

—Jerry Cooke.

Pasternak's "The High Malady"

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT PAYNE

IN THE winter of 1917 Boris Pasternak arrived in St. Petersburg from the town in the Urals where he had spent the war years as a factory worker. He had written little during the war—a few verses and four short stories later collected together under the title "Aerial Ways"—and only one of his books had been published previously, the slim volume of verses called "A Twin in the Clouds," which appeared in Moscow in 1914. He was unknown, except to a small circle of acquaintances who regarded him as a promising pianist who had studied under Scriabin, or as a promising philosopher who had studied Kant at the University of Marburg. But during the war he had lost all interest in music and philosophy. When he arrived in St. Petersburg, he had already made his resolve: he would be a poet, or nothing.

Those who knew him speak of a dedication to poetry so strong that he seemed to have no existence outside of poetry. He recited poetry like Yeats, in a deep and resonant incantatory voice, shaking with emotion. He wrote once: "Even if I had never been born, it is inconceivable to me that my poems would not have come into existence." It was not only that he was the dedicated poet, but he

saw himself even then as the poet of Russia, rooted in the land, as though that shamanistic voice which came from his throat was the voice of the Russian people and of the Russian earth.

In St. Petersburg he was inevitably caught up in the Bolshevik Revolution, for which he had very little sympathy and almost no understanding. Yet increasingly he became gripped by the spectacle of an entire civilization in convulsions. Today when we read accounts of the Russian Revolution we seem to be reading about an event as distant as the French Revolution: the pages are already frayed, and the yellow stains of age are everywhere. Pasternak wrote his own account of those days when men sat in huddled groups and talked—not of Lenin and the armed workmen from the Putilov factory—but of typhus, the cold winds coming down the streets, and the strange shuddering in the air.

IT WAS Pasternak's first encounter with politics, and characteristically it follows the lines of a sustained debate on the nature of poetry. Could a poet, in this age of torment, continue to enjoy "the high malady which is still called song"? He came perhaps inevitably to the conclusion that the song would remain, but its meaning

and relevance would be utterly changed. Henceforward poetry was to be a more desperate, because a more straightened, and therefore more pitiable thing. Instead of the enchanting images of the Symbolists there would be images of gutters and water pipes, railways, the trickle of typhus in the streets. In this mood he composed his poem, which is at once a debate on the nature of poetry and an account of his journey from the south to the capital, where the Bolsheviks were in power. In the end, of course, the theories broke down; and the last verses of the poem, with their brilliant evocation of Lenin, not the familiar dog-eared Lenin of the history books, but

Lenin seen through the eyes of a superbly gifted poet, give the lie to the theories. Confronted by Lenin, Pasternak wrote with a triumphant command of the rhetoric he may have despised, but which he employed with consummate effect.

"A man must be a witness to his time," Pasternak once wrote, and in "The High Malady" he showed, as he showed again in "Doctor Zhivago," that the testimony of the poets is still the most rewarding there is. It is a poem of amazing complexity, but uttered with the full breath, and of all his works it is the one which shows him most completely a man of his own time.

The High Malady

By BORIS PASTERNAK

THE moving riddle glitters,
The siege comes, the days pass,
Months and years pass away.
One fine day the pickets tell us
The stronghold has surrendered,
Unbelievably comes the roaring of the flames:
The vaults are blown up, and men search for the doorways:
Moving in, moving out—and the days pass,
Months and years pass away.
All the years pass into shadow:
The story of Troy is born.
Unbelievably comes the roaring of the flames.
Patiently they await the coming of the army.
They are grown weak and blind—the days pass,
And in the fortress the walls crumble into dust.

I am ashamed, every day more ashamed
That in an age of such shadows
A certain high malady
Is still called song.
Is this the time to demonstrate with noise—
Sounds so perilously assimilated with the earth:
Away from books, hurling herself
Onto the sharpness of bayonets?
Hell is paved with good intentions.
It is a current notion
That if your verses are paved with them
All your sins are forgiven:
All this wounds the ear of silence,
As it turns from the war,
And how acute are the ears of silence
They learned from the days of destruction.

