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Judita Vaičiūnaitė's Perceptions of Lithuanian Folklore: Tales and Myths

Živilė Gimbutaitė

Živilė Gimbutaitė holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Indiana University, Bloomington. She was a Visiting Lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, and is currently teaching English at College of the Desert, Palm Desert, California.

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Judita Vaičiūnaitė has been called "a city poet" and "poet of the cultural sphere" (Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Viktorija Daujotytė) with reference to her numerous poems concerning Kaunas and Vilnius, world literature, other cultures, and historical events. Vaičiūnaitė's poetry ranges widely, from passionate personal lyrics to poems recreating moments and luminaries in Lithuania's past, to interpretations of classical literature and myth and reflections on Italian, Egyptian, Near Eastern, Indian, and Chinese culture, for example *Alyvmedžių žemė* (Land of Olive Trees), a cycle of nine poems on Italy in her collected poems of 1985, or the oriental themes in *Kai skleidžiasi papirusas* (When the Papyrus Unfolds), 1997. Vaičiūnaitė's last collection of poems, *Debesų arka: 1998-2000 metų eilėraščiai*, (An Arch of Clouds, Poems of 1998-2000), 2000, like the previous works, reveals a poet with global interests but essentially a lyrical, eloquent voice of Lithuanian culture.

Expressions of Lithuanian culture are in turn celebratory, interpretive, and recreative. Vaičiūnaitė celebrates artists, poets and writers of the past; for instance, *Senos fotografijos* (Old Photographs) offers a series of poems dedicated to nineteenth-century women writers. She immerses herself in historical events and personages, as in *Nemuno elegijos* (Elegies of the Nemunas River), *Kęstutaičiai* (Descendants of Kęstutis), or *Kanonas Barborai Radvilaitei* (A Canon for Barbara Radvila). She explores branches of folklore, visual art and traditional symbols, customs and beliefs, including myths, songs and tales. Vaičiūnaitė's interest in Lithuanian culture appears to stem directly from her poetry of feeling and experience, for example, when she finds that her "yard is a part of Vilnius" (*Ir mano kiemas – juk dalelė Vilniaus*), (from an untitled poem of 1957) and her practice of customs (like the making of *verbos*, decorative floral stalks) partakes in old traditions; her relatedness to nature is typical of ancient beliefs and attitudes, and words on her tongue feel like "syllables of the protolanguage" (*Ir žodžiai burnoj – lyg prokalbės skiemenys*, in *Griausmas* (Thunder), 1970). [1]

Vaičiūnaitė's attention to aspects of her native culture is often explicitly motivated by a conscious effort to know and elucidate, thus to nourish and preserve traditional lore. In Juodkrantė (titled after a village, meaning "black shore," on the Neringa Peninsula), she asks, *Kaip tave pažint, mažytis gintaro dievuk*? (How is one to recognize you, little god of amber?), indicating her effort to understand ancient beliefs and customs. She kindles an old hearth fire and admonishes herself and the reader to safeguard it, not to abandon it: *Išsaugok, neapleisk*. In *Ablinga* (also the name of a town, the site of a massacre in the early years of World War II), she writes, *Išlik, išlik, sena ugnies dvasia* (Thrive, old spirit of fire), referring to the creative spirit of culture, the symbolism of fire.

Vaičiūnaitė's poems concerning Lithuanian culture are embellishments of native lore as well as contributions to culture by virtue of her exquisite verbal art. In the poems related to folklore – the paraphrases of tales and the series on mythical beings on which I focus – we find not only knowledge and appreciation but also elaboration and invention. Vaičiūnaitė perceives mythical beings – Laumė, Perkūnas, Bangpūtys, Žvėrinė, Žemyna – as the ancients initially perceived them, as animate natural phenomena, and recreates them anew in one series of poems. Familiar with written lore, the attributes of the myths acquired in time, she also reinterprets and enhances their symbolism. The paraphrases of tales, with excerpts from texts adapted as epigrams for poems, are evidently adaptations and elaborations of given material. Remarkable for

the poet's dramatic involvement in the stories by way of identifying with characters and relating to natural phenomena, the paraphrases offer new plays of metaphor and amplification of moments in the form of song refrains.

