

Poems by Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė

The life of Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė would make a great novel, maybe even a movie, an independent film depicting the life of a complex figure who defied the expectations of society, eschewing marriage and family for a life of writing. She was part of a circle of Lithuanian diaspora artists and intellectuals in the 1950s and 60s which included Henrikas Nagys, Antanas Škėma, and Algimantas Mackus. My father was one of her friends. He referred to her by her nickname – Pūkė. In Lithuanian, *pūkas* is an adjective meaning something soft and fluffy. While one can see a reason for shortening Pūkelevičiūtė, there was nothing soft and fluffy about Birutė. Her literary output exceeded that of most of the male writers of the era. She crossed genres with ease: her works included novels, plays, children's books, and poetry.

While many readers are familiar with Pūkelevičiūtė's novels and her works for children, they are less conversant with her poetry. Her first book was a volume of poems, "Metūgės" (New Shoots) published in 1952 when she was 29. The poems are deeply saturated in images from the Lithuanian countryside, in mythical and religious symbols, in dreamlike recollections of family. Some contain depictions of erotic longing that seem tame today; in 1952, however, they were at odds with the conservative standards of Lithuanian diaspora culture. The book was negatively received by many critics, though two prominent poets from very different literary traditions, Henrikas Nagys and Bernardas Brazdžionis, lauded the debut collection, as Sandra Bernotas

states in her 2021 article in *Oikos*. Bernotas also reminds us that the works of contemporary male writers of the time, such as Škėma, were also frequently savaged by critics.

Pūkelevičiūtė took the criticisms to heart. In her introduction to the second edition of “Metūgės” (1996), she characterizes young diaspora poets of the 1950s as having belonged to an impenetrable literary community whose members adhered to traditional mores. In retrospect, it was probably not so much the limited sexual material in the book that unnerved the male critics as much as Pūkelevičiūtė’s nonconformist lifestyle: she wrote in a style quite different from that of other poets; her artistic roots lay in the bohemian world of theater (she was an actress); and, especially egregious, she had lived with the married Škėma, who’d left his wife and daughter in the U.S. to be with Pūkelevičiūtė in Montreal.

Who knows what Pūkelevičiūtė might have accomplished as a poet had she not listened to the critics, those who wrote for the Lithuanian press as well as those who may have taken up space in her head. Perhaps the work of poetic resurrection would not have been necessary. As it stands, “Metūgės” is out of print. Translations of the poems into English have been few and far between. Fortunately, former English professor Aušra Kubilius has taken on the important task of translating “Metūgės,” making it available to a much wider audience. Her website NewShoots (<https://newshoots.pub>) contains translations of a third of Pūkelevičiūtė’s poems. Included as well are the poems in their original Lithuanian via digital republishing of the 1952 book. Kubilius is currently looking for a print publisher for the manuscript that would include translations of all of the poems.

Pūkelevičiūtė is a difficult poet to translate. For one, her vocabulary is extensive and sometimes archaic. Syntax is often complicated, and the structure of many poems is fairly unconventional. Many of the line breaks don’t seem to be deliberately placed, but rather wander into the territory of the next line, imbuing the poems with a sense of abandon. These are not prose

poems, per se, though they have prose-like qualities. Kubilius does quite a good job of translating the poems. For one, she has an ear for poetic language. Lines such as “Green windmills sunk knee-deep in soft, warm grass” from the first poem in the collection, and “Their cheeks rough like rain-lashed autumn apples” from the section titled “My Mothers” are just two examples of beautiful, natural sounding sentences that stay true to the meaning and structure of the originals.

This adherence to truth and form while aiming for musicality is another of Kubilius’ strengths as a translator. If I have a bone to pick, it’s that there are times when the syntax of the translations, which does mimic the syntax of the originals, seems somewhat awkward. What sounds natural in Lithuanian can come across as odd in English – “Strange is the forest here.” Another example occurs in a poem in section four, the second line of which is translated as “With teeth I want to rend bleeding muscles of robust animals.” If someone were to ask me to rewrite the line, I’d try something like “I want to rend the bleeding muscles with my teeth,” putting the prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence and adding the necessary definite article *the* before *bleeding muscles*.

