and it was the literature: the pre-1917 period, for example, is covered in twelve pages. The approach is mainly biographical, with a marked weakness for gossip. Thus, the story of Libedinskii's wife is given much more space than his writings, and we learn more about the prices which the works of Solzhenitsyn, Mandelstam, and Bulgakov command on the black market than about the works themselves.

The organization of the book is incredibly haphazard. A section on Il'f and Petrov digresses in mid-paragraph to Kataev's *Rastratchiki* because, you see, Kataev and Petrov were brothers. The chapter on Soviet poetry, 1920–41, arranges its material into the following sections (none more than three pages long): Tikhonov, Bednyi, Bezymenskii; Aseev; Briusov and Others (Khodasevich, Kliuev, Bagritskii, Sel'vinskii, Platonov, Pavel Vasil'ev, and Voloshin); Mandelstam; Akhmatova; Tsvetaeva (where incidentally, both *Remeslo* and *Posle Rossii* are omitted from the list of her major works). Zabolotskii gets six worthless lines; Aleksandr Prokof'ev gets thirteen immediately above. The two paragraphs on Merezhkovsky end: "Merezhkovsky was not, however, in a class with two of the influential essayists of the day, Vasilii Rozanov and Lev Shestov, both of whom were later to interest D. H. Lawrence," but neither Rozanov nor Shestov is mentioned elsewhere in the text.

It should also be pointed out that much of the discussion is derivative. The section on Aseev (pp. 86–87) is so closely modeled on that in Zavalishin's *Early Soviet Writers* (pp. 230–31) as to raise suspicions of plagiarism; the garbled account of Leonov's first two novels (pp. 41–42) also seems to have been based on a misreading of Zavalishin (pp. 305–6) rather than of Leonov. The alterations are almost as revealing: useful comment has been dropped and empty verbiage substituted. One of the few original judgments concerns Ehrenburg's "extremely interesting *Padenie Parizha* (1941–42)" with which he "reached the pinnacle of his pre-war fame in 1940."

The book contains many elementary blunders: like Platonov (see above), Shklovsky is classed as a poet (p. 34); Ol'ga Forsh's *Sumasshedshii korabl'* is listed among novels on "safe" Soviet themes (p. 57); Pushkin's "Prorok" appears to be attributed to Pasternak (p. 125); Solzhenitsyn's "Pir pobeditelei" is stated as having been read in "countless typewritten copies in sub-rosa gatherings of Solzhenitsyn's admirers in [Russia]—and staged in the West" (p. 144). But perhaps it is best to end with two quotations to indicate the level of "discussion": "Pil'nyak was not always appreciated by the critics, who—as everyone knows—function in the Soviet Union on a somewhat official basis" (p. 48); "the roots of dissidence go far back, are deep and wondrous, and simply cannot be stamped out" (p. 166).

One could go on, but to deal with all the errors and omissions, the trivializations, misunderstandings, and unattributed borrowings would require a review as long as the book. I doubt whether it deserves even this much.

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ISAAC BABEL: RUSSIAN MASTER OF THE SHORT STORY. By *James E. Falen*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974. xiii, 270 pp. $9.75.

Surely nothing comes harder to the critic than the celebration of an irreproachable work of art. The lapses and failures that commonly afflict the artist are easy,

and, all too often, gratifying to set forth. Moreover, they handily serve the critic who may fix upon the blemishes in order to illuminate worthier features by contrast and indirection. But what to do about Isaac Babel who presents a manifestly flawless surface?

James E. Falen has performed an act of celebration. Edward J. Brown has called his study of Babel "a labor of great love." And, as befits such a labor, Falen has worked unobtrusively, never giving way to the grandiloquence, the critical contrivances, the pedantry, or any of the other conceits that literary scholars and critics have devised to compete with their subject instead of serving it. With modest eloquence, grounded in solid scholarship, Falen has accomplished the rarest of feats: the demonstration of the greatness of a great artist. Even readers who require no persuasion as regards Babel are bound to be moved and informed by this book. If it has a fault it is also Babel's; its very excellence may serve to discourage others from engaging one of the most challenging, and, until Falen, one of the most forbidding topics in twentieth-century Russian literature.

It is now up to the reviewer to demonstrate the excellence of Falen's study in this brief space—a vain endeavor, given the density of the materials that are subject to scrutiny in this book. In a half-dozen chapters the biographical thread is discreetly interwoven (but never confounded) with the subject of the stories, while the author secures it to the geographical and historical frame. Springing from this rich texture are Falen's first stunning critical intuitions which are elaborated later in the chapters devoted to close readings of the texts. The first chapter, "Early Years," touches immediately upon the central elements of Babel's genius. For example, of Babel's childhood experience of Odessa pogroms, reflected in "The Story of My Dovecote" and "First Love," Falen writes: "What Babel is describing is a kind of awakening, the emergence through contact with violence of a sense of spiritual and sexual power."

In two particularly compelling chapters, "Literary Apprenticeship" and "The Odessa Tales: An Introduction," Falen shows that Babel's fascination for violence, death, sexuality, and the blind chaos of his era called for certain stringencies of style and ambiguities of tone. Unlike Patricia Carden who, in her study of Babel, perceives a clear moral intent, Falen classes Babel with Chekhov in the deliberate avoidance (or consummate concealment) of moral judgments. Babel's method, Falen notes, "becomes increasingly ambiguous with regard to his personal attitudes, and his technique becomes an ever more direct assault upon the reader's sensibility." Falen develops one important aspect of this ambiguity: the Jewish tradition and culture which both bound and alienated Babel. "In Benya Krik," Falen writes, "Babel tried to create a figure who would embody the liberation for which he himself was searching." Indeed, who else but Babel, writing in the immediate postrevolutionary period, would have had the joyous effrontery to present a Jewish gangster from Odessa as a liberating force? In a far darker vein, another type of killer, the Cossack, emerges in Babel's work to fulfill the same liberating function. Falen observes, quite correctly, that Babel did in some measure welcome the upheavals and the destruction of revolution and civil war, though scarcely in the orthodox mode. The main point, however, is that although chaos inspired hope in Babel, it was, as Falen notes, "a desperate hope" pointing to "a profound sense of social alienation in the man that holds it." In this connection, I am hard put to accept one of Falen's rare simplistic formulas, to the effect that Babel had a "deep self-sacrificing commitment to revolutionary ideals."

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 *ostraniaiushchii 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 choppiness), 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*.