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Boris Pasternak; A New Romanticism

Henry Gifford, *Pasternak*, Cambridge University Press, £8.75.

'WHERE SHALL I put my joy?' runs a line in one of Pasternak's early poems. Professor Gifford writes that it is 'a very rare thing for poetry in this age continually to celebrate happiness'; his book shows Pasternak as this rare kind of poet.

This is an important book—the first full introduction to Pasternak for the English reader, particularly valuable for its attempt to 'place' him, among Russian and non-Russian writers. It moves chronologically but is primarily critical, not biographical. Pasternak held that a poet's life should remain obscure, and Professor Gifford tells his life-story only where this makes for clarity about the works. A discussion of his devotion to music, in childhood and adolescence, brings an examination of the 'musical' in his early verse; an account of his subsequent devotion to philosophy leads to reflections on the 'philosophical' in the verse. Poetry was Pasternak's third choice of creative career. Here Professor Gifford relates him to the main poetic movements of his time: Symbolism, Acmeism and Futurism. He was closest to the Futurists, but where they rejected the past, he did not; they were preoccupied with devices, he with perceptions; they sought self-expression, he to remove the self altogether and 'allow the surrounding world to make its disclosures to him'. Thus originates a kind of verse which Henry Gifford calls, in one of his many apt descriptive phrases, 'poetry of the unguarded instant'.

Removal of the 'self': a guiding concept in this book is 'disinterestedness'. I want to pick out three or four such concepts and suggest that they point to a special Pasternakian quality which, almost a new virtue, is what Henry Gifford communicates best about him. It was the 'selfless concern for the truth' which Pasternak saw in Marburg University's philosophical school that took him there as a student in 1912; his sense that his own philosophical thinking was not 'disinterested' was what made him give it up; 'disinterestedness' is what he praises in the music of Chopin, and what he loves in a woman. In Yury Zhivago we see a 'state of grace which . . . depends on the response of a truly disinterested imagination'; near the end of his book, Henry Gifford dwells on a phrase in one of the last poems: 'to play, without holding back', and the idea of an unrestrained, uncalculating 'playing'—a game, a role, the natural play of light—approaches that quality: morally it is something like 'selflessness', politically it is the stance 'above the barriers', aesthetically it is to be found in the 'centrifugal' method.

'Centrifuga' was the name of a group of artists Pasternak once belonged to, but what Gifford calls the 'centrifugal' method is all Pasternak's own. 'Not I but the world': as a poetic discipline this is exacting and original. Not my *feeling* is interesting, he would say, but what it does to the world; not the forceful feeling but the force of the feeling. Personal passion becomes an impersonal force, introspective beginnings the sharpest attention to environment. Professor Gifford quotes from the end of the poem 'Marburg':

> Why, the nights sit down to play chess
> With me on the moonlit parquet floor.
> There's a scent of acacia, and windows are thrown open,
> And passion like a witness grows grey in the corner.

The emotions of a failed love affair, which started the poem off, yield their centrality to the environing world and themselves disappear. Along with a number of other critics Henry Gifford also discusses Pasternak's use of 'metonymy', but of particular interest is his linking it to this 'centrifugal' idea.

Another concept he uses of Pasternak is 'naïveté'. The early verse is difficult, 'virtuoso'. Yet the virtuosity (which is 'not unlike that of an extemporisng pianist elated by his audience') is accompanied by a kind of naïveté. One of the many instructive comparisons in this book is of Pasternak with T. S. Eliot and García Lorca. The 'alert sophistication' of Eliot or of Lorca, their sort of 'mannered self-possession', is not found in

