

PLENARY ADDRESS

POETICS OF THE LATVIAN LANDSCAPE

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Key words: *neuroscientists, art, landscape aesthetics*

Why poetics?

Plato may have discredited poets (Murdoch, 1977) to establish reason as the only reliable source of truth and beauty. Today, however, neuroscientists have discovered that reason alone, without subjectivity and the emotions, makes the individual (Damasio, 1994; Sacks, 1987; 2003) an incomplete witness of the experience of landscapes. Consequently, truth and beauty is not only visual, but may reside in what is perceived through other senses (Bunkše, 2007).

The importance of poetry to national identity is well known. The stereotypical view of poems is that they are works of imagination and tend to express human emotions. It is true that poetry can be merely sentimental. Nonetheless, the best will encompass factual and emotional truths about the human condition, including being in landscapes. Many will resonate with the experiences of another human being (Bachelard, 1964) or a nation (Bunkše, 1990; 2004; 2007). Such poems become epiphanies that lead the reader or listener into new imaginative, emotional, and factual experiences of landscapes (Bachelard, 1964). And epiphanies *diminish the distance between the internal and external worlds of a human being* — distance being a condition of contemporary mobility, when many are visitors, especially to rural landscapes.

A role of all the arts and all the senses

“*Poēsis*, literally, ‘invitation to discovery’ (Heidegger, 1975) is not the sole domain of poets” (Buttimer, 2010). All the arts — literature, sculpture, music, painting, architecture, et al. — *may* bring us closer to discovering the emotional and perceptual realities of landscapes, albeit not always with equal efficacy. Music, which Kant called “the quickening art” may be the most effective in uniting a human being with self and cosmos, as Oliver Sacks (1987) recounts a traumatic episode on a mountain in Norway:

Then, all of a sudden, with no warning whatever, into the cold, starry, impersonal cosmos — the equally cold and impersonal micro-cosmos of the mind — came *music*, warm, vivid, alive, moving, personal.

Scents, especially subtle ones, may take longer to kindle awareness (Bunkše, 2007). In any case, the arts will engage all the senses, not just the visual, as is the assumed practice within much of geography, planning, architectural design, landscape architecture, and theories of tourism, in which “the ideology of sight” (Cosgrove, 1984) dominates.

Unique personal and national landscapes

The choice of “Poetics of the Latvian Landscape” is based on my own personal history vis-a-vis Latvian landscapes and on the dominant historic role of folk poetry in Latvian culture.

Pēteris Bankovskis, a Latvian writer (2010), has captured the essential characteristic of the Latvian landscape as “an absolute, irregularity that is impossible to predict.” Just when one has grasped an element of the landscape, “a field metamorphoses into forest, forest into bog, bog into field. In the center of a field, either a lake or a great oak or a power pole may appear, but beyond the field, [there may be] a mist-filled valley and clouds that seem like mountains.”

Geographers and planners generally refer to the Latvian landscape as a mosaic — indisputably true from spatial and land use perspectives. Bankovskis’ evocation is of a landscape experienced at ground level. Moreover, he thinks, and I agree with him, that the attraction of Latvian landscapes can best be discovered slowly. “It seems to me,” he writes, “that for reasons unknown, most truly good things can only be enjoyed slowly — a slowly read and re-read book, a slowly savored meal... a stroll, not a run, a bicycle versus a car, train versus a plane...”

For me, as it was for William Wordsworth, being in the landscape, walking in it, can lead to poetic imagination and even poetic rhythms (Solnit, 2001). In others, walking spurs scientific imagination. Thus a human being is in the landscape and it is the perceptions of that being which matter most. As already hinted, this changes the definition of what a landscape is in the social and exact sciences. Carl Sauer (1925) advanced the classic definition of a cultural landscape as the visual expression of the mutual interaction of a culture and its physical environment over time. A human being

in the landscape means that the landscape is *apprehended with all the senses as a unity by that human being* (Bunkše, 1976; 2007).

It is a Cartesian versus a life-world or existential and phenomenological stance toward the landscape. The late Denis Cosgrove referred to the former as “a visual ideology” (Cosgrove, 1984).

My attitudes toward the Latvian landscape are evolving, ever since I first returned here from exile in 1990. They are a complex mix of insider-outsider perceptions. Paul Bankovskis (2010) has expressed this very well: there are aspects of the Latvian landscape “that only we can see through the blindness of love, but cannot hide that which others will notice.” I both love the Latvian landscape and am repulsed from what I know “others will notice.”

