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THE AMBER LYRE

The Amber Lyre: 18 th-20th Century Lithuanian Poetry, edited by Justinas Marcinkevičius, Vytautas Kubilius, Antanas Drilinga, Albinas Bernotas, Eugenijus Matuzevičius, illustrated by Vytautas Valius. Moscow: Raduga, 1983. 263 p., 1 R, 40 kp.

Any satisfactory translation of Lithuanian poetry, inaccessible even to many Lithuanians in the original, is welcome, and this collection is more welcome than most. In general, the poems read quite well, reproducing the form and content of the originals sufficiently faithfully. It is obvious that the translators, most numerously Peter Tempest, Dorian Rottenberg, S. Roy, and their shadows, worked hard to retain the tone and imagery of the poems. Thus the reader may become acquainted with Lithuanian poetry from its incipience to the present.

The complaints one has are not new. The title of the book, *The Amber Lyre,* is translated as *Gintaro krašto poezija, The Poetry of the Land of Amber.* Yet, many poets — émigré and dissident — who wrote in and about that land are omitted, the basis of selection being political, of course. The result is, therefore, not an anthology, but a selection. Furthermore, the brief biographies at the end of the book of the poets are useful, but boring. Few of us care whether a given poet was "born into a family of peasants," as most are said to have been, or consider such information crucial. The Foreword, "The Lithuanian Muse," by Edvardas Mieželaitis is rhetorical, illogical, and evasive, but there are readers to whom this kind of self-aggrandizement may appeal:

> It is a mighty and luxuriant tree of poetry that has sprung up on the shores of the Baltic. A veritable tree of knowledge! It has deep roots, a strong and sturdy trunk, wide-spreading boughs, green foliage and amber blossoms. A full five thousand songsters have woven their nests in its branches and so the whole tree resounds with lyric voices (p. 11).

At least the metaphor is not mixed.

But we read the poems nonetheless and recognize the poetry we know and treasure—and this familiarity is the primary criterion for evaluating and recommending a translation. The book has four sections, not indicated in the table of contents: 1) the 18-19th centuries on pp. 16-38, 2) the 20th century to World War II on pp. 39-98, 3 and 4) the "rich and extremely varied poetry of Soviet Lithuania" (jacket notes) on pp. 100-54 and 156-236. The proportionate length of the sections is questionable, given the relative importance of the poets included, as are the modifiers of the last two phases of the poetry, written under censorship. But beyond all this are two hundred years of song and lament, partly represented in this selection, beginning with Donelaitis, the first entry, and ending with Baliukonytė, the last.

The translation of an excerpt of the third part of Donelaitis's long poem in section one reproduces the content, some of the syntax, and the melodic elements of the original. The diminutives of Donelaitis as well as the lexical variations are not rendered, but the rhythm retains the pentameter, although the meter itself differs. These are the first four lines:

> Now does the sun we love retreat again
> And, leaving us, roll swiftly down to dusk,
> Hiding its rays from us as days go by,
> And longer every day the shadows lie.
> (p. 16, translated by Peter Tempest)

The original, transposed into contemporary Lithuanian, reads as follows:

> Ant saulelė, vėl nuo mūs atstodama, ritas
> Irgi, palikusi mus, greita vakarop nusileidžia.
> Vei, kasdien daugiaus ji mums savo spindulį slepia,
> O šešėliai vis ilgyn kasdien išsitiesia.
> (Lithuanian text from *Lietuvių poezija,* I, and II, edited

by V. Kubilius et al., Vilnius: Vaga, 1967, v. I, p. 78,
further pagination indicated as used.)

In the second section Mykolaitis-Putinas's "Roadside Crucifix" (Rūpintojėlis), for example, is not as successful as some of the others. The rime pattern is changed, but there is rime, albeit much less complex and sonorous than in the original. The awkwardness of the translation may be attributed to the demands of riming, but its brevity and distance are unnecessary. Diminutives may be untranslatable, but repetition, obvious in the original, may be reproduced easily and would establish tone. In this instance, although the original is identifiable in the translation, the result is markedly inferior to others:

> Lord, how bright the autumn night is
> And how vast high heaven appears!
> And the stars, both huge and tiny,
> Glimmering, move me to tears.
> (p. 62, 11. 1-4, translated by Peter Tempest)

The original is much less trite and much more heartfelt:

> Dievuli mano, kas per šviesios naktys!
> Ir kas plačių padangių per aukštumas!
> O žvaigždės, žvaigždės! didelės ir mažos
> Taip spindi, net graudu, dievuli *[sic]* mano.
> (v. II, p. 10)

It is interesting that Putinas's original capitalization of the word "Dievuli," diminutive of "God," is changed in the Lithuanian edition of the poem, but reinstated elsewhere in the translation (omitted here in the last line).

In the third section Lionginas Pažūsis translates Nėris's poem "Tu nubusi," "You Will Waken":

> Meanwhile spring will strew the sky with stars,
> Off will all the gates and fences blow.
> Through the gaps in cracking snow-drift bars
> Soon a blade of grass will peep and grow.
> (p. 105, 11. 5-8)

The second stanza of the original is such:

> O pavasaris žarstys žvaigždes
> Ir tvoras ir pavartes vartys. —
> Pro skylėtas baltas paklodes
> Kils ir šiaušis dirvos varputys.
> (v. II, p. 38)

Seeking to keep rhythm and rime somewhat like those of the original, Pažūsis sacrifices the imagery which is essential to the poem. He weakens the effect of spring by changing the subject "spring" of the first two lines in Lithuanian to "gates and fences" in line two of the translation. The image of the holey white sheets is interpreted and changed in the translation, and the action of the weed is minimized from "will rise and bristle" to "peep and grow." This distortion is less excusable than the terseness of Tempest's rendering of Putinas.

In the fourth section Degutytė's "Neringa Pines" (Neringos pušys), translated by Dorian Rottenberg, is successful. Both the form and the content are faithful and effective.

> On and on they march
> Over Neringa quicksands,
> Bent and sped on by the westerner,
> Tall, speechless and boughless pine trees,
> With crowns tossed and shaken
> Burdened with the storm's wailing and the seagulls' sobbing.
> Like ancient rust-eaten statues —
> A multitude sombre and silent —
> They march on, Neringa pines,
> Over the quicksand landward,
> My sisters
> Tall.
>
> (pp. 188-89)

This is quite similar to the Lithuanian:

Jos eina ir eina —
Per Neringos klampų smėlį,
Palinkusios nuo vėjo vakario,
Aukštos, bežadės ir besakės — pušys —
Su išsiūbuotom viršūnėm.
Su audrų nenumaldomo gausmo ir žuvėdrų verksmo našta. —
Kaip senos pažaliavusio vario statulos,
Kaip didžiulė, tyli, įtempta minia —
Eina palinkusios Neringos pušys
Nuo jūros — per klampų smėlį —
Mano seserys —
Aukštos

(II, pp. 450-51)

The word order of the antepenultimate line of the translation could have been more faithful to the original, where the ending "smėlį" (sand) mirrors the second line, but, all in all, the translator has succeeded in presenting a complicated poem whose every element is significant.

These four examples show the facility of the translations. Those unable to read the originals and those interested in the art of translating should not overlook *The Amber Lyre,* which contains some of the best translations of Lithuanian poetry to date.

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