

The Poetic Imagination of the Latvian *dainas*

By VAIRA VIKIS-FREIBERGS

The Latvian poetic imagination finds what is probably its purest and most original form of expression in the *dainas* or folksongs, a vast body of verse transmitted for centuries as an oral tradition.

As a corpus of poetry, the *dainas* are remarkably homogeneous in terms of metric form and structure, but widely heterogeneous in terms of style and content. Next to sublime lyrical and metaphysical poetry one can find hackneyed and unimaginative examples of poetic mass production. Because of the immense size of the corpus,¹ however, it is easy to find large numbers of *dainas* which are of very high quality. As for the range of content, it is

¹Over 700,000 songs and variants (most of them quatrains) have been recorded in the Archives of Folklore in Riga. About 65,000 of these have been published in book form at various times since the nineteenth century.

partly reflected in the scheme of classification adopted by Krisjanis Barons, the nineteenth-century compiler of the *dainas*. Barons chose two main classifications: first, the stages of human life from the cradle to the grave, with their attendant family feasts and rituals; second, the stations of the solar year, with their attendant festivals and celebrations. To these may be added a third broad category, which includes songs devoted to various forms of work and activity encountered in a peasant society, including a large number of songs about singing itself. Even these three broad classes do not encompass all of the *daina* types which have been recorded, such as the mythological songs, the songs presenting magic formulae or incantations, riddles, children's games, obscene songs, etc.

Because of this heterogeneity of the *daina* corpus, it is obvious that any descriptive generalizations will not apply uniformly to all *dainas*. Nevertheless, it does seem possible to delineate certain general characteristics which are most typical of this material. In my opinion, the main *daina* characteristics are related to three basic factors: the oral nature of the *daina* poetry, its essentially lyrical style, and an underlying philosophy which sees man as living in close harmony with nature. The combined influence of these basic factors thus constitutes a general mental framework which seems to have channelled the poetic imagination of the creators of the *dainas* into certain favoured forms of expression to the exclusion of others.

The most fundamental aspect of the *dainas* is probably their being the product of a pre-literate society. This means, among other things, that their mode of transmission was strictly in the oral-auditory modality. Literate traditions, on the other hand, rely very heavily on purely visual transmission (far more written poems are read visually than are heard at poetry recitals). Psychologically, these two sensory modalities exhibit a number of interesting differences, particularly in their interaction with memory processes.

Auditory presentation, being sequential and ephemeral in nature, places a greater strain on memory encoding and retention and suffers more from temporary fluctuations in attention on the part of the listener. The poet working exclusively in the oral mode thus has to compensate in various ways for these limitations on his medium of communication. In the *dainas*, for instance, the strict adherence to a few metric patterns as well as the brevity of the *daina* strophes are among the factors which make this material more easy to memorize. Visual presentation, on the other hand (such as the written word), offers the advantage of a stable stimulus, parts of which can be returned to at will. The visual modality thus permits the transmission of more detail, of more information, provided that it is not sequentially paced (as is the case with movies and TV).

Whatever the medium of communication, the basic processes involved in the poet-audience relationship are essentially the same. We can assume that at the very basis of artistic creation there is an experience or an idea of the poet which he tries to communicate by encoding it in verbal terms. The encoded verbal output of the poet next becomes a stimulus for the person hearing or reading a poem, who now has to decode the poetic message so as to produce, for his part, a series of intellectual, aesthetic and emotional responses. The effect of the medium in this process is to favour those poetic devices which are most compatible with its inherent characteristics.

In comparing the *dainas* to poems of the literary tradition, the verbal stimulation produced by the *dainas* may be said to be centrifugal and open-ended, while the stimuli of the written tradition will more often tend to be centripetal, closed, and directed toward a common core of response. This difference can best be seen by examining a specific example. First, consider these two *dainas* on a patriotic motif:

Oh, fatherland,
Your comeliness!
The little grass blooms
With silvery blossoms.

Small is my father's country,
But grandly it carries itself:
Every little juniper tree
Blooms with silvery blossoms.

Ai, tēvu zemīte,
Tavu jaukuminu!
Smildziņa ziedēja
Sudraba ziediem.

Mazs bij' tēva novadiņis,
Bet diženi turējās:
Visi mazi kadiķīši
Zied sudraba ziediņiem.

