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Vertimo studijos, núm. 13, 2020

Vilniaus Universitetas, Lituania

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=692774285006>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15388/VertStud.2020.6>



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Netikėta laureatė: Louise Glück Lietuvoje

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the work of the American poet, Louise Glück, winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature, with a discussion of what kinds of challenges her poetry might pose for translators. Very few people knew of her work in Lithuania prior to the Nobel Committee's announcement. Her poems were only published in Lithuanian translation for the first time in July, 2020, and only a handful at that. This paper argues that her work has important similarities and differences to Lithuanian poetry of the twentieth century, and that despite her free-verse lyrics written in rather plain diction, there are still many challenges to rendering her work in another language. The Lithuanian translations reveal stumbling points over ambivalent word choices, surreal imagery caused by ambiguous syntax, and the need for careful attention to the tone of the narrative voice (the lyrical subject) of the poems.

Keywords: Louise Glück, poetry translation, American poetry, translated poetry in Lithuania.

Summary: Straipsnio tikslas – pateikti Amerikos poetės Louise Glück, 2020 metų Nobelio literatūros premijos laureatės, kūrybos apžvalgą, aptariant jos keliamus iššūkius vertėjams. Lietuvoje nedaug kas buvo susipažinęs su šios poetės kūryba iki šių metų Nobelio premijų komiteto sprendimo, nes jos eilėraščių vertimai į lietuvių kalbą pirmą kartą išleisti tik 2020 m. liepą. Ir tik pluoštelis. Straipsnyje aptariami svarbūs poetės kūrybos panašumai ir skirtumai su XX a. lietuvių poezija ir pažymima, kad, nepaisant L. Glück verlibro ir gana paprasto ir aiškaus žodžių pasirinkimo, vertėjas, bandantis perteikti jos eiles kita kalba, susiduria su įvairiais sunkumais. Vertimų į lietuvių kalbą analizė atskleidė, kad neretai užkliūnama verčiant dviprasmius žodžius, kartais dviprasmiškumų sukelia eilėraščių sintaksė ir surrealistiniai įvaizdžiai. Be to, verčiant būtina atidžiai įsiklausyti į eilėraščio lyrinio subjekto toną.

Keywords: Louise Glück, poezijos vertimas, amerikiečių poezija, verstinė poezija Lietuvoje.

1. Introduction

The winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature came as a surprise to many. Few had placed the American poet Louise Glück among the front-runners. Of course, the literary decisions of the Nobel committee are often a surprise, yet the 2016 prize had gone to an American as well, the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. Furthermore, subsequent prizes had gone to Europeans (granted, Ishiguro was born in Japan, nevertheless, he is a British citizen), and before Dylan, we had seen a Frenchman and a Canadian take the coveted award, so it did not seem likely that a white North American rooted firmly in the Western tradition would get the nod. On top of that, previous committee members had criticized

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the American literary scene: “The US is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature... That ignorance is restraining.” (Goldenber 2008). That was the permanent secretary of the Nobel prize jury, Horace Engdahl, speaking to the Associated Press. He stepped down from his role a year later, but when the committee in 2016 bypassed luminaries from the American literary world such as Phillip Roth, W.S. Merwin, and Louise Glück herself to give the prize to a rock star, many of us in that world felt that a bias against American literature had been confirmed: it was as if they had said: none of your prize-winning writers can write nearly as well as this folk-rock singer, so there. Thus, it was with utter disbelief, and a kind of stunned joy, that I read of their 2020 announcement. American poetry had now been given worldwide validation... finally. It is worth mentioning in this context that the American winners of the literary Nobel had all been novelists (depending on how we count T. S. Elliot: an American born, raised and educated, who wrote all of his mature poems while living in Britain, eventually becoming a British citizen). This was the first unquestionable American Nobel Prize in Literature for poetry, and only the thirteenth woman in its history: how did it happen?

2. Louise Glück and the Translation of Her Poetry into Lithuanian

Louise Glück (b. 1943 in New York City) has had a long and illustrious career. Author of 13 books of poetry, and two books of criticism, she won the National Book Critics Circle Prize in 1985 for her fourth book of poetry, *The Triumph of Achilles*. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for *The Wild Iris*, and the National Book Award in 2014 for *Faithful and Virtuous Night*. Along the way she has also taken the Bollingen Prize, the Wallace Stevens Award and other prizes. She served as US Poet Laureate from 2003-4. Her standing in contemporary American poetry is unmatched by her peers with the possible exception of the recently deceased W.S. Merwin and John Ashbery.

Even though Glück’s work is well known and firmly established in the United States, she is much less known in other parts of the world. Lithuania, for instance, knows next to nothing about her, despite the fact that Lithuania regularly publishes more literary works in translation than those written in the native tongue. (Brasaitė 2013: 196) ¹ In other words, Lithuanians are no strangers to literary translation, including translated poetry, yet hardly a soul had heard of Louise Glück. When the prize was announced, media outlets scrambled to find someone to discuss her work. They found two people: myself, an English language poet and translator born, raised and educated in the United States, though now residing in Lithuania; and Marius Burokas, poet, translator and critic, the only person who has translated Glück’s work into Lithuanian (or, at the very least, the only one who has published his translations). ² Both of us conducted numerous interviews with press, radio, and television in the

week following the announcement of the prize. What everyone wanted to know, of course, was who is this laureate and what is her work like? It must be said that neither Burokas nor I felt especially up to the task, for neither of us are scholars of her work. We are poets and translators who for the last decade have felt a growing admiration for Glück's poetry in a country that has not been reading her at all. Thus, Burokas may well be the best person to translate her work, and I may be the best person to critique his translations, but that is all, though, perhaps, also enough.

