The Face of Pasternak

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Recommended Citation
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THE FACE OF PASTERNAK

I AM tempted to say that art does not equal itself, does not mean itself alone, but that it means tangibly something beyond itself. In this way we call art symbolic in essence. If I believe an author is not too great in his natural endowments, or if I do not discover in his works this immense spiritual quality, this sense of all-surpassing, overarching importance to life, he is as nothing to me however good the written page.

So Boris Pasternak declared in a letter to Eugene Kayden in 1958. When he died in his home at Peredelkino near Moscow on May 30, 1960, he had received from the world of letters, outside his native land, full recognition as an artist of "immense spiritual quality."

In the world of letters, the quality regarded as immensely spiritual has a variety of meanings. One might study Boris Pasternak's background, search out the biographical facts of his life, in order to discover wherein lay his immense spiritual quality. He was born in Odessa in 1890 of well-to-do Jewish parents. His father, Leonid, was a famous painter; his mother, Rosa, a concert pianist. Through them, he was exposed to the open world of art beyond the ghetto, to men like Tolstoy and Rilke, both of whom his parents knew personally. Greek Orthodox Christianity drew him powerfully, but he grew up in a turbulent era in which orthodox religion was being assailed by a new religion of grandiose revolutionary illusions.

In truth, external biographical sketches cannot evoke for us the face of the person, Boris Pasternak—this person whose voice was destined to shatter the conspiracy of silence that surrounded his world. He was an artist speaking out suddenly in the midst of darkness and fear, with a lyric clarity almost as touching as the voice of a bird breaking through the gloom of a long murky night. It was through art, not polemic, through a barrier of silence. His lineaments of Boris Pasternak are the lineaments of the description of life, birth, and death.

Not for biography—whether this or that of the man, or only to a more intimate, more unique individuality of man—"The face of man when it is linked to the quality of the art, what kind of form is preserved, the image which has it fallen apart?"

Pasternak himself wrote, "I, I," he wrote to Eugene Kayden, "I, you to write about me. "Without revelations?" "

TIME

The story of Death and the Lord's prayer is the history of "dwell therein" (I Corinthians 15:22) and the cross over the plaque. When the story closes, "And the chant. . . ."

2. Ibid., p. vii.
polemic, through a courageous work of art, that his voice broke the barrier of silence. It is to his art, then, that we must look for the lineaments of Boris Pasternak. "Art," he said, "is not simply a description of life, but a setting forth of the uniqueness of being." 2

Not for biographical details, then, not for the prying-out of parallels—whether this or that "fact" actually happened to Boris Pasternak, the man, or only to Zhivago, the character—but for something deeper, more intimate, must the novel Doctor Zhivago 3 be searched: for the uniqueness of man's being as understood by Boris Pasternak.

"The face of man can preserve itself as the image of God only when it is linked by faith with the original Divine Image in which it was created. As soon as man breaks his tie with God, the face loses the quality of the image: it falls apart," writes Max Picard in The Flight from God. 4 The face of Boris Pasternak, as mirrored in his art, what kind of face is it? Is it a face in which the divine Image is preserved, the image of Love? Is this its immense spiritual quality or has it fallen apart?

Pasternak himself told us where to look for his face. "What am I," he wrote to Eugene Kayden, "without the novel, and what have you to write about me without drawing upon that work, its terms and revelations?" 5 Thus we must look at his book.

"The story of Doctor Zhivago opens with a funeral. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the earth and everything that dwells therein" (Ps 23:1), chants the priest as he makes the sign of the cross over the dead mother of a weeping ten-year-old boy (p. 3).

When the story closes, the boy, grown up, grown old before his time, lies dead of a heart attack, his body awaiting cremation in a civil ceremony. "Only the flowers compensated for the absence of the ritual and the chant. . . . [They] seemed to take over the function of the Office of the Dead." "Perhaps," the author reflects, "the riddles of life

2. Ibid., p. vii.
that so puzzle us are contained in the green of the earth, among the
trees and the flowers of graveyards. Mary Magdalene did not recognize
Jesus risen from the grave, 'supposing Him to be the gardener' "
(p. 493).

Lara, the dead man’s mistress, grieves that he does not have a church
funeral: "He would have deserved all that, he would have justified
and given meaning to 'the lament over the grave which is the hymn
of Alleluia.' " Leaning over the coffin, she makes "three sweeping
signs of the cross over the body . . ." (p. 500). For Lara, there will
be no one to make this act of charity. After the funeral she goes into
the street and is never seen again. "She vanished without a trace," we are told, "and probably died somewhere, forgotten as a nameless
number on a list that afterwards got mislaid, in one of the innumerable
mixed or women’s concentration camps in the north" (p. 503).

