Smykoŭskaja, V. I. *Tvorčaja koncepcyja piśmieńnika: Zaduma i jaje mastakaje uwasableńnie ŭ 'Paleskaj chronicy' I. Mieleža*. BDU, Minsk 1976. 112 pages.

The death of Ivan Mielež at the height of his powers on 9 August 1976 robbed Byelorussian literature of one of its most outstanding novelists. Born in 1921, he began writing while Stalin was still alive and displayed considerable narrative mastery in his otherwise rather conventional war novel *In the Direction of Minsk* (*Minski napramak*, 1950-2), but it was not until 1960 when the first part of the so-called Palesian trilogy *People of the Marsh* (*Ludzi na balocie*) appeared that he unfolded the full range of his originality and epic skill, most notably in the areas of characterization, complex but convincing plot development and above all psychological perceptiveness. Set in the pre-collectivization period of the author's childhood, it was followed by the no less masterly *Breath of the Storm* (*Podych navalnicy*, 1965), but for many years there was no sign of the expected third part. The relatively relaxed atmosphere ensuing from the 20th Party Congress had gradually dispersed, and Mielež — unlike Bryl and Šamiakin who also received a new lease of life in the Thaw — seemed unable to respond to the post-Khrushchev era; in 1976, however, *Potymia* published the final part of trilogy *Snowstorms, December* (*Zaviei, śniežań*), and Mielež's *magnum opus* was successfully completed, only months before his death.

V. I. Smykoŭskaja's short study has been unfortunate in its timing since its appearance coincided almost exactly with that of *Snowstorms, December*, thus preventing it from taking the latter into account. The author's aim has been to throw light on Mielež's 'creative laboratory' by comparing the three main variants of *People of the Marsh* and *Breath of the Storm*: the 'first draft', the text as published in *Potymia* and the revised version which appeared in book form. When she concentrates on structural and stylistic comparisons based on her research into the novelist's 'personal archive' she can be interesting, but regrettably, a great part of the book is taken up with rather rambling generalizations which apparently owe nothing to the special material at her disposal. Though himself an acute commentator on contemporary literary

developments, Mielež has not so far been fortunate with his critics, too many of whom, including Smykoŭskaja, have indulged in *parti pris* statements introduced by expressions like *ahulnaviadoma* (the latter's universal adoption, incidentally, coinciding precisely with the dropping of compulsory references to Stalin).

The author attempts to place Mielež in a rudimentary context, showing his move towards the epic genre to have been characteristic of Soviet literature as a whole, and indicating his immediate predecessors (who were no more than general influences, for she is rightly at pains to emphasize Mielež's originality): Kolas in theme and Čorny in technique, with a nod in the direction of Šolochov. Smykoŭskaja very properly stresses the background to the writing of the first two parts of the trilogy, showing the change of conditions characteristic of the post-Stalin era, with new possibilities opening up before writers and a far greater premium set on originality and individuality; on the other hand, her conclusion from the increased role of the communist activists in the final ('book') version of her text is only that the novelist was broadening his work's philosophical basis.

Not many Western readers will be impressed by Smykoŭskaja's suggestion that Mielež's epic 'in present-day conditions of fierce ideological struggle with bourgeois tendencies towards the dehumanization of art and literature rings out as a call to unity on the part of the progressive forces of humanity in striving for the lofty ideals of Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood, in the struggle for Peace and the Happiness of all peoples'. Nor are they likely to find his work made more valuable by the remarks of the General Secretary of the CPSU at the 24th Party Congress with which this very uneven study ends.

The author has had access to some new material but has not made as much use of it as she might. Nonetheless, the subject is an interesting one and some readers may think it worthwhile to winnow the wheat from the chaff. We are still, however, a long way from anything like a definitive study of one of Byelorussia's greatest writers. *Arnold McMillin*