

Against the Soviet system's evils, the ultimate weapons are love and compassion.

Two Russian Novelists

MILTON HINDUS

I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography, by Boris Pasternak. *New York: Pantheon, 1959.*

The Chains of Fear, by N. Narokov. *Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958.*

AS AN EPIGRAPH for his *Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller used an interesting quotation from Emerson: "These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies—captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly." I am tempted to set Emerson's words at the head of my own review not because I wish

completely to deny the value of Mr. Narokov's novel but because it is clear to me that it cannot for a moment bear comparison with Pasternak's more literal transcription of his material.

One may say that the difference in quality between the two books is due not so much to their forms as to the difference in talent between the two writers. There is some truth in this objection, yet the validity of Emerson's theory is supported by a comparison between Pasternak's own novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, and his autobiography. This autobiography is, to be sure, a mere sketch and less weighty a work in every way than *Zhivago*, but it is, so far as it goes, extraordinarily pure and satisfactory

to the reader while the novel is more of a mixture. *Zhivago* can be treated as a work of art and praised in superlative terms, as it has been by Edmund Wilson in his article in *The New Yorker*; it can be treated as art and criticized harshly for its aesthetic shortcomings as it has been in *Kenyon Review* and other smaller periodicals. It can likewise be treated as a sociological document and praised or blamed without reference to its artistic merits—this has been the usual approach.

A fourth type of approach to *Zhivago* is possible—which is to see it as a fiction consisting in large part of insufficiently transmuted autobiography. Although the ingenuity of Wilson discovers some subtly developed formal schemes in the novel, a more naive approach sees it as a loosely strung picaresque tale—a form not ranking at the apex of a hierarchy as art but ideally suited to absorbing a maximum amount of personal recollection without too obtrusive evidence of doing so. A second characteristic of *Zhivago*, which undoubtedly results from the large infusion of autobiography in it, is that all its characters seem to speak with the same voice. It is the voice of the great lyric poet who has created them but who doesn't have the dramatic gift to endow them with independent lives of their own. I say these things without meaning to denigrate the accomplishment of Pasternak in *Zhivago*; the author's unretouched account of what he has directly heard and known may vitiate its status as an autotelic imaginative work, but it is also responsible for the world-encircling effect of the novel.

What is a legitimate criterion to apply in judging books making use of a Soviet background? It is suggested by a passage at the end of the admittedly autobiographical *I Remember*: "This unique world, the like of which has never been known before, has now receded into the faraway distance

of memories and hangs suspended on the horizon like mountains seen from a plain or like a faraway big city against the smoky background of a red sunset. . . . One would have to write about it in a way to make the heart stop beating and the hair stand on end. To write about it in an ordinary and commonplace way, to write about it unemotionally, to write about it less colorfully than Gogol and Dostoevsky have depicted Petersburg, is not only senseless and useless; to write like that would be both dishonest and base."

Very well! But who succeeds better in writing "about it in a way to make the heart stop beating and the hair stand on end"—Pasternak or Narokov? The answer to my mind is clearly Pasternak. Though Narokov is an estimable writer and there are some powerful scenes in his book, his fictional composition, by the very skill of its construction, gives to his most harrowing passages something of a meretricious air. To make melodrama compete with a plain account of horrible reality requires the genius of a Dostoevsky or a Shakespeare. It is no reflection on Narokov surely to say that he is not in this class. Neither, for that matter, is Pasternak. But by the latter's own criterion, his autobiography—with all its shortcomings and incompleteness—is more moving than his novel, and the most moving pages of the autobiography perhaps are those containing the notes, supplied by the editor or publisher, at the end of the book. Here indeed is matter enough "to make the heart stop beating and the hair stand on end."

Let me give a concrete example of what I have in mind. In Pasternak's *I Remember*, we are given the following account of his relationship with the emigré poet, Marina Tsvetayeva, whose work he very much admired after an initial period of indifference:

In the summer of 1935, feeling ill and

on the point of a breakdown from insomnia lasting for almost a year, I found myself at an anti-Fascist congress in Paris. There I became acquainted with Marina Tsvetayeva's husband, a charming, refined, and steadfast man, and I grew fond of him as if he were my own brother.

