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## A QUESTION OF INFLUENCES: DONELAITIS AND GERMAN LITERATURE

In defining the literary environment of a particular work, the student of literature usually seeks to designate and evaluate the influences that may have affected the character and dissemination of the work in question. Determining the various influences on Donelaitis and his works remains delicate and difficult task, for so far there has been no exhaustive study of the problem.<sup>1</sup> This lack suggests that, perhaps, no such study is possible, for it is difficult to say whether any author or movement had really decisive influence on the nature and publication of Donelaitis' major work, *The Seasons*. The question of influences also cannot be answered by superficial, haphazard, and doubtful comparisons.

Although *The Seasons* by Donelaitis is a unique, independent, and purely Lithuanian work of poetry, nevertheless it was written in a certain literary, social, and political context that had at least some bearing on its composition. First of all, geographically as well as temporally, Donelaitis came into contact with German literature. Thus, the question of mutual influence between Donelaitis and German literature arises naturally and will be the focus of this essay.

While at the University of Königsberg, which he had entered in 1736, and while attending the Lithuanian seminar at the University, Donelaitis no doubt had the opportunity to become acquainted with the literary situation of his time. It is definitely known that in addition to Lithuanian, he knew German, Greek, and Latin; this enabled him to follow the current literary tendencies in German and Lithuanian literature and made the riches of classical Greek and Roman literature accessible to him. Donelaitis did not know English or, most probably, French<sup>2</sup>; thus any direct influence from English or French literature can be excluded.

The influence of classical literature with which Donelaitis was well acquainted can be assessed briefly. It would be nonsense to deny that thematically Hesiod's *Works and Days* or Virgil's *Georgica*, where we also find considerable didactic element, had no significance to Donelaitis.<sup>3</sup> Like Hesiod and Virgil, Donelaitis was concerned with the common people, but expressed the concern in his own unique realistic and didactic manner. Even the classical hexameter that Donelaitis adopted in *The Seasons* does not detract from his originality in the eighteenth century European literature. Donelaitis began using the hexameter before any contemporary writer of note, even before the appearance of Klopstock's *Messias* in 1748. A closer study of the Donelaitian hexameter reveals that, compared to the classical, it is more tonal and is close to the Lithuanian folk song. Donelaitis, therefore, modified the classical hexameter to fit the folk idiom of his language. In considering the Donelaitis' relation to German literature, one must keep in mind that he began writing when Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and Hamann were still swaddled babes, even though Donelaitis' works were published only when these literary giants were in their twilight years, or had already departed. Donelaitis' contemporaries such as F. G. Klopstock (1724-1803), B. H. Brockes (1680-1747), J. Ch. Gottsched (1700-1766), A. Haller (1708-1777), F. Hagedorn (1708-1754), E. Ch. Kleist (1715-1759), Ch. M. Wieland (1733-1813), Ch. F. Gellert (1715-1769), G. E. Leasing (1729-1781), the Englishman James Thomson (1700-1748), and others, wrote on the subject of nature and experienced mutual influence; any influence between these contemporaries and Donelaitis, however, was in one direction, i.e. toward Donelaitis, for even though Donelaitis wrote *The Seasons* in the period of 1765-75, the poem was not published until 1818. Thus, any impact that Donelaitis had on German literature came after 1818. Temporally it is possible that Donelaitis could have

followed his contemporary Klopstock. Even in 1883, however, the first Lithuanian newspaper *Auszra* (The Dawn) correctly observed that "Donelaitis had no model among other nations, whereas Klopstock flew far."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Klopstock viewed the world from celestial heights, while Donelaitis was concerned with the hardships of his common people.

Gellert (1715-69) and his fables could be considered a more significant influence on Donelaitis.<sup>10</sup> His realistic fables notably differ even from Gessner's idylls, which were popular throughout Europe. But the same sentimentalism will be found also in Kleist's *Der Fruehling*, Hagedorn's *Die Enipfindsamkeit des Fruehlings*, and Wieland's *Der Fruehling* (1752). The introduction to the 1756 edition of Gessner's idylls could be applied to all of them:

Often do I fly from the city, and seek the deepest solitudes; there, the beauties of the landscape sooth and console my chest, and gradually disperse those impressions of solicitude and disgust, which accompanied me from the town; enraptured, give up my whole soul to the contemplation of nature; and feel, at such moments, richer than an Utopian monarch, and happier than a shepherd of the golden age.<sup>11</sup>

