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## MYTH AS MIRROR OF THE SELF: THE POETRY OF JUDITA VAIČIŪNAITĖ

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Judita Vaičiūnaitė (b. 1937) is, perhaps, the best known woman poet writing in Lithuania today. In her more than thirteen books of poetry she has explored a wide field of experience—from the enchantment of old Lithuanian mythology to variations of modern jazz; from noble historical figures to the contemporary alienated city dwellers. She has borrowed from Greek antiquity, from music, painting, Baroque architecture, travel, newspaper headlines, cinema, her own past, elements of stress, drama, erotic intensity and made them serve her in creating her own poetic dimensions. A poet of the city and the night, of storms and equally stormy emotions, she is also a recreator of myths.

Vaičiūnaitė conforms to all the classical definitions of the use of myth. Myth as expression of areas of knowledge perceived in the collective unconscious of the people. The fact that human experience finds parallels in the present and a thousand years ago. That a myth is a message from ourselves to ourselves, a secret language which allows us to treat an inner event as if it were an outer event. The fact that myth is silent and it takes a shaman, a poet, to bring it to life. Poets are mythmakers.

Vaičiūnaitė does not search for myths in the folklore. Rather, a popular song of the past is deromanticized into the banality of the present, the old elements vanishing into an unidentifiable time. Such is the song about the hussars who come to drink green wine at an inn and buy the innkeeper's daughter. Vaičiūnaitė's lumberjacks drinking the wine, a girl with green eyes, cloudy with tears, wandering among the filthy tables and the drunken men. The hussars vanish into songs, trampling across the centuries. The whole poem resembles a dream where the past and the present echo each other; the time is both fragmented and fluid.

In another poem Giordano Bruno appears, but not as the story of continuous inquisitions; instead, the poem is a state of mind, a presence witnessed by millions who gather his ashes.

Both examples are from an early collection, *Per saulėtą gaublį* (*Across the Sunny Globe*, Vilnius, 1964). Both show the main tendencies of the poet insofar as mythological or historical figures are concerned. It is not the story or the ornamental values that are important. The symbiosis, the state of mind, the poet's "persona" orders and dominates all.

In *Vėtrungės* (*Weathervanes*, 1966) there is a cycle of poems dealing with Orpheus and Eurydice. She is a white mannequin in a store window, who can only be a figment of a dream. Orpheus is a black jazz musician, who knows all the possible varieties of loneliness. Eurydice, in the ninth circle of hell, observes the blinding neon lights of advertising. Orpheus plays the sound of an assassin's bullet. Blood streams into the lap of Jacqueline Kennedy; it accompanies the funeral of the President. Eurydice understands that the pain in the voice of the saxophone is the river Lethe and the silhouette of Orpheus grows dark and silent over the skyscrapers.

The seven poems of the cycle superimpose the ancient myths on the new, violent reality.

In the same collection there are four portraits from "Odysseus"—Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa and Penelope. All of them terminate with a declaration of love. These women are, however, very much aware of their roles in the myth:

Forgive me, they are, after all, only a herd of swine  
I herd them from the table to the pigpen  
But if you're sad,  
they'll sit like players around the feast table . . .  
And the ancient song of the goblets and flowering

torches will muddle the hexameter order  
and eyes shining with contempt they will resurrect my  
antique statue . . .

. . . I won't keep you by force.

Sail away, if you're afraid of angering fate,  
of cutting the red thread of the plot . . .

I'm readying your wine caskets for the journey.,  
Offering my wisdom, my gentleness.

Your skiff will carry you away  
to the rocks of Ithaca which no one can find, which  
never existed.

And so you won't see the huge proud eyes shining with sorrow,  
I'll take my leave unnoticed.

I was hospitable. And kept my word.

Strange one, who gave me up.

My only one . . .

I love you, Odysseus.

