'Integral Errors':

remarks on the writing of

Doctor Zhivago

by

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1

The suggestions I shall make about the style of ***Doctor Zhivago*** spring from a puzzlement I have long experienced from reading certain parts of it. Alexander Pyatigorsky[1], at one point in his essay on this novel, asks: 'Is this a mistake or a device? (Eto oshibka ili priyom?)' and his question sums up what I have in mind. Are those parts written clumsily or cleverly? Are they straightforward, unambivalent and unsubtle, or subtly symbolic, requiring interpretation, perhaps some kind of lateral thinking? I am following up the second possibility: that they are clever and meaningful in an unusual way. I am supported in this by the often quoted sentence in the book about an 'unnoticeable' style. Yurii Zhivago dreams of

> an originality that would be smoothed and slightly muted, outwardly unrecognisable, concealed under the cover of a commonplace and familiar form - an unnoticeable style that would attract no one's attention...

To read the passages in this way does confirm what I take to be the book's main message. Nonetheless it is disconcerting to know that Anna Akhmatova said, of ***Doctor Zhivago***, that it contains

> some completely unprofessional pages.. I should think they were written by Olga.. I have never had any impulses towards editing, but with this I felt like seizing a pencil and crossing out page after page.

Could she have meant the very pieces I am about to discuss? She goes on to say the book also contains landscape descriptions unequalled in Russian literature, and for me too the landscapes are a non-troubling part of the book.

I shall look, first, at mistakes, inadvertencies, committed, it seems, by the author, and secondly, at an apparently deliberated *motif* of mistakes and inadvertencies throughout the novel.

2

There are chronological errors. Zhivago is said to be a captive of the partisans for one and a half years, yet they seize him in what has got to be the summer of 1919 and he escapes just after the defeat of Kolchak, which took place in January 1920. There is another such inconsistency in the Epilogue: Tanya (Lara's and Yurii's daughter) describes how in the NEP years, when certain banknotes were known as 'limony', she did all the housework for the old woman she lived with, yet in 1922-4, when those banknotes were around, she must have been only two or three years old. In a book so long pondered and worked at and for which so much preparatory research was done, it would be strange to assume mere ignorance or negligence. Might these

instances have been put in, or left in, to tell us not to be fussily concerned with chronology, to dwell on bigger matters than that? There is no particular sign, though, that this is the intention, and my second hypothesis is that Pasternak put them in, or, more likely, having noticed them, left them in, because for some reason he valued incorrectness itself, that is to say that the 'bigger' matters include the slackness or impreciseness signified by inaccuracy as such.

Another kind of apparent slackness, a stylistic kind, is the tendency to near-tautology. In Part VIII we read: 'Zhivago woke from a confused feeling of happiness which was so strong that it woke him'. The sentence I quoted above contains something similar: 'an unnoticeable style that would attract no one's attention'. Tautology is fairly characteristic of Pasternak's later prose style: in his ***Autobiographical Sketch*** he declares that Tolstoy's main feature is his 'originality' which 'is not like anyone else's'. Should we see these as stylistic failings, oversights, or, rather, as deliberate slackenings of some sort, even perhaps as a mild laughter at the reader and a conscious preference for something ordinary and low-powered after so many years of carefully extraordinary, high-tension, writing?

Odd too and apparently inadvertent is the use of a more large-scale repetition. The Tanya episode partly duplicates the earlier one about the boy Vasya: in each, a young person loses home and family in the Civil War years, lives in the house of an old woman who is no relation, later tells a story of murder which involves going below ground level. These are both in the Epilogue; more widely separated in the book are almost identical accounts of the effects of war on towns and villages - of World War I and of the Civil War (pages 113 and 522 of the Feltrinelli edition). The second account selects just the same features as the first - long lines of houses turned to rubble, inhabitants rummaging in ashes and digging things up - and it repeats some of the dominant vocabulary of the first. Perhaps Pasternak felt restricted by the actual repetitiousness of war, or was making the point that war, whether national or civil, is always the same. But why would he make it so obscurely? - I read the book five times before I saw it. Why no stronger similarity, and no remark about it? Did he forget he had already used those details? Or did he just not bother, or, realising that he had repeated himself, purposely leave it like that, making, perhaps, a virtue out of error, and doing so in the unnoticeable style he, like his hero, sought? As I have implied, ***Doctor Zhivago*** was his supreme, most beloved, work, to which he devoted all his passion and talent, and it is hard to believe that any part of it was done without care.