3. The Realm of Glück's Imagery

At first glance, Glück's poetry does not present the obvious challenges: there is no set meter, no rhyme scheme, and the diction tends to be quotidian (a word one probably wouldn't find in her poems). Her often short, lyric-narrative free-verse poems, heavy on enjambment, short on words (though that depends, as we shall see), are set in the language and tone of intimate, yet everyday speech, which make them seem especially amenable to translation. Yet, her styles change, drawing on surrealism (early), imagism, confessionalism, and objectivism (Oppen, especially), all infused with an outlook informed by the great English modernists (Eliot in particular), not to mention precursors such as Emily Dickinson, another poet who favors short, incisive and compressed lyrics. On top of that, the poems, although often feeling confessional or autobiographical, resist easy identification of the lyrical subject with the author: Glück speaks through other voices, invented characters, mythological characters, flowers, God... The translator must then be minutely attuned to voice. The importance of this cannot be understated, as the poet has herself commented, "the poem, no matter how charged its content, will not survive on content but through voice." (Glück 1994: 91–92)

So, although the lyrical personae of her poems are often different, her work is also eminently recognizable as her own. The official press release of the Nobel committee states that Glück won "for her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal."

³ This pithy statement is worth dwelling on, for it succeeds in pointing to qualities of her poetry that are indeed significant. Firstly, the "unmistakable poetic voice" stands out as remarkable when we consider the striking diversity of her books. Glück herself has commented that all her books are different from one another. ⁴ This is my reading experience as well. When *A Village Life* was made a finalist for the NBCC award in 2009, I read with interest her rather long-lined free-verse poems about the inhabitants of a village in some indeterminate Mediterranean (seemingly Italian, seemingly in the mid-to late 20th c.) country. The poems consistently changed perspectives, now speaking with one persona, now another as they give us different views on small town life: love, work, birth and death. Here is the last stanza of "Midsummer" from that collection:

*The summer night glowed; in the field,
fireflies were glinting.
And for those who understood such things,
the stars were sending messages:
You will leave the village where you were
born
and in another country you'll become very
rich, very powerful,
but always you will mourn something you
left behind, even though
you can't say what it was,
and eventually you will return to seek it.*

Long lines full of rich description are not, as I found out, Glück's usual style, though the sense of melancholy, of a character facing up to elemental themes of loss, most definitely are. When I turned to her next book, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, I was met by two primary narrators: a male painter and a female writer, both of whom spoke in ways that were sometimes confessional in style (in style, I say because Glück herself was not confessing to anything from her own personal life, at least, not directly):

*Sometime after I had entered
that time of life
people prefer to allude to in others
but not in themselves, in the middle of the
night
the phone rang. It rang and rang
as though the world needed me,
though really it was the reverse.*

*I lay in bed, trying to analyze
the ring. It had
my mother's persistence and my father's
pained embarrassment.*

*When I picked it up, the line was dead.
Or was the phone working and the caller
dead?
Or was it not the phone, but the door
perhaps?*

That is the first section of "Visitors from Abroad", a multi-part poem. The lines tend to be shorter, and there is less descriptive richness than in *A Village Life*. Many poems are written from the first-person singular, but our immediate desire to read these as confessional or autobiographical is quickly short-changed by the realization that one of these voices is male. Glück, on top of that, has made it known that she is no fan of seeing her work autobiographically: "the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth."⁵ Other poems seem to have a similar autobiographical orientation, but are cast with the pall of myth (e.g., "The Sword in the Stone"). Furthermore, from

a stylistic perspective, these often long lyric sequences are interrupted with prose poems with a decidedly narrative bent. Nevertheless, despite the different personae and formal constructions, there was something unmistakably “Glück” about these disparate books: a stark confrontation with elemental themes in a voice bereft of comforting illusions, a poetic style of minimal rhetorical flair, and an intimate address to the reader (and from these, the “austere beauty” mentioned in the Nobel press release).

Duly impressed, I turned next to *The Wild Iris*. This was the book that confirmed for me her status as one of America’s pre-eminent poets. Here, the reader is met with another wide range of personae, the difference being that most of them are plants. The setting is a garden. Using the technique of interior monologue, the flowers speak to us; the gardener speaks to us; they speak about love and loss, about death and rebirth, about purpose and meaning; they ask questions of their creator; sometimes, the creator answers with His own monologue. The poems tend to be short in this collection, never longer than two pages, a common feature, as it turns out, of all her earlier work. Many commentators have noted Glück’s emotional astuteness, her ability to clearly depict and analyze the nature of grief, despair, courage and love (especially its complications), yet what *The Wild Iris* makes clear is that she is a metaphysical poet as well. Her poems in this collection titled “Vespers” are addresses (or prayers) to God, who seems absent (each quotation below is from a different such poem):

*Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree.
Here, in Vermont, country
of no summer. It was a test: if the tree lived,
it would mean you existed.*

