Doctor Zhivago, by the Russian Writer Pasternak — This Novel Did Not Oppose the Russian Revolution

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As for the novel being splendid, surpassingly splendid, this is something doubted only by those who have not read it or not probed its depths, or whose taste falls short of savoring fine literature; but reading it and probing its depths requires patience, the utmost patience, and forbearance, the utmost forbearance, and it may well require being read twice or more, and the reader may well need to go back and reread some of its chapters more than once.

The reason for this is, first, that it is exceedingly long, its pages running past six hundred, and that its characters are so numerous, so diverse, and so varied in temperament and disposition that it is difficult for the reader to keep them all present in mind from the moment the novel begins to the moment he finishes it; and because its settings are scattered as widely apart as settings can be scattered in a country of such far-flung extremities as the Russian lands, whose various regions differ in climate, terrain, language, taste, and other customs and traditions.

And because, in the end, it does not unfold over a year or two or a few years, but rather begins at the very start of this century and ends around its first third, or a little before, or a little after. All of this disperses the reader's attention and makes gathering its events together in the mind exceedingly difficult … and I confess that, having read it once, I was compelled to go back and reread various chapters of it, and even after all this I remain unable to summarize it.

Nor do I suppose that any other critic manages a summary where I, for all the reasons just given, have fallen short … so let it suffice for me instead to depict the particular qualities that distinguish this novel among the contemporary Russian fiction I have had occasion to read.

The novel begins, as I said, at the very start of this century, shortly before the revolution whose flames first blazed up in Russia in the year 1905, and it tells us of children attending school, and of these children's families, and it describes to us, with the utmost precision and power, the thoughts stirring in these children's minds as events around them

provoke them — above all when those events touch their families nearly or at a distance — and the thoughts stirred in them by social upheavals: the workers' movements, when they strike and fill the streets of Moscow with clamor, uproar, and turmoil, and the movements of the police when they disperse the workers' demonstrations and the students' demonstrations as well, and the effect of all this on the minds of these children, not yet thirteen years old.

And in dealing with these children's families, the novel does not stop at how these families are affected by events, but is compelled to describe the lives of the fathers and mothers, and to portray their conduct, their conversations, and their judgments on things. And the echoes of all this reverberate in these children's minds, taking shape and developing there, producing in them various kinds of emotion, so that they find themselves pondering things children are not accustomed to ponder, suffering and grieving over what does not usually pain or grieve children.

And throughout all this, the novel accompanies these children through their primary and secondary schools, and through the university in its various faculties; it follows them from boyhood into the first years of youth, when the First World War overtakes them and they are swept into it by force … some of them conscripted by their age, others volunteering to fight the enemy out of love for their homeland and in its defense.

And the novel depicts the war's effect on civilian life, both material and moral alike … just as it depicts these young men's conduct on the field, and their country's conduct in the war, as the Russian armies advance and as they are compelled to retreat. And in the midst of this comes the great revolution of the year 1917, and the novel describes this revolution's echo within the army, and the turmoil of the soldiers and their officers, some resolved on continuing to fight, others inclined toward peace and ease, until, when the orders of the revolution reached the army, their divisions and disagreements only deepened.

Then comes the peace which Russia concluded alone, apart from her allies … but the revolution had already affected everything in the lives of the fighting soldiers and in the lives of the anxious civilians, and everything became utterly confused, with people divided between the believer in the revolution, devoted to it, carried along with it until it attains the goal it set for itself; and the denier of the revolution, bold in his denial; and the one apprehensive of the revolution, who fears its consequences and fears resisting it as well. And life had begun to grow

harsh and oppressive for people: a cruel nature on one side, exposure to hunger and misery on the other, and flight from the city to wherever life might be gentler and safety assured.

And the novel follows some of these young people whom we came to know in their boyhood, never leaving them until their lives end, or until the novel's account of them ends while they are still alive … some of them emigrated to foreign lands, and some remained in their homeland and bore there such varieties of misery, such kinds of hardship and toil, as defy description.

