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God, Thine Earth is Burning: Nature Attitudes and the Latvian Drive for Independence

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ABSTRACT: The dominant element in Latvian culture is *nature* rather than history. Latvians are as bound to place, to landscape, to particular geographies, as other peoples are bound to tribal legends and religions. Incorporation of this Baltic land into the Soviet Union in 1940 occasioned dramatic conflicts between these deeply-rooted orientations to the concrete facts of nature and the abstract formulations of Marxism-Leninism. The *nature culture* of Latvia, celebrated in *daina*, folk arts and crafts, is the bedrock on which the current independence movement has been built. Two major challenges are being addressed: the overt political one between Moscow center and the Baltic republics, and a deep intellectual conflict between the closed ideology of Marxism-Leninism and the open-ended nature and place-oriented cultures of the Baltic peoples.

Introduction

Un Mājas? Sapnis
Starp diviem celiem,
Starp to, kas bijis,
Un to, kas būs.

And home? A dream
Between two roads,
Between that which was,
And that which will be.
J. Rainis

Current Latvian nature attitudes reach back into an immemorial past. They reflect a lifeworld that was deeply entwined with nature. Consequently, the contemporary Latvian world view represents a classic symbiosis of nature and culture. Indeed, it can be said that the dominant element in Latvian culture is nature, not history; not stories of deeds and events (although these are not lacking) but evocations of being; of life in particular nature-culture settings. Latvian culture is a *nature culture*, made up from the concrete details of close interactions with the land, sea, forest, and sky. Latvians are as bound to place, to landscape, to particular geographies, as other peoples are bound to tribal legends and religions.

When in 1940 Latvia was occupied by the Russians and, along with its Baltic neighbours, Estonia and Lithuania, forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, the orientation of the Latvians to the concrete facts of nature and culture came into sharp conflict with the abstract, often arbitrary formulations of Marxism-Leninism.

On the other hand, the nature culture of the Latvians is the bedrock upon which the current independence movement is built. The Gandhi-like, disciplined, passive resistance to what Latvians call Soviet "tank psychology"- the implicit and explicit use of tanks, of military force – is literally made possible by the singing of songs, including folksongs, in which Latvian nature and culture are ever present. Strength and calm are attained not only through the act of singing together, but from the sense of ties to ancient ancestors and landscapes. Thus the Latvian, as well as Baltic, movement toward independence represents a twofold conflict: the overt political one between Moscow center and the Baltic republics; and a deeper intellectual conflict between the solipsistic, closed ideology of Marxism-Leninism, and the open-ended nature, place, and *genre de vie*-oriented cultures of the Baltic peoples.

The question is how Latvians, who live in an urbanized, industrialized society, one in which even the farming population is housed in urban apartment blocks and works on industrial farms, can maintain links with a

distant nature oriented culture. To answer that question it is necessary to sketch in the geographic, historic, and mental context of Latvia.

A Timeless Ethnic Domain

According to Marija Gimbutas (1963), tribes of Baltic speaking peoples, i.e., ancestors of Lithuanians and Latvians, may have inhabited the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea for as long as four millennia (a hint of that duration is imbedded in the work "baltic," which stands for white in Latvian). While such antiquity of the Balts in this part of the world might be questioned, it is certain that Latvian nature attitudes represent ancient interactions with the natural habitat by farmers and herders, fishing and forest folk. They are the expression of farmers who tended well-to-do farmsteads scattered on the alluvial plain that bisects the country; of farmers, herders and woodsmen who, save for easternmost Latvia, lived on isolated farmsteads in the rolling landscapes that make up the rest of Latvia. These landscapes had been formed by continental glaciation, consisting of moraines, drumlins, eskers, and kame terraces; of deep glacial meltwater stream valleys that now contain incongruous small streams. They also inhabited rolling uplands where the winters can be bitter and having an apple orchard is chancy. Their arable and meadow land had been hewn from spruce and fir forests which even today form a canvas of serrated silhouettes in these landscapes. Ancient animistic beliefs were expressed in sacred oaks and birch groves, still preserved in some rural landscapes, even though the original beliefs for preserving them were more or less eradicated by the brutalities that followed the Protestant Reformation. Numerous lakes, streams, and bogs provided an important adjunct to the principal economy of farming. Seafarers and fishermen, too, contributed to nature attitudes. Before Soviet paranoia about borders of the empire and zeal for collectivisation drove them away, fishermen inhabited small hamlets, which dotted the sandy, heather and pine clad littoral of the Baltic Sea.