The role of folklore

Another reason for poetics of the Latvian landscape is the historic fact that ancient folklore, or folk poetry (i.e. the *dainas*), has been the source of Latvian history, ethnography, national literature, and identity. It is closely bound up with the Latvian landscape and specific ideas of the landscape as home (even though the word ‘landscape’ never appears in the folk poetry). Folk poetry was the mainstay of Latvian culture during some seven hundred years of German colonial rule. Poetry, with its subtexts, served well during the long Soviet occupation of Latvia, especially in the subtle works of the unofficial poet-laureate, Imants Ziedonis (1995–2002). The values of honesty, hard work, respect for nature, and humor were brought out in his prose and poetry.

In my own biography, a childhood interest in literature, writing, and poetry culminated in doing a doctoral dissertation on nature-landscape attitudes based on Latvian folk poetry (Bunkše, 1973).

What it means to have a poetic approach to landscape

Unlike the social and exact sciences, which strive for a single, universal meaning or truth, in the poetics of landscape, many versions of landscapes are possible, many kinds of narratives, evocations, and emotions may emerge. Good art enlarges and widens perceptions, enriches them. It serves the human imagination in this particular way.

Music is perhaps the most extreme in this regard, with some exceptions. When a definite landscape is labeled for a composition, when there is specific, representational evocation of sounds and moods in nature, then the listener is, more or less, close to the composer's intent. An excellent example is Charles Ives's New England small town street scene sounds, evoking a rambunctious *Fourth of July* (i.e., Independence Day) celebration. Even more explicit are operatic musical scenes, with explicit visual stage designs, such as the rich, lively Paris bistro street landscapes in Puccini's *La Bohème*.

Much more open to varied interpretations are certain compositions by current composers of classical music. Their music may be inspired by a particular landscape or situation in nature, it may set moods, but the music is often abstract and open to the imagination and mood of the listener.

As an introduction to the poetics of the Latvian landscape I have chosen to play a short excerpt by the contemporary Latvian composer, Pēteris Vasks. Vasks is part of a broader "New European" classical music movement, which encompasses the Estonian Aarvo Paart, John Tavener, an Englishman, and Georgs Pelēcis, another Latvian. The Latvian musicologist, Inese Lūsiņa (Lūsiņa 2008), thinks that all of these composers evoke archetypal, eternal truths. Landscapes figure in some, if not all the works of these composers. Tavener believes, "That even if we live during a dark age, nonetheless we have the opportunity to

heal the world through art" (translated from the Latvian).

Peteris Vasks is inspired to evoke nature and landscapes in his compositions, especially Latvian ones. At the same time, global contexts are important to him. "Never will I cease to extoll the beauty of the earth...", he says, "and the small plot of land that is Latvia in the big map of the world" (Vasks, 2010). At the same time he finds possibilities "within human interiority" for local, national, European, and global concerns. In short, inner and outer landscapes are unified in Vask's Landscape compositions. This latter notion is a theme that I will pursue later on. The following two minute excerpt that I shall play for you is taken from Vask's composition (Vasks, 2002) "Plainscapes," which he calls a meditation. Although rolling upland landscapes are canonized by Latvians, the central part of Latvia consists of a relatively large plain (Zemgale), which is an extension of the Gulf of Riga. There are plainscapes in Latvia also elsewhere.

The excerpt follows about ten minutes of slow, quiet, non-rhythmic contemplation, into an awakening of life on the plain. The awakening is abstract and not imitative of any particular sounds of nature. From the very beginning there is a sense of a quiet vastness, soft and non-threatening, evoked by violins, but not exclusively so. When a chorus of voices, without words, joins in together with a cello, the light of dawn is sensed. This is confirmed in a relatively moderate crescendo of abstract sound. Again, nothing natural is imitated, but an awakening of nature in a vast landscape is clear. Then follows a silence. I had absorbed the external landscapes with a sense of intimacy in immensity. The external landscape had become a part of me through the ritual of listening — one of the leading themes of this essay. Others will have day dreamt of different impressions of a landscape.

An example from poetry

Ziedonis represented the epitome of Latvian Soviet era poets. He achieved a status not uncommon for poets after the death of Stalin, similar to rock stars, when reading their works in public. His poetry and prose writings carried implicit messages for Latvians of hope and the ethics of work, honesty, and responsibility. He also engaged in prolonged actions over a number of years by a group of volunteers to “save the oaks” — once sacred — as well as large erratic boulders, from the encroachment of brush and forest that was occurring during Soviet occupation (Bunkše, 2004).