This, then, is the most general possible sketch of the novel's subject: it is social in the most precise sense of that word, on the one hand, because it describes the movements of the groups supporting the revolution and those resisting it with the finest and most detailed depiction, and it is, at the same time, individual in the most precise sense of that word as well, because it follows these particular individuals among the young people we saw as children, never leaving them, letting nothing of what befalls them in events, or stirs in their minds in the way of thoughts, or occurs to them when they are alone with themselves, pass without being portrayed in the finest and most precise portrayal.

And among these it follows one particular figure, Doctor Zhivago, never leaving him from the moment his mother dies when he is a boy not yet ten, until he himself dies in the prime of his youth, having reached forty or nearly reached it … it follows him calm and it follows him troubled, it follows him afraid — and how often he was afraid! — and secure — and how seldom he was secure! — it follows him fighting against the revolution's enemies against his will, and fleeing the fighting, watching at every moment for his own arrest.

And it follows him with his family, after he had married a girl he had known as a boy and been joined to in the first years of his youth; then it follows him fleeing with her; then it follows him after he is taken for the war without her knowledge; then it follows him after he flees the war and returns home only to find his family gone — his wife having fled with their son; then, in the end, it follows him enjoying — amid the utmost fear — two utterly contradictory things at once: enjoying a love of overwhelming intensity, carried to the farthest limits of strength, with a woman friend he had known in his boyhood days, and enjoying, when night falls, the leisure to turn to pen and paper, pouring into them whatever fills his soul of poetry and prose; for he is a skilled physician, yet at the same time a

distinguished man of letters.

And it follows him, in the end, after he has returned to Moscow following terrors upon terrors, where he takes to publishing pamphlets that people read and discuss, and then afterward lives an empty life devoid of meaning or purpose.

Then one day he steps down from a tram only to fall down dead, his heart having suddenly stopped beating, and people gather around him, and a lady passes by, stops, looks, and then goes on her way — but it is not long before she learns the identity of this fallen man, and she turns out to be that very woman friend of his, with whom he had lived in the farthest East, delighting in love and letters together; so she returns to him after he has been carried to his home, and sits alone with his body, telling him of all the terrors that befell her since she parted from him in the farthest East, and she does not leave him until he is laid in his grave.

And when the novel ends in this manner, at once splendid and terrible, the author appends to it some of the late doctor's poetry; and I will not speak of this poetry, for I read it translated into French, and how often translation loses the splendor of poetry, above all when it is rendered into verse bound by meter and rhyme, or freed from both.

Let me return now to the novel itself, having set before you as much as I was able of its subject matter, and let me pause briefly over some of the particular qualities that lend it its splendid beauty and its terrible power.

It speaks of a generation of Russians who grew up before the revolution, whom the revolution overtook in the first years of their youth, and who then lived alongside it until what had been in turmoil settled down, until it had secured itself against its enemies and managed to triumph over them, until it had the leisure to attend to Russia's internal and external life, building its structure upon its new order, after it had filled people's hearts with terror, and exposed them, and been exposed alongside them, to the harshest difficulties, carried to the furthest limits of harshness. And the novel's author does not portray the realities of the revolution itself, but concerns himself, before anything else, with its effects on people's souls, and in particular on the souls of those who did not believe in it but were simply compelled to submit to it by necessity.

Before this novel, I had read another, longer novel by the contemporary Russian writer Alexei Tolstoy, in which its author

concerned himself with depicting the revolution itself, and depicting its effects on the souls of those who believed in it and defended it, sacrificing for its sake their lives, their blood, and their ease without hesitation or flagging, and depicting too its resistance to its enemies, both Russian and foreign.

And I found in that novel splendor indeed, and beauty indeed, and it is longer than Pasternak's novel, for it runs to three volumes, but it comes close to confining itself to a description of the revolution and its resistance, and the faith of its adherents in its truths and its aims, and their tremendous efforts in fighting those who opposed it; so that it is closer to being a history of the revolution than a history of the souls of these people upon whom the revolution was imposed, whose hearts did not respond to it, but who submitted to it reluctantly and suffered a great deal from its terrors.