Between these two moments—the moment when the ten-year-old
boy experienced death for the first time and his uncle "spoke to him
of Christ and tried to comfort him" (p. 5) and the moment when
the grown man lay dead, his body awaiting cremation and a civil
ceremony—stretches an extraordinary story of hours and days, weeks
and months, years and decades, of the human body and soul in travail,
of a society torn down and being rebuilt, of men of "principle" ruth­
lessly determined to reshape the planet, and of one single man believ­
ing that "people must be drawn to good by goodness" (p. 261); that
life exists in its own right, and not as an illustration for a superior
policy; above all, that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.

Before the reader’s eyes there unfolds the spectacle of a world
made by God and ruined by men. The terrible scenes of derailed
trains; of burned villages where only a few houses still stand, empty,
uninhabited, "piles of charred rubble with black chimneys rising out
of them" (p. 468); of orphaned fields, plague-infested with mice,
looking as if they had been put "under a curse" (p. 467); of cities
in the process of demolition; of human lives herded irresponsibly
from one place to another; of families destroyed, and individuals dis­
integrated—all this, set against the tremendous and poignant beauty
of forest and mountain, snow and sky, wild bird and wild beast, heart­
breaking reminders of a world created in harmony, makes a contrast
that lives in the aroused mind long after the reader has finished the
book.
The Face of Pasternak

The idealists, the dreamers of socialism and brotherhood, thought they were destroying the “world of ignominy and fraud” in the 1905 revolution. Tiverzin, the railway worker, lived for “the time when everything on earth would be as rational and harmonious as it was now inside his feverish head” (p. 31). The girl Lara, who would grow up to die “forgotten as a nameless number on a list,” hears the gunfire of that first revolution and thinks: “The boys are shooting” (p. 51). Later, when the real revolution comes in 1917, she realizes: “You couldn’t say, ‘The boys are shooting’ this time. The children had all grown up...” (p. 128). The children had grown up, their revolution was “not the idealized intellectuals’ revolution of 1905, but this new upheaval, today’s, born of the war, bloody, ruthless, elemental, the soldiers’ revolution led by those professional revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks” (pp. 160–161).

The Train of History, as Lenin and the Bolsheviks symbolized their movement, was on its way. These men conceived of society as a train that could be seized by a new set of engineers and driven full steam ahead to the glorious destination of the new order. The Train of History was to become a familiar phrase everywhere. In the 30s one heard it in America. You could not jump off the Train of History, men were told. You had to ride it out to its destination. To abandon it was, at best to be left behind, at worst to be crushed beneath its roaring wheels. The anathema pronounced against all those who, like Silone and Malraux, had deserted the Communist cause was that they had jumped off the Train of History.

In his beautifully delineated novel, Pasternak uses the Bolshevik metaphor with intense poetic power. The reader experiences what the ride in the Train of History meant, experiences what it meant to jump off that train, to be left behind and, even though not crushed beneath its wheels, to die of exhaustion in heart and body.

In the novel there must be many perspectives or it is not a work of art. There is the perspective of immediate human life, and...
over and around the immediacy of life are the perspectives of allegory. In *Doctor Zhivago* many allegories open out of the immediate daily lives of the people. There are the allegories of snow and spring, death and resurrection; the allegories of forest and city, of the wolves and the candle burning in the window.

The allegory of the train opens the book. The first chapter is called "The Five-o'clock Express," for from the five o'clock express the father of the ten-year-old boy, the millionaire Zhivago, leaps to his death in despair because he cannot find the answers to the problems of his life. But this is only a "little" train, "a neat little yellow and blue train, tiny in the distance" (p. 11). At the height of the novel, the little yellow and blue train, from which a millionaire of the old order leaped to his death, seems indeed innocent compared to the iron monsters moving or stalled on snow-covered rails. The Train of History. Where is it going? Will it reach its utopian goal? According to St. Thomas More, who invented the word "Utopia," the word signifies a pre-Christian "nowhere."

Immobilized and buried in the snow, [train after train] stretched almost uninterrupted for miles on end. Some of them served as strongholds for armed bands of highwaymen or as hideouts for escaping criminals or political fugitives—the involuntary vagrants of those days—but most of them had become mortuaries and mass graves for the victims of the cold and of the typhus raging all along the line and mowing down whole villages (p. 378).

