

Vanished Writer, Vanished Book

. . . I cannot write otherwise than I do write. I am unable to, and I will not, even though I should want to violate myself; there is a literary law which makes it impossible to violate a literary talent—even with your own brain. . . .
—Boris Pilnyak, September 28, 1923

FORTY YEARS AGO BORIS PILNYAK was recognized throughout Europe as “one of the giants of the modern novel,” in the words of the dust jacket on his now-forgotten *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. At this point in time the phrase seems more a publisher’s blurb than a just appraisal. I quote it that we may measure the distance traveled by Pilnyak between 1931, when Farrar & Rinehart published this work in Charles Malamuth’s translation (“His books sell in the millions, the present literary generation considers him its master”), and 1938, when he was apparently shot in Moscow’s Butyrskaya prison as “a Japanese spy.” And in 1970, he remains—unlike his posthumously rehabilitated contemporary, Isaac Babel—practically an unperson, an unwriter in the land where he was once a literary star.

We do now have available in translation several volumes of Pilnyak’s short stories. But his early avant-garde *The Bare Year* (published in this country in 1921 as *The Naked Year*), is long since out of print; and for the ordinary reader *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea* is almost as difficult to come by here, and as undiscussed, as in the Soviet

Union. For this reason I am emboldened to write of an author whom I am unable to read in his original language. If Pilnyak is much spoken of in the literary and political histories of his time, it is almost always in terms of his early experimentalism, his stylistic dependence on Andrey Bely and Alexei Remizov (he dedicated “The Third Workshop” “To A. M. Remizov, in Whose Workshop I was an Apprentice”), his leadership—along with the bold and brilliant Eugene Zamyatin—of the All-Russian Union of Writers in the struggle against the vulgar Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, his humiliation during the Stalinist era, and his ultimate disappearance at the height of the great purges. Much is made of the circumstances surrounding the composition of *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*, which are seen as either pathetic or degrading; but I am unaware of any serious commentary on the book itself.

Unquestionably, *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea* can be studied as a kind of casebook of literary equivocation, if not downright crawling, put together not so much from inner conviction as from personal weakness and ambition. Its real merits, however, are all the more remarkable when one takes into account the conditions attendant upon its appearance.

Pilnyak had gotten into hot water several

“Vanished Writer, Vanished Book” is one of a collection of essays on neglected novels entitled *Rediscoveries*, edited by David Madden, which will be published by Crown in 1971, copyright © 1971 by Crown Publishers, Inc.

years earlier with the publication of his story "Tale of the Unextinguished Moon," subtitled "The Murder of the Army Commander." Despite Pilnyak's denials, it had been all too clearly inspired by the death in November 1925 of Frunze, Trotsky's successor as Commissar for War; and it suggested that Stalin was responsible, if indirectly, for that death.

In 1929 he published in Berlin (for copyright reasons) a short novel called *Mahogany*, and was promptly assailed for having arranged with a White Guard publisher to print abroad a book considered unsuitable for Soviet readers—a charge with which a new generation of Russian writers has become all too painfully familiar. The charge was as baseless then as now, for as Pilnyak observed in a letter to the journal which had attacked him, "the books of my comrades in Soviet literature are published there: Andreev, Vera Imber, V. Kaverin, Nikitin, Romanov, Tolstoy, Fedin, and others, and I had found not one single name of an émigré author." The editor responded by calling this a "formal evasion," and Pilnyak found himself charged with being "an agent of the class enemy" and a criminal. His true crime had consisted not in publishing abroad, but in leaning toward Trotskyism, criticizing various aspects of Soviet life, and propounding a heretical critique of Marxism (about which more in a moment).

Responding to parallel attacks, Pilnyak's colleague Zamyatin withdrew with dignity first from the All-Russian Union of Writers and then from the Soviet Union itself ("I have been sentenced without trial," he wrote to Stalin in requesting an exit visa, "to what amounts, for a writer, to capital punishment—silence. . ."). Pilnyak however undertook to square himself, and buckled down to the task of producing a politically acceptable novel. The result, incorporating substantial segments of *Mahogany* into a grandiose narrative of socialist construction, was *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. According to the historian Robert Conquest, the

repellent Nikolai Yezhov, Stalin's creature and later head of the secret police (until his own downfall and disappearance), "personally oversaw the production, listing fifty-odd passages for amendment."