And this is the difference between The Road to Calvary, the novel written by Alexei Tolstoy, and Doctor Zhivago, the novel we are speaking of, written by Pasternak; and there are those who say that this novel is hostile to the Communist revolution, and that those who awarded its author the Nobel Prize gave him this prize precisely because he was at odds with the Russian revolution.

But I do not hold this view, for this novel of Pasternak's was not written to fight the revolution or resist it; had it been written for that purpose, its author could not have found safety or ease, nor could he have gone on living, as he has lived until now, calm and secure; rather, the novel was written to portray, realistically and without exaggeration, the effect of the revolution, and the circumstances surrounding it, and the terrors that it would stir up in the souls of those who took no part in it and did not believe in it, but submitted to it only because they neither wished nor were able to do anything other than this.

And how many are those who have written novels and written history, and portrayed, in their novels or their histories, the terrors of the great French Revolution! The blood that was shed in it, the lives that were destroyed in it, the varieties of toil, hardship, misery, and deprivation that people tasted in it, without being its enemies or adversaries, but simply portraying realities that had occurred and were in need of someone to portray them!

So too did Pasternak portray the terrors of the great Russian revolution and the suffering of some people under it and under the

circumstances surrounding it, and there is in this no hostility toward the revolution or enmity toward its adherents, but only a portrayal of realities that could not help but occur when a revolution is compelled, as the French and Russian revolutions were both compelled, to protect itself whatever that may cost it and cost the people around it.

And I know of no Russian writer who has portrayed the terror, dread, and anguish filling people's hearts, souls, and minds, and governing their every affair, as the author of this novel has portrayed it; for if those who triumphed in the Russian revolution, established its foundations, and carried it through to its goal are heroes, then those who bore the terrors of this revolution are heroes too; for they suffered as people do not ordinarily suffer, and tasted, from misery, hunger, and the force of nature, terrors we read of and can scarcely grasp, can scarcely believe, because they reached such a pitch of cruelty, severity, and trial of the soul that they are hardly credible except after the greatest effort.

And I know of no contemporary Russian writer who has portrayed the harshness of nature when winter grows fierce, when the snow pours down, when the rivers freeze, when transport comes to a halt, when crops perish before they bear fruit, and when people suffer through all this, finding nothing to eat, nothing to wear, nothing to ward off this bitter cold — and who are, besides, afraid, their hearts filled with dread, their souls possessed by despair of life, so that they wait to be seized at any moment to be delivered to death, or to have death delivered to them, and who hear no sound, feel no movement, without imagining that those who will seize them and carry them off to where they will never return have arrived; and there is not one of them who does not think of some boy who will be exposed to terror after him, or some wife who will suffer every kind of misery after him.

I know of no contemporary Russian writer who has portrayed all this as Pasternak has portrayed it in this novel, nor do I know a writer who has portrayed the beauty of nature when spring comes, when the sun shines, and when life returns to everything except these fearful souls, which think, or scarcely think, of anything but life's hardships and its troubles, and of this death which is on the point of pouncing upon them to snatch away a breadwinner or a beloved.

Nor do I recall having read a portrayal of the movement of crowds in fear and in security, in anger and in contentment, such as I have read in this novel, nor do I know anyone who has described the lives of fugitives

on the trains that carry them along only to stop, until they despair, or nearly despair, of their moving again, while they are nonetheless fleeing from death, or from something resembling death.

All this you will find in this novel — indeed, you will find in it far more than all this — on condition that you read it with patience enough for the reading, and resolve not to turn away from it, even by the breadth of a finger, for a passing thought or something happening around you; indeed, you are obliged, if you wish to read it and truly enjoy it, to devote to it, throughout the reading, your mind, your heart, and your taste all at once. And you will find, if you do this, that you will win a pleasure such as is rarely won in the reading of any book.