Vaičiūnaitė's perceptions of folklore illustrate the poet-dramatist Balys Sruoga's dictum that "the basis of the Lithuanian sensibility is the experience of the universe as an organic unity, a merging with it [i.e., nature], an organic relation or concurrence between humans and nature" [2] This sensibility has long been expressed by the rhythms and lyrics of folk songs, by layers of metaphors that find correspondences among all beings and phenomena, animate and inanimate. Features of song – repetition, refrains, epithets, diminutive word forms, direct address to natural phenomena – are in fact recurrent aspects of Vaičiūnaitė's paraphrases of tales and poems about mythical beings (as well as her variations of songs, omitted here).

Paraphrases of Tales

The poem *Juodvarniai* (Ravens) in a series titled "Paraphrases" augments a moment from the story "Twelve Brothers Flying about as Ravens" (*Dvylika brolių juodvarniais lakstančių*) that is stated epigrammatically: "They carried the sister into a huge forest, seated her on the tip of the fir tree, bid farewell, and left her" [3]. The poet impersonates the sister, who longs for her brothers and mourns their departure, pouring her feelings into verses of song:

My twelve brothers, whom I shall never find, my twelve brothers, whom I shall never see – yet for the youngest of them I am still embroidering a linen shirt...	*Dvylika mano brolių,* *kurių niekuomet nesurasiu,* *dvylika mano brolių,* *kurių niekuomet neregėsiu –* *vien tik pačiam jauniausiam* *dar siuvinėju marškinius...*

In the second stanza, the brothers are metaphorically months and constellations in space, illuminating her spirit, but at the same time they are as distant as stars and as fleeting as memories. The ambivalence of these newly found relations is expressed by the sourness of the apple mentioned in the last line: it is love and life, but not sweet.

My twelve months only their light through the window, twelve constellations of outer space, which I will never reach, having secretly plucked at night the most sour apple	*Dvylika mano mėnesių,* *kurių vien šviesa pro langą,* *dvylika lauko žvaigždynų,* *kurių niekuomet nepasieksiu,* *patį rūgščiausią obuolį,* *naktį slapčia nuraškius...*

The metaphors of months and constellations, referring to expanses of time and space, imply that the brothers are the sister's whole world, suggesting her boundless love. The apple symbolizes this world and love as well as the ambiguity of her feelings. Vaičiūnaitė thus voices the intricacy of latent emotional content at a turning point in the story, which tends to be lost in narrative plot.

Another, untitled, paraphrase relates to the story *Baltas vilkas* (The White Wolf), in which a maiden must scale a glass mountain to retrieve her beloved. The scene is provided by a quote from the wise woman's instructions to the maiden: "Scale the glass mountain; at its summit you will find a court, and there is your white wolf" (*Nuženk pas stiklinį kalną, užlipusi rasi dvarą – ten yra tavo baltas vilkas*). Stepping into the maiden's shoes, the poetic persona finds solace in nature when she is enveloped by forest and moonlit drifts of snow. Ensconced in white fur, she is united with her beloved in mind or imagination. By stipulating an organic unity between humanity and nature, Vaičiūnaitė mitigates an intolerable, sorrowful episode in the story and in this case ensures a successful outcome to the maiden's challenge. Again, she expresses feelings latent in the story:

I did not fear the eyes of the beast in the fierce embrace and the hardening cover of forest, together we fall asleep, under blankets of snow.	*Nepabūgau žvėries akių,* *plėšrios rankos apglėbia, sustingdamas* *gaubia miškas – užmiegam kartu,* *o ant mūsų sninga ir sninga.*
Delight in this snow of night while the moon's halo blooms, while we are safe in its circle of light, in the still undisturbed harmony of space.	*Pasidžiauk tuo nakties sniegu,* *kol dar žydi mėnulio drignė,* *kol šviesos ratile saugu,* *kol laukinės darnos nesutrikdėm.*
Surrounded by glistening snow drifts as if drawn into white fur, take my sorrow and my soul – I loved you, so you can shed your werewolf skin.	*Spindesys ir pusnynai aplink,* *lyg į baltą kailį įvilktų,* *mano sielvartą, sielą paimk –* *pamilau, kad neliktum vilktaku.*

