

Doctor Zjivago

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I remember when the book came into our home. A thick hard cover with a blue paper jacket. According to my memory we still lived in our first apartment in Motala on Luxorgatan 4 just across from the Luxor plant with its characteristic building seen from our kitchen window. We lived there until the end of the spring term in 1958 and the translation by Sven Vallmark was indeed printed in 1958. On the other hand I do not suspect that my parents knew about the book well before Pasternak's Nobel Prize was announced in the fall of 1958 in fact I recall that there was quite a commotion about the book so it must have caught general attention in connection with the announcement, and I wonder whether my parents may have heard of Pasternak before, after all he was known as a poet not as a writer of novels. Furthermore a search on the Internet reveals that critical comments on the translation (which must have been made in a hurry and by an amateur (a journalist) to boot) were published in a Swedish daily in early 1959. Memories play tricks on you. I do, however, recall that my father read the book with appreciation, noting that the chapters were short; and I am sure that my mother followed suit. At the time the book was promoted as a modern Russian epic in the classical tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The memory remains very strong and I got the feeling that it was an important book. I never read the book as a child nor in my youth, but did watch the movie which was released ten years later. Unfortunately the invasive images of a film version may usurp your attention and experience of a novel, and to this day the images of Omar Sharif and Julie Christie, as well as some mysterious come-on appearances by Alec Guinness, still remain with me, as did the whining balalaika sound theme, which at the time, before my taste for music had yet had a chance to develop, struck me as beautiful and evocative and I even considered to look for a recording of it. The movie diverged from the book, as is inevitable, and should hence be seen as a kind of Bowdlerization which is almost always the case whenever a novel is being filmed¹. The book itself I did not read until after the death of my father, I suspect that it might have been in the early spring of 1980². A few years

¹ One thinks of Classics Illustrated, where works of literature were cast in the form of comics. It was common in my childhood and many books I encountered in that way. True sometimes adopted novels may be superior to the originals. Somewhat disdainfully one may claim that second rate novels may provide the material for first rate movies.

² In fact my memory is fairly accurate as it usually is when it comes to old ones from your childhood and youth. In a long letter to Susan Taylor on January 10, 1980 there is a reference to the novel, in fact I can provide the following quote *But there are good things in life. One of which is Doctor Zjivago. I started reading at at home [at my mothers place in Motala] at Christmas, and have been reading it ever since, whenever I feel entitled to treat myself to it. Like late at night, on train rides, etc... The translation is a Swedish one, which makes for a freshness I think would have been lost on me on an English one. Once again I am reliving the childhood ability to loose [sic] myself in a made up world. It is poetry at its*

later I came across an American on a train in Sweden who spoke enthusiastically about the film, but found the book the most tedious book he had ever tried to read. I did not agree with him. I recall that when I read it I was struck by its poetry. Poetry at its best, with no formal strictures, nor any obscure verbal condensation that could bespeak pretense as much as true expression of feeling. But the poetry of metaphor, similes and attention to the seemingly inconsequential detail of which life is constituted (in fact the footnote above confirms the accuracy of my memories, as well as the unintended consistency of my reaction). Of course in the conversation in the train compartment, which included a lot of other people and remains fairly vivid to this day, I said nothing of this, surely no one would have understood.

So my first reading of Dr. Zjivago was a delight (however with some qualifications conveyed by the aforementioned note). Why read it again? Working through the first volume of Deutscher's biography on Trotsky, we are made privy to his exploits on the battle field during the Civil War. This is surely a view from the top and gives no indication on how those times were experienced on the ground. For all the exulted talk on behalf of the people, the peasant and the proletariat, it all seems so cold and abstract, lofty ideas that may engage the active imagination, meaning the imagination that drives action, but tramples so much underfoot, because active as that kind of imagination may be, it is more in the nature of an intoxication than one of sympathy. Thus Pasternak's novel came to my mind. Did it after all not take place in a background of social upheaval caused by the revolution and intensified by the Civil War? A true novel of imagination and sympathy, not one of a historical narrative dressed up as fiction to sweeten the pill. Thus I delved into it after a period of almost forty one years, incidentally encompassing a stretch of life, whose extent realistically I may never experience again.

