

Balys Sruoga, Raštai, t. 16: Laiškai Valerijai Čiurlionytei, 1915–1918, sudarė Algis Samulionis, Neringa Markevičienė, parengė Neringa Markevičienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2019, 552 p. ISBN 978-609-425-272-3.

SUMMARY

After a lengthy break of over 10 years, production of the Lithuanian literature classic *Writings*, by Balys Sruoga, is being renewed.

Algis Samulionis, the world's pre-eminent researcher of Sruoga's life and works, first prepared the comprehensive *Writings* volumes back in January 1991. Based on his publications, a succession of fictional, scientific, and critical works – as well as translations – were produced between 1996 and 2008. Following Samulionis's death, the preparation of *Writings* was continued by Donata Linčiuvienė: from 1996 to 2008 she prepared and edited every volume of Sruoga's *Writings*. Only a small number of his letters were not prepared this way.

This volume presents all 205 of Sruoga's surviving letters, which he wrote while studying in Petrograd and Moscow (in Russia) under artist and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and the sister of musicologist Jadvyga Čiurlionytė, museum worker Valerija Čiurlionytė. Letters sent to Sruoga himself never survived the trip, and it is therefore impossible to recreate the dialogue between recipients.

In 1982, Čiurlionytė transferred a portion of Sruoga's letters (123 of them) to be preserved in the manuscript section of Vilnius University. The remaining 82 letters were sent to the Manuscript Repository within the Library at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

This epistolary collection consists of letters, postcards, poems, prose, and translations, all ordered chronologically.

Traditionally, Sruoga's letters were copied verbatim (including mistakes in spelling or punctuation) reflecting latest “upper” layer of writings. A minimal amount of editing has been done to help the letters conform to modern language standards.

Sruoga's letters to Čiurlionytė allow us to better understand the writer's life in Russia.

The letters and postcards not only detail the different stages of Sruoga's relationship with Čiurlionytė (a formal acquaintance which grew steadily into friendship, then love), but also his personal approach to life, human relationships, and his personal turmoil when facing important existential

questions. The letters reveal that Sruoga was not a traditional lover to Čiurlionytė, but rather her teacher and spiritual leader.

The letters describe Sruoga's thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives during his student years: his conviction was so strong that these beliefs never changed, right up to his death. Sruoga's views were also mirrored by authority figures in his life, such as Jurgis Baltrušaitis and other Russian symbolists.

In his youthful letters, Sruoga is revealed as a headstrong adventure seeker, longing for adrenaline-fueled experiences with no regard for his own safety. He described his adventures – whether alone or in the company of friends – with humor; he knew he was at best an amateur climber. Somewhat provoked by his constant conscription into wars, Sruoga would find humor in his both himself and the absurdity of the world. He had to work hard to overcome the first real challenge he had encountered in life: the need to obey, humiliate himself, and shed his values.

Through these letters, it is discovered that Sruoga viewed the world as layered in mystery: he felt himself hovering between worlds, a stance which frightened and even disturbed Čiurlionytė. Letters reveal the dreams, visions, and inexplicable sensations he regularly encountered.

His letters are fascinating in how they play with Lithuanian language. Sruoga, who studied in a Russian environment but grew up in his homeland of Baibokai, would communicate using different languages with different recipients. Sruoga's letters contain many peculiarities which ignite the interest of linguists.

The letters openly explore those living in Russia who were close to Sruoga (such as Stasys Šilingas, Adomas Varnas, Juozas Tallat-Kelpša, Sofija Čiurlionienė, Danutė Čiurlionytė, Julija Biliūnienė, and brolis Juozapas Sruoga) as well as those he was not close to, such as his brother Adolfas Sruoga and his wife Tatjana.

Once again in his younger letters, we find works of fiction – prose, poems, translations – committed to paper as a student. We also get to know the motivations and impulses which prompted their creation. Letters provide insight into Sruoga's creative workshops, which never ran during his later life after many of his original works were destroyed. By reading his letters we not only find an authentic life history told by the true narrator, but we also learn about the historical beginning of, and influences behind, his work.

An issue of genre purity and contamination arises for all text and fictional works delivered as letters. Some letters and postcards do exist; "pure" letters – complete with poetic verse and Sruoga's notes, as well as

fictional texts – which were sent as the letters. The collection largely consists of regular letters, some with poetic inserts.

Most of the letters and postcards by Sruoga were intended for Čiurlionytė and written from Petrograd and Sochi; a minority came from Moscow.

The language of Sruoga's letters carries an incredible contrast to that of his published works, since they are riddled with mistakes: long and short vowels are confused; nasal letters are very often omitted from the accusative singular and genitive plural cases, in singular and plural endings of nominative cases of active participles and in the roots of verbs; there are incorrectly-written forms with consonant assimilation.

The causes of the mistakes vary - at the beginning of the 20th century, for example, spelling within the Lithuanian language was not yet standardized. But the primary reason was that Sruoga never formally studied at any Lithuanian school. The writer graduated from Panevėžys Realschool, where all students were taught in Russian. Later, he studied at the universities of Petrograd, Moscow, and Munich – further muddying his linguistic education. Mistakes were made due to his inaccuracy, but also his psychological state: in letters where the author complains of a bad mood, or talks about disasters or failures he has experienced, numerous mistakes plague the pages.

Some of Sruoga's letters contained poems while others exist as separate texts of fiction. Sruoga was always more focused on the intense search for stylistic variation rather than on consistency of spelling. Lithuanian writers often use words from their local dialects, and Sruoga is unique in this regard: he used not employs words from his own local dialect, but also from many others. Oddities include the illative case, the supine, the dual form of predicates and verbs, infinitive forms of dialect verbs, subjunctive and imperative mood forms, and others. His letters even contain a significant number of foreign words, mainly when translating Slavic works.

The new edition of *Writings* by Sruoga is addressed to the philological community: textual and literary scholars, linguists, literary historians, editors and cultural historians. The publication of Sruoga's letters has been formatted to meet various philological needs.