Drebulė (Aspen), a paraphrase for *Eglė žalčių karalienė* (Eglė, Queen of Serpents), dramatizes the pathos of the daughter's betrayal of her mother to her uncles. Quivering between willful silence and fear of the whip, she instinctively feels her impending transformation into an aspen tree. In another paraphrase of the same story, the poet voices Eglė's addresses to the trees – oak, ash, birch, and aspen – as she inquires which trunks hold her children. For example, stanza 2:

Perhaps I'll still hear you amid stamping hooves: underneath the bark, patiently, throbs the heart, gathering moss in which tree trunk are you tormenting yourself, Oak?	*Gal dar išgirsiu, kanopoms trypiant:* *plaka širdis po žieve, kantrybėje* *sąmanom apželiant –* *kuriame kamiene kamuojies,* *Ąžuole?*

In each of these paraphrases, the poet augments characters' emotions, relating them to natural phenomena, i.e., space, as opposed to the dimension of time, in which narratives develop in a manner consistent with many of her personal lyrics as well as numerous folk songs.

Cycles of Poems about Myths

There are two series of poems concerning mythical beings: *Pirmykštė ugnis* (Primordial Fire) of the late 1960s (included in *Nemigos aitvaras*, 1985) and an untitled series in *Debesų arka* (2000). The early cycle features Žvėrinė (protectress of beasts and hunters, alternatively Žvėrūna), Žemyna (Earth Mother), Laumė (goddess or witch associated with forests, stones, and the underworld), Perkūnas (Thunder), Lauksargis (lit. "protector of fields"), Aušrinė (Morning star), Bangputys (god of storms, lit. "blower of waves"), Vėluokas (possibly a god of the underworld, wealth and fertility),[4] Upinė (river goddess), and Gabija (the sacred hearth fire). The later cycle focuses on Žvorūna, Medeina (goddess of woods), Žemyna, Bangputys, and Spingsulė (lit. "twinkler"), thus returning to three figures in the earlier series: Žvėrinė–Medeina, Bangputys, and Žemyna. The difference between the early and late representations of these mythical beings is resuscitation versus poetic redefinition or recreation. In the early series, elements of ritual – invocation, prayer, offerings – in natural, occasionally wild scenes suggest an early stage of animation and personification in the myth-making process, according with the title "primordial fire." The recent series contains more sophisticated objective description, perhaps influenced by traditional lore about these myths. Attention is given to the signs, symbols, and likenesses of the deities, as well as the natural attributes that originally motivated personification.

The contrast is evident in the two versions of *Bangputys*, folklorically a storm god associated or equated with Vėjopatis, ruler of the realm of winds.[5] In *Bangputys*, from "Primordial Fire", the poet responds to Bangputys's sphere of activity at the outset with an offering:

In a deep dish I bring you open-eyed fish from the sea and burn resinous amber – accept my fragrant incense	*Giliam dubeny tau nešu prasimerkusias jūrų žuvis ir deginu gintaro dervą – priimk mano kvepiančius smilkalus*

She feels the cold seaside air and cloudy sky as the sand dunes are lit by dawn. Addressing Bangputys again, she says, "I cower from the supernatural sound of your wild waves ... I am blinded by the prehistoric radiance of your depths; pierced by your whirlwind, I shudder with lightness."

The later "Bangputys" speaks of relics and footprints of the mythical being, objects of devotion referred to as "idols" (Lith. stabai), connoting secondary forms and likenesses as opposed to the real thing, the ruler of winds. The last tercet of this poem reads, "idols on sand dunes, idols on old lighthouses, idols there on the masts of sailboats" . The poem is exquisite with regard to poetic sound devices, images, and structure, in contrast with the direct dialogue and expression of feeling in the earlier "Bangputys":

Ephemera in amber, night moth in amber, a beast's prehistoric print,	*Lašalai gintare,* *naktinis drugys gintare,* *žvėries priešistorinis pėdsakas,*
in a castle of waves, in a castle of clouds and skies, passed by the vibrating wind,	*bangų pilyje,* *dausų, debesų pilyje,* *kur vėjas praskrieja virpėdamas,*
the amber Sun will shine, the amber Moon, cut asunder, will shine, stars will shine where the sea sparkles.	*švies gintaro Saulė,* *švies perkirstas gintaro Mėnuo,* *švies žvaigždės, kur mariose mirga*, [8]

The series of four repeated words – *gintare* in the first tercet, *pilyje* in the second, *švies* in the third, and *stabai* in the fourth

