

ROMANTICISM IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE

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The ROMANTIC MOVEMENT reached Lithuania in the beginning of the 19th century, and it was at the University of Vilnius that it found its strongest expression. From there, it penetrated the rest of the country, starting a social, and later a literary, movement.

This romantic retreat into the past found especially great popularity in Lithuania. The conditions in Lithuania at that time were particularly harsh — Lithuania had been under Russian occupation since 1795. Therefore, the memories of a glorious and independent nation, in contrast to the present state, were very stimulating. The apotheosis of the past, then, inevitably became national and patriotic in character.

Herder, the German philosopher and poet, directed the attention of the romantics to a new source of creative activity — the folk, and its folklore — it was the folksongs of Lithuania that best exemplified the harmonious blend of beauty and vigor so characteristic of all folk art. The interest that Herder, Goethe, and other German thinkers showed in these Lithuanian folksongs strongly affected the Lithuanians at the University of Vilnius and incited them to examine the folk more closely and to collect its folklore. Eventually, the poets themselves began to imitate the form and manner of folklore.

Of all the poets and writers who became greatly interested in the Lithuanian past, it was Simanas Daukantas (1793—1864) who, through his idealization of it, became the man of letters who most influenced later generations. He was born on a Lithuanian farm; he studied at the University of Vilnius where, fascinated by the ideas of the romantic movement, he devoted the rest of his life to historical study and to the elevation and glorification of Lithuania's past through his numerous writings.

Finding his support in the German idealists (Fichte and others), he created a nationalistic philosophy, delineated the national character, and created its ideal.

Even though Simanas Daukantas did not neglect folklore and even published several anthologies of it, it was in the poetry of Simanas Stanevičius (1788—1848) that the folklore motifs found their best expression, and it was his anthology of songs that was most influential.

At the time that these people were producing all this literature, their social support and backing lay exclusively in the nobility, because the folk was not yet ready to participate in any cultural activity of the sort. Only the expansion of the school system by bishop Motiejus Valančius (1801 —1875) and the abolition of serfdom (1861) created in the nation a new social group — the educated folk — capable of taking an active part in the movement. When the adults themselves learned to write and saw to it that their children were, they educated, formed their own intelligentsia. When this intelligentsia began to edit and publish underground newspapers [in 1883 "Aušra" (The Dawn), and others], the historical and patriotic romanticism of Simanas Daukantas then found its genuine response among the peoples. Only then did the admiration of Simanas Stanevičius for folklore, and his efforts to publish it, cause it to become the literary model of the day.

In 1864 a new milieu for literary activity was formed. On one hand, the Russian administrators prohibited all publications in the Lithuanian language. That, of course, greatly impeded any cultural progress. On the other hand, serfdom was abolished and the children of the "third estate", so-to-speak, were able to get education. Within a few decades, there sprang up a new intelligentsia out of this "third estate", among whom the scattered ideas of Daukantas and other earlier

romantics were revived. This new intelligentsia transformed these scattered ideas into a mass movement, which became contraband, because it involved publishing Lithuanian literature outside the country and importing it into Lithuania illegally. These and other similar circumstances tended to strengthen the tone of romantic, patriotic enthusiasm in the various kinds of literature being written.

POETRY

THE POETIC phase of the romantic movement, which can be said to have started with the publication of the newspaper "Aušra" (The Dawn), produced one of the greatest poets in the new Lithuanian literature — Jonas Maironis (1862—1922) who had caught the spirit of the times and given it a unified expression. Using Simanas Daukantas as the source for his creative thought and ideology, he completely lost himself in the past. With what unbelievable vividness this magnificent past, full of great battles and noble, high-spirited dukes, rises before the reader through his inspired poetry! Even when he is describing the beauty of nature in contemporary Lithuania, he very often contrasts it with the beauty of the past ages, at the same time urging us to draw strength from the glorious past with the help of Divine Providence. He had the ability to express this peculiar form of romantic idealism in powerful epigrammatic "slogans", which incited the whole nation to rise against the foreign oppression.