Pasternak (or indeed in 'any of the most considerable Russian writers'). For his 'elaborate mastery of technique went with naïveté of feeling' and much of his 'subtlety rests at the level of very fine sensuous notation'. This is a true and important distinction. 'Joy, astonishment, and an impatient eagerness to take life at the full' do sum up most of Pasternak's feeling-content. He is brilliant, but he is not sophisticated; conscious, self-aware, smiling, but not ironic; delighted with his forerunners (Pushkin, Lermontov, Blok . . .), but—except for some overt parodies—not poising his poems in courteous or critical relationship with tradition; and perhaps what lies behind his verbal intensities and obscurities is not so much any highly cultured sense of complexity as the fact that (like Russian literature itself, one might say) he arrived at poetry late: twenty-three when he started to write, he found (as Henry Gifford quotes from *A Safe Conduct*) that his 'fifteen years of abstention from words condemned him to originality as some mutilations condemn to acrobatics'. The naïveté is not assumed—not, as Henry Gifford calls that of Tolstoy, who makes a frequent appearance in this book, a 'dogmatic innocence',—but something 'absolutely required by his kind of artistic passion'. Another writer who appears very frequently in these pages is Osip Mandelstam, and the book closes on a contrast between the 'Shakespearean' Pasternak and the 'Dantesque' Mandelstam, two poets who (it is implied) 'divide the modern world' between them, Mandelstam representing a 'subtle and sustained' thinking, Pasternak a naive and impetuous delight.

Another important concept, this one from Pasternak's aesthetic theory, yet also conceivable as contributing to the idea of a virtue, is 'dislocation'. This is fairly fully examined by Henry Gifford, who suggests that even his love of trains and railways has to do with his poetic: '. . . the railway fascinates him . . . as a means to that "dislocation" in which art consists'. The force of feeling, Pasternak says, 'dislocates' not any particular thing but all 'reality' at once, and art is a 'record of that dislocation'. Reality's shifted condition justifies randomness in the poet's approach, for if 'particulars gain in vividness, while they lose their independent meaning' so that 'each may be replaced by another', then whatever detail the poet jots down will bear the quality of the whole—he can choose, as it were, without looking; cannot but 'piously reproduce' the world. (This conception—I have quoted phrases from it in Henry Gifford's translation—explains the exhilarating mixture of categories which I think Isaiah Berlin in 1950 was the first to notice as central to Pasternak's lyrical experience and which Henry Gifford notes too, saying 'poetry so conceived will move easily from the palpable to the notional'; it also explains Pasternak's dispensing with mellifluousness—for 'poetry becomes a matter of overwhelming sensation'—as well as his selecting images by casual signs such as similarities of sound, a process of which Henry Gifford gives a lucid account with reference to several poems.) Now in this theory the word 'piously' (*svyato*) stands out, and there *is* piety here. Even though the world's dislocation may be produced by the poet's feeling, and even if the resulting poems sometimes look inventive in the extreme, yet the attitude taken, or tried for, is compounded of self-erasure and faithful attention.

I come back to my thought that Professor Gifford is identifying a new virtue: the disinterested playing, the showing of a naive delight through an elaborate and brilliant technique, the piety towards a dislocated universe—what do these things add up to? Professor Gifford uses the word 'grace', not only of Zhivago's character—of his 'rare virtue of inspiring freedom and unconcern'—but also as an analogy for the 'purity of concentration' he finds Pasternak requires both in art and in love. He certainly ranks Pasternak's poetry very high and claims a more than ordinary importance for it. 'In writing this book', he says in the 'Foreword', 'I have been conscious that the case of Pasternak . . . could become exemplary for the whole world. Poetry will have to save itself by its own exertions.'

Yet 'virtue'—a word I am trying to use—can sound motionless, and so can 'grace', while Pasternak's world-view is anything but that. In 1922, the year of his volume of poems *My Sister Life* (and, as it happens, also the year of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, its temperamental opposite), he noted: 'The live, real world is the only project of the imagination, which, having once succeeded, goes on for ever, endlessly succeeding. Look at it continuing, moment after moment a success.' For him there is simply nothing static, nothing finished, no absolutes.