Repetitive treatment is given, too, to certain kinds of strong emotional expression. At her mother's death, Tanya screams and goes into convulsions (87); hearing her husband's plan to

depart, Lara rolls at his feet and howls like a peasant woman (110); at Yurii's coffin Marina rolls all over the floor, screams and raves 'the way peasants keen' (505). Again the similarity is at once substantial and unemphasised, and it is difficult to know whether there is a message. Are the three women, or all women, being shown to be alike in grief? Or is this repetition meant to distinguish the more ordinary emotions from the less common intuitions and creative states the novel is centrally concerned with? Or is this again an almost unnoticeable, but, once noticed, consciously preserved, infelicity, essential to the book's symbolic meaning? Further examples could be added. The ecstasy of Yurii's reunion with his uncle (181) echoes that of Lara's reunion with her friend Nadya (101). Still less conspicuous is a parallel between the careers of Liverii Mikulitsyn and Pasha Antipov: each goes off as a volunteer to the war, disappears, re-emerges as a revolutionary leader. So what? - we may, or may not, ask. So nothing, probably, just one of life's numerous unremarked coincidences and parallels, in this case doubtless typical for many lives. But if Pasternak had wished to say 'this is the kind of thing that so often happened in those years', or 'this is what typical men are like', or anything else that would amount to a message, surely he would have said it a trifle more noticeably? The very unnoticeableness of the repetition is what prompts the suspicion that it is not that sort of message at all but is either 'a mistake or a device' and perhaps a device which requires the appearance of a mistake.

3

My reasons for thinking these inadvertencies, faults or oddities are committed on purpose or at least wittingly, are as follows.

Remarks in letters written during the writing of the novel point to an awareness and acceptance of its stylistic faults. In 1955, for example, Pasternak wrote:

> The desire which pursues me more and more, to write modestly without special effects or stylistic coquetries, has probably taken me too far.

In another letter of the same year he said:

> I began writing /my novel/ in those post-war years when I lost artistic concentration, inwardly declined like a weakened violin string or bowstring, without a consciously sustained artistic aim, domestically - in the bad sense, with a kind of greyness and naivety, which I allowed and forgave myself. It's uneven, unravelled, not many will like it.. But I could do no otherwise.

The last sentence (ya inache ne mog) recalls Luther and thus suggests not a confession of weakness but the resolve to defend

a stance.

Then, within the novel, the notion of inadvertency is given explicit value, several times, a prominent example being Yurii's enraptured reception of the February Revolution as 'freedom by inadvertency, by a misunderstanding' (svoboda po nechayannosti, po nedorazumeniyu). And in Pasternak's life too, the indefinite, unplanned, hazy and chance-guided was just as explicitly given value, many times, as when he resolved to be quite unlike Mayakovsky, as a poet, seeing Mayakovsky as the embodiment of 'biography as spectacle', as someone 'wholly contained in his manifestation', full of 'the expressed and the definite'. This is not to say that in his daily life he particularly liked to make mistakes, but it is to suggest that the 'motif' of mistakes, integral to the novel's text, and the presence of apparent mistakes or faults in it, just as integral to that text, are a sort of correlative to, or reflection of, the indefinite, hazy, chance-guided, vacillating and creative personality of Yurii Zhivago the poet.

4

More interesting and more puzzling than the examples given hitherto is the inclusion in the narrative of a series of errors made by the novel's characters, integral to the text in that they are not supplanted by their correction but remain significant *qua* errors.

Many times an account is given of someone's wrong assumption about something in advance of the true account of it; or else a misperception - or the misinterpretation of a perception - precedes the accurate interpretation, the true perception of the same thing. Also, uncertainties, hesitations are described at length as if they are to affect the subsequent action, and yet they do not and appear gratuitous (thus Yurii's lengthy and useless hesitation about the family's wisdom in going to Varykino; or Tonya's mental rehearsal of a speech she might make, as they arrive at Torfyanaya, and which she does not make, bursting into tears instead as if correcting a mistake).

It would be easy to see these passages as mere padding to the story, that is as defects, as not very subtly handled preparations for, or links in, the main narrative. But if instead we see them as devices - priyomy -, as calculated technical effects despite their not much looking like them, we may see Pasternak quietly arguing for an alteration of perceptual and conceptual habit, for something like a blurring and fraying of what is usually welcomed as definition, factuality, exactitude. Then they may seem the shufflings and draggings of feet, among striding marchers, of someone in whose head there is the beginning of a unique vision. Such a view would certainly contribute to a reading of the book as one in which the clear outlines of a Strelnikov and of those who 'make history' represent but one way of being, while the

often annoying vagueness and inconsequentiality of a Zhivago and of those who make poetry is another, integral to history's text.