This effort, together with a number of other abasements, brought Pilnyak a certain temporary relaxation of the campaign against him; at least he was enabled to travel to the United States. There he was lionized by writers like Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis at a New York literary banquet, driven across the country by Joseph Freeman for more lionizing by Hollywood producers like Irving Thalberg, and enabled to acquire an American automobile. He returned to the Soviet Union with the car, and with the material for a put-down of his American experience, which he entitled *OK*; but in the end, of course, nothing helped, and degradation was followed by extinction.

ONE CANNOT HELP but feel that the largely adverse verdict of historians and critics on *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea* has been inspired to a considerable degree by the unheroic conduct of its author, and to a lesser degree by aspects of his method and style which in fact antedated his harassment by party hacks and thought police. Pilnyak was in the habit (not unique among modern writers) of reworking stories, of pillaging his earlier productions; if he can be castigated for converting *Mahogany* into *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*, and for inserting crude paeans to the Party and assaults on Trotsky, he can also be saluted—at least by those of us who have not been subjected to such pressures—for insisting on retaining much of its thematic material. It was an insistence that may very well have contributed to his final downfall.

Two sets of brothers are principal characters in *Mahogany*: they remain such in *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. The brothers Bezdyetov are mahogany furniture

restorers of Moscow who go to the back-water town of Kolomna and stay with Yakov Skudrin, an old peasant representative, whose brother Ivan, "a half-mad idealist expelled from the Communist Party," lives nearby in an underground dugout. The Bezdyetovs

were devoted to the art of antiquity and anonymity. . . . This art continued to be the business of nameless individuals, of cellars in towns, of wretched serfs' quarters in the huts of the manors, of bitter vodka and of the cruelty of loneliness. . . . When serfdom, which nurtured this art, was abolished, furniture factories replaced the masters who were serfs. But the nephews of the masters—through vodka—remained alive. These masters construct nothing new. They merely restore the antiques; but they have preserved the habits and the traditions of their uncles.

If the symbolism of these figures is fully obvious, that of old Communists like Ivan Skudrin is scarcely less so. In a time of exhaustion and venality, Ivan is an extraordinary reminder of the revolutionary vitality that had swept everything before it—and that is now an encumbrance to Stalinist consolidation.

"In the year twenty-two," Ivan explains, "I was kicked out of the party for drunkenness. . . . However, I am a communist. . . . Our first revolution, the Bolshevik, the October one, was a social revolution; then came the second revolution, the cultural one. What we want is a revolution of honor, of conscience, that all may become honest; otherwise, we shall perish."

When he troubles to, Pilnyak can be as physically pungent as the earlier masters of the Russian novel. He describes Ivan's old brother Yakov thus:

For the last forty years or so, Yakov Karpovich suffered from a hernia, and when walking he supported this hernia with his right hand put through the seam rent of his trousers; his green hands were swollen with dropsy; he would put a lot of salt on the bread from a common saltcellar, crunch it,

and then carefully put the remainder of the salt back into the salt box.

Despite the fact that Yakov's heretical theory, propounded in *Mahogany*, must have been one of the reasons for the storm raised by that book's publication in Berlin, Pilnyak persisted in including it in *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. It is worth quoting as an example not only of Pilnyak's persistence in clinging to his "errors," but of what may also be regarded as his prescience.

"The theory of Marx about the proletariat [says Yakov] is rank nonsense and will soon be forgotten, because the proletariat itself is destined to disappear. . . . Revolution is to no purpose, it is a mistake made by history, a little mistake at our expense. Two or three more generations will pass, and the proletariat will disappear—first in the United States, in England, and in Germany. Marx expounded his theory at a time when labor was based on muscles, having decided that labor will be forever based on muscles. And yet it turns out now that mechanized labor is replacing muscles; soon engineers alone will remain to guide the machines, and the proletariat will be transformed into engineers. The machine is run by five men, and in the office there are forty; the office employees will become proletarians. . . ."

