

Narratives of Landscape in Latvian History and Memory

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LATVIAN LANDSCAPE has played a crucial, albeit changing, role in Latvian conceptions of identity. The nineteenth-century nationalist movement was articulated in terms of the relationship between land and people. During the independence period a uniquely local vision of the landscape was nurtured by art and literature, which encouraged a reverence for the landscape. Simultaneously, government policy encouraged agriculture, which flourished. Thus, the Soviets, following their occupation, entered a 'historically saturated landscape' and adopted as their remit the destruction of that landscape. My paper traces the semantic history of Latvian landscape and examines its role in providing a still point in personal narratives of loss and displacement. I conclude that the Soviets only partially succeeded in their mission of destruction. Although they succeeded in changing the physical face of the landscape and farming they were unable to destroy the pastoral vision which is a component of so many Latvian narratives.

Our native hearth
Is burning in the sky
In order to come home
We do not open the door
But the cover of a book.

We cannot learn from a snail
Because home is not a refuge for us
But we will be a refuge for the homeland

Māra Zālīte

BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

MY FIELDWORK WAS CARRIED OUT OVER A PERIOD OF 10 MONTHS between 1992 and 1993 and three months in 1999 and involved listening to over a hundred life histories. My proposed study was of neurasthenia the most commonly used diagnosis in the ex-Soviet Union which relates to such symptoms as tiredness, anxiety and irritability – conditions most of us are familiar with at some time or another under another name. As so often happens in anthropological projects – particularly those dealing with illness – I found the fieldwork expanding, in my case moving inexorably back in time to events some 40 or 50 years old. I heard stories of imprisonment, expropriation, deportation and return. However, these stories were not only concerned about the unfolding of events in time, they also interrupted the narrative sequence in order to describe the places of their early

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REFLECTION

experience and thus to recreate landscapes of memory for themselves and their listener. There is a short book by Poulet, which argues that Proust's work is concerned not with time but with place and, in particular, with places lost (1963). Latvian narratives, too, are concerned not only with the reconstruction of past times but also with the imaginative recreation of place. Description is as important as narration in Latvian autobiographical accounts, in that it ties freewheeling accounts of movement and loss to recognisable and shared landscapes.

Roskill describes the interdependence of the visual and linguistic in the context of landscape painting and argues that there are certain conventions of transposability from visual images to linguistic descriptions.

"Space and time enter inevitably into the way that landscape is perceived. Things are taken as set apart from one another, in a fashion that entails both distribution and extension. But because of the parts played by imagination and recall here, in piecing together how the key features in question take up their places and what sort of ordering they imply, it is not at all clear that what happens spatially and temporally within an outdoor scene can be identified and responded to, independently of acquiring a language in which to do this" (1997: 11). The pastoral focus of Latvian painting and literature enabled this transposition from narrative eye to I to take place.

My point of departure for this paper is a kind of paradox, which I would like you to consider. It concerns the way in which my Latvian narrators so often interrupt, or put on hold if you like, their narration of a rapid sequence of violent events in order to describe a seductive pastoral landscape and to take pleasure, albeit fleetingly, in the feelings thus evoked. For example, Janis interleaves his account of his train journey, under arrest, to a prison camp outside Moscow with a reference to the countryside: "And then we were loaded into the wagons and we started the journey to the east. And I remember it was about 2nd or 3rd June and we passed through Lithuania and it was high summer and beautiful and I so much wanted to throw myself out of the wagon doors and run into the forest". Pastoral form and feeling is intertwined throughout Janis' and many other Latvian narratives. It suggests that pastoral is not incompatible with extreme experience; indeed, but rather can help sustain the experience and its narrative representation. I find a parallel in a recent book on pastoral, which begins in an unlikely way by considering an episode from Primo Levi's *If this is a Man*. Levi and a fellow prisoner have found temporary respite from the regimented labour of Auschwitz: "Levi's and Jean's sense of physical and conversational ease at noontime replicates, under painfully unlikely circumstances, a situation conventionally found in pastoral poems" (Alpers, 1997: 5). Alpers uses this example to dismiss the case against pastoral on the grounds of its inability to "envisage deprivation of this extent and severity" and to argue that the pastoral mode can indeed encompass the extremes of human experience (*Ibid*: 7).