In the novel's second paragraph, unnamed persons, seeing a funeral procession, enquire, of other unnamed persons, who it is that is being buried, and are told the name 'Zhivago', to which they respond 'Ah, so that's it, it's clear then', apparently meaning they would indeed expect Mr Zhivago to have such a rich funeral. But their assumption - natural enough since he is the famous one - is wrong and they are corrected, by further unnamed persons: 'No, not him - her', Mrs Zhivago. An unremarkable moment, serving at most the slight purpose of suggesting that Mr Zhivago is still alive and of pointing forward to his death later in Part I, yet it is oddly prominent, coming as it does right at the beginning, as the introductory motif. And it is immediately followed by another instance of unnamed persons making an erroneous assumption, this time spelled out more fully, if hypothetically. A ten-year-old boy climbs onto the grave-mound and the implied author comments: 'Only (to people) in that numb and feelingless state which generally comes at the end of a big funeral could it seem that the boy wished to make an address on his mother's grave'. The implication is that to some people it did seem so, or that the author himself, glancing in his mind's eye at the picture he had evoked, thought at least for a moment of the possibility - the boy is in a speech-making stance, after all. But the hypothetical mistake is immediately corrected. Instead of making a speech, he bursts into tears (like Tonya, much later, at Torfyanaya). And the tears are introduced by yet another, not quite so clear, instance of a potential assumption being proved wrong. 'He raised his head.. His neck stretched out. If a wolfcub had raised its head with such a movement it would have been evident that it was about to howl'. The boy, however, 'covered his face with his hands and burst into sobs'. Of course, if sobs were seen as an equivalent to howling, then the (unnamed observer's) assumption would be correct, but more likely we are to see the neck-stretching movement as leading to its opposite - the dropping of the face into the hands: instead of a straining into howls, a collapse into sobs.

Why is a wolfcub mentioned? It may point far forward to the ominous wolves in Part XIV. Why is it mentioned that some could think the boy is going to make a speech? It may well contribute to that important characteristic of Yurii which consists in his not making speeches (except once, when drunk) - his not doing 'official' or public things. But while noting these possible functions, I am singling out the device here of a misperception and its correcting. Why is a correct version of something repeatedly introduced *via* an incorrect one?

Before discussing this further, I will mention instances of mistakes or misapprehensions by the novel's characters that

occur later in the text. Tiverzin wrongly thinks he alone started the railwaymen's strike; Lara wrongly things she is a burden to the Kologrivovs; Anna Gromeko, when the wardrobe falls on her, mistakenly nicknames it 'Askold's grave', meaning to call it 'Oleg's horse'; at the Christmas party Lara's wrong assumption that Komarovsky is seducing yet another young girl is set forth at considerable length and is followed by Yurii's wrongly assuming she is being rough-handled when, collapsing after firing the gun, she has to be pulled along. Rather similarly to the latter example, in the forest scene in the war, Lara wrongly supposes the men helping a badly wounded soldier along are about to do him some harm - 'Have you gone mad?' she cries - and again there are several paragraphs about the error, easily overlooked or regarded as narrative padding, so unimportant do they seem. The forest episode echoes an earlier one where Yurii, rushing towards his wife (she has just given birth) is stopped by the gynaecologist who wrongly assumes he intends some harm and also asks: 'Have you gone mad?' There are very many more such errors, often narrated with a minimum of emphasis and yet conspicuous for being there at all. Why does the story move in part through them? When Yurii does see his wife in the hospital, he mistakes the height of her bed, taking it to be as high as a stand-up writing-desk. Perhaps he is incessantly preoccupied with writing, but what is to be noted is the stress on a misinterpretation. When a thief breaks into her flat, Lara mistakes him for Pasha: again, this may tell us something about her marriage, but the use of the mistake motif is to be remarked. Then, at several points there is inconsequential dispute as to the explanation of something or other - why the stopped train is delayed for so long in Part I, what jewels the gift necklace is composed of, in Part IV. Each time someone, of course, must be in error.

