

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 26, No.2 - Summer 1980

Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas

ISSN 0024-5089

Copyright © 1980 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



## JONAS MAIRONIS AND THE WINDS OF FREEDOM

RIMVYDAS ŠILBAJORIS  
Ohio State University

Jonas Mačiulis, who lived between 1862 and 1932 and wrote under the pseudonym Maironis, was both a poet of first rank and a major personal presence, a cornerstone, one might say, in the edifice of the Lithuanian national revival at the meeting point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His most significant contributions are in the realm of lyric poetry, but he also wrote several longer narrative poems, ballads and even historical drama.<sup>1</sup> In 1907, when Maironis completed his poem *The Young Lithuania* (*Jaunoji Lietuva*), such a country existed only in the dreams of patriots, in a twilight zone of history, between memory and hope. In this situation, Maironis' poem stands as an expression of faith that there will indeed be a new morning, a fact not at all as obvious in the lives of nations as it is in nature.

The narrative begins in a well-to-do Lithuanian farmstead of the 1890s and moves beyond the time of its own composition, to the 1920s, envisioning a future independent Lithuania. This path closely parallels the one eventually taken by Maironis' own life, and indeed, an earlier version of the poem, published in 1895 under the title *Through Grief to Glory* (*Tarp skausmų į garbę*) is a sublimated autobiography. Like Maironis himself, its hero sacrifices his young love to become a priest and to serve the cause of Lithuanian liberation. The hero of *Young Lithuania*, Juozas Rainys, turns away from priesthood to seek happiness in marriage, but is rejected by the girl's aristocratic and Polish-oriented father. In a typically Romantic beau geste of patriotic faith and personal despair, Rainys then throws himself totally into the national struggle. Jailed by the Russians, he falls ill with tuberculosis and later dies in Switzerland, not having seen the dawn of freedom.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Lithuania was in the grip of two great forces — those of Poland and of Russia — which stood in conflict with one another. Neither of them could even conceive, much less recognize, the strength of an emerging third force, the indigenous ethnic Lithuanian consciousness. The Poles understood what "Litwa" meant to them: a much respected, though still not fully developed Northern province of the commonwealth, something like what Scotland must have seemed to Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century — a land which has given to the Polish throne a noble line of kings as well as great soldiers and outstanding poets. This is the "Litwa" of which Adam Mickiewicz sang in the opening lines of his famous rural epic *Pan Tadeusz*: "Litwo, ojczyzna moja ..." — "Litwa, my fatherland, that you are like to health Only he shall perceive who has lost you forever". To the Russians, on the other hand, "Litva" was first of all a historical name which used to designate broad expanses of their own ethnic territory, a former grand duchy which used a version of old Russian as its own written language and which now, logically, should be fully assimilated into Mother Russia as "Northwestern Territory," the name given to Lithuania by the Tsarist government. Both the Poles and the Russians felt morally and historically entitled to Lithuania, as they struggled for its possession and for the loyalty of its inhabitants. In this conflict, the Polish cause seemed about to prevail. Polish language and Polish mentality in Lithuania were spreading in widening circles from the nobility to the minor rural gentry, and, through the influence of Polish-oriented Catholic priesthood, into the peasant households as well. This trend was strengthened by the very ambitions of simple people to strive for education and social advancement for themselves and their children, because one could only enter this upward spiral by committing oneself, at least outwardly, to the polonized social, economic and cultural power structure.

Between these two forces, the national awakening appeared as a romantic dream, or some visionary foolishness, denying the evident reality of the natural downward course of history toward the gradual evanescence of the Lithuanian national ethos. The patriots, however, were convinced of the justice of their ideological premises which they based on two main foundations. One was the ancient Lithuanian language and folklore which others supposed to have become all but extinct, while in actual fact almost the entire peasant population knew no other language and no other customs. The other was a proud new "ethnic" reading of the record of history. Whatever the state language in the past, or the relationships with Poland, it was, after all the ethnic Lithuanians themselves who withstood the might of the Teutonic Order and at the same time imposed their will upon vast areas of Russia. History thus perceived became a well spring of national feeling, focused

upon the concept of a heroic people, speaking a language rich in ancient beauty and possessing a heritage of the past which entitled it to stand free as an equal among all nations.

The poem *Young Lithuania* is situated in time at the point of the most intense conflict among these historical forces and it reflects in its own structure their various

complex interplays, with the dramatic tensions and occasional ironies inherent in them. In a number of instances, the resolutions of these conflicts in the poem move away from, or pass beyond, the corresponding historical realities. To the extent that this happens, the poem becomes less reliable as witness to historical truth, but stronger, more inspiring to Maironis' contemporaries as a work of art. As such, it contributed a great deal to the growth of national awakening, so that, from our own point in time, it appears as though the poet's wishful thinking had become the active will of the people.

