

## WRITERS OF LITHUANIA

### JURGIS BALTRUŠAITIS

1873 - 1944

Throughout the 19th century, Lithuanian literature, poetry in particular, until the emergence of the first major poet, Maironis, was rather scanty. The gap that was formed by the lack of conscious intelligentsia during the oppressive occupant's days left a marked scar on the whole national culture and led to one of the very painful experiences in the history of nations: the loss of some of the more progressive people to foreign countries where they could satisfy their intellectual and artistic thirst. This was the story of Adomas Mickevičius, Milašius, and Baltrušaitis; the first was claimed by Poles, the second wrote in French, the third in Russian. All three are well known figures in Lithuanian literature. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, however, differs somewhat from the other two poets in respect to his usage of both his native and Russian tongues, and he stands out as an interesting figure who managed to extract the main features of the Russian poetry of the day and thrust them through the old sediments of his national mythological traditions.

Born on May 3, 1873, to a farmer's family in Paantvar-džiai village, Baltrušaitis acquired his elementary education in Kaunas and, at the age of sixteen, started to make his own living as a tutor. In 1893 he moved to Moscow, where he spent the greater part of his life. He graduated in Physics and Mathematics from the University of Moscow. Besides studying the Sciences, he attended the History-Philology lectures and soon devoted himself to literary studies. He had an exceptional talent for languages and, in a short time, learned several of them. Thus he was able to read such classics as Sophocles, Dante, Cervantes, Wilde, Ibsen and Slovacki in the original. After 1895 he worked for different Russian periodicals, concentrating primarily on translations. During his college years he wrote several poem cycles and two dramas, though he did not publish them until 1899.

Baltrušaitis was a very bright personality. This was not unexpected of a person leading two careers at once — in the diplomatic and literary fields — against the highly intellectual attitudinal climate of the Russian Symbolists' Movement, a period considered to be a peak in the history of Russian culture. In spite of constantly poor living conditions and financial troubles, he led quite an interesting life and managed to visit a great many of the Western European countries (staying longer in Switzerland, where he took a cure from T. B.). In 1920, after Lithuania was built up as an Independent State, he was commissioned to Russia as a Delegate for Foreign Affairs and, with the same duties, travelled in Turkey and Persia. In 1939 he went to France as Minister. While in Moscow, he took an active part in cultural life. Lecturing and writing articles; and, after the beginning of World War I, he joined in patriotic activities by working in the Committee for Lithuanian Refugees. From 1917-19 he was a superintendent of the repertories of all Russia's concerts and theatres in the Theatre and Music section of the organization TENUSEK. At the same time he was elected president of Russia's Writers' Association. In his very wide circle of friends were included such influential people of the day as Belmont, Briusov, Ivanov, Poliakov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Giovanni Papini, and Gordon Craig.

In Baltrušaitis' literary bequest we find books of poetry — **Steps of the Earth** (1911), **Path in the Mountains** (1912), **Lily and the Sickle**, all in Russian, and a great number of articles, several fiction pieces, and volumes of translations as well. In Lithuanian he left the poetry books **The Wreath of Tears**, **Smoke on the Altar**, and a long satirical poem, **Grand-Opening with a Rat**.

There are many different opinions on the difference of value between Baltrušaitis' Russian and Lithuanian poetry. Here it may be mentioned only that his Russian works are treated more abstractly and subtly, while the Lithuanian ones have more vigor, are more down to earth (speaking in the terms of differences in thematic treatment, not criticism). All of his poetry is highly characteristic of the Russian Symbolists which, unlike the French Symbolists, were born much later and developed a peculiar philosophy of art with streams of mysticism and special missions for humanity (Ivanov, Biely — who prophesied that art was a revelation and through it went the road to a new culture and new mankind). Throughout Baltrušaitis' works the dominating symbolical theme is that of Man, the Wanderer, or Vagabond, who wanders on the roads of the world trying to solve the eternal Mystery of the Universe, Formally this theme, if embodied in the widest scope of subjects on earth, starting with the smallest insect and going up to nature's powers like thunder and lightening, which all



have a unique part in the whole Pantheistic Cosmos, each whispering the eternal Mystery, develops, by man, a brotherly feeling for every living being and every plant, reechoing the one St. Francis was singing to the World. Baltrušaitis' pantheistic emotions, however, do not fall into the same category with Western, Christian pantheism, but are deeply rooted in Lithuanian Paganism, the worship of Nature's powers. Thus Baltrušaitis, in his writings, does not limit himself with a narrow circle of subjective symbols, but through mythology appeals to the whole nation. The time element in his works is felt deeply in the rhythmic movements of the weaver's shuttle (The Weaver), the rower's rowing (The Song of Sea), both echoing the pendulum of the Cosmos. Although the mystery who is the Weaver and who the shuttle, will be solved only through the greatest pains, and although the rower when turning around sees behind him just a short narrow stream (that is all that is left of man's life), the poet rejoices, because the earth is crowned with Man. Sometimes when telling of the ancient past of his Country (Vision of the Ages), the poet himself becomes a high priest sacrificing the holy fire to the pagan god Thunder.

Baltrušaitis' late poems, which he himself called "accords," are interesting because of their formal innovations, rich in musical quality and purified play with words (Biely experimented somewhat on the same point). The poet himself has described his own works best, saying that his lyricism originated from the old folk songs and his mysticism from the old tales, myths, and legends.

**D. J.**