The engineers of whom Yakov speaks are the principal figures of *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*. If they are carelessly introduced and cursorily characterized, if their life experiences are narrated in a disjointed and fragmentary fashion, if their chronology is maddeningly confused, this can be attributed only in part to their having been created, so to speak, *sur commande*; for this had been Pilnyak's mode of writing, in emulation of Bely's *St. Petersburg*, from the time of his earliest successes. If we trouble to disentangle the intertwined lives, it is because even the black and white traitors and patriots have incandescent moments in which they emerge, almost despite themselves, as creations of a writer of quality.

Old Professor Poletika, a Bolshevik Marx-

ist, "a scientist with a European reputation, a great theoretician and a great practical man, a builder," is the hydraulic engineer supervising the design of a new channel, for which a monolith must be constructed near Kolomna to buttress and throw back the waters of the Oka and the Moscow rivers. "Professor Poletika, senile and professorially odd, never drove in automobiles and always went out in a frock coat." On the very next page, however, we are told that 25 years earlier he had been "a beardless engineer who had just graduated from the institute," which would indicate that he is now a senile old man of 48 or 49. And when this old man who never drives in automobiles arrives at Kolomna, "A Russian Nami [explained in a footnote as a new brand of Soviet automobile] took . . . Poletika to the monolith." Such slapdash carelessness seems always to have been present in Pilnyak's fiction, alongside a painstaking mosaic of interlocked themes and life stories.

LET US RETURN to the oddly intricate relationship among the engineers. Poletika, who had loved "only once in his whole life," had been married for 11 years to Olga, a movie-theater pianist, when she deserted him with their children in 1915 for Edgar Laszlo, tutor of their son (killed on the Western front later in the war). Laszlo subsequently becomes an engineer, and finds himself working on the construction of Poletika's monolith. He was "forever bound" to Olga, but

was not physically faithful to his wife, like many men of that epoch, and just as many women were not faithful to their husbands. In freight cars, in sleepers, on a visit to various towns, on casual nights—for the everyday life of all was broken in those days and each one had at his back a zero at stake in the desperate game—were scattered women who did not impose any obligations, who gave joy with their femininity, which seemed to be eternal, which destroyed the zero that was ever-present. The conflagration of the

revolution did not leave mental capacity for anything greater, and the women were lost at dawn and on new roads.

Laszlo has been involved for some three years in an affair with Maria, wife of a dedicated and heroic engineer, "risen from the workers," Fyodor Sadykov. "Maria Fyodorovna Sadykova loved Edgar Ivanovich, and she remained his mistress when he arrived at the construction site. Maria came with everything that was beautiful in her—to give herself up to him. She loved, her love treading the paths of classical music, without justifying herself, without thinking of justification."

When Sadykov learns of his wife's long-term affair, he calls her and Edgar Laszlo into his office: "We are building a new society and a new morality. It seems to me, Edgar, that there is no reason why we should quarrel. But you understand that I cannot allow any disrespect to my wife. Since you love each other, I propose that you should marry and dispense with unnecessary lies."

Shamed, Edgar returns to his wife Olga with the news. "Fyodor acted cruelly and honestly in accordance with communist morality. You can judge as you like. I cannot fail to accept his challenge. I cannot abandon a woman who has honestly given herself to me and whom previously I took in a way that was not quite honest."

Olga, who has had a daughter by Edgar as well as a grown daughter, Lyubov, by Professor Poletika, replies: "Tomorrow my daughters and I will leave you to save your honor, if this honor of yours demands that you should abandon your daughter and your old wife."

And her older daughter Lyubov cries out bitterly, "I am also a communist. . . . Your honor, Edgar Ivanovich, is the honor of a coward and a thief who is canonizing his theft."

In such wretched circumstances Edgar marries Maria, who soon becomes aware of the painful truth: "You don't trust me; I am a stranger to you. You needed me as a mis-

tress, but I am not fit to be your wife. I have not read either Marx or Goethe; I cannot advise you; I am unnecessary to you. I wish I could trust you, yet I cannot and do not trust you, just as you do not trust me."