The members of Marina Tsvetayeva's family insisted that she should return to Russia. They were prompted partly by homesickness and sympathy with Communism and the Soviet Union and partly by the consideration that Marina Tsvetayeva could never be happy in Paris and that she would perish living in a sort of vacuum without any readers to respond to her.

Marina Tsvetayeva asked me what I thought of it. I had no definite opinion to offer. I did not know what to say to her and I was very much afraid that she and her remarkable family would find things rather difficult and not very peaceful in Russia. The general tragedy of the family infinitely exceeded my fears.

The muted quality of the writing here hints only very faintly of the full extent of the horror involved or of the courage of Pasternak in touching upon it even so gingerly as he has done. The facts are to be found in the bare notes in back of the book:

Tsvetayeva, Marina Ivanovna (1892-1941). Poet. Began her literary work in 1910. Left Russia in 1922, to be with her husband, a former White officer, first in Czechoslovakia, later in Paris. Returned with family to Russia in 1939. Her husband was arrested and punished. Their daughter, too, was arrested and their son was killed early in the war. Tsvetayeva was banished to the provinces, where she could find no employment, and hanged herself.

Say what you will, I find it impressive for a Soviet citizen to dare to describe "a

former White officer" (Marina Tsvetayeva's husband) as "a charming, refined and steadfast man," and to say, "I grew fond of him as if he were my own brother." Perhaps he may have felt as kindly about Narokov—a pseudonym, as we learn from the publisher, for Nikolai Marchenko who also "fought with the White Army, was captured by the Reds, and escaped. Subject to suspicion and constant surveillance for many years, he had remained in semi-hiding as a school teacher in a small provincial town. In 1932, he was caught, and imprisoned by the GPU for six months. It was during this time that he gathered, from his own observations and from tales of his fellow-prisoners, much of the material for *The Chains of Fear*." For Pasternak and Narokov, in spite of the disparity that exists between their literary talents, do have something in common after all. They share a concern for humane and religious values.

The poet Tsvetayeva's name occurs again in a passage (pp. 88-90), perhaps the most moving in Pasternak's book, in which he calls the roll of the Soviet writers who have killed themselves: Mayakovsky, Esenin, Paolo Yashvili, Fadayev. Pasternak reflects on the desperation that must have preceded these suicides, concluding with the following tribute: "But all of them suffered beyond description, their suffering reaching the point where the feeling of anguish became a mental illness. Let us bow our heads with compassion for their talents and their bright memory as well as for their sufferings." To these names, he could well have added those of men who suffered less melodramatic ends. I mean men like Tretyakov and Mandelstam who, like the heroine of *Doctor Zhivago*, simply disappeared one day without a trace.

PASTERNAK'S BOOK of recollections is, for the most part, a paean in praise of famous men: Tolstoy, Rilke, Scriabin, Mayakovsky.

The entry of these men, however fleetingly, into his life marked the high points of it, we feel. The signal events of the revolution and all that followed were as nothing when compared with these privileged moments. Especially important to him as an example is his father's great friend Leo Tolstoy (his father, Leonid Pasternak, was a very accomplished painter who did several portraits of Tolstoy reproduced in this book in black and white). It is Tolstoy probably who inspired Pasternak to simplify his style—the simplicity of *I Remember* when compared with his autobiography of a quarter of a century before entitled *Safe Conduct* is startling. The earlier book, according to the later Pasternak, was “spoilt by unnecessary mannerisms.” In *Safe Conduct*, for example, the University of Marburg is described in the sentence: “The grey-green half-spat-over university boomed and subsided in a hundred auditoriums.” No such affectations disfigure the present book.

It is Tolstoyan, too, for Pasternak to reject all of his work before *Doctor Zhivago* and this autobiographical sketch as worthless. The terms in which he does so leave no doubt in my mind of his sincerity; in fact, the contrition he experiences in contemplating his past is of a quality we find only in the most significant autobiographies: Saint Augustine's or Rousseau's. I do not mean that Pasternak is in their class spiritually or intellectually (and, besides, his work is fragmentary and sketchy when compared with theirs), but only that he resembles them in the genuineness of his effort at self-refinement.

