Penguin Modern Classics

Boris Pasternak

The Last Summer

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Boris Pasternak had been recognized as a leading Russian poet many years before the famous *Doctor Zhivago* was published, but it was that book and his refusal of the Nobel Prize which made his name a household word in the West. He was born in Moscow in 1890, the eldest son of Leonid Pasternak, a painter, and Rose Kaufman-Pasternak, a musician. He had an exceptionally happy childhood and inherited from his mother a deep love of music which was his initial inspiration and the first medium of his creative efforts. During the First World War he worked in a factory in the Urals and after the revolution was employed in the library of the Commissariat for Education. He lived mostly in Moscow.

Pasternak translated Shakespeare, Verlaine, and several German writers (among them Goethe, Kleist, and Rilke) into Russian. His prose writings are few; *Doctor Zhivago* was his only full-length novel. He wrote short stories and two short autobiographical works, as well as a number of volumes of poetry. He died in the spring of 1960.

BORIS PASTERNAK

THE LAST SUMMER

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE REAVEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

LYDIA SLATER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

TO THE PENGUIN EDITION

WHEN, with the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* in the West, and more particularly after the award to Boris Pasternak of the Nobel Prize in October 1958, his name became a household word, and the hysterical sensation-mongers of East and West made him the centre of a violent and ugly political campaign, they completely misunderstood and misinterpreted his book and its message. True, there was enough genuine recognition and scholarly appreciation too, but it was constantly being drowned by the unbearable buzz of the loudest and cheapest of professional bluebottles, whose aim in life it is to convince their public of the myth that it appreciates only filth, money-talk, and scandal, and accordingly to feed it nothing else. How much all this hullaballoo must have hurt and astonished Pasternak is easy to understand if one remembers his own views on fame, on 'fireworks' and 'circus-smell', and, in contrast, on 'silence, best of sounds on earth'. I think that the following extracts sufficiently illustrate his attitude:

It is not seemly to be famous;
Celebrity does not exalt. . . .

To give your all – this is creation
And not – to deafen and eclipse.
How shameful, when you have no meaning
To be on everybody's lips. . . .

Into obscurity retiring
Try your development to hide,
As autumn mist on early mornings
Conceals the dreaming countryside.

Another, step by step, will follow
The living imprint of your feet,
But you yourself must not distinguish
Your victory from your defeat. . . .

How far removed is the pre-1958 Pasternak, in this modest, serious, and silent mood, from the whirlpool into which he was so soon to be drawn, and which made it impossible for him to continue in seclusion his conscientious and fruitful work. How foreign, in what direct contrast to his own feelings, were the sensation-mad antics of world journalism! – and yet, disgusting though they were and however much they may have turned one's stomach at the time, the harm they did was not permanent. Something more dangerous was happening in the meantime: publishers and translators all over the world got to work on every available scrap of Pasternak's writings in a feverish race to be the first to publish this or that item and to secure the copyright for it; a few of them, alas, were more concerned with the speed than with the quality of their publication, and though their motives were very understandable and only too human, there is no escaping the fact that for Pasternak himself this must have been a great disappointment and a disservice, for his original texts were often distorted beyond recognition. To do justice to the translators, it must be said that they were not only harassed by the pace set them by their rivals, but confronted with a very difficult and thankless task in the first place. Quite apart from the genuine complexity of Pasternak's language and the impossibility, for anyone but a true poet of his own magnitude, of rendering adequately the poetry even of his prose into a different language, it must have been utterly bewildering for a non-Russian who had no inborn feeling for the language to have to decide what particular meaning, out of many in the dictionary, the author had in mind when using this or that word in an unusually involved context; often several Russian words of seemingly the same root, and sounding almost

alike, have completely different and sometimes even opposite meanings; how can any foreigner then be sure that he has happened to guess the right one? Time and again they failed. Thus it is indeed more surprising to find that some translations from Pasternak really do have something in common with the original text. And this, I think, is the case with George Reavey's translation of *The Last Summer*, in the form in which it is now presented.

The Last Summer (whose original title is simply *A Tale – Povest*) lies about half-way between *The Childhood of Luvers* and *Doctor Zhivago*, and has, in one way or another, connexions with both. Fifty years of creative life separate these last two works, and it is not only the years that divide them; they might have been written by two different people.

