

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 12, No.4 - Winter 1966

Editor of this issue: Thomas Remeikis

ISSN 0024-5089

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LITHUANIAN FOLKSONG AS A PHILOSOPHICAL "LEITMOTIF" IN GERMAN LITERATURE: ERNST WIECHERT

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A reader of the prose works of Ernst Wiechert¹ sooner or later will encounter the author's reference to a segment of the Lithuanian folksongs, which he elevated from the German text by the usage of Lithuanian epithets "dainos" (songs) or "daina" (song). The frequency and intensity in the application of these "dainos" reflect an interesting diversity. In some instances they assume a form of melodious souvenirs in the author's book of travels, such as "Kurische Nehrung" and "Land an der Memel," while on other occasions they are put in service to create a foreign-to-German atmospheric mood associated with the author's selected region of East Prussia. But in his novel *Missa sine nomine* Ernst Wiechert goes beyond the expected "just a symphonic inclusion" of these Lithuanian folksongs. Already in **Jeromin-Kinder** it may be noticed that Wiechert betrays his enchantment not only with the musical qualities of these "dainos," but with their philosophical, enigmatic content as well. He soon reaches the conclusion that these seemingly simple and naive folksongs possess a key to the mysterious and confusing meaning of life. Following only a hasty introduction of this intriguing aspect in **Die Jeromin-Kinder** Wiechert quite obviously entertains a thought of employing a Lithuanian "daina" as a capital motif embodying his own "Weltanschauung." This achieves literary crystallization in the novel *Missa sine nomine*, which also remains as the last literary testament of the author.

Turning our attention to the Lithuanian folksong in the novel **Missa sine nomine**, ("An des Njemen anderm Rand") it must be said at the beginning of the discussion that this song is an authentic Lithuanian "daina" still echoing at the side of the pale Baltic dunes or being sung on the banks of the river Nemunas (Njemen). One may thus reasonably assume that Ernst Wiechert heard this Lithuanian folksong during his visit to Kurische Nehrung and that it must have stimulated his musical senses to such a degree of intensity that he and his companions sang it with an enthusiastic crescendo.

Behind this melody the poetic eye of the author perceives a mysteriously dark nordic land inhabited by ancient figures possessing penetrating insight into man's existence. Many historical epochs, carved with tragedy, love, and compassion passed slowly through the eyes of these people. Wiechert very soon recognizes that in their rustic footsteps the complexity of life becomes one easily distinguishable path leading to a mysterious, philosophical lighthouse of clairvoyance, the light of which travels in the form of the Lithuanian folksongs. It is then not at all surprising that the author decides to make use of this "daina" as the glittering leitmotif of his final novel.

This Lithuanian folksong which appears in the opening pages of *Missa sine nomine* consists of the following stanzas:

An des Njemen anderm Rand
steh'n drei Ahorn frish und gTuen.
Unter diesen Baeumen, unter diesen gruenen,
sassen einst der Kuckucks drei.

Waren nicht der Kuckucks drei,
nirht die Voegel girrten so,
war'n drei junge Burschen unter diesen Baeutnen,
stritten um ein Maedchen sich.

Sprach der erste: "Sie ist mein."
Sprach der zweite: "Wie Gott will."
Aber dieser dritte, aber dieser juengste,
hat sich tief, ja tief betruengt.

Moechte zieh'n wohl in die Stadt,
suchen einen Spielmann dir.
Tanze, lieber Knabe, tanze, wenn auch traurig,
Denn du sollst nur froehlich sein... ²

From the first quartrain the reader discerns that the currents of the narrative are paralleled by a romantic aura which pervades the remainder of the Lithuanian folksong. This nearly mystical sphere lingers above the story as a prophetic star which is to profoundly affect the characters and their actions in the novel. Time and space do not seem to be of any notable significance. As this "daina" was sung in the past and is to be heard in the present and future so the meaning of it continues to flow in an eternal circle of time. Consequently, it is not difficult to imagine that before and after the fictional existence of Freiherr Liljecronas others walked and will walk across the grey bridges of life — searching, losing and finding the purpose of their being. Like the "daina," the story of the three brothers in **Missa sine nomine** begins in East Prussia, where the river Nemunas (Njemen) hurries through the northern landscape. Here the hand of Morae scattered Liljecronas into their individual destinies marked with deep impressions of tragedy and sorrow. Freiherr Aegidius loses his beloved land; Erasmus pursues his own selfish path of survival, leaving his people to be crushed under the wheels of enemy tanks; and Amadeus pays a high price for his outspokenness in the Nazi concentration camp. The prophetic words of the second and third stanzas culminate in the "mariage de convenance" of Aegidius and the submissive loneliness of the Freiherr Amadeus and Erasmus. The emphasis, however, falls upon the "tief betruengten" Amadeus. The last two lines of the fourth and final verse provide the novel with a philosophical "leitmotif," which as a transparent shadow follows the footsteps of Freiherr Amadeus and simultaneously serves as a coalescent for the lives of the entire "Triptychon."