As said before, the attitudes of ancient rural Latvians continue to inform modern Latvian landscape tastes and perceptions of nature. This is true not only of rural folk but most urbanites as well. To be sure, the Romantic Movement left its mark on Latvian nature attitudes, as have contemporary ecological concerns. Nevertheless, a modern Latvian possesses a strong sense of an unbroken mental and spiritual connection with distant rustic ancestors and their "natural" milieu. This is not merely nostalgia for a lost world (as Peter Laslett would put it, 1971), although nostalgia is a factor. It is as tangible a sensibility as any sensibility can ever be. It comes to the fore on special occasions, such as summer solstice celebrations, choral performances, and national song festivals. Folksongs, folk dances, and folk games are known to all and are always at the heart of these and other celebrations.

But the sensibility that one's culture has deep roots in local nature does not need special social occasions for it to awaken. There are still places in Latvia where it is possible to have communion with the past. An aspect of nature usually helps-time of day or night, the right condition of the atmosphere, the particular slant of sunlight on a scene. The places are ubiquitous ghost landscapes of individual farmsteads in their woodland settings, abandoned or disused since the Soviet occupation. With the cultural and psychological orientation of the mind toward human life as an ancient part of nature in this particular corner of the Baltic, there awakens in one deep associations with a hoary past. The summer solstice, a special moment of northern nature anyway, then becomes an epiphany. The stillness of a hay meadow in its setting of a spruce forest at sunset is then transformed into a timeless stillness, bringing the present into a synchronous unity with a stone age past. At moments like these, in such places, it takes no particular effort of the imagination-as Vico knew-to realize that thousands of years ago there were people here who had a similar vision and feelings. Even a night train rushing through a landscape of low-lying mists can trigger an epiphany in which the ancient past suddenly becomes real. The forests, birch groves, meadows, fields, old barns, and dark farmhouses sliding past one's window then lose all traces of the passage of time, of the impress of wars and twisted ideologies, of the human hand itself. All is then transformed into a timeless nature, except that the mind knows and the heart feels that the shadowy silhouettes of barns, houses, and birch groves identify this as a distinctly Latvian ethnic domain.

The Past as Homeland

David Lowenthal has demonstrated convincingly that modern humans have lost their sense of continuity with the past; that the "past is a foreign country" (1985). In the world of today past landscapes are supplanted by modern ones. Or the past is altered. Even preservation alters the past because it represents a self-conscious expression of what people of today consider the past to have been. The past is changed in the image of the present, becomes unreal, is lost, and becomes a foreign entity.

Although Latvians have been immersed in the twentieth century as much as any other people-especially in their experiences of mechanized warfare and the mass bureaucratization of society-their ties to the past, to old nature attitudes and cultural landscapes remain intact. Indeed, the past is the only homeland that the Latvians have. In part, this is so because Latvians and their culture are threatened with extinction. It is also so because Latvians are in exile everywhere. In the words of the contemporary Latvian philosopher Dace Bormane, "Latvians in their dwelling places abroad are exiled in the world; those living in Latvia are in internal exile. A

symptom of the Latvian people's situation is the feeling of exile" (1991, p. 27). Exiled from the world of today Latvians have found their homeland in the past from which they want to fashion the homeland of the future. Or as the modern Latvian poet Rainis wrote before the first Latvian independence declaration in 1918, "If there is no homeland, nevertheless it will come into existence (cited by Viese 1990a, p. 149).

