

Kristijonas Donelaitis

Donelaitis, Kristijonas (signed himself Christian Donalitus; 1714—1780), classical Lithuanian poet, the first to be translated and recognized in histories of European literature.

Donelaitis was born, grew up, and worked in a region inhabited by Lithuanians from early times. Occupied in the 13th century by the Teutonic Order, the territory became in the 16th century part of the Duchy of Prussia, and in 1701 was proclaimed the Kingdom of Prussia. To Lithuanians the region is known as *Mažoji Lietuva* (Lithuania Minor). After the devastating plague of 1708—11, a scant third of the original Lithuanian inhabitants remained in Lithuania Minor, the others were replaced by German colonists in massive numbers.

Donelaitis was born on Jan. 1, 1714 in Lazdynėliai, district of Gumbinė (Germ. Gumbinnen). In his time inhabitants of Lazdynėliai consisted of Lithuanians and Germans in equal numbers. Donelaitis grew up with 6 other children in a Lithuanian family of free peasants. At the age of 17 he left to study at Königsberg, then the cultural and administrative center of East Prussia. From 1731—36 he attended the cathedral school, and from 1736—40 the university, where he studied theology in preparation for the Lutheran ministry. He had come to Königsberg with a strong

Lithuanian background, which was further shaped by the classical curriculum and spirit of the school, the religious movement of Pietism, and a seminar in Lithuanian studies required for all students from areas where preaching was in Lithuanian. Along with Lithuanian and German, Donelaitis received a good foundation in Greek and Latin and a smattering of French and Hebrew. He became well-acquainted with ancient classical authors (Homer, Hesiod, Horace, and Vergil). He enjoyed music and attempted some composition himself. Pietism, teaching industriousness, piety, abstention from vain entertainment, and asceticism, deeply affected the future poet's character. Lithuanian studies strengthened his grasp of his native language, and nourished in Donelaitis a mature enthusiasm for the language and the people who spoke it.

Pastorate. After a brief period of teaching in Stalupėnai, Donelaitis was appointed pastor in Tolminkiemis. The parish was scarcely 20 km from his native Lazdynėliai and as far from the administrative center of Gumbinė. Massive German colonization had already significantly changed the ethnic composition of those areas. In the parish of Tolminkiemis Lithuanians remained only a third of the 3000 inhabitants. Donelaitis would preach in German at morning services and in Lithuanian during the afternoon. In his parish were 4 royal estates, 2 farms of free peasants, and 32 hamlets of serfs. Donelaitis sided with the serfs and resisted the landlords, who tried to take over not only peasant lands, but also part of the parish property. In time left over from his pastoral work he built a church of masonry, a rectory, and home for widows of clergy. He also fashioned thermometers and barometers, and build himself a piano and a clavichord. That was one of his hobbies; another avocation was poetry.

Literary Work. In his spare time Donelaitis would compose verse in Lithuanian and German and read it to

visiting friends. When he began to write is not known, but it is assumed that it was just after his studies at Königsberg. Of his German works only the titles of 3 poems are known. His Lithuanian works consist of 6 fables and the poem *Metai* (The Seasons). This title was given to the poem not by the author but by the original publisher, Ludwig Rhesa (Rėza), professor at the University of Königsberg. The fables are considered to be the earliest of the poet's works, for the versification is strained in places and the sentences cumbersome. Some elements in the fables, taken from the animal or plant world, are known in world literature from the days of Aesop; Donelaitis, however, expanded the contents of the fables and developed the action and characters in great detail. Moreover, Donelaitis linked his allegories to the social conditions of his time, which are especially brought out in his poem, *The Seasons*.

The Seasons: Social Background. The work consists of 4 parts: "Joys of Spring," "Summer Toils," "Autumn Wealth," and "Winter Cares." In these 4 idylls, totaling 2997 hexameters, are depicted the natural setting of Lithuania Minor, its people, their work, and their customs. The poem forms a realistic portrayal of Lithuanian peasant life in the 18th century, as it was affected by colonization. Germans and Austrians, Swiss and French, brought in and given special consideration by the government, became the upper class of landlords and officials, while the indigenous population became the lower class of serfs.

In *The Seasons* the village life of the latter is depicted as patriarchal in structure. The natural virtues idealized by the Pietist movement, diligence, piety, honesty, and submission to authority, flourish. The social consciousness of the people is largely dormant. There appear only a few characters through whose lips the poet accuses the gentry and the government of exploiting the people. However, such

characters are not portrayed sympathetically; they are considered degenerates by the villagers in the poem and by its author. The poet contents himself with telling his readers that all men were created equal in the beginning and that only later did some become lords and others serfs. Donelaitis calls the latter *būrai* (boors), and shows deep sympathy for them. He reprimands their evil exploiters, but he does not raise any protest against the system of serfdom.

The social contrast coincided with a national and even a moral division. The villagers, who cultivated the aforementioned virtues, were Lithuanian. The immigrant colonists tended to weaken these virtues with their drunkenness and their backsliding from the church. The poet condemns the imported vices and urges his brother Lithuanians (the *Lietuvninkai*) not to succumb to the novelties but to preserve their traditions, including their language, customs, and dress. In a word he preaches passive resistance, though with some exceptions. The author recognizes certain desirable traits in the newcomers. For instance, he urges Lithuanian women to learn industriousness and other useful virtues from the German women. In the general picture portrayed by the poem it is evident that with the aging and passing of the exponents of the old patriarchal culture the Lithuanian village with its traditions is sinking in the maelstrom of immigrant culture.