He can write about his Scriabin period when he was infatuated with music: “No one had any doubts about my future. My future had been settled, my path in life correctly chosen. I was meant to be a musician, everything was forgiven me for the sake of music, every shape and form of ingratitude and rudeness toward my elders

I was not fit to hold a candle to, stubbornness, disobedience, negligence, and strangeness of behavior. Even at school when, during the Greek and math lessons, I was caught trying to solve some fugue or counterpoint problem and, asked to answer a question from my place, stood like a fool and did not know what to say, my classmates did their best to shield me and my teachers forgave me everything. And in spite of that, I gave up music.”

Or he can write about a period of his past:

The *Contemporary Review* published my translation of Kleist's comedy *The Broken Jug*. The work was both immature and uninteresting. I should have been deeply grateful to the journal for publishing it. And I ought to have been even more grateful to its editorial board for letting some unknown hand go over my manuscript and improve it beyond recognition.

But the feeling of fairness, modesty, and gratitude was not fashionable among the young people of the left wing artistic movements and was looked upon as a sign of sentimentality and spinelessness. The proper thing was to have a high opinion of oneself and one's talents, to strut about, to be impudent, and, however much I hated it, I strove to keep in step with them all so as not to fall behind my friends.

Finally, in the same vein:

Among my depressingly incompetent writings of that time, the most awful ones were my translations of Ben Jonson's *Alchemist* and Goethe's poem *The Mysteries*. There is extant a review of them by Blok published in the last volume of his collected works among other reviews written for the publishing house World Literature. This scornful and scathing criticism is well deserved and justified in its final appraisal.

The conscientious self-destructiveness of

this recalls Tolstoy's consignment of all his work before his "conversion" (including *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*) to oblivion. Pasternak can say at the end of this autobiography that *Doctor Zhivago* is not only his "chief and most important work" but "the only one I am not ashamed of and for which I can answer with the utmost confidence."

A WORD SHOULD BE SAID perhaps about Pasternak's remarks *On Translating Shakespeare* with which the publisher has pieced out the autobiographical sketches that should otherwise have made too skimpy a volume. I was more impressed by these little essays the first time I read them in periodical form than when I reread them in this book. I was so predisposed in favor of Pasternak by the nature of his subject and his manner of treating it that I am afraid I saw more than was really there. Of course, it is a point in favor of Pasternak that his attitude toward Shakespeare is anything but Tolstoyan. It will be remembered that it was one of Tolstoy's less happy inspirations to compare Shakespeare unfavorably with Harriet Beecher Stowe! It is good, then, to have a great Russian writer who is, in so many other respects, a disciple of Tolstoy make amends for him. Pasternak makes these so handsomely that he seems to have fallen into an opposite extreme—the Bardolatry of the Victorian Age.

He sounds positively ecstatic in his admiration: "Shakespeare's use of rhythm is clearest in *Hamlet*, where it serves a triple purpose. It is used as a method of characterization, it makes audible and sustains the prevailing mood, and it elevates the tone and softens the brutality of certain scenes. . . . The characters are sharply differentiated by the rhythm of their speech. Polonius, the King, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz speak in one way, Laertes,

Ophelia, Horatio, and the rest in another. The credulity of the Queen is shown not only in her words but also by her singsong manner of drawing out her vowels."

Such remarks from a distinguished practicing poet in his own right impress us; they should impress us even more if there were specific illustrations to support the general observations. But one reluctantly thinks after a while that Pasternak's command of his subject and even of the English language itself leaves much to be desired. A note in his handwriting in English reproduced in the book as well as other messages in English that we have seen convince us that his ability to express himself in English is very imperfect indeed. But what of his ability to understand it? Well, it may certainly be better, and yet how good is it really?