A retreat into the past, nostalgia for the past is neither new nor novel. There is a paradise lost syndrome in all of us, if for no other reason than as nostalgia for the unselfconscious, eternally sunny days of childhood. Turning to the past in the face of an intolerable present is another common reason. It is therefore not surprising that threatened with extinction as a culture group, their landscapes devastated, their moral stamina undermined by the Orwelian nightmare of Soviet double-speak and double-think, Latvians are seeking solace in the past. But there is an overriding factor at work here. Like exiles everywhere, Latvians suffer from a loss of identity as a community and from a sense of powerlessness over their destiny. To recapture the identity that was destroyed by conquest and by the state engineering of their souls (to paraphrase Stalin), Latvians are embarked on a *relocalization of themselves in their specific geography and history*; in a specific place and time. They are trying to leave the self-referential and arbitrary milieu created by Soviet ideology, in which features of geography, nature, culture, and history are made up a priori to suit the needs of ideology. Instead of copying an ideological blueprint or model, they want to use the nature and culture of the place that they inhabit as inspiration for the creation of a distinct Latvian identity. In other words, as the controlling factor, they wish to substitute an empirical vision of the life process in a specific place for an ideological generalization that is specific to no particular place at all.

In this sense the Latvian situation bears similarities to that of the Renaissance when humanists were trying to reestablish life in the here-and-now in lieu of the ideology of other worldliness that had prevailed during the Middle Ages (the major difference is the total rejection of ideology by the Latvians). As then, the Latvians are turning to the past for lessons and inspiration, except that in their case it is not the writings or architecture and the plastic arts of great artists of Classical Antiquity that move them; it is the folklore and folk arts of their distant and not so distant ancestors.

Latvians are in direct communication with past landscapes and lives through a large body of lore that was central in the lives of their rustic ancestors and which continues to be central in the lives of contemporary Latvians, whatever their background or calling. That lore consists of folk arts and crafts in all their varied forms: weaving, pottery, wood and leather working, amber jewelry making and the like. It consists of an abiding interest in all aspects of so-called oral literature, including proverbs, fairy tales, and tales about places in the landscape (castle ruins, old trees, rocks, houses, and the like).

Interest in folklife and culture is, of course, an aspect of most modern societies. In Scandinavia, Ireland, Scotland, and elsewhere, folk culture has been incorporated in certain aspects of contemporary urban life. For Latvians, however, it has historically been central to their very survival as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity. It was a source of social coherence, cultural identity and continuity during some seven hundred years of German colonial rule (since the early 13th century). Of importance is the geographic separation of German and Latvian traditions. Somewhat like the Romans, the Germans ruled the subservient population of Latvians from cities, strongholds, and manorial estates. Not until the Enlightenment did they become interested in Latvians and their culture. For their part, Latvians came to associate rural environments as synonymous with Latvianness, in spite of the fact that many lived in major cities or were seafarers. This meant that rural lifeways and nature remained a major element in Latvian culture. During the first national awakening in the eighteen sixties, folk culture became the source of mainstream Latvian history and culture. When the Soviets occupied Latvia in 1940, it became practically the sole repository of Latvian sensibilities and culture. Latvian history, especially of the independence period (1918-1940), could not be passed on from parent to child, from one generation to the next. Such information was too dangerous, especially in schoolyard situations, where an unguarded remark by a child could get a Gulag sentence for the entire family. Most significantly, the rural countryside became once again identified with Latvianness. Indeed, that is the dominant reality today, for Latvians are a minority among other minorities in Riga and several other cities. While theatres and other cultural institutions and monuments are Latvian in these cities, there is a feeling that only in the rural countryside does one have a true identity through contact with timeless nature and culture. (Some small rural towns with a strong Latvian presence and effective care for the environment are called "green".)