The national movement itself was divided into several factions centered around a conservative, agrarian Catholicism and a positivist, sometimes Marxist, orientation aiming to speak for the proletariat and for the non-clerical intelligentsia. In Lithuania the clergy and the peasantry were a much stronger force, mostly because the process of industrialization and urbanization was not then far advanced. In the poem, Maironis, through his main hero, Rainys, clearly takes the Catholic position. To Rainys, his Catholicism is an emotional force which permeated his love for the country and for its humble people, and this united feeling achieves the status of faith and of wisdom, free from any theories of intellectualizations. It is most strongly present at moments such as the following, during a Holy Mass, at the singing of a religious hymn:

None but the poor have such feeling for prayer,  
The heirs of a land where the burden of sorrow  
Is ancient, and bitter, and harsh.

The German marauders, the tyrants of serfdom,  
The rivers of blood, and the flooding of tears,  
The chains as a gift from false friends.<sup>2</sup>

This hard-faced, reticent, homespun folk, opening their hearts in prayer, is the ultimate source of Rainys' religion and his patriotism. In contrast to this, the socialist-positivist point of view is presented from a hostile perspective, deprived of all wisdom and poetry. An advocate of socialism says:

Stop dreaming! The epoch of poets,  
As well as the smell of theology stupid  
Have long since outlived their own time.  
Today we are seeking a different well spring  
Of strength for our social demands.

Late in the poem, the friends of Rainys, survivors of the struggle for freedom, pass a harsh judgment on those of their compatriots who have opted for socialism:

Those cosmopolitans! Giants this moment,  
Strangers to glorious past! Featherbrain'd dreams of a Marx or a Darwin  
Are dearer to them than their land.

Maironis does not develop a rational argument for his political position, and perhaps it is proper that he should not, because he is, after all writing a poem and not a social treatise. In the romantic and idealistic mold which shapes this poem, the emotional aspect of crucial human choices is the most important thing. Rainys' decision to strive toward priesthood is therefore also presented as the gradual growth of a poetic experience, as the transformation of a child's intimate thoughts into images of beauty and faith:

How touching to him were the vespers of Sabbath  
With the candles aglow, like his wandering dreams,  
When the organ resounded the voice of the faithful.  
Oh, the candlelit twilight! Oh, the suppliant organ!  
And the silence which comes to converse with the soul!  
This invisible God, before Whom through the ages  
Countless millions have knelt, like to dust on the road!

On his way to this luminous vision of faith, Rainys encounters another great emotional experience — romantic love. The result is a dramatic crisis in which the battlefield of conflicting feelings expands over the crucial social, ethnic and political issues of the day. Rainys falls in love with young Jadvyga, the daughter of a stern, upright local landowner, and all his dreams of priesthood are consumed in the conflagration, leaving only the bitter ashes of regret and self-reproach for having "betrayed" his calling. At this time, Rainys is still a patriot of the commonwealth, of "Litwa," dreaming the same imperial dreams as Goštautas, Jadvyga's father. Therefore Goštautas welcomes Rainys to his home, until the moment when he perceived the young peoples' romantic attachment to each other. Then comes the blow: Goštautas declares in

the proud voice of ancient nobility that his daughter could never be the wife of a peasant, even an educated one, who might otherwise be acceptable to him culturally and ideologically. In the agony of this rejection, Rainys comes to understand that if he is a peasant, then he also is an ethnic Lithuanian, belonging to a people with noble pride of their own, to which the Polish allegiance of the aristocracy has nothing more to say. Just then he learns of patriotic Lithuanian publications smuggled by brave men across the East Prussian border,<sup>3</sup> which were capturing the peoples' minds, building up to an irresistible tide of liberation. This powerful new force becomes an inspiring alternative to Rainys' shattered inner worlds, and from that time on he becomes committed to the new ideal. Yet, the candles of his priesthood dreams are still glowing deep in his soul, and his love for Jadvyga is not so much a bittersweet memory as a continuing, torturous presence, especially because Jadvyga herself has now embraced the Lithuanian cause. Even her father, Goštautas, changes his world view and comes to Rainys' aid, albeit too late, when the young man is already broken in health in Russian prisons. Thus, as a fighter for freedom, Rainys entered the battle still carrying the wounds of previous conflicts fought and lost, and won again, but only after his fatal hour had already struck. His condition evokes the image of a hero very much at home in the tradition of Polish romanticism, in spite of his newly found Lithuanian ethos. Indeed, even the succeeding Lithuanian generations read with great emotion the "Lithuanian" poems of Adam Mickiewicz, written in the same romantic spirit, such as *Pan Tadeusz*, or *Konrad Wallenrod*, or *Grazing*, having quite lost the desire to understand what in those same works could move the romantic soul of a Pole. On the other hand, Maironis' description of the change of heart in the Goštautas' family is true historically only in very few instances. Most of the polonized Lithuanian landowners remained completely Polish in their outlook and threw a proud "przenigdy" — "forever never" — into the face of the young Lithuanian movement.

