

front, is blind to the most obvious fact of all: No modern ideology has proved so systematically hostile to religion as Marxism itself. Harrington tries to avoid this problem with an appeal to the "real" Marx of humanism and toleration. It is an ideological mantra, the favorite of Marxists everywhere. There is no point in entering the sectarian debate; the "other" Marx has had his theoreticians and his day. In the end, Harrington must be called to

account for his own desperate "orthodoxy." He is, as Hans Ehrenberg once said of Feuerbach, "a true child of his century": a "non-knower" (*Nichtkenner*) of death, and a "misknower" (*Verkenner*) of evil. Most of the religious lambs who lay willingly with Marxist lions have long since been devoured. Their numbers make a bitter mockery of any call, however well-intentioned, for future coalitions of this sort. □

WRITERS IN RUSSIA: 1917-1978

Max Hayward, edited and introduced by Patricia Blake
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / \$22.95

Herb Greer

The nerves of Russia are uncommonly important to us, and so are her social nuts and bolts, so far as we can spy them out across a wide linguistic and political abyss. It follows that the products of Russian writers have a special interest for the West. When a man comes along with the singular talent for opening this difficult field to us he deserves the most generous praise, and his work ought to be handled with the greatest care. In this book there is a little less care than praise. With its generous preface by Leonard Schapiro and a long, affectionate introduction by Patricia Blake, *Writers in Russia: 1917-1978* seems at first not so much a monument of scholarship as a sort of literary dolmen or cairn to Max Hayward himself.

By these accounts he was a formidable eccentric in the British tradition: a marvelous if erratic companion, brilliantly talented, something of a drunk and a depressive, and a tremendous amateur in the best sense of the word, with all his heart in his work, though lacking the careerist flair for slotting into a corporate environment. His great love was languages, of which he knew several. Among these Russian took pride of place, and with it he developed his superb gift for translation. He gave us the English versions of Nadezhda Mandelstam's great memoirs, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*; through him we know Olga Ivinskaya's *A Captive of Time: My Years with Pasternak*. He was the co-translator of *Doctor Zhivago* (in which the character of Lara was based on Ivinskaya) and of

Herb Greer is an American writer and playwright living in Europe.

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Working with others he also provided versions of writing by Mayakovsky, Isaac Babel, Yevgeny Schwartz and (among others) later authors like Andrei Amalrik and Andrei Sinyavsky.

This book is deceptively titled. It is not a long and systematic essay on twentieth-century Russian literature but a set of prefaces to other people's work. This is not to say that the material is thin or trivial; but there is an occasional oddity which appears to be the result of haste or carelessness, e.g., the opening chapter's assertion that the Russian Empire passed away with the Romanovs. In general, however, these relatively short pieces are full of the sort of detailed discussion that comes only from a man who knows his stuff. Above all they offer a good deal of useful background to the one aspect of Russian literature which colors its appearance in the West: the peculiar relationship between writers and the political fabric of society. As Hayward shows, this is not exclusive to the Communist scheme of things, but goes well back into tsarist times, at least as far as Pushkin.

Possibly our greatest problem in dealing with Russian writers is a residue of cliché which clings to the Western perception of Russians and their culture. Hayward himself is not always free of this. In the middle of his account of the Russian (nineteenth century) Empire, one stumbles across:

The most impressive testimony to the collective genius of the peasantry is the Russian language itself. None other—not even the closely related Slavic languages

—can match it in its breathtaking resourcefulness.

This type of special pleading is understandable in a man who has spent far more time inside books than among Russian peasants. Even so, Hayward might have seen that such a proposition—aside from its flimsiness on *prima facie* grounds (collective genius?)—is a stale dreg of the mystical rhetoric found in certain Russian writers of the last century, and not rare in this one. In America it was vulgarized into the image of the half-savage Russian with *soul*, so well known in the show business, popular songs, and jokes of the 1930s and 1940s. Standing outside it, Hayward might have pointed to this type of guff as a necessary reminder that we are still encumbered by a popular cartoon of the Russians as whiskered or lantern-jawed barbarians using stolen technology, the natives of a semi-Asiatic world quite apart from our own. This is not a nitty, minor point. It can help to explain, for instance, why the liquidation of tens of millions of Russians carries less emotional impact in the West than the murder of six million Jews by Middle European Germans. Feeling that life among Asiatic barbarians is cheap, the cliché-prone Westerner can hate Hitler with a virulence that does not extend to the late and bloodthirsty dictator of Russia and his system. After all, Hitler's victims were mostly from among our sort; indeed Hitler himself was one of us, and so hideously offensive in a way that Stalin was not and is not felt to be. Thus it becomes easier for

apparently sane people to excuse Stalin and even to praise him.