Geilert was known for his fables throughout eighteenth-century Germany and among the Lithuanians in Prussia. This is evident from a number of translations, such as, for example, Mielke's translation of the "Thresher", which was well known in Lithuania Minor.<sup>12</sup> Similar motifs are found in Donelaitis' descriptions of the boors, even though Donelaitis was equally interested in Aesop's fables, which were already translated into Lithuanian in 1706 by Donelaitis' teacher Johann Schultz.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to his acquaintance with German and English literature, Donelaitis was evidently also influenced by his social and political surroundings and by the first examples of Lithuanian poetry. For example, another friend of Donelaitis, A. Schimmelpfennig, wrote poetry that found an echo in Donelaitis' *The Seasons*.<sup>14</sup> Pietism, which appeared in German literature of that time, is also reflected in Donelaitis' work in a moderated didactic form, even though this aspect could also be traced to the poetry of antiquity.<sup>15</sup>

Donelaitis' poem had to await publication for 38 years after the poet's death, until a number of favorable developments occurred. The new German literary movement, which received its initial impulse from England and which was manifested by Bodmer and Breitinger in the South and Herder and Hamann in the North, appears to have indirectly prepared the ground for the appearance of Donelaitis' *The Seasons*. The goal of the new German literary movement was the renunciation of the then dominant classicism and a return to the world of folklore and nature. Herder and Hamann indirectly encouraged the appearance of Donelaitis' poem, for the romantic movement inspired by Hamann and Herder created an interest in folklore.<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Gedimin Rhesa (1776-1840), professor at the University of Koenigsberg, reacted to this romanticism in 1818 by publishing a German translation of the poem, together with the original Lithuanian text which he had obtained from Donelaitis' friend, Joh. Got. Jordan (1753-1822).<sup>17</sup> The romantic spirit manifested itself in the omission of 456 original lines, which were more realistic or were more bluntly against the lords.<sup>18</sup>

J. Sembritzki, a cultural historian of that era, maintains that Rhesa was encouraged to publish Donelaitis by Philipp Ruhig and by Herder, even if from a more distant temporal perspective.<sup>19</sup> No doubt, even Donelaitis must have been more confident in writing a major work in Lithuanian after Philipp Ruhig had published a scientific study of the Lithuanian language in 1745.<sup>20</sup> Ruhig's study included three Lithuanian folk songs and attracted universal attention of the German literary world.

There were people, however, who popularized *The Seasons* in German literature. The publisher of the first edition of *The Seasons*, Rhesa, dedicated the book to W. Humboldt, the famous German humanist and pedagogue, founder of the Berlin University. Humboldt had even asked Rhesa to hasten the publication of Donelaitis' work.<sup>21</sup>

As soon as *The Seasons* were published, A. J. Penzel, a lecturer of English at Jena University, who had mediated between Rhesa and Goethe on Lithuanian folk song matters, wrote a review in the *Jenaer Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (Aug. 1818, No. 152),<sup>22</sup> in which he claims originality for Donelaitis and doubts Thomson's influence. It is possible that Penzel wrote the review wishing to ingratiate himself with Goethe and to show his literary competence, which he claimed to Goethe while seeking a position in the academic library at Weimar.<sup>23</sup> As a result of the great interest in folklore in Germany of that time, such people as Goethe, Herder, and Lessing turned their attention to Lithuanian folk songs and were enchanted by them. Goethe in fact, used one folk song, published by Herder, in one of his works — "Die Fischerin" (1782). And in general, Goethe on numerous occasions called attention to the beauty of the Lithuanian daina.<sup>24</sup>

Goethe was not as enthusiastic about Donelaitis' poem as about the *daina*. Perhaps Rhesa, having dedicated the first edition of Donelaitis' poem to another great man, Humboldt, did not want to impose with Donelaitis upon the Olympic classic of Weimar. Perhaps Goethe himself paid too little attention to Penzel's review in order to interest himself in a realistic poetry, which was notably different from the gentle romanticism of folk songs. Nevertheless, according to the German writer Ernst Wiechert, Goethe did recognize Donelaitis' poem by commenting that it reminded him of Iliad and Odyssey.<sup>25</sup> This would be a significant acknowledgement, for Goethe was an admirer of Homer and did not care to compare just anything with his work (he was even careful in respect to *Nibelungenlied*).

