

“Kindred Spirits”: Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton

by Gregory J. Ryan

“Although we are separated by great distances
and even greater barriers
it gives me pleasure to speak to you as to one
to whom I feel to be a kindred spirit.”

(Letter from Thomas Merton to Boris Pasternak dated August 22, 1958)

Boris Yeltsin frequently appears in the media these days because of the hope he offers to the people of the former Soviet Union. The difficulties they are experiencing are necessary growing pains as they move from a totalitarian society to one that is open and free. One could argue that the seeds for this transformation were nourished in part by the literary artistry of another Boris — Boris Pasternak, whose novels struck a responsive chord in Thomas Merton.

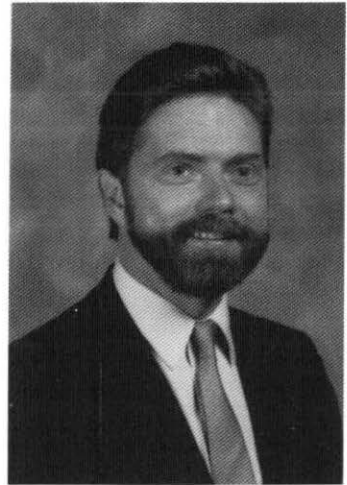
During the 1950’s, a time when many people in the West believed the former Soviet Union to be “Satanic” and prayed fervently for its “conversion,” Thomas Merton recognized Boris Pasternak as someone who shared his own beliefs about the holiness of creation, including all of humanity.

This brief article will examine Merton’s published writings about Pasternak which include articles, a number of Journal entries, and several letters.¹

Readers of the *Seasonal* are already familiar with the details of Merton’s life and how his parents’ artistic talents influenced his life and his work.

Boris Pasternak was born in Moscow in 1890, the son of an artist father who had been Tolstoy’s illustrator; his mother was a musician. As an adult, Pasternak lived simply in his “dacha” giving himself to his writing — not unlike the solitary Merton writing in his monastery and hermitage. Before his death in 1960 Pasternak was recognized as a world-class writer, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 for *Doctor Zhivago*. In Merton’s view, Pasternak’s artistic achievement was remarkable because it showed that Pasternak’s philosophy of “personalism” as exemplified in *Zhivago* could be sustained in spite of the totalitarian Soviet government.

Merton completed several studies of Pasternak’s life and work before the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* and he had written to him twice. His Journal entry for May 18, 1958 contains his first mention of Pasternak.



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Above all, this year has marked my discovery of Pasternak.

First, in the copy of *Encounter* which came by chance with a review of [Merton's book of poems] *Strange Islands*.

Then, in last month's *Partisan Review* clandestinely acquired. I have just finished his marvelous story "The Childhood of Lovers." This is a great writer with a wonderful imagination and all he says is delightful—one of the great writers of our time and no one pays much attention (now no doubt they will, with *Dr. Zhivago* — coming out in English in the Fall). He is so good I don't see very well 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!! (*SFS*, p. 203)

Eleven days later, he writes:

Finished Pasternak's *Safe Conduct* and felt as if I must at once begin to read it again. A magnificent book, one of the great ones.

. . . I have thought several times of writing to Pasternak. How absurd — as if I could contemplate the writing of such a letter.

But perhaps I could send him "Prometheus" — And need to send the "Tower of Babel." [Poem first published in *Jubilee* (October 1953)] (*SFS*, pp. 204)

Shortly after the European publication of *Zhivago*, Merton received the American edition from the publishers Kurt and Helen Wolff. Since he was a monk living a simple life of silent prayer under a vow of poverty, it was not uncommon for his publishing friends to send him books as gifts.

September 9, 1958

For the last 5 days or so — reading *Dr. Zhivago* which finally came. Deeply moved by it. Not being in the habit of demanding absolute structural perfection in a novel, I can call it great. Wrote to Helen Wolff at Pantheon about it and she wired asking permission to use what I said. Later sent a tepid review of the book clipped from the NY Times as a specimen of the kind of reception it is getting. I would like to write something about Pasternak. Wrote a letter to him but don't know if it will get through. Sent him "Prometheus." . . . (*SFS*, pp. 216-217)

Within a month of receiving the book, Merton sent a copy of the limited edition of *Prometheus* as a gift to Pasternak and a letter to tell him how much *Zhivago* had meant to him. For his part, Pasternak wrote to the Wolffs on September 18, 1958 to ask them to thank Merton for him and to tell him that ". . . his unerring understanding, the miracle of his insight, seem incredible to me . . . He should not waste time and strength on me either writing letters or articles. What he has said to me and to Mrs. Wolff in these letters is already more than enough . . ." ² In these years before Vatican Council II it was highly unusual for a Trappist monk to be reading novels, so it took some convincing before his Abbot allowed Merton to pursue his study of the Russian novelist.