A prose poem — an epiphany (1978) — evokes two archetypal Latvian landscapes, the border between the sea and the land:

...to walk around something... no matter what — around a blossom or the sea. The blossom's as large as the sea. Not to run straight into the sea; not to trample the blossom; not to climb into the soul of another. But to be close, by the side, walk all around; remain close.

In the daytime the sea is full of light, which it receives from the sky. At nighttime the sea is full of warmth, which it received from the day. I walk by the sea on a summer's night and warmth comes from it. I walk on the very edge, my arms outstretched like wings. One arm in the midnight fog of the land, the other, over the sea. I call that nearness... I walk around the sea on stormy nights. The waves come from the dark of the sea. I hear them, but do not see them yet. When they roar, on the shoals, for a moment a white line lights up, like laughing teeth, then disappears and the dark is there again. There is no shore, no distance, only darkness without depth...

Although the poem is hardly Ziedonis' entire *oeuvre*, it does represent the conflation of

the sublime (the sea) and the pastoral (the land) into a dominant pastoral attitude toward landscapes and nature in Latvian perceptions (Bunkše, 2001).

Later in the same prose poem there is the previously mentioned slowness of movement, revealing the character of the Latvian landscape:

At times I feel awkward going straight into a stranger's farmstead. It's like breaking into an unknown soul. Thus I first walk around the farmstead. Each home radiates its own light, perhaps an aura. For some the rays are diminutive, close to the window, the front door. At other homesteads the rays meet you from a kilometer away. They flow over fences, through tree-lined alleyways. I walk around such a homestead, along the invisible border where the nearness of home begins. Far shines the farmstead where bees are kept. It shines as far as the paths of its bees... These are places of great goodness. Here I would bring children for their noonday nap...

By an invisible border Ziedonis does not imply anything mystical. Rather, it is a poetic way to indicate entering into an ineffable realm of quiet diligence, patience, and harmony that beekeeping demands and represents. Overtly he declares that these are “places of great goodness” where children can be safe. He is lauding the rural landscape as a repository of national values. It is a pastoral ideal that reaches back to Virgil, Horace, and Hesiod. It is also the ideal upon which the Latvian nation and the idea of a particular “Latvianness” is founded.

Invention of the Latvian nation

The 19th century was rich in the invention of nations and tradition in Europe. Art played a major role in developing national consciousness based on often imagined pasts.

It all began with James MacPherson (1736–1796) and the creation of Scottish myths. He came out of the mountains of Scotland, ostensibly with Gaelic poems composed by Ossian in the third century AD (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1965). Although later debunked, he exerted a strong influence on the imaginations of several European writers. A major influence to Latvia came from Finland, where Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) had collected Finnish and Karelian Finno-Ugric folklore and compiled it into a national epic, the *Kalevala* (1835). It marked the beginnings of modern Finnish literature.

Similarly, in Latvia folklore and folk life became the principal foundations of Latvian literature, idea of a Latvian nation, and national landscapes. Inspirations in Latvia came from “Counterenlightenment” (Berlin, 1999) thinkers, such as Johann Georg Hamann and especially from Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder was in Latvia for some five years (1764–1769), heard folk song singing and included several in his *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778–1779), a seminal work that argued for histories of ordinary folk, excluded in the histories of great events and leaders (Bunkše, 1973).

These and other influences led to the First National Awakening during the 1850s, which was begun at Tartu by some thirty ambitious Latvians (Balodis, 1990). This movement led to the collection of Latvian folk songs, known as the *dainas*, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, *eventually constituting a massive source of historic Latvian folk life*. The first national Song Festival was held in 1873 in Rīga. The key figure, who devoted most of his life to the *dainas* was Krišjānis Barons.

Barons sorted, catalogued, and readied the *dainas* for publication as well as to archive them. From an anthropological standpoint, he was remarkably modern in his approach, not trying to change them or using them for an epic story (Bunkše, 1973). He

did, however, reject urban folklore, which he considered sentimental and foreign. In addition, he classified the *dainas* according to basic and derivative songs and organized their publication in terms of two leading themes: (1) the yearly cycle of work and life, and (2) the lifecycle of a human being. That did remove them from the way that individual singers or song callers might string them together at particular occasions, but their texts were accurately recorded and published (Bunkše, 1973).

The originals, as written down by numerous collectors and delivered to Barons, are gathered in *Dainu Skapis* — the Cabinet of *Dainas* — a national treasure treated like crown jewels or a national constitution.

What is a *daina*?