Perhaps what he offers is a modern romanticism. For his 'selflessness' sprang from a passionate, instinctively idealizing (as all love idealizes) response to the actual world—not only to the totally animate Nature of, say, *Werther* (while freed from the magnified self of Werther, as well as from his wish to abandon it) but also, and without distinction, to History, totally meaningful and experienced in the continuous present. Henry Gifford notes that the summer of 1917 'gave him absolute faith in the romantic vision'. It is indeed vision, not manner. On meeting Mayakovsky, Pasternak explicitly renounced the 'romantic manner'. His romanticism was to have nothing to do with 'spectacular' behaviour or life-style, but was a recognition that he saw, and would always see, the world as being 'transformed', see it with the eyes of delight—a hale ascent into a saving idealism surely comparable to the Christian's decision to see the world as 'redeemed'. Pasternak does finally give us a new kind of Christianity, and he offers throughout his life's work a new romanticism.

What I am calling romantic is this vote for happiness, this belief in an ideal power of feeling, and this constant looking to reality itself for an inexhaustible model, guide and guardian of his moral being. (He himself, of course, called this 'realism', and kept 'romantic' for quite different approaches, less valuable; but I am proposing that through Pasternak 'romanticism' should become respectable—real—again.) And he is modern, not in the Futurists' militantly urban way, but in a way that makes the self-projections not only of the Byronic Lermontov and the sacerdotal Blok, but also of the technological Mayakovsky, look stylized and old-fashioned.

He is modern, first, in that to be urban or not is no longer an issue. ('He has simply accepted that for the city dweller there need be no division between what lies in his daily environment and what stretches beyond it'.) Secondly, in that, without being properly philosophical—Professor Gifford shows that he is not—he is existential: not just what the world is, but *that* it is, delights him—'look at it, continuing!' A naive enough feeling, but the thought prompting it is as elusive and subtle as that which prompted Rilke's existential despair (it was also in 1922 that the *Duino Elegies* were finished). Thirdly, he is conclusively post-symbolist: post-decadent and post-transcendentalist. Neither the tragical 'God is dead' is wanted any more, nor are any compensations for it. That everything to which the godly and otherworldly languages once applied is

really nowhere but *here* ('endlessly' proceeding and succeeding) is a certainty central to all his work. Akin to Wordsworth (Henry Gifford has an interesting reflection on the significance of 'sister' to each poet), he yet entertains no idea of anything even so separate as a 'spirit' moving through all things, but gets the accumulated meaning of 'spiritual' into his notion of the power or strength or force (same word in Russian) of human feeling, which he unreductively likens to the forces studied by physics. He is modern, finally, in that his philosophy is worked out in relation to a modern tyranny, the faceless totalitarian state. Almost a kind of Schweik, he occupies the natural position of someone too intelligent for its stupidity, too deep to conceive of its shallowness, too romantic to think anyone can really desire that inertia.

Hence the apparent naïveté in such moments as his eccentric response to being pressed to sign the letter of condolence to Stalin on his wife's death, his personal interpretation of certain Party statements, his adapting himself submissively and *yet* genuinely to the pressure of Socialist Realism; the naïveté too in much of the tone of his novel and also in his expectation that it would be published in his own country.

Thus far my meditation on a group of concepts which, though they don't at all dominate Professor Gifford's book, leapt to my eye as leading ones. Now to look more closely at the book itself; first on the poetry, then on the prose.

Pasternak's initial success was with the highly original, often difficult poems of *My Sister Life*, and of *Themes and Variations* a year later. After this, his story is of steps taken towards simplicity. Where to 'put' his joy—in difficult verse or in transparent prose—mattered to him a great deal.

He tried to answer what he felt was the age's demand for epic with his long narrative poems in the 1920s. Here Gifford well describes the difficulty Pasternak must have felt in switching from the lyrical vision—the vision of a world full of human feeling yet without human beings at its centre—to the task of looking directly into the public light of contemporary events, with heroes at the centre of them. Although he finds them short of plot and drama, Henry Gifford sees much merit in these poems, which seem to me so much less compelling than the lyrical poems. *The Year 1905*, for instance, may show a 'command of varying distances' and a well-controlled 'sudden sharp focus on telling detail', but these are the merits of prose; and I find it hard to follow praises for its 'subtlety of rhythm' or for the 'synthesizing imagination' in lines like:

Snow lies upon boughs,
Upon wires,
Upon branches of parties,
On the cockades of dragoons,
And on sleepers of railroads.