I want to show that the pastoral mode of narrative is not merely compatible with the representation of extreme experience but that it creates the very possibility

of such representation. There is, of course, a long and venerable tradition of mapping temporal sequences onto spatial theatres of memory (Yates, 1966). These places are “like all memory places ... both a private site and a public location, a ‘commonplace’ in a social even a national imaginary” (Mitchell, 1994a: 207). These public memory sites highlight the select nature of memory and what can and cannot be remembered. Narrators may feel unable to recall certain sites/sights and return instead to other more familiar and comforting landscapes. “But describing the experience, recounting the experiential density of visual details, especially those trivial details that do nothing to advance the narrative, but ‘spread the narrative in space ... this way of telling is too dangerous’. It threatens to ... take the narrator ‘back in memory’ to a place he cannot endure” (Mitchell 1994a: 201-2). Instead, Latvian narrators interrupt their story to revisit a pastoral landscape where childhood memories are grafted onto a culturally shaped emblem of national identity. In doing so my Latvian narrators are following a tradition which connects pastoral writing with war. Indeed, Virgil who is seen as one of the originators of Western pastoral poetry wrote against a background of civil war and one of the protagonists in *The Eclogues* – Moeris – was dispossessed of his land. The ninth eclogue includes the lines:

Oh Lycidas, we’ve lived to reach this – that a stranger
 (Something we never feared) should seize our little farm
 And say: ‘This property is mine; old tenants, out!’ (Virgil 1980: 97)

Latvian folk songs also attest to the interconnectedness of pastoral and soldiering themes. Most are sad, such as the following:

I have to go
 I cannot stay
 There is no one to harvest
 The rye and oats I sowed

I have to go
 I cannot stay
 My horse stays behind
 Nurtured but not yet ridden.

Whoever harvests my rye and oats
 Let him take my horse
 Let him take my horse
 And let him take my bride.

Some are angry and bitter:

Take the plough yourself master
 To the big field
 Why did you hand over to the king
 So many young ploughmen?

For the narrator, a pastoral landscape answers both to a psychological need and to a figural and rhetorical device which promotes the involvement and commitment of the listener in the story. The psychological need is for a still point in a story, which careers unpredictably forward with no subject in control. The need for persuasive literary figures which promote involvement, on the other hand, derives from the compulsive need to testify: to make public the personal. Latvian narratives of violence and dislocation have, as their constant reference point, a pastoral past and this iconic past draws upon sedimented layers of meaning. As Empson has written, pastoral accounts succeed in "putting the complex into the simple" (1935: 23). Golden age stories, which are a recurring feature of Latvian life stories, inhabit a pastoral landscape. The golden age story holds together individual and community history: individual experience is mapped onto a pre-existing narrative template. In short, the pastoral theme in personal narratives represents an achievement of social connectedness.

LANDSCAPE IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

In freezing narrative action storytellers enter pastoral landscapes of memory. These are drawn not only from memory but also from a shared language and history and its associated images and stories. The personal story can only be told if it borrows a collective idiom.

Until the Soviet occupation and the attendant reconstruction of society Latvia was predominantly agrarian. At the end of the nineteenth century 70 per cent of the population of what is now Latvia were country dwellers. At the outbreak of the First World War that figure had fallen to 60 per cent. But shortly after independence the figures for 1920 are 76 per cent (Skujenieks, 1938: 43). Present-day figures reflect the Soviet introduction of heavy industry and the migration of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union to Latvian cities. The distribution between country and city has been reversed with some 70 per cent of the population living in towns. However, throughout history, the Latvian countryside has been periodically emptied. History books recount how, following the invasion of Livonia by the armies of Ivan the Terrible: one could not hear a cock crow from Riga to Tallinn. The First World War saw a mass exodus of three-quarters of the population of Kurland. And there is, of course, the more recent Soviet experience with its large-scale deportations of people and attack on the physical face of the landscape in the name of amelioration programmes, which has resulted in the emptying of the landscape and a reversal to a wilderness of untended bushes and undergrowth.