Doctor Zhivago was not written in one go, at the end of the fifties: Pasternak carried the unwritten book within him for many, many years, and its ideas and the characters in it grew and matured and changed, until some of them became very different from their prototypes – less tangible and more universal. I see *Doctor Zhivago* not as a homogeneous whole but as a magnificent composition made up of a multitude of integral components. It is a work of such complexity and concentration that it leaves one stunned and breathless after the first reading, and one has to read it again and again. The author appears now as the passionate philosopher, whose very passion compels him to write with 'unheard-of simplicity', now as the mature epic poet, now as the bard of Slavonic folk-lore, now as the Christian, and at times even as the youthful creator of Zhenia Luvers: it is he, I think, who is mainly responsible for the matchless descriptions of season, landscapes, and weather which are scattered throughout the book, and also for some of Zhivago's poems.

The Childhood of Luvers is in my opinion the most perfect piece of prose ever published by Pasternak. Its psychology and language stand comparison even with Tolstoy. Unfortunately it is only a

fragment of a larger novel, only the first few chapters of it. The rest, not only conceived but already written down, was lost in anti-German riots at the beginning of the First World War. I remember my brother reading parts of it to my parents when I was a child.

Many more manuscripts were lost in various circumstances in the course of his life, but Pasternak allegedly did not regret it; he says that

> In life it is more necessary to lose than to gain. A seed will only germinate if it dies. One has to live without getting tired, one must look forward, and feed on one's living reserves, which oblivion no less than memory produces.

(See also the remaining stanzas of 'It is not seemly'.)

The Last Summer is set in the same part of Russia as *The Childhood of Luvers* – near a factory town in the Urals, on the banks of the Kama. Serezha, the hero, arrives there to visit his elder sister, married to a factory employee. Apart from the fictitious details of Serezha's own family and background, the story (and certainly the whole of Serezha's thoughts and personal recollections) are purely autobiographical. The characters who appear in Ousolie* – Serezha's brother-in-law, a fussy and artificially simple man, who tries to play the fool, though he 'could be a natural fool without trying', the telephone-operator and dressmaker, the mysterious Lemokh, the workmen and the Tartars – all these, and particularly Serezha's elder sister, a former revolutionary, slightly irritating and somewhat comic, whom Pasternak introduces mainly in order to set off more distinctly Serezha's own character in the turmoil of formation: all these were drawn from life, from the milieu of friends and acquaintances and workmen in the chemical factories in the Urals, where Pasternak spent a couple of winters at the invitation of a friend, a remarkable man and scientist. Like,

* Ousolie and Solikamsk are salt-towns, bearing within their very names the salty whiteness of their appearance.

much later, his discovery of Georgia, his visit to the Urals must have been a tremendous experience and a revelation to Pasternak, and gave him inexhaustible material from which he could draw at will in the future. It is fascinating to read his account of a winter journey, in March 1917, from the 'Quiet Mountain' works to another factory, situated beyond 'the limitless snow desert of a vast frozen river'. Wrapped up in three *azyams*, unable to move, he lay like a heavy sack, in a mass of hay, sleeping, waking, and dozing for hours on end, at the bottom of a covered sledge drawn by three horses, one behind the other, racing among snowdrifts and through dense glittering forests. Every now and then the driver had to jump off and run alongside the sledge, supporting it with his shoulder to prevent it from overturning. Then, the changing of horses at night, in an encampment, reminiscent of tales about robbers; a dim light in the hut; the samovar is hissing, the clock ticks on; while the newly-arrived sledge-driver takes off his overcoat and warms himself, talking quietly to the woman who is preparing his supper, another driver wipes his moustache, buttons up his armyak, and goes out into the frost to harness a fresh team of horses. All this, exactly as in the days of Pugachev, two hundred years ago; and next to it, a most up-to-date chemical factory, amid the same endless snowy waste.

Many of Pasternak's earlier poems are the fruit of his experience of the Kama district and the Urals, and a number of his prose works abound in variations on the same theme. We get to know the Northern spring, slow and timid in its preparations, and then suddenly bursting all barriers and spreading like wildfire; the ice melting and breaking on the northern rivers – an event as majestic in its violence as any tropical thunderstorm; the description of Siberian sunsets and dawns, nightingales, waterfalls, mountains, and timber; a moonlit snowfield, and the plaintive baying of just- visible wolves, foreboding disaster; the sheer pleasure of cutting large, clean, glittering slices of blinding snow, in bright sunshine, while clearing a snowed-up railway-line – all these are unforgettable passages.