5

Frequently in such instances our attention is deflected from the more dramatic to the less, or - more often - the instance of the 'mistake' is accompanied by an instance of the reduction of drama. Thus at the Christmas party we expect Komarovsky to be murdered or at least seriously wounded, but instead a wild shot does no more than graze the arm of someone else and the very slightness of the wound is lengthily drawn to our attention by an account of Yurii, the medical student, going up to offer help but finding it does not even need a bandage. Then Yurii's expectation of violence done to Lara after the shooting is let down by the information that her companions are 'only' helping her. The potentially dramatic burglary at Lara's flat dwindles away as the thief takes nothing. At the end of Part IX there is a particularly elaborate passage of this sort: the making of a mistake and the diminishing of 'drama'. Yurii is riding home to his wife, having decided to end his relationship with Lara; he starts changing his mind, and in the midst of his indecision he is

suddenly stopped in the forest by three men on horseback and kidnapped - surely a most dramatic incident, and it seems to be coming to a climax, as a fitting end to the whole chapter, for, along with the reader, Yurii supposes that he is now about to meet Liverii, the partisan leader he has heard so much about. 'So you're Liverii?' he says to the main man of the three. The reply however is not 'yes, I am' but 'no, I'm Kamennodvorsky', that is - as far as the moment's drama is concerned - 'no, as it happens I am someone else'. Thus Part IX ends in an anti-climax, which is insignificant for the narrative, as it matters neither to plot nor to characterisation whether Liverii is one of the three or not, and is almost negligible even as a down-grading of the dramatic element since, after all, Yurii *is* kidnapped and suddenly removed from personal-amorous ponderings into the heart of battle and history; nonetheless there it is, this 'no you're mistaken, I'm not the one you expected, there is no interesting coincidence here and no climax to the chapter', a moment which in its inconspicuous way is strangely important to the thinking that informs the novel.

The paragraph which critics often quote as being *about* coincidence, drawing attention to its centrality in ***Doctor Zhivago***, is also attached to a moment of mistaken assumption (Lara's fear that the wounded man is being harmed, in Part IV chapter 10) and also turns out, when looked at closely, to amount to almost unnoticeable diminution of the moment's drama. Yurii, Lara, Galiullin, the dying man who happens to be Galiullin's father, and others, are all by chance together in the forest-glade, and the author comments, as if to say 'look how astonishing - all knew one another before!' but in fact saying this:

> All of them were together, all side by side, and some did not recognise one another, others had never known one another, and some things remained forever unconfirmed, others began waiting for other occasions, another encounter, to be revealed.

'Others had never known one another' - this is certainly no thesis about 'coincidence' (dramatic, amazing, a past meeting repeated in the present) but something very different.

The motif of integral errors in ***Zhivago*** may well have grown, in its unemphatic form, out of the emphasised version of it in a story Pasternak wrote in 1917, 'The Childhood of Lyuvers' (Detstvo Lyuvers) - a study of a young girl's perceiving of her environment and beginning to think. Pasternak's interest in the child's mind is close to his interest in the poet's: child and poet are both understood as being more absorbed in a pre-linguistic looking, listening and feeling than are grown-up non-poets.

Zhenya Lyuvers looks over a fence, and thinks she sees three figures behaving very oddly - asleep on a bench but repeatedly

half-waking to gaze all in one direction; they stand up and she learns the truth - they were only looking at a book together, moving their heads as they turned its pages; nothing odd about that. The mistaken version precedes the correct one and while the mistake is mysterious, imaginative, individual and open to change, the true one is unmysterious, final, public, not open to further imagining. Although there is value in learning truths, there is also clearly a value, perhaps even a greater value, in getting things wrong in one's own way.

That the concern with mistakes is related to a concern with the origin of poetry is suggested further by the parallel, in that story, between the setting right of the girl's perceptual errors and the way she learns or applies the names of things. On an eastward journey she is awed by the unfamiliar mysterious-seeming landscape, 'like an enormous green-yellow storm-cloud', then, as if the name has grown out of it, she asks: 'Is this the Urals?' Pasternak's statement about how art comes about, in ***A Safe Conduct*** (1931) is almost a theoretical counterpart of this pattern of experience: 'we cease to recognise reality' - there is something unnamed about it - we name it - 'the result is art'. ***Zhivago*** too contains many occasions of acquiring or recalling a thing's name only after an absorbed immersion in its nameless, unrecognised qualities. Thus Yurii on the train to Yuryatin, aware in his sleep of something 'magical - springlike - blackishwhite - rare, scattery, like a gust of snowy wind in May, transparent, fragrant', only secondarily - and as a late (and not obviously best) stage in the mental process - naming it: 'bird-cherry! (cheremukha)'.