Indeed, it could be argued that Latvian identity was forged in the countryside. Serfdom, which tied Latvians to the land and yet denied them land of their own, created a passionate longing for land. The nationalist movement of the 1850s and 1860s created a literature that was predominantly pastoral. It also gave pride of place to the folk songs collected by Barons in the 1890s, which represented human life as rooted in nature and came to be seen as representing the quintessential

Latvian spirit. The high literacy rates suggest how influential these publications were in shaping values and feelings.

It is no accident that the epicentre of the 1905 revolution moved very quickly from the towns to the countryside and was able to draw upon centuries of suppressed bitterness. Karlis Ulmanis, the first president of Latvia after the declaration of independence on 18 November 1918, was head of the farmer's party. One of the major government reforms during the period of independence was the redistribution of land to the landless thus creating Latvia as a country of small farmers.

With the first Soviet occupation in June 1940 it is the countryside that is seen as bearing the brunt of the onslaught and as being the site of resistance. Land of relatively modest sized farms of 30 hectares and above was confiscated as were farm dwellings. During this first year of occupation some 35,000 people were also arrested and killed with a view to eliminating systematically the *intelligentsia*, the business class and, indeed, anyone in a position of power or influence.

The Soviets had known how to strike at the heart of national identity with their two-pronged attack on land and people. As a result, the German invasion of the following summer, encountered a demoralised and terrified population many of whom saw the Germans as liberators. Confiscated land was restored, but those relatively few country folk who had collaborated with the Soviet occupiers were in turn expropriated.

It is probably the restoration of land and property that helps to explain why the German invasion is described not as an occupation but as a period of time. With the advance of Soviet military forces in the autumn of 1944 there was a resurgence of fear for life and livelihood. Many thousands of Latvians sought refuge in the forests. Plakans estimates that in the post-war period these people numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 (1995: 155). Misiunas and Taagepera quote a figure of 40,000 (1993: 83). The forests were thought to hold the only hope of national regeneration. As Schama writes in another context: "By retreating to the realm of the bison, the depths of the primeval forest, those later survivors of national disaster in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would find asylum, succour, the promise of re-emergence" (1995: 42).

The importance of collective farming to the Soviet enterprise entailed a major onslaught on both people and landscape. Latvian farmers were used to living in independent farmsteads and had no wish to join collective farms. Draconian measures had to be implemented to persuade them to do so. Taxes imposed on farmers in 1947 and 1948 gave an indication of what was to come.

For farmers classified as *kulaks* a tax of 40 per cent of estimated income was imposed in 1947 and 75 per cent in 1948. In practice, incomes were overestimated and farmers were unable to pay the taxes. Despite this softening approach only 8 per cent of farmers had joined the *kolkhozes* at the beginning of 1949. On 25 March 1949, one-tenth of the rural population, some 50,000 men, women and children were deported to Siberia in an attempt to persuade the rest to join the collective farms. Many were deposited in the region of Tomsk.

Because land had already been confiscated, the definition of a *kulak* was used retrospectively. In practice, there was a large element of arbitrariness in the compilation of the lists for deportation and local envy and animosities were sometimes exploited. Those who survived deportation and exile often had no homes to go to and their return to the homeland could also be painful. The deportations had the desired effect of speeding collectivisation. Misiunas and Taagepera quote a figure for collectivised farms of 11 per cent on 12 March and 50 per cent on 9 April. By the end of 1951 more than 98 per cent of all Latvian farms had been collectivised. The Soviets imposed a different face upon the landscape: where farm dwellings had been scattered over the landscape, the Soviet system of collectivised farming required workers to live in artificially created villages consisting of medium-rise blocks of flats. People living in outlying farmsteads were forced to move to the centres of administrative regions, thus reversing centuries-old patterns of scattered rather than village settlement. Figures 1 and 2 show how such farmsteads look today.

