

# Victim of His Own Might

***The Taste of Power*, by Ladislav Mňacko, translated from the Slovak by Paul Stevenson (Praeger, 235 pp. \$5.95), portrays a Communist chief of state who seems more a victim than a victimizer of his gray and embittered society. Robert L. Stilwell is a member of the Department of English at the University of Michigan.**

By ROBERT L. STILWELL

ABOUT certain novels we are compelled to feel, rightly or wrongly, that their largest significance belongs as much to the history of politics as to the realm of literature. Such works are animated, however tacitly, by the pieties and passions of ideological systems. They show us characters committed to, or in some manner involved with, those pieties and passions. And their advent is more often than not converted into an extraliterary occasion.

The classical tradition of these "political" novels, as Irving Howe has demonstrated in his book *Politics and the Novel*, may be said to extend from Stendhal, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky in the nineteenth century to Malraux, Silone, Koestler, and Orwell in the twentieth. During the past decade or so, however, the most publicized of such fictions have come from writers in the Soviet Union or in the Communist societies of Eastern Europe. Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw*, Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Petru Dumitriu's *Incognito*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—most readers in the West will be able to assemble their own open-ended list of titles.

*The Taste of Power*, by the Czech journalist and novelist Ladislav Mňacko, is among the most recent of these works and the latest to become available in English. It is a post-mortem inquiry into the career of "the head of the government" in an East European state; its force and innovative nature derive mainly from its exposure of the ironic discrepancies between the public conduct and private motives of this individual, who throughout is identified only as "the statesman" or "the great man." During the three days of listless public mourning before his official funeral, the statesman's sloppy drinking, his lechery, his greed for more and more authority,

his growing paranoia—all are relentlessly brought to light through the memories and conversations of his closest boyhood friend, a professional photographer named Frank. It is Frank who serves, rather like the newsreel reporter in *Citizen Kane*, as a catalyst for the complaints of various people who were used or abused by the dead leader. And from these complaints there emerges, cumulatively, the picture of a far from attractive yet curiously human figure, for whom the taste of power had slowly turned into the taste of gall.

The Oxford scholar Max Hayward, in his foreword to the present edition, suggests that by the outspokenness of its indictments Mňacko's novel "goes far beyond anything hitherto published in Russia or anywhere else in Eastern Europe." In my opinion this is true (although I might draw back from employing the word "far"). Mňacko renders a gray and embittered society, a society in which revolutionary idealism has hardened into a totalitarianism that makes the late chief of state seem less a victimizer than a victim. At one point he displays a band of Soviet army stragglers who have become thugs indistinguishable from the Nazis they once fought. And in the person of Galovitch, the dead leader's principal rival for power, he presents a Party functionary who is not only brutal and boorish but a fool.

Regrettably, Hayward is also forced to note that unspecified pressures have delayed the publication of a complete text of the work in Czechoslovakia. But in our time any untrammeling of the creative spirit surely furnishes cause for gratification; and the very existence of *The Taste of Power* represents, if not exactly a liberation of that spirit, at least another liberalizing.

What seems likely to depress many readers is the generally undistinguished quality of Mňacko's writing. His basic plot-premise—the piecing together of the life of a powerful public figure following his death—is embarrassingly hackneyed; nor does that life ever become much more than the thinnest sort of scenario. Coincidences multiply shamelessly; flashbacks are handled in

a wooden and creaking manner, and the narrative is consistently flat and gritty. Moreover, either the author or his translator appears to have reached almost invariably for the first cliché of idiom or idea that lay at hand. Characters are forever sowing the seeds of suspicion, making themselves scarce, heaving sighs of relief, or realizing that "Power . . . is neither good nor bad in itself—it depends on the man and how he uses it."

