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## Review: A. Platonov, Kotlovan, trans. Mirra Ginsburg

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Falen's readings of the stories often reflect that "peculiar radiance" he perceives in Babel's own work. I am not, however, persuaded by the interpretation of Babel's film scenario "Old Square No. 4" (1939) as a satire of Stalinism that contributed to his arrest a few weeks after its completion. Babel's major work is vastly more provocative than this rather crude screenplay; scores of Babel's colleagues had died, apparently for much less, during the *Ezhovshchina*. The fact is that the obliteration of writers rarely had anything to do with the content of their work. Most often, as Ehrenburg observed, it was a "lottery." In Babel's case, his imprisonment was certainly connected with the arrest in 1939 of Ezhov; the NKVD chief had spared Babel, apparently in deference to his wife's long-time friendship with the writer.

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THE FOUNDATION PIT. By *Andrey Platonov*. Translated by *Mirra Ginsburg*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975. xiv, 141 pp. \$7.50.

In part because of his sad literary fate, Platonov's available work produces a somewhat schizophrenic impression: the sentimentally patriotic war stories published in the USSR since his death in 1951 seem written by a different person than the horrendously bleak *povesti* issued in the United States (for example, *Chevengur*, *Kotlovan*). But Platonov is more interesting for what he tells us about the Russian literary tradition. His *povesti* use a form remarkably common in Russian fiction, the folk epic with its allegorical techniques. In *The Foundation Pit* the old Slavophile dichotomies are embodied in almost totally abstract characters: the *skitalets*-Everyman Voshchev searches for meaning in the realm of intuition but encounters men who live by hollow intellect, while potential resurrection resides in an innocent girl-child. This schematism, Platonov's *ostraniia-iushchii iazyk*, and the starkness of his landscape make *The Foundation Pit* painful but moving reading.

Mirra Ginsburg has translated Bulgakov, Zamiatin, and other Soviet authors very successfully, but in this case I prefer T. P. Whitney's version (Ardis, 1973). Platonov's awkward language is designed to make the reader clamber over each phrase painfully, but, perhaps because of the influence of a commercial publisher, Ginsburg smooths it out, shortening the sentences (which causes some choppi-ness), and emphasizing the formality of bureaucratic jargon rather than its absurdity. Here is the opening paragraph:

V den' tridtsatiletiia lichnoi zhizni Voshchevu dali raschet s nebol'shogo mekhanicheskogo zavoda, gde on dobyval sredstva dlia svoego sushchestvovaniia. V uvol'nitel'nom dokumente emu napisali, chto on ustraniaetsia s proizvodstva vsledstvie rosta slabosil'nosti v nem i zadumchivosti sredi obshchego tempa truda.

Whitney:

On the day of the thirtieth anniversary of his personal life, Voshchev was given his walking papers by the small machine shop where he had been getting the means for his existence. In the document of dismissal they informed him he was being detached from production as a consequence of a growth in the strength of his weakness and of pensiveness in the midst of the general tempo of labor.

Ginsburg:

On the day when he reached the thirtieth year of his personal life Voshchev was *discharged* from the small machine factory where he had *earned* the means of his existence. The *dismissal notice* stated that he was being *separated from his job* because of his *increasing loss of powers* and tendency to *stop and think* amidst the general *flow of work*.

Whitney's use of the colloquial "walking papers" and the elaborately illogical "growth in the strength of his weakness" captures Platonov's irony; his reproduction in English of the Soviet "tempo of labor" provides a sense of the world Platonov satirizes. The Ardis edition is, furthermore, a satisfying aesthetic object, having an extraordinary cover designed by a Soviet; a profound, literary introduction by Joseph Brodsky (the Dutton translator's introduction is distressingly formulaic); and, most importantly, the original Russian text, for \$3.95 in paperback.

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TYRANTS DESTROYED AND OTHER STORIES. By *Vladimir Nabokov*.

Translated by *Dmitri Nabokov* in collaboration with *Vladimir Nabokov*. New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1975. xii, 238 pp. \$8.95.

This book is a collection of thirteen short stories. All but "The Vane Sisters" (1951) were written in the 1920s and 1930s in Berlin, Paris, and Menton. They have been translated from the Russian by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. The stories—"Tyrants Destroyed," "A Nursery Tale," "Music," "Lik," "Recruiting," "Terror," "The Admiralty Spire," "A Matter of Chance," "In Memory of L. I. Shigaev," "Bachmann," "Perfection," and "Vasily Shishkov"—are representative of Nabokov's early creative writing and form a clear foundation for his mature and better known works. Problems of literary ethics, portrayal of the clash between old Russia and the new Soviet Union, hatred of tyrants ("tygroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man" [p. 37]), the appearance of the hero's double, man's encounter with his past—all these are found in *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, as in Nabokov's later novels. Colorful characters, unusual situations, introspective intensity, dramatic effects, the atmosphere of reverie, fear, horror, or nightmare frequently prevailing over the plot, unresolved endings, suspense, ambiguity, and surprise, instances of parody, irony, and comedy, and literary allusions unmistakably point to Nabokov's artistic method. The language is poetic in its remarkable "made-strange" technique in combination with metaphors, personification, similes, hyperboles, alliterations, and synesthesia. Colors are abundant, and the aesthetic device of contrasting glittering brilliance and lusterless mistiness is typical of Nabokov's style with its chiaroscuro effect. The book is indeed a welcome addition to Nabokov's literary *oeuvre* in English.

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