

Dr. Zhivago

The emergence of this book from Russia - and this in spite of the events which have accompanied its recognition - is one of the best things which have happened for a long time. The story of the Revolution has often been told, more or less untruly. Who, after all, one thought, could tell such a story? One did not expect the privilege, and the education, of seeing it through the eyes of a great poet and, hereby, a great novelist.

A great book, of an unfamiliar kind, it is the story of Zhivago's discovery of the Revolution. Born about 1890, he grew up into great hopes. 'The whole of Russia has had its roof torn off, and you and I and everyone else are out in the open.' To take part in such a change is exhilarating and joyful. Socialism is 'the sea of life'. Then as the change begins to define its nature, it is seen to be 'the revolution, not the one idealised in strident fashion in 1905', but something 'bloody, pitiless, elemental', and 'unchosen'. Later, it appears that 'those who inspired the revolution aren't at home in anything except change and turmoil'. The revolution is 'never-ending preparation'. But 'man is born to live, not to prepare for life'. Some sort of settled existence emerges at last, but it is an unhappy existence resting on duplicity and falsehood. 'In his heart everyone was utterly different from his words.' These are Zhivago's thoughts. After his death the narrative continues, to bring us briefly up to the present time. The war against Hitler came as a relief. 'Its real horrors, its real dangers, its menace of real death, were a blessing compared with the inhuman power of the lie.' Finally at a time near to the present, two ageing friends of Zhivago are reading his poems and feeling a sense of hope. 'A presage of freedom was in the air.'

This vast history is told through the adventures of Zhivago: his military service as a doctor, his migration with his family to the Urals, his conscription by the partisans, his return to the Urals and finally to Moscow; his love for his wife, and for Lara, the woman for whom he abandons his wife. Lara, identified by Zhivago in his love for her with Russia, and with life itself, is the vehicle of hope in the book. While Zhivago criticises the revolution, Lara - as it were - compassionately suffers it. At the end of the book she meditates beside the dead Zhivago. 'It was not out of necessity they loved each other ... They loved each other because everything around them willed it, the trees and the clouds and the -sky over their heads ... Never ... had they lost the sense of what is highest ... joy in the whole universe ... the feeling of their belonging to it.'

This is one of the few novels for which the term 'poetic', in its finest sense, is suitable. The story is told in short sections, mostly only a page

or so in length, each one of which has the air of a finished statement, as if it were a poem. The hopeful and inspiring quality of the book arises from just that 'joy in the whole universe' which enables the author to shew us the victims of his drama as a part of the larger mould of nature, with its perpetual promise of the renewal of innocence and strength. We see and smell and touch Russia; and cannot lose hope for the people who spring out of that vast background. For all the violence with which it is filled, the book has the air of a meditation.

Few novels, too, are indubitably tragedies in the sense in which certain great plays are tragedies. This novel is, and is the more effectively so for its continual quietness of tone. Everything is vivid, nothing is forced or inflated. We are struck rather with a sort of 'leanness' and matter-of-factness in the mood of the narrative. 'This was how it was.' Some scenes, indeed, are from the technical viewpoint of the modern English novelist positively thrown away. Lara, as a young girl, tries to shoot her middle-aged lover, misses him, and slightly wounds someone else. With what marvelous generous casual brevity this splendid scene is offered! Violence appears in the book, as it appears in life, absurd, ugly, highly contingent. Some deserters pursue an officer. He mounts a water butt to address them, and by this gesture checks them and gains their attention. He slips and half falls into the water butt. They burst out laughing and shoot him. This is how it is; and in his way of narrating these things the author conveys the real misery of life, where dramas never make complete sense and irrevocable losses come about by accident. The tragedy of Tanya, Zhivago's wife, is the more poignant because it never occupies the centre of the stage. It seems to happen without Zhivago's will, and he grieves over it as over a catastrophe of nature. Tanya and the children go in exile to Paris. Zhivago is with Lara. It never seems to occur to him, even when he has himself parted from Lara, to leave Russia. In a letter Tanya tells him that she knows he does not love her. She loves him: and even if she had not, 'out of sheer terror of inflicting on you such ... an annihilating punishment I would have taken care not to realise that I didn't love you. Neither you nor I would ever have known it.' This wonderful cry is uttered. Zhivago hears and suffers; but nothing comes of it and the story goes quietly on.

"What I have come to like best in the whole of Russian literature is the childlike Russian quality of Pushkin and Chekhov, their shy unconcern with such high-sounding matters as the ultimate purpose of mankind or their own salvation ... while Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky worried and looked for the meaning of life and prepared for death and drew up balance-sheets.' So wrote Zhivago in his diary. Pasternak himself surely exemplifies that childlike Russian quality, and it is with Chekhov, and no doubt with Pushkin, that he should be compared. Zhivago is a tragic hero of a kind rarely achieved. He is a singularly unintense man. Though we vastly sympathise with him, we never excessively like or dislike, admire or despise him. He is an honest man, but not an especially heroic or purposeful one. As Tanya says, he has no will. He suffers and endures, he even mildly declines. What he profoundly and movingly is is a human being, one who suffers the violence of events

and the duplicity of the powerful without being totally destroyed or totally corrupted: he is, in one sense, and for what he is worth, where our hopes lie; while in another sense our hopes lie with his author.

Shelley's view that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind has fallen on bad days of late. A work such as *Zhivago* makes one realise how far a great artist can become the most profound consciousness of his time, deepening the understanding of his readers, and through this communion of understanding joining dissimilar peoples to each other. Seeking a name for the quality which makes this possible one is led to call it compassion, love. A writer can be remarkable without it; and where it is present in a great writer it is inseparable from his insight: whether he is looking at a marriage or a revolution or a cow tied up in a yard. This loving insight is present in *Zhivago* in great things and in small; in the sweep of the narrative which takes us through fifty such years without seeming less grand or less complex or less terrible than its theme; and in the tiny details which ravish the reader's delighted attention on every page: Lara as a girl, 'her vest stretched over her breast as firmly and simply as linen on an embroidery frame,' Zhivago's dead brow beneath Lara's kiss, 'somehow smaller, like a hand clenched into a fist.'

Iris Murdoch

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