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Bernardinai.lt: ‘Girl with Ermine’.
Field: ‘Extravaganza’.
Gobshite Quarterly: ‘Heat’, ‘Cafés light their fires…’, ‘Mare’s Tails’.
Lumina: ‘That Diaphanous Night, 5: …I caress the things you touched:…’
Mayday: ‘Every Day’, ‘Coronation’.
New Humanist: ‘The Street Ship’.
Introduction

Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937-2001) was a major Lithuanian poet of the second half of the twentieth century. She was born in Kaunas during Lithuania’s brief period of independence, a period book-ended by the Russian Empire (from the time of the final, 1795 partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic), and the Soviet Union. Her family moved to Vilnius after the Second World War, and she lived the last decade of her life in the newly independent Republic of Lithuania. Her generation produced a number of astonishing poets, among them her friend Tomas Venclova, all of whom, to varying degrees would mark their creative work with resistance to Soviet rule and Soviet ideology. This resistance was often expressed in subtle ways. Closed borders also prevented direct contact with many cultural developments in the west. Thus, although both Lithuania and Great Britain are part of Europe, both part of the “Western” tradition, their cultural spheres diverge enough to call for some commentary. Perhaps of all Western European nations, Ireland is the most similar to Lithuania: small, agrarian, Catholic, possessing a proud pagan past, fated to be the plaything of empires. Yet, they were different empires, with different languages in play. Lithuania, despite the widespread adoption of Polish by the upper classes through the late renaissance up to the modern period, despite the ban on the printed Lithuanian word imposed by czarist Russia in the late 19th century, despite almost a half-century in the Soviet Union, retained its language, and Vaičiūnaitė was one of its masters. It is not an easy language to master. The vocabulary is rich, the nouns have seven declensions, making word order quite free, the verbs have a plethora of possible prefixes giving them nuances unavailable to English without the addition of quite a few words, and Vaičiūnaitė does not give translators much room for addition. Her poetry is compact, precise, the lines short, the line breaks sharp, run-ons (like this and the preceding sentence) are common, and the images come in waves. Not to mention, like most Lithuanian writers, she likes adjectives (the white whale of contemporary English language poetics as taught in MFA programs). As the translator, I have preserved her stylistic features except when the poem was simply not sounding right in English. All translation involves a degree of domestication, and I have tried to keep this degree small. Even in her rhyming poems, I try to make

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1 Earlier parts of this essay have appeared in the Vilnius Review, Mid-American Review, the AGNI blog, and World Literature Today’s Translation Tuesday blog.
them sing, sometimes finding the means to preserve her exact rhyme scheme, sometimes merely rhyming some of the lines, or by creating internal rhymes, slant-rhymes, in other words, by trying to signal to the reader the song-like quality of a certain lyric. I do not like to change what a poet is actually saying in terms of thoughts, images, feelings and figurative language. On the other hand, Vaičiūnaitė is a largely unknown poet outside of Lithuania. Few people read Lithuanian. The poems have to “work” as English poems, or they will not be read. And yet they are well worth reading, both for her blending of styles old and new, and for her deeply felt encounter with her city, history, myth, and the general features of human experience. Although, she tends to write short, highly compressed poems, when she wants to treat a theme more expansively she writes sequences of such poems. Four complete sequences, or cycles, are included in this selection of her work, organized in general chronological order from her first collection published in 1960, to her last in 2000. In order to further assist the English language reader, I would like to discuss some of the culturally-bound features of her work, helping bring the reader to the author and her poetic world.

One of the cultural differences especially relevant to understanding Vaičiūnaitė’s poetry is the relative persistence of neo-romantic strains in Lithuanian literature far into the 20th century, and even into the 21st. Romanticism came late to Lithuanian poetry, the language itself having been banned by the Russian empire after the 1863 uprising. Mairionis, starting in 1895, was the great romantic of Lithuanian literature, articulating Lithuanian identity in relation to nature, Catholicism and ancient history, with a verse of scintillating musicality. Salomėja Neris, the first prominent female poet in Lithuanian, continued this tradition during the mid-twentieth century (with a late twist: she became a diehard communist, even writing an odious encomium to Stalin). A romantic musicality became a hallmark of Lithuanian poetry throughout the 20th century, with themes often drawn from nature and rural life. Although a much longed-for independence from Russia saw the introduction in the twenties of the modernist avant-garde in the work of Kazys Binkis and the Four Winds group, and other modernist influences could be felt in the work of, for example, Henrikas Radauskas, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas and Vytautas Mačernis, the full-fledged development of these movements was suppressed after the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1940 and its dogmatic imposition of Soviet realist art-values. Annexation went hand in hand with industrialisation and the collectivisation of
the agricultural economy. Thus, various means of subtle resistance to Soviet rule became, in literature, a focus on the individual, on subjective experience, on nature and traditional country life, along with references to Lithuania’s past. Hence the neo-romanticism. Hence its persistence.2

We can see these elements in Vaičiūnaitė’s oeuvre as well. Her ‘To Gather Geraniums Yet’ uses rhyming quatrains in a paean to flowers. The narrator, sunk in wintry gloom, in a lonely city flat, darning her ripped tights – a sign of the general Soviet poverty – draws strength and hope from the natural world’s manifestation of beauty and renewal:

each day deeper yet – January,
into the jaws of solitude’s flat,
to carry the profile secretly,
like the germ of life, by the heart.

