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The Poet and the Revolutionary

Zhivago and Strelnikov: Pasternak and Mayakovsky. (A note springing from Angela Livingstone's review of Henry Gifford's Pasternak *in* PNR 5.)

PROFESSOR GIFFORD says that one of the main antitheses in *Dr Zhivago* is between, on the one hand, Yury himself and, on the other, 'those who have capitulated to the ethos of the new system'. He lists the latter: Pasha Antipov, Liberius, Dudorov and Gordon. Zhivago, he says, 'makes for life', while these are people who 'in their censure of his attitudes make for death'.

It seems to me that to put Antipov/Strelnikov in the same list as these others, to say that he 'capitulates', and that he 'makes for death', is both to miss the complexity of his character and to ignore the complex fascination that Pasternak feels towards him. In Henry Gifford's view Strelnikov is straightforward, he is one of those who 'traduce themselves', who join the side of the overprincipled, the artificial and the untalented, and are unable to be disinterested, natural and contemplative. Strelnikov seems to me to be far more than this.

True, he is summed up as being all *will*, and is said to lack the 'unprincipled heart which knows no general cases but only particular ones . . .' and so forth. But he is also summed up in a number of other ways. For a start, he makes a favourable impression on Yury, as the latter tells Lara when recounting to her his meeting with him in the train. Yury had expected to find some typical revolutionary maniac, and didn't. The point is that he didn't even find a 'type' at all, he found an individual. 'Belonging to a type means the end of the human being', says Yury, and not belonging to one means there is 'a grain of eternity' in you. This is what he discovers, to his surprise, in Strelnikov. Hence he is convinced that the latter will be decoyed by the really faceless political activists. He says that though Strelnikov is as crazy as they are, he went crazy in a different way—not through reading books but through what he had felt and experienced. This too works against the notion of a man obsessed with theory and principle, and in fact there is a contradiction here which seems to go right through the novel. I don't think Pasternak solved it, or was even able to solve it.

I sense a profound uneasiness in the novel on this score. It is partly traceable to the incompleteness and awkwardness in the whole treatment of the transformation of Pasha Antipov into Strelnikov. This transformation seems to me not well done, either psychologically or aesthetically. Take the sentence about the character change that Pasha goes through, as observed by Galiullin when he comes across him in the war, at the front. 'From the shy, girlish, mocking boy full of mischief and obsessed with purity there had emerged a high-strung contemptuous hypochondriac who knew everything.' The trouble here is that we cannot tell whether this is supposed to be an amazing change or a normal development. Perhaps purity-obsession leads naturally to hypochondria, and mockery to contempt. But does it? And why does the timid boy become an irritable know-all? In any case, which part of this change is Galiullin 'surprised' by? Is it that an amiable adolescent has become a repulsive man? But Yury is to make it clear that Strelnikov is *not* repulsive. Is it the excess of seriousness in someone who has once been playful and mischievous? But seriousness is not actually mentioned, what is mentioned is hypochondria and contempt. Neither of which we *see* in the later Strelnikov.

Is Pasternak doing lip-service to the novelistic necessity of providing psychological development for his main characters, without caring much about it? I suggest that he is, in fact, roughly fitting a piece of unavoidable character-sketching to his own prepared scheme, which has to do with the idea of imitation. The two halves of Pasha, the earlier and the later, hold together through his ability for mimicry. His mischievousness as a small boy was expressed in a talent for mimicking the behaviour of others. His later commitment to the revolution, Yury explains (and doubtless we are to agree with him), has to do with that very same talent, or habit, now reinforced by the general imitative spirit of the age. This is something Pasternak has to say about revolutionaries in general, and it is related to other points throughout the book, for instance to the amiably ironic observation made by Lara at her wedding-party—that drunk people always enjoy *acting* the part of drunks, and 'the more drunk they are the more untalented and amateur is their stress on it'.

Mimicry, imitation, acting out the required part—all this is the realm of the type, the typical. It is in this context that Strelnikov (like Pasha) is introduced. Yet at the same time, and here the uneasiness comes in, he is called *un*typical. And in fact the whole depiction of Strelnikov bears the mark of Pasternak's intense interest in him and sense of kinship with him as his opposite: that is, of a poet's fascination for a man who has *no* idea of poetry at all but has committed himself to moral fervour, to action, and to death in action.

The quality of this fascination can be found in the two episodes which bring Zhivago and Strelnikov together. One is their meeting on the train (Chapter 7), the other their meeting at Varykino (Chapter 14). Before discussing these episodes, I want to show that *Dr Zhivago* is by no means the first work in which Pasternak expresses such a feeling; it has a history in his writing.