It is ironic that when the Soviets took over and censored Latvian history they permitted the continuation of most folk traditions as harmless (or even as positive) expressions of the Latvian folk (to them, the proletariat). Clearly they did not understand the unique historic role of folk traditions for the Latvians. In all likelihood, the ahistoric nature of Latvian folk culture (in the sense of chronologies, great people, and events) saved it. Given the material and spiritual transformation of Latvian society into a dispirited mass of *homo sovieticus*, Latvian folk culture insured the continuity of precisely those aspects most important to a national identity: language and, for lack of a better concept, a certain spiritual outlook on self, society, and the universe; in other words, the subjective interior that forms the core of any cultural identity. Thus, Latvian apartments in nondescript

Communist tower blocks were furnished with Latvian pottery, weaves, inlaid woodwork, amber, books bound in leather, and the like. The children, carefully nurtured in these settings, learned about Latvian aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. They also learned that these sensibilities were deeply rooted in rural Latvia and in Latvian nature from visits to the country as well as from choral singing of folksongs in which nature is deeply entwined with culture. All of this was underscored by folk costumes that were often worn on these occasions, especially by women. Woven from natural wools, with sophisticated geometric patterns, their earthen and field grain tones, brought forth by natural dyes, represented many regions and localities. All of this constituted a host of symbolic messages about culture, nature, and place that the children learned to "read". Above all, in their refinement and attention to detail, the costumes stood as bright alternatives to the drab realities of Communism.

The Dainas

By far the most important folk culture source is an inordinately large collection of folk poetry called the *dainas*. The Latvians regard the *dainas* as the repository of all the wisdom accumulated by their ancestors about life and death, culture, and nature. The *dainas* have a central hold on Latvian imagination. As one scholar describes their role in Latvian society (Svabe 1952, Vol. I, XXV):

> Latvians have such piety towards this inheritance from their forefathers ... that a favorable sentiment, which cannot be attained even by a clever politician, is gained rather easily by the song of a chorus; every Latvian who listens to it, regardless of religion, political conviction or social status feels that a centuries long common fate unifies him with people who sing and listen to these songs.

The *dainas* epitomize Latvian ties to the rural countryside and to nature. They also epitomize an ethical view of the world based "on respect and reverence toward all living and non-living in nature" (Viese 1990b, p. 35). It is a view couched in terms of kindness and gentleness, with forms of address in which the diminutive is a frequent presence (this makes the *dainas* especially difficult to translate into English). The bridge that connects the past and the future is the mother, who is likened to the sun: "The sun brings warm mornings, mother brings kind words" (Viese, Ibid)

Latvians believe that in the ancient nature wisdom of the *dainas* is the path to building a new society free from the moral irresponsibility instituted by Soviet ideology and from the economic and ecologic destruction of Latvia wrought by that ideology. The *dainas* are the key to a Latvian homeland.

Most *dainas* are short, cryptic, non-rhyming lyric quatrains that normally contain two parts: a thesis and antithesis, or an elaboration or explication of the original thesis. Each *daina* can be self sufficient but in practice, when sung or chanted, they were strung together like beads on a thread, to suit a particular occasion, e.g., summer solstice visit to another farm, a song contest between a bride's and groom's wedding parties, or herding horses in a summer forest meadow. The following *daina* (in feminine voice) is typical:

Bēdu bēdu, kas par bēdu:	Sorrow, sorrow, oh what sorrow!
Es par bēdu nebēdāju	Over sorrow I did not mourn!
Liku bēdu zem akmeņa	I put sorrow 'neath a stone,
Pāri gaju dziedādama.	Walk'd over it with a song.