Sometimes they are edged with wry humor:

*In your extended absence, you permit me
use of earth, anticipating
some return on investment. I must report
failure in my assignment, principally
regarding the tomato plants.*

Yet, like Job, we cannot escape the elemental, theological Problem of Evil:

*why would you wound me, why would you
want me
desolate in the end, unless you wanted me so
starved for hope
I would refuse to see finally
nothing was left to me, and would believe
instead
in the end you were left to me.*

In a way, the metaphysics is inescapable for anyone interested in exploring such themes. It would be difficult, after all, to consistently stare down loss, despair and death without any consideration for meaning, purpose, origins, and ends. These qualities are often heightened in Glück’s

work by her use of mythology. The myths are usually Ancient Greek (though Dido and Eve appear as well, among others), drawing especially on stories of Persephone and the Homeric journeys of Odysseus. This is one way, perhaps the primary way, Glück connects personal experience with the broad sweep of the human condition. The individual life, on the one hand, lives out these stories, and the stories, on the other hand, inform and give meaning to the individual life. Thus, in *Meadowlands*, we see autobiographical poems about the break-up of a marriage alternating with mythological poems drawing on the Odysseus-Penelope story. *Averno* similarly uses myth, but a different myth, that of Persephone, to investigate the mother-daughter relationship. In “Persephone the Wanderer”, the author contemplates the meaning of the mythical story, and ends with a starkly beautiful question addressed, seemingly, both to herself and to the reader:

*When death confronts her, she has never
seen
the meadow without the daisies.
Suddenly she is no longer
singing her maidenly songs
about her mother's
beauty and fecundity. Where
the rift is, the break is.*

*Song of the earth,
song of the mythic vision of eternal life—*

*My soul
shattered with the strain
of trying to belong to earth—*

*What will you do,
when it is your turn in the field with the
god?*

This is one way to understand the Nobel announcement’s comment on how she “makes individual existence universal.” The emotional weight of her lyrics arises from personal experience, yet the lyrics are rarely personal in the sense of being directly about the person known as Louise Glück. Individual experience becomes universal, even mythical. Here is Anders Olsson, Chairman of the Nobel Committee, writing of her work:

In her poems, the self listens for what is left of its dreams and delusions, and nobody can be harder than she in confronting the illusions of the self. But even if Glück would never deny the significance of the autobiographical background, she is not to be regarded as a confessional poet. Glück seeks the universal, and in this she takes inspiration from myths and classical motifs, present in most of her works. The voices of Dido, Persephone and Eurydice – the abandoned, the punished, the betrayed – are masks for a self in transformation, as personal as it is universally valid.⁶

As one can see from the mythological examples Olsson has selected, it is often women's experience that is the starting point for her poems. Glück speaks through male personae as well, but she has, importantly, taken women's experience and perspectives and made something universal out of them. Another way of putting it is that we are not asked to read her women's voices qua women, nor qua women's role in society (though those readings are available as well), but qua human. Women stand for universal human experience in her work just as much as men's voices do in the work of men. Here is how Glück addresses the issue:

I'm puzzled, not emotionally but logically, by the determination of women to write as women. Puzzled because this seems an ambition limited by the existing conception of what, exactly, differentiates the sexes. If there are such differences, it seems reasonable to suppose that literature reveals them, and that it will do so more interestingly, more subtly, in the absence of intention.⁷

The British poet and critic, Fiona Sampson, has noted this as well: "Glück has the confidence to assume that a woman's experience can provide the human example. By doing so she's already managed, without polemic, to assure several generations of women that their lives are as real, and as mighty a measure of the human, as any man's."⁸

Another woman, the poet and critic Maureen McLane, has pointed out how Glück's poems often revolve around themes common to the romantic movement: nature as addressed in apostrophe, nature personified;⁹ I would add myth to this connection to romanticism as well – mythological characters used to depict the nature and drama of the human. Yet, the poet has stated that romance is something she strives to avoid: "romance is what I most struggle to be free of."¹⁰ How then to explain this contradiction? The answer, I believe, lies in how she uses nature and mythology to speak, that is, the voice, the tone, the emotional content. The voices of her flowers are pained, suffering, bereft. More importantly, they are modern. They speak as those who are adrift in a world without any ready-made meaning, in which cherished illusions have been shattered; they speak as those who have seen horror, abuse, and death. It is more as if characters from a Beckett novel were speaking to us in the voices of flowers than any characters from romantic poetry. Furthermore, we should remember Glück's engagement with Eliot. Writing on him and William Carlos Williams, she states, "I love both these poets, all the time."¹¹ Williams is an obvious stylistic precursor: short, highly enjambed free-verse lyrics. Yet, her garden in *The Wild Iris* is closer to Eliot's *Waste Land* than to anything in Wordsworth, Keats or even Williams. The latter exult in nature, while Eliot finds it barren, disappointing and turns to God. As Glück puts it:

If Williams thought of the real as that which was capable of being registered by the senses, Eliot, in his deepest being, equated the real with the permanent. Under which system, earth does not qualify. To be human and feel this is to have certain fond attachments seriously undermined.¹²

Yet, where Eliot's sense of loss and spiritual longing seeks otherworldly assistance, Glück's personae are always thrown back on their own resources with no grand philosophy or religion (or fantasy) to back them up. They must face suffering and death with their own limited abilities to understand, observe, wonder, and even wryly smile. (Yes, there is humor and irony in her poetry as well.) These elemental themes are often acted out in landscapes indelibly marked by the seasons: autumn and winter standing in for melancholy emotions and traumatic events (often as recalled), while spring is the rebirth. Yet, in her poetry, spring is not so much automatic as an act of will. Glück's personae must face their losses and push themselves to rebirth even as they feel nature calling them to life. A poem like "Snowdrops" expresses this well:

*Do you know what I was, how I lived? You
know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.*

*I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring—*

*afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy*

in the raw wind of the new world.

