

A Literary Gem: now accessible to the English-speaking world

Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė's **Metūgės** ("New Shoots") in English



Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė

Photo: Vytautas Maželis

Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of **Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė**, a creative and dynamic force in the Lithuanian emigre community. The multifaceted author was a poet, novelist, playwright, actress, and theater director. In a highly ambitious undertaking, Pūkelevičiūtė directed and produced a film adaptation of one of her plays, "Aukso žąsis" (The Golden Goose, 1965). The movie was screened at select theaters in Lithuanian communities in Canada and the U.S., including Chicago's prestigious lakefront McCormick Place.

Pūkelevičiūtė was known for her masterful command of the Lithuanian language and her ability to create powerful and evocative images. While her work was sometimes criticized and misunderstood, it was always grist for a lively debate. On the occasion of her centenary, her literary oeuvre is being reintroduced to Lithuanian audiences.

An article on Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė's life, "A Woman of Creative Passion" by Virginija Babonaitė-Paplauskienė, and several poems translated by Aušra Kubilius were published in the Oct.-Dec. 2023 edition of *Lithuanian Heritage* magazine.

Translator **Aušra Kubilius** has taken on the task of making the poetry of Pūkelevičiūtė available to English-speaking readers. She has translated Pūkelevičiūtė's first collection of poems, *Metūgės* (New Shoots, 1952), into English and is currently searching for a publisher. A significant selection of her translated poems is available on <https://newshoots.pub/>. Additionally, readers can access a facsimile of the original published *Metūgės* in Lithuanian, which is no longer in print.

Translating Lithuanian literature into English is a challenging task, requiring a unique skill set that involves a deep understanding of both languages and sensitivity to cultural nuances. In this conversation, two translators, **Birutė Šležas** and **Aušra Kubilius**, discuss the challenges and rewards of translating *Metūgės* and Lithuanian literature in general.

Birutė Šležas interviews translator **Aušra Kubilius**

Birutė Šležas: Recently, you translated *Metūgės*, a book of linked poems written by the Lithuanian emigré writer Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė – actually her first book. I know that only some of the poems have been translated before, but never the whole book. I also know there was a controversy when the work was published in the 1950s. The poet later wrote there were "scathing criticisms of this book's morality and eroticism." So, how and why did you choose this translation project?

Aušra Kubilius: Initially, I didn't know about the controversy. Yes, Pūkelevičiūtė wrote about the painful issue herself – her comments are on the website.

As to why I chose this book: A few years ago, the writer Birutė Putrius, an old friend who knows I look for engrossing translation projects, gifted me two books by Pūkelevičiūtė – the novel *Naujujų metų istorija* [New Year's Story] and *Metūgės*. I skimmed through the novel, tried translating a few pages, and lost interest. Then I started reading the poems in *Metūgės* and got hooked. The poetry was not like the usual traditional Lithuanian – Pūkelevičiūtė is not Maironis (though I enjoy his "Trakų pilis" [Trakai Castle], which I can still recite from my days at Boston Lithuanian Saturday School).

What was it about Pūkelevičiūtė's poetry that captivated you in particular?

The boldness of her imagery, the freshness of her format, the sort-of-feminist topics grabbed me. Also, I usually read poetry out loud and was struck by the musicality of the poems. There's not a steady meter nor a consistent rhyme scheme, but there's lush alliteration and dramatic pacing from the syntax – it's a pleasure, a revelation, to read the poems aloud. So I began translating the first poem, which starts with the month of May (surprisingly, a male) celebrating his wedding that includes drunken bees as guests. The poem ends with the speaker urging someone to "come to the woods" and listen to the uneasy beating of the heart of the forests. It's wonderfully creative and evocative stuff in 14 lines.

Most of the 33 poems are lyrical but tell stories. They're brief narratives that are somewhat linked and somewhat chronological. A few times, another speaker is included within the "story," so there's a story within a poem and then the story of the linked poems as a whole.

What do you mean by "stories or story?"

Individually, many of the poems are self-sufficient vignettes. The overarching story is not explicit. Seasons change in the poems, so perhaps it's a year in the speaker's life, who is mainly a young woman. Or perhaps the time frame is longer, covering the main speaker's maturing years, her conflicted loves (real or fantasized), and her attitudes toward religion and God, including after a war.

