

Impressions of Boris Pasternak

Last autumn interest was aroused by the publication in Italy of 'Dr. Zhivago,' a novel by Boris Pasternak which has not yet been published in the Soviet Union. Acclaimed in some sections of the Western press as an indictment of Soviet society, the author himself has denied any such intention and has described it as a "depiction of the experience of one family - one aspect of life." An English translation of the novel will be published by Messrs. Collins in June. In this article a friend of the poet recalls some impressions of the man.

I am not attempting an analysis of Boris Pasternak's work. I am setting down a few recollections of him, dating from the years 1945 to 1950, in the hope that I may be able to convey some faint idea of the personality of the greatest living Russian poet.

He is a short man, strongly built. He has fine, Jewish features which, lighted by his eyes when he is laughing or telling a story, are beautiful. In repose there is something faintly equine about his face, due, someone told me, to an operation he underwent years ago. His earlier portraits show him strikingly handsome.

You do not need to have been talking to him long before you realise that his outstanding moral characteristic is integrity - utter honesty to the point of naivete, combined with great subtlety. And the other thing you notice is his gaiety. He has the capacity for mirth which most people lose when they pass out of their teens, if they ever had it. When I last saw him he was nearly sixty, but when you talked to him you felt that he was a young man, and a very young man. He did not seem to be bogged in the compromises and pretences that age people and slow them up. Of all the people I ever met, the only one of whom Pasternak, with his combination of innocence and intelligence, reminded me was the marvellous boy, John Cornford.

There was something boyish in the glee with which he recalled a jape of many years before. It was before the First World War - 1911 I think, when Pasternak was 20 or 21. He was staying in the country with the Lithuanian poet Baltrushaitis (who was, some years after the Revolution, to return to Russia as his country's Minister). Their *dacha* was not far from that in which the distinguished poet, Vyacheslav Ivanov was living, along with his niece. After a good supper with wine, Baltrushaitis proposed that Pasternak and he sneak into Ivanov's garden, hide behind the shrubbery and howl like wolves. Pasternak agreed. It was a bright moonlight night and the shadows

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were intense. The two young poets began their howling. After a couple of minutes the door onto the verandah opened, and Vyacheslav Ivanov and his niece appeared in the doorway and stood listening. Then Ivanov began a long story about the curious habits of the wolves in the Tula (I think) Guberniya, how they would frequently do as they were doing tonight - roam the *dacha* gardens regardless of the proximity of man - and so forth. The two wolves stopped to listen but were soon obliged to start up again in order not to burst into laughter. They did not make themselves known, and left Vyacheslav Ivanov under the impression that he really had had wolves in his garden. Pasternak said that he had occasionally wondered if, among the poems of Vyacheslav Ivanov, there was one about the wolves which invaded his garden one summer evening in 1911, but he never got round to checking-up.

He sometimes said things which, from another man, might have sounded like expressions of vanity. Once when I called on him he talked about the attribution of the Nobel Prize to T. S. Eliot, which had been announced a day or two before. He was very pleased with the news, and said: 'I'm happy that the Nobel Prize has gone to Eliot. I've often thought that he was doing the same sort of thing as I - though I prefer my way of doing it.' Another time he told me that he had recently tuned in to the B.B.C. and had landed in the middle of a poetry recital: 'I listened closely. The stuff sounded familiar, though I couldn't place it. I realised it must be an English translation of something I'd written years before. The recitation came to an end, and the announcer said, "That was Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*."'

He was worth hearing on the subject of his fellow-writers. Of one poetess he said, 'She is not so much immoral as well-educated. And she has sincerity rather than genius.' He liked to talk of Mayakovsky, about whom he told me a characteristic anecdote. Once, many years earlier (I cannot remember whether it was just before or just after the Revolution), when times were hard, Mayakovsky said to Pasternak: 'I've just had a splendid idea. You go round telling everyone 'hat I'm the best poet in Russia, and I'll go round telling everybody that you're the second-best.' The two futurist poets liked and respected each other, although they went different ways. Once, during a storm, as the two of them were watching the lightning, Mayakovsky said: 'I know you love the look of that stuff. It has no interest for me until it's running through a wire doing a job.'

He was gentle in his references to writers who may not have had a generous portion of talent but who behaved like decent people. On the other hand, he was not kind to those who combined mediocrity with ill-nature. For example, to the late Vsevolod Ivanov, the author

of *Unforgettable 1919*, a play which advanced the frontiers of serenity and tedium. Ivanov carrying the Zhdanov line rather far, had attempted to prevent Pasternak from receiving a cash advance to which he was entitled. Pasternak remarked: 'I know that Ivanov wants my blood. I'd be prepared to give him some, too - in the form of a transfusion. But I'm afraid that even a litre of my blood wouldn't turn Ivanov into a competent writer.' When he met Ivanov at the party given by Konstantin Fedin to celebrate his Stalin Prize, he refused to shake hands with him - to the surprise of some present, who did not attach the same importance to words as Pasternak does.

I remember once hearing him describe the music of Rimsky-Korsakov as the 'musical multiplication table.'

