

The Letters of Jurgis Baltrušaitis

“I write only what is my deep inner necessity”

The first exhaustive collection of letters by the poet, translator and diplomat Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873–1944) compiled according to the scientific principles of text linguistics serves to significantly widen both the poet’s creative and biographical horizons and the opinions on his work established in the history of literature. The book contains letters in Lithuanian, Russian and Italian languages with Lithuanian translations and commentaries. Their autographs are kept in Lithuanian, Italian and Russian libraries and archives. The published letters were addressed to Lithuanian writers Liudas Gira, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Balys Sruoga; diplomats Antanas Liutkus, Vaclovas Sidzikauskas, Jurgis Šaulys, Juozas Urbšys and the historian Marija Mašiotaitė-Urbšienė. The famous Russian recipients were writers Andrei Bely, Valery Bryusov and Vyacheslav Ivanov; actors and directors Alexander Dyakonov, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, Alisa Koonen, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Nikolai Podgorny and Konstantin Stanislavsky; the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev; the composer and pianist Alexander Scriabin; the pianist Vera Ritter, and the Italian writer and literary critic Giovanni Papini.

Baltrušaitis’ letters are very varied: from a brief note arranging a meeting or disclosing some news, through sensitive, introspective texts, to literary-philosophical studies or theatre reform projects. His letters were also a means to communicate and express concern and attention, to talk and express himself. The poet’s intimate letters are witnesses to his inner experiences and dramas; they stimulate an internal linguistic form. Baltrušaitis’ unique personality is best revealed by the letters that show him to be one of the most accomplished letter writers of his time. In his letters we see what remained hidden in his creative work, and what his contemporaries missed. He followed the etiquette of letter-writing, paid attention to salutations, never forgot to enquire about his correspondent, to send his regards and bid farewell. To Baltrušaitis, writing a letter was a way of communicating. He addressed the other person in a way and tone he thought fitting, and at the same time wrote about himself, his condition, his plans and intentions. Simultaneously, he revealed and created his inner history.

In terms of quantity and often the intensive content of his letters, Baltrušaitis belongs with the most extraordinary writers of the genre. He wrote most of his letters while travelling and away from Moscow. His journeys started in 1900 when he first visited the Caucasus. Many of the letters were written when Baltrušaitis was staying in Merreküll (Estonia), the Caucasus, various spa towns of Italy, Switzerland and France. In the magnificent nature of Scandinavia he reported feeling 'a significant closeness – neighbourship, even – with another world, the degree of contact with which is the only measure of our worth, and the search for which is probably the only meaning of life'. Typically, in all of his travels Baltrušaitis would become acquainted with writers, artists, and other interesting people. He was drawn to silence and solitude, yet constantly sought out people and conversationalists who had an interest in the aspects of the period and the human soul.

The letters of Jurgis Baltrušaitis are a useful source in discovering the connections between Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, Norwegian, and Swedish literature, theatre, translation and culture in general, in the first half of the twentieth century. In his letters Baltrušaitis liaised between the cultural worlds of these countries and attempted to transport the modern changes in Western literature – the phenomena in Italian and Scandinavian culture – to the Russian literary circles of the time, as well as to some Lithuanian writers. The letters serve to identify once more the collaboration of Baltrušaitis and some of the most famous writers of the time (Giovanni Papini, Giovanni Amendola, Valery Bryusov, O. Kampa). For example, Baltrušaitis was one of the first to promote the work of the famous English director and artist Gordon Craig not only in Moscow, but also in the artistic circles in Italy.

The letters reveal Baltrušaitis' role as a reformer of the theatre, promoter of theatrical experimentation and advisor. Such prominent directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavsky applied many of his ideas on the revitalization of theatre: theatre as a new art for developing the personality; theatre as a temple; theatre as a spiritual community. Some letters to the theatre figures resemble short art criticism tracts on the programme of theatre rejuvenation. Baltrušaitis essentially formed the repertoire of translated works of drama in the main theatres of Moscow.

Often, Baltrušaitis' letters are poetical and philosophical texts of an undefined genre that deepen and broaden the ideas he expressed in poetry and articles. These letters reveal his aesthetic phenomenological views in which inner experience and the spiritual journey of the artist is formed, and one may even experience the mystical encounter and relationship with the secrets of

the Universe and God. From the reflections on inner experience comes the constant search for the inner word, also characteristic of his correspondent, the famous Russian phenomenologist Gustav Shpet. The letters of Baltrušaitis bear witness to his opinion that creative work is the art of life, as it reforms and affects life itself. This shift occurs when the artist is changed by his own existential experiences, when he crosses the line of transcendence, and sees the eternal spiritual being. By contemplating inner experiences and moral values the poet seemingly connects transcendental and phenomenological philosophy.

Baltrušaitis' efforts to organize the literary process (attending to translations, publishing and forms of literary communication) are also obvious in his letters. When translating works of writers of various nationalities he not only familiarised himself with modern writing, but also initiated the newest literary trends.

The letters also contain some references to Baltrušaitis' skilful diplomatic work: he tried to maintain a friendly relationship between Lithuania and Russia and to establish cultural cooperation between the two countries.

Another little-known aspect of the poet and diplomat's work revealed in the letters is his effort to save the Russian intelligentsia from the Stalinist terror in the 1920s and 30s. These efforts are especially apparent in his letters to Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius while trying to save Gustav Shpet. Baltrušaitis was hoping to send the philosopher to Kaunas; after his friend's arrest and deportation he concerned himself with his fate and helped his family. By issuing visas and helping them leave Russia, Baltrušaitis saved the lives of almost twenty well-known personalities such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Osip Mandelstam, Marc Chagall, and others.

There are many more letters by Baltrušaitis to famous cultural figures, but even the ones selected for this publication reveal the poet's connections with other cultures and the value he attributed to intercultural links.