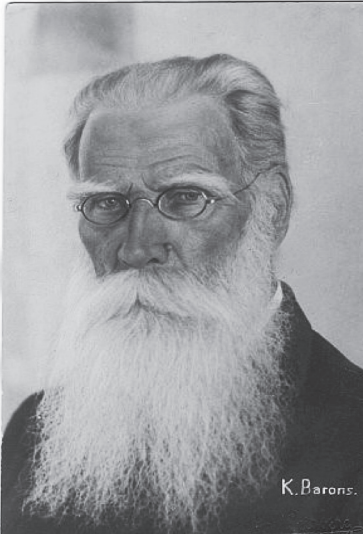
A *daina* is a short four-line, independent song or quatrain. There are exceptions and somewhat longer songs do exist. The quatrain consists of a thesis and an antithesis. Most are matter-of-fact and unsentimental. The following are two examples:

Arājs ara kalniņā,
Avots tek lejiņā.
Netrūkst maizes arājam,
Ne ūdeņa avotam!

On a hill plows the plowman,
In the valley below a brook flows.
For the plowman no want of bread,
Nor water for the brook!

Kam tā sēta uz tā kalna,
Astrām jumta istabiņa?
Tur saulīte miglu meta,
Miglainā rītiņā.

On that hill, whose farmstead,
The house roofed with astras.
On a foggy morning,
A fog-cloud rises in the sun.



Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923)

The second *daina* is unusual in its aesthetic evocation, enigmatic, and difficult to translate poetically, which is true of most *dainas* due to the frequency of diminutives and simplicity of the prosody. This is true even in Latvian, as the word ‘*astra*’ illustrates. Its literal meaning is a horse’s, or perhaps mare’s tail hairs — clearly a metaphor to heighten the beauty and prosperity of a farmstead.

Moreover, the rhythms of the *dainas* have proven difficult to imitate, even for Latvian poets. They depend on the use of syllables and diminutives. The latter give the *dainas* a softness and melodious expressions of kindness. But diminutives may also serve for sly, hidden mockery of feudal lords, dangerous animals, or storms at sea (but usually when the danger from the animal or the storm has passed will there be sly mockery).

The *dainas*, Latvian national culture, and the *beau ideal* of rural landscapes

When Latvian national identity was formed during “The First Awakening,” the

dainas figured strongly as a rich source of past and present rural life and life on the sea-coasts and rivers; and as the basis for the emergence of national literature and the arts. Large song festivals began in 1873 and became a strong factor in galvanizing pan-Latvian unity. Choruses were drawn to the capital Riga from all of Latvia, from the smallest hamlets. Since many characteristics of farmsteads and rural and forest landscapes are evoked in the *dainas*, they reinforced rural, pastoral sensibilities, especially the image of the independent family farmstead, isolated between fields, birch groves and forests. Even though Latvia had villages in its southeastern borderlands, the dominant settlement pattern was held to consist (and still is believed to be thus by many) of dispersed rural farms in rolling uplands, with a country church and pub (*krogs*) as centers of sociability.

Rural sensibilities and idealized rural cultural landscapes became the bedrock of Latvian national identity during the 19th and much of the 20th centuries. This in spite of numerous prose and poetry writings, as well as paintings about the Baltic Sea and its coasts. Indeed, Blaumanis’ novella *Nāves Ēnā* (In the shadow of death) (1959) depicting a dark moral drama played out by fishermen adrift on an ice floe in the Baltic Sea, led me to a lifelong passion of reading about the oceans and seas, as well as to sailing.

Family farmstead landscapes were wrecked by the Soviets after they occupied Latvia in 1940 and again in 1945. As a landscape ideal they were nurtured as subtexts by poets such as Ziedonis, and the ideal remerged during the Second National Awakening in the 1980s and early 1990s. Though less ardently, they still figure as a pastoral landscape aesthetic ideal. Sublime characteristics in Latvian landscapes and nature are largely ignored, conflated with pastoral perceptions, or not sought out at all (Bunkše 2001).

Dainas today

Today the *dainas* continue as a record, a treasure trove, of past landscapes, life, and perceptions. Although the word 'landscape', i.e. *ainava*, never appears in the *dainas*, nonetheless they have been shown to have remarkable persistence and stability over time, so that cautiously, they may be regarded as a record that is close to representing the late Middle Ages (Bunkše, 1973).

According to Zariņa (2010), the word '*aina*,' i.e. 'scene,' was introduced into the Latvian during the 1880s, probably from the Liv (Finno-Ugric) word for hay meadow. It is significant that there is no hint of 'land' attached to *aina*, only the feminine gender suffix '-ava'. The idea of land is a separate and powerful theme in the cultural-political history of the Latvians, which requires much further study.