The speaker is a flower who has lived through the trauma of winter and senses the approach of spring. Yet there is an act of will here that gives the poem its drama: "afraid, yes, but among you again / crying yes risk joy", and we can see that taking the risk of experiencing life again is not without cost, for it comes "in the raw wind of the new world." A world of rebirth that will nevertheless be replaced, in time, by winter. I think the extent to which we can see ourselves in this poem, to feel that sense of forcing ourselves to flower in the face of suffering and death, depends in part on seeing ourselves in a fallen world with no one to rely on but our own resources.

4. Similarities and Differences with the Lithuanian Literary Tradition

There is much more that could be said about the psychological, social, and metaphysical perspectives of Glück's lyrical subjects, but I want to use this poem now as a spring-board to leap into the Lithuanian poetic world, a world that has just this year been introduced to her work. One might

expect such a poet to find traction in the Lithuanian literary landscape in which neo-romantic tendencies lingered through the 20th c., in which the melancholy aspects of our existence are often the dominant mood of the work. There is, arguably, more autumn and winter in Lithuanian verse than spring. On the other hand, Lithuanian poetry from the last century could be said to have less of an individual sense, and more a bardic perspective of speaking for the whole nation. Lithuanian poetry was long a bulwark for national identity, protecting that fragile sense of nationality under occupation (first, of the Russian empire, then of the Soviet one). As the poet and critic, Kornelijus Platelis has pointed out,

[i]n these years we were living in the same political situation as that of East European Romantics of the XIX century: occupation by a foreign power, censorship, collaborators and resisters. So, our poetry had this additional meaning and additional burden though it wasn't romantic in its style. Yet our mentality was somehow romantic (Platelis 2008: 5–6).

This orientation was not just a Soviet-era phenomenon, but had its roots in the well-springs of Lithuanian national identity. The émigré literary scholar, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, points out a significant group of what he calls “village prose” and “village verse” writers, whose work was rooted in “the centuries-old traditions of the Lithuanian farming community, since it is perceived to embody the quintessential traits of the Lithuanian national character and culture.” (Šilbajoris 2002:169). Lithuanian poetry spoke to who Lithuanians were as people, with a kind of romantic nationalism of resistance, whereas Glück's characters often feel startlingly alone, left to their own desires and disappointments, speaking for themselves, yet through themselves reflecting general human truths. Furthermore, what may not be so easy for Lithuanians to relate to is the direct, unadorned intimacy of Glück's address. Glück spent considerable time in psychoanalysis, and it has marked her worldview and poetic style:

Analysis taught me to think. Taught me to use my tendency to object to articulated ideas on my own ideas, taught me to use doubt, to examine my own speech for its evasions and excisions. It gave me an intellectual task capable of transforming paralysis – which is the extreme form of self-doubt – into insight (“Education of the Poet”, Glück (1994: 12).

Lithuanian culture has had very limited engagement with psychoanalysis, and both autobiographical and confessional poetry are rather new to its tradition (e.g., the recent work of Giedre Kazlauskaitė and Nojus Saulytis). Another factor that may mark Glück's work as fundamentally different from Lithuanian poetry is her connection of this intimate individual voice, especially when she speaks in a woman's voice, to universal human experience. Although there were strong women poets in the 20th c. (e.g., Judita Vaičiūnaitė, Nijole Miliauskaitė, Janina Degutytė), it is not readily apparent that they took, or that their readers took, their female personae to stand for the experiences of all. Even in the work of Vaičiūnaitė, who often wrote from the perspective of female historical and mythological characters, who wrote also in a rather

minimalist lyrical style, and so might be considered the closest to Glück, one often finds her mythological monologues cast in a narrow range of romantic tropes: Nausicaä or Circe pining for the departed Odysseus, the spirit of Barbora Radvilaitė hearing her grieving husband sigh as her coffin is transported back home... The neo-romanticism that runs through 20th c. Lithuanian poetry has largely been expunged from Glück's work, or perhaps it has merely been sharpened in its pain by a sense of modernist alienation and disillusionment. She has this ability to make the simplest of the natural processes and human activities heroic, but heroic in a very modern sense. Compare her snowdrop above struggling towards spring with Beckett's narrator in *The Unnamable*: "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." We have here a heroism humbled by its lack of illusions, with no grand narrative to guide it, a heroism that is individual and prosaic, yet its drama is gripping, relatable, life-affirming. Glück's work could show Lithuanian poetry a possible link between its neo-romantic past and its more cynical post-modern present. This can only be accomplished through translation.