(Judita Vaičiūnaitė, *Vėtrungės*, p. 45)

The tone is ironic. If the hero is not content, he can always cut the red thread of the plot. Circe knows he will reach the shores of Ithaca that never existed. As he was strange and lunatic, so she was hospitable and kept her word. Calypso helps the two build the ship and weaves the sails. She does not like the role assigned to her—a goddess infatuated like a miller's maid. Her own humiliation is freely assumed. The pride of Calypso is the pride of the self.

The innocence of Nausicaa is the simplicity of a body that does not know the touch of men's hands. No one questioned the lover—powerful and fierce and mysterious. A perfect example of dark romanticism's demon-lover.

I never kissed a man.

And my voice is like a wave on the ocean.

And my body doesn't know the palms of a man yet.

But I yearned for one like you.

And we were, we two,  
intoxicated by the exhaustion and wonder . . .

Why do you hide your tears under your mantle,  
we do not ask you—

powerful, incomprehensible, free . . .

Hugging the column I blend into it . . .

May history be silent

how I stood alone in the great hall,

because no one will ever know

what I felt then,

what I won't confess even to myself:

I love you, Odysseus.

The fourth portrait, that of Penelope, is the very down-to-earth wife, who through centuries is fated to watch an empty room while the hero takes the longest possible time to come home. Her faithfulness does not even lead to admiration:

. . . and is it my fault that the city laughs,

the young men and the slavewomen,

my fault that I am the boring and strange Penelope?

After all, I'm of the kind to whom they return,

The faithful kind.

I've become famous for all time in my patience and wisdom.

I'll wipe the blood from your hands

with my hair and my lips.

By your knees I'll cry out with joy.

I love you, Odysseus.

The ancients would have frowned on the word "boring". It is the projection of a modern woman's frustrations on the models of the stories of antiquity.

Later, the myth is the bridge between those different levels of time—the ancient myth, the modern version and the time of the poet's "I". A good example would be the cycle, "Three Destinies". In the first time there is Nike de Samothrace, a figure of victory, lying in an empty apartment, in the madness of the sun in June, crying in vain for the broken wings, hating the absent lover, a personal defeat. In modern Greece, a singer in a short red tunic sings the song of a siren, but the ears of

the listeners are blocked with wax. Her hands are tied and bloody, the weapons of the vanquished rest in a pile. It is the defeat of the Greece of the colonels, the defeat of the siren-poet, the absurdity of war. Then there is a witch, usually a symbol of uncorrupted free will, waiting for fire to wash her body. The surroundings are modern (there are many to watch her burning, since the cinemas around are empty), but the witch transcends time. The witch may come from another time, still she comes from ours. All the destinies speak of physical defeat but the victory is that of free choice. The choice of individual suffering is the ultimate choice of the value of life.

The examples chosen are from "Repetitions" (Judita Vaičiūnaitė, *Pakartojimai*, Vilnius, 1971).

There are also the characters from Lithuanian history. Barbora Radvilaitė who speaks through the lips of the poet. Dramatic monologue is a favorite form of Vaičiūnaitė. The duchess, surrounded by envy, love and revenge, the figures of former wives, an evil mother-in-law, a vacillating husband and the adoring painter of her portrait. Barbora defines herself through the poetic medium:

I shall not be a yellowing parchment. I shall not grow old.  
My love will be the power to survive. As the lines of poetry are to the poet.  
I was born here.  
Here I became the renaissance of Vilnius.  
From here my charm will endure through the centuries ...

(Judita Vaičiūnaitė. *Nemigos aitvaras*. The Fire Spirit of Insomnia, Vilnius, 1985, p. 263.)

There are also the ancient gods. The poetic pattern of Vaičiūnaitė holds true. A personal experience personified in a mythological context. The thick fog of ponds and fountains—the foreign blood of September—the rough, red bitten lips. Here is the executioner-god Perkūnas to whom the poet offers her head on a wet, wooden scaffold. And she knows how meaningless is the act of his ax.

If there is meaning it lies in digging forever in the blue earth, in the mines of amber.

