Chapter 1

Reception, importance and position of *Doctor Zhivago*

> I would pretend to have seen nature and universe themselves not as a picture made or fastened on an immoveable wall but as a sort of painted canvas roof or curtain in the air, incessantly pulled and blown and flapped by a something of an immaterial unknown and unknowable wind.

This sentence comes from a letter Pasternak wrote in 1959. He was writing in English, so there are some oddities of expression: by 'pretend' he may mean 'claim'. It describes what he would do to get art to resemble 'living reality'. Rather than seek to convey any particular thing or state of affairs, he would write, he says, as if he had seen everything at once – 'nature and universe themselves'; moreover, as if he had seen it all in endless, mysterious movement. This is what he set out to do in *Doctor Zhivago*.

The extraordinary metaphor of the painted canvas blowing in the wind points to the heart of Pasternak's work. We shall come back to it, or to what it implies, more than once, as indeed he himself kept coming back to it. Later in this introductory chapter I shall relate it more closely to *Doctor Zhivago*. But first I propose to consider Pasternak's novel in its time and place, asking how it was received and what makes it a 'landmark'.

In 1958, people started talking about Pasternak all over the world. Journalists, literary critics, people in public life, writers and readers, all suddenly became interested in this Russian who had written a novel which his own country refused to publish even though he had been appreciated as a poet there for some forty years. Its publication abroad was rapidly followed by his being honoured with the highest international award for literature, the Nobel Prize.

Pasternak never sought fame, but the book made him famous and the Prize made him more so. The violent reaction of the Soviet authorities made him more famous still. *Doctor Zhivago* was denounced as an anti-Soviet work by large numbers of Soviet citizens who had not read it. Its author was attacked as a traitor and condemned in the Press and at writers' meetings in the most vituperative language: he was not merely a 'literary weed' but a 'pig fouling its own den', a 'snake enjoying the odour of decay in poetical dung-waters of lyrical manure', a 'mangy sheep' and various other animals. But name-calling was the least of it. Pasternak was expelled from the Writers' Union – the sole means by which Soviet writers can publish and prosper – and threatened with exile and deprivation of citizenship. The international PEN Club and influential individuals in other countries tried to intercede with the Soviet powers but it was not until he had written two public letters acknowledging 'mistakes' and asking to be allowed to stay in Russia that he was left in peace – under close surveillance. Only in 1988, more than thirty years after its world-wide publication, has Pasternak's novel appeared in its own country. Though his other works were reprinted, *Doctor Zhivago* could not even be mentioned before the intellectual liberalisation now introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev.

While persecuted by his fellow-countrymen, Pasternak found himself winning friends in the rest of the world, receiving up to seventy foreign letters a day, most of which expressed admiration. Except at home, people were writing about him everywhere. By the end of 1959, some 350 articles had appeared, acclaiming *Doctor Zhivago* as a great work of art or a great statement, or, at the very least, a great event. As N. Chiaromonte wrote: 'Here is Russia, once again speaking out freely'.

If a landmark is 'a conspicuous object in the landscape which serves as a guide', the furore over *Doctor Zhivago* undoubtedly made it a landmark in literary history. How conspicuous would it have been without the furore? How clearly does it stand out now, thirty years afterwards? And to what is it a guide?

It certainly stands out as a large novel about large subjects. We encounter in it a quarter of a century of tremendous historical change: the 1905 revolution, the First World War, the two revolutions of 1917, the Civil War, and the subsequent decade of social, economic, political and personal transformation in Russia. Its depiction of an important period of history reflected in individual lives has made some readers compare it to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

It stands out too for its discussion of large human questions: what is history? what is art? what do we live for? do we need religion? what is existence all about? These Tolstoyan questions and Pasternak's answers to them are explicit or implicit throughout the book and lead some to call it a philosophical novel.

To Pasternak himself it was a supreme landmark, an infinitely greater achievement than anything else in his achievement-filled life. He had not previously been known for making long lucid statements; more often he seemed an inspired stammerer or a lyrical spirit unable (as he said) to ward off 'the slanting images flying in a downpour' through his window and onto the page of his notebook. Now, in his one and only novel, which he referred to as his 'novel in prose', he had made for the first time a large general statement in familiar language.

Russians who read the book clandestinely saw it as a landmark both in Pasternak's work and in the censorship-ridden culture they had become used to in the preceding three decades. Free and outspoken, it conveyed an authentic personal experience of the Revolution with little regard for the restraints that made most writers either 'toe the Party line' or 'write for the desk drawer'. It sympathetically evoked the atmosphere of pre-revolutionary Russian culture. It was a defence of poetry. And it spoke warmly of religion, for some even becoming a guide to the religious life. 'A miracle of nonconformity', said Victor Frank, a Russian scholar living in the west, 'full of supreme indifference to all the official taboos'.

