horizons. Childhood memories, for Gustas, are like the "airy cages" of the book's title: they hold us captive with invisible bars.

Several of the later poems in the cycle do not spring from a confrontation with childhood memories, but from a more recent visit to Lithuania. In these poems the poet celebrates a joyful reunion with the scenes of her childhood:

in Lithuania
there are rivers
that tirelessly plow the clouds

in Lithuania
there are forests
with hearts of raspberry

in Lithuania
lives in faithful wedding
the grass with the earth

in Lithuania
there are women
when you see them
you are gladdened
that one of them
gave you birth

With this final poem Gustas has completed her pilgrimage home. She had begun by narrating the simple facts of birth. At the end, she sings a rhapsodic hymn of loyalty to her human mother and to her mother-land.

A German critic reviewing Aldona Gustas' earlier collection of lyrics, "I-love-you-texts" (*Liebedichttexte*) stated that to discuss Gustas is to give the reader a "confidential tip."⁶ Through her Lithuanian heritage she has brought to German literature a fresh lyrical voice and a perspective on life and love that has been shaped by the landscape and the human relationships of the Lithuanian countryside.

1 Gustas has published the following volumes of poetry: *Nachtstrassen* (Stierstadt(Eremiten, 1962); *Grasdeuter* (Hannover: Fischersträss'ner Presschen, 1963); *Mikronautenzüge* (Hamburg: Montage, 1964); *Blaue Sträucher* (Bremen: Verlag schöngeist-bel esprit, 1967); *Notizen* (Berlin: Edition der Galerie am Abend, 1967); *Liebedichttexte* (Berlin: Berliner Handpresse, 1968); *Worterotik* (Berlin: Fietkau, 1971); *Frankierter Morgenhimmel* (Düsseldorf: Eremiten, 1975); *Puppenruhe* (Düsseldorf: Eremiten, 1977); *Eine Welle, eine Muschel oder Venus persönlich* (Düsseldorf: Eremiten, 1979); *Luftkäfige: Eine litauische Kindheit* (Berlin: Mariannenpresse, 1980).

2 Aldona Gustas, ed. *Berliner Malerpoeten: Bilder und Texte* (Herford and Berlin(Nicolai, 1974; reprinted 1977 Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag).

3 In *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 8, 1969. Other reviews by Krolow of Gustas' lyrics have appeared in the same newspaper on June 1, 1975 and on May 13, 1979.

4 Some of Gustas' poems have been published in Soviet Lithuanian periodicals translated into Lithuanian by Vytautas Karalius. The Lithuanian press in exile has published two articles on Gustas with sample poems in Lithuanian translation: Alaušius (pseud.), "Aldona Gustaitė: Vokiečių poetė lietuvaitė," *Aidai*, Nr. 9, November, 1969, pp. 402-406; and R. E. Maziliauskas, "Panas lietuviškose samanose: Aldona Gustas ir jos kūryba," *Septintoji Pradalgė*, K. Barėnas, ed. (London: Nida, 1971), pp. 304-331.

5 In an earlier version this verse read "a Russian moon." Gustas dropped the word "Russian" to avoid unintended political overtones. Cf. Maziliauskas, p. 318.

6 "Seit 1962 . . . gilt Aldona Gustas als eine Art Geheimtip." H. K., "Zarte Verse," *Berliner Morgenpost*, February 2, 1969.