It is not known whether Donelaitis was discussed when Adam Mickiewicz and Odyniec visited Goethe in 1829.<sup>26</sup> Mickiewicz mentions Donelaitis and *The Seasons* in the 1823 edition of *Grazyna* (in the fourth footnote), where German-

Lithuanian relations in Donelaitis' birthplace are discussed. To emphasize the superiority over foreign colonizers, the casual expression of this superiority was popular among Lithuanians in Prussia and was noted by Mickiewicz, But the artistry of the work could not be negated because of this ethnocentrism, as sponsorship of the poem by people like Humboldt unmistakably indicates.

In the period of romanticism it was difficult for the realistic work of Donelaitis to measurably influence German literature, as did the Lithuanian folk songs (of the romantic rewrites of folk songs by Chamisso). Jakob Grimm, the coauthor of the world-famous tales, favorably reviewed Donelaitis' work published by Rhesa and called Donelaitis the first "noted Lithuanian poet."[27](#)

There were also attempts to consider Donelaitis a German writer. A. Bezenberger maintained that although Donelaitis was "a national poet, his style was not completely Lithuanian."[28](#) Tetzner in one of his articles says that "Donelaitis was also at the same time a German poet."[29](#) Adam Mickiewicz (in the cited footnote in Grasyna) thought that Rhesa, Doneiailtis' translator into German, was a German. Among Doneiailtis' German writings, Tetzner found only three short poems.[30](#) In defending Doneiailtis' national character, W. Storast (Vydunas) acknowledges that "Doneiailtis' hexameter flows easier than the metre of Goethe and Schiller."[31](#)

German translations of *The Seasons* were, it appears, more valued from a philological standpoint; the publishers and translators, at least, leaned in that direction. In 1865, A. Schleicher published a full original text with a German translation in St. Petersburg-[32](#) G. H. F. Nesselmann published the original text with a metric translation in 1869.[33](#) The translation by Ludwig Passarge in 1894 must be considered as the best of all German translations.[34](#)

Even though Doneiailtis was favorably evaluated and accepted from the philological as well as the artistic standpoint and did not cause larger ripples in German literature (just as nobody had decisive influence on his work), nevertheless, for the first time he pushed Lithuanian literature into wider horizons. Almost throughout the entire nineteenth century Doneiailtis' *The Seasons* and the Lithuanian folk songs were the most important sources of Lithuanian literature in German encyclopedias and textbooks.

## NOTES

1. As this article was going to press, L. Gineitis' study *Kristijonas Doneiailtis ir jo Epocha* (K.D. and his Epoch), Vilnius, 1964, appeared. Gineitis, a soviet literary historian, attempts to deal with the question of influences in the most extensive manner so far.
2. The first publisher of Doneiailtis' poem Rhesa, in his introduction to the edition, claims that Doneiailtis did know French. See *Das Jahr in vier Gesaengen*, Ein laendisches Epos aus dem Litthauischen des Christian Doneiailtis, genannt Donalitiuis, in gleichem Versmass ins Deutsche ueber-tragen von D.L.J. Rhesa, Prof. d. Theol., Koenigsberg, 1818
3. The supplement to *Viltis* (No. 8, 1914), commemorating 200 years since the birth of Doneiailtis, distortingly emphasizes that Doneiailtis "consciously" followed ancient authors.
4. J.K. Sz. (J. Koncevičius), "Doneiailtis", *Auszra*, 1883, No. 7, pp. 206-208; cited from Lietuvos Myletojas (J. Sliupas), Lietuvos Rastai ir Raštininkai, 1891, p. 20.
5. F. Tetzner, Die Slawen in Deutschland, Beitrage zur Ku^de der Preus-sen, Litauer, Letten ... Braunschweig, 1902, p. 54. On parallels between Kleist and Doneiailtis cf. A. Senn, Handbuch der litauischen Sprache, Heidelberg, 1957, p. 57; also A. Musteikis, "Doneiailtis the First Realist", *Lietuvių Dienos*, 1956, No. 4, p. 21.
6. J. Nadler, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, Wien, 1951, p. 234.
7. K.A., "Donelaičio Metai ir Tomsono Metų Dalys", *Šviesos' Keliai*, 1931, No. 6, pp. 395-400; J. Petrusis, "Duonelaicio Poetika", *Švietimo Darbas*, 1927, No. 1, p. 38.
8. L. Passarge, *Chr. Donalitiuis' Litauische Dichtungen*, Halle, 1894, p. 9.
9. J. Petrusis, op. cit., for example.
10. Christian Fuerchtegott Gellert, *Fabeln wnd Erzaehlungen*, Leipzig, 1746.
11. Cited here from *The Works of Solomon Gessner*, Liverpool, 1802, vol. 2, pp. i-ii.
12. M. Biržiška, *Rinktiniai Mūsų Senovės Raštai*, Kaunas, 1927, v. 254.
13. *Die Fabulen Aesopi*, zum Versuch nach dem Principio lithuanicae linguae littaisch vertiret von Johan Schultzen, minist. candid., Koenigsberg, 1706. This work was reprinted in *Archivum Philologicum* (Kaunas), 1935, vol. IV, pp. 137-148.
14. Biržiška, op. cit., p. 219.
15. For the effects of the ideological and political environment on Doneiailtis, see the article by A. Vaskelis in this issue of *Lituanus* (Spring 1964).
16. Kristijonas Doneiailtis, *Metai*, ed. by J. Ambrazevicius, Kaunas, 1940, p. 179.
17. Rhesa, *Das Jahr in vier Gesaengen*, op. cit.
18. Consistent with the romanticism of the age, Rhesa was the first to publish a large collection of Lithuanian folk songs: *Dainos oder litthauische Volkslieder*, Gesammelt, uebersetzt und herausgegeben von Prof. Rhesa in Koenigsberg, 1825.
19. J. Sembritzki, "Die ostpreuss'sche Dichtung", *Neue Preussische Provinzial - Blaetter*, 1855, VII, p. 82. Tetzner. op. cit., p. 53, maintains that Doneiailtis was acquainted with Ruhig but doubts whether he knew Herder.
20. Philipp Ruhig (1675-1749), himself a true Lithuanian, was one of the earliest students of Lithuanian language and collector of Lithuanian folk songs. His study of the Lithuanian language here referred is: *Betraetzung der Littauisehen Sprache in ihrem Ursprung Wesen und Eigenschaften* . . . mit Fleiss angestellet, und . . . zum Druck gegeben, von Philipp

