



Volume 53, No 1 - Spring 2007
Editor of this issue: Patrick Chura

Book Review

Janina Degutyte – a Lithuanian Poet of Feminism Ahead of Her Time

Degutyte, Janina. *Poezija/Poems*. Selected and translated by M.G. Slavenas. Vilnius: Lithuanian Writers' Union Publishers, 2003. ISBN-998639297. 292 pages.

Reviewed by Ina Bertulyte Bray

The work of Janina Degutyte (1928–1990) had been translated into a number of other languages, but it is only now that it has become available in English in a comprehensive bilingual volume, selected and translated by Marija Grazina Slavenas. Both in content and in physical appearance, this is a jewel of a book. Meticulously edited, the selection is thoughtful and representative, and the translation sensitive to the original. The introduction is by the foremost émigré literary critic Rimvydas Šilbajoris. It is especially laudable that the publication is bilingual. The fact that the original poems appear parallel to the translations provides a truly multifaceted crystal with which to perceive the poet's words.

The book was published by the Lithuanian Writers' Union in Vilnius and, according to a review by Valentinas Sventickas in the poetry magazine *Vilnius* (2003: No. 13), it was meant as another volume in the Writers' Union's new series of poetry in English translation. However, there are noticeable differences. Other titles in this series (those this reviewer has happened to see) are much smaller in format, appear random in their selection and lack the scholarship necessary to inform the unfamiliar reader about the time or significance of the poet. Professor Slavenas does just the opposite. She includes substantial literary, historical and biographical information. The 102 poems, chronologically selected from the poet's considerable body of work, illustrate her progression as an artist and human being.

Degutyte's life coincided with the fifty-year-long occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union. During that time, she became an almost iconic figure. Her poems were published and republished numerous times, twice earning her the prestigious national poetry award. A two-volume collection of her work appeared in 1998. She died of cancer in 1990, only one year before her country, which she so loved, regained its independence. The feminist critic Solveiga Daugirdaitė calls her a link backward to prewar Lithuanian poetry and forward in the direction of modern feminism (*Draugas, Literary Supplement*. November 13, 2005.)

Janina Degutyte belongs to the generation of writers who were born in independent Lithuania before World War II. These writers were forced to witness the traumatic events of that war, the brutal Soviet and Nazi invasions, followed by Soviet reoccupation, with protracted guerilla warfare, deportations, political repression, and censorship. In addition, Janina suffered devastating personal tragedies: her father was killed in 1942 during the Nazi occupation. She grew up frail, lonely and loveless, subjected to relentless physical and psychological abuse by her resentful alcoholic mother. She drew her strength from nature, art, and music, and transcended her debilitating reality by creating another world in poetry. It is not surprising that she was drawn to French Symbolism and the mellow, melancholy poetry of European Neo-Romanticism, which she both read and translated. Slavenas comments in her lengthy interview with Undinė Uogintaitė (*Draugas, Literary Supplement*. November 5, 2005) that Degutyte also translated Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva, two outstanding women poets of the Russian Silver Age, both of whom were denounced as decadent and mercilessly silenced by the new Bolshevik regime. It is significant that the renowned literary critic Viktorija Daujotytė in her book on women's literature makes a special point that Degutyte's early attempts at poetry, made while she was still in school, were also judged by friends as "decadent" (*Parašyta moterų*, Vilnius: 2001).

Her Lithuanian models were Salomėja Nėris and Putinas. Out of all these influences, Degutyte developed a voice uniquely her own. Her first book appeared in 1959, after a bleak decade of strictest censorship; and her voice rang out like a silvery

bell and excited readers not only in Soviet Lithuania, but also on this side of the Iron Curtain, the present writer included. Literary critics at that time referred to her as an “innovator” and a “modernist.” Prof. Šilbajoris points out in the text’s introduction that her poems contain “subtle nuances drawn from deep archaic layers of the Lithuanian language” that found an immediate echo in Lithuanian subconscious memory. As all poets of her time, she knew how to evade the dictates of socialist realism by resorting to the hermetic Aesopian language, obliqueness, metaphor, and multilayered symbolism. Her special signature was the depth and subtlety of her subtexts.

So white this December city.
High sugar belfries.
Windows with silver birds.
And trees – snowy wormwood trees
Reaching into high clouds.
Such a festive city – almost unreal.
So white...
As if there had never been
soot,
or blood.
As if everything was
absolved and justified,
and nothing inscribed.
And everything still to come.
Still to come.
“Sugar Belfries,” 120

The poets of the Silver Age saw themselves as visionaries and bearers of truth, which they expressed indirectly through images and symbols. No doubt, Degutytė likewise viewed poetry as a mission and her personal obligation to speak up for truth. She skillfully manipulated mythological and folkloric themes and well-known names in world literature (“Antigone,” “Scheherazade,” “Judas,” “Cassandra”) to express a spirit of integrity and survival. Hiding behind the form and language of Lithuanian folksongs and dirges, she paid special homage to the memory of Lithuanian partisans killed in the guerilla warfare of the fifties. She even succeeded in dedicating several poems to victims of the Gulag and the Holocaust. Her quiet yet compelling voice broke through the glass wall of official denial and public amnesia at a time when such topics were unmentionable. These poems are included in the volume under review.