Contrast to these the following lines from a patriotic poem by People's poetess Mirdza Ķempe,² writing today in Soviet-occupied Latvia:

I see around me armies of flowers,
corporuses of forests,
Fields, cities, hydroelectric stations
Hotly breathing, passionate and alive.

Redzu ap sevi ziedu armijas, mežu masīvus,
Tirumus, pilsētas, upju elektrostacijas
Karsti un alkaini elpojam dzīvi.

In cinematic terms, one might say that the *daina* zooms in on a single, apparently insignificant detail and freezes on a close-up. The contemporary poetess, on the other hand, pans over a series of details expressed iteratively by means of collective nouns, and freezes on a long shot, a panorama. Or again, the *daina* style could be seen as analogous to *Ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, while the higher-definition literary style has a closer affinity with the Western approach to flower arrangement, most clearly depicted in seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings. The former focuses the viewer's attention by presenting as little as a single flower and leaf in the appropriate container; the latter builds up a cumulative air of richness and profusion by showing over-stuffed vases brimming with every conceivable variety of flower, regardless of its season, and liberally scattering over the whole a wide assortment of dewdrops, snails, bugs, berries, butterflies and feathers. One has intensity, the other, extensivity; each is but a different means for communicating the same basic experience, delight in the beauty of flowers.

The fundamental device of the centrifugal approach is the focusing or concentrating of attention on a detail. This is stylistically analogous to the rhetorical figures of metonymy and synecdoche.³ The focusing is achieved in the *dainas* by means of an extremely laconical and restrained form of expression, as well as by the use of concrete, familiar words and images.

²Mirdza Ķempe, *Mirklu Mūžība* (Rīga, 1964).

³See for instance the analysis of Albert Henry in his *Métonymie et Métaphore* (Paris, 1971).

The concreteness of the vocabulary most readily stimulates the listener to an active production of memory images,⁴ chains of associations, emotional connotations, etc. The laconism has a similar effect, inviting the listener to fill in the gaps which the poet has left unfilled, and thus making him an active participant in the creative process. This is the same process of psychological closure by which the silences or "empty" times in music serve to define the rhythm of the "full" times.

In the centripetal, literary approach, on the other hand, the author tends to pile device upon device, stimulus upon stimulus, in order to insure as much as possible that the receiver will respond with the one, fairly specific reaction that the author had in mind. Much less is left to the imagination of the reader to fill out, and he is consequently reduced to a more passive role, a consumer of the work of art rather than an active participant in the creative event.

The distinction between centripetal and centrifugal styles outlined above has a definite similarity to the distinction between "hot" and "cool" media as made by Marshall McLuhan (v.g. in his *Understanding Media*⁵). Interestingly enough, the examples quoted earlier even include the McLuhan-esque contrast of terms, since Kempe's land is "hotly breathing, passionate and alive," while the silver mentioned in the *dainas* exudes not only brightness, but a certain metallic coolness as well. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the distinction made here overlaps only partly with the dichotomy of media types as defined by McLuhan, especially since it is not always clear just what dimension his dichotomies are based on.⁶

The extent to which a poem reaches its audience depends heavily on a common background of shared experience and on a feeling for the idiosyncrasies of the language used. The centrifugal type of poem is particularly vulnerable in this regard, which is why the *dainas* are notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to render effectively into another language. The reader from another culture is required to make a definite effort of empathy and imagination in trying to envisage what the effect of a *daina* might have been in the original, and to let his imagination read between the lines and go beyond the bare literal meaning of the text.

The centrifugal approach is perhaps at its most evident in the manner of expressing emotion in the *dainas*. The ancient Latvian poets seem to have had a strong aversion toward the direct expression of deep emotions, especially negative ones. Instead, they would focus on some concrete detail, indirectly

⁴Recent developments in experimental psychology have demonstrated empirically what might seem to be intuitively obvious: that concrete words produce more mental imagery than do abstract ones. See for instance Allan Paivio, *Imagery and Verbal Processes* (New York, 1971), pp. 179-180.

⁵*Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), chapters 2, 8, 9.

⁶For instance, radio is said to be hot while the telephone is cool. In our terms, both are auditory and sequential. Their only difference is in the dimension of directionality; radio is unidirectional, while the telephone is interactive. Or again: the movies are hot for McLuhan, while TV is cool. Here both media are not only visual and sequential but unidirectional as well. The basis of McLuhan's dichotomy now shifts to the degree of definition (or of clarity) of the stimulus, which is high for movies and low for TV.

linked to the emotion concerned, and leave the listener to infer the rest.