Ultimately, the controlling lesson of the entire novel would seem to be the hoary truism that power can imprison a man and corrupt him to the bone, regardless of the ideological sphere within which he gains it. That Mňacko's less than admirable central character was unmistakably a Stalinist, and that Mňacko has been able to dissect him while retaining his personal allegiances to the Czech Communist Party, are facts that confer a measure of interest upon this truism in its present incarnation. Nevertheless, it remains a monumental banality; and as such it does little to illuminate either the art of fiction or the desperately problematical condition of modern politics.

## Deeds in the Mind

***The Apple in the Dark*, by Clarice Lispector, translated from the Portuguese by Gregory Rabassa (Knopf, 361 pp. \$5.95), the story of a fleeing criminal and two isolated women, demonstrates the treacherous power of words over thought. Richard Franko Goldman translated from the Portuguese Eça de Queiroz's "The Mandarin and Other Stories."**

By RICHARD FRANKO GOLDMAN

BRAZILIAN writers have been part of international literature ever since Machado de Assis, and today the number of interesting poets, novelists, and essayists in that country is impressive. Many are comparatively well known to American and English readers, but Clarice Lispector, who must be considered among the most accomplished of contemporary novelists writing in Portuguese, has remained almost unknown here. Miss Lispector, born in 1924 in the Ukraine (while her parents were en route to Brazil), published her first novel at the age of nineteen, and has been highly regarded in her adopted land for the past twenty years or more. *The Apple in the Dark*, published in Brazil in 1961, is her fourth novel, and the first to appear in English.

A fascinating and distinguished work, it more than explains the esteem in  
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# For Whom Do They Write?

By ZENA SUTHERLAND

IT'S ALWAYS delightful to read an impassioned plea by a stranger who expresses just what *you* think. What perspicacity! What intelligence! What this means is that I have just seen an article by Carolyn Heilbrun (*Publishers' Weekly*, July 10), in which she appeals for more and better books for young people, urges the abolition of Victorian fiction for the high school, and suggests that literary quality and accessibility might produce adolescent book-buyers.

Mrs. Heilbrun has three children, and she is an assistant professor of English literature at Columbia University. The first time I saw an article by her I was intrigued, although not completely in agreement. That time she claimed that more children had read Gilbreth and Carey's *Cheaper by the Dozen* (Crowell, \$4.50) and Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (Doubleday, \$3.50) than all the children's novels of any one year—and that there wasn't a librarian living who would have suggested either of them, if anybody had thought to ask.

Well, it all depends on the librarian; some of them are aware of children's reading tastes. Mrs. Heilbrun's statistics I can't dispute, although they seem suspiciously sweeping. There's no doubt, however, that young teen-agers like this kind of book, a humorous chronicle of family life, just as they have taken for their own many of the autobiographical accounts by those physically handicapped. Mrs. Heilbrun claims, in her more recent article, that many of the books designated by publishers as teenage books are too young for the intended consumer and that many of them are mediocre.

I can't wholly agree that "No one who has known Jane Eyre's passion, or Heathcliff's, is going to settle for the shatteringly mundane adventures of Jane Smith from Cooksville High." First, many voracious readers—young or old—can enjoy reading at different levels of quality; second, young people are passionately interested in the present and in the problems peculiar to their age in that present. Third, one cannot assume that no good books have been written for the adolescent or the pre-adolescent about a Jane Smith in a small town. There are more puerile than good ones, true, but the good do exist.

Mrs. Heilbrun's dark suspicion is that "publishers are producing all their young

people's books for libraries and schools, which now buy 75 to 95 per cent of them, or for Grandma's gift hunting, or for tots who want to look at magnificent illustrations while being read to." In a recent meeting the president of the Children's Book Council, Seth Agnew, said there were two answers to the topic of the day, "Children's Books: Who Is the Audience?": that librarians think the books are published for book-sellers, and book-sellers think the books are published for librarians.