Political commitment, however, was only one aspect of her poetic landscape. She is primarily known as a poet of nature and a master of miniatures. Slavenas characterizes her 71 nature poems as “fragile watercolors,” most of them defying translation. For Degutytė, nature was the source of her life, and her personal relation to nature was almost mystical, allowing her to hear and understand its voices, merge into it and become part of it:

At the source, at the very source, is a glow...
I don’t ask whither flows the stream.
At the deepest source is a glow.
Through me ripple sod and sky,
Birches and the midsummer sun.
What am I in this eternal flow?
“Intermezzo,” 41

She perceived the destruction of the environment by modern civilization as a tragedy and expresses this in several poems, juxtaposing the two:

Between lethal clouds
and toxic oceans
rye fields are blossoming –
like small islands.
Far away from the stony web of streets,
Far from faceless houses,
These islands,
As they did a thousand years ago,
Float in green clouds.
“Rye on the Hill,” 108

Her love of nature merged with the deep love for her homeland, as so many of her poems attest. It is a great irony that she was not allowed to see Lithuania regain its freedom.

Degutytė created memorable portraits of women, especially those symbolizing the Lithuanian mother. In her autobiographical texts, she also grapples with the question of women as artists. She herself followed her calling fully aware of the sacrifices involved, as a number of her poems indicate. She knew the obstacles facing a single woman: if a woman

strove to achieve the same success as a man, she had to work for it twice as hard and make choices that included renouncing motherhood. Working through her own complex relationship with her mother, she presents motherhood in a new and unconventional light. These are all topics current among contemporary feminist authors and far ahead of her time (*Rūpesčių moterys, moterų rūpesčiai*. Vilnius: 2000). Thus it is not surprising that she was rediscovered by two foremost contemporary critics of feminism in Lithuanian literature, Solveiga Daugirdaitė and Viktorija Daujotytė.

Daujotytė scrutinizes Degutytė's style of writing and finds a striking resemblance with what has become known in the West as a "woman's voice." Is this one of the reasons why her poetry found such a lasting echo among her women readers?

Solveiga Daugirdaitė concentrates primarily on the thematic content of the poetry, especially her fragmented autobiographical texts disclosing the tortured mother-daughter relationship. During her lifetime, Degutytė was an immensely private person and carefully concealed her personal life. It was only several years before her death when she disclosed some of her childhood experiences to Daujotytė, who eventually made them public by publishing them. In the cycle dedicated to the memory of her mother, which is included in full, Degutytė was finally able to free herself from the demons of guilt and self-castigation and to see her mother in a new light, as the pitiful human being she really was:

Born under a black star,
she was not warmed by the sun,
the moon did not light her way.
A white jasmine branch chars in the hands
Of one born under the sign of a black star.
Touched by her parched lips, a bubbling
Spring freezes into a fountain of ice.

No love on earth could break
Through the stone wall
Which kept you closed in.

. . .

Was it foreordained:
that the tears of the child
should metamorphose into poetry?

And all of it was prepaid –
With your doomed fate.
"On the Other Side of Hope," 225

In the final analysis, it is her voice for its own sake that matters most. Degutytė possesses a rich poetic self and has been called a poet who writes "with her soul." She never tries to startle her audience with semantic or figural inventions or by drawing attention to herself. Her poems are inner-directed, her voice quiet, and she is at her best when she speaks directly to the reader in a personal, intimate way. Her poetry is permeated by an undercurrent of sadness and yet radiates her faith in love and humanity. These qualities meant many things to many people and made her the beloved poet she was. The reviewer in *World Literature Today* calls Janina Degutytė a "lyric voice at its purest," preceded by Salomėja Nėris and succeeded by Nijolė Miliauskaitė (2005:5). The reviewer in *New Hope International on Line*, reading her translation and presumably without knowledge of Lithuanian, refers to the "sheer beauty" of her poetry (December, 2004). These assessments are, of course, also a tribute to the success of the translation.

It is much easier for a translator to offer only the "highlights," a poet's best work. Slavenas decided to take a risk and present a chronological cross-section from 1959 to 1990. This includes the daunting task of recreating changes in form, mood, and content. For the reader, it offers an opportunity to follow the progression away from the lilting endrhyme of her early work toward free verse with intricate inner rhymes. The reader can also follow the emotional intensity of her earlier poems such as "Yellow Stars," or the above-mentioned poems in "Roles," as it gradually gives way to a reflective, measured tone.

