The Eucharist of Boris Pasternak

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Pasternak died—and in spite of all the clamor of modernity, in spite of all the news about global events, the world became quiet and empty for a moment. This din drowned his voice, he took no part in these events. But, as he said in one of his poems, "a miracle is a miracle."[1] And the miracle was that his lone voice was heard even in his silence, that we felt his presence—in life, in the world, in history being made before our eyes—as a source of joy and hope . . . .

It was good to know that in Peredelkino, a few kilometers from hectic Moscow, there lived a man who not only had not forgotten the most important thing, but who had also become for thousands and thousands of people a *witness* to that most important thing . . . .

It is not our purpose here to talk about the place and value of Pasternak in Russian literature. But it is a duty of us all to try to understand and to remember his testimony. And that brings us, of course, to the amazing book that has exploded as a bomb over the world and now, after the death of its author, contains his final testimony addressed to us.

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When Pasternak's novel had ceased to be a burning sensation, when everybody had read it, and the time of the first hasty and acute reactions had passed, people began to argue about *Doctor Zhivago*. Alongside a chorus of enthusiasm, there also began to be heard voices of protest debunking the novel and its author. All this is natural, and we can assume that there will be a long debate. Too many issues are intertwined in *Zhivago*, it touches too vividly upon times and affairs that are still not forgotten, and are still being responded to with acute pain. The process of slowly digesting, absorbing, understanding *Zhivago* has started and will continue for a while . . . .

Perhaps we will see in *Doctor Zhivago* what we do not see now; it is also possible that what now seems to us the most important and central to it will take a more modest place as we absorb it. Such is the fate of all great works of art. As *Anna Karenina* was being printed in one of the large Russian magazines, an influential critic denounced it as an uninteresting "salon drama." There are still people who believe that, although [Fyodor] Dostoevsky was a deep thinker, he wrote badly.

Literary critics will disassemble the novel into pieces, discover all the possible influences, make all the necessary convergences. *Pasternak and Tolstoy*, *Pasternak and Dostoyevsky*, *Pasternak and Blok*—all of these titles can already be anticipated in the extensive literature which, in due course, will acquire the honorable status of "Pasternak

[1] "The Miracle," a poem in Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 551.

bibliography," and inevitably become the apparatus of "Pasternak studies." Ideologues, for their part, will prove to us that Pasternak "expressed" the very things they claim. We will certainly read about Pasternak's place in the "liberation struggle," of his position on the idea of the person, democracy, and so on. American PhD candidates, following Edmund Wilson, will hurriedly begin to collect information about the symbolism of the Orthodox service as the key to *Zhivago*, while others will apply to it the infallible categories of Freudian psychology or sociology . . . and thus well-ordered, deciphered, dismembered, and explained in minute detail, *Zhivago* will take its rightful place in the history of culture, and we will be able to move on.

Without denying the value of any of these approaches, but being neither a literary critic nor an ideologue, I would like to approach *Zhivago* somewhat differently. I confess that after a second reading of the novel I no longer saw clearly that which seemed clear after the first, and I could no longer simply and, as they now say, "neatly" answer the question of what Pasternak wanted to say with his novel. And yet reading the novel—and entering into its life and thought—are making it more and more obvious what he said to *me*. I think that, along with the objective content of any literary work that is the subject of scholarly and ideological study, there exists a certain undeniable mystery of personal perception. An author of any true work of art speaks not only *urbi et orbi*,[2] to everyone, but also addresses everyone individually and personally, and art, just like the revelation of faith, comes to life in a new and unique way every time when such a personal meeting takes place. And only thus, through personal perception, can a work of art become transformed into something more than art, can die as art or as *just* a book and be resurrected as the invisible yet driving force of life.

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So much has already been said about the religious nature of *Doctor Zhivago* that to add to it would be akin to forcing an already open door. It is of course a religious book, but not in the sense that it deals with religion, but rather that everything in it is related to some kind of ultimate spiritual depth, to some fundamental, in Pushkin's sense of the word, *essential* issue. People and events and nature—all is living and moving as if against a background of something else, and it is this something else, not explained but shown, that gives meaning and significance to everything that takes place, and, by being mysteriously present, points to the importance of it all.