Another prejudice or bromide has been heavily reinforced by Western media treatment of dissenters and writers such as Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. This casts Russia as a fundamentally unstable society, seething with popular discontent and held together only by the ruthless

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pressure of a Communist elite and its ubiquitous secret police force. It follows that if this minority of brutes can be swept aside by a dissident-led movement of some kind, the mass of the Russian people will support this uprising and turn Russia into a free country just like ours. But as the word indicates, the dissidents are a minority and a small one. They are at odds not just with the Russian government and most Soviet citizens (without whose toleration and support the government could not function), but with each other. The dissident movement both inside Russia and among émigrés and exiles is complex, harboring fierce disagreements and often diametrically opposed ideas about the way Russia ought to evolve. Some of this is sketched out by Hayward in an interesting section on Solzhenitsyn and the Russian tradition, highlighting a few of the strands of debate in the dissident movement, and reminding us that some dissidents, like Solzhenitsyn, are harsh in their criticisms of Western society as well.

The editor is not very helpful in this context. Patricia Blake writes that Hayward "acted as the custodian of Russian literature in the West, until such time as it could be restored to Russia." The condescending idea that Russian writing was at some point dissected out of Russia seems absurd. The tie between a nation and its literature is not severed by the mechanics of political repression, and it is clear from Hayward's accounts that this did not happen in Russia even during the terrible Stalinist era. There is a more comprehensive treatment of the problem in *Russian Writers and Soviet Society: 1917-1978* by Hayward's colleague and drinking companion Ronald Hingley.* In a way that Hayward's anthology does not, Hingley illuminates the stabilizing factors in Soviet society, and comments:

We must avoid suggesting that all writers of the Soviet period have necessarily felt intolerably frustrated by the restrictions to which they have been subjected. Admittedly some of the best original talents have suffered unbearable psychological tension and severe cultural paralysis. However, many others have positively thrived in literature's hot-house atmosphere, as it has been well called, without being unduly exposed to successive freezes and thaws . . .

One of Hayward's anecdotes provides an unexpected sidelight on our own experience of Russian authors, partly by contrast and partly as it were by echo. This is a report of a government propaganda exercise in

1948—a poetry reading which filled the largest auditorium in Moscow. The attraction was not the theme ("Down With the [Western] Warmongers!") but the knowledge that Boris Pasternak would appear. Hayward, working for the British Embassy in Moscow at the time, was present. To the delight of the crowd Pasternak declined to speak on the official theme. Instead he recited some prewar work, which the audience knew well enough to prompt him when he forgot a line. It is hard to imagine such an audience at a Western poetry recital, even for the pop-star performances of Dylan Thomas. But there was something else besides an intimate acquaintance with and love of the poetry. Hayward's account makes it clear that the occasion had a kind of Roman excitement about it, with many there to taste the spectacle of a poet defying a government which might at any moment crush and kill him, as it had done to his friend and colleague Osip Mandelstam. (Those who entertain the idea of Russian leaders as boorish philistines who care more for guns than poetry may be interested to read Hayward's guess as to why Pasternak was not killed for his defiance. It would seem that Stalin had a kind of superstitious regard for him, which extended to others like Anna Akhmatova. These survivors did not have an easy time of it, but they did continue to produce marvelous work.)

That Roman excitement has a strong and—I sometimes think—vicious analogue in the Western media response to dissidents, especially authors. Among us writing suffers more financial exploitation than it does in Russia, where the political factor tends to dominate. But our publishers and journalists are ingenious and manage to combine the two very profitably, using publicity which presents a crude picture of the writer of quality (and only of quality) as a gladiatorial dissident. When we outside the specialist world think of Russian writing, this tends to shape our impression of these authors, and of Russian literature. It is a pity, because there is far more to this story than the questions of whether writers are spiritually and/or politically "on our side." Either by accident or design Hayward's posthumous collection is made to pander a little to the gladiatorial prejudice—but only a little. With close attention plus a bit of supplementary material (I strongly recommend Hingley's book), Americans should find this work more absorbing, richer, and more sobering than they may have imagined. □

*Random House, 1979.

THE MIDDLE OF MY TETHER: FAMILIAR ESSAYS

Joseph Epstein / W.W. Norton / \$14.95

Mark Lilla

For nearly ten years now Joseph Epstein has published a regular essay in the *American Scholar*, that remarkable quarterly he edits for the Phi Beta Kappa society. You will not have noticed his name on the cover or contents page, though, since he chooses to write under the *nom de plume* "Aristides" (a.k.a., "the Just"). I assume it was for reasons of *plume* and not of *guerre* that he originally picked up the *nom*; Epstein is a writing man, not a fighting man. And what a fine writing man he is. Like many loyal readers of the *American Scholar* I turn first to Aristides when the issue arrives, expecting to be amused and charmed. I always am. But only in rereading this latest collection have I realized what rare and valuable gifts Epstein has, and how unfortunate it is that the essays are not more widely read and appreciated. He is, as one of his own hapless students might put it in a term paper, extremely *sui generis* in his own individual way.