Meanwhile many of the book's non-Russian readers

experienced it as renewing that youthful zest for living which the translation of nineteenth-century Russian novels at the beginning of this century had seemed to bring into the ageing culture of Europe – the same unsophisticated critical attitude and unashamed concern with spirituality. Like those earlier novels, it was also praised because, contrary to the 'microscopic analyses of western novelists', it was (to quote Czeslaw Milosz) 'open to huge vistas of space and historical time'. It was a guide to simple-heartedness and to a rediscovery of the eternal values: love, beauty, art, faith. It was like the best of the past returned. Readers compared its hero not only to the Holy Fool of Orthodox tradition and the 'superfluous man' of the Russian nineteenth-century novel, but also to Odysseus, Everyman, Hamlet, Faust and Jesus Christ.

I hope to show that *Doctor Zhivago* is more than a work of conservation or restoration, that it offers something unique, not easy to sum up, through which it is a landmark of another kind and a guide to something less nameable than 'religion' or 'personality' or 'perennial human values'. Motifs of waking up and of resurrection are woven throughout the book. A nightingale's song is described as 'falling into two syllables, summoning, heartfelt, imploring, resembling a plea or an admonition: wake up! wake up! wake up!' (the translators curtailed this important passage), and each of the hero's bouts of illness and recovery is presented as a dream-descent into Hell and a waking up to Heaven. Several commentators have discussed the resurrection imagery. But what is it Yurii wakes or is resurrected *to*? What was Pasternak hoping everyone who read this book would wake to see?

It is evident that waking up includes starting to live without pretentiousness and verbiage. Such change was a lifelong preoccupation of Pasternak's. In 1932 he wrote, in a love poem: 'It's easy to wake up and start to see, / to shake the wordy rubbish from one's heart / and live not getting cluttered any more – / all this is no great cunning.' What is seen, then, when the clutter is gone? I believe an answer is given in every aspect of the novel, which could thus be called a book

with a message, even with a mission. Not, though, with a definitely worked out ideological system. In her excellent essay on *Zhivago* written shortly after its publication, Helen Muchnic wrote that in it 'Religion, politics, philosophical discourses are peripheral to a prevailing sense of wonder', and this goes some way towards summing up Pasternak's message.

Critics have had trouble describing the form of *Doctor Zhivago* and even the genre it belongs to. *Is* it a novel? many have asked. Isn't it too lyrical, subjective, shapeless, to be called that? There are long diary entries in it, its dialogues are virtually monologues, its landscapes and described states of mind can be lifted out and read on their own, almost as poems, and its last chapter actually consists of poems: Isn't the whole thing some kind of poem? It has been called 'a rhapsody', 'a kind of morality play', 'an introspective epic', 'a poet's novel', 'an apocalyptic poem in the form of a novel', yet also 'a political novel par excellence', 'a love story for all time', as well as 'one of the most original works of modern times', 'something wholly *sui generis*', and 'one of the most paradoxical phenomena in twentieth-century European culture'. Perhaps what Tolstoy said about *War and Peace* should be said about *Doctor Zhivago*: it was 'what the author wanted to express, and was able to express, in the form in which it was expressed'.

There have been disagreements as to which century *Doctor Zhivago* really belongs to. Some find it modern, even 'modernist', others find it old fashioned, 'a nineteenth-century novel by a twentieth-century poet'. What does link it with the literary traditions of the nineteenth century is its concern for the fate of Russia. Russian literature, after springing miraculously into existence with Pushkin (1799–1837) and fountaining into a half-century of writers of genius, has always had an exceptional real-life importance to its writers and readers. It was never thought of as mere self-expression, embellishment of experience or entertainment, but always as a most serious part of living, the expression of an active

understanding of society and an interpretation of Russia's role in the world. It was highly conscious of its Russianness. With the dark ages only just behind them and the 'dark folk' all around them, and with vital social and philosophical questions still unsolved and urgent, writers in Russia often took on a special responsibility as moral guides, explorers and discoverers. Literature became a kind of parliament, a means of freely discussing society and the human condition, other forms of utterance being lamed by censorship, persecution, and the absence of usable institutions. Dostoevsky's novels plunge into questions of good and evil, Heaven and Hell, freedom and despotism; and in Tolstoy's the existence of God, the moral status of art, the nature of history and the iniquities of the social system often loom as large as do the characters and story. So Pasternak becomes another notable instance of the Russian writer taking on public moral responsibility when even he, poet of gardens and weathers, singer of love and of language, finally steps on to the public stage to record history, judge society, debate and define the nature of human being.