The following series of examples will show how the same concrete, ordinary image can serve as a starting point for a variety of different effects. The central image in these *dainas* is that of a woman making shirts, which used to be an ordinary domestic task for women, especially for unmarried girls who needed shirts for their dowries.

I sewed a single linen shirt,
All summer long I sewed it.
God, grant that this shirt
May go to a pleasing wearer.

Šuvu vienu linu kreklu,
Šuvu visu vasariņu.
Dod, Dievini, tam kreklam
Pa prātam valkātāju.

(7395)⁷

This *daina* may seem almost prosaic in its simplicity, yet, if read without literary preconceptions, it can be surprisingly effective. There is something quite touching in the image of a young girl spending many hours sewing and embroidering a shirt for her future husband, while having no idea if the man destined to wear it will be to her liking. There is an implicit contrast between the girl's ability to control and direct her handiwork and her helplessness⁸ with respect to the single most important event of her life, which gives an unobtrusive, yet clearly tragical undertone to this *daina*.

The implicit tragedy becomes an actual one in the next, closely related example, where a girl's anxiety over her future has been replaced by despair over the present:

I sewed a single linen shirt,
All summer long I sewed it.
It did not go to the one it was meant
for,
It went to another, along with my tears.

Šuvu vienu linu kreklu,
Šuvu visu vasariņu.
Kam to šuvu, tam netika,
Citam devu raudādama.

(7394)

In this restrained form of expression (only the word "tears" refers directly to the girl's sorrow), the impact of the brief text is made all the stronger by the details which are alluded to without being given. One wonders why the girl could not marry her intended, just why she had to marry another, etc., etc. None of this do we find out from the song. We only know that such things do happen, and are left with the bitter taste of this knowledge. This seemingly very personal and individual song thus paradoxically neglects the particular in favour of a general statement about a certain aspect of the human condition.

The next example, just as simple, is even more powerful:

Finely I spun, densely I wove
A war shirt for my dear son

Smalki vērpu, biezi audu
Deliqam kača kreklu,

⁷The number quoted after a *daina* represents the code attributed to it in the Barons classification. The source used for this paper is a 12-volume selection from the *dainas* edited by A. Švābe, K. Straubergs and E. Hauzenberga-Šurma, *Latviešu tautas dziesmas* (Copenhagen, 1952-1956). The code number is not given for songs quoted either from memory or from secondary sources not giving the code number, because of the enormous difficulty of locating any given song in the corpus.

⁸Up until the nineteenth century marriages were often arranged on the basis of a few formal meetings, without the future partners knowing each other personally.

May he remember me by it
While wondering through foreign lands.

Lai viņš mani pieminēja
Svešu zemi staigadams,
(7396)

A mother's love and concern for her son are expressed here with extreme reticence and economy of means. The only word having a direct affective connotation is the diminutive form of "son," which is something like "my little boy" or "my sonny." The depth of feeling is only alluded to by the wish to be remembered and by the two adjectives qualifying the mother's actions, which indicate that she is taking special pains to make this particular shirt a fine one. Implicit, but unexpressed, is the thought that this shirt may well be the last thing the mother can ever do for her son. Thus, in spite of the quiet domesticity of the scene depicted, the song takes on a deeply tragical meaning.

The same laconic reticence, bordering on stoicism, can be seen in many funeral songs, which include some of the most touching in *daina* poetry:

Farewell, father and mother,
Good evening, Earth mother, to you;
Good evening Earth mother to you,
Take my body in your keeping.⁹

The doors of the earth are closing,
The lock of the earth falls shut;
Under the earth shall I be sleeping
As long as the sun is in the sky.

Ar Dieviņu, tēvs, māmiņa,
Labvakaru, Zemes māte;
Labvakaru Zemes māte,
Glabā manu augumiņu.

Aizverāsi zemes vārti,
Aizkrit zemes atslēdzin';
Gulēt manim zem zemites
Kamēr saule debesis.

It must be emphasized that, with just a few changes in detail, the same concrete image can serve to create a variety of different effects. We have seen above three examples where the simple image of sewing a shirt was the focus for complex psychological situations with tragical overtones of varying intensity. The same image can be used equally well for comical effect, as in the following satirical *daina*:

Sew, mother dear, my shirt,
With fine, tiny lacings;
For three years my tearful bridegroom
Will tear at them with his teeth.