Some time in 1946 I asked him if he could tell me the date of Osip Mandelstam's death. It was common knowledge that Mandelstam had been arrested in the Great Purge about 1937 and that he had died in Siberia, but I did not know exactly when. Neither did Pasternak, but he promised to find out (and very soon did so). He told me a story. Mandelstam had already once been arrested, about 1931, for writing a lampoon on Stalin. This had circulated in type-script among the intelligentsia and had found its way into the hands of the police. One day Mandelstam's wife came to Pasternak to beg him to do what he could to get Osip out of jail. This was the first news he had had of Mandelstam's arrest; the two had never been close friends (even their stylistic evolution, as Pasternak once remarked, had proceeded in opposite directions: Mandelstam's from clarity towards obscurity, Pasternak's from complexity towards simplicity). However, Mandelstam's wife begged him to do what he could, and Pasternak promised to try to help. It happened about this time that some high Government or Party dignitary died. In accordance with custom the body lay in state in the Columned Hall of the House of Unions, while Soviet notables stood guard of honour and the public filed past. Pasternak went to the Columned Hall to pay his last respects to the dead and noticed among the guard of honour someone he knew - I think it was Bukharin. He remembered Mandelstam's wife's request and stopped for a moment to ask Bukharin to see if he could do anything to help. Bukharin wasn't hopeful but said he would try. A few nights later a party was in progress in Pasternak's flat when the telephone rang. The voice at the far end asked if that was Comrade Pasternak; Comrade Stalin would like to speak to him from the Kremlin. A moment later a voice with a perceptible Georgian accent spoke: 'Is that Pasternak? This is Stalin.' 'Good evening, Comrade Stalin. By the way, this is not a leg-pull, is it?' 'No, no, this is Stalin, all right¹.' At the name of Stalin there was a hush in the room. Pasternak said: 'There are

twenty-six people in the room and they're all listening. Does that make any difference?' Stalin said, 'No, that's all right. What's this about Mandelstam?'

'I'd like to do what I can to help him.'

'Do you think he's a very good poet?'

'You know, Comrade Stalin, you should no more ask one poet what he thinks of another than you should ask a pretty woman her opinion of another pretty woman's looks.'

'Then am I to take it you don't think much of him?'

'No, no, you've got me wrong. I'm a different sort of poet from him, that's all. I think he's a good writer.'

'Very well, thank you.' Pause. 'Why don't you ever come to see me?'

'I should have thought it was rather your place to invite me.'

Stalin laughed and wished Pasternak a good evening and that was the end of the conversation. The next day Mandelstam was released. Pasternak had never heard from Stalin again.

Pasternak once told me of an idea he had had for a poem on a political theme. It would take the form of a mental soliloquy by Stalin as he drove by night through some villages which had been ruined by the 'dekulakisation' of 1930. The headlights pick out the blackened shells of houses one after another, and Stalin ruminates on the monstrous cost of his policies in terms of human suffering. And against that he sets the final result, the building of a strong, rich Russia. The net result was that Stalin justified himself, but, as Pasternak said, such a poem, by suggesting that there was a debit column at all, disqualified itself from publication, and it had never got beyond the planning stage.

Pasternak wears no label, and his political position can be represented in different ways. He criticises governmental policies of which he disapproves. For example, I remember his saying, back in 1948, that the Russian nationalism which was then being encouraged by the authorities (Russian priority in inventions, etc.) was a thing which they took for a toy horse, safely bridled; the day might come when it would prove to be a bloody great stallion and would bolt off in the wrong direction, dragging everybody after it. But it would be false to represent him as a sort of one-man Opposition. I once heard him say that the English Puritans in their treatment of poets were wiser than Stalin was. Cromwell never examined Milton on all the points of his faith; if he had (Pasternak said) he would soon have established that Milton was a heretic. He was content to accept him as a Partisan of the Commonwealth against the Monarchy, but Stalin wanted not merely agreement on the main line but conformity on every point, and Pasternak was not capable of this.

When in 1946 Zhdanov launched his attack on 'un-Bolshevik' writers he concentrated his fire on the poetess Anna Akhmatova and the humourist Mikhail Zoshchenko. I do not think that he criticised Pasternak by name, but at all events others following in his footsteps did, and Pasternak came to be subjected to a kind of official boycott. I believe I am correct in saying that no original poems of his were published between 1947 and Stalin's death. During this period he published translations: Goethe's *Faust* and several plays of Shakespeare (I once asked a cultivated Russian friend who knew English if his translation of *Hamlet* was good. She replied, laughing, 'Undoubtedly better than the original'). Twice before the Zhdanov manifesto and once after it I heard Pasternak recite in public and, on the basis of his reception, was able to form an idea of his popularity with the literate public. Two of the recitals were combined operations, involving a dozen or more poets, each of whom recited only one or two poems. Both times Pasternak was acclaimed longer and more loudly than anyone else; the runner-up on the earlier occasion was Anna Akhmatova; on the second, the chairman vainly tried, in defiance of the unceasing applause, to prevent Pasternak from giving an encore. More interesting was the one-man recital he gave in the large theatre of the Polytechnical Museum. The place was packed, some people sitting in the gangways. Pasternak had a triumphal reception. After the conclusion of each piece people from all parts of the hall would shout out the names of their favourites in much the same way as a popular tenor is urged to render this, that or the other Neapolitan song or snippet of opera. When someone raised the cry 'Sixty-sixth sonnet,' others took it up until it seemed the whole audience was chanting 'Shidisyat shistoi sonet!'. And Pasternak 'obliged' with his superb translation of Shakespeare's 'Tired with all these for restful death I cry . . . ' Another thing I remember from that evening is that when, as happened once or twice, he forgot his lines and stood at a loss, there were many people to prompt him from memory, calling out the next line from their places. It would be hard to imagine a more splendid tribute to a living poet. One of the charges most frequently made against Pasternak by the critics was that he was too difficult, could not appeal to any considerable public . . .