Amelioration was the blanket term used to cover all such acts of aggression carried out against farmers and their land in connection with collectivisation. The term was used to describe the draining of marshy land as well as the destruction of farmsteads, wells and roads leading to remote farmsteads. Indeed, some marginal zones near the sea became prohibited areas as figure 3 shows. Not surprisingly, the use of the term amelioration by Latvian country people was strongly ironic. In driving farmers out of their remote farmsteads Soviet authorities were not only ensuring ease of surveillance and control but also striking at the central symbol of Latvian identity: the small, single farmstead situated on a slight incline and fringed with forests.



Figure 1



Figure 2

THE PROMOTION OF LATVIAN ART

However, the rural character of Latvian identity was shaped not only by historical events but also by a self-conscious direction of the education system and of artistic enterprise. School children during the independence period were obliged to spend three weeks a year working on farms.

The ethnographic museum, which was set up outside Riga in 1925 and covered several hundred hectares, turned traditional country life into an art form. Painting had lagged behind literature in Latvia. Indeed, the art historian Siliņš gives a new meaning to still life in the Baltic context; he describes Livlandisches Stilleben as “a period of sleepy stillness in social, literary and art matters” (1979: 275). But all this changed during the independence period under Ulmanis who was particularly concerned with the popularisation of literary and visual arts on the grounds that it would promote national self-confidence.

Exactly two years after the declaration of independence on 18 November 1918 the Cultural Foundation was established – significantly on the day of independence to promote and give financial support to the arts. Its self-avowed rationale was closely linked to the development of national identity. “The Latvian nation has suffered so much that it wants to speak at long last ... Our nation is like a jug that has just been taken from the kiln and wants to ring out. In its roots it has remained healthy, but it wishes to be still more unified and to create its art and its spiritual life” (*Kultūras Fonds*, 1928: 3–4). Indeed, throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Cultural Foundation was active in the support of the arts. Considerable sums of money were given in prizes; for example, Purvītis received 500 lats in 1921 on his birthday. In the 1920s, the average sum given for study abroad was 1,500 lats.

Publishing, including art books, was heavily subsidised. Art museums were founded in the provinces in Cēsis and Talsi. Several exhibitions were mounted in the provinces throughout the 1930s. In 1939, a travelling exhibition was organised which stopped in some 50 places throughout the provinces. The work of artists was subsidised by generous government purchases of paintings.

Between 1935 and 1938 the Cultural Foundation purchased paintings from two exhibitions to the value of 25,000 lats (Siliņš, 1990: 18). The association of Latvian artists, formed in 1929, argued for “art with a Latvian content and form” (Siliņš, 1990: 409). In practice, this involved a certain ambivalence because both government and artists recognised the need for foreign travel and study but it certainly served to promote landscape painting. One of the goals of this painting was the promotion of attachment to landscape and the perception of its beauty. Indeed, a synonym for beautiful is the Latvian word *gleznains* which is translated literally as painting-like – a good example of life imitating art or landscape perceived as art. Ulmanis himself contributed to an exhibition catalogue with the words: “We must take care to honour works of art and also to honour artists and to see to it that they can work in peace” (*Ibid*: 18).

The result of this cultural policy was to broaden the category of those observing the landscape so as to include not only the recently emerged intelligentsia and

