

The Underground Men

***Death of a Simple Giant and Other Modern Yugoslav Stories*, edited by Branko Lenski (Vanguard, 306 pp. \$5.95), introduces members of a new literary generation who are chiefly concerned with the recent history that has made their country a modern nation. Thais Lindstrom teaches Russian and comparative literature at Sarah Lawrence College.**

By THAIS S. LINDSTROM

YUGOSLAVIA is like a palimpsest. Crouched between the Alps and the Adriatic shoreline, it has received layer upon layer of occupation, ideology, religion, and empire, until the sharp crack of the shot at Sarajevo let loose the holocaust out of which the small, new, sharply individual state was born.

It is the suffering of the people smothered for 300 years under successive layers of absolutism that Ivo Andric, one of the first modern writers from Tito's Yugoslavia, dramatized in his Nobel Prize-winning novel *The Bridge on the Drina*, and to American readers he is the best-known.

The new generation of writers, grown up in the Communist era, has not followed Andric's lead. What figures crucially in their fiction is the recent reality that has wrought Yugoslavia into a modern nation. Among them Miodrag Bulatovic, only in his midthirties but considered in Western Europe as a leading avant-garde writer, Branko Copic, prolific short-story writer, and Ciril Kosmac are reliving in their work their harrowing and heroic experiences of partisan resistance of fascism. They belong to the so-called "war-obsessed" school.

In this latest literary testimony from Yugoslavia, a collection of some fifteen short stories, *The Death of a Simple Giant*, by Ciril Kosmac, and the *Shepherdess*, by Mihailo Lalic, again bring back into sharp focus the effect of the perilous resistance days. The Giant, a harmless rustic idiot, "God's child, born with a dark cloud over his mind," who is taken care of by the villagers, is strafed by a low-flying plane, and because of his bulk and strength takes marvelously long to die. His impending passion is brought out forcefully against the background of terror which the villagers obdurately ignore in their tenacious pursuit of everyday chores and even pleasures.

The shepherd girl in Lalic's story carries messages to the partisans, is captured by Cetnik (quisling) sentinels, and, in a feat of extraordinary stoicism and dedication to her mission, exhibits only contempt for the jailers who torture and finally hang her. This tale told at white heat is as terse and compelling as any that has been created from the legends of resistance movements in Europe.

In antithesis to writers still haunted by the numberless unmarked graves in Yugoslav forests, a silent tribute to the four years of the fight against fascism, is the new group of "psychologists," led by Desnica, Doncevic, Marinkovic, and Voranc. They speak for present-day Yugoslavia, mutating from a predominantly agricultural country to a modern nation. Stories by these writers that appear in this collection are centered around urban derelicts who have become detached too quickly from their village collective; they languish in the towns searching for a new identity. Incapable of finding it, they experience a new kind of loneliness, and within it the slightest external trifle takes on the dis-

torted exaggeration of a Kafkaesque nightmare. Their only escape is into dreams, and their dreams begin to intrude on the grey and stifling reality of their lives.

Such an "underground man" is the *Insect Collector* drawn by Ivan Doncevic, who in the evenings avenges himself for slights received or imagined during his office day by identifying the offender with the horse fly, dung beetle, or hornet which he impales on pins in his cardboard collection box. Yet more distorted is the story *Ashes*, by Ranko Marinkovic, which moves around a theme of festering frustration bred in morose and idle solitude. Tonko, jilted by a girl eleven years ago, feeds his jealous fantasies with plans of revenge. When she sends for him to become godfather to her newborn son, he sets out with a gift-wrapped box containing a bomb that he has decided to place in the baby's crib; the tale ends with a Pirandellian twist as Tonko loses all grip on reality when he reaches his destination. The neuroses of the uprooted, inarticulate, and lost "little" man hopelessly shut into a world of growing hallucinations and terror are as relentlessly chartered in the monologue of *The Lovers*, by Bulatovic. In the face of an incomprehensible and dehumanized world, the hero's limited, factual mentality gradually crumbles; he attempts to fight his way back to reality by beating his wife to death, and the account of his disintegration ends in a mad-

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Not only was Charles Dickens a master of eloquently written death scenes; he was rather prolific in ways and means of killing off his characters. Listed below are the names of fifteen characters from ten of the novels, and the fifteen deaths they died. R. B. Stone of Durham, New Hampshire, feels that you should have no trouble placing each character in the right novel, but challenges you to assign to each victim the correct cause of death. The coroner's report is on page 43.

- | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Barkis | () accidentally hanged | () <i>Bleak House</i> |
| 2. Stephen Blackpool | () beaten to death | () <i>David Copperfield</i> |
| 3. Carker | () burned to death | () <i>Dombey and Son</i> |
| 4. Sydney Carton | () chest injuries | () <i>Great Expectations</i> |
| 5. Jonas Chuzzlewit | () decapitated | () <i>Hard Times</i> |
| 6. Lady Dedlock | () drowned in the Thames | () <i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> |
| 7. Miss Havisham | () exhaustion and exposure | () <i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> |
| 8. Krook | () fatally injured by a fall | () <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> |
| 9. Abel Magwitch | () "He went out with the tide" | () <i>Oliver Twist</i> |
| 10. Nancy | () ill-usage and consumption | () <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> |
| 11. Ralph Nickleby | () poison, self-administered | |
| 12. Daniel Quilp | () railroad accident | |
| 13. Bill Sikes | () shipwrecked and drowned | |
| 14. Smike | () spontaneous combustion | |
| 15. Steerforth | () suicide by hanging | |

ness that is streaked with Gothic horror.