During the period of his poetic career, Lithuania regained more and more of her lost freedom (after 1904) — freedom of the press was restored and national organizations and schools were permitted to function. All this new freedom influenced the general trend of literature, too. The spirit of romanticism did not die; it simply added new appendages to its old body. Individualistic romanticism was one of these branches, which was primarily concerned with the esoteric and rebellious spirit of the individual, and with its conflict with society. Subjects for this type of individualistic poetry were still sought in the past, and the form of expression — in folklore. Imitation of forms found in folklore again became very popular, extending well into the period after the First World War, when Lithuania was again an independent nation, until the end of the Second World War. Eventually, this type of romanticism merged into neo-romanticism — symbolism — which school had the greatest number of representatives. For example, Jonas Aistis sees the world as a very fragile and wistful entity. Bernardas Brazdžionis portrays man as an eternal pilgrim to the Other Side; while Antanas Miškinis returns to the form of the folksong, and his poetry is full of moments in the country life of people — peasants — in contrast to the life in the city.

At the present time, when the country is again under foreign occupation, the poets in exile express a close affinity to the Earth, to her past. Some express it in the traditional romantic style, others (especially the younger generation) under the influence of modern poetry, treat it in the light of existentialism.

PROSE

THE BACKGROUND of romantic prose is usually historical study. Using the material of romantic historians, Vincas Pietaris (1850—1902), converts it into a piece of art, in his novel "Algimantas". He takes his reader to 13th century Lithuania. There he sees liberty, justice in dealings between ruler and subject, and noble, and heroic Lithuanian Dukes constantly fighting their aggressors — the Russians. An idealized picture of the past is kept unified and vivid through the intensity of numberless incidents. Vincas Pietaris could be called the Walter Scott of Lithuania.

Out of this patriotic romanticism emerged Šatrijos Ragana — Maria Pečkauskaitė (1877—1930). Yet, in her greatest novel "Sename Dvare" (In the Old Manor), she drifts into metaphysical romanticism. Her principal characters feel so very strongly the presence of another metaphysical existence — and such a strong attraction toward it — that mere physical existence becomes to them only a reflection of the other. Consequently, wistfulness, melancholy, awesomeness before the idea of eternity, yet also a forgiving and understanding attitude toward this life, reach a pinnacle in this novel (which is also a pinnacle of Lithuanian literature) of what we call metaphysical romanticism.

Next to the "Old Manor" of Šatrijos Ragana, the vigorous and healthy country life of the peasant and farmer, so aptly recreated by Vaižgantas — Juozas Tumas (1869—1932), attracts our attention. Vaižgantas combined idealized romanticism with practical positivism. In his prose he expresses the same ideas and moods which were expressed by Maironis in his poetry, and by Vincas Kudirka in his political essays. In his "Pragiedruliai", written in free verse, he presents yet another aspect of romanticism — the romantic relationship between man and nature. His characters feel a sensual nature, as an essence in which there is both life and spirit; a nature with sympathy and feeling, taking an active part in man's perpetual war with destiny; a nature that is preserving, yet revengeful. Man is a part of these natural forces, pulsating with nature, both petting their momentum from the sun.

This same general tendency is followed and somewhat extended by Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius (1882—1954), a romantic and realistic writer, prolific in all literary genres. Fascinated by Lithuanian folklore, even collecting it himself, he employed in his prose the manner — their poetical figures and style — which gave a completely different appearance to his collection of legends from far back in Lithuanian history. These legends are collected in one book called "Dainavos Šalies Senų Žmonių Padavimai" (The Legends of the Old People in the Country of Dainava). Lost in the past, he brings forth the old legendary heroes in all their nobility and magnanimity, thus creating the greatest of individualistic romantic heroes, who obey only their vigorous hearts, which are constantly yearning for life, honor and power; and who finally are destroyed in their unequal battle with circumstances. But in his shorter works, Vincas Krėvė elaborates on the pantheistic and sensual relationship between nature and the simple people, as was done earlier by Vaižgantas. No other writer, however, has

shown so well the unique mythical motif — the close association between the destiny and life of man and tree: the tree is cut down, and the worshiper — companion man dies. This particular feature is unique with Krėvė. No other writer or poet has felt so keenly the whispering of the spirits in the grass of the cemetery, and the voice of the Creator in the soft breeze of the wind...

With his "Legends of Dainava" Vincas Krėvė ended the Lithuanian' romantic prose writings. The new age brings with it realism, impressionism, expressionism, and aesthetics.