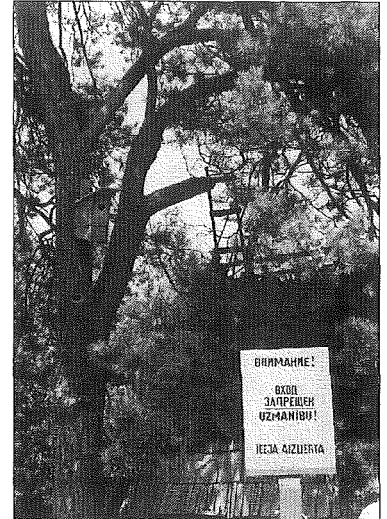


Figure 3

urban middle classes but also those who lived in the countryside and worked the land. Of course, another way in which this was done was through calendars. Painter, in his fascinating study of owners of reproductions of Constable's cornfield, explored the diverse and autobiographically specific ways in which artistic images enter ordinary people's lives (1996). But such images also create profound commonalities in ways of seeing. Raymond Williams has suggested that what is significant is not the landscape in itself but the sensibility of the observer: "The self-conscious observer ... this is the figure we need to seek: not a kind of nature but a kind of man" (1993: 121). Latvian art and literature, I am suggesting, combined to transform small farmers into these kinds of self-conscious observers and to elevate the farmstead as a root metaphor of Latvian culture. As Bishop has claimed in relation to Constable's paintings, so too Latvian painting was "not just concerned with evoking memory but also with organising memory landscapes" (1995: 54).

To summarise, therefore: actual historical events, the meanings ascribed to those events and artistic representations of landscape have all contributed to the specifically Latvian experience of landscape and place. The rural landscape has been the site of deprivation, violence and suffering. However, it has also been the source of hope for a better future. Artistic and literary representations have reaffirmed that hope by emphasising the enduring qualities of landscape, which dwarf historical and biographical changes.

Perhaps the best known Latvian painter is Purvītis who painted the landscape of Vidzeme in spring, summer, autumn and winter.¹ Puvitis landscapes of the changing seasons are shown in figures 4, 5, 6 and 7. As in the serial paintings of Monet, who studied the same subject under different conditions, repetition serves to essentialise the landscape. Tucker writes: "These paintings chart the passage of the sun across the stacks with such specificity that they collectively form a kind of chronometer" (1990: 84). Tucker argues compellingly that Monet's retreat from

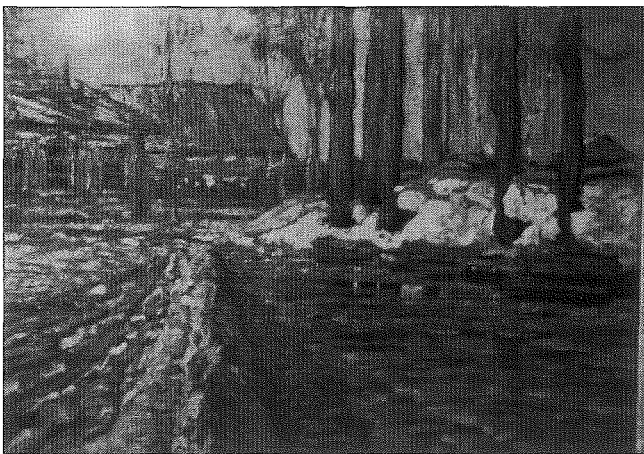


Figure 4

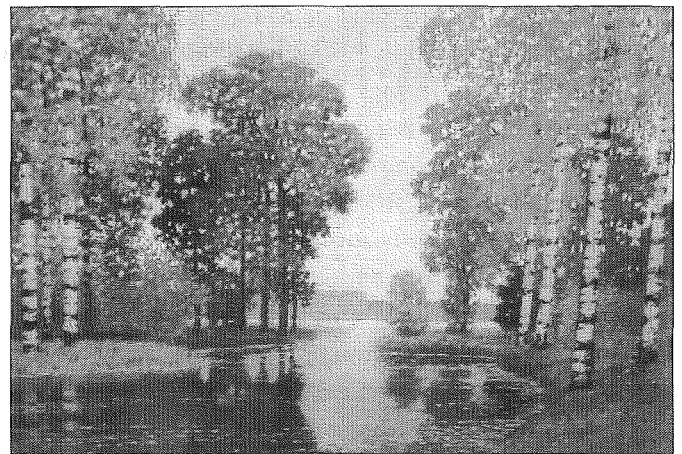


Figure 5

the city to the country was linked to the need to provide an untroubled image of national identity during a period of history when France was particularly under threat. So too Purvītis' depopulated images of Latvian countryside served to consolidate and unify the identity of Latvia as an emerging nation.

