

Heirs of Ivan And Alyosha

PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON

HARVEST ON THE DON, by Mikhail Sholokhov. Translated by H. C. Stevens. Knopf. \$5.

Mikhail Sholokhov does not instantly satisfy one's conception of what a Russian ought to look like. Very small, features knobbly but delicate, washed-out blue eyes with a spot of ice in them, springy white hair, white mustache, he would appear quite natural coming out with the crowd from an English North Country football match. His tongue is acid, his wit is swift, his confidence is enormous. In his own Don country, he breeds hundreds of horses: he is a true Cossack. By far the most famous of living Soviet writers, he may be a great one.

I don't say this simply from reading translations of the Don novels—there have been three before *Harvest on the Don*, his first since 1935—though he is obviously a fine and strong novelist. But when I was in Moscow, all literary persons from the boss professor to the undergraduate told me that Sholokhov has used the Russian language in prose as nobody has used it before: nobody. The Russians regard him as a superbly original stylist, and insist that in translation we lose something of extreme importance from his work. With Tolstoi, they say, we lose little: the style itself is so simple that we are able to grasp the great internal impetus without trouble. As for Dostoevski, his style often bordered on journalese. Translation allows us to get to the core of these two, and, aesthetically speaking, we miss little; we get most of the greatness.

But Moscow intellectuals, who today are interested and excited by questions of style, despair of conveying to us just how good Sholokhov really is. Apparently he uses the dialects of the Don Basin in a new way: his prose is racy, edged, ingenious, with overtones of lyric and folk poetry.

Mr. H. C. Stevens's translation of

March 2, 1961

49

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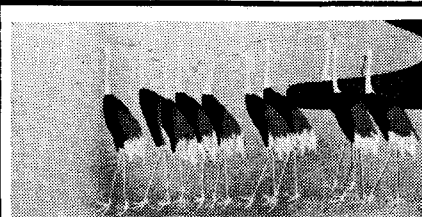
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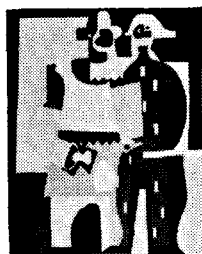
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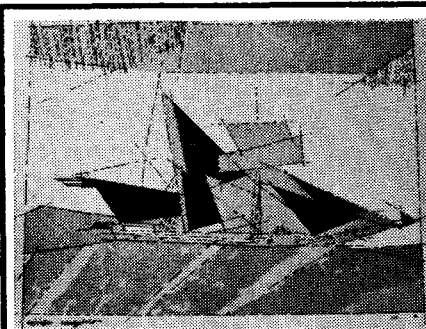
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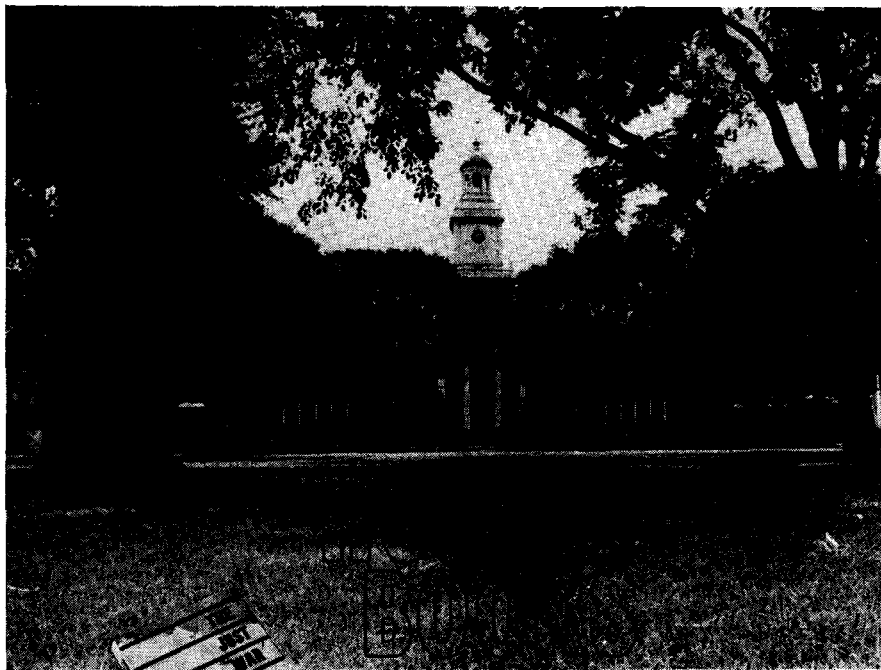
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Harvest on the Don seems to be a workmanlike job; yet almost nothing of stylistic interest comes through. Perhaps it can't. Perhaps that is our hard luck. But the vigor, the bite, the flavor of a countryside and of the men of 1930 struggling to make the new collective farms work—these things come over all right; and so does that curious wildness of spirit, that deep-rooted clowning spirit, so Russian, so engaging, and so strange.