Edgar's plea, "We must love each other, do you hear? We must! We love each other, we are chained to each other—" does not persuade her; she hangs herself.

The death of Maria becomes "the symbol of Woman's destiny" to the female laborers of Kolomna, who had been living in squalid barracks for several years, and had been gossiping over the affair between Edgar and Maria:

. . . in every women's barrack, assuming seventy-one women in each, there were seventy-one sorrows. . . . Women, made equal to men in civic rights, were not rendered equal in every-day life and were certainly not made equal by biology, once children are left to the care of the mothers. In the barracks were collected single women, old women over forty; from thirty to forty, widows with children; from twenty-two to thirty, old maids; up to twenty-two, young girls whose future destiny was to remain in these barracks. All these women's destinies were determined by the absence of men; and it was but natural that in such barracks sex quesitons were treated with intense interest, woman's fate being bitter and doomed to unhappiness.

When the women learn of Maria's death they take the occasion, in a scene reminiscent of Zola's *Germinal*, to demonstrate against rape, molestation, and favoritism. Edgar, who has followed Maria's coffin to her grave, is surrounded by "a hundred faces, copper and stone faces, that looked past him, as if he were a blank." Suddenly he is set upon by his serving maid, Darya.

"Push him into the hole and send him to hell!" shouted Darya, and again struck him on the chest. . . . The women shouted, thunderously, terribly, and crowded toward the grave. The faces of the women ceased to be like copper or stone; they became human.

The trees surrounded the grave in silence. The grave diggers hurriedly filled the grave, looking at the crowd with fear and anxiety. The dead woman was forgotten. Darya mastered her tears. "Comrades!" shouted Darya, stopped short and waved her red kerchief. "Comrade women! We are the organized proletarian women. Maybe the court will acquit him, but we, women, must live and build up our own life: we condemn him. It is for us to live, for us to judge!"

Pilnyak's nervous, disjointed report of the deprivations and personal agonies of technicians and working men and women, laboring together in dismal conditions on grandiose projects, oscillates erratically between the terrible and the ridiculous. If what I have quoted thus far seems to point more in the latter direction, I hasten to add that even when Pilnyak, a Russian nationalist and a basically unpolitical novelist, is composing a scene obviously skewed to follow political directives, certain of his true beliefs are apt to burst through, much as do curiously affecting moments in the commercial scenarios of hired writers who are better than hacks.

Fyodor Sadykov, the worker turned engineer, is a clockwork figure that could have been wound up for any of a dozen dishonest books about high-minded proletarians. Nevertheless, at key points in his marriage to Maria he comes to life (it is perhaps revealing that only in their sexual connection do most of Pilnyak's people acquire a texture of reality). Maria, we are told, "was of a type that possessed the greatest feminine force—namely, weakness." She is the daughter of an engineer; her parents had been killed during the civil war. After hiding in their cellar for a week she had come to the revolutionist Fyodor, her eyes vacuous. "Kill me too, if you like! I have nothing to live for," she says helplessly.

"She became the wife of Fyodor Sadykov. Fyodor took her because of death, from pools of blood at the front, just as newly born kittens unwanted by anyone are taken from cesspools by the scruff of their necks.

Fyodor Ivanovich was what is called a coarse, unrefined man; he had his life's work mapped out for him by the revolution."

FAR MORE SIGNIFICANT in Pilnyak than such spontaneous reflections are the recurring appearances of the carefully rhythmic leitmotif, one of the stylistic devices he had borrowed from Bely. When he is ruminating on the fitful nature of the relations between the sexes as a necessary consequence of the revolution, he observes:

The palm of a woman's hand placed on a man's eyes may sometimes conceal the whole world, not merely by the physical law of vision; it may so conceal the world that the palm becomes larger than the world itself; while the naked knee of a woman can possess the heart even as do thoughts of death under fire in battle, for not only are death and love zeros, but they are also equal to each other.