5. Difficulties of Translating Glück into Lithuanian

Marius Burokas is an award-winning poet, translator and critic. He is also an astute reader of American poetry, and one of Glück's few avid readers in Lithuania before the Nobel. His translations reveal the subtle difficulties that many will encounter when attempting to translate Glück's work. But the virtue of Burokas' translations, besides their general accuracy and trenchant choice of words, besides the fact that they are the only translations into Lithuanian of Glück's poetry, is that he has chosen work that allows us to see the many different threads of theme and style that wind their ways through her long career. The theme of rebirth we have been looking at is represented in his selection by an early poem, one that reveals much that will later seem essential to the poetry of Louise Glück:

All Hallows

Even now this landscape is assembling.
The hills darken. The oxen
sleep in their blue yoke,
the fields having been
picked clean, the sheaves
bound evenly and piled at the roadside
among cinquefoil, as the toothed moon rises:

This is the barrenness
of harvest or pestilence.
And the wife leaning out the window
with her hand extended, as in payment,
and the seeds
distinct, gold, calling
Come here
Come here, little one

And the soul creeps out of the tree.

Visų Šventųjų diena

Net dabar kraštovaizdis tvarkosi.
Kalvos tamsėja. Jaučiai snaudžia
įkinkyti į melsvą jungą,
švariai nurinkti
laukai, pėdai dailiai
surišti ir sukrauti šalikelėj
tarp sidabražolių, po kylančiu dantytu mėnesiu:

Tai derliaus ar maro
nuogumas.
Ir žmona išsilenkia pro langą,
tiesia ranką, it užmokesčiui,
ir sėklos
tolimos, auksinės, kviečia
Ateik
Ateiki, mažoji

Ir siela išsluogija iš medžio.

The title positions us in an autumnal landscape. The harvest has happened (or “pestilence”, which could be read as metaphorical given that the hay is tied up in sheaves and so, harvested), and this gives us “barrenness”, which Burokas renders as *nuogumas* [nakedness]. His choice, marking the vulnerability of the bare fields, may be said to fit what follows, as the call of the seeds intimates a future cycle of life, and so, perhaps, the sensuality of spring. Yet, the final line is elliptical: is the tree dying (as the soul is said to leave the body at death)? Or is the spirit of the tree being called back to life? All Hallows Eve is, of course, Halloween, the time when the dead return to earth. Burokas has translated the title in accordance with standard Lithuanian usage, which has replaced the pagan with the Catholic: All Saint’s Day. The choice of the pagan name, *vėlinės*, would, I suggest, be more fitting given the images of a soul in a tree, the seeds with voice, and the strong sense of seasonal change. In other words, the poem is more pagan than Christian. Be that as it may, in order to understand the final line, attention must be paid to those seeds calling the soul from the tree. The woman’s hand is extended “as in payment”, and the seeds are “gold”. The woman seems to be buying the return of the soul. This then returns us to the theme of “barrenness” and “pestilence”: has she lost a child? is her womb barren? is she luring back the soul of a dead child, secreted in a tree, secreted from the world’s harm, like Daphne escaping Apollo by turning into a tree? We cannot be certain, but the possibility of such a reading argues for a more precise translation of the “barrenness” in line 8: instead of *nuogumas*, *bergždumas* [used to refer to a barren womb] might better connect us to the ideas of an empty womb and the possibility (or desire) of a return to life.

These themes of loss and rebirth in the context of pagan mythology continue in Glück’s later work. Some poems abandon explicit reference to the human, yet the humanity of the speakers is undeniable, as in the title poem of her masterpiece, *The Wild Iris*:

The Wild Iris

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.

Laukinis vilkdalgis

Mano kančios pabaigoje
vėrėsi durys.

Išklausykite: pamenu tai, ką
mirtimi vadinate!

Ir triukšmą viršuje, ir pušų šakų ošimą.
O tada – tuštuma. Tik blausus
spindulys mirgąs paviršiuje.

Siaubinga išlikti
vien sąmone,
žemės gelmėje palaidota.

Bet ir tai baigėsi. Tai, ko taip bijote,
būti siela ir negalėti prabilti,
baigėsi staiga, kieta žemė
pasidavė. Ir tai, ką palaikiau
paukščiais, nardė po krūmokšnius.

Ak, jūs, nepamenantys
sugrįžimo iš ano pasaulio,
pažvelkit, vėl kalbu jums:
visi iš užmaršties sugrįžę,
įgyja balsą:

ir iš širdies manos gyvasties
išsiveržia šaltinis, šešėlių mėlis tamsus
raibuoja jūros žydram vandeny.

There are some changes to the poem in Burokas' translation worth noting, in particular, those that alter the tone of voice – the plain, understated diction of the speaker: here, a flower. Glück's poetry is known for her unadorned speech, her understated emotion. So, first of all, Burokas changes the verb of the second line from the ordinary "was", to vėrėsi [opened]: being is changed into action; a small change, but it is the cumulative effect of such small changes that I would be concerned about. In the second stanza, he adds an exclamation mark. Glück rarely ever uses them, as they rupture her calm, melancholy monologues. In the third stanza, the translator has omitted "dry", thereby removing a key descriptor of the scene: the contrast between winter and the death associated with it, and the rebirth of spring; but what is crucial for Glück's work is the struggle, the way in which her personae face down the bleakness of that landscape (standing, as it so often does, for death). They live in a Beckettian fallen world, a Eliotian waste land of sorts, and must choose life without any illusions. For that reason, the omission of "dry" must be considered a loss. In the next stanza, Burokas has chosen palaidota as a rendering of "buried", which is the funereal meaning of the word, though užkasta [buried, but more literally so] would capture the more prosaic meaning of the English, especially as it relates to a