Šuj, māmin, man krekliņ'
Sikajām siksniņām;
Tris gadīj' tautu dēls
Zobiem plēsa raudādams.
(7379)

The "three years" in this example is, of course, a hyperbole, a figure of speech particularly frequent in the satirical *dainas*.

Finally, the same image can lead to a pure play of poetic fantasy, unimpeded by any sort of content:

Of linden leaves a shirt I sewed,
Of maple leaves a bed-sheet;
Of maple leaves a bed-sheet,
Of hazel-tree leaves a cloak.

Liepu lapu kreklu šuvu,
Kļavu lapu paladziņu;
Kļavu lapu paladziņu;
Lazdu lapu villainiti.
(39844)

⁹There is a play on the multiple meanings of the verb *glabāt*: to have in safekeeping, to save, to hide, to bury.

We have seen from the previous series of examples how the concrete focus in a *daina* was not to be taken as the actual *meaning* of a song, *au pied de la lettre*. These were songs "about" making shirts whose real meaning had no more than an incidental relationship to actual shirt-making. The important thing in the centrifugal style is the process of focusing on the concrete detail, which in turn leads to a fanning out of meaning from this central core. Thus it is rather typical of the *dainas* that the detail focused on in a poem may often be a plain, ordinary and familiar thing, neither "poetic" nor remarkable in and by itself. But the very fact of singling it out tends to elevate it to a symbolic or a near-symbolic level, to effect a sort of apotheosis, a transmutation of the ordinary into the sublime. This apotheosis is underscored in the *dainas* through various means, a few of which we shall examine here.

Among the simplest devices for focusing found in the *dainas* is the use of what may be termed simply "focusing epithets." These include the popular epithets "silver," "golden" or "diamond," with their connotations of brightness and enduring value, as well as the epithet "white," with its multiple positive connotations in Latvian¹⁰ which may be applied to close relatives (a mother, sister or brother) as a sign of love and affection.

It must be noted that the focusing epithet is rarely an empty verbal formalism in the *dainas*. While it typically assumes a symbolic or evocative value, it also is usually firmly rooted in accurate observation. In the two songs about the fatherland quoted earlier, the grasses and junipers blooming with silvery blossoms were of the order of poetic exaggeration rather than of poetic fiction, since both grasses and junipers do have a silvery element in their actual physical appearance. Along the same lines, the origin of the focusing use of the epithet "white" may be connected with the custom of putting on clean white clothes on Sundays and festive occasions.

There are a few cases, however, where the focusing epithet designates something wholly in the realm of the imaginary, such as the legendary fern blossom, the plucking of which was believed to bring a life-time of happiness:

All the flowers have bloomed,
The fern alone has not blossomed;
It blooms on Midsummer night
With silvery blossoms.

Visas puķes noziedējās,
Papardīte neziedējē;
Tā ziedēja Jāņa nakti
Sudrabiņa ziedījēm.
(32415)

Not surprisingly, variants of this song describe the fabulous blossoms as being either of gold or of diamond.

Various idiosyncracies of the Latvian language also appear to be used as focusing devices in the *dainas*. One of these is a construction involving a redundant use of the verb form, the closest to which in English would be a participle followed by the normal verb conjugation. Thus, in the following example, *degtin dega*, which I have rendered as "their eyes flash fire" is more literally something like "their eyes *burning* *burn*," with an obvious emphasis on the idea of burning.

¹⁰Cf., for instance, Zenta Maurina, "The White Gown: Variations on Latvian Themes," *Mosaic*, 1/3 (April 1968), 70-82.

The little bee has splendid daughters
With little red eyes.
Their¹¹ eyes flash fire
Through the oak leaves.

Bitītei greznas meitas
Sarkanām actiņām.
Tai actiņas degtin dega
Caur ozola lapiņām.

Another frequent device for creating focus and emphasis in the *dainas* is the transformation of physical scale. This appears most often as miniaturization, or reduction of scale, though aggrandizement or increase of scale is also occasionally found.