This seems a mere visual listing. In the interests of straightforwardness, Pasternak has given up the more strenuous, category-leaping synthesizing he was capable of in other poetic 'lists', such as (twenty pages back in this book and three years in Pasternak's life) these lines addressing poetry:

You are not the posture of the euphonist,
You are summer with a seat travelling third,
The edge of town, not a refrain.
You are Yamskaya street, stifling sweet like May . . .

1932 brought the volume *Second Birth*. The real poetic rebirth, as Henry Gifford says, was to come with Pasternak's reform of his style in the early 1940s; the 1932 rebirth was the man's rather than the poet's. The Caucasus and love were its immediate causes; Tbilisi became as important to him as Marburg and Venice had been, the Georgian poets Yashvili and Tabidze joined the group of important human influences upon him which included Chopin, Scriabin, Rilke and Mayakovsky. Attempts to write on public themes and in an 'inconspicuous' style were now handed over to his projected novel; but these poems do 'enter the process of time' and, although Pasternak 'still finds it difficult altogether to refuse difficulty', they are simpler, with a prevailing note of 'freedom and innocence'. For the next eleven years, unable to publish original verse, Pasternak devoted himself to translation—from a number of languages, English prominent among them. An excellent chapter on Pasternak as translator (which I wish I could dwell on) shows how by translating poets such as, and especially, Shakespeare Pasternak kept in touch with a living tradition. When he returned at last to his own verse he wrote in a new way. The poems of *On Early Trains* (1943) are no longer a 'welter of impressions' but a poetry of 'effortless clarity' and 'contemplative calm'. The new style is well conveyed in a study of the fine poem 'First Frost'.

But some of Pasternak's later poems are disappointing and I suspect Henry Gifford forgives him too much. Although he does bring in Nadezhda Mandelstam's criticism that there is an 'official report' tone in many of the later poems, he lets him off easily for the artificiality of his war-poems, quotes the whole of the dull Nobel Prize poem without severe comment, and also quotes in full the much acclaimed but rather tame 1956 poem 'In Hospital', giving it a sensitive analysis which none the less errs, I'd contend, in being totally admiring. Happiness takes many forms, peaceful gratitude is not the same as ecstatic amazement, and it is surely the latter that is the more creative in Pasternak. Gratitude—in the Hospital poem—leads him to count things over in a methodical, enumerating way which, to my mind, is unworthy of his talent: 'Militsiya, ulitsy, litsa'—can sound affinities like these really save, say, the first half of this poem from reaching the edge of banality that Henry Gifford argues it is far from? It was not gratefulness but violent shocks of joy (even if resulting from grief) that previously led him to such accidental richness of sound as in the splendid line quoted on page 75: 'Poshchadyat li ploshchadi menya?' Somewhere Henry Gifford writes of his 'almost reckless aptitude for rhyme'. Surely he loses much when he loses his recklessness.

Professor Gifford's treatment of the verse is throughout both analytical and comparative. In addition to a great many part-quotations, some twelve poems, from different periods, are given in full and analysed in detail, always revealingly. Quotations are in Cyrillic and are accompanied by literal translations in which word-order and line-endings reflect where possible those of the originals. There happens to be an unfortunate error in line nine of 'First Frost' where 'Winter, and all's again as at first' needs changing to '... and all's again *for the first time*' (a typical Pasternakian conception); but errors are very few indeed and these translations constitute one of the book's excellences. With these merits, the treatment here of Pasternak's verse is immensely far removed from the discussion it gets in Robert Payne's *Three Worlds of Boris Pasternak* (1961) —the only other at all reputable book hitherto which sets out to describe Pasternak's whole oeuvre. It offers the wider perspective which will help the non-formalist to read Dale Plank's *Pasternak's Lyric* (1966). To the essays collected in my own and Donald Davie's *Pasternak* (1969) it adds the virtues of

monographic survey and of consistent comparison with non-Russian writers. And it forms a splendid chronological and comparativist companion to Olga Hughes's *The Poetic World of Boris Pasternak* (1974).