flower bulb. The funeral meaning fits the theme of the poem, just with less of Glück's understatement, and less of her ambiguity. Finally, one cannot help but notice the addition of an exclamatory *Ak* at the start of the sixth stanza. Much like the exclamation mark above, this rings a false note in the context of Glück's oeuvre. It brings her work closer to the overt emotiveness of the romantic poets, and threatens to obscure a difference of outlook that is crucial to understanding her brand of late modernism. The translator has effected some other slight shifts in meaning in this poem (e.g., *tamsus* [dark] for "deep"), yet they do not alter the overall tone and meaning of the flower's speech, characterized by melancholy, understatement, and a clam, even stoic, perseverance in the face of suffering and death. The Lithuanian, overall, has the beauty and strength of the original.

As previously noted, Glück does not write the same way from book to book. Her early work, in particular, can carry traces of surrealism. This, too, can throw off a translator. In "Happiness", the poet gives us her version of an aubade: traditionally a poem of lovers parting in the morning. The emphasis here is on their togetherness, their connection. Indeed, the connection is so deep that they mirror each other: "Look at your face, you say, / holding your own close to me / to make a mirror." Yet, in the first stanza, the two are so intertwined with themselves and the world that we are not sure what is what anymore. Boundaries are called into question:

*I watch him turn to her
as though to speak her name
but silently, deep in her mouth—
At the window ledge,
once, twice,
a bird calls.*

The scene is one of awakening, so Glück gives us the confused, oneiric logic of the night intertwined with the differentiating logic of daytime. Layered on top of this is the expansive logic of love: I, a lover, am part of everything, and my lover and even the birds speak through me... From a linguistic point of view, at issue here is the "deep in her mouth—"; is the male lover inside the female, speaking through her mouth? Or is he, more prosaically, yet weirdly, simply speaking down into her mouth? And why the dash afterwards (so reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's work)? It gives us the sense of the bird calling from inside her mouth as well. Of course, it need not be so, and if there were a full stop it would not be so, but the dash opens the door to that possibility: a connection is forged between her mouth, his voice, and the bird's call. Burokas is not sure what to do with this strangeness. He simply cuts "deep in" and leaves the crucial line to read "but silently, her mouth—": "bet tyliai, jos burna —":

*Stebiu jį pasisukant į ją
tarsi norėtų išarti jos vardą,
bet tyliai, jos burna - -
Prie palangės*

*čirpteli paukštis
kartą, du.*

The result is also strange in Lithuanian, though the strangeness is of a different sort. It could mean, “with her mouth”, for *burna* looks the same in both the nominative and instrumental cases, and need not occur with the explicit preposition in order to be instrumental. This reading, then, would give us the surrealism, the connection between the two images. In a feat of ambiguity, fitting his poetic skills, Burokas (a prize-winning poet), then allows us to read the phrase in the nominative as well, thereby connecting us to the next line: “*Prie palangės*”, at the window ledge. The man speaks her name with her mouth, and her mouth is (the dash often substituting for the verb “to be” in Lithuanian) at the window ledge. The strangeness of the English is thereby preserved, and, I believe, in the right (surreal) way.

Furthermore, it would be remiss not to call attention to the shocking use of the first-person singular in this poem. The narrator of the poem, as an observing “I”, is in the position of a voyeur. Is this a memory? Is Glück calling attention, in post-modern fashion, to the made quality of the poem, to the fact that this is all a creation of the author observing a construct of her imagination? Perhaps not, or not exactly, for the second stanza begins: “I open my eyes; you are watching me.” It is as if the narrator is a participant who has been dissociated from herself, like a spirit rising above her body and watching:

*A man and a woman lie on a white bed.
It is morning. I think
Soon they will waken.*

The narrator is both the woman and the creator, dissociated at first, and then fully participant by the end: “And the burning wheel / passes gently over us.” This poem is another example of how Glück takes a traditional, romantic subject, and twists it with dream logic, with postmodern self-awareness of the constructed-ness of her art, thereby making it new (to follow Pound’s famous Modernist prescription), making the tried and true, once more a source of wonder.

The use of themes drawn from Greek and Roman mythology, including of course, stories from Homer, has been a constant in English literature since the Renaissance, or indeed, since Medieval literature. Chaucer’s epic *Troilus and Creseyde* is based on a story from Troy. Shakespeare set plays in Ancient Greece and Rome, Keats wrote odes on Ancient Greek themes, and Tennyson’s “*Ulysses*” is a Victorian poem of great rhetorical power that imagines Ulysses as an older man at home. Modernism may well have tried to look away from this tradition, seeking the freshness of the real in language stripped of rhetoric, or seeking alternative mythologies (e.g., from Asia), but it never strayed far from what is, after all, the origins of Western Civilization. Yeats, Pound, and H.D. are three modernist poets who incorporated Greek mythology into their work with power and freshness. By the late twentieth century, we saw female poets reworking these ancient myths from a woman’s perspective. Louise Glück could

certainly be said to fall into that camp, writing from the perspectives of Persephone, Penelope, or Dido. Yet, she has never shied from male personae either, with powerful poems in the voice of Hades, for instance. “The Parable of the Hostages”, comments on the Greek warriors at Troy without specifying who the lyrical persona might be, though we may be able to guess:

*The Greeks are sitting on the beach
wondering what to do when the war ends.
No one
wants to go home, back
to that bony island; everyone wants a little
more
of what there is in Troy, more
life on the edge, that sense of every day as
being
packed with surprises. But how to explain
this
to the ones at home to whom
fighting a war is a plausible
excuse for absence, whereas
exploring one's capacity for diversion
is not. Well, this can be faced
later; these
are men of action, ready to leave
insight to the women and children.
Thinking things over in the hot sun, pleased
by a new strength in their forearms, which
seem
more golden than they did at home, some
begin to miss their families a little,
to miss their wives, to want to see
if the war has aged them. And a few grow
slightly uneasy: what if war
is just a male version of dressing up,
a game devised to avoid
profound spiritual questions? Ah,
but it wasn't only the war. The world had
begun
calling them, an opera beginning with the
war's
loud chords and ending with the floating
aria of the sirens.
There on the beach, discussing the various
timetables for getting home, no one believed
it could take ten years to get back to Ithaca;
no one foresaw that decade of insoluble
dilemmas—oh unanswerable
affliction of the human heart: how to divide
the world's beauty into acceptable
and unacceptable loves! On the shores of
Troy,
how could the Greeks know
they were hostages already: who once
delays the journey is
already enthralled; how could they know*

*that of their small number
some would be held forever by the dreams of
pleasure,
some by sleep, some by music?*

As Glück presents it, the fundamental dilemma here is how to avoid going home. Where Tennyson presents us with an aged Ulysses at Ithaca deciding he cannot just sit at home – that despite his age he must seek adventure, Glück places her men at an earlier time when they are still faced with the choice of whether to go home or not. Furthermore, her narrative voice is more distant from the characters being described. Where Tennyson is all heroism, Glück is far more critical. In her version, one is tempted to see the men as overgrown children who want to keep playing, and this is certainly part of the poem’s meaning: “war / is just a male version of dressing up”. On the other hand, the poet is sympathetic to these “men of action” as well. They are, after all, faced with a dilemma. They have duty and love for their families, but also want to be true to their adventuring selves. Their home island seems “bony” to them because it is like a skeleton, a dead stone. The pleasures of home are not their pleasures. Then, moving from the “men of action” cliché, Glück brings us to the philosophical theme of incommensurable (or seemingly so) desires: “oh unanswerable / affliction of the human heart: how to divide / the world’s beauty into acceptable / and unacceptable loves!” The warriors are imprisoned within their desires. They are pawns not of gods and fate, as the ancient myths would often have it, but of their own, all too human (to paraphrase Nietzsche), yearnings: “some would be held forever by the dreams of pleasure, / some by sleep, some by music”. So, what seems at first a feminist critique of “manly” men becomes a much more subtle and nuanced look at the diversity of human desires and our inability to escape them. Already, while still on the shores of Troy, the men are lost. They cannot make sense of their competing desires, but then, neither can we.

In translation, Burokas does an admirable job of rendering this lengthy meditation on the human condition. There are a few spots though where his language could be more precise in order to not lose the force of the main themes Glück has deployed here:

Alegorija apie įkaitus

*Graikai sėdinėja pakrantėje
svarsto ką darys, kai baigsis karas. Nė
vienas
nenori grįžti namo, atgal
į tą uolėtą salą; visi trokšta dar trupučio
Trojos gėrybių, dar šiek tiek
pavojingo gyvenimo, nori jausti, kad dienos
pilnos netikėtumų. Bet kaip viską
paaiškinti
likusiems namie, jiems
karas – vienintelis tinkamas
pateisinimas negrįžti, o
prasimanytų pramogų paieškos –
nebe. Na, tai jie išsiaiškins
vėliau, jie juk*

veiklūs vyrai, intuicija
lai lieka vaikams ir moterims.
Taip jie svarsto kepinant saulei, patenkinti
suvirtėjusiais savo dilbiais, kurie atrodo
labiau nuauksinti, nei buvo namie, vieni
ima truputį ilgėtis šeimų,
ilgėtis žmonių, nori pamatyti
ar karas jas pasendino. O kitiems
šiek tiek neramu: o ką, jei karas
tik vyriškas dabinimasis,
žaidimas, sumanytas išvengti
rimtų dvasios ieškojimų? Ak,
bet tai nebuvo vien karas. Pats pasaulis ėmė
juos šaukti, opera prasidėjo garsiais
mūšių akordais ir baigėsi vingria sirenų
arija.
Ten, pakrantėje, aptariant įvairius
grįžimo namo planus, nė vienas nesitikėjo
kad prireiks dešimties metų parplaukti
Itakén;
niekas nenumatė neišsprendžiamų dilemų
dešimtmečio – ak,
neatliepiamas žmogaus širdies maudulys:
kaip padalinti
pasaulio grožį į laukiamą
ir nelaukiamą meilę! Sėdėdami Trojos
pakrantėje
ar galėjo graikai nutuokti
kad jau tapo įkaitais: kas nors kartą
atideda kelionę, tas
jau pakerėtas; iš kur jie galėjo žinoti,
kad iš jųjų saujelės
vienus amžiams pavergs malonumų svajos,
kitus – miegas, o dar kitus – muzika?

