

by David Scott

1958 was one of the pivotal years of Merton's life. I was still in short trousers at school. The world was a narrow place about the size of an iron bed and a cabbage patch, which was a thin strip between my bed and the next person's bed. It contained a splintery wooden floor and a chair for clothes. It was very Trappist, and not too dissimilar to Merton's world. Across the water, in the Abbey of Gethsemani, things are stirring in the life of Merton. In 1956 Merton is avidly reading Suzuki on Zen. In 1957 he is thinking of going to Latin America to help with a new foundation. In the same year, Eisenhower promulgates his 'Doctrine', warning that the United States would permit no Communist conquests in the Middle East. On March 15, 1958, Merton goes to Louisville and at the corner of Fourth and Walnut has a deep experience of his oneness with all the people there.

Also in 1958, Merton was reading voraciously, and in the magazine *Encounter*, he came across some writing by a Russian called Pasternak. He read another article about him, and probably the review of a translation of Pasternak's novel *Dr Zhivago*. He read a short story of Pasternak's called 'The Childhood of Lovers', and in his Journal for May 18 1958 Merton wrote,

He (Pasternak) is so good. I don't see how the Reds can avoid killing him. Coming down the chapel steps and praying for his soul, a great one, a man who is spiritual in everything he thinks and says! ¹

Ten days later we read that Merton has finished reading Pasternak's autobiography *Safe Conduct*, "a magnificent book, one of the great ones. The fabulous descriptions of the flower store in Leningrad," ². Here it is from *Safe Conduct*:

It was the narcissi, as brilliantly perfumed as any infusion could be, adulterated to sheer whiteness. But even this full tempest of rivalry was further conquered by those dark cockades of the violets. Sultry and half insane, they

hypnotised with that indifference of theirs, like eyes with no whites. Never sullied by cough of man, their sweet atmosphere surged out of the depth of the cellar and up the broad stairs, till one's lungs were all one rigid woodland congestion. As if it was by this scent, cheating the mind, that the spring months created their very concept of the earth which won them to their annual return, and the sources of the Greek myths of Demeter were somewhere close at hand.³

There was also in Pasternak's *Safe Conduct*, incidents in Marburg and Vienna, evocative descriptions of trains, of the Urals, Pasternak's devotion to Scriabin and Mayakovsky, Mayakovsky's suicide, and Pasternak's piteous lamentation over him, and the cryptic conclusion. As a result of these discoveries, Merton decides to write to Pasternak. He is nervous about it, but decides that sending him a poem will help. He does just that and sends him his *Prometheus*. He says that he is familiar with *Safe Conduct*, and on the strength of that, continues in a deeply personal vein: "It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings. In the language familiar to me as a Catholic monk, it is as if we were known to one another in God." Merton also uses the orthodox word, *sobornost*, for this sense of mutual togetherness and understanding. Merton sends Pasternak his recent piece of writing, *Prometheus*. Merton tells Pasternak that he has read and enjoyed the work of Mayakovsky and Blok, and he concludes by saying that he "hopes to enter upon a dialogue that will really lead to peace and to a fruitful age for man and his world. Such peace and fruitfulness are spiritual realities to which you already have access, though others do not".⁴

Some time in late August or early September 1958, Merton gets hold of a copy of *Dr Zhivago*, and writes in his journal for September 9th, "For the last 5 days or so - reading *Dr Zhivago* which finally came. Deeply moved by it. Wrote to Helen Wolff at Pantheon about it."⁵ Pantheon, the American publisher of *Dr Zhivago*, found his letter good copy for the advertising of the book, and they circulated an advertisement decrying the censorship of Pasternak's novel in Russia, and his expulsion from the Soviet Writer's Union. The advertisement included a quote from Merton taken from a letter he wrote to Aleksei Surkov, head of the Soviet Writers Union, on *Dr*

Zhivago. "It burst upon us full of turbulent and irrepressible life, giving us a deeply moving image of the heroic suffering of the Russian nation and its struggles, sacrifices, and achievement".⁶