The ideological and emotional issues in the poem are confronted and developed mostly in interior spaces: drawing rooms, churches, student quarters, peasant houses, and the like. There exists, however, another dimension — that of broad landscapes and changes of seasons — which gives the poem a certain spaciousness and a feeling of reality embracing the dreams of the young patriotic idealists, translating them, as it were, into an actual country, Lithuania, old and new, with forests and rivers and wide spaces open to the restless winds of freedom. The romanticised, idealized Lithuanian landscapes which Maironis was so fond of depicting in his short lyrical poems now enter the structure of the narrative, filling out gaps in time or providing a commentary, or an emotional ambiance, for the ensuing action. A number of these poetic landscapes have in fact acquired a life of their own in the minds of Maironis' readers and are often regarded as separate poems, apart from the main body of the work.

The panoramic views of the Lithuanian countryside find their equivalent on the ideological and historical plane in the references made to the widespread East European liberation movements of the time. The names of outstanding figures in the Hungarian, Czech, Greek and other national movements are mentioned as examples of courage and devotion for the Lithuanians to follow. At one point Maironis says:

Karadzic, Safari, Dobrowski and Deak!  
Your names and your deeds shall resound through the ages,  
Your sons and your grandsons shall speak of them proudly.

The national awakening in Lithuania itself is depicted in the context of this powerful tide of patriotic feeling. Maironis speaks of it as an irresistible change of seasons, as a springtime of nations, spreading from the southeast to the northern lands and now touching Lithuania as well. The mood of young Lithuanians at the time is well conveyed by Maironis when he describes a small group of students in Warsaw, led by Rainys, as they come together to discuss their nation's future and end their meeting with a rousing song:

The Slavs have arisen. From the shores of Black Sea  
The Spring sweeps across the Carpathian hills.  
With us it is Winter; the grip of the eagle  
Forbids our script and chokes off our speech.  
Stand shoulder to shoulder, men, lend us your strength,  
We shall thus awaken our own dearest land  
And make Lithuania free!

At one point in the poem, during a patriotic celebration, Maironis even introduces an envoy from the Tartars, ancient enemies but also ancient friends of the former Lithuanian grand duchy, now united in common cause against the Russians. Even the Russian revolution of 1905 is regarded by Maironis as a liberating force, not only for the Lithuanians but also for the Russian people themselves. As part of this great historical change, Lithuania no longer appears as a weak, forgotten land, and its national aspirations no longer seem like an esoteric ethnic whim, as some of the polonized Lithuanian nobles were apt to think. It is precisely through this exhilarating feeling of hope and strength, rooted in a deep faith in the historical legitimacy of the national cause that Maironis' poem made its greatest impact on the Lithuanian readers. In telling the story of his troubled and ultimately tragic hero, Maironis thus also created a song from which heroes are born.

1 Most of Maironis' lyrics are collected in *Voices of Spring* (Pavasario balsai, first edition, 1895). The long poem *Made of Raseiniai* (Raseinių Magdė, 1909) is still popular with the readers. The ballad *Čičinskas* (Čičinskas, 1919), depicting the gruesome fate of a traitor to the Fatherland, is well

remembered, as is the lyrical tale *Jūratė and Kastytis* (*Jūratė ir Kastytis*, 1920) which has been set to music. As a playwright, Maironis produced the historical trilogy *Death of Kęstutis* (*Kęstucio minis*, 1921), *Vytautas With the Knights of the Cross* (*Vytautas pas kryžiuočius*, 1924) and *Vytautas the King* (*Vytautas karalius*, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> All English translations in this article are my own — R. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Among the most influential of these journals were *Aura* (The Dawn, 1883-1886), edited by Jonas Basanavičius, the patriarch of the Lithuanian national renaissance, and *Varpas* (The Bell, 1889-1896), edited by Vincas Kudirka, a writer, publicist and dedicated fighter for freedom, author of the Lithuanian National Anthem.