The singing and chanting of *dainas* helped to pass the time and to lighten the drudgery of repetitious labor, such as milling flour by hand. But most of all, they served to bind together a population living largely on dispersed family farmsteads (the country church and the pub were the other ties). Latvians sang about everything. As a traveller observed during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Latvians had songs for all occasions places, and things (Buttner 1952, I, XXIX):

> He sings his marriage songs during marriages, funeral songs during funerals; his Jahnu [summer solstice] songs on Jahnu eve, cowherd songs while on his way to herd ... The extraordinarily rich store of songs makes it possible for the singers to submerge into the magic of these songs for hours, even days. When in his house, the Latvian includes in the spirit of his magic every tool, thing, possession ... We can only wonder at their capacity to adopt songs for each occasion precisely and unerringly.

Many occasions for singing were in outdoor settings, so that song became an integral part of rural landscapes, as another nineteenth century traveller observed (Katefeld 1952, I, XXX):

> If there are many singers then such singing can be heard for many versts. On beautiful summer nights, out in the open, such singing does not sound at all unpleasant ...

That then is a short synopsis of the complex cultural and psychological realities within which Latvians are struggling to regain their freedom. I now wish to examine one leading nature theme which is central to the Latvian view of the world and hope for a new homeland. That theme is land (also the earth generally), as defined by a single family farmstead. There are many aspects of nature that Latvians sing about, but none are so important as land. Land is a close, immediate entity and it concentrates basic emotional and practical associations about culture, nature, the past, and the future.

The Land

> Oh land of my father,
> Your loveliness,
> The little hairgrass
> Blooms silvery blossoms.
> A *daina*

In describing the feeling of exile in Latvia, Dace Bormane (1991, pp. 27-28) speaks of a prevailing chaos

of time and space and a milieu that has been purposefully destroyed. "Only the Land remains, seemingly stable even in defeat," she writes. "It can be said about the Latvian nation that it once was. One does not speak of the land that way, nor about the human being." She explains that a centuries-long cultivation of the soil has made the Latvian "a man of the earth" and implies that the only way to regain the homeland is to articulate a widespread rallying call for the Latvian to become "a master in one's own plot of land." With the call goes the belief that mastery would lead to responsibility which would eventually lead to a harmonious existence in an economically and ecologically sound habitat. It is an agrarian philosophy of democracy not unlike that of Thomas Jefferson's farming yeomanry. Although most of the current generation have never heard of Jefferson (his ideas of democracy and human rights are too dangerous to the regime), they share his idea that a man with his own piece of farmland becomes a responsible citizen, and ensures the survival of democratic principles.

No one in Latvia truly believes that things are that simple. Still, it is a dream that is compelling them to fight for independence. It is articulated in parliamentary debates and in all the free media (some of the media are still in Communist hands). But by far the most powerful expression and affirmation of the dream occurs in choral singing, which takes place frequently, all over Latvia, and culminates in a national festival of song. It is on these occasions that what I have briefly sketched in above, concerning nature and Latvian culture, comes together into a powerful sense of homeland. Most songs are quiet, even plaintive. They are very much rooted in Lutheran hymn tradition (indeed one of the most moving is the "Lord's Prayer") and their contents are not militant-a characteristic heightened by the fact that female voices dominate, especially the higher registers of sopranos. (It is worth noting that Latvian choral singing of nationalistic songs stands in sharp contradistinction to the male dominated martial choral singing of Russia and of the all male choruses of Nazi Germany.)

Songs that move an audience the most are about nature, about specific geographic features, such as rivers (e.g., Daugava, Gauja), about the land as Latvian heritage. Many were written for the first Latvian declaration of independence in 1918, although one of the most powerful, if not the most popular piece, is the full length requiem, *God, Thine Earth is Burning*, performed for the first time in 1943, at the height of the Second World War, and resurrected in 1990 (it was clearly inspired by Verdi's *Requiem Mass*).