Of course, no one is asking me to rewrite the line. Translation of any kind is difficult, and poetry presents complex issues one doesn’t usually find in, say, articles about how to pack a suitcase. Translating the thirteen poems on <https://newshoots.pub> has undoubtedly taken much time, patience, and energy. Kubilius is also the proprietor of the website, an ongoing responsibility of a different kind. The website is easy to find and contains some important information about Pūkelevičiūtė, though I think more can be done in terms of its visual appeal.

A writer friend of mine who specializes in website design suggested that a more dramatic homepage, one including a photo of the writer followed by one of her poems (or a section of one) and a one paragraph description of the translator’s mission, would give readers a more immediate and intimate sense of both

poet and project. The next page, or a separate link leading to that page, might then contain a deeper contextualization of Pūkelevičiūtė's poetry in the light of Lithuanian diaspora culture as well as a brief analysis of possible influences on her work and perhaps something about poets she herself might have influenced. The naming of two links, "Metūgės 1" and "Metūgės 2," confused me, although Kubilius gives a short explanation of what they contain on the homepage – maybe I'm just slow on the uptake here. Perhaps renaming the links The Poems in the Original Lithuanian and The Poems in English Translation would make for an easier navigating experience.

This is a wonderful project, one deserving funding from Lithuanian organizations and individual donors. As I read the poems, both the originals and the translations, T.S. Eliot's dictum came to mind: Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. Pūkelevičiūtė's poetry is genuine; Kubilius' translations are genuine in the same way. Here's hoping that sometime in the next few years we might see translations of all the poems gathered into one magnificent book.

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Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė

From "Coming of Spring," Section 1

Green windmills spun by whistling wind –
Green windmills sunk knee-deep in soft, warm grass.
The sun-ball flames on a gold-haired giant's palms,
heated lakes don't fit within their shores, while
unhayed meadows hum like seas – with milk, and honey.
Bright May thus celebrates his wedding, and
drunken bees at evenings no longer find their hives . . .

Let's both go into the woods.
Here it's quiet:
Black spruce branches droop to the ground. No warbling
from birds napping after noon – only in a thicket
the great heart of the forests pounding loudly.
Hear it?
Her beats are heavy and uneasy.

From "Coming of Spring," Section 1

TWO APRIL FULL MOONS

THE FIRST

Bright spring night.
All windows wide open to coolness. All pitchers
brimming with thick sap.

And, as three miller's daughters shake out
big comforters, their colorful bedding fills with
scents of forest breezes.
You three miller's daughters, you red-haired sisters,
you won't sleep anyway tonight!
Tuck up your pleated skirts and, holding hands,
run by the river – – –
Tarred trough-like dugouts rocking; somewhere
amid the reeds, Vandenis¹ whistling; an enormous
full moon rattles over the wooden bridge.
Then once again stones start to grind in the old
watermill:
Big barefoot ghosts sit on beams and sift flour
through white birch sieves.
Because tonight three miller's daughters roll up
their sleeves and knead sweet Easter breads.

¹ *Vandenis is a male water-spirit in Lithuanian folklore.*

From "Blades," Section 3

Golden harvest time.
Stalks condemned and sickles ready. Like executioners.
Boats return laden. Windmills press gray blades together.
– I'm a smalltime trader: I feed my lamp cheap oil and
wear yellowish silk slippers. Why are you calling me?
'Til now I peddled old cloth and gilded candlesticks.
Evenings I'd stop on the bridge and count copper
coins. The bridge white and curved like a whip.
Do I really have to go?
My windows were low and the house not whitewashed.
But it's sad even at small funerals.
The forest murmurs like an inhospitable cathedral. The
unfamiliar psalms are stern.
All right, I'll find myself red travel boots.

From "To Girls," Section 4

I am a she-wolf, lynx, and the green snake.
I am hungry – my fingers are pincers.
Evenings I see distant fires and shadows
of wild horses.
And when a tumid night begins to flash
lightning, I gather blue bolts in my lap:
I am uneasy.
In the midsummer storm comes my beloved.
My overripe lips split in half, like a fruit.
My breasts are two white she-birds with red
beaks. I hold them with both hands for they may
fly away. My limbs melt like snow and my womb,
like a gold chalice, fills with sweet hot wine.
I am blessed among women.
Now I walk silently and am open
like a wound.

Translated by Aušra KUBILIUS