During those days there fell on everyone
A lust for a story: and the winter nights
Were not weary of picking up lice,
As horses prick up their ears.
The ears of the silent darkness
Stirred, filled with snow,
And in the night we became fairy-tales,
Restless on the mint gingerbread of pillows.
In Spring a shudder seized upon
The upholstery of the theatre boxes.
February was poor and frowsy:
Often it would gurgle and spit
Blood, and then secretly whisper in the ears
Of a railway carriage about this or that:
The journey, the sleepers, the thaw, everything else,
Or about how they walked away on foot from the front.
Already you sleep, you wait for death:
To the story-teller—a little grief.
In the slush of thawing galoshes
The clothes' bug gathers the lie

Which is entangled in truth,
And does not tire of pricking up its ears.

Although the thistle of dawn,
Trying to make its shadow as long as possible,
Lengthened with the same labor
The long-drawn hours,
Although, as of old, the road dragged the wheels
Through sand to the narrow pass,
And then bore them again on clayey soil,
And drew them into the distance,
Although the vault of autumn, as before,
Was cloudy and the forest distant,
And the evening cold and covered with haze,
It was still a forgery.

And the sleep of the earth caught napping
Was like a child's convulsions,
Like death, like the shadow of a grave,
Like that peculiar stillness
Which sleeps, when the whole country is muffled,
Shuddering and every now and then
Trying to remember: What is it
I wanted to say?

Although, as before, the ceiling,
The support of the new room,
Carried the second floor to the third
And the fifth to the sixth,
Suggesting by the regular alternation of layers
That everything in the world was unchanged,
Yet this too was a forgery:
And the waterpipes
Sucked the distress of those days
As they climbed upwards:
And the smell of chop-suey and laurel
Burned in the smoke of newspapers.
Standing upright in the air, it seemed to say:
Wait a moment!
What did I want to eat before?

So, crawling like a hungry tapeworm
From the second floor to the third,
And creeping from the fifth to the sixth,
It glorified strength and stagnation,
And proclaimed that tenderness was forbidden:
Yet what should we do? Every sound disappeared
Behind the rumble of overgrown skies.
This rumble, falling on the railway station,
Disappeared behind the water-tower
And was thence borne beyond the forests—
The embankments shone like gashes,
And the snowdrifts beat up and down

Like pumps, there among the pines.
And the rails grew blind and began to itch
As soon as they touched the snowstorm.

So the fool, the hero, the intellectual,
Coming from behind into the glow of legends,
Into the flaming decrees and posters,
Blazing with the glory of the dark forces
Which stealthily like a smile
Mock at him because of his exploits,
Or perhaps because
It is not immediately apparent
That twice two is a hundred:
Coming from behind into the glow of legends
The idealist intellectual
Prints and writes posters
On the beauty of his own sunset.

Muffled in a warm coat the hack
Looks back towards the dimming north:
The snow competes in diligence
With the death which ceases only at dusk.
There like an organ with mirrors of ice
The railway station flashes its riddle,
And does not close its eyes,
But lives on with its misery,
Competing in its wild beauty
With the emptiness of conservatories.

On rest-days and holidays
The insufferable horror of typhus
Quietly embraces our knees,
And dreams and shudders at
The motionless songs
Of the crumbling of thrones:
And there comes from the hollow organ,
Like dust in the seams
Of the organ's furry skirt,
The song of decay:
The exacting ear
Still entreats the mist and the ice
And the pools lying on the earth
To be as silent as possible.

We were like this music on the ice:
I speak of my companions
With whom I intended to leave the stage,
And with whom I shall still leave it.
There is no place here for shame:
I was not born to look three times in different ways.
More equivocal than any song
Is the stupid word "enemy."
I travel. In every world
The high malady travels.
All my life I wanted to be like others,
But the age in its beauty
Is stronger than my whimpering cry,
And wants to be like me.

We are the music of tea-cups,
Going out to drink tea in the darkness
Of the voiceless forests, of oblique habits
And secrets which flattered no one.
The forest crackled: the fine weather was
Held in suspense: the jackdaws wheeled:
The ice-cold year stood ashamed at the gates.
We are the music of the thought
Which outwardly remained within its logical frame,
But which was precisely the cold turning to ice
On the dirty stairs of the courtyard.

