

CREATIVE WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND ITS DIFFICULTIES

KOSTAS OSTRAUSKAS

KOSTAS OSTRAUSKAS, a graduate (M.A.) of the University of Pennsylvania, is the youngest Lithuanian playwright. One of his plays, "Kanarėlė," had its premiere in Chicago last year (cf. LITUANUS — March, 1957). He is also active as a literary critic. At present he is completing his dissertation in the field of Lithuanian literature. — This article was first printed in "Literatūros Lankai," a literary magazine, and it appears here in an abbreviated version.

Many an exiled writer, living within a culture comparatively new to him, is tempted to consider writing in the new language. This temptation becomes much more pressing in view of the fact that the available native audience is limited, as compared to an almost unlimited reading public provided by the new language. Such efforts, i.e., the attempts to use the foreign language as a creative medium, have been made in the past, and most likely will be made with increasing frequency in the future, as the present generation of exiled writers familiarizes itself with the new culture and the potential audience.

But not all the writers, or potential writers, are of equal interest here. The generation of older writers, even if it attempted the experiment, could not achieve significant results. Their knowledge of the new idiom is too limited, too elementary, for they not only lack a rich vocabulary, but in many cases have grammatical and syntactic problems as well. Yet, because of their advanced age, they lack the time to learn. We must also exclude the generation of potential writers, those who as yet have no literary achievements to their credit. This group, born in one and maturing in another cultural atmosphere, presents somewhat of a cultural 'split personality' problem, which requires special discussion. On the other hand, to gauge the literary prospects of this group is to predict the future, a difficult task, promising only vague results.

A third group stands in different perspective. It possesses proven talent, and has some language skills; it is composed of younger writers, and, in isolated cases, of older writers who have been able to master the new language. This group of writers, faced with the possibility of using the foreign medium, is the subject of this article, to answer briefly the following two-folded question. "Is it possible to create in a foreign language, and are the achievable results comparable to those possible in the native idiom?"

The editors of Books Abroad, at one time, posed this question to foreign born critics and authors, now writing, to some extent, in English: how does a foreign-born writer develop a personal literary style in English? The responses are printed in the 2nd and 3rd issues of 1949, and they represent a variety of interesting comments upon this and related problems. The article contains valuable material and will be referred to later. (It is interesting to note, that even if most of the correspondents despair of ever developing a distinct literary style, the replies, taken as a whole, are written in a highly developed English).

A language may be learned for purely communicative purposes, but it is much more difficult to use it as a literary medium; to develop a personal distinct literary style. The reasons for this are at the same time elementary and complex. Sketching them in general terms, it first must be noted that a language is an organic rather than an artificial attribute, which in the case of a writer, at least in part, is his creative essence. Therefore, a language becomes a literary medium only when its native spirit suggests creativeness and when emotions come naturally. This naturalness has a dual origin: it is either a native quality, i.e., when the language of the author is his native tongue or acquired in early youth, i.e., when the foreign language is learned early in its native surroundings, and is widely used thereafter. Otherwise, this naturalness, with very rare exceptions, is unattainable. Of course, even an older person of ability, especially if he possesses tangible linguistic talent, may master a foreign language. But, this is not enough. The idiomatic authenticity of the language will hardly ever be achieved. Several writers, polled by Books Abroad, complain of exactly this difficulty.

An ability to communicate may be sufficient for scientific or popular writing, although even here it is just as hard to achieve a personal style, but it is certainly insufficient for literary work. One may suggest, an extensive and systematic reading of works characterized by good language and style, as a means of gaining the needed acquaintance. But, is mere reading, no matter how extensive, sufficient to develop a personal and distinct style? Hardly, and this is another common experience of the writers in the survey.

In short, after reaching maturity, it is possible to learn a foreign language, but rarely adequately, for creative purposes. A writer, learning a language in his later years, but desiring to employ it creatively is condemned to struggle with numerous obstacles, practical and psychological, of an almost insurmountable nature.