The subjects of his essays are not of the moment; to my knowledge he has never used his space to write about the pressing problems of nuclear strategy, surrogate motherhood, post-structural semiotic film criticism, or the Decline of Western Culture (DWC). Instead, each essay is devoted to an eternal human concern: books, the mail, clichés ("The Ephemeral Verities"), faces, names ("Onomastics, You and Me is Quits"), vulgarity, movies, memory, pens, juggling, childhood, generalizations. Beginning with reflections on a recent conversation or postcard received, Epstein knits and purls his anecdotes, selectively dropping the appropriate aphorism (by Santayana, La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne, Karl Kraus, Yogi Berra), concluding with his serious punch line buried in a clever little joke.

How might we characterize these "familiar essays"? The dust jacket puts Epstein "in a tradition that has come down to us through such writers as Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, and George Orwell." Close enough, but

Mark Lilla is Executive Editor of the Public Interest.

the blurbist misses all that is distinctly American in these essays. In his musings on face, Epstein confesses that his own mug has at various times been compared to those of Sal Mineo, Ken Berry, Walter Kaufmann, and Lee Harvey Oswald. His writing has the same composite quality, though here I would put him in more flattering Yankee company: Mark Twain (the essayist), H.L. Mencken (the serious), Ring Lardner, E.B. White, and James Thurber.

Even these comparisons don't quite fit because Epstein is writing essays in

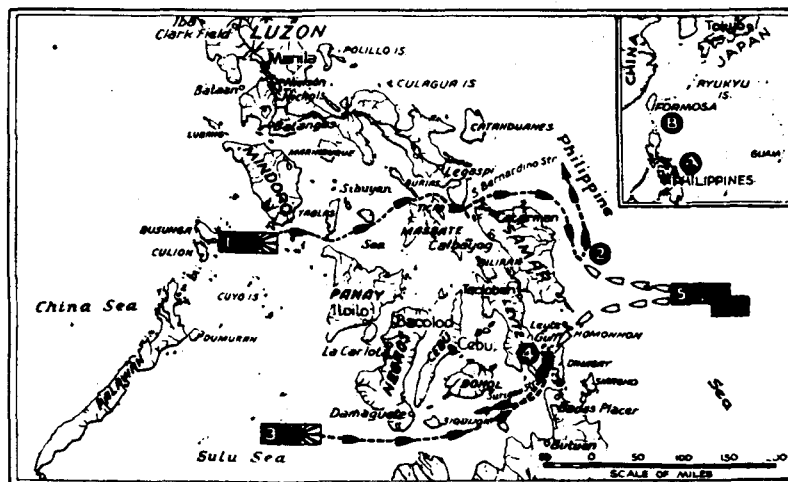
less hospitable times. We have come to distrust the cozy, knowing style Thurber and White popularized in the old *New Yorker*; the politicization of that magazine has made the first-person plural seem downright sinister ("We were talking to two Sandinista friends in Maine last weekend . . ."). The essayist also has a tough go of it in this age of the professor; he must publish in magazines that print words like "simplistic." (Why not "simplistical," or "simplisticatory," or "simplisticistical"?)

Epstein's work is all the more remarkable coming as it does from someone known to attend faculty meetings. Perhaps this is why under his stewardship the *American Scholar* has become one of our leading intellectual quarterlies: Epstein knows how the new academic barbarism can snuff out good writing, and is determined to use his pen and editorial pencil to keep the civilized essay alive. Some have wondered whether the Aristides essay belongs in the front of a serious periodical, with serious pieces by Hugh Trevor-Roper, and Richard Rorty, and

Hilton Kramer, and Jacques Barzun, and E.D. Hirsch. But *American Scholar* works in a way other literary quarterlies do not precisely because Joseph Epstein the editor is also his own ideal reader, and Aristides the writer simply presents the private musings of that reader. There would be no editor without that ideal reader.

What should the ideal *American Scholar* reader be like? He should first and foremost be comfortable with his own learning. He should be learned without being ostentatious, intellectually earnest without being tortured or pedantic, skeptical without being cynical. And he should *love* books—all books. The concerns of the bookish are Epstein's concerns: how to write a book preface; how many books to read at once; guilt from not reading enough books; guilt from reading too many books; how to stop buying so many books; is there life outside books, and if so, where can we read about it? In "Bookless in Gaza" he asks, "if there is a Heaven, will it contain books?" He concludes that it will, but in hell "there will be no actual books, but

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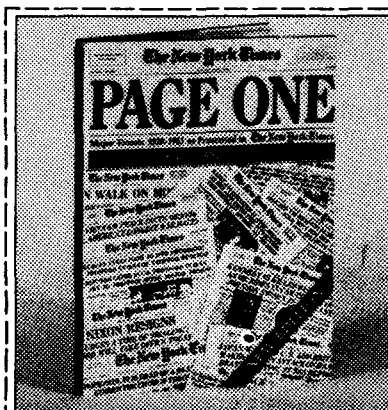
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