I attended the Ninth Congress of the Soviets:
In the liquid twilight I visited twenty people

Before I could get there,
And I cursed life, cursed pavements,
And on the second day, I remember,
On the very day of the triumph
I went in bewildered excitement to the theatre
With a pass for the stalls:
I went soberly by sober roads,
Looked around; and I saw—
It was as though everything was burned to the ground,
As though nothing would ever rise from those walls.

There was, for example, the Carelian question*
Uttered in all the newspapers, looking down,
Provoking response from the sick eyes of birch-trees.
On the cross-bars of telegraph poles
The snow lay in thick ribbons,
And the wintry day came to an end
In the outline of branches.
Not only for itself, but in answer to
A demand. At this very moment
The story of the Congress
Seemed to be the moral of a fantastic painting.

HOW shall I conclude my fragment?
I remember his voice which pierced
The nape of my neck with flames,
Like the rustle of globe-lightning.
Everyone stood. Everyone was vainly
Ransacking that distant table with his eyes:
And then he emerged on the tribune,
Emerging even before he entered the room,
And came sliding, leaving no wake
Through barriers of helping hands and obstacles,
Like the leaping ball of a storm
Flying into a room without smoke.

The thunderous ovation
Came as a relief, as the explosion of a cannonball—
Which cannot not burst: all obstacles falling away.
And he spoke. We remember and honor
The memory of those who have fallen.
But I think of their transiency. What was there
In this moment which bound itself for ever to him alone?

He was like the thrust of a rapier.
Hunting after the last spoken word
He drew his sharp line, opening his coat
And putting forth the uppers of his boots.
The words might have been about gasoline,
But the curve of his body breathed
With the soaring flight of the bare essential
As it tears through a senseless layer of lies.
And his harsh voice,
Which everyone heard too well,
Had been traced by the blood of history.

He was the face which spoke to them:
When he appealed to the facts,
He knew that when he rinsed his mouth
With the momentum of his voice,
History was pouring through him.
And now, although without familiarity,
And feeling more at ease with her than with anyone else,
He was intimate only with history,
Envious only of the envy of the centuries,
Jealous of their single jealousy.
So he governed the stream of thought,
And became the government of his country.

—TRANSLATED BY ROBERT PAYNE.

*In 1917 the rights of the Carelian minorities were being hotly discussed by the Bolsheviks. Carelia is famous for its birch trees.

From the Heights a Downpour of Light

"Selected Writings," by Boris Pasternak; translated by Beatrice Scott, Robert Payne, Babette Deutsch, and C. M. Bowra (*New Directions*, 286 pp. Paper, \$1.35), is a new edition of the author's poetry, short stories, and autobiographical pieces. The collection is discussed by Marc Slonim, critic and teacher, who is the author of *"Modern Russian Literature from Chekhov to the Present"* and other studies.

By Marc Slonim

SOME three decades before "Doctor Zhivago" sprang into prominence, Boris Pasternak had been acclaimed, by a small but influential group of admirers, as the greatest poet of the Russian post-revolutionary era. Even the Communist critics could not deny his extraordinary craftsmanship and the power of his voice. Pasternak's

poetry absorbed many elements of the Symbolist and Futurist movements of 1910-1922 but in the Thirties it asserted itself as highly original. Intent on his inner world, Pasternak projected his emotions and ideas through an unusual association of images in lyrics which blended a subjective and often highly philosophical vision of reality with verbal perfection and bold use of vocabulary. Pasternak appeared much more as a pathfinder and a source of inspiration and imitation for other poets than as a follower of a tradition or as a mere representative of literary fashions.

His collections of poems—"Above the Barriers," "Life," "My Sister," "Themes and Variations," "The Second Birth"—as well as his prose pieces, assured him a somewhat special and isolated position in Soviet letters. The Communists demanded a functional kind of poetry within the pattern of politically conscious, edu-

cational, and didactic art addressed to the masses. Pasternak refused to follow the designated way. "In the era of rapid tempos one should think and write slowly," he retorted in 1932 to the promoters of topical poetry. He also abstained from political rhetoric and from any comment on social changes.

