



Doctor Zhivago
(and other books of 1958)

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Doctor Zhivago

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Contribution to 'Books of the Year: I', *Sunday Times*, 21 December 1958, 6



Boris Pasternak at Peredelkino, 1958

DOCTOR ZHIVAGO by Boris Pasternak (Collins) seems to me a work of genius, and its appearance a literary and moral event without parallel in our day.

The extraordinary circumstances in which this book was published in Italy, and, in particular, the crude and degrading

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misuse of it for propaganda purposes on both sides of the Iron Curtain, may distract attention from the cardinal fact that it is a magnificent poetical masterpiece in the central tradition of Russian literature, perhaps the last of its kind, at once the creation of a natural world and a society of individuals rooted in the history and the morality of their time, and a personal avowal of overwhelming directness, nobility and depth.

Some critics have tended to attribute the exceptional popular success of this novel to curiosity, or to the scandal that its appearance created. I see no reason for this belief. Its main theme is universal and close to the lives of most men: the life, decline and death of a man who, like the heroes of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Chekhov, stands at the edges of his society, is involved in its direction and fate, but is not identified with it, and preserves his human shape, his inner life and his sense of truth under the impact of violent events which pulverise his society, and brutalise or destroy vast numbers of other human beings.

As in his poetry, Pasternak melts the barriers which divide man from nature, animate from inanimate life; his images are often metaphysical and religious; but efforts to classify his ideas, or those of the characters of the novel, as specifically social or psychological, or as designed to support a particular philosophy or theology, are absurd in the face of the overwhelming fullness of his vision of life.

To the expression of his unitary vision the author devotes a power of evocative writing, at once lyrical and ironical, boldly prophetic, and filled with nostalgia for the Russian past, which seems to me unlike any other, and in descriptive force today unequalled.

It is an uneven book: its beginning is confused, the symbolism at times obscure, the end mystifying. The marvellous poems with which it ends convey too little in English. But all in all it is one of the greatest works of our time.

If it were not for *Doctor Zhivago* I could truthfully say that for many reasons I most enjoyed reading Lady Diana Cooper's *The Rainbow*

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Comes and Goes (Rupert Hart-Davis), Sir Maurice Bowra's *The Greek Experience* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), Rachel Cecil's *Theresa's Choice* (Constable), Erich Heller's *The Ironic German* (Secker & Warburg) and Roy Jenkins's *Sir Charles Dilke* (Collins).

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