

Boris Pasternak, DOCTOR ZHIVAGO, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, with an introduction by Richard Pevear. 513 pp. Harvill Secker. £20. 978 1 846 55379 0

For Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* was his "chief and most important work", the only one, he declared, "of which I am not ashamed and for which I boldly answer". He had indeed to answer boldly in his own country, where he was viciously abused for it, called a traitor, expelled from the Writers' Union and threatened with exile. Abroad, translated into eighteen languages after its 1957 publication in Italy, it stirred such responses as Nicola Chiaromonte's "Here is Russia, once again speaking out freely". In 1958, the year Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize, an English translation was published, by Max Hayward and Manya Harari, with a revised American version later that year.

The novel was read avidly all over the world - for the political excitement of its being published at all, for its panoramic story of Russia in times of great change (the 1905 and two 1917 revolutions, the first world war, civil war and difficult subsequent years), and for its account of a poet's experiences in an anti-poetic age. The poet is heard not only in the poetry-writing episodes and the twenty-five poems which form the final chapter, but also in the many brilliant lyrical descriptions, in its very personal way of resisting ideological clichés, and even in the occasional awkwardness with which Pasternak the poet puts together his "novel in prose".

The 1958 translation was in good, easily readable English but was done in great haste. It was clear that another translation, far more faithful to the original, was needed. Now, fifty-two years later, a new translation has appeared, by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, very different indeed from the first (and with a substantial introduction and an appendix of explanatory notes). I will explain why I was immediately delighted with their translation, then disappointed, then finally convinced it should be strongly welcomed.

Hayward/Harari achieved easy readability by modifying what seemed to them too stark, complex or eccentric, and by making hundreds of omissions. Certainly, their translation preserved the main essentials of Pasternak's novel and very many readers have enjoyed it with no sense of loss. But

so much was left out - words, phrases, sometimes whole sentences; Pasternak's characteristic tautologies and near-repetitions were curtailed; it was all smoothed over, speeded up, altered. Even in Zhivago's simplest diary-jotting - "Earth, air, moon, stars, fettered together, riveted by frost" - Hayward/Harari changed "air" to "sky", added an "and", abandoned "fettered" and unconsciously introduced "seem" after "stars" (their American version additionally changed "fettered" to "cemented", confounding metal with masonry).

In the new translation all is rectified. Nothing is added and nothing omitted. We now see that Pasternak did *not* write the Russian equivalent of "He is a fantastically complicated character", as Hayward/Harari have it, but wrote, as in Pevear/Volokhonsky, "It is inconceivable what opposites this man unites in himself"; and when, after Lara's departure, Zhivago thinks sad words but cannot say them, it is not merely that "He had not the strength to say these words out loud" (Hayward/Harari), but, as Pevear/Volokhonsky correctly write: "He had no strength to utter this sequence of words aloud without convulsive spasms in the throat interrupting them". Everywhere, descriptive imagery is faithfully recorded, for example in the passage where "a wave of soft, dark and sweet droning separated from the heaviest, barely moving bell and floated away, mixing with the dark moisture of the rain. It pushed itself away from the bell . . ." (Pevear/Volokhonsky) The surprising verbs "separated" and "pushed itself away" (describing a sound!) were replaced in the Hayward/Harari translation by a lazily repeated "drifted", so that Pasternak's unique perception was lost. By contrast, Pevear/Volokhonsky's dedication to rendering every word respects his thoughtful, unhurried style and often - as here - rescues his prose from banalities that are not his.

Reading on, I encountered disappointing moments. They are of two main kinds. Ambiguities arise from excessive adherence to the original's word-order: "We re-laid the stove that heats the two rooms in a new way"; [some doctors left their jobs and] "did not fail to present their leaving out of mercenary considerations as a demonstration of civic motives". Some idioms or usages are incompletely de-russianised: "the concentration he had gone into over his head" (*s golovoi*); "pouring from empty into void" (talking a lot, to no purpose); "he has no one to divide with" (meaning "share with"). And there are, thirdly, a few dismaying formulations, as in the philosopher-uncle's statement

that, since Christ, man no longer dies under a fence but (say Pevear/Volokhonsky) "in his own history", whereas Pasternak surely meant (in Hayward/Harari's memorable phrase) "at home in history"; later, Zhivago's important question, "*Chto genial'no?*" (meaning, roughly, "What has genius?" - omitted by Hayward/Harari) is distorted into "Where does the genius lie?"

Such infelicities do mar the text, yet it is important that whereas Hayward/Harari's faults were hidden, being mostly absences and inappropriate fluencies, Pevear/Volokhonsky's are visible, easy to locate and to put right in any later edition. More important still, they are not typical of the whole text: most of the book's nearly 500 pages are free of them; and there are none in the translation of the poems. What does run through the whole of it is a sometimes potential, sometimes actual, slight element of foreignness. This arises from its closeness to the original and is remarkably suggestive of Pasternak's own care with language, his wide and unusual vocabulary, his ability to be unexpected, and perhaps the intention he shared with his poet-hero, to write in a plain style but with explosive material buried inside it.

Commentators on earlier Pevear/Volokhonsky translations have categorized their method as "foreignizing" rather than "domesticating". The same term can be used here. Readers should be prepared to appreciate the tinge of foreignness, and should read slowly. As well as a gripping story, *Doctor Zhivago* is a work of meditation and quiet challenge. Pasternak meant every word of it. I believe he would be pleased with the powerful fidelity of the translation now before us.

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