

The Green Linden

Selected Lithuanian Folksong

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Forward: On the Dainos

It sometimes happens that when the snow 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 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 present a form of poetry as ancient as anything on this earth, for they are essentially spells, incantations, offerings 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 *arrière-pensées*, 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 colours 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 don't 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. But Lithuania, too, has its imperial tradition, as the Russians learned to their cost. 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 in the collection called *The Book of Poetry*, which may have been compiled by Confucius. 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 my the threshold.*

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*O little sun, God's daughter,
 Where have you been dwelling?
 Where have you been straying?
 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 which 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 my treasures". Our sun is an atomic pile menacing us with deadly radiations. There 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 kindly face and with a quite delight in human preoccupations. Man, far from being alienated, far from being mysterious cut off from the sources of power, is the friend and lover of all creations.

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

Robert Payne

Introduction: The Antiquity of the Daina

In 1940 I went to Dzukija, a sandy, hilly land in southeastern Lithuania, to write down the texts of *dainos* sung by an old woman from her repertory of more than 300 songs. In almost every corner of Lithuania could be found women reputed to be “great singers”. They were the last bards of Lithuania, the chief transmitters of its heritage from past ages to the 20th century, and the last vestiges of an era which is fast disintegrating today. From the gifts of these women the Lithuanian folkloristic archives have filled their dower chest during the past two centuries. The archives of the Academy of Sciences in Vilnius now boast more than 200 000 texts of *dainos* and about 30 000 melodies. Some thousands of these have been collected in many volumes. (See Bibliography, page 133.)

The woman, reaping oats with a sickle, sang in full voice. This was “a sacrifice to the gods” in the best meaning of the phrase—a personal, and collectively sanctioned, need. Even by the best singers in the world, the *daina* cannot be performed on a stage with equal feeling and power, because it cannot be separated from its environment. As the woman sang, the earth seemed to move and breath hope, together with the *daina*’s three-tone melody and simple rhythm.

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In the *daina*, melody and words were created at the same moment, as a song; taken separately, the two elements lose much of their value. We search in vain for a fixed prosody in the verses; the words were adjusted to the melody, to special rhythms: to reaping, to plucking, to swinging, to weaving, to the flight of a bird, to a wedding dance, to a game. Hence the continual repetition of phrases, the abundant use of refrains and little words that appear only in songs, such as *lylia*, *lylia*; *lingo rito ta ta to*; or

dobile dobileli (“clover, little clover”). Some of these little words, while they have no separate meaning, suggest the rhythms and sounds of work. A few work *dainos* are known that consist only of such refrains:

Saduto, tuto!
Saduto, tuto!
Sadu, sadu, tuto,
Saduto, tuto!
Tuto, saduto!
Tuto, saduto!

The *dainos* are remarkable for their almost infinite number of diminutives, which often create the effect of rhyme. They lend to the *daina* its characteristic softness and tenderness of sound of expression. Among the diminutives most commonly used are: *motinėle* (“little mother”); *saulelė* (“little sun”); *merguzėlė* (“little lad”); and *baltasis dobilėlis* (“the little clover”). The syllable *ėl* embellishes the language of the *dainos*.

It has been said that *brolis* (“brother”) can be expressed 300 different ways in the diminutive in Lithuanian. Countless diminutives can be derived from such words as *motina* (“mother”), *sesuo* (“sister”), *tėvas* (“father”), *liepa* (“linden”), and others. Sometimes more than half the words in a stanza are diminutives

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The *daina* is manifold and many-layered. Some layer are old, some are recent, and some contain ancient elements fused with others from later historic periods. The *daina* was transmitted orally from generation and was continually altered. Thus not one *daina* with firmly established text exists. Even the same person, on different days, may sing the same *daina* in somewhat different ways. Certain *dainos* in published collections have several variations. The elements most strongly fixed in Lithuanian songs are their mythological images, and others related to an archaic, patriarchal family life and to agricultural work.

In this collection, *dainos* are classified under ten headings: mythology, nature, love and courtship, singing and drinking, marriage, family life, orphans, work, war, and laments. The contents make up the peasant's life, his observation of nature, his participation in the seasons, his dependence on the blessed life-bringing natural forces and on the constantly threatening powers of evil and death. Much was sung of love and courtship, marriage, and the destiny of a married woman. This inevitable cycle of human life is portrayed in the *dainos* as an intense drama, which begins with a young maiden thriving in her father's and mother's house, "the white lily" whose youth and innocence are compared to the green rue (the wreath of rue is the symbol of chastity); continues with her dreams and expectation of meeting a lad, "the white clover," coming on a bay steed; culminates in the wedding ceremony and the painful departure of the bride from her beloved mother, father, sisters, and brothers; and ends with her unhappy life in an alien house, suffering from a mother-in-law and not infrequently from an unkind husband. A tone of resignation and fatalism replaces the mood of joyful days and the mother's tender love. An unhappy life may be foreseen even in her father's house:

*O wreath of rue that crowns my head,
How long shall you stay green and glad?*

A picture of maidenly joy and conjugal sadness is dramatically drawn in these lines:

*The wreath was sung over.
The veil was sighed over.*

The tragedy comes from the strict patriarchal rule: the girl has no free will to marry; she weds a boy of her father's choice, not a true love of her own. Echoes of stealing or buying a bride can still be found in the folklore. Another ancient feature, going back to the Indo-European common homeland, is horsemanship and an usual love for horses. On horseback the lad comes to visit his maiden; on horseback the farmers and warriors and kings of early Lithuanian history rode to the world of the dead. The steed (*zircas*) and not the work horse (*arklys*) appears in the songs. A fast bay is the dream and pride of youth. In the (To be continued..)