Some of his observations on *Romeo and Juliet* can be characterized as inattentive if not incompetent. He tells us, for example, that in this play, Shakespeare "composes no arias, no duets. . . . It is in blank verse that the hero and heroine address each other." What, then, of the initial exchange between the hero and heroine in Act I, Scene 5, lines 96-109, which not only rhyme but compose a perfectly balanced *sonnet* in their totality? If this is not to be called a *duet*, I know of nothing in dramatic poetry that deserves the term. And is it not precisely the plenitude of rhyme in this play that convinces critics that it belongs to an early period of Shakespeare's work? All this is elementary—to the student of English literature.

But is it possible that Pasternak would undertake such vast and weighty works of translation from English without knowing the language perfectly? The answer is that it has been done before by men who could not have been called charlatans. I am told on good authority that Mallarmé, who was a professor of English and a translator of

it, understood it only imperfectly. I know for a fact that Marcel Proust, who translated a good deal of John Ruskin, depended on dictionaries, friends, and even his mother to help him over what should otherwise have been insuperable difficulties. Men of letters, and especially poets, are often attracted by the charms of alien languages in proportion to the vagueness of their apprehension of them. William Butler Yeats was only being candid when he confessed that a page in French seemed to him more beautiful because he was never quite certain of precisely what it meant.

I judge from the evidence that Pasternak belongs to this select company. Reading poetry in any language but one's own is, except for the very rare linguist, like hearing music through a wall. Cervantes compared translations to Flemish carpets turned inside out. But for certain poetic souls, the handicap is turned into an advantage. Pasternak's remarks on Shakespeare do not illuminate Shakespeare's art, but they cast light on his own: "His poetry draws its strength from its very quality of sketchiness, powerful, uncontrollable, disorderly, and abundant. . . . The stormy quickness of the brushstrokes of a Rembrandt, a Michaelangelo, or a Titian was not the fruit of their deliberate choice. Possessed by the need to paint the universe, they could not paint in any other way."

Of course, this is not altogether fair to Pasternak's accomplishment. Wherever his subject is not tied up with technicalities of Shakespeare's language (the more parochial concern) and deals with problems of character or ethics (the more universal concern), he shows genuine insight. In this category I would put his discussion of the character of Lady Macbeth: "She is one of those active, insistent wives, a woman who is her husband's helper, his support, for whom her husband's interests are her own

and who takes his plans on faith once and for all. She neither discusses them nor judges nor selects among them. To reason, to doubt, to make plans—that's her husband's business, it's his lookout. She is his executive, more resolute and consistent than he is himself. Miscalculating her strength, she assumes the excessive burden and is destroyed, not by conscience but by spiritual exhaustion, sadness, and fatigue."

Good, too, is his discussion of *Othello*, though the assumption it is based on is questionable: "Shakespeare was not interested in what a man had been at birth, but in the point he had reached, in what he had changed into, what he had become. In Shakespeare's view, Othello, who was black, was a human being and a Christian who lived in historic times, and this interested him the more because living side by side with Othello was Iago, who was white, and who was an unconverted prehistoric animal." The questionable assumption (and according to the dominant current in Shakespearean criticism the wrong one) is that Othello is a blackamoor. He is certainly tawny but, as Dowden says, "there is nothing to suggest that he is of the Negro type, unless it be his rival's spiteful epithet 'thick-lips.'"

THE IMPRESSION of Soviet cultural and political life created by Pasternak's and Narokov's books on the whole is one that has become sufficiently familiar from innumerable candid accounts of existence on the other side of the curtain that have appeared at intervals over the past generation. Scott Fitzgerald, in a letter to his daughter in which he warns her against Communism, nevertheless speaks of the original idea on which the movement is based with "some politeness." He advises her to "read the terrible chapter in *Das Kapital* on *The Working Day*, and see if you are ever quite the same." It might be

a good idea now to accompany such required reading on the sufferings of mankind which arose out of limitless individual accumulation with required reading of such books as Pasternak's and Narokov's which exhibit the matchless cruelties created by a system of collectivism "before which" (as Fitzgerald puts it) "you and I as individuals are less than the dust." In jumping out of a frying-pan, hapless humanity seems to have landed in a fire!

