

ROBERT PAYNE

ON THE DAINOS

ROBERT PAYNE is an Anglo-American novelist, poet, historian, and anthologist. He is known for his novels based on the lives of Christ and Shakespeare, his biographies of Mao-tse-Tung and Lawrence of Arabia, and his anthology of Chinese poetry THE WHITE PONY. His astounding range of interests is matched by the lucidity and fluency of his style. The above is a foreword to THE WHITE LINDEN, an anthology of Lithuanian folk songs, edited by Algirdas Landsbergis and Clark Mills. It will be published this spring by Voyages Press, New York. THE POPLAR BLOOMED

*The poplar bloomed, fair on the hill.
O green rye, O beloved.
Tiny, the bees hummed in the valley.
O green rye, O beloved.*

Translated by CLARK MILLS

It sometimes happens that when the snows melt on the mountains there can be found high up mysterious snowfields which never melt however strongly the sun beats down on them. These snowfields scattered about the summits remain through all seasons: the centuries pass, and they are always there. So it is with cultures: here and there we come upon patches of brightness which linger on against all expectation and seemingly against all reason. Some prodigious power of survival breathes through them. We tell ourselves that they should have perished long ago, but they haunt us with their immortality.

The **dainos** of Lithuania are like those snowfields. They seem to have been sung from time immemorial, and they are still being sung. They owe their survival to their poetic power, and also to the very nature of the country which gave them birth, a country hemmed in by forests, swamps and seas, outside the main highways of European civilization. They represent a form of poetry as ancient as anything on this earth, for they are essentially spells, incantations, offering to the gods. Though they are simple and immediately comprehensible, they do not belong to the world we know. There is about them something steady and direct like the eyes of animals. These poems to the gods show no fear, nor do they plead for mercy. These poems are never oblique; there are no **arriere - pensees**, no efforts to embroider outside the naked lyrical thrust; the songs sing themselves, and they ask only that they should be permitted to sing. One comes to them almost unbelieving, surprised that such perfect songs should be permitted to survive. They have a beauty and pure primitive splendor above anything I know in western literature except the early songs of the Greek islanders. They seem to have been written at the morning of the world, and the dew is still on them.

The people who wrote and sang them are among the most enviable who ever lived. They had a deep instinctive feeling for the simplest of all things — for woods and running water and girls' faces and the colors of the sky. They sang artlessly, but how much art there is in their artlessness! They sang with the full voice, conscious of their power to summon the gods at their bidding, conscious of their pride, their mortal splendor. For them the world is washed clean by the heavenly rains, and neither guilt nor regret have worked on them.

We are accustomed to believe that great poetry springs out of great and powerful civilizations, and we point to Hellas and the Spain of the Conquistadors and Elizabethan England — these countries were so powerful that they shook the world, and something of their power entered their poetry. But poetry does not necessarily, or even very often, spring from imperial power, of which there was little enough in Weimar, and there must have been even less in the courts of the troubadour princes of southern France. Poetry comes to birth whenever men come to their maturity. It is a thing of the innocent eye and the innocent tongue, and of the wayward human spirit which manifests itself in obscure places. We do not know why the first Greek songs were sung on an obscure island of the Aegean, but they were; nor do we know why there was such a

proliferation of song in Lithuania, so obscure a country that the histories of Europe pass it by in silence or with a brief mention of the Teutonic Knights. Yet Lithuania, too, has its imperial tradition, as the Russians learned to their cost. But of that imperial tradition there is no sign in the **dainos**.

To set the **dainos** in their proper context we must look back, I believe, to the earliest surviving songs from China, the collection which may have been compiled by Confucius called **The Book of Poetry**. Here, for example, are two songs, one Chinese, the other Lithuanian:

Heiho, the sun in the east!
This lovely man
Enters my chamber,
Enters my chamber,
And steps through my door.
Heiho, the sun in the east!
This lovely man
Enters my garden,
Enters my garden,
And steps over the threshold.

O little sun, God's daughter,
Where have you been dwelling?
Where have you been dwelling?
Why have you left us alone?
— I have kept shepherds warm,
I have shielded the orphans
Beyond the seas and mountains.
O little sun, God's daughter,
Who kindled the fires in the evening?
Who kindled the fires in the evening?
Who made your bed for you?
O morning and evening star!
The morning star my fire,
The evening star my bed.
Many kinsmen have blessed me,
And many are my treasures.

It is not only, of course, that the Chinese poem has similarities of form with the Lithuanian poem, and they share the same crisp, sensuous quality, but they speak of the sun with an exquisite friendliness and enjoyment, without ceremony. The sun and the poet speak to one another in terms of intimacy, enchanted with one another's presence. There are sexual overtones: in one poem the sun is masculine, in the other feminine, but essentially both poets are speaking of the same sun, **because there is no other and it is unthinkable that there should be any other**. They see the sun who is created anew every morning, the everlasting day eternally revived for the pleasure and delight of those who bask in its splendor.

In our own age such simple joys are rare, and we are in danger of forgetting that there was a time when joy existed on the earth, when men could say: "Many kinsmen have blessed me, and many are our treasures." Our sun is an atomic pile menacing us with deadly radiations. Theirs was a face which peered down at them every morning and went away for a little while each night. So it is throughout the **dainos**: the world of nature shines with a kindly face and with a quiet delight in human preoccupations. Man, far from being alienated, far from being mysteriously cut off from the sources of power, is the friend and lover of all creation.

This is why, in our desperate age, the **dainos** acquire a supreme importance, for they speak of a time when joy still walked over the earth.

VALIO, SCYTHE!

*Valio, scythe! Friend
to mow the hay.
Unwhetted, you will
down no hay.*

*Scythe I pulled,
for evening waited.*

*Hard, that long pull,
hard the long wait.*

*Valio, how rings
the silver scythe!
Stung by high sun,
copper handle flashes.*

*At home in my hand,
the new scythe handle!
The lord's meadows
foreign to my feet.*

*Cranes cross green fields
in slow stilt walk.
We, the young fellows,
trudge his green meadows.*

*The sun slips down
past the green forest.
The dew silvers
the green grass.*

*Sun falls west, and maiden
lies in her featherbed.
We, the young fellows,
mowing the hay.*

Translated by PETER SEARS

I DRANK...

*I drank the beer,
sweet mead.
Oh, what are these lines
everywhere on my face?*

*That bitter hop,
the wheat of winter,
is what has written
everywhere on my face.*

Translated by CLARK MILLS

THE WOODS ARE GREEN

*The woods are green, green their lindens.
Green the lindens, green their leaves.*

*I, orphaned and without a father,
am a pied ox with no ploughman.
Green the woods, and green their lindens.*

*I, orphaned and without a mother,
am naked distaff with no spinner.
The lindens green, green their leaves.*

*I, orphaned and without a brother,
a sharpened scythe with no mower.
Green the woods, their lindens green.*

*I, orphaned and without a sister,
finest of linen with no weaver.
The woods green, green their lindens.*

Translated by CLARK MILLS

IT'S TIME TO GO HOME

*It's time to go home, to start home,
They'll still be up at home.*

*We'll find mother waiting,
Spinning coarse gray oakum.*

*But spin it fine, spin it fine, mother,
It's your daughter you're sending so far away.*

*To a farm she's never seen,
To marry a lad unlover.*

Translated by RITA HOWES