It is interesting to note how Ernst Wiechert develops and slowly reveals the full meaning of the "leitmotif:" "Tanze, lieber Knabe, tanze, wenn auch traurig, denn du sollst nur froehlich sein..." One may view this poetic task progressively or regressively — beginning with the very introduction of the "leitmotif" and proceeding onward or stepping backward from the solution of the "leitmotif's" philosophical puzzle to the first indicative tones of its inception. Proceeding along the progressive path of thought it is necessary to remember that this "leitmotif" will accompany (in truly Wagnerian fashion) the steps of Freiherr Amadeus. Consequently, the reader is obliged to remain in the very vortex of Amadeus' existence. Any independent consideration of one ("leitmotif") or the other (Amadeus) would not render the complete understanding of Ernst Wiechert's thought as fully emphasized in the lines of the "leitmotif."

After the journey to the limits of man's existence the tones of the Lithuanian "daina" return to the troubled mind of Freiherr Amadeus as long lost musical friends. They return him to the days of his youth and the beginning of his search for the meaning of the vocal "leitmotif." He remembers how he and his brothers ("die drei jungen Burschen") listened attentively to the Lithuanian "daina" sung so softly by the seemingly ancient Grita:

... und es hatte sie zwischen den jungen Schultern gefroestelt, jene fruehe Ahnung der Kreatur vor dem Unbeschuetzten der Menschenfuesse. Und spaeter, viel spaeter war Amadeus zu der alten Kinderfrau gegangen, in der Daemmerung, wenn sie mit gefalteten Haenden auf der Schwelle sass, und hatte leise gefragt: "Was ist das, Grita: 'Tanze, wenn auch traurig, denn du sollst nur froehlich sein...'?"

Und sie hatte das grosse dunkle Schultertuch um ihn geschlungen, weil sie gefuehlt hatte, wie die jungen, schmalen Schultern bebten, und leise geantwortet: "Lass es nun, junger Herr. Bis du erfahren hast, dass die Traene salzig und der Kuss suess ist. Und dass es besser ist, als wenn es umgekehrt waere."³

He further reminisces:

... dass sie dies "daina" an vielen Saergen der Gutsleute gespielt hatten: Tanze, wenn auch traurig... "

... die Frauen der Gutsleute hatten geweint, und nach einer der Beerdigungen, als sie schweigend an dem grossen Fenster ihres Musikzimmers gestanden hatten, war der Vater leise hereingekommen, hatte sich hinter sie gestellt und mit seiner sanften, wie aus der Ferne kommenden Stimme gesagt: "Wer den Armen eine Bruecke baut, ist mehr, als wer den Koenigen ein Reich baut..."

Und darueber hatten sie lange nachgedacht, jeder fuer sich, wie sie niemals im Gespraech zusammen etwas bedachten.⁴

The father comment "Wer den Armen eine Bruecke baut, ist mehr, als wer den Koenigen ein Reich baut..." immediately provides a strong hint regarding the answer to the "leitmotif's" philosophical riddle. However, the unusually perceptive mind of Amadeus has not yet attained sufficient maturity to detect the hidden idea in the final strophe of the Lithuanian folksong. His near companions enjoy this knowledge, but they silently stand by, permitting Amadeus to discover the secret thought

pursuing the pattern of his own life. Following the homecoming, Amadeus projects the dormant concept of his philosophy of human existence, so vitally connected with the theme of the "leitmotif." Unfortunately, it finds its echoes not in his extension of a pertinent action, but in his romantic withdrawal into the sphere of music:

Und manchmal schlaegt er die Notenblaetter auf, die die Breeder mit den Instrumenten gerettet haben, und folgt dem Gang der schwarzen Zeichen, und hoert die Toene, die einmal gewesen sind, als er selbst noch war. Dieses grosse Raetsel des Daseins, dass ein schwarzes Zeichen einen Ton bedeutet und der Ton in seiner Verknuepfung mit andern Toenen einen Zustand des Herzens bedeutet, eine Traurigkeit oder einen Glanz der Augen, oder den Tanz eines jungen Knaben "we auch traurig." Das grosse Raetsel, dass die Schwingungen einer Saite auch die Schwingung des Herzens ist, und das Zittern der Saite ist doch nich anderes als ein Gesetz der Zahl, mit einer Formel auszudruecken, indes die Schwingung des Herzens durch nichts auszudruecken ist als durch ein Laecheln der Lippen oder durch eine Traene an der Wimper.⁵

