

MUCH ADO ABOUT PASTERNAK

A Review of "Doctor Zhivago"

by MICHAEL HARMEL

YESTERDAY Boris Pasternak was practically unknown in that part of the world which, absurdly, is called "the West". In the Soviet Union he has long been one of the best known men of letters: poet and celebrated translator into Russian of Shakespeare and other classics. If say, last year, the Nobel Prize committee had done anything so improbable as to present its annual award for literature to Pasternak, most Russians would have been delighted. And so would many of us abroad, for the hide-bound conservatives of the Nobel literary jury have for many years betrayed gross political prejudice, and such recognition for some eminent Soviet writer was long overdue.

Alas, in offering its 1958 prize to Pasternak, the jury was merely running true to form. The award was in fact a sly move in the cold war, a transparent attempt to embarrass and discredit the Soviet Union. It was not a recognition of Pasternak's many years of poetic and Shakespearian endeavour: it was a bravo for his all-advised action in sending his first novel "Doctor Zhivago" abroad for publication despite its rejection by a Soviet publishing house. "I fear the Greeks," Pasternak might well say, "especially when they bear gifts." For, in the circumstances, he could hardly, as a self-respecting Soviet citizen, do other than reject the prize — the first of its kind ever to be offered to a Soviet writer. All the award has done for Pasternak is to get him into hot water with his fellow-citizens, some of whom were apparently so annoyed with him that they demanded he get out of the country.

Meanwhile, of course, all this bohaai has meant plenty of free publicity for "Doctor Zhivago." The book is being lauded to the skies. The publishers of the English edition (Collins and Harvill Press: S.A. price 21s.6d.) modestly compare it with "War and Peace"; the English literary critics are freely flinging around phrases like "brilliant", "work of genius", and so on. In Johannesburg a Sunday newspaper is "adapting" it as a serial, and some crackpot outfit in America is even proposing to get it out in Russian and smuggle masses of copies into the Soviet Union as anti-Communist propaganda!

The book is anti-Communist no doubt; in fact it's anti- any sort of politics and schemes for human betterment: it's downright anti-social. But as "propaganda" it's bound to fall flatter than a pancake. Its only social message is the sort of commonplace selfishness summed up in the vulgar phrase: "B-gger, you Jack; I'm all right"; the conceit of the intellectual snob with his arrogant contempt for the masses. The masses are hardly likely to be impressed.

Zhivago, Pasternak's hero (I use the word in a double sense, for the author does not conceal his sympathy with his main character) is a figure out of the old Russia. One of the landed gentry, and married to an heiress, we see him as a medical student, officer in the first world war, doctor and poet. Around him, in the fires of war, revolution and civil war, his familiar old world collapses and a new world is born. But Zhivago does not really participate in these mighty upheavals — he is merely carried along with them like a piece of driftwood in a storm. Nor is he changed himself, as everyone else around him is changed. He remains an odd, eccentric figure from a nineteenth-century Russian novel — with a dash of Oblomov's pathetic futility; a trace of Raskolnikov's insane egoism; a smattering of Tolstoyan Christian anarchism. He remains, to the end, the perpetual university student, idly playing with half-formulated ideas, irresponsible, immature, parasitic. He is entirely occupied with himself, his family, his love-affairs.

As a student under the Tsarist regime, Zhivago shares the prevailing mood of intellectual revolt against the sordid oppression and stultification of the system — though he does nothing about it practically. The socialist revolution itself finds him apathetic, almost bored.

When he reads in the paper the announcement of the establishment of Soviet power, he is indeed "shaken and overwhelmed by the greatness of the moment and the thought of its significance for centuries to come."

"What splendid surgery!" he says to himself. "You take a knife and you cut out all the old stinking sores. Quite simply, without any nonsense, you take the old monster of injustice which has been accustomed for centuries to being bowed and scraped and curtsied to, and you sentence it to death."

Yet even then, he philosophises on, though the revolution has "real greatness", "real genius", it is "so misplaced and so untimely."

Indeed, for one like Zhivago (and one suspects, too, for one like Pasternak) the Revolution is "misplaced and untimely." He is far removed from understanding the real meaning and significance of what is happening about him: the storm into which life has thrown him. And he does not understand, until the very end, nor does he accept that it means the end of the old world, the old sort of parasitic environment, of which, however much he might have affected to despise it, he was a part. Nor that he, Zhivago, must change himself or perish.

Seeking to run away, to his wife's family estate in the country — in the midst of the civil war! — he is kidnapped by a band of partisans fighting the Whites, and forced, against his will, to serve as their medical officer. His family is exiled. A passionate love affair with another man's life ends in tragedy.