– create a charm, or spell, concerning Bangputys's legacy, reading, when linked, "in amber, in a castle, his likeness will shine" (*gintare pilyje švies stabai*). This sentence might be the matrix of the poem. Other guiding threads are found by connecting the first, second, or third lines of the tercets into sentences. For instance, the string of first lines reads, "Ephemera in amber, in a castle of waves, the amber sun will shine [forming] idols on sand dunes" (*Lašalai gintare, bangų pilyje, švies gintaro Saulė, ant kopų stabai*). By an associative leap, the connections among the repeated words and the four tercets represent the four winds, four sons of Bangputys or Vėjopatis, at the four cardinal points of the earth.[9] Read in this way, the poem is a poetic analogy or likeness of Bangputys. Thus it suggests an answer to Vaičiūnaitė's question "How is one to know you, little god of amber?": by way of its forms or likenesses.

The two versions of Žemyna also illustrate the difference between resuscitation of myths in the early cycle and poetic redefinition in the later one, without any loss of relation to the goddess. Žemyna personifies earth and its mysterious life force, particularly as the "bud-raiser" and "blossomer" *Žiedkelėlė* of spring; anthropomorphically, she is the Earth Mother.

In *Primordial fire,* Žemyna is represented as barely perceptible and pathetic, ostensibly in winter, possibly a symbolic winter of discontent with myths (the Soviet era). The poet observes that her "blood is yesteryear's," her "voice vanishing, as it were of one deceased" (*Bet ir kraujas pernykštis, ir tavo balsas lyg numirusio, nykstantis*).[10] Confronted with a scene of "Frostladen ashberries, rotting leaves, on which a wild boar sleeps, and sticky red shadows" (*Šermukšnių uogas aptraukia šerkšnas / ant pūvančių lapų užmiega šernas, / Raudoni, lipnūs šešėliai*), the poet wishes Žemyna's "idolatrous rock would reveal itself once again amidst tangled wild roses" (*kad vėl išryškėtų pro dūmus šėtro iš raizgių erškėtrožių stabmeldiškas tavo akmuo*). For the fulfillment of her desire, she makes an offering: "I pour out drink for you" (*Nulieju tau gėralo*),[11] which is the gist of the poem, itself a brief ritual, an effort to revive Žemyna.

„Žemyna" from the collection *Debesų arka* is an intricate metaphorical description of (and address to) the blue forget-me-not, a metonym for the multifaceted Blossomer, the whole of earth in spring. The epithets for the flower evoke broad dimensions of time and space, appropriate for Žemyna: its blue is linked with the azure sky; the remembrance implied by its name extends to ancient times when our forbears worshipped the earth; its various forms and loci suggest the ubiquitous nature of the Blossomer.

Forget-me-not –
  Žemyna's blue-blossomed wild flower,
the blue of our eyes spreads,
  a spring spurts out through gravel,
forget-me-not, perpetual blue flower,
  as our foremothers' hands
shaped clay with snails,
  an azure wreath covered their hearts,
earthly joy ramified,
  unearthly aspiration delayed,
having experienced
  bright times and dark times,
withstood the wind's affection,
  you remember its persistent whisper,
forget-me-not of the swamps,
  turfen forget-me-not.

Neužmirštuolė –
  Žemynos laukinė gėlė žydražiedė,
plečias akių mėlynumas,
  šaltinis ištrykšta pro žvyrą,
neužmirštuolė, nemiršėle,
  molį su sraigėmis žiedė
prosenės rankos,
  o širdį apgobė vainikas žydras,
žemiškas džiaugsmas kerojo,
  nežemiškas lūkestis uždelsė,
šviesųjį metą, tamsųjį metą
  patyrusi, tuolaik
vėjo lipšnumą atlaikius,
  prisimeni ščiūvantį kuždesį,
pelkine neužmirštuole,
  velėnine neužmirštuole.[12]

