TOLSTOY'S EPIC VISION: A STUDY OF *WAR AND PEACE* AND *ANNA KARENINA*. By *Harry J. Mooney, Jr.* University of Tulsa Department of English Monograph Series, no. 5. Tulsa: University of Tulsa, 1968. ii, 88 pp. $2.50, paper.

Tolstoy's Epic Vision is a most unfortunate attempt to bring together a series of impressions about Tolstoy which are inaccurate, misleading, effusive, and, it must be added, occasionally astute. While the book hardly pretends to be a definitive study of Tolstoy (it is difficult, in any case, to do much with both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* in a slim ninety-page volume), even if one is prepared to grant the author his own self-admitted limitations, the book remains largely superficial or panegyric, for Mooney tends to regard both novels as if they were holy writ. The imperfections of Tolstoy are closed to Mooney, as are the fascinating labors Tolstoy engaged in during the construction of his novels (Tolstoy's drafts reveal so much about their development, they are essential to any serious critic). Most of all, Mooney's basic premise places him in difficulties from the first. Influenced by George Steiner's equally faulty, but far more sophisticated *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, Mooney chooses to regard *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* as "epics" rather than novels. In his opening he states: "Leo Tolstoy is probably most effectively approached in terms of his relationship not to the conventions of the novel but rather to those of the epic. The following study represents, at least in part, an attempt to set his two major works within the framework of that vibrant tradition, and to render them more accessible to the contemporary reader than they would be if read *merely* as novels, although among the greatest of the world." Why "merely" as novels (the italics are Mooney's, not mine)? Are they anything less for being what they are? Tolstoy himself was not beyond comparing *War and Peace* to Homer, but aside from the obvious similarities in proportion, both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* owe much more to the novelistic tradition to which they belong, and of which Tolstoy was always conscious. Moreover, once Mooney turns to his discussion of the two works, he must approach them as novels (it is rare that he even mentions an "epic" moment, and then only in relation to *War and Peace*), investigating precisely those characteristics he as a critic concerned with the novel, and we as readers of novels, will appreciate. Only his sense of Anna Karenina's duality produces a few pages of perceptive writing; for the rest, his admiration for Tolstoy's panoramic sweep prevents him from paying much attention to details.

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THE FIERCE AND BEAUTIFUL WORLD. By *Andrei Platonov*. Introduction by *Yevgeny Yevtushenko*. Translated by *Joseph Barnes*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970. 252 pp. $6.95.

Five years ago Andrei Platonov was a nonentity. Now, after the Soviet publication of two collections of his stories, from which the present translation is derived, he is recognized at home and abroad as one of the great Russian writers of the century. This resurrection is not really surprising, for the most vital works of Soviet literature are precisely those that have been censored, restricted, or somehow neglected. Without the state support of bunko, the Gladkovs, Fadeevs, and Alexei Tolstoys would flit away to everlasting oblivion, and Soviet prose would be seen to begin with Zamiatin and Pilniak, to continue with Babel, Olesha, Bulgakov, and other suppressed talents, and to conclude with Platonov and Solzhenitsyn. Among these

writers Platonov was the most firmly committed to the Communist dream, but like them he wrote artistically, thoughtfully, and honestly. For this reason critics attacked him, Stalin branded one of his stories "scum," and the doors of the publishing houses closed. For the last three years of his life (1948–51) he escaped starvation by working as a janitor in the Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow.

This first collection of his work in English is carefully arranged to cover his entire career, from the twenties to the late forties. The stories move from animal to man to machine. "Dzhan," the opening story, reveals an uncommonly subtle perception of nature, reminding one more of Darwin than of any writer of fiction. First it presents the nameless multitude of forest creatures: "Chagatayev walked into the grass; it trembled around him, rippling up from below, for lots of unseen creatures were running away from his approach—some on their stomachs, some on their legs, some in low flight, however they could. They had probably been sitting there quietly until then, only a few of them asleep, by no means all. Each of them had so much to worry about that the daytime, it was clear, was not long enough, or else they were sorry to waste their short lives in sleep and were just barely dozing, letting a film fall halfway across their eyes so they could see a sort of half life, listening to the darkness and not remembering the worries of the daytime" (p. 39). There follow encounters with individual animals—a lame camel, a toothless dog, a flock of thirsting sheep, a family of ravenous eagles, a mysterious lamb. In these passages Platonov unmasks the hopeless superficiality of Turgenev's prettified landscapes, as well as the creaking theatrical props of Sholokhov's dramatic background to human affairs. With Platonov, nature is not cruel, sympathetic, or indifferent to man, but struggles together with man. Platonov's animals are not indications of the hero's mood, but living creatures which suffer in their own tragic way: "They cannot cry, to find in tears and in exhaustion of the heart both comfort for themselves and forgiveness of their enemy. Instead they must act, seeking to wear out their suffering in struggle, in the dead body of their enemy or else in their own destruction" (p. 99).

Platonov's perception of man is no less profound. He writes with a sad love of life, as an optimist convinced of the perfectibility of man but distressed by the prevalence of misery. The striving for love and happiness is the central theme of these stories. In "Dzhan" a university graduate hopes to bring the socialist paradise to the most miserable people on earth, a people so tormented by poverty and exploitation that "they're pretending to be dead, otherwise happier and stronger ones will come to torture them again" (p. 114). All they have is their *dzhan*, their soul or "sweet life." Only Vsevolod Ivanov has produced scenes of gloom and brutalization to compare with those in this story. The hero fails in his mission, but he does succeed in restoring the will to live in the people. The heroine of "Fro" pits her personal happiness against the future happiness of the nation—and loses. In "The River Potudan" a young groom feels so ashamed and undeserving of his happiness that he wants to drown himself. The next three stories—"Homecoming," "The Third Son," "Aphrodite"—describe the agonizing psychological adjustments of a man returning to a changed home. In the title story Platonov, who was educated as an electrical engineer, glorifies the locomotive, but even here attention centers on the feelings of a disabled engineer and the author's compassion for him.

The translation is accurate and modest, but tends to simplify elliptical passages. Occasionally an adjective is dropped. The calm, pensive tone of the original is excellently preserved in this version. The book is prefaced by Evtushenko's tribute to Platonov, one of his most forceful statements on Soviet literature.

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