In fact I do not remember much from the novel when it comes to particulars, in fact only one scene stands out in my memory, and that is of Zjivago (incidentally accompanied by his common-law wife, but that detail had faded away) delivering fire wood to a wealthy professional who is so immersed in a book he is reading that he cannot be bothered to acknowledge his presence. Zjivago is intrigued and tips over to his desk casting a furtive glance over the owners shoulder only to discover a tract he himself had written a long

best. The plot is secondary, there is no mechanical flow of details. of getting things straight, but rather those impressionistic touches. It entails the metaphoric agility of poetry, the unexpected simile, the astute observation, but without the condenseness and pretentiousness of the poetic form. The epic quality of a novel makes it flow forwards, things changes [sic] are the same, but not yet the same. I feel I have found here a very sympathetic temperament. The obsession of [sic] the innocuous detail, the way the snow drop falls, the way a bell gives away its last toll, the seasonal changes, all those things that in their innocuity really points and penetrates to the mysteries of life. It is a great experience, and gives a more convincing impression of Life, than anything merely realistic and documentary I have ever read. The five days later to the same correspondent. I finished Doctor Zjivago. A wonderful book, but I have to admit that it failed to sustained [sic] the same high quality throughout. As usual in a long epic book the patience and stamina of the author starts to wear down, imagination falters and promises suggested after the slow and full build up are bound to be crossed and obfuscated. But as a whole I was very much impressed. Further search reveals a reference in a German letter on Christmas and a few days later an extended quotation in Swedish to a Swedish couple, to be found in an another footnote further on.

time ago. This incident actually only comes at the very end of the book. But what I remember is the poetry which emerged from the pages. I had previously³ acquired an English translation of the book, published in a pocket-edition. This one I had barely glanced at and found disappointing. It just could not convey the same magic. I do not really understand why. Could it be, as I thought forty years ago, that the fact that it was in Swedish was actually what lent the translation a freshness to which I was singularly perceptive after almost a decade of English immersion? Or could the Swedish translation, for all its apparent flaws, nevertheless convey the special quality of the poetic prose? I had in fact read Pasternak in English before if only one short book 'The Last Summer' which was part of a pile I brought with me on the train from Vancouver to Montreal in the late summer of 1974 although I have to admit that I recall very little of what it was about except that the general mood of it was quite consistent with what I would later encounter in *Zjivago*. But details, with exceptions as obscure as accidental, are lost but the general tenor may reside with you. And it was that which appealed to me and promised to provide a necessary complement to the abstract Trotsky account.

Now at the time of Cold War the Pasternak book was a sensation bordering to the notorious, which no doubt contributed to the attention it got. It was seen as an indictment of the Soviet regime, showing its true face, and one is tempted to interpret the award to Pasternak as a political gesture, just as the award to Solzhenitsyn some twelve years later was so interpreted⁴. Both prize winners had to denounce the awards on penalty of expulsion from the Soviet Union. Now the book, started by Pasternak just after the war and thus during the late period of Stalinism, was about to be published during the Chrustjov thaw, which had enabled the initial works of Solzhenitsyn to become public, nevertheless earned the ire of the Soviet authorities and was smuggled out and published first in an Italian version in 1957. For many years it was banned in the Soviet Union, but nowadays (under Putin?) required reading in Russian schools.

Having forgotten the plot reading it again is like reading it for the first time, except that the mood and what made the book so pleasant to read for me, still imbues it with a glow, which possibly would never have been present during an actual first encounter. In fact without this prehistory of my acquaintance would the book have made the same deep impression? Those are questions which can never have any satisfying answers, both as to veracity and meaning.

To recall the actual plot in this essay would be rather pointless, the main thing that holds the attention of the reader is the identification with the main protagonist Yuriy Zjivago, in many ways unavoidably the *alter ego* of the author himself. Zjivago belongs to the upper echelons of Russian society (just as Pasternak had) and had been, like them, abroad several times during his early childhood. But he is abandoned by his father (who later on, turns out to have committed suicide on a train) and orphaned by his mother and grows up in a loving family where he is treated as one of them. In particular he is drawn by a sisterly attraction to the daughter and as there are no incestuous taboos in place

³ As testified by a concomitant remark in my letters to the effect that my own English translation was as of still stuck in transit.

⁴ In the meantime Sholokhov had been awarded in 1965, a far less controversial choice, maybe intentionally so by the Swedish Academy in order to soften the Pasternak affair.

ending up marrying her as the most natural thing in the world. He is a weak character with no aggressive will of his own but liable to comply. He trains himself as a doctor as he has scientific interests and is driven by a desire to be useful and being of talent, medicine turns out to be a safe and conventional career. However, his real passion lies elsewhere in thinking and thus being drawn to philosophy and in feeling thus being drawn to writing, in particular to poetry; but just as life is split into a political and a private sphere, your work should be split between a social and individual one. As a doctor he shows great talent, which invariably only can manifest itself in diagnosis where a certain measure of creativity and deeper understanding come into play. At the outbreak of the war he is ordered to the front to perform his duties and thereby becoming isolated from his wife and family. As a doctor he comes into contact with Lara, a young beautiful woman whom he has previously only glanced, and is unconsciously drawn to her involuntarily and hence irresistibly, but of course nothing happens, he is not the one to take charge and take decision, his will is weak and ineffectual.