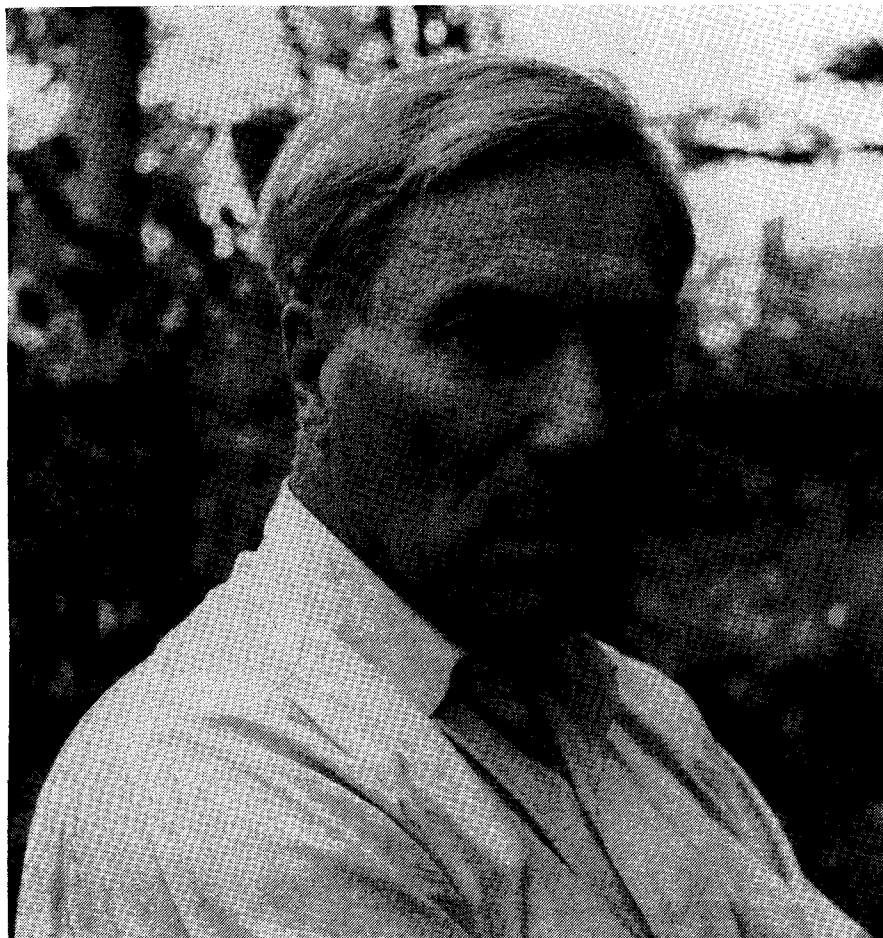
His official detractors censured him as a "decadent formalist" and exposed his alienation from the masses by quoting his famous lines: "With a muffler around my throat, shielding myself with the palm of my hand, I call out in the courtyard—'children, what millennium are we celebrating there?'"

IN "Safe Conduct," his autobiography (written in 1931), which forms the largest portion of the recently reprinted "Selected Writings," he says that art is concerned not with man but with the image of man: "the image of man as it becomes apparent, is greater than man . . . focused on a reality which feeling has displaced, art is a record of this displacement . . . the direct speech of feeling is allegorical and cannot be replaced by anything."

The impressive enchantment of Pasternak's art consists precisely of his capacity to displace shapes, categories, images, and events, and to create a poetic reality in which the phenomena of *this* world are simply a pliable material for transformation and transposition. In the same way physical and spiritual levels, nature and history, everyday occurrences and imaginative flights are considered and treated as mere aspects of one and the same unity. Whatever Pasternak chooses to draw into the field of his vision is suddenly revealed and illuminated by a powerful beam of emotion. Pasternak's friend, Marina Tsvetaieva, another great Russian poet of the Twenties and Thirties, defined his poetry as "a downpour of light."

These characteristics of Pasternak are present in his early prose writings (1918-1931), which are all included in the *New Directions* timely reprint (with the exception of one tale now appearing in the first issue of the *Noonday Review*). They offer the reader the opportunity to compare them with "Doctor Zhivago" and to trace back many ideas and techniques that have delighted, startled,

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—Jerry Cooke.

Boris Pasternak: "With a muffler around my throat . . . I call out in the courtyard—'children, what millennium are we celebrating there?'"