It is fair to talk about the *symbolism* of *Doctor Zhivago*, but this symbolism is very far from a commonplace, conventional understanding of symbolism

[2] "To the city [of Rome] and the world," a Latin expression used in the Roman Catholic Church.

as actions and situations which are meant to represent something "other" and only thereby acquiring a symbolic meaning. The symbolism of *Zhivago* is defined in the novel itself. "Life is symbolic," says Pasternak, "because it is meaningful."[3] The concept of symbolism here is contrary to its usual understanding. This or that event—or even life itself—is not meaningful because it is symbolic, but rather it is symbolic because it is meaningful. If one looks at the life of the world, man, nature, history, and every event in a special way, and if one treats them accordingly, then man and his life, the world in which he lives, acquire a new meaning, are disclosed in new dimensions. This is what symbolism means.

[3] Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 42.

One can *see* and one can *contemplate*. Contemplation is impossible without seeing, but one can see and not truly behold. So it seems to me that the symbolism of *Doctor Zhivago* is a symbolism revealed in contemplation. It is not symbolism opposed to realism, but rather realism pushed to its limit, because to know the reality fully is to know its meaning, its ultimate essence. In literature, "realism" is usually defined as a description of the world and of life "for what they are." But who will tell us what it is and what it is like? Pasternak's response and his method is to see as much and as fully as possible, to expand seeing to contemplating, to unravel the symbolism of life through comprehension of its meaning.

But this is in fact a religious—and moreover deliberately Christian—approach to life and to man. The Gospel says, "you shall indeed see but never perceive" (Matt. 13:14). In the man Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee, one may or may not see the Son of God. In order to see, one needs depth of sight, one needs contemplation in the deepest sense of the word. And this contemplation constitutes the movement of faith, which determines all the other "moves" and the entire approach to reality. For if I saw and knew God in a man, Jesus, then in every person I see and learn more than meets the eye.

Hence the possibility of this strange identification in the parable of the Last Judgment: "*I* was in prison and you came to *me*" (Matt. 25:36). Faith that is directed to God reveals to us the true nature of the world, life, man. Here lies the foundation of Christian symbolism, incomprehensible to all those who oppose symbolism to realism as something that is merely "symbolic," unreal. Faith makes possible the *contemplation* that we have just discussed, that new and perfect realism that also becomes a perfect symbolism. "Life is symbolic because it is meaningful."

This approach—religious in the deepest sense of the word—constitutes, in my personal experience and perception of *Doctor Zhivago*, the most important content of the novel. Modern literature has lost this approach. It has lost it completely, one might say sincerely, not because of ill will and not for trivial reasons; but still it has lost it, and, for all of modern literature's unquestionable successes, this loss defines its crisis. It offers us a lot of fun, a lot of aesthetic pleasure, for people have learned to write, to *make* literature in ways they may not have known how to before, but it has ceased to *nourish* us, that is, to be transformed into us, into our spiritual experience, to renew and expand it from within.

Reading the amazing descriptions of nature in [Ivan] Bunin, one admires their perfection. But this is the perfection of seeing, not contemplating. He sees and lets us see, but he does not contemplate and does not lead us into contemplation, into spiritual compre-

hension of reality. This seeing can turn into a primordial, almost animal joy of life, and it can identify and reflect the sadness and absurdity of life; it can, finally, lead us to some kind of mystery and point it out to us, but without turning into contemplation it remains, at the end, *just* literature.

And here a *miracle* of *Doctor Zhivago*—and I deliberately use this word—is that it returns this approach to us. It has *enlightened* art once again, and this art has not only begun to reflect the light or the darkness of life, but has become in the world and in life a source of light and warmth itself.

How long since we have had a chance to read a book that we could feel and experience as if it were radiating light and warmth, in spite of all the horrors that filled it! This book came to us from a man who, it would seem more than anyone else, had the right to express disappointment and frustration, cynicism and accusatory anger. And in order to write it, to explore that light and warmth, he did not depart, as others did, into a kind of sweet otherworldliness, into the contemplation of the past, into the escapism of the intimate, personal, lyrical. No—he, a refined lyricist and singer of "details," took as the subject of his book his own terrible time, the terrible Russia of that time, and the terrible people of that Russia and that time.