The very structure of the *dainas* invites a miniaturistic approach: each *daina* quatrain, like the Japanese *haiku*, is often a poem in miniature, though compositions involving several stanzas can also occur. In general, the miniaturization seems to be related to the lyrical tendency of the *dainas*, whose creators seem to have had a deep abhorrence of the grandiose and a mocking attitude toward the bombastic. Consider, for example, the following *daina*:

The Wind Mother turns
Now this way, now that,
Sweeping the house of God,
The room of the Moon.

Apsagrieza vēja māte
I vienādi, i otrādi
Dieva namu slaucīdama
Mēnistiņa istabīgu.
(34049)

This stanza presents a metaphor for the wind sweeping across the sky (the Latvian word *Dievs*, God, originally meant "sky"). Here is a subject which fairly begs to be blown up to epic proportions, and which the Western European or the Slavic imagination might easily have translated through the image of a dishevelled horseman, cape flying behind him, galloping across the sky on a steed sweat-soaked and foaming at the mouth. In sharp contrast, the *daina* presents the modest and intimate image of a little old country woman sweeping a dwelling-place with a broom. The image chosen by the *daina* poet thus involves not only a reduction of scale (the wide expanse of the sky versus the confines of a house) but also a reduction of the cosmic to the familiar, of the awe-inspiring to the ordinary.

The reduction of physical scale is particularly clear in the following examples:

Make a bridge, dear brother,
Over the wide sea
So that our sister
May come and visit.

Tais, bāliņi, tiltiņu
Par plašo jūru
Lai brauca māsiņa
Ciemoties.
(52231)

I'll make a bridge
Over the wide sea
So that each evening
I may visit my sister.

Taisiņu tiltu
Pār plašo jūru
Lai varu ik vakarus
Pie māsas sērstī.

The image here is of reducing the wide sea to a scale more accessible to man, to a size which might be bridged. Psychologically, the wish for a bridge

¹¹The Latvian text has a singular *here*, i.e. it says "her eyes," as if going on to talk of the bee itself, not its daughters, as might be expected. This may well be an error of transcription, of *tai* for *tām* (pl.). The plural form would make the song more coherent and logical.

represents the longing of family members for a sister who has moved far away to the home of her new husband. The sea thus stands both for spatial and temporal separation. Interestingly enough, the image also brings up echoes of ancient Indo-European mythology. As Donald Ward has noted,¹² the theme of a brother (or a sweetheart) building a bridge across the sea to rescue his abducted sister appears in several guises both in the *vēdas* and in the later Indian epics (notably the *Rāmāyana*).

The next song again evokes a play of ideas on physical scale and on the ability to accomplish what seems like a hopeless task:

I don't sleep days, I don't sleep nights, I can't manage to fill My dower-chest. Come, little sister, Little girl spider, Help me to fill My dower-chest.	Neguļu dienu, Neguļu nakti, Nevaru pūriņa Piedarināt. Nāc tu, māsiņa, Zirnekļa meitiņa Palīdzī pūriņu Piedarināt.
(7760)	

By asking a spider for help the singer seems to aggrandize it, to bring it up to a human scale. The same kind of elevating of an insect to a human level appears in another example, partly reminiscent in its content of the "lilies of the field" of the Gospel according to St. Matthew (6:28-29):

Beetle-bug, horned-bug, Your dress is splendid; The lords have none such, Nor do the boyars.	Kukaini, ragaini, Tev grezni svārķi; Ne tādi kungam, Ne bajāram.
(52476)	

The tendency to miniaturization in the *dainas* could be linked, at one level, to the extremely frequent use of diminutives in this material. Not every diminutive, however, implies a reduction of physical scale. In Latvian, as in the other Indo-European languages which have preserved it, the diminutive noun-ending is semantically ambiguous. In one sense, the diminutive is literally that, i.e. it refers to an object of smaller size, so that, for example, a piglet is a small (or young) pig and a kitten is a small cat. But the diminutive also carries with it a connotation of affection, of liking, of sympathy. Thus kitten, of course, is also a term of endearment. While English has preserved the diminutive form in only a few exceptional cases, in Latvian any noun whatever can be modified with a diminutive ending, though there is a tendency to a decreased frequency of these forms in modern Latvian.