By its direct address to the flower and its reflections on earthly joys and sorrows in time present and past, this poetic "Žemyna" celebrates the real earth that is the source of the myth and locus of the blue flower; the earlier poem addresses a more abstract mythical figure. In its real, earthly dimension, which is a source of inspiration for poetry, *Žemyna* alludes to virtually all Vaičiūnaitė's nature lyrics and poems of experience in which she relates to natural phenomena. In its epithetical play and spatial-temporal adventure, it accords especially with *Veronika žydi* (Veronica Blossoms),[13] and *Žalioji vila* (The Green Villa),[14] The catalog of veronicas – wild veronica, veronica of the swamps and springs, veronica of the slopes, desert veronica; glistening, dewy veronica – also implies the ubiquitous Blossomer. Like the forget-me-not, it is perceived in an expanse of space, as an image of warm drops from a rainbow. *Žalioji vila* evokes the eternity of Žemyna by the image of a blue lilac and a white lilac "blossoming above temporal sorrow." Allusions to Žemyna occur in the paraphrases of songs and tales that address birds, traditionally harbingers of the Earth Mother, for instance, the poems *Gegutė* (Cuckoo) and *Pelėda* (Owl).

Expressions of the poet's relation to nature in the paraphrases of tales and representations of myths illustrate Vaičiūnaitė's tendency to associate all folklore, both material and verbal, with natural phenomena and particular locations in Lithuania. She notices visual folk art in her poems, for example, "solar wheels on crosses, on spindles" (*saulės ratai – ant kryžių ant verpsčių*), from *Juodkrantė*[15] and stones with serpentine and solar ornamentation in the series *Senoviniai raštaženkliai* (Ancient Scripts).[16] These are material signs and symbols. She also speaks of "the sheen of story or legend above farmsteads" (*sakmės spindesys virš sodybų*)[17] in the collection *Šaligatvio pienės* (Sidewalk Dandelions) and the "inaudible

peal of tales" (*pasakų negirdimas skambėjimas*)[18] in the ambience of a place; of "Light above our heads – like a wreath./ That point, that nest, that homestead concealed in the infinity of night, of autumn and nebulae" (*Šviesa virš galvos – lyg vainikas. / Tas taškas, tas lizdas, ta tėviškė slypi / nakties ir rudens, ir ūkų begalybė*j...).[19]

Vaičiūnaitė retrieves the spatial dimension of folktales, which seems to correlate with their emotional content. She perceives the myths at their source as animate natural phenomena and is, therefore, able to contribute to their traditional symbolism. (Incidentally, I think that her contribution to Žemyna's meaning is Žemyna's identification with the blue flower, combining a symbol of Romantic longing with a linking of our aspirations and longings back to earth.) Her embellishments of folklore in its spatial dimensions remind us that songs, tales, and myths are timeless and continually available for reinterpretation. Indeed, she suggests that this kind of perception, compatible with knowledge of written lore and cultural history, is a condition of its authentic appreciation and preservation.

1. Vaičiūnaitė, 1985, 311
2. *Lietuviškosios pasaulėjautos pagrindas yra visatos, kaip organiškumo vieneto, pergyvenimas, su ja susiliejimas, organiškas žmogaus ir gamtos sutapimas*". Sruoga, quoted by Meila Balkus, 2002.
3. *Jie nunešė seserį į didelę girią, pasodino į eglės viršūnę, atsisveikino, ir paliko.*
4. Vėluokas appears to be absent from prominent studies of myth. I associate Vėluokas, perhaps erroneously, with *vėlės* and Veliona, discussed by Greimas, 1979, 61-65.
5. Greimas, 1979, 128.
6. *Gūžiuos nuo antgamtinio ūžesio tavo laukinių bangų ... Nuo tavo gelmės priešistorinio spindesio apanku, nuo kiaurai ūžiančio tavo viesulo šiurpiai lengva...*
7. *ant kopų stabai, stabai ant senų švyturių, stabai ten ant burlaivių pirmgalio*
8. Vaičiūnaitė, 2000, 82.
9. Cf. Pranė Dundulienė, 1989, 27, speaking of the four sons of the Mother of Winds – Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern – who represent the four quarters of the world and personify orientation in the geographic and cosmographic spheres.
10. Vaičiūnaitė, 1985, 11 [lines 7-8].
11. Ibid., [line 9]
12. Vaičiūnaitė, 2000, 81.
13 Vaičiūnaitė, 1985, 201.
14. Ibid., 212.
15. Vaičiūnaitė, 1968, 1.
16. Ibid., 8-9.
17. Vaičiūnaitė, 1980, 96.
18. Vaičiūnaitė, 1968, 13.
19. Vaičiūnaitė, 1977, 74.

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