The other rural landscape

What about the other rural landscape, "the landscape we cannot hide?" It is, of course the ubiquitous, largely decaying Soviet-created industrial farmscape. It has inspired all kinds of commentary, it represents problems of abandonment and ruin. We would like for it to not be there. We learn to ignore it — most of the time.

"The sound of big stones dreaming": Inner and outer landscapes

I wish to end by returning to the philosophical leitmotif of this essay, namely the human being in the landscape, specifically the general concept of the individual striving for *unity of outer and inner landscapes*.

Barry Lopez has inspired this notion for several decades in a number of essays, books, and fictional writings (1976, 1986, 1989, 1999). In the essay, "Landscape and Narrative" (Lopez 1989), his thinking is inspired in part by the "beautyway" of the Navajo Indians: "I think of two landscapes,

one outside the self, the other within."

Navajo rituals aim specifically to unite the inner and outer landscapes of an individual, ultimately to attain inner peace from the order of the outer landscape. The landscape is apprehended through all the senses and it manifests itself in relationships. "Ultimately a human being becomes familiar with a landscape not by knowing the names and identities of all that it contains, but by *perceiving relationships* [italics mine]." In the desert it is the smell of a creosote bush, resiliency of a palo verde bush twig when a black-throated sparrow lands on it, and "the fluttering whirr of the arriving sparrow"; how sand crumbles underfoot in an arroyo; by the sound made when two pebbles are knocked together; or the light feel of "the desiccated dropping of a kangaroo rat." The key is perceiving the relationship "between the sparrow and the twig" (Lopez, 1989).

By inspiration from Navajo Indian ceremonies and thought, Lopez is advocating neither a return to their way of life, nor literally emulating their ceremonials. Rather, he is looking back into their cultural mores, in order to find ways for contemporary individuals to connect with landscapes with as much affective harmony as is possible (and implicitly, to create landscapes that would lend themselves to such relationships). Lopez (1976) shows what he means when he speaks of "the invisible landscape." He writes: "...that is why we're here, I thought — to change. That is why I came into the desert." He tells of covering himself in the evening with an Indian blanket woven some hundred years ago:

Here everything is... elementary. It is unimportant to move. You must wait... listen carefully. At last, before dawn, you will hear quiet music. This is the sound of the loudest dreams, the sound of big stones dreaming...

Listen, until you are able to hear the

dream sounds of dust, which falls on your head...

I listen all night. I hear nothing. But during this time I am able to separate all the scents that have gathered deep within the threads of the blanket. And the sounds, that still reverberate within them. That is what I search for.

I am able to smell the heat of the day in the cracks of the earth...

I hear the flight of a gray eagle. It is impossible to see him[, sic] but I hear the sound of wind flowing through his feathers.

Inga Ābele

In Latvia, it is the talented young writer, Inga Ābele, currently known in the wider European world as a playwright and prose stylist, who independently, without any connection with Lopez, evokes a unity of inner and outer landscapes and perceptions by several senses.

The following excerpt is taken from her short story "Bird" (Ābele, 2010). It is self-explanatory and requires no further comment:

...I tried to feed you and give you warmth, but you died the next day. I found you lying on your back. In your crooked, yellow fingers you were clutching emptiness. That's all. No, actually everything began on that day — I broke my finger nails tearing at the earth's crust, splitting the iron-hard clay, digging you a grave. The clay gave in and broke, revealing the damp core of the earth. Revealing my character. Revealing death. Your death, bird, was my first great rebellion. I roamed through meadows and loathed the grasses, weeping and cursing like an evil dwarf with a horrid red face, roaming through fields of greying dandelions — a tiny, hate-filled speck amid the green indifference of nature, who has just discovered powerlessness.

Conscious of the moment, when the bodily heat of life crashes like a bird against the crystal clear surface of the spirit and glides down to earth on powerless wings.

Next day, as I was sitting on a hillside beneath wind sound filled silken birches, a fast tremor ran over the far flung landscape. It seemed as if the sun had fallen, like a star. I knew that when a star falls, you must wish for something. I chose hope. Otherwise I had no chance to continue living without losing my pride — with a choking disdain for The One Who Has Left Us So Painfully. It was only an unexpected, swift burst of light, perhaps the shadow of a fast moving cloud, perhaps only a simple caress of eyelashes by the wind. But I felt different, stood up, brushed away the ants from my legs. It was then that I realized that nature gives no answers, because nature is our green-matted inside. That each morning we come to ourselves from the outside.

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