NARRATIVE EXTRACTS

Most narrators take time to locate their childhood in an idyllic pastoral setting, which emphasises solidity and permanence. Lidija insisted on recalling her childhood before she moved on to describe her many later bereavements:

We weren't particularly poor. My mother with a grand gesture had bought a cow. It was a brown Latvian cow. I don't quite remember but she must have been about seven years old. She was a well-built cow. She was called Laura. Nearly every household had a cow, but they were smaller, ours was built like a ship. My mother looked after her well and it was interesting that there was a shepherd's path. First came the house and then to the right of the house there was a beautiful alley of lime trees and beyond that there were more lime trees. So the landscape was very beautiful. And then there was the yard and the cellar and beyond that the shepherd's path again. And then in the mornings all the inhabitants would let their cows out onto the path. But the cows wouldn't go anywhere they waited for Laura to appear. And then when Laura appeared, then they all fell into line with Laura at the head. Laura was the leader. It was interesting that when they returned home Laura came first with her head in the air, she had beautiful large white horns. And she gave very good milk, quite a lot, but most important it was sweet as cream.

The elements of this narrative, namely, trees, alleys and cream suggest permanence, order and plenty all things, which were painfully lacking in Lidija's later life.

Trees are particularly important symbols of permanence and they figure in many accounts of childhood. Orchard's play an important role in Anna's recollection but are coupled with more sinister events:



Figure 6

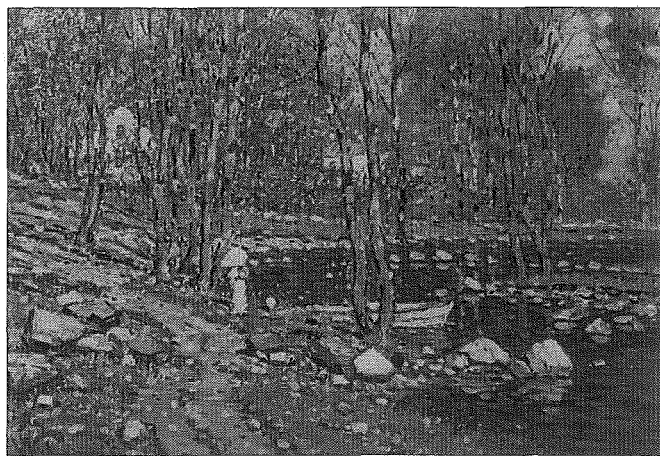


Figure 7

I was born in the farm house that my great grandfather built more than hundred years ago. There were large lime and apple orchards around. And my childhood came to an end there on 25th March 1949, in the morning half-light, in the dawn. On waking I saw soldiers in the room with daggers. My grandmother dressed me and then I remember that father took me in his arms and carried me out into the courtyard ... I was six. It was my seventh year. My seventh birthday took place in Siberia in the region of Tomsk.

Childhood is associated with age and permanence in the account of Uldis:

My roots, the clan of Versis comes from the direction of Kurzeme. We come from the region of Kuldīga. For example, in Kuldīga there is a bridge built of bricks. It's one of the oldest in Europe. That was built in its time by my great grandfather – Indriķis Vērsis.

Memories of forest partisans conjure up a magical world far removed from the experience of fear, famine and cold that was the everyday reality for many. Emma spent seven years hiding in the forest with her husband. However, the very real fears of being captured are assuaged by the protective powers of the forest and its animals.

It was a terrible time, continual fear of ambush. To the animals in the forest we were one of them. Like us the stags slept during the day, but during the night they would go to a clearing or a meadow to eat. They would go past us, but when there were checkists about they would bark re, re, re. The whole forest resounded and we knew we were being surrounded. Then we had to stay put. That's how God protected us. There was a spring and I went to fetch water from there. There is a wolf sitting at the side of the path looking at me. As I go past I say quietly to him: 'Go home, little wolf, go home'. And he laid his ears back and didn't touch me. And so the animals helped us.