The amber to find in its purity in the mines of Crete, the amber that sealed the documents of Rome, the amber buried in the ancestors' tombs, the amber in the outline of sacred animals, so no harm will come to the people. The infinite horizons will never be dark, the sea and the skies will be forever blue.

But what of the myths we create ourselves? Vaičiūnaitė knows that man creates of his destiny myths to give his existence a meaning. We borrow alter-egos from the arts, we create alternatives to the grey absolute of everyday.

Vaičiūnaitė knows and understands our weakness, so from Fellini she borrows the character of Cabiria, the darkness under the bridges, the brutality versus the eternal light, the fragile shoulders to carry the black horror.

To Unknown Cabiria

Under the bridge—their own life. The colors and lights of the dregs.  
Their own echo, when the metal above quivers from the wheels and the steps,  
when the black water lengthens the yellow blaze of the lanterns.  
The world of the condemned.  
The world of the forgotten.  
The submerged roofs and belfry towers fell over on the black water,  
the blackened river blossomed with red and green posters— smoke of illusions.  
Dream under the bridge of the real eternal light,  
when your dress as light as a rainbow in the wind  
will flutter above the railings of the bridge . . .  
Dream under the bridge that he'll come and understand everything and forgive everything,  
and you'll fly to him like a light across the black bridge . . .  
In the black water disintegrated the cigarette butts and spit,  
the nightly curses and suffocated laments . . .  
In the black water—death, sin and torment . . .  
Wander under the bridge. After all you can bear anything,  
the bridge of black horror, of a choked roaring you'll bear  
on your fragile shoulders . . .

(Judita Vaičiūnaitė, *Nemigos aitvaras*, Vilnius, p. 139.)

Many Lithuanian poets looked to prehistory and to myths for their inspiration. Many of them called it looking for their roots. Judita Vaičiūnaitė understood that the only roots grow in one's soul. The poetry of Judita Vaičiūnaitė, like that of all good poets, rises from the inner reality in relationship with the elements of the beautiful and tragic reality throughout the ages.

It would be a very superficial judgment to consider her poetry only in her reworkings of the myths. Her poetic world remains that of the stage.

The poet herself has often compared her heart of conflicting passions to a stage. And so we come again to the definition of myth. In modern terms, a myth is the projection of the passions of the poet onto the realities of today. Or the opposite. In the poetry of Vaičiūnaitė, all the myths are ambivalent. For so are the feelings of the poet.

Here is an example with an ironic aftertaste taken from the world of music:

—A transparent evening and a prelude of Bach  
a small round table, the golden light of the grapes,  
and they who this evening are proud and crystalline sad,  
I understand. So Gothic. So, so narrow for two.

(Judita Vaičiūnaitė, *Nemigos aitvaras*, Vilnius, 1985, p. 55.)

Myth makes people comfortable, in a sense. Zeus and company and their followers make the modern reader relax. After all, all of it is the faith of the ancients. We are people of the concrete, we would be insulted if somebody suggested that we create our lives in the forms of myths.

We do not believe it. We love the facts. Facts are square and strong. So, a poet like Judita Vaičiūnaitė enervates us. She often uses creatures from a world that we have chosen to freeze in a heroic stance. Perhaps, they are very much like us. Their passions very much like ours.

What is it, really, that we learn from poets? The beauty and the terror of human destiny throughout the ages? Too much. Too romantic. Well, let us talk about poets who struggle for the meaning, for the definition of their existence. The passion of the moment, the parallels of meaning of history and the present, the grace of the human spirit in the poet and the present.

Graceful and fragmented, nostalgic and painfully present, permeated by the spirit of the sidewalks of the city and playful with the romantic Baroque past, the poetry of Judita Vaičiūnaitė acts out its own myth and draws us into it.

Judita Vaičiūnaitė, above all else, is a dramatic poet. She knows that all her readers play many parts on the stage that we call life. Some of the parts are very old and we call them myths. It is the grace of the poet that she makes them intelligible to us and makes them part of our reality. Finally, what is the greatest myth of all: that we possess ourselves, that we possess the world.