THE LESSON OF PASTERNAK

In the January 5 issue of the New Leader, the distinguished Italian novelist, Ignazio Silone, comments on the Pasternak affair. His remarks are here reprinted in full, with the permission of the New Leader.

The great storm around Boris Pasternak has now abated. Now we can put into perspective some of the things revealed by it.

What, above all, is the true significance of the protests that have been voiced in all parts of the world against the grave threats and persecution to which Pasternak has been subjected in Russia? These protests, in my view, constitute the most fitting reply to the abject rationalizations which the poet himself was forced to submit in rejecting the Nobel Prize for Literature. The first reason given by Pasternak for his rejection referred, as we know, to the particular psychology of the national society to which he belongs and which, realistically, he must take into account. But the intense emotion and the rising storm of protest engendered throughout the civilized world by this episode demonstrate that there exists, at least potentially, a society larger than the national society to which Pasternak, as a man and as a consummate artist, fully belongs.

All of us knew, in discussing the Pasternak affair, that we were not arbitrarily interfering in the internal affairs of a foreign country. Pasternak is our colleague; he belongs to us as much as to the Russians; he is part of what Goethe called Weltliteratur. The boundary-less society of artists and free men felt outraged and wounded by the ignoble behavior of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy. We had the right and the duty to intervene. Pasternak unexpectedly gave a name and a face to the cause of the freedom of art. With him our dignity and our honor as writers were at stake. Now the simple fact that a novel has been the center of the world’s attention for a couple of weeks must impress upon us the importance which true art can still assume in the life of the people.

After Budapest, after Warsaw, we now have Doctor Zhivago. Anyone who, in the future, speaks of the role of the intellectuals in our time will not be able to ignore these fundamental events. In this sense, the Pasternak case has served as a touchstone which no Western literary circles can refuse to recognize. The cowardice, the ambiguity, the subtle distinctions, the hypocritical evasions of “equi-distance” (“on the one hand, it is true that Soviet bureaucracy . . . but on the other hand, it is undeniable that Western political speculation . . .”) have again laid bare the malaise which still afflicts many Western writers when they are confronted with the need to assume a responsibility that endangers their tranquility. This is a lesson to keep in mind.

The Pasternak case has also enabled us to see more clearly the present status of cultural life in the Soviet Empire. We already knew that the “thaw” was a short-lived one. We knew that the cultural institutions, the publishing houses, the writers and artists associations, the editorial offices of the reviews remained unchanged, with the same directors who had been placed there by Zhdanov. But we never could have predicted that the insolence of these gentlemen could take this form, which, to us, appears mad. To be sure, even now we are not in favor of a rupture of cultural relations with Russia; we remain, now as always, partisans of a free circulation of men and ideas.

But we shall not easily forget the names of the Soviet men of letters who promoted the shameful campaign against Pasternak and who led the Moscow Writers Union to request that the Government deprive Pasternak of the right to work and live in Russia. We must wait for one of these gentlemen to appear at some international conference in Venice, Rome, Zurich, or Paris, to ask him to account for his ignominy. Of course, shameful attitudes have been taken by other writers, recently and in the distant past. But the literary history of no country knows a more degrading spectacle than that of an assembly of eight hundred writers condemning a novel without having read it. Not even the Spanish Inquisition, in its darkest period, descended to such depths of violence and stupidity.

It would seem that certain Russian writers, including some famous ones, did not join in the general outcry against Pasternak. We must hope that more will be known about this, and soon. But the question that arises is this: Taking into account the conformism of the Writers Union, is it conceivable that it could have been convened, and that it could have taken
these mad decisions, without an explicit order from the supreme political authorities? No, this is unthinkable. How, therefore, can we explain the fact that these decisions were not implemented? The apparent repentance, it appears to me, was dictated by the information which had in the meantime been received by Khrushchev on the internal and international repercussions of the scandal. He must have noticed that the Zhdanovists of the Soviet culture apparatus had forced his hand, and he offered Pasternak the possibility of an accommodation.

Pasternak’s letter to Khrushchev was rather disappointing to many admirers of Doctor Zhivago. But who can judge? We must exercise our imagination to conjure up the lynch atmosphere to which Pasternak was exposed during a period of some ten days. To be sure, it is an embarrassing letter. Fully five times, despite the brevity of the letter, Pasternak repeats that his statement was written freely, without violence, without blackmail, without suggestions from others. “I have not been subjected to threats or to constraint,” we read. . . . “Nothing can force me to act against my conscience . . .” “I have given up the prize without constraint by anyone.” And so on.

Would this not seem too much for a free man in an atmosphere of serenity? The letter is based upon a glorification of Pasternak’s native soil which ominously recalls the notorious sentiment of Blut und Boden, in sharp contrast with the internationalist tradition of the founders of Russian Communism, almost all of whom knew exile, and with the work of Pasternak himself. Nobody leaves his own country with a light heart, but if need be, one can in fact emigrate. Before being Italian, German, Russian, one is a man.

Finally, the references in Pasternak’s letter to the circumstances through which Doctor Zhivago came to be published are not truthful. And the publisher, Feltrinelli, has done well to refrain from setting the record straight—for how, after all, can one engage in polemics with a prisoner? But we may be permitted, through an association of ideas, to recall an episode from the period of the great Stalinist trials: A defendant, forced to confess that he had met Trotsky’s son in a Copenhagen hotel, gave a fictitious name—so that from the falseness of this detail, the falseness of the entire testimony could be deduced abroad.

Alas, in these days, Pasternak was so deafened by the hysterical shrieking of the Moscow writers that he failed to perceive that, because of the alert sounded by international opinion, he was stronger than his adversaries. But Doctor Zhivago will survive all polemics; this is the revenge of which no dictatorship can deprive the poet.

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