Perhaps the most important role of landscape is in the memories of exiles. For the inmates of prison camps conversation about the landscape of home was a gift reserved for special occasions such as birthdays and name days. Men remembered landscapes but found it more difficult to talk about them and share them with fellow prisoners. Miervaldis imprisoned in Mordovia in the 1950s has this to say:

We never spoke of those times when we lived well. Because we spoke about today, about what we would do because we each had our duties. Later when I was transferred to the mine, to the coal mine – then, of course, we only spoke about what had to be done and whether the plan was filled. Well, we might tell some jokes or pull each others legs. But specific memories about how things had been – that was very difficult, very painful. Of course, I thought my own thoughts. Very often I walked Riga's streets, along the boulevard beneath the lime trees. There were dreams that perhaps one day we would succeed in returning. That was the hope and you see one could only survive with that hope. The alternative was death.

Without landscapes of hope prisoners simply gave up the will to live.

Women were more ready to share pastoral memory as a means of supporting each other. This is Ilze speaking:

A close person was very important there, terribly important. To celebrate a nameday, a birthday we spoke about our childhood. Maybe one didn't talk about one's case. But

one's childhood, one's youth – one definitely described that. Because we had nothing else from the outside world. It was the only thing left – a close and sincere relationship. It was the only good thing left. Support from each other.

Such narrative extracts support Elie Wiesel's wonderful insight: "God's punishment contains its own reward, namely, the ability to long for a paradise lost" (1996: 28).

Recollections of the return to the homeland from exile or imprisonment in Siberia are also part of a pastoral vision. The return from Siberia was associated with restrictions on where one could live, with practical problems of accommodation, access to medical treatment and schooling as well as with ostracism from cowed neighbours and relatives terrified of possible repercussions from and their association with the returnees. All of these problems have a place in the narrative accounts. However, they do not intrude upon the lyrical accounts of homecomings to landscapes where time has stood still. This is Andrejs' account of his return to his parents' summer house after imprisonment in Karelia.

I got out in Koknese station, I look, the station is bombarded, the culture building is bombarded. And quietly I go along the roads of Koknese, along by the old park. And then I entered it and saw those old alleys of trees, the old pond and then I felt that the old branches were like outstretched hands. That was exactly how I was welcomed.

Figure 8 shows the landscape around Koknese with the frozen river Daugava.

DISCUSSION

Western literary traditions of pastoral writing incorporate a number of themes. The central thrust of pastoral is a longing for a lost innocence and happiness. Images of childhood and youth are central to this emotional constellation (Skultans, 1998a and 1998b). Things natural and simple are valued above art and artifice and the country above the city. The pastoral tradition has influenced both literary and artistic conventions and feelings and attitudes of ordinary Latvians (see, Alpers, 1997: 13). Much of Latvian literature and art from the second-half of the nineteenth century is pastoral in content and feeling and it has played a significant part in shaping Latvian notions of identity and attitudes to nature. Thus, I want to argue that although the form of pastoral transcends geographical and social difference, its flesh has fed upon the specificities of local history and culture. The emotional power of pastoral, its seductiveness if you like, derives from its contrast with a difficult present. "Nostalgia posits two different times, a problematical present and a past which is the object of yearning" (Bishop 1995: 57).

The intimate and cared for landscapes represented in literature and art draw their emotional power from these other darker landscapes that they overlay but which have a place in shared memory. Thus, the images of pastoral landscape serve both the needs of the shared national story and the autobiography of the storyteller. Pastoral landscapes provide a balance for earlier landscapes of devastation both in historical and individual narratives. They serve to ground the

life stories of those whose experiences have taken them to bleak and empty landscapes. In either case the symbols and images of pastoral evoke desire and longing that make detachment impossible (Bishop, 1995: 61). No wonder then that landscape has been described as “the parachute cords of identity” (Schama, 1995: 74).

