

## BOOK NOTES

**I** REMEMBER: SKETCH FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, by Boris Pasternak. Translated with a Preface and Notes by David Magarshack. With an essay "On Translating Shakespeare" translated by Manya Harari. Pantheon \$3.75.

In these brief and fragmentary memoirs, written after *Doctor Zhivago*, there is the same return to the pre- and early-revolutionary past with its aspirations as yet untested and undestroyed, the same gaps in chronology and event, the same lofty refusal of direct controversy that characterized the novel and were attributed by many critics in the West to the impossibility in which the author found himself to speak his mind freely. The omissions, the critics said, were in themselves the gravest of charges against the Soviet régime. The fact, however, would appear that they result simply from the deliberate artistic choice of a poet who insists on holding to his own vision of the world, rejecting any and every element that would distort it. Logically, the Communists consider this attitude inadmissible: they would want Pasternak committed—as were Mayakovsky and the rest, the suicide poets and those who have lived—to celebrate their system, pliant, Congress after Congress, Stalin after Lenin, Khrushchev after Stalin, year after year, to all the changes that are brought to it. The magnitude of Pasternak's powers, the nature of his religious preoccupation and personal nostalgia, have excluded even the possibility of his assuming so minor, so fatal a role. Saving our pity and concern for the weak who need them, it is time we took Boris Pasternak at his word: he has written, in the freedom of his spirit, precisely what he has wanted to write, nothing more and nothing less.

**P**ORTRAIT OF ZELIDE, by Geoffrey Scott. Scribner's. \$3.95.

This is a book to make married men appreciate their wives and simultaneously to persuade bachelors of their blessed state. After encountering "Zélide," one is grateful for what one has, even if it is nothing. What a monster of a woman! And, like all monsters, exercising a considerable fascination—even evoking a sense of pity, and sometimes a nervous laugh. "Zélide" was born to the blue-stocking in 1740 as Isabella van Tuyll. Her intelligence was so formidable, her self-consciousness so total, as to frighten away all suitors (including the fatuous Boswell, whose "love" letters have to be read to be believed), until she finally married a colorless Swiss mathematician,

M. de Charrière, and went to live with him, her senile father-in-law, and her two aged sisters-in-law in the family manor at Neuchâtel. After seventeen tedious years, she met the love of her life, the young Benjamin Constant. He could not have better prepared himself for his future liaison with Mme. de Staël, except perhaps by perishing at birth. Mr. Scott's little book, originally published in 1925 and now reissued, is beautifully written: he works the Lytton Strachey vein, while ignoring the coarser seams of irony and condescension. And "Zélide's" letters, abundantly quoted, glitter as brilliantly as a Cyclops' eye.

**T**HE FIG TREE, by Aubrey Menen. Scribner's. \$3.50.

Harry Wesley, the serious son of chapel-going English parents, decides when he grows up to save humanity. As a Nobel Prize winner who alters the structure of plant cells, he has to retire at thirty-two—science is a young man's game—so he turns to producing extraordinary fruit in Italy. "Fig trees had been growing in this spot for two thousand years, but nobody had seen a tree such as this one. . . . Its figs were colored a royal purple and they were as big as grapefruit." This is the story of the consequences of partaking of these forbidden fruits; of the havoc wrought on innocent Harry Wesley and on his neighbor, an American who has money and whose sole ambition it is to eat two square meals a day. Instead of solving the nutritional problems of mankind, the gargantuan fruits induce aphrodisia and atavism, and millennia of civilization evaporate as Harry and Joe succumb to primitive passion. Joe makes rapid progress from contented sloth and obsessive gluttony to overpowering lust. Where hitherto his most shocking fantasies have been that he was a fat poodle being chased by a cop after stealing a sausage from a butcher, he now dreams sheer pornography. Both he and Harry furthermore are suddenly devastatingly attractive to all women, including the improverished contessa with whom their relationship has previously been impeccable. (*Her* problem is the weight of ancestry: she stems from a Renaissance line reduced to trade. "The family that had once poisoned a cardinal now printed certificates of hygiene on paper cups of an ice-cream called 'For Baby.'") She happens to be a lush beauty, but as Harry points out, in their condition of roaring explosive health, they'd just as soon seduce a crosseyed fishwife, were she the first female available. Before this satirical fable ends, church and state as well as science and no less than three national characters come in for quite a lampooning by Mr. Menen's genially acidulous pen.