In examining the use of diminutives in the *dainas*, one can find examples where the diminutive ending seems merely tacked on to a word as a convenient way of adding an extra syllable or two, where needed to fill out the metric pattern of a line. But in many more cases the diminutive is made to carry the full weight of its meaning, and contributes to creating an atmosphere of lightness, brightness, warmth and affection, which is one of

¹²Donald Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 63.

the hallmarks of the *dainas*. The effect of the diminutive is particularly interesting in those cases where true endearment could not have been meant:

A sharp-tasting seed is the mustard,
Let us sow it at the edge of a swamp;
Cold and biting is our little sister,
Let us marry her off far from here.

Sinepīte sīva sēkla
Sēsim purva malīgā;
Sīva, dzedra mūs'māsiņa
Dosim tālu tautiņās.
(12318)

Similarly, in the next example, we find that a wild animal which has done considerable damage, and would well deserve threats of being skinned alive, is addressed with remarkable gentleness by the *daina* poet:

Oh little bear, you broad-footed one,
Why did you trample my flax-field?
My sister will have to get married,
Weeping, her dower-chest empty.

Ai lācīti, platkājīti,
Kam nomini linu druvu!
Ies māsiņa raudādama
Tukšu pūru tautiņās.

In these instances the diminutive serves to impose emotional distance, to take the edge off the unpleasantness referred to. This seems to us but one level of what is a general tendency in the *dainas*—the transmutation of the common, the harsh and the ordinary by transposing „ to the realm of poetic imagination. In this context, the use of the diminutive becomes a device for affective focusing.

The interesting thing about this process of imaginative transfiguration is that it seems to reflect far more than a Freudian mechanism of denial—a blind escape from the harshness of reality into a world of fantasy (beautiful as this may be in the hands of some poets). The psychological attitude in the *dainas* is to face reality, but to refuse to be cowed by it:

Come, little grey stone,
Let us play with each other,
I shall soon play you under
A drift of white flour.

Pelēkais akmentiņš,
Iesim abi spēlēties.
Gan es tevi iespēlēšu
Baltu miltu kuponā.

The little grey stone in this song is actually a large heavy millstone, and the playing refers to the back-breaking chore of grinding the household grain on a hand-mill. But these are not euphemisms in the ordinary sense of the word. What this *daina* conveys is that the grinding of the grain may well numb a girl's arms with fatigue and give her an aching back, but it will not be allowed to break her spirit.

In some *dainas*, needless to say, a difficulty may be openly acknowledged, and resentment openly expressed:

Oh, little grey stone,
Why do I have to roll you?
You should lie in the water,
The waves should roll you.

Vai, pelēku akmentiņi
Bij' man tevi ritināt?
Ūdenī tev gulēt,
Vilņam tevi ritināt.

More often, however, an acknowledged difficulty will be expressed in a satirical or self-mocking manner:

I know how to dance, I know how to
prance,
I know how to tease young men.
[But] when I had the warp stretched
on the loom,
I just stood there and cried and cried.

Māku diet, māku lekt,
Maku puišus kaitināt;
Kad uzliku audeklīnu,
Āpar gāju raudādama.
(7332)

With the exception of the satirical songs, and a certain number of bitter songs of social protest (dating from the more recent centuries when the Latvian peasants were reduced to serfdom), the general attitude of the *daina* poets is most often cheerful and playful, with a sort of affectionate intimacy towards the natural world which at times may look like irreverence, but actually stems from a profound feeling of harmony and oneness with nature. Something of this serenity comes across in the following examples:

I slept in sweet slumber
On a sea-side sand-dune:
The stones sang, the sea sobbed,
The Wind mother warbled.

Apsagūlu saldu miegu
Jūrās kāpas galīgā;
Dzied akmens, raud ūdens,
Vēja māte gavilēja.

Slowly, slowly, God came riding
Downhill into the valley:
He would not stir the ploughman's horse
Nor the wild cherry blossoms.

Lēni, lēni Dieviņš brauca
No kalniņa lejiņā;
Nетraucēja ievas ziedus
Ne arāja kumeliņu.
(33683)

Similarly the sun, about which there are many *dainas*, both mythological and otherwise, is never formidable, intimidating or remote, but always warm, supportive and consoling. The mother is often compared to the sun ("sun" is a feminine noun in Latvian), and the sun often appears as mother or god-mother in the *dainas*:

The sun, my god-mother,
Adorns me in beauty:
A silken belt, a golden cloak
Hemmed in with silver.