There are momentous political changes, war, revolution, Bolshevik take over and then a bloody Civil war. As a reader we are only indirectly following what is going on, our perspective is as limited as that of Zjivago himself. The Bolshevik takeover is never explicitly mentioned, only by hindsight and prior knowledge can we discern the subtle changes. What we notice though is that daily life is changing and getting harder and harder. Living quarters are being requisitioned and old families have to squeeze themselves together without too much protests. Zjivago himself is initially quite sympathetic to the revolution, and then we are talking about the February one, which enjoyed a large support among many classes of society. The Bolshevik continuation was more of a clandestine affair much quicker more organized and engaged far fewer and does not get any attention in the novel. Things start to become harder, it is difficult to make daily ends meet, and his wife and father-in-law dream of finding peace and security far from urban centers retiring to the countryside, more specifically to foothills of the Urals (where Pasternak had 'done time' more particularly in Perm), from where the family business of the mother and wife respectively had taken place. Zjivago is not enthusiastic but complies as always. An epic winter journey through towards Siberia takes place (and although feeling like Siberia, it really is not being west of the Urals). The expedition is pure madness of course and very dangerous, as people from Moscow they will be conspicuous, but luckily they have powerful protectors in the background. What ensues is a rather idyllic life in the country side toiling for the daily bread and spending time in the evening reading classics. Occasionally Zjivago has business to Perm (renamed 'Jurjatin' in the novel) where he studies in the library where he one day catches sight of the woman - Lara - who served as nurse at the front. He is reluctant to impose himself nevertheless but she has also caught sight of him. Against any conscious intention they drift into an affair, her husband is presumed lost and killed in action, this being the reason for her seeking to serve at the front where he had disappeared; yet rumors are rampant though that he survived and now serves as the mysterious Streljnikov a successful commander in the Civil war that is ravaging and remains but a confusion. Zjivago is racked by guilt, the situation is highly irregular and confusing. It is not as if his resourceful wife Tanja has been replaced in his affections, far from it, the brother-sisterly bond between them still remains, as it never went beyond

it. What he is experiencing with Lara, and she with him, is something entirely new in his life, as is as well what she experiences with him. Maybe their first ever purely sexual experience. Zjivago decides to confront the situation with his wife, but he is saved from it by being taken prisoners by the Red partisans in the forest to serve as their doctor. He is kept in captivity for a year and a half being at a loss both as what happens in the Civil War and what happens to his family. Finally he manages to escape, miraculously hooks up with Lara again and with her returns to the village where he has lived with his family, the members of which have in the meantime escaped to Moscow and then to Paris and will be out of his life for ever. They enjoy a few days together in the deserted village where wolves have taken possession. Through the evil genius of the novel, the lawyer Komarovskij, they are being separated. Eventually Zjivago returns to Moscow descending into depression and paralysis. His former servant and his family take care of him with an easy familiarity which soon descends into condescension and contempt. Their daughter, however, takes pity on him and moves in with him and soon they live like husband and wife even siring two daughters. An arrangement clearly dictated by convenience from the side of Zjivago always willing to comply. His steady degeneration cannot continue indefinitely, his half-brother takes charge of him and arranges that after a period of rest and reflection he should get regular work at a clinic. On his first day on his way to work he gets caught in malfunctioning tramway traffic, tries to escape and falls down dead on the street from a heart attack, sharing the fate of his mother, the prospects of which he has been aware for many years (the curse of being trained as a doctor). In the movie, his death has been given an extra romantic twist, as following upon his catching sight of Lara through the tramway window and in vain trying to catch up with her. This is of course one of the scenes I remember best from the movie. But the ending of the novel is superior. The last pages are devoted to epilogues, clarifying a few loose threads; one of them, obviously an afterthought on the side of the author, being that unbeknownst to Zjivago, a daughter was born to him and Lara after their separation, a daughter who was tragically separated from her mother as a consequence of the upheaval of the times. That this is the case if never explicitly mentioned in the narrative but as readers we are trusted to put two and two together.