The Seasons: Literary Composition. This work of Donelaitis did not differ in literary form from the fables, poems, and idylls then in vogue in Germany and in Europe generally, nor did it depart from the fashion of writing in imitation of the ancient Greek and Roman poets. *The Seasons*, moreover, followed the literary tendency of the day to portray not cities and aristocrats but rather the natural setting of the village and its inhabitants (for example J. Thompson, A. Haller, E. Kleist, B. Brockes). In the poem the

reader finds a good deal of the didactic element so popular at the time. Donelaitis, however, stands out among other writers firstly in that he employed the classical hexameter before any European writer of the age. (F. Klopstock, for example, used it only in 1848). Secondly, for this Lithuanian poet nature was not conceived in the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment; the peasants he portrayed were not sentimentalized stereotypes. People in *The Seasons* are drawn realistically, with their labors, experiences, cares, and primitive mentality, abounding with mythology. Thirdly, Donelaitis is characterized by his clear stand in the social, ethnic, and moral clash between the immigrant colonists and the old Lithuanian inhabitants. This was his original contribution.

The Seasons does not have any single, simple plot, with characters described in detail. The narrative of the poem is often interrupted by asides, didactic passages, and lyrical reflections. The characters are sketchy; they are simply good or simply bad, with few nuances. Donelaitis is not given to detailed description of objects or persons. He shows them in the dynamic of life, acting and speaking, even larger than life. The poet, moreover, knows the psychology of peasant and serf, and in a stroke he could create an unforgettable, original image. To this end the poet makes ingenious use of synecdoche. For example, in describing the anger of a bailiff he uses the phrase *iltinį griežia*; literally, "he gnashes his canine tooth." He also employs hyperbole, exaggerating tempo of action, distances, and results to the point of demolishing the bounds of reality and creating a new artistic world, as in "While Mikols in the garden sings butchered shoat / With flaming straw — the smoke for miles beclouds the skies / And dims the sun, the stars, and e'en the frigid moon..." He has nature operating in terms which only a villager's associations could attribute to it. When the spring

time sun begins to warm up, "Each hill and dale had cast away the snowy furs." The picturesque vocabulary of Donelaitis is akin to folklore. In his lyrical treatment of nature and people (at times with sublime reflections, at others, with light irony), he comes close to Jonas Basanavičius, Vincas Pieta-
ris and other Lithuanian writers, who lived a century and a half later but belonged to the same geographical and linguistic area.

Tolminkiemis, where Donelaitis lived longest, and where he died on Feb. 18, 1780, is only 15 km from the present border of southwestern Lithuania. Under extended German rule the Lithuanian name of the village was preserved in the German transcription *Tolminkemen*. After World War II the Russians changed it to *Chystye Prudy* and colonized it with their own people. The church and other buildings erected by Donelaitis were destroyed. From under the ruins of the church, in the crypt of which the pastors of the parish were customarily buried, the presumed remains of Donelaitis were recovered. Based on skull structure, the appearance of the poet has been reconstructed. Before that artists had depicted him according to his traits of character, as they imagined them.

Posthumous Publications. During the lifetime of the poet, not a single work of his was published. His manuscripts remained in the possession of his widow. They were copied by a neighbor, J. F. Hohlfield, thanks to whom they survived; only fragments of the originals remain. The first edition of *The Seasons* was prepared by Ludwig Rhesa with a German translation, the poet's biography, and a description of his works. The publication was called *Das Jahr in vier Gesaengen* (The Year in Four Cantos), published in Königsberg, 1818. The fables were published in 1824. These published works were for several decades the only means by which the writer was known to his fellow countrymen and others. Rhesa made alterations and deleted the harsher realistic expressions (468

lines). A new and fuller Lithuanian text was prepared by the philologist August Schleicher under the title, *Christian Donaleitis Litausche Dichtungen* (The Lithuanian Poetry of Christian Donaleitis), published by the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, 1865. The third edition, the best and most authentic, was prepared by George H. F. Nesselmann, with a German translation, under the title *Christian Donalitis Litausche Dichtungen*, Koenigsberg, 1869. Later a few Lithuanian editions appeared; one of them was published in the United State in 1897. On the initiative of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and under its funding, the definitive and ornate edition of *The Seasons*, edited by Juozas Ambrazevičius directly from manuscripts in the archives of Koenigsberg and illustrated with the wood-cuts of Vytautas K. Jonynas, was published in Kaunas in 1940. Under Soviet occupation, among other editions, one was published with illustrations by the artist Vytautas Jurkūnas (Vilnius, 1956).

Among Lithuanian authors the works of Donalaitis have been translated most frequently. Besides the first translations into German (1818), Latvian (1822), and Polish (1883), later translations appeared in those languages, along with ones in Russian, Czech, Belorussian, Georgian, and Hungarian. Most of these have appeared since World War II. The only English translation of *The Seasons*, imitating the original hexameter, was done by a Lithuanian American, Nadas Rastenis and published in 1967 with an introduction by E. Tumienė. (English passages used in this article are from the translation by Rastenis).