

# XPEIAZETAI BOHOEIA\*



\*He Needs Help

The walls of Demetrios' house in the slums of Athens are cracked. Icy winds blow right on his face while he sleeps. His blanket is threadbare. He eats one meal a day—bread dipped in oil.

Demetrios' mother has tuberculosis and is hospitalized. His father, a rag man, earns \$13 a month. Demetrios does not pray for a blanket or more food. He prays to grow up quickly so that he can help his parents.

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"I am proud of just this mile of steel; upon it my visions come to life, erect. Here's a fight for construction instead of style, an austere disposition of bolts and steel."

Back home he began to feel out of place within the framework of the new conformity and complained, "I swell with the milk of verse, there is no pouring it forth anywhere it seems, and it brims me over."

He could only live as an independent and intemperate artist and, although he wrote only a few weeks before his suicide, "I subdue myself, setting my heel on the throat of my own song," Mayakovsky's anarchy reasserted itself and he put a bullet through his head.

From the fourteen volumes of poetry composed between 1915 and 1930 Patricia Blake has judiciously chosen for the present collection those poems that are free of topical or purely political issues. It is particularly gratifying to see included the later lyrics, such as "Impossible," "What Happened," "You," "I Call," which represent a most unusual and provocative aspect of Mayakovsky's art. Although the lyrics deal with the traditionally romantic themes of a poet's love and despair, something of a tour de force is achieved by a positive absence of all romantic clichés. As for instance, in writing about love:

To love  
means this:  
to run  
into the depths of a yard  
and, till the rook-black night,  
chop wood  
with a shining axe,  
giving full play to one's strength.

Perhaps the greatest impact of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poems upon the reader is that of his language. He breaks to build, forging a living idiom that in his own words "will explode like a bomb, ache like a pain in the wound or ring out in joy like a triumphant hurrah." His stanzas bulge with bold, brash metaphor and uncouth diction; syntax is wilfully destroyed, nouns are transformed into verbs and adjectives, prefixes are transposed to coin new words and suffixes added to fulfill his rhyme.

George Reavey's translation of this highly idiomatic verse is competent and at times even imaginative; he is particularly successful in rendering the outsize imagery of the poet's heroic and intensely lyrical moods. For those who know Russian this bilingual edition provides an opportunity to read in the original text the work of a writer whom two such unlike-minded critics as Stalin and Pasternak called the greatest Soviet poet.

**NEITHER HERO NOR STOIC:** Anthony Bonner's translation of "The Complete Works of Francois Villon" (McKay, \$3.95) is the closest and the most accurate I have seen. It is in free verse, in American speech that is both colloquial and vigorous. In his first book Mr. Bonner proves himself not only a gifted translator in his rendering of a very difficult work, but also a scholar in his knowledge of textual and linguistic problems connected with medieval literature.

One finds Villon in this translation. He appears neither heroic nor stoical. He is a poor lover or, more simply, the poor man surrounded by all the legendary heroes. It is especially this feeling of union with what is above time that makes Villon a poet. All the themes of the fifteenth century find their purest expression in his work: the Virgin, death, fortune, the martyr-lover, the harlot, the shepherd, the malice of priests, the vanity of this world, the flight of time.

The volume is presented with the French text facing the translation, with a judicious selection of brief notes on difficult passages, and with an eloquent homage by William Carlos Williams to the French poet.

—WALLACE FOWLIE.

**UNHEARD HINTS:** Throughout "On the Way to the Island" (Wesleyan University Press, \$3) David Ferry's critical perception overshadows the intense personal vision by which a poet creates his own world. We can never say of him, as he does in his "Lines for a Dead Poet": "We were his citizens, and stayed/ In a country that his poems made." Nor does he display either the power of Pope by which "the shapeless vicious scene/ Composed itself" so that "of folly he made beauty" or the magic of Marianne Moore "To squeeze from a stone its juice,/ And find how sweet it is."

As these quotations indicate, Ferry is capable of intelligent, analytical comment, clearly and precisely expressed. But his lyrics are concerned with nature's hints of immortality and man's obtuse self-absorption. Moreover, while imitating Wordsworth's simple diction and humble subject matter, Ferry lacks the passion to raise them above the commonplace. Instead of emanating from fresh observation, his poems cling to the studied, borrowed air of the groves of academe.

—ROBERT D. SPECTOR.

### LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

Column Two should read: 13, 12, 11, 8, 14, 9, 7, or 13, 8, or 5, 10, 4, 3, 1, 6, 2. Column Three should read: 14, 10, 4, 5, 1, 12, 7, 11, 13, 6, 3, 9, 5, or 8, 2.



## Outside Story

WASHINGTON, D. C. THE HAPPIEST event of this theatrical season has been hatched not in New York but in Washington, D. C. Here at Zelda Fichandler's Arena Stage, a farce called "The Egg" is delighting Capital audiences. As adapted by Robert Schlitt, this American premiere of Felicien Marceau's Paris success seems ideally suited to its in-the-round presentation. "The Egg" concerns a blithe and likably candid young man named Magis, who shares confidences with the audience as he wanders through a series of escapades typical of ordinary French life, and even painfully similar to some that occur within American families. Magis begins his mildly inquisitive exploration of how life works by demonstrating that "the system" that makes society function is pretending that the world is reasonable; then, when we find out it isn't, we lie about it in order not to feel excluded. Instead of thinking that there is something wrong with such a system, we blame ourselves, and this self-blame, which is equivalent to what some people call being responsible, is ridiculous in a world where everything appears to happen by chance.

M. Marceau does not labor his thesis, but rather has earthy, casual fun with it. He illustrates, with vignettes from Magis's existence, the futility of trying to feel a part of society, or, as he puts it, "to be inside the egg." An impulsive petty theft leads not to jail but accidentally to sex, which had previously eluded Magis's "honest" efforts. A betrayal of his sister's fiancé proves that "love is nothing but a lie people make up because they're not sure." And his own purely physical affair with a married woman brings him a marvelously uncomplicated happiness.

But one reason men are unhappy is that when they are happy they start asking themselves why, and such questionings, combined with conceit, push Magis back into the system again. He gets married. As he says in a moment of genuine sadness, "I wanted to get inside that egg where the young people are, where life is just a game of rummy. For a moment it opened up for me and then it closed with me still on the outside."

But his dull marriage is livened when an old suitor of his wife returns and begins to cuckold him. Magis doesn't mind this, as long as he feels that he

is part of the affair and not merely ignored by the lovers. But his ingenious way of insuring this makes the lovers fear that he is crazy. When he realizes this, Magis feels "locked up like a madman inside his own mind," and cleverly if reluctantly murders his wife in such a way that it will appear that her lover committed the crime.

The final trial scene is delightful. Every time the lover tells the truth, the prosecutor patiently uses impeccable reason and logic to show the jury either that the defendant is lying or, if not, that he is an even worse scoundrel than everyone had thought. And so, at the end of the play, Magis has demonstrated that he now knows how to beat the system before the system beats him.

William Schust gives a remarkable performance as Magis; his shining good nature and innocence gain him our full sympathy in his battle against the caricatures of "The Egg's" corruptly reasonable inhabitants. And under F. Cowles Strickland's sure-handed direction, a cast headed by Alan Oppenheimer, Howard Wierum, J. Robert Dietz, Maurine Marlowe, and Judith Doty finds a style of playing that turns horror into comic strip, and yet keeps a sense of life in scenes that with less clean-cut acting could have seemed sordid. No wonder that Washington theatregoers have donated funds to Arena Stage to permit it to build America's first brand new theatre-in-the-round. If "The Egg" is a representative sample, the pleasure-come next September—will most certainly be ours.

UNFORTUNATELY, good comedies do not grow on trees, nor do they seem to take place under them. For while Lawrence Roman's "Under the Yum-Yum Tree" is occasionally hilarious, it is blighted with long, unfunny discussions about premarital sex. Sandra Church, Dean Jones, and Nan Martin do all they can to cover up the implausibility of their roles, and Gig Young has a field day with the play's one effective character, a candid and melancholy seducer who without shame or malice uses the conflict between a young girl's parental teachings and her obsessive cravings to his temporary advantage. However, the "False Alarm" ending only confirms the play's already too apparent purposelessness.

—HENRY HEWES.

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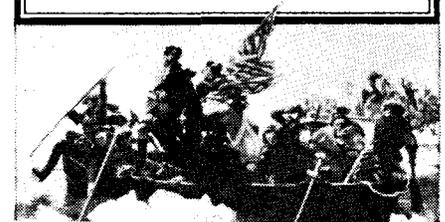


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