The national anthem, itself a hymn, sets, as it were, the scene. Although land is mentioned only implicitly, this short two quatrain, *daina*-like poem asks the Lord's blessing for Latvia as the place where young women blossom (most Latvians, including myself, who have never looked at the original text, have always believed that the operative word was "sing") and young men sing (*Kur latvju meitas zied,/Kur latvju dēli dzied*). In a song called "Latvian Hymn" by V. Pludonis, the first of the four quatrains contains the current political agenda:

> We want to be lords in our land of birth,
> We want to debate here our own laws.
> This land is ours, these cities ours.
> We don't want to beg for that which is ours, but to take.

The refrain is "this land is ours," which is combined with: "we are tied to you with a hundred ties"; it is also combined with the idea that the Latvian tongue still resounds here and that the land is "the ancient dowry" given by God and Laima (a goddess), as is also the Baltic Sea. The last two lines of the song are as militant as the Latvians get, vowing that no one is the four regions of the country will ever again give it up to strangers. In "Eternal Life to You, Latvia" (V. Pludonis), the toast is made for eternal life, "Like the sea, that roars at your feet," with the explanation that "ancient God Himself" blessed the fields in forest clearings as "our home." In "Holy Inheritance" (L. Breikšs) one of the quatrains encapsules Latvian earth and nature iconography as the essence of homeland:

> Nowhere on earth will we be greeted this warmly,
> No one will greet us as these fields of grain,
> Around which reach upward birch tribes
> And linden trees look skyward with the wind's voice in them.

In a somber song by Kārlis Skalbe, a much beloved writer who took part in Latvia's 1918 independence declaration, a powerful mood is created by a slowly paced melody (and a rare emphasis on male voices) in combination with simple landscape imagery and cultural symbolism:

> Eternally blue are Latvia's hills,
> Eternally there is no rest beneath Latvian birches,
> Eternally weeps the (medieval) horn over Latvia's hills.

The next stanza explains:

> Broken the vessels of our pagan offerings,
> In stars of blood dressed the fields of homeland;
> Beneath the hoary branches of the spruce grove,
> Tortured martyrs have no rest.

Vessels of pagan offerings refers back to preconquest Latvia, prior to the 13th century. In typical Latvian understatement Skalbe relieves but does not resolve the somber mood of the song by saying that the curses of heroes roll between the granite blocks of the eternally white rapids of Daugava (ironically, perhaps purposefully, now beneath a damned up Soviet lake). This is all. The call to arms is implicit, but Skalbe knows perfectly well the Latvian distaste for drama and hyperbole. There is no image of marching heroes, no rousing call to the flag. Only the suggestion that heroic resistance to oppression is as enduring as nature herself.

Although the songs sampled above were composed by specific authors, they are closely linked to the *dainas*. In some instances a song is made up entirely of *daina* texts.

One of the most important songs about land is a case in point. In its first stanza is the essential Latvian dreamscape:

> 'Tis fine for everyone, 'tis fine for everyone,
> In my father's land.
> 'Tis fine for the rabbit to tumble about,
> For the heath cock to call a mate.

All the requisite elements of the dream for homeland are here: the land, the independent family farm under the successful guiding hand of the master of the farm. Success is measured by the suggestion of bounty-there is enough here not only for people but wild animals as well. Life is harmonious, easy, and happy, for even the creatures of nature are at play. The rabbit and heath cock (*Lyrurus tetrix*) may be no more than poetic images to make a point, but they also represent a self-consciously selected setting for the farm in nature. A bear, wolf, or moose could have been just as easily in the song, but they are creatures of the more hidden recesses of nature. Rabbits and heath cocks prefer the borders between forest and cleared land: the brushlands, birch groves, and heaths that commonly outline the Latvian farm. As such it represents the canonical image of the independent family farm engraved in every Latvian consciousness by folksong, novel, and painting (just as an English pastoral landscape has been engraved upon every English consciousness).