In his work, as far as the usage of language is concerned, a style-conscious writer attempts to achieve two basic results, namely to use the most exact word in its most effective place, and to attain the necessary syntactic construction depending on the circumstances. He will work on these aspects, changing a word or the order, until a satisfactory result is obtained, but in a foreign language an elusive defect will always remain. It remains elusive, precisely because the author's language is not native to him. Again, several respondents complain of this obstacle.

But this only raises other barriers. Faced with this problem, a writer must of necessity become much more conscious of his style, than he would if the language were native; he is forced to rely heavily on external aids. He is faced with the prospect of partially eliminating the personal touch of his style. This leads to further literary complexities. An author for whom style is part of his creative totality, will naturally feel a depressing helplessness, when coming face to face with this consequent difficulty, from which, if he is conscientious enough to realize the part, it is impossible to escape. Inevitably, the style will seem too primitive, inevitably there will remain the fear of cliché usage, easily avoidable in the native tongue.

Even an author, who is well on the road to a distinct style, has not surmounted all the difficulties he needs to overcome. Creative writing in a foreign idiom, is not merely the translation of thoughts and images from one language to another. One meets with still greater complexities.

A foreign-born writer, can never find acceptance in his new language, unless he breaks through to its spirit, surrenders to the culture which that language reflects, and merges himself, emotionally and spiritually with its birthplace. One of the aims of an author is to extract the hidden beauty of a language; having chosen a foreign tongue, a writer is seriously handicapped for it is almost impossible to reach these hidden depths. Herein lies the unfortunate dichotomy between aims and results. Forever, the foreign-born writer must labor to achieve that which comes naturally to his native colleagues. His greatest victory will only be partial; while doubting and laboring, he shall miss the inspired word. (This dichotomy is by no means confusable with a serious author's usual dissatisfaction with achieved results, with the inability to reach creative perfection. Here we are speaking of the dissatisfaction which sees obvious shortcomings in the work, due to the limitations of the foreign language).

Consequently, a serious writer, respecting his creative powers, and unwilling to limit or bind them (something almost unavoidable in such a case), tends, even while living in foreign surroundings, and sufficiently knowing the language, to retain his native language. Heinrich Heine, even if his last twenty-five years were spent in Paris, and he had immersed himself in French cultural life, continued, with rare and insignificant exceptions to write in German. James Joyce, who left Ireland in 1912 never to return, in his nature and work never forgot Dublin, and wrote only in English, even though as a talented linguist, he was able to teach several languages. Of course, these examples are only several more striking ones, from many cases.

On the other hand, we also meet distinguished authors who made the experiment. Taking only the French language as an example, we find Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke, D'Annunzio and T. S. Eliot, who have contributed something in that language. But, their creative excursions, with the possible exception of Wilde's, were scattered, rather insignificant, and they have to be considered as a literary tour de force.

There are, however, a number of exceptions which stand in sharp contradiction to the above mentioned examples. To name only two, the most striking case is provided by Joseph Conrad (Teodor Jozef Korzeniowski) who, although a Pole by birth, wrote only in English. Today, Arthur Koestler distinguishes himself in several languages. Nevertheless, these exceptions — and exceptions only because, usually these writers acquired the language in early youth and later lived surrounded by it — no matter how impressive, do not negate the rule: to write in a foreign language learned only when the author was mature, as capably as in the native tongue is almost or actually impossible. This creative process, from the beginning, is bound to limitations, a fact which will be reflected in the artistic value of the work. Such desire, however, if considered on the level of a general creative vocation, is understandable, and therefore cannot be denied. But, from the practical point of view and keeping in mind the hindering obstacles, desire and will are not sufficient because the projected aims and the achieved results cannot be reconciled. Thus, only the following question remains: Which serious and conscientious writer, consciously wishes to limit his creative powers and at the same time lessen the artistic value of his work?