Around this horror of immobilized trains, mass graves, of travelers turning off the road at the sight of travelers, of strangers killing strangers "for fear of being killed" (p. 378), of ruined fields and ravaged towns, stand irrefragable reminders of God's creation.

Now and then there was a quiet, pale gray, dark rose evening, with birches, black and fine as script against the afterglow, and black streams faintly clouded over with gray ice flowing between steep white banks of

succeed to a remarkable degree in expressing "the whole of poetry and life in their complete unity" is most impressive from the structural standpoint, for only when careful attention is given to the structure of this novel does one become aware that the poems, gathered together rather ineptly as an appendix to the book, must have been intended as a vital part of the inner structure of the novel, performing a spiritual function with the most artistic delicacy within the very context of the story. Had the author had the freedom to work on the page proofs and galleys of his book, one can scarcely doubt that he would have righted the compositor's work.

The author had the freedom to work on the page proofs and galleys of his book, one can scarcely doubt that he would have righted the compositor's work.

Over the broken world, over their accustomed

Awakening one night Zhivago sees that the glassy dusk of a white snow blackened at the

Over the broken world they take their accustomed

What is history? the doctor was mistaken

Perhaps the most

It is on this night that after car is filled, bends

It is on this night that

What is history? the

Perhaps the most

It is time in the coming down of the

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If the enigma of the strange and sad destiny of the Jews troubles the people of this story. Lara asks why "these people who once liberated mankind from the yoke of idolatry, and so many of whom now devote themselves to its libera-
tion from injustice, should be so incapable of liberating themselves" from a loyalty she calls obsolete. She cannot understand why the Jews do not "dissolve among all the rest whose religion they have founded . . ." (p. 300).

Misha Gordon, Zhivago's friend, wants to shout to his people: "Come to your senses, stop. Don't hold on to your identity. Don't stick together, disperse. Be with all the rest. You are the first and best Christians in the world" (p. 123). Down the ages, the Jews have been characterized as a practical people, good at survival; yet how can a people that refuses to give up its identity even in the face of the cruelest extermination be called practical, good at survival? This steadfastness will never be loosed in the name of expediency, practicality, survival—evidently it is God's will that identity, particularly Jewish identity, be not jettisoned but fulfilled.

The relationship of the Old Covenant to the New contains the answer to Zhivago's question: What is history? When the Old came to an end, he says thoughtfully, something in the world changed: "Individual human life became the life story of God . . ." (p. 413). Time and history belong to God's love—all time relates to salvation, to the Saviour. "As it says in a liturgy of the Feast of the Annunciation, Adam tried to be like God and failed, but now God was made man so that Adam should be made God" (p. 413).

PRAYER

As the story is haunted by the memory of the Saviour, so it is haunted in a lower key, in counterpoint, by the memory of home and family. "I was looking out of the window in the train—I thought, what is there in the whole world worth more than a peaceful family life and work?" (p. 170). In a speech at a party, he cried: "During the revolution it will seem to you, as it seemed to us at the front, that life has stopped, that there is nothing personal left, that there is nothing going on in the world except killing and dying" (p. 182). This is almost midway in the book. Later, he writes in his notebook: "What happiness, to work from dawn to dusk for your family and for yourself, to build a roof over their heads . . . to feed them, to create your own world . . . in imitation of the Creator of the universe . . ." (p. 277). Real life, meaningful life, the goal of all quests, the aim of all are one's family, to ( . . .

Most moving is Zhivago a man of two worlds, largely but even when we sharply on key word heart addressing the Vision, not the Frieda, the shattered world, the world who has had little kind of prayer; of catastrophic world, was obtainable from to pray to Him, but from one's own inner foreign land learned of one's mother words pronunciations of . . .

One receives the suffering, longing "way of Zhivagos. We sacraments, to receive them, many of us, then the storm as a violent . . .

Yet here is a man for the creation of the path of truth and is a life after dea sions where the (pp. 11-12).

It goes back to the young p rayer: "Ang path of truth and is a life after dea sions where the (pp. 11-12).

The young ma
"Freeing themselves," stand why the Jews religion they have out to his people: identity. Don't stick it the first and best, the Jews have been rival; yet how can a face the cruellest? This steadfastness practicality, survival early Jewish identity, New contains the When the Old came the world changed: "God . . ." (p. 413). relates to salvation, of the Annunciation now God was made.