After Edgar has had to give up his wife Olga in order to marry his mistress Maria, Pilnyak reverts to the metaphor, in a new context:

Every man knows of the happiness of possessing a woman and every man knows of the still greater happiness of possessing a human soul—a wife, her head, her hair, her voice, her words. . . . The palm of a woman's hand can shut out the whole world not merely by the physical laws of sight; it can shut out the whole world to such an extent that the palm of the hand becomes greater than the world. And at such hours Edgar Ivanovich was most intensely aware of the fact that Maria was of no use to him, not necessary to him.

In his last, climactic scene with Maria before her suicide, Edgar thinks:

The wife Olga, with her face growing old, her hair turning gray, her warmth, her caresses, could force a human being to open his heart, and something beautiful dominated that which had given life to red-haired Leessa. The knees of a woman may be more

majestic than Mont Blanc. The knees of Maria were stripped naked; they were the knees of a weak townswoman, almost a girl, and nothing more. . . .

Until now I have not so much as mentioned, in a novel that commences with a listing of 22 principal characters and 18 minor characters, the villain of the piece, who in his monstrosity stands astraddle its entire concept. Yet another construction engineer, Evgeny Poltorak, is first seen by the unworldly visionary, Professor Poletika, in the restaurant of the Great Moscow Hotel. And in the very first descriptive words we become aware of yet another of Pilnyak's symbolic themes, Russian duality, his people's destiny to face both the East and the West.

Poltorak was dressed like a foreigner, but his cheekbones were defiantly Slavic. His blue coat was made not only for the eyes of strangers, but for the lordly comfort of its possessor. His parted hair shone with brilliantine. His index finger was decorated with a shining diamond in an old setting. It was precisely this ring that arrested the attention of Professor Poletika, who, only after examining it carefully, glanced at the perfectly courteous face of the engineer. Poltorak's eyes looked energetic, clever and precise, "and yet they are the kind no decent man should have," thought the professor. "He is right in concealing them behind the diamonds."

Pilnyak cannot let it go. He must point out that "Poltorak always evoked in Poletika a feeling of dirty stickiness."

Poltorak, the novelist informs us, "lived behind the trenches of history." The image might well apply not only to privileged engineers, but *a fortiori* to those Soviet writers who could manage, like Pilnyak himself, to produce work acceptable to their rulers. The itemization of Poltorak's worldliness in the materially deprived Russia of the twenties reads like an inventory of the luxuries with which "honored artists of the republic" have been suborned: Moscow cabarets, suppers,

fox-trots, meetings at early dawn in the actors' circle, Saturdays at the Casino, Sundays at the turf, evenings at home with children who are taught English, maids in white apron and cap, carpets, bronzes, paintings, a "severe" telephone, wine, fruit, caviar, sturgeon laid out for guests on porcelain—and the recurring mahogany which serves to remind us of the scavenging Bezdyetov brothers, searching out the handicrafts of the old regime.

"Poltorak was ill," we are informed bluntly. Curiously, Pilnyak attributes the villain's "illness" not to his bourgeois origin, but to something brutally simple: "He was ill because of women, having unchained his instincts."

The catalogue of Poltorak's amatory adventures is punctuated with a leitmotif: "Poltorak knew well how the heads of women bend at the behest of lips, and how their eyes quiver under a kiss—how enfeebling words are uttered—how to lay his head on the lap of a woman, face down, baring her knees, when, beyond drunken shouts and whispers, conscience falls to pieces."

So he moves from his aging wife Sophia, "a tired and worthy woman," to his mistress Nadezhda to his wife's sister Vera, dying of tuberculosis in the Crimea; and to Lyubov Poletika, Olga Laszlo's daughter by her first marriage to Professor Poletika. Only Lyubov, the young Communist archeologist studying "the obscure history of those stone-women that are dug out of the ancient tumuli of the steppes," succeeds in resisting him because of her adherence to the principles of Communist morality.

"Poltorak wanted to believe that the girl was giving her time to those antiquities because of erotic mysticism," Pilnyak informs us, and promptly destroys the insidiousness of this evil reverie with the hasty assurance: "nevertheless it was not true so far as Lyubov was concerned. Lyubov was digging into the ages in order to give them to the future."