October 12, 1958. Sunday

. . . Thursday afternoon Rev. Fr. gave me a letter from Pasternak inside an envelope from New Directions — air mail, registered, but unopened. I explained with vehemence to Rev. Father that Pasternak was a great and basically religious writer and I could see he did not believe me — or, if he did, a little, it was against his will to do so. The letter was brief but very cordial and confirmed my intuition of the deep and fundamental understanding that exists between us. And this is the thing I have been growing to see is most important: *Everything* hangs on the possibility of such understanding which forms our interior bond that is the only basis of true peace

and true community. External juridical, doctrinal etc. bonds can never achieve this. And this bond exists between me and countless people like Pasternak everywhere in the world (genuine people like Pasternak are never "countless") and my vocation is intimately bound up with this bond and this understanding for the sake of which also I have to be solitary and not waste my spirit in pretenses that do not come anywhere near the reality or have anything to do with it. (*SFS*, p. 223-224)

During this time Merton was struggling with his own understanding of commitment, community, obedience, and how they fit in with his life as a monk/writer.

October 15, 1958. F. of St. Teresa

... They are matters of psychology and disorganized living wrong attitudes, "conflicts" more than anything else. And because of them I have been failing to face the issue — have been getting away from the big job of my life, the fighting out of the inner battle for freedom, and losing myself in exterior plans — and in useless writing. (*SFS*, p. 224)

Over the next two years, Pasternak and Merton exchanged a total of six letters which were published posthumously in a beautiful, hand-printed limited edition by Victor Hammer.

Pasternak, as a sign of great solicitude, wrote to Merton in English. In his first letter to Merton, dated Holy Cross Day, September 27, 1958 from "Peredelkina near Moscow," he told Merton that he didn't sign his name "for the better sureness of its reaching you."

Merton was delighted to receive word from Pasternak.

October 18, 1958. F. of St. Luke.

Two letters have arrived from Pasternak — my letter and [the gift-book] *Prometheus*, saying that he liked especially sections IV and VII — and that the last had some "fine individual Christosphotic touches." I was very pleased. Will write to him again. He keeps insisting that his early work is "worthless." His heart is evidently in *Dr. Zhivago* — to which he does not refer by the full name. Only as "Dr Zh" or "the book published by Pantheon."

Talking to Fr. Lawrence about it and remarked on the strange and marvelous fact of this apparently easy and natural communication between a monk in a strictly guarded Trappist monastery and a suspect poet behind the Iron Curtain - I am in closer contact with Pasternak than I am with people in Louisville or Bardstown or even in my own monastery - and have more in common with him.

And all this while our two countries, deeply hostile to one another, have nothing to communicate between themselves - and yet spend millions trying to communicate with the moon!!

This simple and human dialogue with Pasternak and a few others like him is to me worth thousands of sermons and radio speeches. It is to me the true Kingdom of God, which is still so clearly, and evidently, "in the midst of us." (*SFS*, p. 224-225)

Merton was still engaged in the interior struggle of freedom and obedience on a very personal level. He was working out the possibilities for more solitude in his life perhaps as a hermit on the grounds of his own monastery or another monastery. Perhaps by leaving his Order and transferring to another Order. Perhaps by starting an entirely new religious Order which would allow him the leeway his life seemed to require. This was a struggle that seemed to stay with him for a number of years — some might say, for the rest of his life.

October 23, 1958

... Brought back face to face with my vow of obedience and the paradox that this is what matters most. And it must matter not only on paper but in life. Yet I refuse to make the great melodramatic gesture of false acceptance — which would include the acceptance of things God does not want me to accept. I simply obey. But I still never lie down and accept this monastic situation as inevitable, definitive or “right.” At the same time, once again — how can I be sure that I have something better to put in its place? (*SFS*, pp. 223-225)

Surely this struggle must have added to Merton’s attraction to and identification with Pasternak and the hope he offered the Russian people. And the hope he offered to Merton, as well.

Merton wrote Pasternak: “I can speak to you as to one whom I feel to be a kindred spirit . . .” Merton told Pasternak that he felt so close to him that “In the language known to me as a Catholic monk it is as if we were known to one another in God.” Pasternak told Merton that his writing “seems to me wonderfully filled with kindred thoughts as having been written half by myself.” Their mutual respect for each other’s writing had developed into a deep friendship, a true spiritual communion.