Pasternak replied to this letter of August 22, 1958, thanking Merton for it, and calling it congenial, and saying that it seemed to him "wonderfully filled with kindred thoughts as having been written half by myself".⁷ James Laughlin, Merton's poetry publisher at New Directions, sends Merton Pasternak's *Selected Writings*. Merton says that he hopes to write a study of Pasternak, and says that these writings will help him. Pasternak is sending his letters so far through James Laughlin's New Directions Publishing House, and so Merton can enlist Laughlin in sharing his enthusiasm for Pasternak, "It was exciting to get the letter and his (Pasternak's) few words confirmed my conviction of the deep understanding that exists between us, or rather the identity of certain basic ideas and attitudes in both of us".⁸ Merton's first published comment on *Dr Zhivago* apart from the advertisement for Pantheon publishing, is written to Laughlin, "a tremendous piece of work, not of course perfect in every respect, but all the better for it."⁹ The relationship between Pasternak and Merton was forged.

A longer letter, and a meatier one, winged its way from the monastery to Pasternak on October 23, 1958. By the time Merton wrote this letter he had read *Dr Zhivago*, and his response to Pasternak is very interesting. First, he says how many ideas they share, for example, "I am bringing out a book on sacred art in which one of the theses is practically this: 'All genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St John'".¹⁰ By far the most important thing for Merton about the book was that it touched his recent discovery, through a dream, of the power of feminine wisdom. The dream is well known to us now, but Merton retold it to Pasternak in the light of his reading of Lara, the heroine of Pasternak's novel.

Shall I perhaps tell you how I know Lara, where I have met her. It is a simple enough story but obviously I do not tell it to people – you are the fourth who knows it.¹¹

He goes on to tell the story of how in a dream he saw a young Jewish girl of the race of St Anne, who suddenly manifested a very deep and

pure affection for him and embraced him so that he was moved to the depths of his soul. He learned that her name was "Proverb", which Merton thought "very simple and beautiful".

"A few days later" Merton continues, "when I happened to be in a nearby city (Louisville) which is very rare for us, I was walking alone in a crowded street and suddenly saw that everyone was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were and were perhaps ashamed of their names - because they were mocked on account of them. And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from before the beginning, was playing in his sight all days, playing in the world."¹²

So Lara was Proverb as well, and the book "a world in itself, a sophiological world, a paradise and a hell, in which the great mystical figures of Yurii and Lara stand out as Adam and Eve and though they walk in darkness walk with their hand in the hand of God. The earth they walk on is sacred because of them. It is the sacred earth of Russia, with its magnificent destiny which remains hidden for it in the plans of God."

Merton's reading of *Dr Zhivago* was immensely important for him. First it reassured him in his own thoughts about faith and culture. Pasternak was someone who was breathing the same existentialist air. What do I mean by that? The novel *Dr Zhivago* (*Zhivago* means 'life'), is asserting the strength of the spiritual life in the midst of a grey, secular, bureaucratic culture. It is a novel about the triumph of the spirit in adversity. The book came at a pivotal time in Merton's life, and in the novel, the pivotal chapter is one that describes the essence of the Christ-like vision in contrast to the Old Testament. The plot of the novel is set to one side and Lara listens to her friend Sima, describing, by candlelight, matters of the Spirit. *Zhivago* is in the next room, but divided only by a curtain across the doorway, so he hears the talk. Sima really does all the talking, and she is telling Lara about the essence of Christianity. Put very simply, Christianity humanises the great Hebrew tradition. We remember that Pasternak's family was Jewish. Christianity, says Sima, is about

one young girl saying yes to God in the peace and silence of an ordinary room, and about one sinner, Mary Magdalene, saying yes to the risen Christ, the lifting up of the sinner, and the intimacy of the sinner in the presence of Christ. We can see, without much underlining, how Merton would respond to that interpretation of Christianity, and how it echoed his own discovery through the 'Proverb' dream, of the essentially personal nature of God's revelation. We can also see how the peace, silence and stillness of the context in which these meetings, these revelations take place, could excite Merton's interest so much. The chapter in *Dr Zhivago* in which the Sima-Lara dialogue takes place is, 'Opposite the House of Caryatids' ch.13, section 17¹³.