The Saviour, so it is memory of home and train—I thought, in a peaceful family, he cried: "During 1 to us at the front, all left, that there is dying" (p. 182). ites in his notebook: for your family and . . . to feed them, to Creator of the un

the aim of all art, he had thought earlier is "homecoming, return to one's family, to oneself, to true existence" (p. 164).

Most moving is the atmosphere of prayer that suffuses this novel. Zhivago is a man of prayer. Sometimes the prayer is not "trued," but even when vague and ambiguous, when waveringly off key or sharply on key with exact purity, the sound is the voice of the human heart addressing God. One thinks of Auden's line: "Sin fractures the Vision, not the Fact"—the vision in Doctor Zhivago is fractured by a shattered world. One is made aware that here is a writer, a man, who has had little chance to practice more than a personal, a hidden kind of prayer; certainly no outward practice could be possible in the catastrophic world of Doctor Zhivago, and just as certainly no help was obtainable from the outside. All one could learn of Christ—how to pray to Him, how to know Him—would have to be learned alone, from one's own intuitions, insights, memories: like the language of a foreign land learned from afar, from the dictionary and the memories of one's mother who spoke it, with no one to correct the strange mispronunciations of the words, the odd inversions of the clauses.

One receives the premonition that this stumbling, faltering, yearning, longing "way" will some day, God forbid, be the lot of thousands of Zhivagos. We may be those Zhivagos, deprived of all access to the sacraments, to religious truths, to the treasury of Christ's words. How many of us, then, might not fall silent, our prayer crushed out by the storm as a violent wind knocks the breath out of a man?

Yet here is a man in the very center of the blizzard, Doctor Zhivago, the creation of the writer Pasternak, who has not lost his breath but steadfastly continues to address God, not blaming, not despairing, but in utterly loving speech, like one who in the midst of destroying winds, has found the calm eye of the hurricane.

It goes back to Zhivago's youth, this habit of prayer. The boy of ten prays: "Angel of God, my holy guardian, keep me firmly on the path of truth and tell Mother I'm all right, she's not to worry. If there is a life after death, O Lord, receive Mother into Your heavenly mansions where the faces of the saints and of the just shine like stars" (pp. 11-12).

The young man fresh out of Gymnasium and university proclaims

that his “reverence for the supreme powers of heaven and earth” (p. 87) is without religiosity, yet he perseveres in his habit of speaking continually to God. Now, he says, he speaks to “the supreme powers of heaven and earth” through art—art, which he calls the answer to the desolation of death. Distinctively Christian words are the garb of his art. Like a wedding garment, the Christian vocabulary clothes his thoughts, and realizing this, he declares: “All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John” (p. 90).

In the beginning was the Word. One is suddenly reminded of the remarks of Elizabeth Langgässer in her novel, The Quest, which also depicts a terribly broken world, where she speaks of the end of the world as “a relapse into ghostly silence, dumbness, and fearful soundlessness, as its beginning had been the tireless speech of God.”

When returning home from the first world war, Doctor Zhivago, a mature man, looks out of the window as his train approaches the city and instant prayer leaps up in his heart—after three years of scenes of death and destruction, fire and ruin, he senses the passing of a nightmare, homecoming, reality. At this moment the train breaks out of the woods, a sloping field rises from a hollow, opposite the field a dark purple cloud covers half the sky, but sunbeams are breaking through and “the Church of Christ the Saviour showed over the rim of the hill” (p. 165; see also p. 473).

“Trued” or off-focus, the Christian phrase, the Christian symbol, above all the Christian sense of relationship of the creature to a Creator who cares for His creation, who came down from heaven to save it, whose tireless speech sustains His creation and keeps it from relapsing into fearful soundlessness—this sense of the Christian relationship and the response of the creature to that sense, not the blind howl of agony calling out from nothingness to nothingness, but the outpouring of loving trust and loving praise: This is the atmosphere of prayer that pervades Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago.

Older, broken, desperate, having sent away his beloved Lara because it seems the only way to save her life, the doctor stands at the window of the lodge and suddenly imagines that Lara has turned back. “O God, is it Thy will to give her back to me?” he cries (p. 450). At all times, in captivity of the body, in captivity of the soul, Zhivago refers to God’s will. He is described by the author as a man who, even when “he cursed h
when "he cursed his luckless fate," at the same instant prayed to God (p. 444). In looking at the sleeping heads of Lara and her little daughter on their snow-white pillows, "the purity of their features, and of the clean linen and the clean rooms, and of the night, the snow, the stars, the moon, [surges] through his heart in a single wave of meaning, moving him to a joyful sense of the triumphant purity of being" (p. 437). And he whispers—this is on the very eve of his giving up forever these beings to whom he is bound by the most intense affections—"Lord! Lord! and all this is for me? Why hast Thou given me so much? Why hast Thou admitted me to Thy presence, allowed me to stray into Thy world, among Thy treasures, under Thy stars, and to the feet of my luckless, irrational, uncomplaining love?" (p. 437).

