

ANTANAS ŠKĖMA

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Antanas Škėma belongs to that generation of Lithuanian writers whose views were formed and who emerged into the literary world in a period of wars and occupations, in that tragic epoch of contradictions and the denial of an absolute scale of values. And this generation differs from the preceding one not only in its world view, its concept of man and of ethics, but also in its esthetics.

The esthetics of the writers of the period of independence might be roughly called "symbolic," while the esthetics of this generation might be called "existential"; to these writers creation itself is a mode of existence — that is, it is an existential act and an existential truth. Instead of the sentimental and intimate ego-centrism of their predecessors, these writers turned to humanism, to an emphasis on man and the ethical problem; in other words, they focused their attention on existential motifs.

Škėma, who was born in 1910, entered the literary world relatively late. He fulfilled his creative apprenticeship in the theater, where he worked for a long time as an actor and a director. He made his debut as a writer with a collection of short stories, "**Nuodėguliai ir Kibirkštys**" (**Cinders and Sparks**), published in 1946; this also included his first attempt at drama. He later concentrated his efforts on two genres, prose fiction and drama. The main body of his work consists of a collection of stories and short plays "**Šventoji Inga**" (**Saint Inga**), the novel "**Baltoji Drobule**" (**The White Sheet**) and two prize-winning plays, "**Pabudimas**" (**The Awakening**) in 1956 and "**žvakidė**" (**The Candlestick**) in 1957.

Skema's esthetics and his form, and in part his world view, were formed under the influence of Ernest Hemingway, Isaac Babel, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Leonid Andrejev, as well as under the influence of literary Freudianism. His relation to reality approaches that of the surrealist tradition because of his rejection of certain logical imperatives, his Freudian sexo-centrism and his style combining poeticized essay and techniques of fiction.

In spite of his "advanced" age, Antanas Škėma is one of the most distinctive representatives of the modern trend in Lithuanian letters. The basis of his work is man, as he grew up and was formed in the collisions of the past decades; his is the persecuted man — the product of a convulsive solution of ideological, social, political and economic problems. His man has almost completely lost the consciousness of his individuality, and is like the ward of some grim orphanage whose spiritual parents are something. And that something is exactly the atmosphere of an upheaval-torn era. Even in geometrical space or surface, Škėma's characters are bounded by the perception of certain new and indefinable standards. Ignas Skaidra, the protagonist of "**Alter Postweg Nr. 16**," is in contact with these new standards, which are a projection toward "beside." Škėma's man is tied by many bonds to the consciousness of a kind of collective will. He cannot even die alone. Life, death, eternity, hell are like the train of "**Šventoji Inga**" that is doomed to continuous destruction and in whose conception there are many elements in common with Jean-Paul Sartre's "**Huis Clos**."

Antanas Škėma is one of the few Lithuanian writers who in a real way — that is, sensually and intellectually — have made contact with the era of concentration camps and compulsory "reforms of man," that era the highest expression of which in the Lithuanian consciousness was exile. While others lived in the past, in the native earth they brought with them in their luggage, and considered the present a "no man's time," a vacation, a dream, Škėma considered his era to be an inescapable reality. His characters live in a post-diluvian age, that is, in a new age in the full sense of the term, and they hopelessly search for contours in its empty space. He does not deal with historical facts and is not interested in causes, but attempts to portray their effects on man and on reality.

In "**Alter Postweg Nr. 16**" and "**Šventoji Inga**," Škėma depicts not persons but moods and fragments. Skema's men, as is usual with men of the new epoch, are but fragments of the intellectual, moral and sensual cultures of the Old World, or are

living organisms ruled by Freudian complexes.

In a sense, Škema's position is an amoral one, in that it rejects any clearly formulated moral system. In practice, however, his world is still under the massive influence of Christian morality. His man is not "condamné d'être libre" but rather the reverse. And thus a sexual complex and the fall of the moral principle appear in parallel in the tragedies of Ignas, in "**Caro Vagonas**" (**The Tsar's Railroad Car**).

In the play "**Pabudimas**", Škema depicts a man against the background of the Soviet "univers concentrationnaire"; he attempts to bring out and emphasize the re-relativization of the moral reaction of an individual in the face of extreme situations and of imminent danger.

Antanas Škema is a writer who is essentially alive, one of those who struggles — in the words of Guillaume Apollinaire — "aux frontières de l'illimité et de l'ave-nir."