7

Hitherto I have been answering my, and Pyatigorsky's, question, 'is it a mistake or a device?', along with the question 'are these mistakes devices?', by suggesting that the passages considered prompt the following messages (thereby implying that in some sense it is indeed a matter of 'devices'): that faulty or blurred awareness, indefiniteness and (in moral terms) indecisiveness, may be more valuable than we think; that we should not always look for the dramatic; and that poetry may benefit from and even need some misperception or faulty recognition. I will end by noting how, in passing, Pasternak often foregrounds 'mistakes', and, finally, by trying to link the idea of 'mistake' with the notion of 'metonymy' that is often associated with this writer.

The February Revolution was 'freedom by mistake'. Waking on the long train journey, Yurii experiences something like 'courtesy by mistake': he takes the quietness of a little station to indicate the courteous behaviour of people aware that some are sleeping on the train, but - we quickly learn - the quietness is really the effect of a nearby waterfall. Everything turns on the central, and superfluous, phrase 'he was mistaken' (on oshibalsya).

Earlier, Lara experiences beauty-by-mistake. At her party, in part IV, she leaves her noisy guests and, after several aimless actions in her kitchen, becomes absorbed in the sounds made by a horse outside.

> Over the yard a hobbled horse was moving with difficulty, in little limping jumps. He was nobody knew whose and he had wandered into the yard, probably by mistake (zabrela vo dvor, navernoe, po oshibke). It was already completely light, but still far from sunrise. The sleeping town, as if quite extinct, was drowning in the grey-lilac cool of the early hour. Lara closed her eyes. God knows to what rural remoteness and loveliness she was carried by this distinctive incomparable iron-shod stepping of the horse.

It is a central example of the virtue of erring. The horse has not merely 'wandered' into the yard, it has done so explicitly 'by mistake' (or, strangely enough, 'probably' so) - a quasi-tautology; Lara has apparently wandered into the kitchen by mistake, and now all this errancy and error produces a dream of beauty. Over against the indefiniteness of the wandering, the horse's steps are called 'distinctive', and I am inclined to read this horse, hobbled like the white horse in Rilke's 20th Sonnet to Orpheus, as a token of the Poet, constrained in relation to the world of action but producing clear sounds that evoke wider and freer spaces.

8

The error made by Anna Gromeko (Askold's grave for Oleg's horse) is given this commentary by the author: 'As a woman of unsystematic reading, she confounded contiguous concepts'. Possibly Pasternak read and liked Roman Jakobson's essay of 1935 calling him a 'metonymical' writer and distinguishing him from the 'metaphorical' Mayakovsky. Later critics have expanded Jakobson's idea of two distinct literary modes related to the two poetic devices, the metaphorical one being that in which objects and topics are connected by their similarity, the metonymical that in which they are connected by proximity or contiguity: they are next to each other, border with each other. Not that Pasternak lacks metaphor - far from it, but metonymy, in this sense, is, says Jakobson, the more characteristic of him. Metonymy requires the evocation of place; Jakobson goes so far as to say that in Pasternak's work 'the hero's activity eludes our perception; action is replaced by topography'. Now in fact in *Doctor Zhivago* (written of course many years after Jakobson's essay) not only are objects in adjoining places always described as being alike because of their proximity, but people are regularly shown experiencing each other metonymically, in terms of places: Pasha sees Lara as a 'birch-grove', Yurii perceives readers in the public library as 'houses and streets', and under the influence of the sorceress Kubarikha's chanting he has a

vision of 'cities, streets, spaces..' coming out of Lara's shoulder.

The concept of contiguity, and even that of 'topography', may illumine what I have been calling 'integral errors'. True accounts may be seen as related to mistaken or aberrant ones through their nearness to each other, as if every accurate version had a surrounding of other, preliminary and imaginary versions, and around the defined, accepted and finished ways of seeing things there existed in its own right, as it were, something like a haze or wide margin of unverified impression; convictions and facts do not alone constitute truth but hover in a diffuse but bright dimension of other perceptions that look like mistakes but may be thought of as their local surroundings, touching them and stretching away from them like a landscape. If this is how Pasternak does see it, there may be some influence here of Bergson, very popular in Pasternak's student-years, who wrote that our 'intellect has detached itself from a vastly wider reality', and 'all around conceptual thought there remains an indistinct fringe which recalls its origin'; only, Pasternak does not, I think, ever talk about 'intellect' and he conceives everything far more geographically and tangibly.

NOTES

1. A. Pyatigorskii, "Pasternak i Doktor Zhivago: sub'ektivnoe izlozhenie filosofii doktora Zhivago". *Vremya i my*, 1978, no. 25, p. 159.