Doctor Zhivago is the fruit of a spiritual feat, the fruit of freedom and responsibility. And looking at the amazing face of this amazing man imprinted on the photos, looking at the whole of his appearance against the background of white birches and snow of his suburban seclusion, one cannot help recalling the words of the poet: "A child of love and of light, / He's all—a testament to freedom!"[4]

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So what is this special approach to the world and man, which I define as contemplation and in which I perceive the main theme of Pasternak? I hasten to say that I do not consider the ideology—elements of which are scattered throughout the novel in the statements of Yuri's uncle Nikolai Nikolayevich Vedenyapin, of Sima, and of Yuri himself—to constitute the primary content of this work. Also the idea of a free person, the idea of life as a sacrifice, the "philosophy of history" expressed by Pasternak's characters, and finally, "man thankfully celebrated in all the cradle songs of mothers and in all the picture galleries the world over" — none of this is especially original and is part of the common heritage, a common spirit of Russian religious thought.[5]

And if the novel had been written in order once again to proclaim this "Russian idea" (or rather, the Russian refraction of common Christian ideas), it would have been a *roman à thèse* [thesis novel], in which only this *thèse* would deserve attention. But I think the real value of the novel lies not in this ideology, which, incidentally, is expressed quite inconsistently and not without contradictions. Its value, *literary* rather than ideological, is in what Pasternak—as a writer, not as a thinker—has said, expressed, made us feel and experience.

This brings me to what I felt to be the most important thing in *Doctor Zhivago*. But to explain this most important thing I need to start not with Pasternak, but with Christianity. Two sensations, or, more precisely, two experiences define a fundamental "sense of self" in Christianity, without which its teaching, its life, its call "do not sound." They are the experience of *thanksgiving* and the experience

[4] Alexander Blok, "I yearn to live a life of meaning" (1914), in *The Stranger: Selected Poetry of Alexander Blok,* tr. Andrey Kneller (Boston: Andrey Kneller, 2011). Actual text: "A child of goodness and of light, / He's all—a testament to freedom!"

of *death as the enemy.* That mystery in which Christianity expresses its entire essence and its entire life, which is "celebrated" by the Church, is called thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

Theology teaches that thanksgiving and praise are the highest forms of prayer. All theological doctrines of the restoration of man, of his salvation and return to God, can ultimately be reduced to the fact that in Christ man reclaims pure thanksgiving as the real essence of his life. This is not just one of the rituals, one of the prayers. This is the condition in which and for which man was created, a true insight into the being of and communion with the Divine life. For thanksgiving is simultaneously an act of love and of freedom, and thus in it is overcome the basic limitation, the "enslavement" of creatures, dependency and fear . . . . Christ, the perfect man, restores in himself this original eucharistic relation of man to God and brings us into the eternal Eucharist. To reach it, to *partake of* it—essentially, completely, ontologically—constitutes the intent and the purpose of Christian life.

All this we know in our mind and confess by our mouth. But how weak this act of thanksgiving is in us and in our church life! We can say that it has long ceased to be dominant in our faith, in our Christian life experience. And if the voice of Christianity is heard so weakly in the world, it may be first of all because Christians have forgotten, have lost along the way, this sense of Christianity itself, of living our entire life as a *sacrifice of praise* . . . .

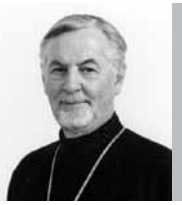
But it is precisely this sense that defines Pasternak's novel from the first page to the last. If he calls his hero "Zhivago"—the living—then life is preserved, filled, maintained in him precisely by this deep sense of thanksgiving, of life as a gift.[6]

This is not some kind of animal life force as such, because Zhivago is deprived of it, as is evidenced by his biography. It is not "vitalism," triumphant despite all obstacles: Zhivago's end, his death testify to this quite eloquently. No, the strength of this very human life that, in spite of sins, falls, and confusion, there is always—as a cleansing and transforming source—a return and true triumph of thanksgiving, a sense of life as purity and wholeness.

I do not include quotations, because this attitude of thanksgiving is not one of the themes of the novel. It is the general tone of the book, the light penetrating it from within. From where did it come to Pasternak? We do not know. But the quality of this thanksgiving, its tonality, is Christian . . . . ✠

[5] Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, 43.

[6] In Russian, the root of Zhivago is *zhiv*, "the living"—*tr.*



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