In the series of three short articles gathered in the book *Disputed Questions* (1960), under the title 'The Pasternak Affair' Merton probes just a little deeper into the Christianity of Pasternak. "One might ask, if his Christian images were nothing more than secondary symbols, subordinated to a great, dynamic world view." It was a question for Merton in his own life, and a question very much still alive today. What place has specific Christian symbolism, in the search for a greater unity among people of different faiths and none? How much does the Christian have to give up to be more accessible to a greater human desire to be 'spiritual'? Lara says in one of her sophianic moods: "it's only in mediocre books that people are divided into two camps and have nothing to do with each other. In real life everything gets mixed up! Don't you think you'd have to be a hopeless nonentity to play only one role all your life, to have only one place in society, always to stand for the same thing." "Where precisely does Pasternak stand," asks Merton. "The answer is that like life itself he stands nowhere but moves."

This sense of human life being lived, as children of God on earth, allows the individual life to become the life of God, and its contents fill the vast expanses of the universe. What moral content is there then to this? Why is the lecherous Komarovsky not the model for humanity, and why not praise the communist party as the incarnation of the gospel? The crucial thing for Merton is that in the individual response to God, not the collective sway, the difference is made. It is as the human spirit struggles to be true to itself, it becomes

true to God, who originally gives life. In that sense, *Zhivago* is the Christ figure, and Lara the Mary Magdalen figure.

The notion of being yourself was very strong in the late 50's. I remember thinking that myself, but I can't remember where I got it from. Perhaps it was from Merton, although since I didn't first read him until 1964, that seems pretty unlikely. There was something existential in the air. Merton's correspondence with the Devon school teacher, John Harris, is interesting on this point. John Harris had read the English translation of *Doctor Zhivago* as soon as it came out, wrote to Pasternak, and Pasternak replied, why not get in touch with Merton? John Harris did, and their correspondence continued for about 10 years. In the second letter, January 31, 1959, from Merton to Harris, Merton counsels Harris:

Do not hesitate to write if there is anything I can do for you or send you...The important thing is who you are: you are not "a man with a problem", or a person trying to figure something out, you are Harris, in Devonshire, and that means you are not and cannot be another in a series of objects, you are you, and that is the important thing. For you see when 'I' enter into dialogue with 'you' and each of us knows who is speaking, it turns out we are both Christ. This, being seen in a very simple and "natural" light, is the beginning and also the fullness of everything. Everything is in it somewhere. But it makes most sense in the light of mass and the Eucharist. So God bless you, and let me know any news of Pasternak or of yourself...¹⁴

Section iii of 'The Pasternak Affair' takes up this theme of 'spirituality', a word rather carved into my heart as Warden of the School of Spirituality for the Diocese of Winchester. What does Merton make of Pasternak's spirituality?

Pasternak stands first of all for the great spiritual values that are under attack in our materialistic world. He stands for the freedom and nobility of the individual person, for man the image of God, for man in whom God dwells. For Pasternak, the person is and must always remain prior to the collectivity. He stands for courageous, independent loyalty to his own conscience, and for the refusal to

compromise with slogans and rationalizations imposed by compulsion. Pasternak is fighting for man's true freedom, his true creativity, against the false and empty humanism of the Marxists—for whom man does not yet truly exist. Over against the technological jargon and the empty scientism of modern man, Pasternak sets creative symbolism, the power of imagination and of intuition, the glory of liturgy and the fire of contemplation. But he does so in new words, in new ways. He speaks for all that is sanest and most permanently vital in religious and cultural tradition, but with a voice of a man of our own time.¹⁵

In 1990 when the world was celebrating the centenary of Pasternak's birth, Gabriel Josipovici created a storm in the literary world by writing a very damning article in the TLS about Pasternak's writing. Josipovici quoted Vladimir Nabokov on Pasternak's poetry "In Russia there is a fairly talented poet called Pasternak. His verse is convex, goitrous and goggle-eyed, as though his muse suffered from Basedow's disease." Nabokov also maintained that *Doctor Zhivago* was a piece of pulp fiction about, as he put it in the afterword to the Russian version of *Lolita*, a "lyrical doctor with penny-awful mystical urges and philistine turns of speech" and an enchantress straight out of teenage romances¹⁶. Now I quote that partly to keep you awake, partly to show that I read the TLS, and partly to quote one or two of the responses that puts Pasternak in perspective which is perhaps necessary after Merton has been having his enthusiastic say. Isaiah Berlin: "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."¹⁷ Those reviews Merton read as well. The less well-known correspondent in the TLS, Henry Gifford, wrote saying, "Pasternak's positions are often puzzling. But the fuller our understanding of his circumstances, the more we are led, with a few exceptions, to admire his courage and clear sightedness. Gabriel Josipovici contends that there was no "emblematic quality to his life". "The huge crowd attending his funeral at Peredelkino proves that it eventually did acquire this."¹⁸