I think that I ought to say something more, before ending this review, about *The Chains of Fear*. It is a difficult book to discuss. In some ways, it seems intolerably old-fashioned. The bare outline of its plot contains so much unbelievable coincidence, unexpected disguises, and plain melodrama that a recital of it would incline the reader to laugh. But it is far from a laughable story that the author has written, and I am speaking not only of Narokov's intentions but his accomplishment, of which, however, it is very hard to communicate the quality. Madness, murder, and suicide stalk through his pages as relentlessly as they do through Elizabethan tragedy or the public life of the Roman Empire.

The trouble, one suspects, is not so much with the author as with the fact that the magnitude of the evils he is dealing with is, in the strictest sense, unimaginable. The tortures he describes have a classic simplicity that should have made them the envy of the Marquis de Sade or the keeper of a Nazi concentration camp. I have no doubt that they are based on experience and that they actually took place. But it is quite another problem to make the beings who suffer such tortures human rather than mere puppets. There is something self-defensive about the mind in insisting that when man's inhumanity to man goes too far the whole thing must be a kind of Punch and Judy show.

Narokov does have one good humanizing

idea in his book, and that is to show his villainous commissar Lyubkin as a man divided against himself rather than a soulless monolith, a man whose affections are torn between a selfless girl, Evlalia Grigorievna, and his self-interested mistress. But the balance of opposites is too neat, and this aspect of the novel, like others, suggests the feeling of contrivance which is the book's weakness.

In both books, and in Pasternak's in particular, we are finally left not so much with a feeling of savage indignation at the injustices depicted (this might have been the case if the writers had been satirists like Swift or Juvenal) but with the feeling that the proper attitude to take toward such an incredible reality is love and compassion. Narokov's faith is that only such compassion can effect the change of the world he depicts into something better; it is a world which no one enjoys, in which no one is happy, not even its nominal masters—perhaps they least of all, as a matter of fact.

Pasternak's faith, on the other hand, finds few objects worthy of it in the world about him and has found refuge in the contemplation of the exemplary lives and works of certain great artists of the past. His is a kind of aesthetic mysticism, not so radical or uncompromising as Proust's and yet not unrelated to it. The most indicative words in *Doctor Zhivago* along this line were: "Forward steps in art are governed by the law of attraction, are the result of the imitation of and admiration for beloved predecessors." The quality of reverence is stamped upon his every page. He writes as if he felt the responsibility in his own person for carrying on the tradition of what Thomas Mann once referred to as "the Holy Russian literature" of the nineteenth century. He has, in other words, a conscious aim to justify his martyrdom on behalf of art.

Sunrise at Campobello:

Sundown at Yalta

A brilliant history of the summit conferences of World War II.

HARRY ELMER BARNES

Roosevelt's Road to Russia, by George N. Crocker. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959.

THIS IS A POWERFUL, absorbing, timely, and convincing book. It is the most brilliantly written and felicitously expressed of all revisionist books yet published on the second World War. Few novels are as engrossing, and only the best produce such brilliant phrasing and cogent allusions. The book is a masterpiece of picturesque but reliable narration. What could be more crisply illuminating and precisely descriptive than the characterization of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's strategy and oratory in lying the United States into the second World War than Mr. Crocker's phrase: "Demagoguery with a Groton accent"? Yet the book is factually thorough and accurate, and the author is acquainted with, and makes full use of, the best revisionist books and documentary sources. Indeed, it is his extraordinary command of the rele-

vant facts which make his book so impressive and convincing as well as exciting.

It is easily the most devastating exposure, analysis, and critique of the personality, methods, and public ethics of President Roosevelt, insofar as these were revealed by his personal intrigues and diplomatic "statecraft" during the second World War. It is the book which the "Blackout Boys" will turn heaven and earth to consign to a still birth and the silent treatment. It is too fundamentally dangerous to risk even a venomous smear lest by virtue of the very bitterness of the attack it might attract reader curiosity and interest.

It is also the book which those who believe that Anglo-American diplomacy from 1939 to 1949 was a planetary, if not cosmic, calamity must not ignore. If they pick it up they will not be able to put it down until the reading is completed. All too many of the leaders of the opposition to American entry into the second World War have by now tended to forget or neglect their earlier realistic activities and statesmanlike convictions of the period from the Chicago Bridge Speech of October, 1937,