

BORIS PASTERNAK

A REPLY TO GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

SIR, – I was astonished and distressed by the attack in your last issue made by Gabriel Josipovici (whose criticism I usually read with great interest and respect) on the reputation of Boris Pasternak. Professor Josipovici's account of Pasternak's attitude to Jews and Judaism seems to me largely true. There is plentiful evidence for this in the pages of *Doctor Zhivago*, confirmed to me by his great friend and intense admirer, the poet Anna Akhmatova. The only other man I have ever known to whom his Jewish origins were a source of equally deep pain was the American political journalist Walter Lippmann. But this seems to me to have nothing to do with the value of Pasternak's poetry.

I do not know whether Josipovici reads Russian; I suspect that he does not. To assess lyrical poetry by translations can lead to absurd misjudgements. Most of those made of Pushkin, who was and is Russia's greatest poet, tend to produce weak, Byronic doggerel. This is true even of Vladimir Nabokov's highly eccentric rendering of *Eugene Onegin*. Josipovici cites Nabokov's onslaught on Pasternak. The brilliant virtuosity of Nabokov's writing is not in question; but he was often, and perhaps deliberately, perverse: he told me (and I expect wrote) that Dostoevsky was the author of cheap thrillers; that *War and Peace* was suitable reading for unsophisticated schoolboys; that *Don Quixote* was one of the most boring books ever written, perhaps *the* most boring (and he also wrote the opposite); and so on. Josipovici's opinion of Pasternak's merits as a poet seems to me on a par with Tolstoy's casual dismissals of Ibsen and Flaubert, his sneering references to Goethe, his view that the fame of Wagner's *Ring* could be explained only by the hypocrisy and snobbery of his obviously bewildered audiences; one might add the earlier T. S. Eliot on Milton, or the earlier Leavis on Dickens. Like Josipovici's review, these seem to me to belong to the curiosities of criticism. The moving national celebration of Pasternak's centenary in his own

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country does not, I wish to assure your readers, rest on a gigantic error. Josipovici is, of course, like all the rest of us, entitled to his views: I should like to be allowed to state my own.

Boris Pasternak is a magnificent poet, one of the great poets of our time, and has been recognised as such even by some of those who find his great contemporaries Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva more sympathetic. Nothing that Gabriel Josipovici can say will do anything to diminish, let alone destroy, the recognition of his genius. As for *Doctor Zhivago*, there are many views about it. It seems to me a masterpiece, and to those who doubt this I can only recommend the reviews of it, when it appeared in English over thirty years ago, by Edmund Wilson and Stuart Hampshire, in themselves works of literature.

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