There will perhaps be another flurry of critical appraisal of Pasternak when the BBC shows their new film of *Doctor Zhivago* with Colin Firth as Zhivago. One remembers with huge nostalgia the David Lean version with Omar Sharif and Julie Christie, setting off the fashion for fur hats, and for the ladies, knee high boots and long overcoats. Merton was disgusted at the thought of film versions of things, but the Lean film certainly evoked the symbolism that Merton traces in Pasternak. Do you remember the candle in the window? Hear Merton:

The crucial symbol of the candle in the window, which flashes out to illuminate a kind of knot in the crossing paths of the book's main characters, sets Zhivago to thinking about Blok. The connection of ideas is important, because the candle in the window is a kind of eye of God, or of the Logos (call it if you like *Tao*), but since it is the light in the window of the sophianic figure, Lara, and since Blok in those days (1905) was absorbed in the cult of Sophia he had inherited from Soloviev, the candle in the window suggests, among other things, the Personal and Feminine Wisdom Principle whose vision has inspired the most original Oriental Christian theologians of our day.¹⁹

We also remember from the film the concept, if not even the reality, of love. "The solution is *Love* as the highest expression of man's spirituality and freedom. Love and Life (reduced to one and the same thing) form the great theme of *Dr Zhivago*. In proportion as one is alive he has a greater capacity and a greater obligation to love...Lara though seduced by Komarovskiy in her girlhood remains the embodiment of a love that is simple, unadulterated spontaneity, a love that does not know how to be untrue to itself or to life. Her love is perfectly aware of the difference between sin and goodness, but her repentance (the Magdalen theme) has a creative power to transcend limitations and to emerge into a new world. Lara is thus the embodiment of the goodness and love of God immanent in his creation, imminent in man and in Russia, and there left at the mercy of every evil." Merton, the voracious reader, points us from there to Soloviev's *Meaning of Love*.

His letter to the American publisher of Pasternak, Helen Wolff, on the pictures of Pasternak's funeral, brings the Merton-

Pasternak story to something of a full circle. The novel itself begins with the funeral of Zhivago's mother, in which we get a tantalisingly short account of the holy Uncle Kolya. Merton writes, on July 23, 1960,

Really the pictures of the funeral floored me. They were tremendous, a very moving witness to the love of the Russian people for the poet and prophet that has been given them – the only one in an age so dry of prophetic inspiration, and so full of the accents of false prophecy. It was just like Zhivago, except for the wonderful silent crowd filing through the trees and over the footbridge. Everywhere people are saying that they still feel Pasternak close to them. He is a great and eloquent witness of the resurrection and of immortality. We will never come to an end in wondering at his gifts and in loving his memory.”

How can I not mention Pasternak's being given the Nobel prize for Literature, and his not accepting it, in order to stay in Russia? It was the fuse for all sorts of thoughts in Merton on the political implications, the conspiracy theories, the absolute fixation that America had on the terrors of Russia, the Cold War, 'Reds under the Bed', and the eschatological scenario of the end of the world through nuclear war. It was all very much part of the 50's. I used to go to sleep at that time in my Trappist, boarding school bed imagining, and in some ways rather hoping, that the world would end before double Maths the following day. The diary entries for the death of Pasternak are epitaphic, and triptychal:

May 29, 1960. Sunday after Ascension

(Boris) Pasternak is ill – perhaps dying – perhaps dead.²⁰

June 1, 1960

Pasternak died on Monday. His story is finished. It now remains to be understood.²¹

Notes and References

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21. *Ibid.*, p.6