Between 1915 and 1929 Pasternak wrote five pieces of short fiction which, together with the autobiographical *A Safe Conduct*, make up a body of prose considerably different in style from his novel thirty or so years later. As Henry Gifford says, his achievement in the earlier prose 'was to increase its range of perception and to devise an elaborate and varied syntax closely related to that developed in his poetry'. So he was doing poetic things in prose at the same time as—in my view—prosaic things in poetry (the 1920s epics). Gifford gives a judicious account of the fictional pieces, but I think *A Safe Conduct* is more interesting than he shows it to be. A point he makes more than once is that 'modern poetry has an inescapable concern with the creative process'. This is very largely the subject of *Doctor Zhivago* and is also the fundamental concern of *A Safe Conduct*. But in using this work mainly as a starting-point for contrasting Pasternak with two other poets (Rilke, to whom it is dedicated, and Mayakovsky, whom a third of it centres on), Henry Gifford omits both to stress what a remarkable literary achievement it itself is, and to mention the detailed prefiguring in it of motifs and ideas which, later put more soberly and spaciously in the novel, are first expressed here in a heady mixture of brilliance and metaphoric density. It seems a pity to allow Pasternak's own judgement on the work—'spoilt by unnecessary mannerism'—to stand, when it is so much more alive than the *Essay in Autobiography* (1957) which partly seeks to take its place, and in which the judgement is made.

Doctor Zhivago—regarded by Pasternak as the high point of his work and, so he said, the only one of his works he was not ashamed of—is a culminating and successful attempt at being prosaically comprehensible (a 'novel in prose'!) in the communication of major awarenesses and thoughts which had appeared before in poems or in relatively esoteric prose. To give only one out of a multitude of possible examples: a corollary to the 'centrifugality' discussed above is Pasternak's expressed view of art. In *A Safe Conduct* he writes: 'When we suppose that in *Tristan, Romeo and Juliet* and other great memorable works a powerful passion is portrayed, we underestimate their content. Their theme is wider than this powerful theme. Their theme is the theme of power.' This is one of the easier paragraphs in a tight-knit, thought-exigent passage, but we note in it paradox, word-play, a laconic, hence demanding, certainty. In *Doctor Zhivago* Pasternak makes Yury reflect on the same thing and write:

> Works of art speak to us in many ways: through their themes, their statements, their plots, their characters. But above all they speak through the presence of the art contained in them. The presence of art in the pages of *Crime and Punishment* is more staggering than Raskolnikov's crime.

The same idea is here carefully spelled out, with repetition and colloquiality, without paradox, and with a familiar Russian example: it has been made easier.

In his chapter on the novel Professor Gifford gives an account of its genesis in the author's life, and offers, perhaps not so much a fundamentally new interpretation of the novel, as a level-headed guidance to questions often asked about it: whether it is a 'historical novel'; how far to hunt for hidden meanings; how to think about its faults; what of the coincidences and improbabilities; the significance of the Poems; the place of Christianity.

Without denying interest to M. and P. Rowland's *Pasternak's 'Doctor Zhivago'* (1967), which unfolds from the novel endlessly complex references to the Bible, and to Roman, Greek and other mythology, he considers the search for occult significances ultimately sterile. Though the book *is* full of symbols and hints, only what is readily discoverable should be insisted upon. The last three or four pages of the chapter dwell on some of these symbolic meanings.

As the work of a writer who, though he did not wish to be, was 'first and last a lyric poet', *Doctor Zhivago* is not wholly satisfactory as a novel—it 'tries to account for more than a novel should'. The coincidences and oddities belong to the attempt to show a special kind of 'interrelatedness', a 'moral and metaphysical design'. It is not quite clear whether Henry Gifford sees this lyrical aim as justified by the book's *being* formally, more than a novel—he does say its 'singularity lie[s] in its form', that is in the inclusion of a chapter of poems and with Donald Davie (in his *Poems of Doctor Zhivago* 1965) he sees the poems as indispensable. For his central thesi[s] about Yury Zhivago is that, while he fails as a moral agent, h[e] succeeds as a moral *being*, and to see this fully we need hi[s] poems. For his virtue lies, characteristically, in the way he per[-] ceives. 'Zhivago's life is disastrously incomplete without th[e] poetry, and his perceptions are more important than anythin[g] he does.'