Now what are the special character of the novel a character that sets it apart from the actual plot, which I against my intention was unable not to sketch. When I first read the book, the poetry of the presentation, was what struck me deepest. The remarkable thing is that this my reaction actually has remained the same over a span of forty years. Poetry as such does not greatly interest me, it makes me impatient and restless and slightly dismissive. I never read the poems in the back of the novel the first time around, and I had no desire to peruse them the second time around either, apart from skimming the fist page or so. Maybe it was a mistake? As I made back then, and as I make now, I make a distinction between the formal aspects of poetry, such as meter and rhyme, and the metaphors and similes it entails. This is well captured, I think, from the quotations from two letters to be seen in a previous footnote, and on which I cannot really improve on by further elaboration, which will of course not prevent me from trying anyway.

What is the difference between poetry and prose? It has to do with the evenness of the margins. Poetry, through its formal garb, brings attention to itself by its typographical

display. Prose does not. Who wrote that? It could have been Alexander Pope? Many people try to write poetry, far fewer try their hand at prose, at least not consciously. In fact most people may not be aware of prose as a species of literary art, as it does not bring attention to itself, it remains obscure and hidden to but the most discerning of readers. Pasternak, true to his calling writes poetry not prose, although it is disguised as the latter flushed both on left and right margins. It is poetry in its slow rhythm and they way it dwells on seemingly irrelevant and innocuous details of life. This is a way of highlighting that there are two aspects of life, an external one, which can be formed into a narrative and even a career, and as thus leaks from the personal to the political; and an internal one which is timeless and thus part of no narrative. The former is practical and goal-oriented, one thing leads to another, one may also think of it as logical and temporal; the latter emphasizes that life just is and that it has an intrinsic value way beyond its merely transactional one. The former is just show the latter is the real thing. To that we will have occasion to return. No wonder that the man on the train found the book so tedious and unreadable.

Another aspect of poetry is given by the similes, the unexpected metaphors and the flight of fancy. Part of the inner experience of life, and also one of the most basic and potent, is the sense of reality. Paradoxically this sense of reality is not expressed through action and narrative, just as a sentence by itself cannot prove its own veracity. Only through inner contemplation can you be brought to the sense of your own existence, and the inevitable existence into which you are trapped. This is an insight which is not necessarily a pleasant and comforting one. The difference between dream and reality can only be discerned internally, although on a deeper level, dream too is reality as a dream. As Cartesius indicated, even if I am dreaming, the dreaming itself is real. In the external life of action, reality itself is merely assumed, not dwelt on as an entity by itself. Now in the narrative that unfolds in the form of the plot, this poetical touch gives to the actions a reality that they themselves cannot convey, it is fiction after all. When we are in Moscow we are in Moscow, when it is winter, it really snows and all of that conveyed by small means but significant details, however insignificant they may be in the life of action and overarching narrative. As an example of the strange way idle thoughts can taken we offer the following scene taken from the beginning of the book, when Zjivago's father has jumped to his death from the train (never witnessed by Zjivago but by one of his school friends). In English translation⁵

When they jumped out on the track and picked flowers or took a short walk to

⁵ the original by Max Hayward and Manya Harari. The original Swedish one by Sven Vallmark goes like this: *Nr de hoppade ner p banvallen och strckte p sig, plockade blommor och tog en liten sprngmarsch, hade de alla knslan av att denna plats hade uppstttt bara tack vare uppehlllet och att krrngen med dess tuvor, den breda floden och det vackra huset med kyrkan uppe p hjden p den motsatta stranden inte skulle ha funnits till i vrlden om inte olyckan hade hnt. Till och med solen tycktes ocks vara en ortens tillhrlighet, dr den med aftonglans skyggt belyste scenen invid rlsen som om den hade varit rdd att nrma sig, som en ko ur en i grannskapet betande hjord, vilken gtt fram till banvallen och stllt sig fr att betrakta mnnskorna.* Which differs partly from the English rendering, especially at the end, where it supplies more details. It could be that the Swedish one follows the original more closely.

stretch their legs, they felt as if the whole place owed its existence to the accident, and that without it neither the swampy meadow with hillocks, the broad river, nor the fine house and church on the steep opposite side would have been there. Even the diffident evening sun seemed to be a purely local feature. Its light probed the scene of the accident timidly, like a cow from a nearby herd come for the moment to take a look at the crowd.