One can't deny that authors and editors want their books to sell, but surely one must concede that many, many of them are thinking of the young people who will read the books. Some books really are produced not for libraries or bookstores but for enjoyment by individuals. Phyllis Whitney, in *Writing Juvenile Fiction* (The Writer, Inc., \$3.50), says, in the chapter advising the neophyte to consider the demands of each age group, "Last of all, we have the 'twelve and up' group. As a matter of fact, many of the books in this group are read by ten- and eleven-year-olds, but it is simpler to refer to the teen-agers. Sometimes a publisher's blurb on a jacket will refer to the book as being for the 'older teens.' This is either wishful thinking, or an effort to flatter younger readers into being interested in the book. The 'older teens' are reading Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. [This was 1947.] Don't try to fool yourself by claiming them for an audience. Concentrate on the twelve-thirteen-fourteen ages and confine yourself to their interests."

Seems to me the thing to remember is that young people's interests are enormously wide and variable. I confess that at the age of twelve I was on a Galsworthy binge, still read the Marjorie Maynard books, and devoured anything with a medical background whether I understood it or not. Book lovers learn to discriminate, and an occasional re-

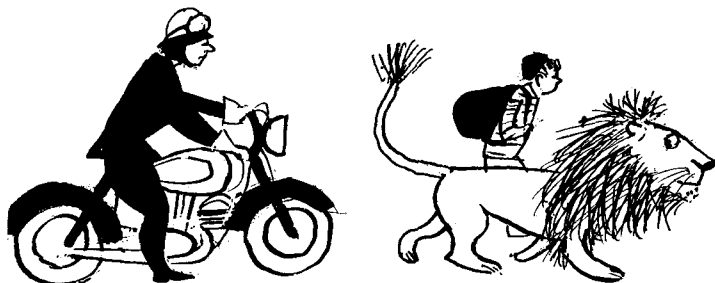
lapse seldom does permanent damage.

A wonderful example is the anecdote with which Annis Duff begins *Longer Flight* (Viking, \$3.50). Her adolescent daughter was leaving the library, and a teacher asked if one of the books she was carrying wasn't too old for her little brother. She was taking the book for herself, she explained. "You were reading that book in third grade." "Once a good book always a good book, and I'm going to read it again." Later she told her parents, "The funny thing is that he said these other two were too old for me!"

**The Four Clever Brothers.** By the Brothers Grimm. Illustrated by Felix Hoffmann. Harcourt, Brace & World. 32 pp. \$4.50. Sent out into the world to learn a trade, each of four brothers became skilled: one was a thief, one a stargazer, one a hunter, and the youngest a tailor. When the King's daughter was carried off by a dragon, her rescue was effected by the combined talents of the brothers. Unable to agree on whose effort was most important, they relinquished the hand of the princess, and each accepted a fourth of the kingdom. The familiar tale is illustrated to perfection with softly colored pictures that are beautifully designed and humorous in detail. Ages 5-8.

**The Happy Lion's Vacation.** By Louise Fatio. Illustrated by Roger Duvoisin. McGraw-Hill. 32 pp. \$2.95. Amiable as ever, the Happy Lion goes off for a beach picnic with his friend François, the zookeeper's son. Unfortunately, the ticket-seller for trains and the ticket-seller for bus rides have the same reaction: "You understand, there is no rule that says you can't. But, on the other hand, there is no rule that says you can." The Happy Lion quietly decides that he and his friend must walk. Arrested the next day while hitchhiking, they escape and go for a ride in the town-fair balloon, which is carried out to sea in a storm. François is rescued by a ship, the Happy Lion by Eskimos, but finally they are reunited, and then they go home. This is a pleasantly bland and lightly amusing tall tale, nicely complemented by the funny illustrations. Ages 5-8.

**The Honeybees.** By Franklin Russell. Illustrated by Colette Portal. Knopf. 30 pp. \$3.95. In this lovely picture book the life cycle of a honeybee colony is factually yet poetically depicted. "They reach out of sight into pastel halls where the light of the sky is dim/To suck the sweet drops of nectar which they will transform into honey.



—From "The Happy Lion's Vacation."