Nonetheless *Doctor Zhivago* is very different from the Russian and European novels of the nineteenth century with their consequential plot lines, interest in motivation and construction of rounded characters. One could never say of Pasternak's characters, as readers often claim of Tolstoy's, that one feels one has really met them, nor (as Bakhtin has shown of Dostoevsky's) that each one speaks from a separate and unique centre of consciousness. On the contrary, they tend to merge, overlap and add up to a single mind. Pasternak deliberately set out to oppose the realist tradition. In the letter to the English poet Stephen Spender from which our opening quotation comes – printed in *Encounter* for August 1960 – he mentions the 'not sufficient tracing of characters I was reproached with' and adds (in brackets): 'more than to delineate them I tried to efface them'.

The short correspondence with Spender, which Pasternak conducted in English, contains illuminating remarks about what he was attempting in his novel. In all great creative works, he writes, there is 'a characterisation of reality as

such' and the nineteenth-century way of characterising it was to apply 'the incontestable doctrine of causality, the belief . . . that all appearances of the moral and material world were subordinate to the law of sequels and retributions . . . The tragic bewitching spell of Flaubert's style or Maupassant's manner roots in the fact that their narratives are irrevocable like verdicts or sentences.' He adds that he too sought to characterise reality as such, for he had always been 'struck by the observation that existence was more original, extraordinary and inexplicable than any of its separate astonishing incidents and facts. I was attracted by the unusualness of the usual.' This is typical of Pasternak: creativity starts from astonishment at the way things are. As a writer he was happiest when he had 'succeeded in rendering *the atmosphere of being*' – which was no longer made up of causality and inevitability.

It is remarkable that Pasternak says nothing about twentieth-century innovations in the novel form. The literary models he takes as his point of departure are all earlier ones, and he talks as if he were the sole writer in dialogue with them. A journalist who visited him in 1957 reported that he spoke of Goethe and Shakespeare as if they were his contemporaries. He seems to have felt sure that no one else was doing what he was doing.

In the same letter Pasternak explains what constituted the new 'atmosphere':

> There is an effort in the novel to represent the whole sequence of facts and beings and happenings like some moving entireness, like a developing, passing by, rolling and rushing inspiration, as if reality itself had freedom and choice and was composing itself out of numberless variants and versions.

This echoes a whole series of assertions within the novel. I shall quote two of them, one near the beginning, one near the end. Yurii consoles a sick woman, saying that though there can be no physical resurrection in any future world, 'all the while, one and the same immensely identical life fills the universe and is renewed hour by hour in innumerable combinations and transformations' (3:3). And later he objects to Bolshevik ideas of mechanically remaking everything:

> The re-making of life! Those who talk in this way . . . have not once come to know life, not felt its spirit, its soul . . . Life is never a material, a substance. If you want to know, it is an uninterruptedly self-renewing, eternally self-working principle, it eternally re-makes and refashions itself, it itself is infinitely grander than the obtuse theories held by you or me. (11:5)

This thought is the novel's philosophical basis, its 'vitalism', as Guy de Mallac calls it. Zhivago himself puts it forward more as a passionate feeling than as an idea. Meanwhile the epigrammatic phrases of his philosopher-uncle, Vedenyapin – 'life is meaningful because it is symbolical', 'communion between mortals is immortal' – underpin the idea by implying a view of existence as meaning something 'tangibly more than itself'.

Several attempts have been made, or initiated, to interpret images, names and references throughout *Zhivago* as belonging to a consistent symbolic system. The most thoroughgoing is that of M. F. and P. Rowland who, with the help of Greek and Oriental mythology, the Bible, the work of Jung, Siberian shamanism and old Russian epic, identify allegory at every step and produce a fascinating view of the novel as concerned with the soul's descent into Hell and its salvation: fascinating, but over-inventive, and complicated in ways that Pasternak both implicitly and explicitly avoided. Their categorising of *Doctor Zhivago* as 'symbolic realism' seems to me apt, neatly linking its two aspects. But their method neglects the meanings the novel can offer to a non-scholarly, impressionistic reading, and pays close attention only to selected features, so that the overall pattern of the work is scarcely noticed. I shall give a more flexible reading and shall not pursue any such detailed allegory as that Anna Gromeko 'represents doomed Imperial Russia', and Yurii's mother – the Russian Church, or even that Lara is 'the quintessential spirit of Russia', although Yurii does sometimes think of her in this way.