Zjivago is a writer, but the opportunities for him to write are few. He looks with longing on the big empty desks that he encounters, especially in the Siberian exile. The process of writing is perspicaciously caught. As a climax Pasternak describes the writing experience of Zjivago as follows⁶:

After two or three stanzas and several images by which he himself was struck, the work took possession of him and he felt the approach of what is called inspiration. At such moments the relation of the forces that determine artistic creation is, as it were, reversed. The dominant thing is no longer the state of mind the artist seeks to express but the language in which he wants to express it. Language, the home and receptacle of beauty and meaning, itself begins to think and speak for man and turns wholly into music, not in terms of sonority but in terms of the impetuosity and power of its inward flow. Then, like the current of a mighty river polishing stones and turning wheels by its very movement, the flow of speech creates in passing, by virtue of its own laws, meter and rhythm and countless other forms and formations, which are even more important, but which are as yet unexplored, insufficiently recognized and unnamed

At such moment Yurii Andreievich felt that the main part of the work was being done not by him but by a superior power which was above him and directed him, namely the movement of universal thought and poetry in its present historical stage and the one to come. And he felt himself to be only the occasion, the fulcrum, needed to make the movement possible.

Obviously it is the author himself who is speaking. One interesting observation is that the formal aspects of poetry are not planned and intentional nor even conscious (no counting of syllables and searching for rhymes) but automatically induced. Goethe remarks once, that if a poet would have to be conscious of the meter he would go crazy. Related to this is the experience that the creative activity as such is independent to the writer, not directed by him only conducted through him. Another example being that the characters of a novel take on independent lives and strike out on their own, and all the author can do is to listen carefully. One is almost reminded of the outside Platonic reality of mathematics, where the process of creation may be willed as such but its results are not subjected to neither whim nor will. However, there is one thing in the novel, where it is difficult not to suspect the will and intention of the author being at play, and that is the prevalence of coincidences.

To be honest, this is something I never was aware of when I first read the novel, I took it in stride and was rather intrigued than repelled by it; however that has been pointed

⁶ Once again taken from the translation by Hayward and Harari

out to me in connection with the announcement of Dr.Zjivago being my next reading assignment. But fiction is fiction and not necessarily a piece of reality, in fact there is an unbridgeable gulf between Art and Reality. Now, the very many coincidences of people meeting unexpectedly and other improbable instances of connections, do of course belong to the privilege of a novel. The important thing is that those events are not employed in an *ad hoc* manner as *deus ex machina* to make plots run smoothly, in which case they appear as merely glitches and technical deficiencies that can only provoke irritation. In the novel they are played for their own sake and as such, at least to me, produce more delight than irritation. In fact one can once again make a mathematical analogy, in which there abounds a lot of hidden connections, the delight of which resides in their revelations.

One final thing to be commented upon concerning the palette of characters, it is indeed wide and multifarious. On the first page of the Swedish version almost thirty names are listed for the reader's benefit, in the English not quite ten, however, with more extensive explanations. The need of such lists are necessary due to the Russian naming customs, where various subsets of the full three part name, along with variations supplied by diminutives, tend to make the correspondences between character and names a bit hazy. Some times one feels almost the need for an index of names at the end of the book.

Zjivago is not only a poet but a philosopher of sorts, homespun maybe but with a genuine passion, no doubt once again being identical with that of the author. His philosophy is one with his temperament, not brazenly presented on the top of his lungs and rammed down the throat of the author, but discreetly conveyed with a touch of resigned irony, and no doubt passed over by most readers (and also, to be honest, faded in memory even among those who have actually taken notice). Characteristic is the exchange at the end of the book when Zjivago once again meet his childhood friends Gordon and Dudorov; although he is fond of them and anxious to maintain amicable relations, he cannot but sadly observe how much they have grown apart and how stunted they are in their intellectual development unable to rise above the cliches of the times. Most intellectuals are mediocrities, as with most people, but it becomes only offensive among intellectuals as their *raison d'etre* lies in rising above it. Gordon and Dudorov survive (at least) to the fifties, the point of view of the novel, confirming to the adage that those meek of mind will prevail (and inherit the earth).

Finally, in the West much of the interest in and the source of attention of the novel, are surely to be found in its conceived indictment of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime. The picture that it shows is hardly flattering, but the implied criticism is rather incidental, not to say unwilling, rather than intentionally pursued. It is a novel of chaos, of what happens when a modern society breaks down and how that effect people on the ground, hapless victims and passive onlookers. It is not an indictment against a political system, but an indictment against chaos. Pasternak lived through it, stoically and also pragmatically, as did Zjivago until his life was cut short. In fact Russia being such a primitive country it was in many ways more equipped to deal with chaos than a more modern and advanced society might have been. In particularly that applied to its vastness in pure spatial terms, that enabled some kind of escape from control, and that is exactly what Zjivagos family dreams about and drives their quixotic quest. But freedom also means loss of protection, you may evade human control but this also entails being

deprived of protection, something they are lucky to escape as well.

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