If, atop this painful obviousness, we observe that Poltorak has successively betrayed

Sophia (Wisdom), Vera (Faith), Nadezhda (Hope), and Lyubov (Love, or Charity), we may leap to the conclusion that Poltorak is simply comical, and in a way that Pilnyak hardly intended—particularly when we see the engineer's predictable but irrational hatred of the patient proletarians at a production conference ("He began to understand in anger that he was dependent upon these people"), his predictable but unmotivated acceptance of "English pounds sterling" from one Sherwood in a plot to blow up the dam, his predictable but absurd involvement finally with the half-mad idealist Ivan Skudrin in this plot, and his predictable murder by Ivan's older brother Yakov.

But we should be wrong. Pilnyak succeeds in investing Poltorak with a horrid Mephistophelian aura that touches everyone about him with a phosphorescent corruption. Particularly in the cases of Nadezhda and Vera, the erotic overtones, with their mingling of sex and sickness, are irresistibly reminiscent of similar decadent involvements in the novels of Thomas Mann—women dying of tuberculosis, or of cancer, whose sexual passion is heightened by the fetid breath of approaching death.

Poltorak leads Nadezhda to a hotel assignation in Kolomna through "corridors that smelled of mice and creosote, of disinfectant," to a room in which she announces,

"With you I want to be the cynical European, the tourist—the kind who may do anything. You too may do anything now. . . ."

Poltorak closed the shutters. The armpits of women smell of sealing-wax. And the room with its bastionlike walls that were sinking in the darkness stolen from the dawn, this room of a provincial hotel through which Russian provincials had passed, the morning, the kisses—all became the office of passion, very terrible, like all such offices of provincial rooms with hotel beds. European morality had forbidden third parties to reveal the secrets of these offices.

After Poltorak has met his fate, Nadezhda gets drunk at a party given by the Bezdyetov

brothers, the furniture restorers, and tries "to play the part of an eighteenth-century marquise in alcohol." She rants on about the love affair of Sergei Yesenin and Isadora Duncan, and finally, drunken and naked, surrounded by mahogany, announces, "I don't know who's the father of my child, and it's utterly immaterial to me. I'm pregnant, and I shall not submit to an abortion. I'm not afraid of life. We're modern people. Nations perish, but I shall have a son of my own, born of the epoch . . ."

The next morning, Nadezhda goes to the doctor's office: "The doctor, washing his hands after examining the case, said to Nadezhda that she actually was pregnant, but that, moreover, she was ill with syphilis."

The seduction of his wife's sister Vera, however, is beyond doubt the most lurid of Poltorak's sins. His wife had pawned her watch and brooch to pay for his ticket to the Crimea, in order that he might go south and bring Vera home to die. When he arrives at Yalta, he meets the dying woman: "Aside from physical changes, she displayed also psychic changes, which suddenly excited Poltorak and pleased him."

On the night train from Sebastopol to Moscow he plays the attentive brother-in-law to the feverish Vera. "He unlaced her shoes, pulled off her stockings. And he felt the restless attack of his ailment, the one which he had contracted no one knows when."

"Like a skilled orator," he makes love to her. "Before the zero of death, everything is nonsense. Carnal love will remain until the zero comes; all the other truths are wrong, except this one."

Vera survives long enough to die in the arms of her sister, who sends her husband a telegram: "Vera just died both of us say be accursed you scoundrel."

ALL OF THIS is unashamedly operatic, but it is grand opera, as were many of the nineteenth-century Russian novels before

Pilnyak, as was Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* after him. And Pilnyak does not hesitate to move from the pathetic particulars of Vera's life—"there was a girl Verochka, there was an adolescent gymnasya student Vera, there was a student at the Moscow Philharmonic, Vera Salishcheva, there was a middling actress of provincial theatres Vera Poleyaya,"—to her apotheosis in flames:

In the chamber of the crematory at a temperature of two thousand degrees Réaumur, in two minutes the coffin and human clothing burn up into nothing, and there remains only the naked corpse—and the naked human being begins to move; the dead man's legs bend under him, his hands crawl to his neck, his head is sucked into the shoulders. Should a living human being with broken nerves stand at this little window through which may be seen how two thousand degrees of Réaumur destroy a man, then the hair of this living human being would turn gray and the last human convulsions will seem to him to violate death. The dead man assumes shameless poses, and a quarter of an hour later only a handful of ashes remains of the man. . . .