Not that I do not think every detail has its meaning; nearly every name, for example, will yield to at least one interpretation. But I believe we should heed Pasternak's warning that if

readers get too enthusiastic in hunting down the significances of details they miss the sense of the whole work. His image of the painted canvas, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, suggests the proper relation of parts to whole. For, as other instances of the same image make clear, he had in mind a canvas with a picture painted on it. The details of the picture represent the features of the real world and – when the picture is motionless – those of the realist novel. Far more interesting than these is the fact that the entire picture, the canvas itself, is in movement, blown and flapped by a wind coming from elsewhere.

There are many descriptions of movement within the novel, but all of them at once (as in the poem 'Wind', 'all the trees as one entirety') are seen as moving under the influence of a force from outside. There is no need to say what that is. Pasternak is not looking for transcendental definitions. All his effort is devoted to evoking the moving historical and seasonal world as he experiences it – the painting blowing in an infinite wind. One way of reading *Zhivago*, then, is to see it as built up on praise for, and delight in, movement, process, change, life's energy and dynamism, and, accompanying this, on incredulity and horror at their opposite: fixity, entropy, the tendency to put a stop to movement and turn process into stasis, the unadmitted will to death and deadliness.

The symbolic dimension, along with the indifference, at times hostility, expressed in it towards politics and Marxist ideology, make *Doctor Zhivago* far removed from socialist realism, that ill-defined but restrictive model set up for literature in the Soviet Union from 1932 onwards. The first part of its demand – literature must 'represent reality in its revolutionary development' – might be seen as answered by Pasternak if one took 'revolutionary' to mean dynamic and changing, but the second part could not: writers must take on the 'task of ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of socialism'. According to socialist realism, literature had to be socially useful, present 'positive

heroes' and express optimism; novels were to imitate Tolstoy in being realistic, non-experimental and easy to read; writers were to be 'party-minded' (as Lenin said back in 1905: 'Down with non-party-minded writers! Down with the literary supermen!'). The mechanistic rhetoric Pasternak deplores was often heard in the later 1920s and 30s: writers were 'engineers of human souls', their work was to be 'cog and screw' of the social machine, they would 'sow the iron seed' of Bolshevism, help reconstruct the world. Novels began to have such titles as *The Iron Flood*, *Cement*, *How the Steel was Tempered*, or *The Story of a Real Man*, *The Making of a Hero*. Successful plots were about the building of a hydroelectric power plant or how a soldier, such as Levinson in Fadeev's *Rout*, masterfully crumples the love-letter in his pocket and sacrifices himself to serve an abstract cause.

When the *Novyi mir* editors wrote to Pasternak explaining why they would not publish his novel, they had socialist realist principles in mind. Pasternak had not yet become anathema to the authorities (this was before the Nobel Prize award) and their long letter is a courteous enough document, notwithstanding its sneers at 'truth-seeking individuals' and its patronising confidence of knowing his book better than he did. They considered its spirit to be simply 'non-acceptance of the socialist revolution'. They saw Zhivago as a pleasure-loving egotist angry with the revolution for destroying his physical comforts, a cowardly evader of the all-important question, 'Whose side are you on?', who does not even distinguish the February (bourgeois) revolution from the October (socialist) one. Yet it is easy enough to show that Zhivago does not value material comforts, and we shall be discussing his changing responses to the events of 1917. Other and various views of the book's attitude to the Revolution have been taken by western readers, some saying it treats it 'as a malady', others that it represents it as 'one of the few great events of human history', Vladimir Nabokov calling it 'pro-Bolshevist', and Frank O'Hara giving this interesting analysis: 'if Pasternak is saying the 1917 Revolution failed, he must have felt that the West never even made the attempt.

Far from being a traitorous work [*Zhivago*] is a poem on the nobility of the Soviet failure to reconstruct society *in human terms*, and it is not without hope.' But perhaps the *Novyi mir* editors' chief blindness was their failure to see that the book is not centrally about politics at all, or even about personalities, but is about creativity, understood as an energy and an integral part of human life and history.