**L**ADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER, by D. H. Lawrence. Grove. \$6.

It's been a tough season for censors. Nabokov's *Lolita* steamed and twisted past them before they could even get their bats off their shoulders, and now the poor fellows are about to be beamed by Lawrence's deliberate, almost artless *Lady Chatterley*. The virtuous police officers who were confused by Nabokov's libidinous avoidance of four-letter words must be stunned by Lawrence's rather pedestrian insistence on including them all. He was a firm believer in what he called "good-hearted" lust. (That wasn't the noun he used.) And as a matter of fact, there can be little doubt that the descriptions of those moments between tea and dinner when Constance Chatterley slipped off to meet her husband's gamekeeper in the woods are just about the only passages that actually deserve a careful reading. The rest of it seems embarrassingly dated, even at its best much closer to Jane Austen than to Henry Miller. Most of this shocking book is a curiously old-fashioned novel of manners, and at times Lawrence's preoccupation with class distinctions could make even adultery seem dull. The book is, however, widely recognized as a classic, and the Grove Press is certainly to be commended for taking the risks involved in publishing it. The situation is especially complicated by the fact that the text is in the public domain and cannot be copyrighted. Even so, Grove has undertaken to pay royalties to the Lawrence estate. Any fly-by-night publisher could bring out a cheap edition without paying royalties—and perhaps cut heavily into Grove's sales. And if the book is banned, Grove stands not only to lose sales but to incur heavy legal expenses. (Furthermore, the publisher has agreed to stand behind any bookseller who gets into trouble over the book.) But it is impossible to guess what the censors will do about *Lady Chatterley*. Times have certainly changed since 1948, when Doubleday lost a case that went all the way up to the Supreme Court involving Edmund Wilson's comparatively tame *Memoirs of Hecate County*. But the Grove edition has already been picked up by the authorities in a number of cities, and there is sure to be at least some excitement over it. The question of what the public should and should not be allowed to buy is a serious and a difficult one, but we have no difficulty whatsoever in saying that we'd much rather let even teen-agers read Lawrence's "good-hearted" and essentially clean-minded celebration of the rain-and-flower-drenched marriage of John Thomas and Lady Jane than some of the sneaking, sadistic filth that befouls the best-seller lists nowadays.

# RECORDS

## A la Russe


ROLAND GELATT

**G**LINKA'S *A Life for the Tsar* is a landmark in musical history that has been damned consistently with the faintest possible praise. There is no disputing its primacy as the first opera—indeed the first music—of any consequence to be written by a Russian composer, nor is there any gainsaying the success that attended its first performance at St. Petersburg in 1836. But *A Life for the Tsar* gets short shrift from Glinka's twentieth-century expositors.

It appears that Glinka had the misfortune to journey to Italy in 1830 and (horrors!) to fall under the wretched influence of Bellini and Donizetti. He returned to Russia tainted with Italianisms and in *A Life for the Tsar* composed an opera within the pre-Verdi operatic tradition. And what could possibly be worse than that? Even so faithful a partisan of Russian music as the late M. D. Calvocoressi felt obliged to warn readers that Glinka's opera would "prove tedious to all but confirmed devotees of old-fashioned, full-dress opera."

Within the past decade, however, the "old-fashioned" Italian opera of Bellini and Donizetti has quite suddenly come back into critical favor. For the first time within living memory *La Sonnambula* is being listened to with respect. And if *Sonnambula*, why not *A Life for the Tsar*? A fresh look at Glinka's first opera would seem to be in order, and this is provided by a new recording of it made in Paris, with a Russian-singing cast, under the direction of Igor Markevitch (Capitol GCR 7163).

**T**HE WORK, in this beautifully executed performance, turns out to be not a bit tedious—and rather less beholden to the pre-Verdi Italian school than one would have been led to believe. The division of the



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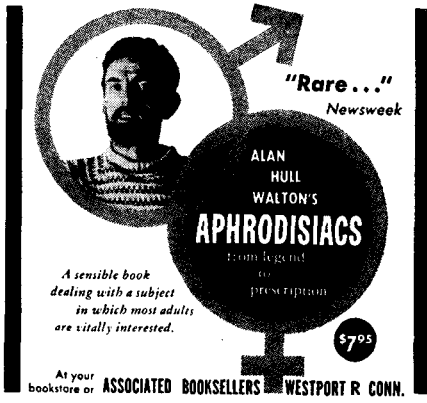
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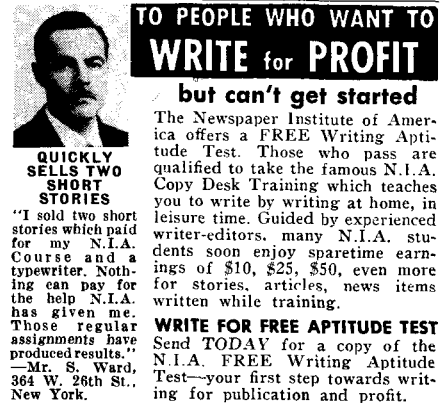
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