

jhs

Gethsemani Abbey
Trappist P.O. Ky.

Dec. 15, 1958.

My Dear Pasternak:

For a long time I have been holding my breath in the midst of the turmoil of incomparable nonsense that has surrounded your name in every part of the world. It has been a tremendous relief to hear from you indirectly and to learn that things are once again beginning to regain some semblance of sanity. You, like Job, have been surrounded not by three or four misguided comforters, but by a whole world of madmen, some of them reproaching you with reproaches that have been compliments, others complimenting you with compliments that have been reproaches, and seemingly very few of them have understood one word of what you have written. For what could be more blind and absurd than to make a political weapon, for one side or another, out of a book that declares clearly the futility and malignity of tendencies on every side which ^{seek} tend to destroy man in his spiritual substance? Perhaps it is the destiny of every free man to bring out, like a poultice, the folly and the putrescence of our world: but such a vocation is not always pleasant.

One of the first things I did when I heard about the Nobel affair was to write a letter to Surkov of the Writers' Union declaring that I spoke for all those who were fully aware that your book was not a political pamphlet and was not intended to be taken as such, and that it was a great work of art of which Soviet Russia should have the sense to be proud. I do not know if it did any good. Incidentally, since we have here no newspapers or radios, it was quite "accidental" or rather providential that I heard so much about the case so soon.

I do not know what the latest developments may be. If the question of making Dr Zh into a movie in America should arise and become an issue with you over there, I would strongly advise that you attach no importance to any movie but rather that you should, if the case arises to make a decision, rather oppose ~~in~~ yourself to it. The movies here are quite bad, and I have always firmly resisted any attempt to use one of my books in a film. If a refusal on this point, by you, would aid your position with your government, then I would advise making such a refusal. Of course, remember I am perhaps not the wisest judge. But certainly a Hollywood production of Dr Zh would do more harm than good in every respect.

I have indeed been praying for you, and so have my young novices, young and pure souls, who know of you and who have been touched by your wonderful poem on Christ in the Garden of Gethsemani. We shall continue our prayers.

Do not let yourself be disturbed too much by either friends or enemies. I hope you will clear away every obstacle and continue with your writing on the great work that you surely have in store for us. May you find again within yourself the deep lifegiving silence which is genuine truth and the source of truth: for it is a fountain of life and a window into the abyss of eternity and God. ~~and~~ It is the wonderful silence of the winter night in which ~~a~~ Yuri sat up in the sleeping house and wrote his poems while the waves howled outside: but it is an inviolable house of peace, a fortress in the depths of our being, the virginity of our soul where, like the Blessed Mary, we give our brave and humble answer to life, the "Yes" which brings Christ into the world.

I cannot refrain from speaking to you of Abraham, and his laughter and prostration when he was told by God that he, a hundred years old, should be the father of a great nation and that from his body, almost dead, would come life to the whole world. The peak of liberty is in this laughter, which is a resurrection and a sacrament of the resurrection, the sweet and clean folly of the soul who has been liberated by God from his own nothingness. Here is what Philo of Alexandria has said about it:

"To convict us, so often proud and stiff-necked at the smallest cause,

Abraham falls down (Genesis 17:17) and straightway laughs with the laughter of the soul; mournfulness in his face but smiles in his mind where joy vast and unalloyed has made its lodging. For the sage who receives an inheritance of good beyond his hope, these two things were simultaneous, to fall and to laugh. He falls as a pledge that the proved nothingness of his mortal being keeps him from boasting. He laughs because God alone is good and the giver of great gifts that make strong his piety. Let created being fall with mourning in its face: it is only what nature demands, so feeble of footing, so sad of heart in itself. Then let it be raised up by God and laugh, for God alone is its support and joy."

I wish you this laughter in any sorrow that may touch your life.

Kurt W. has sent me the Essai Autobiographique and I am reading it with great pleasure. In my turn I am sending you a book of mine, also autobiographical in character, called the Sign of Jonas. It may take a little time to get there. New Directions may also send you a small volume of my poems, of which I am by no means proud.

I am learning Russian now, a little at a time, and later on I would be grateful if you would help me to get a few good simple books in Russian on which to practice-- some good easy prose, and some poems. Is there a Russian book of saints? Someone has suggested that perhaps the legends of Sts Evgraf, Lara etc might throw light on your characters. But anyway, I know nothing of the Russian saints except of course for Seraphim of Sarov. I am very interested in the struggle between St Nilus and Joseph of Volotsk-- you can easily imagine why.

I hope this letter will reach you by Christmas, and it will bring you my blessings and my prayers and my deep affection, for the Holy Feast. My second Christmas Mass is for your intentions and for your family; and I will feast with you spiritually in the light of the Child of God who comes shyly and silently into the midst of our darkness and transforms the winter night into Paradise for those who, like the Shepherds and the humble Kings, come to find Him where no one thinks of looking: in the obviousness and poverty of man's ordinary everyday life.

Faithfully yours in Christ,