The essence of the paragraph lies in the thought of "der Ton in Verknuepfung mit andern Toenen" and in comparison of this harmony to "einen Zustand des Herzens"— all culminating in the "Tanz eines jungen Knaben 'wenn auch traurig'." From this passage it is obvious that Amadeus is subconsciously well prepared to undergo a spiritual transformation (a religious "Wandlung" as the title of the novel suggests) and return to the original path of life so prescribed by the destiny of his own personality. The first distinct reflection of this change is his reluctance to take vengeance upon his attackers. His awakening "inner being" moves the hand away from the human targets:

... Und doch erinnerte er sich, dass er, bevor er abgedruecket hatte, das Korn der Pistole um eine Handbreit zur Seite gedrueckt hatte. Bei allen drei Schuessen.

Und er gruebelte unablaessig darueber nach, weshalb er es getan hatte. Er hatte es ohne Gedanken oder doch ohne Ueberlegung getan. Die Hand hatte es getan, und er wusste nicht mehr, wer oder was die Hand gelenkt haette. Es wuerde das Naetuerliche gewesen sein, dass sie das Ziel gesucht und festgehalten hatte. Sie hatte es auch gesucht, aber sie hatte es nicht festgehalten. Nicht aus Schwaechе oder Unsicherheit, sondern sie hatte es nicht festhalten wollen. Etwas war vorgegangen in ihm, woran er sich nicht mehr erinnerte. Und darueber dachte er lange nach.⁶

With this action Amadeus makes the initial move in arriving at the "leitmotif's" simple but significant thesis. The progress becomes even more distinct in his forgiving and caring for Barbara, in his deep concern for the welfare of his brothers and in his compassion for the war-torn people. It cumulatively shows that "... er schon lange aufgehört hatte, 'für sich' zu leben. Wie jedermann damit aufhört, der für das Heil eines anderen Herzens lebt."⁷

As the colorful spring flower penetrates the surpassing white surface of the snow so the revelation of the philosophical "leitmotif" explodes through the eclipse of Amadeus mind:

"Ich weiss es nun doch," sagte Amadeus... leise und hob die Hand, als haette er ein Raetsel geloest, an dem er waehrend der ganzen Fahrt gegruebelt haette.

"Was wissen Sie?" fragte Wittkopp, ohne den Blick von dem Sternbild des Silbernen Wagens zu wenden.

"Das was sie sang in der Kinderzeit," erwiderte Amadeus. "Tanze, lieber Knabe, wenn auch traurig, denn du sollst nur froehlich sein. ..." ⁸

Now Amadeus grasps fully the principle of self-renunciation in the service of his fellow men. He realizes that he must "dance" for them even if his own heart labors in tears; he must offer them his love even if he never really experiences his own; he must generate happiness even if tragedy darkens his own existence. Above this new path of Amadeus' life lingers the sonorous "leitmotif" continuously echoing the author's final words: "Tanze... lieber Knabe, wenn auch traurig, denn du sollst nur froehlich sein..."

Notes:

1 Born May 18, 1887 Forsthaus Kjeinort, Sensburg— East Prussia and died August 2*, 1950 in Ruetlihof — Uerikon a. Zue-richsee. In his life he has served as a teacher, a Studienrat in Koenigsberg, then became a free-lance writer. Because of opposition to Nazism in *Reden u. Rundbriefen* (1938) he was placed in the concentration camp of Buchenwald. Following 1945 during his travels he visited USA and after 1948 lived in Uerikon. His selected major works include: *Der Knecht Gottes Andreas Nyland* (1926), *Die Magd des Juergen Doskocil* (1932), *Die Majorin* (1934), *Der verlorene Sohn* (1935), *Das einfache Leben* (1939), *Die Jeromin Kinder* (1945), *Der Tolenwald* (1945). Any literary history of post-war Germany provides a notable place for E. Wiechert as a prophetic writer and a regional specialist, whose sentiment remained in the peaceful forest of East Prussia. His knowledge of the Lithuanian ethnic regions found a distinct place in his work and thus he brought the literary tradition, so established by Johann G. Herder, into the era of the twentieth century German literature. (See A. Matulis, *Lithuanian Culture in Modern German Prose Literature*, Vienna, 1966, pp. 16-34).

2 Ernst Wiechert, *Missa sine nomine. Saemtliche Werke* (Wien-Muenchen-Basel, 1957), VI, 18.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 247.

8 *Ibdi.*, p. 434.