

## WRITERS OF LITHUANIA

### MAIRONIS — LITHUANIA'S NATIONAL POET

Vida Tautvydaitė-Zubkienė

Jonas Maciulis-Maironis is Lithuania's greatest national poet, even though the time that he could devote to poetry was very meager. Born and educated in the period immediately preceding the declaration of Lithuanian Independence (Feb. 16, 1918), Maironis understood the responsibilities of the educated Lithuanians toward their country. If it were not for the effort of such devoted persons as Maironis and V. Kudirka, toward an independent Lithuania, it is very doubtful that Lithuania would have been able to assume her place among other European nations after the first World War. The poetry of Maironis was the much-needed support for the oppressed spirit of the enslaved people of Lithuania. There we find a combination of tremendous lyric talent and an almost personal love of Lithuania, which resulted in poetry of such intensity and sincerity, that Maironis has become the number one poet of our nation.

His parents were rather well-to-do, yet they were not under the Polish influence, as was the case with most well-to-do families. It was only when Maironis entered high school that he learned Polish. In 1883 he graduated from high school and entered the university at Kiev, Russia, to study literature. After a year of study, he entered a Catholic seminary for the priesthood at Kaunas, Lithuania. In 1888 Maironis graduated from the seminary and was sent to Petersburg to further his study. From 1894 to 1909, Maironis taught as a professor of moral theology at the Petersburg spiritual academy. In 1909 he returned to Lithuania and served as the dean of the Catholic seminary in Kaunas till his death. After the first world war, when the Lithuanian University was opened, Maironis lectured in the college of theology-philosophy on moral theology and literature.



*Maironis - a painting by  
Č. Janušas*

Thus, Maironis was a man of many professions: a priest, a professor, and a poet. Yet no matter how much he may have accomplished as an able administrator or priest, Maironis has come down to us principally through his poetry. Every Lithuanian child has been brought up on the lyrics of his verse, with its simple and sincere language singing of the glorious past, the helpless present, and a bright future. Like Shakespeare, Maironis is intranslatable. His poetry contains the essence of Lithuania which can only be expressed in the native tongue. However, Maironis was a man of great ideas which can be understood in all languages, even though the beauty of the verse is lost in translation. Quite unlike his contemporaries, many of whom wrote in Polish even though they were Lithuanians, because Polish was the academic language of the day, Maironis never wrote in any other language but Lithuanian, except for a few insignificant etudes while still in school.

To get a better idea of the range of his poetical activity, we shall classify his poetry in three groups: lyric, narrative, and dramatic. His most extensive and permanent contributions lie in the field of lyric poetry. And in general it can be said that lyricism is the principal feature of all his poetry, and the strong point of his talent. The first collection of his verse consisted of lyric poetry. It was called "Pavasario Balsai" (The Voices of Spring), and already has had 10 editions.

As for the themes of his poetry, they are for the most part patriotic and deal with Lithuania and her people. Maironis was a romantic idealist whose object of adoration was Lithuania, which becomes an animate object in his poetry, capable of feeling and love. This type of romantic writing was typical of that particular period in Lithuania, 1850 — 1918, when practically all writing was primarily concerned with idealization of the past in contrast to the present, and a belief in the glorious rebirth of Lithuania. Yet Maironis was not a foolish romantic, and he attempted to find means by which the ideal might become real — through pride in one's native language, interest in the glorious past of Lithuania, pride in the beauty of the Lithuanian landscape, and through a devoted trust in the Divine Providence. We gather strength to fight for a better tomorrow from the deeds of our heroes of old. One aspect of this return to the past is the preservation of the Lithuanian language and Lithuanian customs and habits which are the most precious possessions that a Lithuanian can have, and for the preservation of which so much blood was shed, and is still being shed. A great deal of his lyric poetry deals with the natural beauty of the Lithuanian landscape. To Maironis it becomes still more beautiful because of the great sufferings that it has already borne and is still bearing. Thus, in his nature descriptions the emotional involvement is greater than the purely descriptive aspect.

In contrast to the glorious past, the present slavery is heart-rending. However, Maironis firmly believes in the new dawn and rebirth of Lithuania, basing his hopes on the Divine Providence and the law of eternal flux. The strong are falling and the weak arise in their stead, and the most dangerous weapon that they use is the power of new ideas. Maironis believed that this was the age ideas, against which there is no protection. The course of new ideas is like the steady flow of the river, and they will not be stemmed no matter how difficult it may be to accept them at first. Thus Maironis puts his hopes in the Lithuanian youth who will come after him, armed with this dangerous weapon and the cultural heritage of their forefathers.

Maironis loved Lithuania sincerely and lived according to the ideals that he preached. Lithuania was his sweetheart, his bride who had found the key to his heart. She was his inspiration and the object of all his affections. Thus the patriotic ideology that permeates practically all of his poetry, is very personal. His emotional outbursts are full of catchy aphorisms and epigrams that are much more powerful than logical syllogisms. The beauty of his poetry lies in his ability to experience strong emotion and to share it with his reader. These emotions, however, are not chaotic or sensual. They are highly noble and honorable, bursting like a song from his heart. Consequently, very many of his poems are sung, or are recited to the accompaniment of a musical instrument.

In the field of narrative poetry Maironis has written three long poems. The first one, called "Jaunoji Lietuva" (Young Lithuania), was published in 1908. It consists of nine cantos. It cannot be called an epic poem because it lacks epic objectivity and dramatic characterization. The people are there simply to transmit the ideas of the poet. The plot is fragmentary and the motivation lyrical rather than psychological. The principal themes are basically the same as in all of his lyric poetry.

The second poem, called "Raseinių Magde," is a satirical poem, dealing with the cultural degeneration of one nation under the influence of a foreign culture. Here the plot is much tighter, and by the use of allegory, Maironis escapes the task of characterization. This is his most successful longer work, and approaches the scope of an epic poem.

The last poem written in the period between 1912—1920 is called "Mūsų Vargai" (Our difficulties). It consists of 8 cantos and deals with the turbulent period immediately preceding the Declaration of Lithuanian Independence. It resembles more a cultural chronicle of a period than purely a work of art. It contains too much to be a great poem. Its great beauty, however, lies in the lyric passages, some of which are unsurpassable.

As for his dramatic work, it is far inferior to both his lyric and narrative poetry. Besides two short pieces, Maironis has written a trilogy dealing with two Lithuanian grand dukes of the 14th century.

Maironis can be considered the creator of an epoch in poetry. His spirit has become a part of the Lithuanian culture. His poetry is sung and recited at every cultural gathering. It is only quite recently that the younger generation of poets has finally freed itself from the spell of Maironis and his singing verse. Although a creator of an epoch, Maironis has risen above it, and will always be a rich source of lasting aesthetic values.

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*"The Communist Party of the Soviet Union follows Lenin's thesis that 'all nations will realize socialism, this is inevitable, but not all of them in the same way.'"*

*XX Congress of the Communist Party*