Saulīt', mana krustamāte,
Tā man' dailu izrotāja:
Zīda josta, zelta sagša,
Sudrabiņa ielokiem.
(33937)

The words for "sun" and for "God" in the preceding examples are in the diminutive, indicating here both affection and familiarity. Notice the focusing attributes "silken," "golden" and "silver" in the last example.

The affectionate diminutive in the *dainas* is applied indiscriminately to people, plants and animals as well as to anthropomorphized natural phenomena. In the majority of cases it signals some sort of poetic transformation, though this may be of varying degrees of intensity. The following *daina* offers an interesting example, although its meaning may not be obvious on a first reading:

The little sow trots along,
The little row follows.
Let them pass, o envier,
Let the row in a row.

Cūciņa ceļu tek,
Rindiņa pakal.
Griez, skaugī, ceļu,
Lai rinda rindā.

The diminutive form of the word "sow" here does not refer to the size of the animal but rather to the singer's attitude toward it. The "row" fol-

lowing the sow is undoubtedly a litter of piglets walking single file behind their mother. An "envier" in folk belief was a person who would draw to himself the wealth he coveted or envied in others. At one level this song thus reflects a typically peasant preoccupation with fertility of the livestock, and a superstitious fear of the classical "evil eye." Yet there is also a purely aesthetic level to the poem—the focusing on the graphical image of the animals all in a row—which actually comes to overshadow its more practical, down-to-earth aspects. Lévi-Strauss has said in his analysis of totemism¹³ that a totemic animal is not just something "good to eat" but also something "good to think with." Similarly, it could be said of this *daina* that the sow and her litter can feed the poetic imagination as well as the hunger of one's body.

Indeed, for the *daina* poets, any aspect of reality whatever could become food for the imagination. They seem to have realized that no object is beautiful or interesting by its inherent nature, but only through its interaction with the sensitivity of the observer. Conversely, no object is so insignificant, so ordinary or so humble, no situation so uninteresting or so hopeless that the poetic imagination cannot transform it into a thing of beauty or of intellectual excitement.

An interesting paradox about the *dainas* is that, in spite of the apparent first-person intimacy and the preponderant use of the present tense, they tend to make universal rather than particular statements. This feature has been missed by those critics who have declared that the *dainas* are lacking in poetical scope because of their lyrical intimacy and the lack of an epic time perspective. This is rather like saying that the tuba is more musical than the piccolo because it is larger and makes a louder noise. Centrifugal poetry, such as the *dainas*, cannot be evaluated according to criteria derived from centripetal types of poetry such as the epic romance (or *vice versa*).

The particular danger for those whose concept of folk poetry is modeled on the romance is to confuse verbosity with poetic quality and historicity with universality. Everyone knows that the so-called scope of the epic romance is often but a display of verbal assiduity, drowning the reader in a mass of accumulated details and soporific irrelevancies. The romance can make our "eres aken" with its monotony, as Chaucer well showed in his tale of Sir Thopas.

Within the general framework of the centrifugal approach, the time perspective of the *dainas* might be expected to freeze one particular moment, like a snapshot, and leave the listener to fill in the rest of the sequence. This, however, is only partly true, since many *dainas* seem to transcend (or at least to side-step) temporal anchoring altogether, often presenting a sort of eternal present. It is striking how even material of obvious epic content, and which might easily lend itself to an historical treatment, is completely denuded of specific historical referents in the *dainas*:

¹³Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1962). The English version (Totemism [Boston, 1962]) has rendered this as "goods to eat" and "goods to think with," which may convey roughly the same idea, but changes unnecessarily (and clumsily) the expression used by the author.

The plague takes, the war slays
My white brothers;
I am left all alone
Like a fir tree in a clearing.

Mirst mēri, kauj kaŗā
Manus baltus bālēliņus;
Vienu pate palikusi
Kā eglīte izdzenīta.¹⁴

It is highly likely that this *daina* dates from the seventeenth century when, as a result of the Great Northern War and an epidemic of the plague, "one could ride for three days in Vidzeme without hearing a cock crow or a dog bark," as a Russian general reported to his czar. But the way the song stands, it would be just as applicable to a twentieth-century girl in Biafra or in Bangladesh. By omitting the historical particulars of a situation, the *daina* becomes a universal statement, situated outside of space and time, because applicable anywhere, anytime, in similar circumstances.

Université de Montréal

¹⁴*Izdzenīta* is an archaic word and I have been unable to check the accuracy of my translation of it at the time of writing.