I daresay one might reply to this that the prose part of th[e] book is already filled with his perceptions, and that the tightening and framing off into poems is something a read[er] can imagine, suspend disbelief in, just as he would imagi[ne] the music attributed to a fictional composer. Yet there is [a] way in which the poems do add something that is palpab[ly] needed: for not only are there throughout the book pieces [of] description (observations—to use an earlier phrase of Hen[ry] Gifford's—'out of the corner of the eye') which have no sen[se] unless one sees in them, as Donald Davie has suggested, poe[ms] which Yury 'never got round to writing'—this could still [be] grasped without the presence of actual poems—but there [are] also places in it where Pasternak takes us through the fi[rst] stages of 'inspiration', of the mind's proceeding from 'ordina[ry'] to 'extraordinary' states, after which the next stage must [be] the written poem. Each ends abruptly, unfinished, and [one] turns to the final chapter, not for a particular poem, but [for] the very poetry. I wonder if this is what Henry Gifford me[ans] when he says, 'the poems present a world that at every p[oint] seems to open on to the supernatural' *in a way that the no[vel] cannot*. The novel depicts the upward steps and leaves you [on] the top one, about to lose balance; the poems take fli[ght].

Henry Gifford parts company with Donald Davie when [he] insists that not *all* the connections of poems with narra[tive] need working out; some are worth it, others not. Rather t[o] ponder how some of them contain things Yury never c[ame] across in his narrated life, we should regard him as one w[ho] in Pasternak's words about Chopin, 'looked upon his own [life] as a means of knowing every life in the world'.

Religious imagery is prominent in *Doctor Zhivago*, and [Pas]ternak seems to give a sort of poet's recognition to it. I w[ould] call this not so much a Christian book as a book that see[ks to] evoke that experience of miracle which the Christian [sym]bolism, like other symbolisms, can be used for, but w[...]

being finally not covered by any of them, remains an eternal impulsion to new creation. Which otherworldly language one chooses hardly matters; what matters is the 'happy assurance' that there *is* 'some other level, known to some as the Kingdom of God, to others as history, and yet to others by some other name' (*Doctor Zhivago*, I. 7). I agree with Henry Gifford when he says 'for Pasternak the whole of life properly seen is a revelation' and when he points to the difference between Pasternak and writers like Zamyatin and Bulgakov who, in combining the fantastic with common life, choose a setting distant in time or 'underlined the fantastic with obvious irony': for Pasternak common life *is* the fantastic, which needs no distinctive underlining since there is nothing else but it (there are only people who do not see things this way). But I feel that he speaks too straightforwardly of the novel as Christian, although this emphasis does get poignancy and exceptionality from his observing that 'this [the story of Christ] is a story that had not been told in the Soviet Union for forty years.'

In the 'Zhivago' chapter of this book Pasternak comes over mainly as a conserver of past pieties and communities, home-builder in the midst of alien storm, quiet battler against glitter and rhetoric, morally unassailable representative of (Pasternak's own phrase) 'liberty of being', passive but vigilant judge of his time. All this seems right, he *is* these things. And yet the concentration upon them leaves out other things that he also is. For he is, also, in Yury, someone who welcomes the October Revolution as a 'marvel of history', who has a vision of the fundamental 'components of existence' precisely during and just after a thunderstorm, and who falls in love with Lara —and Lara is someone who enjoys the sound of shooting on the barricades and who disrupts a traditional Christmas party (epitome of those past pieties) by bursting in with a gun to murder her seducer—a straightness of action implicitly applauded. The importance of the Revolution to Pasternak in his *My Sister Life* period is indeed stressed, but the greater stress throughout is on the conservative message. Likewise, Yury's respect for the revolutionary, Strelnikov, seems to me to be played down.

This will be the subject of a short article in a later *PNR*. I will introduce it by quoting, as Henry Gifford does, Zhivago's words: 'those who make revolutions are . . . geniuses of self-limitation'. His commentary on this stresses the 'self-limitation', mine—its paradoxical companion, 'genius'.

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