Ruhig, Pfarrern und Seniore zu Walterkehmen, Koenigsberg, 1745.

21. Cf. V. Maciūnas, "Keturi Mažosios Lietuvos Didieji", *Aidai*, 1948, no. 18, p. 362.

22. This review was reprinted in *Athenaeum* (Kaunas), 1938, vol. IX, no. 2, pp. 21-22, and is repeated in English translation in this issue of *Lituanus* (Spring 1964).

23. *Goethes Werke*, Sophien-Ausgabe. 4. Abteilung. Briefe, Bd. 28, Weimar, 1903, p. 350.

24. Herder's collection of folk songs — *Stimmen der Voelker in Liedern* — first published in 1778, contained eight Lithuanian folk songs. Goethe used one of the songs "Ich hab's gesagt schon meiner Mutter" — in the cited work. Cf. Alfonsas Sesplaukis, *Herder und die Dainos*, Bonn, Baltisches Forschungsinstitut, 1962.

25. See the letter of Ernst Wiechert to Aleksis Rannit, reprinted in this issue of *Lituanus* (Spring 1964).

26. Cf. A. E. Odyniec, *Listy i podrōzy* (German translation by F. T. Brat-anek, *Zwei Polcn in Weimar*, 1870; new edition by M. Mell, *Besuch in Weimar*, 1949). Odyniec had written a drama *Barbara Radzhvillowna*. His *Die Gefangene des Litauers* was read by Goethe in *Melitela* almanach.

27. *Goettingsche Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1819. St. 56-57, pp. 5(53-565).

28. A. Bezenberger, "Der Werdegang des lit. Volkes", *Vielterjahrsschrift fuer Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1915 vol. 13, p. 18.

29. F. Tetzner, "Chr. Donalitius und seine Zeit", *Nord und Sued*, 1897, vol. 8, p. 43.

30. These poems were published in *Altpreuussische Monatsschrift*, 1914, vol. 51, p. 252.

31. W. Storost, "Wie die Litauer ihre Volkslieder singen", *Zeitachrift der 10. Armee*, 1918, p. 39.

32. Christian Donalitis, *Litauische Dichtungen*. Erste Volstaendige Aus-gabe mit Glossar, von Aug. Sehleicher, St. Petersburg, 1865.

33. Christian Donalitius, *Littauische Dichtungen*; nach den Koenigsberger Handschriften mit metrischen Uebersetzung, kritischen Anmerkungen und genauem Glossar herausgegeben von G.H.F. Nesselmann; Koenigsberg, 1869.

34. Passarge, *op. cit.* Presently Donalitis' *The Seasons* are available in translation in many languages. For a bibliography of translations see V. Maciunas and Kostas Ostrauskas, "Donalitis: A Selected Bibliography", *Lituanus*, Spring 1964 (this issue).