

Rimvydas Šilbajoris, PERFECTION OF EXILE: FOURTEEN CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN WRITERS (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970) 322 pages. \$8.50.

The opening chapter of this book gives a brief account of Lithuanian literature from the eighteenth century to the present; writers who, at the present time, live in Lithuania are omitted and some of the authors dwelling in the West are mentioned only in this chapter. The other fourteen chapters study fourteen Lithuanian writers active in the West; two of them died prematurely in automobile accidents, one died a natural death in 1970, and the other eleven are still alive. Eight of the authors (Henrikas Radauskas, Jonas Aistis, Alfonsas Nyka-Nyliūnas, Algimantas Mackus, Henrikas Nagys, Kazys Bradūnas, Jonas Mekas, Bernardas Brazdžionis) write verse; four (Antanas Vaičiulaitis, Antanas Škėma, Albinas Marius Katiliškis, Aloyzas Baronas) write narrative prose; one (Kostas Ostrauskas) writes plays, and one (Algirdas Landsbergis) began by writing narrative prose but has subsequently preferred to write plays. Each of the fourteen studies is preceded by a short sketch of the writer's life. Photographs of the fourteen writers are provided.

This is an important book for method as well as for content. Šilbajoris comes to grips with the work of each of his authors, trying to comprehend it as a whole and trace its development. The present reader finds the chapter on Aistis a noteworthy example of critical sensitivity and perceptiveness. Aistis began writing in independent Lithuania after the age of Maironis and the national revival, that is, after the age when a poet could make it his task to present a shining vision of a future Lithuania; after national sovereignty had been achieved, Aistis "declared his independence from the traditional ways of translating reality into art" (page 78); "his was one of the new voices of truly modern Lithuanian literature" (page 77). Living in the West since 1937, Aistis at first saw the second Soviet occupation as merely one more of the many subjugations Lithuania had suffered. Only after a long time did he realize that something more significant had happened. "His vision now turned to darkness, and he wrote poems asking some of the most bitter and honest questions that any writer had asked of his own people. For the most part he was answered by silence — there was little to say" (page 93).

Šilbajoris has not stated and does not need to state the reasons why he selected the fourteen authors. Naturally writers who have something new to say merit attention, and particular interest attaches to those, like Landsbergis and Mekas, whose outlook is still changing markedly. Although each of the fourteen studies is self-contained, the reader learns to recognize some recurrent themes. First, Šilbajoris is much concerned for the nature and integrity of literary art; as he says, the modern writer "knows that art is not primarily an object but rather a process, a manner in which the artist's awareness of various aspects of being is organized and controlled by his imagination. Such knowledge requires an artist to be relatively free of commitment to any limited ideology, that is, any closed conception of reality" (page 136). Rejecting the view that art should hold up a mirror to nature, he says: "...art, per se, is something else altogether than the reality it is expected to depict. It need not be a mirror at all but rather a creation of the imagination through a process that in some ways resembles the growth of a flower. Composed of sunshine and of soil, of wind and rain, a flower is quite unlike any of these elements" (page 253). Accordingly Šilbajoris is interested in those writers who recognize that traditional themes, attitudes and images have become empty and who strive towards "a new poetic image of reality" (page 273).

Secondly, there is the theme of exile, but for the writers studied in this book exile is something far more significant than loss of one's native land. "The younger writers, Antanas Škėma, Henrikas Nagys, Alfonsas Nyka-Nyliūnas, lived through the agony not only on a national but also on a universal plane. Their exile was for them just one manifestation of the general destruction of all the familiar humanistic values of pre-war Europe" (page 92). The attempt to comprehend the meaning of exile becomes an attempt to say what humanity lost in the Second World War. "To the established Lithuanian writers before the war, reality seemed solid enough to be regarded as something given, as a reliable framework within which to depict imaginary people whose lives would embody the author's ideas... Algirdas Landsbergis, however, could no longer depend upon the world to furnish him with a logical pattern of meaning because it was shattered beyond recognition by the pressure of enormous and tumultuous events. We know what we believe only as long as the image of life seems clear to us; when this image is destroyed, all we have left is a heap of fragments which the artist may look at as an embodiment of his despair but not as a foundation for any coherent idea to be expressed in art" (pages 136-7). For some

of the writers exile is the universal human condition: "Škėma's heroes seem to challenge the world in an effort of love. The world responds to this effort by completely obliterating the challenger in the end, but the first step toward destruction is to make man realize that he is not wanted on earth... He is doomed to be a stranger, an exile" (page 106). "Only a few can look upon exile the way Mackus did, as the fulfillment of human destiny. In his view, the natural condition of a creative writer is exile, in the largest, all-inclusive sense of the word..." (page 184).

Thirdly, although for the most part the writers studied present man as an exile in a hostile universe, Šilbajoris finds in some of their work an element of ultimate religious hope. "Bradūnas' talent has the special quality of distilling hope from the witches' brew of contemporary history and of giving this drop of hope the iridescence of truth" (page 235). Yet on a close reading it appears that the hope expressed by some of the writers is not specifically Christian but is simply an assertion of human integrity in face of an uncomprehending environment. "We can see a progression in Landsbergis' work, from fragments of shattered lives, through complex interplays of different planes and dimensions of existence, to the ultimate simplicity and solitude of a single man saying "no", the voice of a twentieth-century prophet crying in the wilderness" (page 160). "The plays (of Ostrauskas) in effect describe the indestructibility of man or of the idea of man's divinity when placed in the position of victim of his fellow creatures or of death itself" (pages 133-4). Only occasionally is there an approach to an explicit confrontation with Christianity: "The central issue seems to be man's desperate need for self-realization, through such creative power as he has, in the reality he knows around him, instead of being realized by Christ, whose death into eternity removes from man the burden and the joy of an independent act. Poetry, however, is just such an act, and therefore to be a poet is to be a rebel against ready-made salvation" (page 180).

The book provides plentiful passages of verse translated into English to illustrate the points discussed. The quality of the translations is high; direct and free from affectation, they make the thought and images of the original accessible to the reader. The general quality of the book is maintained in the last chapter, which is in some ways the most interesting of all; it is devoted to Brazdžionis. Šilbajoris recognized that Brazdžionis is the most popular of living Lithuanian poets. In approaching Brazdžionis' work he chooses "four rather vague and abstract notions to be used as "compass directions" to mark off the outlines of Brazdžionis' poetic universe"; they are "God", "fatherland", "yearning", and "truth" (page 303). The reader will note that these ideas are not new. Šilbajoris traces the movement and inter-relationships of Brazdžionis' ideas and concludes of his poetry: "All its main devices— constant repetitions of syntactic units, the patterning of sound textures in recurring sequences, elliptical sentences, exclamatory statements, the design of the poems around the focal point of value — are aimed at avoking the greatest possible emotional response from the reader" (page 316). But this observation might suggest further reflection. Perhaps because of the emotional response evoked, Brazdžionis, like Catullus among the Romans, is the easiest Lithuanian poet to enjoy and his work may prove to be the most memorable of all discussed in the book. It is noteworthy that, by reserving him for the last chapter, Šilbajoris has assigned him the most memorable position among the fourteen writers. Brazdžionis indeed is one of the few lyric poets who still know how to sing.

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