Earlier, you referred to her "sort-of-feminist" topics. Can you explain?

As you know, the book was published in 1952, before the second wave of feminism in the U.S. Although Pūkelevičiūtė writes from a female stance about topics such as sexuality, one of her major themes is motherhood – not typical of many of the feminist poets who came after her. However, there

is criticism of patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles.

As we know, the poems are linked. How would you describe the book's structure?

The book has six sections. "Coming of Spring" focuses on nature, starting with the May poem and ending with the first mention of a beloved. Then comes "Early Dreams," which deals with love and introduces the element of never getting married. "Blades" follows with poems mostly about forbidden or conflicted loves but ends with a chilling poem that, as I see it, alludes to the Holocaust. Section 4 is addressed "To Girls," urging them to experience the sensuality of life (it contains the only frankly sexual poem in the book, but couched in delicate language). Then, "My Mothers" contrasts bold versus timid women and notes the passing of time. The final section, "Tales of War," deals not only with death but also rebirth. There's an exultant and then quiescent tone at the end – fertile earth regenerating, you're sweating as you work the land, God by your side on a threshold in the evening as you rest.

How did you go about translating these poems? What was your process?

I started with a close literal translation of the first poem. I knew little about Pūkelevičiūtė, so I came to the poem with fresh eyes and ears – and translated word by word, phrase by phrase, as much as possible following the poet's diction, register, syntax, and punctuation. Her poetry has a lot of dashes and is elliptical, which endeared her work to me because I love Dickinson's poetry, which has similar features. Then, I revised it for idiomatic English. I constantly searched for ways to infuse musicality – she has a lot of alliteration, but I couldn't always place it in the same phrase. I kept reading the original and the English out loud, trying to reflect some of her cadence in the translation. The poems in *Metūgės* are not rhymed, but they include poetic sound features. Finally (after extensive dictionary, Google translate, and even Chat GPT use), I had a draft of all 33 poems, but with questions.



Author and playwright Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė (center) rehearses lines with actors backstage for her production of "Aukso žąsis" (The Golden Goose, 1965).

So, for you, a translator from Lithuanian into English who did not live and get educated in Lithuania, did the language of the poems – its vocabulary and syntax – pose some difficulties?

Yes, although I grew up speaking Lithuanian at home, my language skills were challenged by Pūkelevičiūtė – for example, I didn’t know her extensive plant vocabulary. Also, her puns, double entendres, and allusions took a while to unravel. As I said, she’s elliptical rather than explicit.

I was lucky to connect with the Lithuanian literary scholar Violeta Kelertas. It turns out her father had published the 1952 *Metūgės* in Toronto. Violeta spent days reviewing my translations with me – discussing, correcting, and suggesting.

When did you start thinking about publishing your translations?

After a completely revised draft, I sought copyright permission to publish my work. Ultimately, a curator at the Maironis Lithuanian Literature Museum in Kaunas, Virginija Babonaitė-Paplauskienė, was the go-between to get me that permission from Archbishop Gintaras Grušas, who had inherited the poet’s copyright as her godson and relative.

So after you got the copyright permission?

I kept polishing the poems on my own, and then I reestablished contact with you. I had just attended your dramatic reading of the Katiliškis novel you had translated [*Fall Comes from the Forest*]. I sent you my latest draft and asked for comments.

Since then, we’ve spent many enjoyable, sometimes obsessive, hours discussing and refining the poems.

Yes, I’m grateful that you knew more about some of the Catholic religious references and that you pointed out the archaic dual verb “eiva” [let’s both go] in the first poem (the only instance of that dual form, that I remember, in the whole book).

From our conversations, I know that you also sought input from others about some particularly puzzling aspects of Pūkelevičiūtė’s language.

I double-checked some challenging linguistic items with my friend and translator Birutė Bersėnienė in Lithuania and even triple-checked with new sources here in Boston, such as Liuda Žiaugrienė. My sister, Audra Misiūnienė, was also a help in, for example, untangling the allusion to the fire bread of St. Agatha (though I had deciphered the saint’s torture sequence on my own). So, many – what turns out to be only – women had an input to my translations. Some of us jokingly call it a sisterhood.