The *dainas* cover a whole range of pastoral themes. A happy farmstead is hard to pass by for "Dear bees hum in the grainfield,/Dear maids sing in the garden." Life is without care in the farmstead with noble oaks, with "Rye and barley all around it;" or one with a "Birch grove all around," with "The sun at play in the middle." It is especially fine to live on a "round little hill" where "The sun runs all around/ Sifting silver." A farmstead on a hill with white blossoms and a fast flowing river below means that "I trip up the hill to adorn myself/ Down below to scrub [myself] white." On the other hand, life is bountiful on the edge of a lake, where "The bee crawls into the oak/ The pike into the trap." Size is of no account if there is beauty and nobility in the farm, as explains the young bride as she looks back to her father's "little demesne": it may be small, "But it endures nobly:/ All the little junipers/ Bloom silver blossoms." References to cosmo-magical symbolism are reminders of ancient harmonies with both nature and the cosmos:

> Small is my dear home,
> Three gates of copper,
> Through one rose the sun,
> Through the second the little moon,
> Through the third I drove home,
> With a yellow little steed.

Beauty and harmony of culture and nature is in a sense consummated in the following *daina*:

> Whose enclosure is that on the hill,
> The roof of its house in horsehair thatch?
> There the dear sun threw glimmers,
> On a little foggy morning.

Epilogue

The pastoral imagery above is as idealistic as anything written by Virgil and his successors. Latvians are aware of that and they doubt that it is possible to return to their golden past. As Dace Bormane, an intellectual engaged in articulating the Latvian condition, wrote in early January of this year (1991, p. 29),

> We are diligently striving to return to those symbols and values [that are] of importance to the people, but it seems that we do not realize that it is possible to return only to that which is.

Bormane depicts a situation in which space and time are out of synchronization (1991, p. 27): "If time is real here, then space is unreal; if space is real, then time is unreal." As she explains,

> In his everyday life the Latvian feels like he is on a visit to an ethnographic museum-in a beautiful single family farmstead of the 19th century, but the fact is that we are close to the end of the 20th century. Or put differently: it is the time of awakening for the people, but in the museum there are no lessons for life in the world of today.

Bormane then asks what can be done (1991, p. 28),

> when at the turning of the 20th century, the politico-intellectual core of the people has been neutralized spiritually and destroyed physically ...? In such a situation we are seeking a cultural paradigm by which a human being can articulate his sense of this people, land and world.

Much of that sensibility is embodied in the *dainas*. Together with Bormane (1991, p. 28) I doubt "that such a sensibility carries with it any worldly power. More likely it represents the hope that through it we will become stronger." And yet, I cannot help but think, along with most Latvians, that there is in it a worldly dimension. After all, the ancient wisdom of their forbears has a powerful hold on the modern psyche of the Latvians in their struggle for freedom. Unlike their two Baltic neighbours, Estonia and Lithuania, Latvians have had to rely entirely on their inner resources. Because they are in the same linguistic family as the Fins and share a common border with them, the Estonians have had at least some moral support from without. So, too, have the Lithuanians, whose strong orientation to the Catholic faith gave them a modicum of support among Catholics in the world outside, including the Pope. For the Latvians, however limited in applicability to the late twentieth century their folk traditions may be, they constitute a distinct homeland from which to fashion the future. It is a homeland in which nature and culture have grown together into an inseparable unity over eons of time. I doubt very much that Latvians will want to separate them now, should they succeed in their quest for freedom and rebirth of harmony in their unhappy land.

The unity of culture and nature in encapsuled in this enigmatic woman's (or girl's) *daina*, in which aesthetic sensibilities are more important than the suggestion of gain:

Through a silver birch grove I stroll'd,
Not one little branch did I break.
Had I broken a branch,
I'd walk about clad in silver.

No scientific proof exists that sentiments like these are behind the many birch groves still gracing the borders of the old (and even some new) farmlands of Latvia. But surely there is a connection. And at least for now it is symbolic of the homeland that the Latvians dream of and that they want as their future. Without dreams there would be little dignity and grace in the human landscape, nor would there be any forest, where, as the *daina* insists, "A dear little hare/Could live out a nasty day."

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