Folk songs, or *dainas*, are replete with references to landscape and both are potent symbols of Latvian national identity. Oral folk poetry and song offer a distillation of shared experience drawn from many centuries when official records bore no relationship to the actual history of a subjugated peasant people. The collection of these songs played an important part in the national awakening and the formation of a shared national identity. They were at the centre of the song festivals that, from 1872 onwards, attracted tens of thousands of participants from different parts of Latvia. The words and tunes of these songs are familiar to all Latvians from home and from school. Indeed, it has been suggested that one such song *Pūt Vējiņ'* or 'Blow Wind' is the true national anthem of Latvians. These songs construct a vision in which the natural, human and supernatural worlds are intertwined. Oak and lime trees symbolise men and women. The apple tree is frequently associated with orphanhood, a state which itself has come symbolically to represent the Latvian nation.

Landscape integrates a number of dualisms: it provides a common ground for symbolic and natural worlds, it draws together past and present, the individual and community and personal biography and a common history. Meinig puts this so well when he writes: “Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before



Figure 8

our eyes but what lies within our heads" (1979: 33). The Soviets were well aware of the central importance of landscape for identity and took pains to destroy the sites of mythical stories and to transform the landscape of isolated farmsteads. What they failed to reach was the internalised symbolic landscape, which provides an anchor for so many life stories.

The Latvian experience of landscape must keep in balance and negotiate between these dualisms of the physical and symbolic. While acknowledging the importance of metaphor, I do not agree with Schama's claim: "Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock ... But ... once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery" (1995: 61). Landscapes are nature first and are constantly revisited to provide new metaphors. My position then is pegged out by Ricoeur's programmatic work on narrative. "Language is not a world of its own. It is not even a world. But because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations, and because we orient ourselves comprehensively in those situations, we have something to say, we have experience to bring to language" (1976: 20-21). So, too, it is because we have lived in particular landscapes that we have the wherewithal to construct metaphorical landscapes, which in turn colour our experience of landscape and place. Our reading of the landscape will inevitably be influenced by both the physical experience of landscape, by our particular autobiographies and the symbolic frames we have come to share in looking and talking about landscape.

According to Jackson, "Landscape represents the last and most grandiose attempt to create an earthly order in harmony with a cosmic order" (1979: 154). Images of Latvian landscape enable us to understand local conceptions of that order. These images are distillations of what is given in nature, of historical and autobiographical experience and of shared values and aspirations. In short, we find: "a translation of philosophy into tangible features" (Meinig, 1979: 42). As the Latvian/American geographer Bunkse demonstrates Latvian conceptions of *glitums* or pleasantness embody, when applied to landscape, qualities valued for their contribution to Latvian ethnic identity: tenderness, industry, concern for nature (1990).

Landscapes are storehouses of experience; they are the quintessential place. "Its collective meanings are extractable and readable by later inhabitants. This symbolic housing of meaning and memory gives place temporal depth" (Platt, 1996: 112). What we know about the past influences how we see the present.

But on the other hand, landscapes are not just symbolic playgrounds. They are impregnated with the memory of historical events. In this connection the geographer Tuan quotes a conversation between two physicists Bohr and Heisenberg: "Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? ... Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a different language" (1977: 4). To give a personal example, forests spoke to me in a different

voice, since I knew they had provided my grandfather a temporary hiding place from the KGB. So too the Latvian perception of forest and farm landscapes is changed by knowledge of what took place there.

My argument then, is that accounts of a violent past involve both narrative sequence and intensely experienced descriptive passages and that we must look particularly to the descriptive passages for shared meanings. But, as Mitchell reminds us, "Description threatens the function of the system by stopping to look too closely and too long at its parts" (1994a: 194). If we tarry too long we can become locked in the past and bring narrative progression to a halt. Mitchell refers to ekphrastic hope as the pleasure and consolation we derive in rendering one medium in terms of another, in giving a verbal description of visual objects, and ekphrastic fear as the anxiety lest we are too successful in doing this and lose the original altogether. So, Latvian descriptions of pastoral embody a contradiction: they hold out hope and yet they contain a fear lest the landscape will speak of the brutalities it has witnessed.

ENDNOTE

- 1 For a historically situated discussion of Latvian art see Mansbach (1997: 141–178).

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