Something of it is hinted, quite conspicuously, in several much earlier pieces of prose fiction. I see a beginning of it in the figure of the 'postoronnii' (the stranger, the person outside) in the story 'Childhood of Luvers' (1922). This is not a man of action as such, yet he is someone virtually defined as everything which is *not*, which is outside and has no connection with, the intensely perceptual, hence poetic, world of the girl from within whose sensing and naming mind everything in the story is known. It is continued in 'Aerial Ways' (1925), in the figure of Polivanov, a tough-minded revolutionary linked by biographical and emotional bonds to a woman who lives the life of feeling, not action. It is most notably prefigured in 'A Tale' (1934). Here the main character is a young poet who, right at the end of the story, emerges joyful and refreshed from a state of sleep, dream, reminiscence, and thoughts about art, to find himself suddenly 'devalued from head to foot' by the mere entry into the room of a certain other person, a man called Lemokh, of whom we have been told almost nothing. All we know, and all that matters, is that he is 'dry, definite and very rapid' and appears to represent 'the masculine spirit of fact'.

Masculinity is Strelnikov's main quality too (as in the emphasis on will-power) and the word 'definiteness' is used equally prominently about him—in fact this is the chief thing

Zhivago notices about him when, arrested by armed guards during his naive nocturnal amble around the train taking him to Varykino, and led to the train that has stopped beside it, he meets Strelnikov, by now a famous revolutionary leader, for the first time. Just like Lemokh, Strelnikov is described as entering the room (the compartment) with noticeable energy and directness. Zhivago straightaway wonders how it can be that, among so many indefinite acquaintances, he has never yet come across 'such definiteness as this man'. How is it that life has not brought them together? How have their paths not crossed? He doesn't feel devalued, but neither does he see Strelnikov as inferior. He just sees him as *other*. Clearly Pasternak is showing us two persons who are in some way equal; two opposite, mutually uncomprehending, yet mutually attracted, kinds of life.

The next paragraphs bear this out with their oddly uncomfortable wavering between—or perhaps one should say restless dashing between—on the one hand, praise for this 'finished manifestation of will', this 'giftedness' and 'naturalness' and, on the other, meditation upon the probability that his gift is that of imitation, the naturalness an *act* of naturalness.

Here another point in Pasternak's life comes to mind: cannot all this be seen as a harking back to his old love for Mayakovsky? Mayakovsky was, of course, another *poet*, but the way he differed from Pasternak was the way men of action do. What Pasternak admired—indeed loved—Mayakovsky for was (as he says in *A Safe-Conduct*) that non-introspective strength of will with which, instead of acting out petty roles, as others (for instance his fellow-futurists) did, he acted 'everything at once', acted *life*: he 'chose the pose of an outer integrity' and his whole life seemed to proceed from a single decision (this chimes in even more closely with the life of Strelnikov)—the 'decision of his genius'.

Yet another parallel in *Dr Zhivago* recalls Mayakovsky and is relevant here. A vivid image in *A Safe-Conduct* speaks of the quality of Mayakovsky's life:

> Somewhere in a depth beyond all this, as behind the upright stance of a skater who has set off from a running start, one perpetually glimpsed, preceding all his days, the one day when the amazing initial run had been taken which had straightened him up so vastly and unconstrainedly.

And in *Dr Zhivago* Yury thinks about Lara in words that echo this much earlier account of Mayakovsky: 'It's as if she had taken, long ago in her childhood, a general running start towards life, and now everything were happening for her from that initial run, of itself . . .' (My translation. At this point, as at many others, the Hayward-Harari translation of *Doctor Zhivago* is not very precise.) Surely *this* is the quality, the kind of living-power, that Lara shares with her husband, and this is what makes credible to us her wish to return to him if only he would return to her.

It is true that, as Henry Gifford says, her longing is expressed in terms of domesticity: she wants her home with him again. But here, once again, I sense—not a conflict, but an unsorted out conjunction of ideas. This home-making is certainly part of Pasternak's scheme, his picture of human beings 'at home in history'. But at the same time, almost knocking this imagery over, he shows us, in both Lara and Strelnikov, natural revolutionaries and natural revolution-sympathizers, people who live furiously and fast. My point is that Zhivago loves them both. And I suggest that Pasternak first learnt to love them in Mayakovsky.

There are further points of similarity. Underneath Mayakovsky's entirely successful 'acting', his total 'outer integrity', Pasternak discerned a 'wild shyness', and this too has its counterpart in Strelnikov, beneath whose strength we remember the self-questioning and inferiority feelings of his younger self, Pasha. Then Mayakovsky, like Strelnikov, committed suicide while young, healthy, in love, and in the very thick of events which he was actively promoting. The parallel is thus very much present, and I think it indicates something important in Pasternak.