Did you seek comments from anyone else?

Yes, from a few English-language editors, poets, and writers I knew. Obviously, I was concerned not just with the faithful translation but also with sounding “good” in English. One valuable insight that was reinforced was the challenge of translating from an article-free language such as Lithuanian,

with no the’s or a’s. Where to use articles in English translation, especially in poetry, requires a lot of thought.

And when were you done?

I finished translating the book in the middle of 2023, Pūkelevičiūtė’s centennial birth year. Though I must admit, I keep rereading the poems to this day and am tempted to tinker.

What happens next? You, of course, want your translations to be out in the world and available to the English-language reader.

Well, poems are not as wildly popular as novels. I know you had success in getting your Katiliškis translation published. But when I approached publishers about getting the poems into print, I faced roadblocks – no poetry submissions until further notice, no new poetry submissions for two years, no submissions from a previously unpublished poet/translator in a “major” press, or no response at all. I did get a publishing offer from a press that caters to research libraries, but the contract seemed too restrictive (and the book price much too high for general readers). There’s some irony here when you consider the controversy we mentioned that surrounded the first publication of the Lithuanian poems – and what turned Pūkelevičiūtė from poetry to prose for many years. For a second edition, 44 years later, the poet wrote an introduction, a mini-memoir of what happened to her after the first edition was published. You can see her frank, touching comments online at <https://newshoots.pub/m-2>.

Tell us about the website. How did you develop this creative, novel approach to “publishing” your translation?

Wanting to honor (and capitalize on) the poet’s centennial and “publish” in 2023, I got my husband, Seymour Kellerman, to create a website for my translation of *Metūgės* [<http://newshoots.pub>]. It was a joy to produce (we even added some visuals), and it went online in November last year. I was happy with this innovative way of making at least some of Pūkelevičiūtė’s poetry quickly and easily accessible, if only in an “impermanent medium” for now.

Are people looking at the website?

Yes! It’s great that people are getting to know Pūkelevičiūtė as a wonderful poet – the site has her poems in the original Lithuanian too. We’ve revealed only some of the translated poems so that I might be able to interest a publisher in printing the whole work. I’d like to come out in an inexpensive bilingual edition that would make this book of poems attractive to many English-language readers. Besides her poetry being beautiful in and of itself, I see Pūkelevičiūtė as a forerunner of contemporary feminist women poets, so she’s significant in the history of women’s literature. But for now, I hope readers visit the website. I’d love to get comments, and to keep revealing more of the poems online.

Thank you. I wish you continued success with the website and getting the translated *Metūgės* into print.

My Mothers

(Section 5, p. 73)

And the other women. Timid swallows — — —
From the first September frosts, they wrap themselves
in woeful shawls. White silk fringes reach the ground.
They quietly climb down to a pond and read verses.
The pond — a huge and plaintive tear.
Their hands are powerless. And narrow.
But once stars swerve in sharp angles. Then they
cinch waist with sash and dance, wearing out
their pointed slippers. In one night.
At dawn white-haired dogs lie down on steps and
falling dark moths fill the fire. Like leaves.
Again they wrap themselves in huge shawls —

After that, advent. Advent.
Distant churches drone. Candles in bronze holders
shed tears.
You must pierce fanged dragons with spears and
not lead — ever again into temptation.
God’s face is inscrutable. Like a mask.

From *Metūgės* (Toronto, 1952), by Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė
Translated by Aušra Kubilius
From a selection online at <https://newshoots.pub/p73/>



Aušra Kubilius (left) is a retired professor of English language and literature who has taught in New Hampshire as well as in Lithuania, Malaysia, and Nicaragua during her leaves and sabbaticals. She has translated various texts, including *Encyclopedia Lituanica* entries, art history essays, political memoirs, and oral histories. Some of her notable translations include Bernardas Brazdžionis’s poems published in the journal *Lituanus* and an anthology of verse. Her translation of select poems from Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė’s *Metūgės* can be found on the website <http://newshoots.pub>.

Birutė Šležas (right) has been translating for several years. Her translation of Marius Katiliškis’s classic novel, *Miškais ateina ruduo* [*Fall Comes from the Forest*], was published in 2022.