Like a number of her poems, “To Gather Geraniums Yet” intertwines the modernist alienation of a city dweller with the neo-romantic valorization of nature. The natural world provides the source of inspiration, meaningful connection, life itself. The drudgery of daily life, urban dirt and grit, is placed in negative contrast to the blooming flowers. Vaičiūnaitė positions herself as part of the Lithuanian neo-romantic tradition stylistically as well, composing the poem in rhyming quatrains. Urban existence was largely a new phenomenon for the previously (mostly) agrarian Lithuanian culture, and this poem exemplifies Vaičiūnaitė’s effort to give this new form of life expression, even if, at this stage it is seen in a negative light.

The traditional, formal style evident in ‘To Gather Geraniums Yet’ was only one of her modes. Vaičiūnaitė came to adapt her poetics to urban existence, breaking apart her lines in stanzas, building run-on sentences on top of each other, connecting (or disconnecting) phrases with dashes, using ellipses to create pauses and gaps…

Cupolas, columns, bridges floating by,
time will swim beyond the window,
and we’ll forget that it’s even there…

2 One could argue that similar features were present in the field of Lithuanian painting where expressionism was a dominant mode through the end of the 20th century. The Danish artist Henrik Anderson, who has been coming to teach at the Vilnius Art Academy for years, has said, in conversation, that he was amazed that art was consistently and exclusively understood until very recently from the perspective of the subject, in terms of personal expression.
SAMPLER
Every Day

When words are ripped from the husk of the room, and shredded papers scatter like shards, I hear, every day – in the nexus of streets, by the mouth of the river – your living pulse.

You – a diving suit. You – a city of shrieking glass, cliffs and concrete. It takes strength to emerge from these four walls so that my strophes, poured from sun, thunder and nerves, might, like bowls, collect the yellow summer sky…
The yellow-blooming mustard field.
   Oneness and sun.
A mood –
   like the turning of a hurdy-gurdy.
Edges grow dull,
   and in the warm, round world
something else,
   clear and weighty,
   climbs my throat.
Bitter yellow distances…
   I’m waiting for a miracle,
vainly trying to forget
   yesterday and myself.
All that’s left is the rolling mustard sun –
   a state of weightlessness –
and love, gifting me the meaning
   of tears and wind…
Don’t Be Afraid

– for V. R.

If you think of me as a ray,
I will be that for you –
and shine at midnight on delicate grass…
Let the most beautiful summer be ours –
ever to burden your shoulders with reproof.
And if clouds creep up and pour
their cold, slick rain on summer’s heart,
don’t be afraid.

I’m a ray – golden, warm…
Broken in a tear
to shine more brightly than before.
from the cycle To the Only City

VI

My old courtyard is also a part of Vilnius: its spacious square, its thick stone walls, the clothes hung out to dry, all noise and light, the wind spills over the fence all day and night…

The hollow echo of dusty streets is hardly heard… Windows, windows all around… Shining eyes of glass. Grey pigeons wade through the day in melting snow with blushing feet… They come and go…

How many people have passed through these gates! What variety of footsteps fend the courtyard’s ways! Perhaps those others gazed upon it all the same — these glimmering roofs, these fluttering wings…

Maybe their smiles and tears have now seeped into my old courtyard – this little piece of Vilnius… Maybe for that reason the walls glow with sunlight, trying to tell us something, full of lucid life…
Side-Street Madonna

Wistful and empty. Skies squirt rain.
Pipes rust along an old stone wall…
Does my saint still stand flush
in the bell-tower niche? Ave Maria.

Maybe I’ll meet her – hatless, wet,
shivering on the sidewalk, silent…
Above the pot-holed, cobblestoned streets
dusk lies heavy, dusk swims on.

I love that small, side-street Madonna –
her paint peeling, her feet missing…
I accept her smile like a loaf of bread
and divide it up for a thousand lips.

Her face is familiar, her face quotidian –
they drove a girl into the street today…
A shadow quivers on bell-tower walls:
the niche crumbles, falls… Ave Maria.
For the Unknown Cabiria

Under the bridge – a unique life. The colours and lights of the dregs. A unique echo – when the iron above resounds with footsteps and wheels, when the water’s black lengthens the yellow luminescence of lamplights. The world of the damned. The world of those forgotten. In the water’s black, drowned roofs and bell towers are overturned, the charred river blooms with red and green advertisements – the smoke of illusions. Under the bridge, you can dream of authentic eternal light when your dress, buoyant like a rainbow in the wind, flutters above the railings… Under the bridge, you can dream that he will come and understand, forgiving all – so that you fly across the bridge’s black as if to light… Cigarette butts and spit, the night’s profanities, stifling laments melt into the water’s black… Death, sin, and sorrow – in the water’s black… Maunder under the bridge. You’ll carry it: the blackest terror, the oppressive drone – you’ll lift the bridge onto your fragile shoulders…
from To the Only City

VI

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