Earlier Lara tells him: "You and I are like Adam and Eve, the first two people on earth who at the beginning of the world had nothing to cover themselves with—and now at the end of it we are just as naked and homeless" (p. 403). Naked and homeless, stripped of everything, family, human love, reputation, work, Doctor Zhivago holds on to prayer. And in his poems one finds beautiful, almost awesome, expressions of thanksgiving from a man who has lost every worldly thing. Thanksgiving to the Creator who said: "Be!"—thus creating man and admitting him to His presence, allowing him to stray into His world, among His treasures, under His stars. Zhivago thanks God for everything, for the little houses on the street, the rain clouds, the lamps, the icon lights, the puddles, the white rift of sky; he could pick them up and kiss them. He thinks with joyful gratitude that it is possible for him to receive the dazzling God-made gift of beauty from the hands of the Creator. He relates all beauty to beingness, the God-made gift, and all beingness to joy. "Art always serves beauty, and beauty is delight in form, and form is the key to organic life, since no living thing can exist without it, so that every work of art, including tragedy, expresses the joy of existence" (p. 454).

And so one comes to the end of the book about Zhivago.

Like Cinderella’s coach which turns into a pumpkin, the Train of History becomes a dilapidated trolley, stalled in the city. Zhivago, trying to push his way out, thinks of the problems in school arithmetic, on "how soon and in what order trains, starting at different times and going at different speeds, get to their destinations" (p. 490). But the
method of solving these problems escapes him. There is only one method of solving any problem of destination, after all. It is to be found in his poem “Magdalene”:

Oh, where would I now be,
My Master and my Saviour,
If eternity were not awaiting me . . . (p. 535).

The Train of History and the ruined, wracked landscape are under the eye of God.

HOPE

WHEN the man who wrote Doctor Zhivago died, his coffin was lowered into the grave at Peredelkino. The Office of the Dead was not read over it, just as the Office of the Dead was not read over the coffin of the character he had created in his novel. Instead, a friend read Pasternak’s poem, “Hamlet,” a poem in which he says:

If Thou be willing, Abba, Father,
Remove this cup from me.

He goes on, at once, to add:

I cherish this, Thy rigorous conception.

And he closes with the words:

To live life to the end is not a childish task (p. 523).

What remains? The image of a human being, the face of a man, a book. It is a book pervaded with loving prayer, with the poetry of Christ’s haunting presence, with the purity of the human soul, and with a most astonishing savor of chastity, of cleanness of heart in a story where the betrayal of marriage plays a major, almost symbolic part—all these come together in a final impression of a soul filled, not with anguish, terror, despair which one might expect, but with hope. The final impression of Pasternak’s book is one of hope, of the Gospel’s hope: “In the world you will have affliction,” says Jesus, “but take courage, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

It is this beautiful, courageous, upward movement of hope that emerges when Boris Pasternak’s novel is finished, breaking free like the waterfall out of the waste man has made of God’s world.
The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. So the book opens. As it ends, God's love burns like a candle on a table where bread may be broken, a table near a window. The man in the storm may look up, may see the candle burning in the window, and from his mouth may come a cry of praise through the ghostly silence, as the blizzard sweeps the world from end to end. The man looked up, broke the silence of his world, and the candle lit his face, the face of a unique being preserving the divine Image, the face of a man, Pasternak.

In the Lord's Keeping

"O Lord!" he sighed in his sorrow,
"How perfect the works of Thy hand!
The beds and the walls, my passing
In death, the night in the land.

"I swallow a sedative capsule;
I weep in my desolate place.
O Father, my tears and my torments
Keep me from seeing Thy face!

"How sweet Thy light to my spirit,
At the end in my agony;
How sweet that my lot and being
Are Thy gift of life unto me.

"And, dying, I feel that Thy hands
Are ablaze, that I die in Thy grace,
That I rest, O Lord, in Thy keeping,
Like a priceless ring in a case."

These are the last four stanzas of Pasternak's poem "In the Hospital" and are taken, with the kind permission of the publisher, from Boris Pasternak: Poems, trans. Eugene M. Kayden (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959, Copyright © by The University of Michigan 1959), p. 181.