At the beginning of *War & Peace* Tolstoy says of Anna Scherer that she has adopted the 'pose of enthusiasm', and that she puts on an expression of sincerity. This is a deft piece of disparagement, a light-handed relegating of that lady to the realms of the phoney. The comparison points up how completely different is Pasternak's concern with something that might also be called 'the pose of sincerity'. For him there is a challenging mystery in those people who act out a moral, political or artistic sincerity so well that their lives are nothing *but* the acting, and who are thereby doomed to the acting out of their deaths. He senses a power in them, and, most important, senses its relatedness to the power he knows in himself. Because he is a poet he too is a mimic (we're told he merges as if camouflaged into the Autumn leaves) and he too is an actor who sees the acting turn into an unspeakable sincerity. This is the theme of, for instance, the story 'Apelles' Line', and the poems 'Oh had I known' and (later) 'Hamlet'. Professor Gifford writes:

> Mayakovsky, as Pasternak saw him, was an actor who played out his role in earnest. Thus he foreshadows Hamlet in Zhivago's poem of that name. But Hamlet is made to fulfil the part that had been written for him. Mayakovsky insisted on writing it himself to his own destruction.

Exactly. This is their difference and their likeness. Pasternak rejected one kind of acting and accepted another. He decided against 'the view of life as spectacle', which he saw embodied in Mayakovsky, just as Zhivago chooses a different life from Strelnikov's.

The overall judgement on Strelnikov is doubtless more condemning than praising. But the element of mystery and attraction and the insistence on a profounder kinship—what Frank Kermode has called their 'strange, antithetical relationship'—remain and ought not to be overlooked. I will make this more precise by looking at part of the second meeting between the two men.

From that last conversation between them, after Lara's departure and before Strelnikov's suicide, Henry Gifford has chosen to quote the part where Yury describes Lara at household tasks, and comments that with this description he helps to 'revive in [Strelnikov] the meaning of a private world which he had long excluded from his thoughts'. While not disagreeing with this, I suggest that this selection from the text leads to only one, and not the most interesting, emphasis. I find it more interesting to quote the piece immediately preceding this bit of dialogue.

Strelnikov is talking of his recollections of Lara as a schoolgirl. He evokes two main things about her. One is her personal charm, and the other her way of seeming to express the entire 'anxiety of the age'. All the 'themes of the time' could be read in her face. Zhivago, listening to him in a kind of quiet harmony, agrees with him, saying yes, he too saw her at the same time and in that same way. For a moment they are one in this recollection, as if united at the origin of their careers, both having been moved, in their youth, by love for the very same embodiment of beauty and of universal meaning.

Then comes a clear, laconic division between them. Strelnikov says: 'You saw and you remember? And what did you do about it?' Zhivago answers: 'That's another question.' By a natural necessity the matter is instantly dropped. Strelnikov goes on with his account of the nineteenth century, revolutionary ferment, Lenin . . . and next day he is dead.

Two opposite lives are lived—one in poetry, one in action. They misunderstand and even reject each other, but they spring from the same basic experience, the same feeling and same love. They cannot avoid respecting each other. In Pasternak's condemnation of Strelnikov's way of life there is a vast amount of paradoxical recognition and admiration.

This can be backed up by pointing to very many things Pasternak said and wrote; a small instance is a letter (unpublished) of March 1930. He had heard (as it happens, very shortly before Mayakovsky's suicide) that one Silov had been executed. Silov was a thoroughgoing proletcult theorist, that is, he belonged to a literary movement quite opposed to Pasternak's own nature and choice of literary position. 'I have heard of the execution of Silov . . .', Pasternak writes, and adds that amongst the contemporary *Lef* 'he was the only honest, alive, reproachingly noble example of that moral newness which I myself have never sought because it is completely inaccessible to me and alien to my character; all *Lef* served the (unsuccessful, merely verbal) incarnation of it, at the price of trampling either on conscience or on talent'. Silov alone, he says, gave the *Lef* myth credibility. Here we have the familiar pattern: amid the general untalentedness of a group of theorists (people of 'principle'), the poet recognizes one man who, while wholly embodying their theory, yet does it with vitality and 'newness'; whose talent, perhaps, is the wholeness with which he does it. He comes to a terrible end. In him the poet senses something completely alien and endlessly attractive.

Finally, we can remember that Zhivago calls the October Revolution not only 'splendid surgery' (speaking as a doctor) but also (speaking as a poet) 'a stroke of genius' and 'real greatness', and that he actually says it is akin to genius in art—to the 'blazing directness' of Pushkin and to Tolstoy's 'bold attachment to the facts'. In such an unusual response to a political event, and in such an unusual summing up of a poet and a novelist, we see Pasternak's wish to express an inexpressible unity at the heart of art and history, an elusive fundamental kinship between spiritual and temporal action.