When Pilnyak returns to this leitmotif in describing the cremation of Maria after her suicide, he converts the erotic element of the writhing cadaver into another configuration:

A naked body remains and the naked man begins to move. These last human convulsions may appear supernatural, violating the laws of death, but they are subject to a strange law. The feet of the dead man are bent under him, his arms stretch toward his neck and then are crossed on his chest, the head is drawn into the shoulders; the man, before he passes into non-existence, assumes that pose which he had in his mother's womb, when he arose out of the same non-existence.

At the very end of their lives, Poltorak engages Edgar Laszlo in a lengthy conversation that is all but a monologue. It is difficult to imagine that Poltorak's fury-filled assault on life in the Soviet Union does not

reflect in some degree those perceptions of the author which got him into such terrible trouble that he too, like his engineers Poltorak and Laszlo, wound up with a bullet in his head.

"Have you ever noticed [reflects the doomed engineer] how our—yours, not mine and none the less ours—how our government regime is choking from roguery, flunkeyism, treason, moral dissolution. The government weapons are armies of controlling organizations. The people's commissariat of the workers' and peasants' inspection is a moral institution, just as those placards in the streets, on the stairways, in streetcars, in inns, in institutions: 'Beware of pickpockets.' 'Don't spit.' Don't smoke.' 'Pull the chain in the water-closet.' 'Don't lie.' 'Don't rape.' In my house on the stairway there's an inscription under the electric lamp: 'Thief, do not take the trouble of stealing the lamp; it is soldered.' And in Moscow they put up posters teaching people to act as stool-pigeons. 'Citizen! Your duty is to watch the taxpayer.' You see how the whole country is turned into a moral placard; the placards of morality have come out into the streets because there's nothing left of it in their so-called souls. In Russia, people are guilty by the mere fact that they are alive!"

If Boris Pilnyak deliberately set out to write a bad book in an effort to ingratiate

himself and purchase at least a temporary personal security, it must be acknowledged that he was partially successful—and with a certain vulgar panache, hymning socialist construction with engineering data on problems of hydraulics, earth moving, and geology worthy of a Steinbeck. I would suggest however that *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea* can also be measured by the extent to which Pilnyak failed in this task. His failure—the voice of the artist cheating his paymasters, bursting through the braggadocio and the burlesque of Bolshevik realism—does him honor that should be recognized by us, if it cannot as yet be in his native land.

Even here, the final words should belong to Pilnyak himself, and to the tortured novel in which they glow:

The shelves of years are like the shelves of books. The shelves of human years are like books, for every book is surely a human convulsion of human genius, of human thought breaking the law of death, striding across death, even like the convulsions in a crematory. Assuredly every man must—sometimes at night, when alone in his study among the shelves of books—every man must be horrified in the face of these books; must feel that every book is a counterfeit of real human life, every book is a convulsion of thought cheating death. . . .

A P O R T E S

Revista trimestral de ciencias sociales publicada por el ILARI

Director: Luis Mercier Vega

NUMERO 19

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Usos y abusos de la Sociología | Aldo E. Solari |
| Notas sobre la participación política de los militares en América Latina | Oscar Cuellar |
| La integración latinoamericana: problemas y estrategias | Aviami Li |
| <i>Tres estudios sobre el peronismo</i> | |
| Adhesión militar y control político del Ejército en el régimen peronista | Alain Rouquie |
| Las cuatro fases del gobierno peronista | Peter Waldmann |
| La tendencia peronista en el sindicalismo argentino. El caso de los obreros de la carne .. | Walter Little |
| La Universidad boliviana conflictiva | Huascar Taborga |
| Documento: Antecedentes de la nueva orientación de las Fuerzas Armadas en el Perú | Luis Valdez Pallette |

Inventario de los estudios en ciencias sociales en América latina (23—Antropología)

Redacción y Administración: Instituto Latinoamericano de Relaciones Internacionales
23, rue de la Pépinière
PARIS 8e

Suscripción anual: 20 F. o 4 dólares