

## CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES OF LANGUAGE: A SAMPLE OF LITHUANIAN FICTION\*

LITHUANIAN QUARTET Edited by Stepas Zobarskas (Introduction by Charles Angoff); Manyland Books, New York, 1962; 211 pp., \$4.95. "Three Stories" — Aloyzas Baronas, "On Whose Side is God" — Marius Katiliškis, "Words, Beautiful Words" — Algirdas Landsbergis, "The Bishop and the Devil" — Ignas Šeinius.

Difficulties always arise when writers cross the boundaries of language. Because of a lack of words or a lack of feeling for one of the languages, reality is distorted and passages of lyrical beauty turn into ornamental clichés. When literary works are translated from Lithuanian, with its rather intricate grammar and delicate shades of meaning, into the simplicity and straightforwardness of English, the dangers are multiplied. Fortunately, Lithuanian Quartet, which presents four Lithuanian writers to the English reader, has managed to avoid the greatest of the dangers. The editor has wisely decided not to choose short stories for their stylistic beauty, lyricism, or special features which appeal greatly to the Lithuanian reader but are outside of the English reader's realm of experience.

The short stories that were chosen deal with tangible realities. Each story presents a different facet of reality with the themes of pain and discovery predominating. Whether it is the ache of a soldier's bloody feet, or the moral pain of a man caught in the web of his own flesh, the discovery of eternity, or the discovery of a new, magic word, these stories all possess something of the universal experience of all men. For this reason, the contact with the reader is much more complete than it would be in the case of a purely lyrical story which, in translation, often becomes nothing more than a literary curio.

The simplest, the most direct, and the most unified works are those of Aloyzas Baronas. The tone in these vignettes of human weakness is a mixture of sharp insight, mild amusement, and a certain sadness. The themes are very simple: self-deception in "Dead End Street"; a man discovering the cruel passage of time and finding his own version of immortality in "The Sixth Generation"; small pieces of loneliness touching each other with an ironic twist at the end in "The Relay Race". In these works we find a minimum of conscious effect; the writer does not try to impress in any way. In fact, we are not even aware of whether he likes or dislikes his characters, we do realize that he knows them intimately. Baronas has the art of drawing a scene as familiar as the street one walks on every morning and making it somehow special in a quiet, direct way. We accept Juknis' asking himself the question: what is the good of living (The Sixth Generation) as being sincere because we know there is no conscious philosophizing or dramatization. Every man has much of the indecision of Indriulis and every man, at one time or another, has been the victim of his own kindness, just as Valenta. It is in this understanding of the importance of small everyday conflicts that Baronas reaches his readers so completely. The quiet humor of these stories is the humor with which one must accept life, if it is to be bearable.

"On Whose Side is God" by Marius Katiliškis is the longest of the works, actually an extract from a novel. It relates the experience of men forced against their will to fight, or rather to pretend to fight, the already lost battle for the disintegrating Third Reich.

The world of fighting men, who, above everything else, fight the common enemy of all soldiers of all times — fatigue and hopelessness—has been analyzed by many writers, especially well by Remarque. The story is a mosaic of experiences; in it we find side by side brutality and gentleness, despair and eternal hope, bitter irony and flashes of good-natured humor. The story has many graphically described characters; the emphasis is placed not on their individuality, but on the common experience which unites them. In the no-man's land of interminable muddy roads, between the lost country of their past and the unknown and terrifying land of the future, these men walk with a dream of the basic things in life— warmth, shelter, love and bread. Hunger is the thread uniting the different episodes, a cold gnawing hunger for everything that was and

shall be no more. There is little that is very original in this story, for it has been told before even though the circumstances were different. Katiliškis has, however, an uncanny ability to recreate a sensation in all its details and at the same time to maintain a panoramic view of the entire situation. As far as style is concerned, this story suffers more than others from translation because of its interwoven realistic and lyrical aspects. The style is rich and colorful in detail and vivid in its contrasts.

"Words, Beautiful Words" by Algirdas Landsbergis tries to enter the very private world of word-magic and of the discoveries by a four-year-old boy. The appeal of the story lies in the fact that it is seen through the eyes of the boy; this makes its colors twice as vivid and its forms twice as tangible. The sensation of a child who discovers the taste of a new word in his mouth is extremely difficult to transmit to the reader; generally, however, Landsbergis succeeds quite well. Unfortunately, the work is too long for the material it contains and it is the most self-conscious story in the book. By concentrating on a few of the boy's sensations and eliminating unnecessary repetition the author would probably have achieved a more striking effect. Nevertheless, there is great charm in this story because of the writer's love for the child and because of an intuitive understanding of the child's sadness when he is faced with the complicated and uncertain world of adults.

The last short story in the book, "The Bishop and the Devil" by Ignas Šeinius, is an elegant parable of the temptation of man. It is also the most abstract work. The two main characters, while being essentially down-to-earth, represent the duality of flesh and spirit, ambition and self - acceptance. The Devil enters as a sophisticated silver fox, amused at the self-deceptions that men cherish. The story of Thomas Frost faced with the temptation of increasing his social status and the alternate choice of losing this earthly paradise is told in a subtle and ironic way, in a playful style. In the hands of a lesser writer it could have easily become nothing more than a humorous folk-tale with urban characters. In this work, however, characters balance on the brink of reality, but never become mere abstractions. Together with the author we understand and sympathize with the weakness found in a wise man even though we do not completely enter into his character. The characters, in general, have psychological truth, although no great depth. In this case, the parable is not meant to teach, but to amuse; and the reader is grateful, because amusing parables are not very easy to find.

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As we have seen, Lithuanian Quartet offers a broad enough picture of human existence in a variety of styles. Until now, Lithuanian literature had been a closed world to the readers of other nations. It is to be hoped that Lithuanian Quartet will be followed by other books which will enable the English reader to become better acquainted with Lithuanian prose.

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