Degutytė is often referred to as a minimalist and the short poems which the book includes are without a doubt her real strength. Below is one such example:

And so you failed to escape...
Your eyes deceived you,
Your palms deceived you.
You didn't know you were blind.
To see you had to lose your sight.
And now your shadow falls
On us all,
Like original sin,
And no one knows

Who will be next.
"Oedipus," 152

Slavenas points out in her "Translator's Comments" that in a lyric poem, surface simplicity is often deceptive, and seemingly simple causal words and turns of phrases can sometimes be the most difficult to translate. Degutyté was very particular in her choice of words and went through many revisions to strike the right note. Not one word is superfluous. In translation, likewise, one wrong word or misplaced accent is all that is needed to flatten or distort the mood or image of the original.

Slavenas also discusses the difficulties of reconciling two such basically different languages as Lithuanian and English, especially as concerns the emotional component: "English has a very different emotional tone, and what sounds just right to Lithuanian ears may have a very different effect on an Englishspeaking audience" (294). Among other things, English lacks the diminutives (Lithuanian folklore abounds in diminutives) and declensional and conjugational endings that make the Lithuanian language so pliant. English also lacks gender distinctions. One example suffices: Degutyté's favorite trees – pines, spruces and apple trees – are female in gender, and a native speaker can easily identify them with "sisters" or "mothers." Degutyté chose words for their connotative power and subtle sound associations to create an image, evoke a mood or present 75 an insight with a minimum of baggage. It is up to the translator to find adequate substitutes and make choices as to what will be most effective in the target language. As Šilbajoris points out in the introduction, Slavenas has done a very satisfying job adapting the originals.

All good translators try to create renditions that capture the flavor of the original and yet sound "normal" in English. Slavenas is not a novice in her craft. Reading her translations of other Lithuanian women poets in *Lituanus*, one cannot but agree with Birutė Ciplijauskaitė (*World Literature*, 2005:5) that she has the rare gift to adjust to the voice of the poets she translates without overwhelming them with her own voice. However, in this book, she seems to do it almost intuitively. Analyzing her method, I was surprised to discover that often she is able to find not just semantic but even metrical equivalents, as in the above-mentioned "Yellow Stars":

Falling the yellow leaves, the yellow stars of maple...
(Krinta geltoni lapai, klevo geltonos žvaigždės...) (p. 30)

Equally successful is one of her last poems "It is easy":

It is easy to leave at dawn
(Lengva išeiti auštant)

There are many other examples.

Another fine example of transposing the ballad-like tone and rhythm of the original is "High on the Hill." Every Lithuanian knows that this poem is a tribute to the young men who died during the hopeless, protracted guerilla warfare against the Soviet occupation. Yet it flows so naturally that it could just as well be an English ballad, meaningful in a different context:

Nine bullets passed him by.
The tenth cut my brother down.
Where his head fell – a rose bush grows.
Where his blood was spilled – a fountain flows.

For poetry lovers and bilingual readers, it is a treat to read and compare different versions by different translators. In 76 closing, I would like to submit two renditions of the same short and seemingly straightforward poem "Neringa Pines":

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,
Over the quicksand landward,
My sisters
Tall.

(Translated by Dorian Rottenberg. *The Amber Lyre*. Moscow: Raduga, 1983)

And:

They walk tall
On Neringa's quicksand shore,
Tilted by westerly winds.
Tall, mute, branchless pines,
With ravaged tops,
Battling a relentless assault
Of seagull screams
And surf.
Like age-corroded copper-green monuments,
Like an immense, intense, solemn assembly,
The move inland, the slanted Neringa pines,
From the sea, on soggy, shifting ground,
My sisters,
Tall.

(Translated by M.G. Slavenas, 57)

Both versions observe the form of the original and stay pretty close semantically, yet they present very different poetic landscapes. In fact, they almost sound like two different poems. This is not an attempt to make judgments, merely an illustration of the difficulties and different ways to see and interpret an original.

Not much of Degutyté's poetry is available in English for comparison. Several translations appeared in English in the sixties in Soviet Lithuanian anthologies, but the poems, mostly rhymed, came from the early collections and thus show only one limited aspect. They were translated by the well-established professional translator Lioginas Pažūsis, often in collaboration with Dorian Rottenberg, and throughout the entire Soviet period, Pažūsis remained Degutyté's sole translator. In view of her popularity, one wonders why Pažūsis did not publish an entire collection of her poems in English. In this country, Marija Stankus-Saulaitė, herself a poet, published several fine translations in one issue of *Lituanus*, now available online, but did not continue. In the more recent past, new anthologies of poetry have appeared in translations by Laima Sruoginis and Jonas Zdanys, but neither of them has translated Degutyté. M.G. Slavenas's work, reviving Janina Degutyté's memory and bringing her to the attention of the English-speaking audience, is therefore even more valuable. She calls it a "labor of love" and it shows. Her efforts rightly deserve the critical acclaim the book has already achieved.

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