I was lucky enough, last June, to be at the first night of *The Brothers Karamazov* at the Moscow Art Theatre. The entire intellectual world of Moscow seemed to be there, excited, delighted, but afraid of a shift of emphasis that might unbalance the entire feeling of the book. There was no need to fear. It was forcefully and honorably done: Father Zossima was a figure of great dignity, Alyosha a figure of integrity and sweetness; Ivan, the intellectual unbeliever, was given no more than his fair share. Afterward, at a party, I listened to the talk. I remember a distinguished writer throwing up joyful hands and crying, "We are all the heirs of Ivan Karamazov!" He paused, then added, "Yes, but we must not forget—we are the heirs of Alyosha too."

In Sholokhov's novels, both sets of genes are apparent. Davidov, the ex-sailor now chairman of a collective farm, is totally committed to the Revolution, and indeed would be something of an ass if he were not, in the circumstances: at this stage, revolt is limited to a pair of pathetic anti-revolutionaries voluntarily imprisoning themselves in the attic of a dissident farmer. Davidov is a simple soul in some ways. His sex life is on the trying side, since he is ensnared by a disreputable girl who cares no more for her reputation than for his. He labors among people who, when they don't support him, merely put up with him. When the women won't get in the harvest because they want to go to Mass, he arranges for them to do their job first, after which he sends them off to church in wagons. He is a perfectly ordinary young man, with a streak of extraordinary common sense. His sympathies are with Ivan: in his heart, there remains a touch of Alyosha.

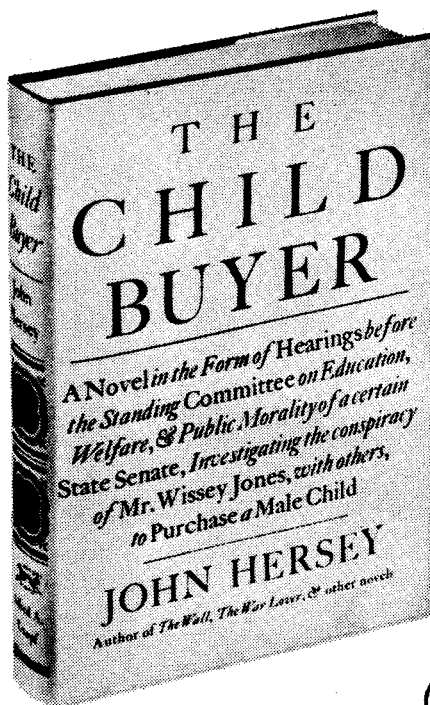
It isn't with Davidov, however,

that Sholokhov is most successful. He is superb with an aged and privileged clown to whom nothing is forbidden, not even to hog the solemn meeting at which new members are admitted to the party. (The Russians venerate age. I was asked by a professor of French, a woman, "Why do you in the West so admire Françoise Sagan?" Entering the caveat that I didn't, I explained that this was part of the cult of youth. "Ah," she said, with her little Jane Austen smile, "that's a cult we don't have here.")

Sholokhov has a wonderful scene in which the two anti-revolutionaries, who have managed to stock up a pitiful supply of arms—about enough to hold up a chicken coop—are at last cornered by a White colonel, who demands that they reconquer the whole district. It is pathetic, it is funny, it is heart-rending. They are in no position to conquer anything, but they dare not admit as much. Trapped in their horrible attic, they have no option but to accede to the impossible, knowing it will bring them to their deaths.