For a while, in the early twenties, the period of "NEP", when the Soviet Government allowed a limited development of capitalist "private enterprise" while it recovered its strength after the exhaustion of the civil wars and famine, Zhivago comes back to life. He writes "booklets", which one gathers consist of the sort of vague, confused and amateurish philosophising which occupy so much of this novel; short stories, sketches and poems. These volumes are printed privately and sold clandestinely at second-hand private-enterprise bookshops. But, one by one, his group of friends become attracted by Communism and desert him. He goes to live alone, "gave up medicine, neglected himself, stopped seeing his friends and lived in great poverty."

And that, for all practical purposes, is the end of the book. Pasternak has stuck on a little "Epilogue" (it occupies fourteen pages out of over 500) touching on the history of some of the minor characters in the war and post-war period. From these pages nothing of the epic grandeur of Russia's heroic resistance to Nazism emerges, nor her astounding post-war recovery and dramatic new leaps ahead. All that Pasternak can say (this time writing boldly himself as author, not putting the words into the mouths of characters) is that "the enlightenment and liberation which had been expected to come after the war had not come with victory" though "a presage of freedom was in the air." These are damning pages, artistically inexcusable, politically a pitiless self-exposure of the writer's limitations.

However, the bulk of the book, and its essence, does not consist of Pasternak's views on the 1950's but of the background, atmosphere and effects of the 1917 Revolution — all seen through the vision of a Zhivago. Now this method of making history come alive through the eyes and the experiences of an individual, or a small group of people, can be enormously effective and artistically valid, as Tolstoy did it, or Sholokov in his "Don" novels, or Ehrenburg in "The Fall of Paris." But, to be true and convincing the picture must emerge through the eyes and experiences of genuine, representative people, acting upon and being acted upon by events. Zhivago is not such a person; he is a detached, cynical observer, through whose distorting vision the great sweep of history is reduced to a series of annoying interruptions to his comforts, his plans, his passionate love affairs, his one-man researches in medicine, his hobby of verse-writing. It is the worm's-eye view of the revolution: an unedifying caricature.

In "Ten Days That Shook The World", John Reed reported, in an unforgettable little vignette, an argument between a soldier on sentry duty and "a tall young man with a supercilious expression, dressed in the uniform of a student."

“ ‘Now brother,’ answered the soldier earnestly, ‘you don’t understand. There are two classes, don’t you see, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. We—’

“ ‘Oh, I know that silly talk!’ broke in the student rudely. ‘A bunch of ignorant peasants like you hear somebody bawling a few catch-words. You don’t understand what they mean. You just echo them like a lot of parrots . . .’

“The soldier scratched his head ‘To me it seems perfectly simple — but then I’m not well educated. It seems like there are only two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—’

“ ‘There you go again with your silly formula!’ cried the student.

“ ‘—only two classes,’ went on the soldier, doggedly. ‘And whoever isn’t on one side is on the other.’”

I have often wondered whatever happened to that insufferable snob of a student and his like after the revolution. Now I know. He is Doctor Zhivago.

It is not easy to reach the necessary objectivity to judge such a book as this as literature, as a novel “pure and simple”, for it is neither pure nor simple. It is certainly not a “great book”; in many ways it does not even measure up to the standards required of a reasonably good novel. The plot is tortuous and unconvincing; as a story-teller Pasternak lacks technical skill; he repeatedly strains coincidence beyond the bounds of credibility. The book lacks structural unity.

Some have seen high tragedy in Zhivago’s story, that of a man from the past, unable to adjust himself to a new society; sublime lyricism in his loves. But to me it seems that, for an artist to evoke the true compassion, the fellow-feeling that goes to make up a great tragedy, his subject must have that in his character which draws compassion to him. Because Zhivago lacks humanity, compassion, humility, he cannot draw compassion or pity to himself. He lives and dies unto himself, bitterly scorning the companionship, the help and the pity of mankind.

Yet it is clear that Pasternak is a richly gifted writer. The translators of the English edition, Max Hayward and Manya Harari, speak of the “astonishing power, subtlety and range” of his prose. While such qualities hardly appear in either the prose or the verse (Pasternak appends some twenty of “Zhivago’s” poems) as translated, the book contains many passages of extraordinary lyrical power and beauty. And these come through despite the occasional infelicities of the translators — who, to the irritation of this reader anyway, have taken the liberty of peppering the text with numerous superfluous footnotes.

It is hardly surprising, on the whole, that “Doctor Zhivago” was rejected for publication in the Soviet Union. For if we, living so far away, can at least attempt to balance the book’s literary merits against its obvious shortcomings, this would be a great deal more difficult in a country where much of the novel, with its cheapening and belittlement of all they stand for, would be unendurably offensive to the public as a whole.