

Translating Lithuanian Poetry

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Translators of Lithuanian poetry hear the resonances of the ancient *dainos* as we work to re-create in the new language the music, images, and metaphorical themes of the old. The *dainos*—literally translated, “songs”—are the earliest incarnation of the Lithuanian lyric tradition, folk poetry of prehistoric origin that celebrates the drama and cycles of daily life. Filled with mythological elements and an integral part of Lithuania’s pagan mythology, dominant in that country until well into the sixteenth century, the *dainos* focus on family and community and endow the manifestations of nature—of which family and community are part—with an active divinity believed to influence all aspects of animal, plant, and human existence.

That oral tradition has been the shaping influence on the country’s written poetry. Though written poetry in Lithuania has had many articulations—encompassing symbolist, romantic, avant-garde, literary expressionist, formalist, and neo-romantic strands—at its core it echoes with the deepest yearnings and expressions of the *dainos*, sustaining a firm sense of organic unity with the world, deep feeling for the authority and consequence of the earth’s simple things, and marked spiritualization of depicted objects.

Translators of Lithuanian poetry face the question of how to work with those echoes, with the strong undercurrents of an ancient lyric structure and thematic impulse of the original text; how to convey what is a subtextual but powerful sense of culture and place; and how to make vivid in the new language the evocative mythologies of the old. Translators also face the fact that the voice of the *dainos*, though certainly given life by both women and men, is distinctly feminine in orientation.

These concerns are continuing sources of aesthetic experimentation and triggers of linguistic and literary revision by translators. They became especially clear for me as I worked on *Five Lithuanian Women Poets*, my translation of poems by Lithuania’s leading contemporary women poets. There were special pleasures in working on those poems and rendering them in English, especially because I had committed to make a space for the bold

maturity of voice and vision of those poets, to allow the confidence and verve of their most recent work to come through at their most urgent and immediate. While I have translated many individual women poets before, my work on the book was the first time I had taken on a focused project of such sort and scope. One of the principal matters I came to terms with in that effort was learning something of how that feminine voice might be rendered authentically through the vehicle of a male sensibility. I was challenged, there, by the tensions of differing worldviews and by a fundamental appreciation of how men and women poets and translators see and render the world differently—through variegated image and metaphorical run—even when working in the same language. Understanding elements of content and form and how they work separately and together in a poem was essential to re-creating those women’s voices. This was a challenge, too, because English is a language and a poetic tradition much farther removed from its oral roots than Lithuanian.

Capturing and sustaining the resonances of the *dainos* in my finished versions was a fundamental goal. This entailed understanding the role, both stated and implied, of the old and deep roots of modern Lithuanian poetry and working to incorporate the expectations and special flavors of that oral tradition into the new, translated text. The reward of fulfilling the task, I think, is a deep and satisfying understanding of how poetry shaped by an oral tradition rings, at its core, with a telling and definitive humanity. Questions about how to meet those challenges most fully, how to convey that sense of the deeply human, render the resonant feminine voice, and convey and invigorate the old mythologies remain, for all of us who translate Lithuanian poetry, the core of our continuing aesthetic and structural explorations in the work.

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For a rich selection of Lithuanian poetry in translation on the web, please visit www.efn.org/valdas/poezija.html. Systematic studies of Lithuania's oral tradition are undertaken by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Vilnius, especially by the Institute's Department of Folklore and its Department of Oral Folklore. The Institute may be accessed on the web at www.liti.lt/en/defaulten.htm.