

ship concerning Soviet literature—or anything Soviet, for that matter—has to be conducted, this secretiveness on the part of the author would be considered a shortcoming. As it is, one must follow a prudent and humane course.

Boris Pilnyak: A Soviet Writer in Conflict with the State is a well-written and thoroughly researched book which caters to the specialist as well as to the general reader. Since there is practically nothing in English on Pilnyak, and very little of substance even in Russian, this book fills the vacuum. The author's general approach, avoiding specialized and minute references unknown to the uninitiated, makes the book appealing to the general public, although its main significance is still to be found by readers familiar with, and interested in, modern Russian literature.

Since there is no comprehensive book on Pilnyak's life and works in any language, it would have been more meaningful had the author chosen to treat Pilnyak in totality—full biography, a discussion of his other works in all their aspects, and a treatment of other aspects of his personality and opus. However, it would be unfair to blame the author for something she did not intend to do. Still, a more complete book on Pilnyak would be more useful and is still awaiting scholars of Soviet literature.

A literature specialist may find the approach too historical while there is little of purely aesthetic analysis of Pilnyak's works. For example, in the author's treatment of *Mahogany* (1929; English translation 1962 [excerpts]) there is no mention of the symbolism of the title, of the virility of the old Skudrin, etc. It is somewhat surprising that the author did not begin her discussion with Pilnyak's first significant work, the novel *The Naked Year* (1922; English translations 1928 and 1975). It is here that Pilnyak's incompatibility with the new system was clearly shown for the first time and that the seeds of subsequent conflicts with the state and the ultimate destruction of Pilnyak were sown. These and other omissions do not detract from the main purpose of the book, nevertheless the inclusion of such items would have enhanced the depth and the quality of the study. At the same time, since many Soviet writers—especially the ones who were, and still are, centers of controversy and conflict—are highly complex

personalities, it is perhaps just as well that our efforts at understanding them are attempted piecemeal. In this sense, Reck's book does its job remarkably well.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

JOSEF SKVORECKY

The Bass Saxophone

Translated from the Czech by Kaca Polackova-Henley
Toronto: Anson-Cartwright, 1977.
Pp. 186. \$4.95.

Josef Skvorecky emigrated to Canada in 1968, the year the Russians invaded his native Czechoslovakia. In Europe, Skvorecky is a highly regarded author and translator of many books ranging from fiction to film scripts and cinema criticism. In his own Czechoslovakia he was a leading cultural figure.

Although it is not absolutely necessary to know these facts about Skvorecky, they help in understanding the particular apprehension of reality that underlies his two novellas in *The Bass Saxophone*. It is a sense of the absurd, a world view which blends a profound humanity with an equally powerful cynicism.

The two novellas "Emöke" and the title story "The Bass Saxophone" (as well as the excellent introductory essay called "Red Music") are about jazz under two totalitarian regimes: the Nazis and the Soviets, both of which possess an instinctive fear of (among other things) jazz. Under the Nazis jazz was referred to as Judeo-negroïd music and was forbidden. Regulations were formulated which defined and restricted the kind of music that was acceptable. In Czechoslovakia the only "true Czech music" that was permitted was the polka. Under the Soviets modern jazz and rock fare little better.

Is it really so surprising that (as abstract as it may be) music, the language which most directly speaks to the human spirit should come under scrutiny; that jazz, this affirmation of the individual creative spirit,

should be regarded as a threat by oppressive governments. In "Red Music" Skvorecky challenges the theory that jazz or the blues are in themselves social or political protests; it is the context of slavery or dictatorship which makes it so. He maintains that "totalitarian ideologists loathe art, the product of a yearning for life, because . . . it evades control . . . thus creative energy becomes protest" (p. 10).

In "The Bass Saxophone" it is the context of the times that turns playing jazz into one of the few avenues of protest. The narrative is set against the background of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia and tells the story of a group of traveling musicians, sent from town to town to entertain the local Nazis during the war. When this motley crew arrive in the town of Kosteletz, they secretly conscript a young Czech to replace their bass saxophonist who is mysteriously unable to perform. The young man is a jazz buff and even though playing with these Germans would be tantamount to treason, he would give his eyeteeth to be able to jam with them and play the bass saxophone. At the rehearsal he soon discovers the limitations of the wartime repertoire and style. The musicians though technically proficient remind him of an orchestra; the oompapa music played with mechanical perfection is enough to destroy the soul. As the story unfolds the bass saxophone itself becomes a symbol of our challenge, of our possibility to protest no matter how fleeting the opportunity. Originally published in 1967 "The Bass Saxophone" is disturbingly prophetic given the ensuing political events in Czechoslovakia.

In "Emöke" jazz is not overtly the subject. It is a lyrical story in a Chekhovian vein, about a self-centered young man away on summer holiday and his attempt at seducing a mysterious woman by the name of Emöke. Emöke in a sense is the embodiment of music; she is sensuous and erotic and awakens those feelings in men. Like music, like the blues, she represents our longing for the spiritual and at the same time our sensual bond with the physical. "Emöke" reads like a piece of music. A sentence may go on for pages; a word, its synonym, another word defining the first from another perspective, more exact, more abstract, more philosophical, more precise, choosing, searching for a word or network of words which would more clearly bear witness to the experience.

Skvorecky's prose sings like a jazz improvisation. That this is not lost in the English is a tribute to the translator Kaca Polackova-Henley who was confronted with a mammoth task which for the most part was beautifully accomplished. There are however moments in "Emöke" when the reader trips over expressions made awkward by an unfortunate translation.

Both "Emöke" and "The Bass Saxophone" have a haunting and mysterious quality about them. They talk about the irretrievable, the lost opportunity, the helpless moments when life seems so arbitrary and we cannot intervene to change the course of events. Sometimes one cannot explain phenomena, the best one can do is describe them. Skvorecky describes them beautifully. With his wandering narrative technique he brings every action to its logical absurd conclusion, its inevitable destiny where dreams are petrified, passions are expended, and indifference sets in.

Although the three pieces of this book are truly comic in many ways, the grotesque assortment of humanity inextricably caught in the web of uncontrollable circumstances—uncontrollable out of personal or political necessity—they leave us in the end with the echo of a screaming bass saxophone and a feeling of immeasurable sadness.

C. Eileen Thalenberg

O. R. DATHORNE

African Literature in the Twentieth Century

London: Heinemann, 1975. Pp. 387.

Professor Dathorne's *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* is a work which deserves close attention for many reasons. Whatever else African literature may be taken to mean or include, it is certainly more than literature written in English and French. This fact has not always been reflected in previous works purporting to study African literature as a whole. Authors