I know no Russian, apart from a few courtesies, so I cannot speak further about the translation, except to say that it has flow and force but suggests no particular stylistic virtue on the author's part. I could, I think, fault one word. An old man, raving on about schoolteachers, refers to "these scientists." The word should be "scholars." One of the happiest moments I had in Moscow, when I was in the Institute of World Literature, was to hear myself referred to as "Scientist Johnson," in reference to some work I had done on Marcel Proust. In Russia, a "scientist" is a scholar, or "somebody who knows." I must say I think two cultures might be bridged with greater ease if we adopted the same usage.

Sholokhov is, I am sure, in the first rank of modern writers. Of course, the Russians have been fortunate. Their literary tradition is so great that they have never, even in the most difficult and doctrinaire of their days, entirely lost touch with it. I suspect that it may be easier for them than for any of us to build a great literature again. I read a story of Tvardovsky's the other day, called "Stovemakers," of which Chekhov might have been proud: a human story, funny, delicate, humane, no



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more political than one of Maupassant's *Contes de la Bécasse*. In Soviet writing, Ivan may be paramount but Alyosha is there still. I suspect that he will always be there. «»

Mr. Hawthorne's Nosebleeds

KENNETH S. LYNN

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE: MAN AND WRITER, by Edward Wagenknecht. Oxford University Press. \$5.50.

Professor Wagenknecht's study of Hawthorne is neither a biography nor a critical work. It is, rather, what he calls a "psychograph," by which he means a study of Hawthorne's character and personality, as revealed in his fiction, letters, and journals, and in all that has been written about him. Disavowing that psychography has anything to do with psychoanalysis, the author takes not Freud but Sainte-Beuve as his literary model.

The quality of Hawthorne's personality that comes through most strongly in this portrait of an artist is his elusiveness. With Hawthorne, one is never quite sure about anything. Even about his physical appearance there was little general agreement among those who knew him. Although Thoreau judged him "rather puny-looking," James Russell Lowell thought he looked like a hawk, and when Henry James, Sr., encountered him at the Saturday Club he saw in his face "the look of a rogue who suddenly finds himself in a company of detectives." Yet this rogue impressed so many people as being of a feminine nature that, as Longfellow remarked, one spoke when he was in the room as if in the presence of a woman.

As for his temperament, his wife called the author of *The Scarlet Letter* and other moonlit tales "our sunshine" and "the light of his home." His daughter Rose described him as "radiant," while his other daughter Una recalled in later life that "he was capable of being the very gayest person I ever saw. He was like a boy.

Never was such a playmate as he in all the world." To Margaret Fuller he confessed that he found the earth so full of beauty he never wished to leave it. However, Fredrika Bremer, the Scandinavian novelist, noticed a "bitter expression" in his smile, while one of his cousins testified that wherever he went "he carried twilight within him." And Hawthorne himself seems to have been deeply distressed by the gloominess of many of his stories, to the point where he actually burned several because they were morbid.

In an early essay, Hawthorne proclaimed that "Man is naturally a sociable being; not formed for himself alone, but destined to bear a part in the great scheme of nature. All his pleasures are heightened, and all his griefs are lessened, by participation." To this credo he adhered all his life. At college he was known for his conviviality. At Brook Farm he would sit up talking till well past midnight, even with "poor Mr. Farley" who was "quite out of his wits." At Lenox he and his wife were "in the center of society." As consul at Liverpool he was a smiling public man who delivered after-dinner speeches in "a masterly manner." On the other hand, the famous period of self-imposed solitude following his graduation from Bowdoin ("... for months together, I scarcely held human intercourse outside of my own family; seldom going out except at twilight, or only to take the nearest way to the most convenient solitude which was oftenest the seashore") was by no means a passing mood. "The freest conversation," declared Mrs. Longfellow, "did not thaw forth more than a monosyllable" from Hawthorne. On trips he liked out-of-the-way hotels, and preferred simply to be registered as the "friend" of his traveling companion. He had a passion for observing other people, but he hated to feel the eyes of others upon himself. As his wife admitted after his death, "I never dared to gaze at him, even I, unless his lids were down. It seemed an invasion into a holy place."

Like Twain and Whitman, Hawthorne had a deep capacity for indolence. Preferring a slower, drifting rhythm, he mocked the hustle and bustle of the age. Politics in particu-