It is to be regretted that the editor, Branko Lenski, has included from Ivo Andric's many admirable tales only *Neighbors*, which illustrates his facility in a genre antithetical to the saga-like texture of his best novel. Artistically, this story is a gem apart. The conscious debt to Turgenev's famous eavesdropping approach and to the other great pioneer of the short story, Anton Chekhov, in the use of the muffled ending, only heightens Andric's own power in keeping taut and exciting a flashback that telescopes a lifetime drama within six pages of seemingly irrelevant dialogue.

On the whole this collection adds little that is new to contemporary letters. Two world wars, with their aftermath of the collapse of traditional social frameworks, and the new breed of urban man spawned by a technological age are themes that have been explored time and again by writers in the West. The novelty is only in the setting and the names. The craftsmanship of these younger Yugoslav writers is for the most part uncertain: primarily concerned with content, they tend to neglect technique and plunge along at a rapid, compulsive pace after the idea. And the idea is derivative, particularly in the work of the "psychologist" group. Their analyses of the obsessive manias of modern urban man

persistently recall pages from Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Céline. The positive image that does emerge is the present personality of this new socialist state. Its iconoclastic political stand is reflected in these stories by the glaring and gratifying absence of the "new positive hero" who lives to serve the Party's purposes and whose doctrinaire conformism dominates Soviet literature. In this respect the independence of Yugoslav writers appears to be as dramatic and invigorating as is the independence of Tito in relation to the rest of the Communist world.

No Peace Outside Yourself: "Take care of your life! Take good care! Don't waste it. For this, now, is your time on earth."

This command—melancholy, pagan, and as simply styled as Swedish silverware—is the theme of a newly translated 1963 novel by Sweden's sixty-seven-year-old Carl Artur Vilhelm Moberg. One of Sweden's pre-eminent contemporary writers, his American following has thus far been limited to a few devotees and members of the American Scandinavian Foundation.

A Time on Earth (translated by Naomi Walford, Simon & Schuster, \$4.50) should attract new fans to Moberg, and enhance his stature here as it has in Scandinavia. In marked contrast to the detailed epic manner of his best-known novels, the art of this book is as spare and lean as a long-distance runner and as fast-moving as a sprinter.

The narrator is Albert Carlson, né Karlsson, a pensive Swede who emigrated to Michigan in 1920 and became successful and unhappy in real estate. He is a two-time loser at marriage and a failure as the father of two mature sons who don't need him. He has just closed out a brief business venture growing oranges in Southern California and now broods about his lonely future. Solitary strolls along the Pacific shore bring relief from the anxieties of money, Cuba, atom bombs, and earthquakes. But the power of renewal is lost for the old immigrant; the days have come when he no longer experiences anything that seems to him worth experiencing.

His thoughts frequently reach back to his childhood in Småland, a south-central Swedish province, and the tragic life of his treasured older brother, Sigfrid, who enlisted in the King's army, was sent home after sixty days, and died within the year. The mystery of Sigfrid's death gives the novel its pace, and the mentor-student relationship of the brothers provides a Bergmanesque platform for the meaning-of-life, meaning-of-death theme.

Moberg expresses a prevalent Nordic attitude toward the vicissitudes of contemporary life. In sinewy prose, skillfully

constructed, he warns the reader: Seek no peace outside yourself.

—WILLIAM S. JOHNSON.

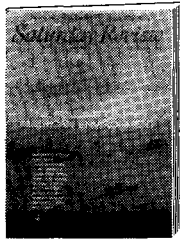
Rob Your Way to Salvation: The satirical point of Michel Servin's *Deo Gratias* (translated by Anthony and Llewela Burgess, St. Martin's, \$3.95) lurks somewhere among the following paradoxes: No matter how repulsively a man makes his living, he can rationalize it to himself as not only acceptable but even admirable . . . Although an amoral atheist may offend heinously against the laws of his God, he can still feel the beauty and spiritual comfort of religion (perhaps *only* then can he feel these things fully) . . . Some who have stolen and cheated their way to affluence try to make restitution by returning part of the booty to their victims and, in this way, achieve as serene a sense of grace as if they had always lived a life of sanctity . . . And, finally, none are so jealous of an institution's reputation and probity as those who plunder it.

Satire aside, if Michel Servin had wanted to give his novel an explicatory subtitle, it might well have been *Quam ab ecclesia furtum facere et salutem recipere* ("How to Steal from the Church and Win Salvation"). For his is largely a how-to-do-it book that describes in the most niggling detail the hundreds of ways in which one can make a handsome living by pilfering from the donative boxes in the churches of Paris. The anti-hero does his work first by day and then by night, poking around through the box openings with all manner of mechanical devices, like sharpened and twisted bicycle spokes with which to impale and fish out the bills, and sticks with string and hunks of chewed caramel toffee attached (chocolate toffee gets too crumbly too soon) with which to draw out the coins.

He extends his operations to include decorative finials, gilded cherubs, altar cloths, and other removables in the holy interiors; and all the while he is so truly reverent (never did a man seem to pray with such feeling) and so carefully prescient that, in all the years of his career, he has but two narrow escapes. As he gets more adept he becomes more greedy, and goes from the churches to libraries, postoffices, and other public buildings, even perfecting a riskless technique for snatching purses from prostitutes after posing as their gentleman of the hour.

There is no question in the reviewer's mind that this winner of the Prix International de Premier Roman and the Grand Prix de Littérature Rhodanienne has overdone the how-to nature of his latest opus by a whale of a lot. Even Melville gave us more cetology than we needed or wanted along with the story of Ahab and Moby Dick, and Servin is no Melville. —NICHOLAS SAMSTAG.

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