Except in talent, novelty and refusal to be scared of the censor, *Doctor Zhivago* has little in common with other outstanding fictional works of the post-revolutionary period. Babel's cycle of stories known in English as *Red Cavalry* (published in 1926 but attacked for not giving a correct view of the Communist Party) is about the Civil War and the 'heart-gratings' of an intellectual amongst men of action. Platonov's grippingly melancholy novel *The Foundation Pit* (written in the thirties but not published in the Soviet Union until 1987, and still undervalued in the west) is set among the brutalities of the collectivisation of agriculture. Zamyatin's *We* (published abroad in 1924 but not published in Russia until 1988) depicts an anti-Utopia in which people are 'numbers', 'personal life' is limited to an hour a day, and all imagination is finally removed by surgery. Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* (published only in 1966, thirty years after it was written) combines New Testament reality with a fantasy-satire on modern Moscow, with the Devil as one of its characters. From all these, *Zhivago* differs both in its celebratory spirit and in its attempt at a straightforward style, a new realism. The other writers mentioned are concerned with innovation in literary language or in ways of projecting the authorial voice, but Pasternak, like his hero, sought 'an originality that would be concealed under a cover of commonplace and familiar forms, a restrained, unpretentious . . . unnoticeable style that would attract no one's attention'.

In these respects he also stands aside from the major European fiction writers of our time. There is nothing in him of the refined, self-conscious narratorial poise of Thomas Mann or Proust, of Joyce or Virginia Woolf, the works of all

of whom he had read, although, as he knew, most of his hoped-for Soviet readers would not have done so.

Eric Warner writes of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* that it 'deliberately strives for the palm of innovation so assiduously courted by modernist art' and 'there remains something unsettling in its dazzling display of technique, something which . . . renders the book overly enigmatic and elusive'. Words like these were often applied to Pasternak's earlier writings too, but by the time of *Zhivago* he was striving for just the contrary of the palm of innovation. Dazzling technique came easily to him and needed no striving for. Simple communication came with difficulty and almost as a heroic exploit. *Doctor Zhivago* is the attained goal of a lifelong journey. Does this mean one needs to know the earlier works in order to appreciate it? Of course the novel must stand on its own and be judged for what it is, yet some acquaintance with the earlier writings helps to understand the personal achievement. It could even suggest a biographic subtext to the many attacks (by Yurii and Lara and the implied author) on the verbiage, cliché-mania and rhetoric so widespread in the Communist period: in repudiating all that, Pasternak was perhaps also dissociating himself from his own previous sins of wordiness. Not that he had ever practised empty verbiage – his sin (if it was one) had been the opposite: never a cliché to be seen! every image vibrant with originality – but still a *lot* of words. His search for an unnoticeable style was a reaction not only to the over-noticeable style of the age but also to his own youthful abundances. To read some of his pre-1940 works – which he once said he would not lift a finger to save from oblivion – is to come back to *Zhivago* with a keen awareness of the difficulty Pasternak had in not being difficult. And this, at the very least, may make us forgive and perhaps overlook the occasional ineptly written passages: they are the stumblings not of someone who cannot walk, but of someone more accustomed to acrobatics and dance. With a few exceptions I am not going to refer to his earlier poetry, since this loses so much in translation, but I will give, in chapters 2 and 3, some account of the earlier

prose works, all of which are now available in acceptable English versions.

Several Russian writers are mentioned in *Doctor Zhivago*, most notably Pushkin, Tolstoy and Alexander Blok. Outside the book, Pasternak spoke of his admiration for Joyce, Proust and Mann. But the only writer he points to as a really important influence on him is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. His whole personality, he said, had been created by Rilke, and at the end of his life he wrote that he had never, all his life long, done anything other than 'translate' Rilke and 'sail in his waters'. It is not obvious how this applies to *Zhivago*, though Pasternak once described his novel as 'the world of Malte Laurids Brigge' (Rilke's novel of 1910), and once, during the writing of it, he jotted down an instruction to himself 'to set things out peacefully and naturally, like the impression got from re-reading Malte Laurids Brigge'. Yet *Malte* has none of the spaciousness of *Zhivago*, and its defining emotions are a finely analysed fear and horror, while *Zhivago*'s are a boldly asserted joy and affirmation. So their affinity may lie in the fact that both are meditations on what it is like to be a poet in an unpoetic time. As well as this, both seem to possess, for many readers, an indefinable attraction and power. When Pasternak sent a draft of part of his novel, in 1948, to his scholarly, responsive cousin Olga Freidenberg, she wrote to him that she was trying to define her judgment of it:

> I'm at a loss: what is my judgement of life? This is life – in the widest and biggest sense . . . What emanates from it is something enormous. Its peculiarity is somehow special (an unintended tautology) and it isn't in the genre or the plot – I can't define it . . . it is a special version of the Book of Genesis . . . Realism of genre and language doesn't interest me. That's not what I value. In the novel there is a grandeur of another kind.