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SHABBY LION

GOGOL. By David Magarshack. (Faber. 36s.)

By H. E. BATES

THE main facts of Gogol's life are, I suppose, as well known as Gorki's celebrated remark that "we are all descended from Gogol's 'The Overcoat,'" a conclusion outmatched only by Chekov's rapturous: "How direct, how powerful is Gogol, and what an artist he is: His 'Marriage' alone is worth two hundred thousand roubles, it is simply delicious. . . . He is the greatest of Russian writers."

These facts—Gogol's childhood in the beautiful and fertile Ukraine; his first excursion as a young man to St. Petersburg; his over-earnest ambition to set the place on fire with a long poem, "an idyll in scenes," or failing that by becoming an actor; his unhappy idealised love-affair with a girl who, though "a divinity created by Himself," turned out to be a prostitute; his humiliating failure as a Civil Servant and his badgering of his vain and improvident mother, who after her marriage at fourteen had borne twelve children in not many more years, to send him notes and songs from Ukrainian folk-lore, from which he concocted the delightful "Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka" and earned himself fame; to subsequent growth through "The Government Inspector," "Dead Souls," "Taras Bulba" and the impossible "Selected Passages from Correspondence with my Friend" to a monumental position of august and influential importance in the Russian literary lions' den—these are all here to provide the spider-work of the tomb in which Mr. Magarshack,

armed with much new material recently made available in Russia, has now embalmed Gogol the man, rather than Gogol the writer.

From the moment when Mr. Magarshack suggests that Gogol had endured dark and unfortunate experiences in his mother's serf-girls' room I feared that his method might well turn out to be the modern one of using a psychological pin to get the wrinkle out. Happily this is not so; Mr. Magarshack rejects the facile approach; the book is painstakingly constructed, thoughtfully, sharply, even caustically written; it is excellent in every way; and presently a strange, conflicting, complex, uneasily pathetic figure emerges: a sort of whimpering, moulting lion with half its teeth drawn and wells of glycerine self-pity rising in its eyes.

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THIS extraordinary figure is compounded of hypochondriac and idealist; realist and self-deceiver; egoist and gormandiser (one of his favourite dishes was boiled goat's milk laced with rum, which he called Gogul-mogul, and another a repulsive mess of macaroni, which he invariably made himself and foisted on his suffering friends); inveterate borrower and ardent spender; a man not only constantly haunted by the horror of imaginary illnesses but terrified by the mere mention of death; a passionate lover of the open road and of fancy velvet waistcoats, which he wore in only two colours, red and blue; a regular mole of a self-searcher, given to prolonged

morbid introspection and the lofty conviction that "Rebukes are good for the soul: the longer I live and the better I become the more I crave rebukes"; and finally the moralist, the religious fanatic, the tireless admonisher, the would-be deliverer of Russia, the inexhaustible giver of advice and humourless lecturer of friends unsparingly self-exposed. In "Selected Passages" and in voluminous correspondence with his contemporaries, no fewer than 350,000 words having been written to them between 1842 and 1848, every letter carefully copied and preserved.

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SOMEWHERE under all this the great humorist, the so-called Dickens of Russia, the poet-realist of the racy-coloured Ukrainian sketches lies crouching; and with him the Ukrainian boy who rode home from school in the long summer holidays in a farm cart, minutely observing the villages, the fields of rye and corn, the merchants in their Siberian-pleated coats and "the young girls in a smart head-dress of yellow, blue and pink ribbons, with gold braid tied over it, in fine smocks embroidered with red silk on every seam and adorned with little silver flowers."

What happened between that time and the moment when the leeches had finished sucking his blood and he lay at last "in state with a laurel wreath round his head and bunch of *immortelles* in his hands," taking with him "his transcendental mission to save Russia," is an affair of forbidding complexity, and to the attempt to unravel it Mr. Magarshack has brought not only light and brilliance. He has somehow made us remember and love "the mysterious dwarf," the boy, and to be lost in pity for "the capricious egotist," the man.