Pasternak loves train journeys, and loves describing them – though 'describing' is not the right word for what he does. These chapters, like the one in *The Last Summer*, are always immensely exciting, and absolutely true to life in each case, but I think that the summer journey that takes the Luvers family from Perm to Ekaterinburg over the Asian border is the most vivid and excitingly realistic of them all.

In *The Last Summer*, only the first few pages and the last three are concerned with life in Ousolie (but what jewels of laconic statement reveal here the images, the sounds and smells of the landscape!); the bulk of the story relates Serezha's recollections and ideas of the spring and summer of 1914. All this is Pasternak's own experience, though he does occasionally retoss and remould various situations and events. Thus we know that he 'spent about a year, in two separate stages . . . in the family of a rich businessman, Moritz Philipp, as tutor of their son Walter, a nice and affectionate boy'; and the Fresteln mansion and life there is a fairly exact replica of Pasternak's own experience.

However, the estate on the Oka river near Alexin and the military barges landing near it on the eve of mobilization, as related to Lemokh at the end of the book – all this has nothing to do with the Fresteln family: Pasternak describes this episode in more detail in his autobiography; he was then staying on the Baltrushaitis' estate as their son's temporary tutor, while also engaged in translating Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. This came before the Philipp-Fresteln engagement.

I am tempted to quote here what Pasternak has to say about realism in art. He writes:

Realism would seem to consist not of a separate trend but of a special concentration in art, of a supreme degree of artistic precision . . . that decisive measure of creative detail which neither general aesthetic canons nor the contemporary public demand from the artist. It is at this very point that Romantic art is contented and stops short. . . . The realistic artist is quite differently placed.

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His work is his cross and his destiny. For him there can be no indulging his fancy, no caprice. What time could he have for playthings, he, the plaything of his own destiny?

First of all, though, what is it that makes a man a realist? What forms him? I should say that it is an early impressionability in childhood and timely conscientiousness in manhood. It is just these two forces that impel him to take up work which the romantic artist neither sees nor has need of. It is his own memories which drive him on to the technical discoveries needed for their reproduction. Artistic realism as I understand it is the depth of the impression made on him by life, transformed into the main impetus of the artist, and forcing him to be inventive and original. . . . His work is original through and through, not because of his divergence from his contemporaries but because of the closeness to nature which was his model. It is always biographical, not out of egocentricity but because he sees his life as the means of knowing every life on earth.

The central theme of *The Last Summer* is poetry, the essence of which is the suffering woman. She is the leitmotif of most of Pasternak's work; but he is not the medieval knight with the name of his beloved on his banner, nor the more modern radical, fighting for the rights of women. His preoccupation with their suffering is on a different level. He writes of it in his reminiscences:

I shall not describe . . . how in the spring of 1901 a troop of Dahomeyan Amazons was on show at the Zoological Gardens. How for me the first sensation of woman was bound up with the sensation of a naked band, of closed ranks of misery, a tropical parade to the sound of a drum. How I became a slave to forms earlier than one should, because I saw in these women the form of slaves too soon....

... From this intercourse with beggars and women pilgrims, from this neighbouring world of the world's spurned and rejected, and the things that happened to them, and their hysterical wailings on the nearby boulevards, I acquired much too early and retained for the rest of my life a feeling of terrifying and breathtaking pity for women.

It is impossible, in English, to feel sorry for someone without implying some sort of superiority on the part of the person who feels the pity. Not so in Russian, where to feel pity and to love someone are almost synonymous notions in popular usage (and expressed by the single word *zhalet*). Serezha feels *compassion* with the suffering women, he suffers – literally – with them and for them, and he loves the streetwalker Sashka in the same compassionate, non-carnal way as he loves Arild or Mary Queen of Scots, because he is a poet and because the suffering woman becomes his sister; because, in the words of one of the prostitutes, he was 'in some way like them' in his capacity of poet, of their suffering brother. Pasternak draws a parallel between the beautiful woman and the poet more explicitly and in a different way in his autobiography. He writes:

'Two expressions have long reached a common triviality: a genius and a beautiful woman. And how much they have in common!' 'From childhood a beautiful woman is inhibited in her movements', and God's nature 'is the only place where she can be quite herself, for with other people she cannot take a step without hurting others or herself being hurt'. 'She would like the night to notice her, the heart of the air to be wrung at the sight of her, the stars to find something to say of her.' But she would burst out laughing if such desires were ascribed to her. 'She is not thinking of anything like this. For thinking thoughts like these she has a distant brother in the world, who is fully accustomed to know her better than she knows herself and to be ultimately responsible for her.' 'She has a healthy liking for healthy nature and is unaware that reliance on the mutuality of the universe never leaves her.' She meets her lover and they walk on together. 'All at once the road widens somewhat and the place seems more solitary, so that they hope to rest a little and look about them; but often at this same time her distant brother makes his way into this place', they meet, and ' – whatever then may happen, no matter – a complete "I am you" binds them with all conceivable ties in the world, and proudly, youthfully, and wearily stamps the medal, profile upon profile'.