There is no need for a line-by-line analysis, as the translation is, for the most part, both poetic and accurate. I want to call attention to several crucial lines in particular. As discussed above, “bony island” is a metaphor that speaks to the attitude the warriors have to their home. Burokas interprets it physically: “į tą uolėtą salą” [to that rocky island]. He preserves the physical sense while losing the psychological connection to death. As we see in the poem, home is not entirely dead to the men, for they wonder about their families there; indeed, they will try to return. Nevertheless, Glück’s metaphor is crucial for helping us understand one way in which the men see home – it is bones to them – and they want “life”, i.e., adventure. Thus their dilemma: they want to see their families, but they don’t really want to be at home.

I would next take issue with Burokas’s translation of women’s “insight” in line 15 as “intuicija” [intuition], for the latter word was readily available to the poet and she refused it. One reason for her refusal may be the traditional and sexist association of intuition with women and reason with men. As we have seen, despite evincing sympathy for the men’s dilemma here, the poem also has a woman’s critical eye. And as a woman, the poet refuses to relegate the woman’s perspective to intuition. Insight

is something that can come from intuition, but also something that can come from reason, from rational understanding. In her essays, Glück often uses the word this way, as something that results from rational analysis (see the quote about her psychoanalytic experience above). An alteration of the term here is an alteration of the narrator's perspective and subtly moves it further from a feminist position.

Two more subtle changes in translation threaten Glück's intentional deployment of clichés. In English, the "men of action" are playing "dress-up". She uses the first cliché to emphasize how these warriors are caught up in the roles they have grown up with. The second is perhaps not so much a cliché as an idiomatic expression for how children role-play, putting on different clothes to pretend to take on different (often adult) roles. Together, these expressions root our adult actions in our social upbringing. Society gives us role-models, and before we know it, there we are on a foreign shore trying to act out our early roles (the brave warrior in this case) and wondering how they fit with the rest of our lives (the "family man" role in this case). The translator's "veiklūs vyrai" [active men] is accurate in terms of meaning, but does it carry with it the sense of acting out a sad cliché? Can any phrase in Lithuanian do that to the extent this English one does? Similarly with line 24: "a male version of dressing up," becomes "tik vyriškas dabinimasis," [only a manly act of adorning/decorating]. The English expression is rich with childhood associations where kids play "dress-up"; "dabinti" can refer to any act of adornment or decoration. Yet, as I have argued, what matters here is not adornment or decoration, but role-playing. The men are caught in roles they have inherited (and acted out) at an early age from their culture. These roles in turn conflict with other roles, leaving the men caught, pawns in a game they did not invent. The poem ends in an even more generalized place of human desire: pleasure, music, sleep... Not all desires that make us who we are or aspire to be can be simply reduced to a limited number of societal roles presented to us in childhood. The men are more than just either warriors or family men, as are we all more than our social roles.

Conclusion

Burokas, overall, has done an excellent job in conveying the poetic power and beauty of Glück's poetry. Only a very close reading of his translations in manuscript could reveal these possibilities for revision. Certain changes, some perhaps a function of what expressions are available in the language, and so not the translator's fault, can reduce the richness of the poems, or alter the perspective of the speaking voice. There is nothing so difficult as translating a master poet, and this difficulty is far deeper than just matching up rhyme, meter and meaning in the traditional sense. The nuances of Glück's voice and imagery, embodied in language that ranges from the idiomatic and cliché to the strikingly original and surreal, make this a challenging task. Burokas is up to the challenge if anyone is, and I hope to see some book-length translations

of Glück by him soon, for her poetry, should, I predict, find a hospitable home in the Lithuanian poetry world.

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Notes

- 1 “As shown by the statistical analysis of Lithuanian press (years 2000–2011), translated fiction print runs are almost two times higher than native fiction print runs.” (Brasaitė 2013: 196).
- 2 Marius Burokas has published translations of Glück's poems in *Šiaurės atėnai* (July 10, 2020) and in *Literatūra ir menas* (Oct. 23, 2020), he has also shared (as yet) unpublished translations with me, for which I thank him.

- 3 Press release. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Mon. 21 Dec 2020. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2020/press-release/>
- 4 Louise Glück – Interview. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Mon. 21 Dec 2020. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2020/gluck/interview/>
- 5 “Against Sincerity”, in (Glück 1994: 34).
- 6 Biobibliographical notes. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Mon. 21 Dec 2020. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2020/biobibliography/>
- 7 “Education of the Poet”, in (Glück 1994: 7).
- 8 Louise Glück: where to start with an extraordinary Nobel winner. *The Guardian* (8 Oct. 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/08/louise-gluck-where-to-start-with-an-extraordinary-nobel-winner>
- 9 The Soul-Excavating Work of Louise Glück, excerpted from *My Poets* (2012), Farrar, Straus & Giroux: <https://lithub.com/the-soul-excavating-work-of-louise-gluck/>
- 10 “Education of the Poet”, in (Glück 1994: 8).
- 11 “On T.S. Eliot”, in (Glück 1994: 20).
- 12 Ibid.