Serezha feels pity for Sashka and wants to help her, and to help all those other wretches; he dreams of some miraculous way to get hold of millions which he would distribute among them, to renew the universe, though he knows in his heart that it would not help and that there is no salvation. He muses on Sashka's childhood in the slums, at the railway crossing, and how she looks at the frightening engine-smoke, while a book is being written about her, called 'Childhood of a Woman'. But no, the book is not about her; it is about someone else: 'the name is not Russian and the town is different'. Was it about Lara Guichard? Or was it the childhood of Zhenia Luvers? But these two are worlds apart! Their only connexion is their suffering, for Zhenia too, without yet knowing it, is suffering for becoming a woman. The chapter is simply called 'The Long Days'. Or was that book written about Anna Tornskjold? One cannot help feeling that Anna's personality, though probably real, is not very important for the story. Serezha fell in love with her because she happened to be there. He needed her and his love for her as a driving force, as fuel for his poetry, for his thoughts and his feelings.

There is not much of a plot in *The Last Summer*; Pasternak is not really interested in plots. It is, in the words of V. S. Pritchett, a 'concerto in prose' – reminiscences loosely interwoven, cutting into each other, brilliant descriptions of people, situations, thunderstorms, and thoughts. Serezha writes the outline of his future drama, he writes it with such inspiration, and it carries him away so far (as it does the reader) that he forgets all about Anna and his love, and even her physical presence in the room behind him does not bring him out of his trance. He writes about himself and his music and his poetry, about birches and thunder and waterfalls and whirling leaves, and about the miraculous millions which he would not touch for himself. (And as I write this, I am struck by the strangeness of the coincidence – that Fate did, at the end of his life, give Pasternak just these abstract and miraculous millions which he could not and would not touch – a

coincidence as absurd and seemingly impossible as those which abound in *Doctor Zhivago* and which reasonable people refuse to accept.)

The whole of the story of Mr Y is pure and undiluted poetry, at any rate in the original Russian. These passages are charged with such drama and lyricism that I cannot read them without tears.

In spite of the comical touch introduced by the arrival of the furious Mrs Fresteln, we cannot forget the mood of this drama and the sadness of its concluding words. For some reason, they remind me of a chapter in *Safe Conduct*, on 'that eternally recurring strangeness which may be called the poet's last year': it deals with the problems of ugly ducklings and similar questions, and is a quiet and seemingly ordinary, matter-of-fact discussion; but it leads one inescapably to the final truth, tentatively delayed by a last shred of hope, contained in a question-mark: 'But can there be such sadness when there is such joy? Is this not the second birth then? Is this death?'

With all his vitality and joy of living, his unconcern, and his humour, Pasternak bore within him an immense and unallayed sadness all his life. But perhaps, without this ever-present, though often unnoticed, sadness, his poetry in verse and prose would not have been the blessing and miracle it is.

Oxford, 1960 LYDIA SLATER

For references and quotations I have consulted the original Russian texts, where available, and also the following publications in English:

Doctor Zhivago, translated by M. Hayward and M. Harari. Collins and Harvill Press, 1958.

The Last Summer, translated by G. Reavey. Avon Books, 1959.

Fifty Poems, translated by L. Slater. ('It is not seemly' was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement*.) Allen & Unwin, 1963.*

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Safe Conduct and Other Works, translated by Alec Brown. Elek Books, 1959.

I Remember, translated by David Magarshack. Pantheon and Collins, 1959.

An Essay in Autobiography, translated by M. Harari. Collins and Harvill Press, 1959.

Chopin (on the 135th anniversary of his birth), translated by Richard Newnham from a version revised by the author in 1959.

* *Fifty Poems* incorporates all my translations of Pasternak's poetry, including the collections published by Peter Russell in 1958 and 1959.–L.S.

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