How is it possible that such a strong bond was forged between these two men who lived on opposite sides of the globe? In one of his essays, later published as “The Pasternak Affair” in *Disputed Questions*, Merton wrote about his Russian friend with words that we could just as easily apply to Merton himself: “His spiritual genius is essentially and powerfully solitary . . . His very solitude made him capable of extraordinarily intimate and understanding contacts with men all over the face of the earth . . . He is full of love.” (*DQ*, p. 10-11) It should be noted that both men maintained “epistolary friendships” all over the world. In one letter, Pasternak apologized to Merton for not being a good correspondent due to the large number of letters he was obliged to write. Merton himself left carbon copies of over three thousand letters as part of his literary estate. While their letters to each other may have been relatively few in number, they were remarkable for their mutual understanding.

Merton shared Pasternak’s love for Russia, its language, and its people. He told Pasternak that the earth which Yurii and Lara walked upon in *Doctor Zhivago* was sacred. “It is the sacred earth of Russia with its magnificent destiny which remains hidden for it in the plan of God.” Merton went on to ask Pasternak to recommend texts so he might learn the Russian language and read Russian masters like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Berdyaev in their native tongue.

The content and tone of the correspondence belie the fact that they were exchanged between 1958 and 1960 at the height of the Cold War when people all over the world spoke of the “Iron Curtain” which separated Russia from nations in the West. The threat of mutual nuclear annihilation by the United States and the then-Soviet Union was accepted by many as a distinct possibility. But these political obstacles did not block the reality of their friendship.

Merton’s concern for Pasternak was artistic as well as spiritual. He understood that Pasternak would suffer greatly for his art just as he suffered in his own way for his. According to Merton, Pasternak was not only an artist, but a prophet who willingly and courageously accepted the consequences of his work. “The liberty that Pasternak defends is a liberty of the spirit which is almost as dead in the West as it is behind the Iron Curtain.” (*DQ*, p. 28)

Just four days after the Nobel Prize was awarded for Doctor Zhivago, the Soviet Writer’s Union expelled Pasternak from their ranks saying that he must have had secret connections with the West; disreputable ties with Wall Street as Merton put it. “Pravda” called the book a “literary weed.”

October 30, 1958

The other day Fr. John of the Cross heard over Hanekamp's radio that Pasternak had won the Nobel Prize in literature and that the Reds did not want him to receive it. A great fuss about this - (SFS, p. 227)

Not wishing his art to become a political issue and as a witness to his deep love for his country, Pasternak refused the Nobel Prize and continued to live in his homeland. This was the selfless act of a totally free man who knew he could not live and write anywhere else in the world and still be true to his art. In a letter written on Easter Monday 1961 to Pasternak's sister, Lydia Pasternak Slater, Merton said, "It was my opinion that he was a truly spiritual man in an age when even apparently religious people are seldom spiritual . . . He obeyed God in his own way, and for this he had to pay dearly, but he realized the meaning of his actions." (P/M: SL, p. xix)

Merton believed that the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* was one of the most significant literary events of the century. In a letter to an admirer of Pasternak living in England, Merton wrote: "He is our greatest writer and poet and more than that. He is a sign of hope and perhaps the first star of a new dawn for mankind." Notice that Merton says Pasternak is "our" greatest writer, not "their" greatest writer. These are the words of one universal man speaking of another.

. . . Yesterday I decided, perhaps in a crazy moment, that I might perhaps be able to do some good if I wrote a letter of protest to the Union of Soviet Writers, which I did. Sent a copy to Helen Wolff at Pantheon - afterwards felt very strange, as if I had sent up a rocket into a sky of which I know nothing. And I wonder about my motives, too. Consciously, they were good enough. Unconsciously, maybe they were crazy. (SFS, p. 227)

It was characteristic of Merton that he would do something on the spur of the moment, only to have mixed feelings about it later.

October 31, 1958

By the time I had written my letter of protest about the treatment of Pasternak he had already, under pressure, refused the Nobel Prize. Perhaps my protest in union with many others, may keep him at least alive. The general opinion seems to be that he will be forced into complete isolation.

A wonderful letter from Pasternak to Kurt Wolff in German, was forwarded to me from Pantheon — most of it is concerned with his reaction to my letters and to my "perfect" understanding of all that was most important to him in his work. [Merton translates the German as: "The aptness of his understanding and the clarity of his insights is beyond belief."] — and he picks out especially my reaction to his Hamlet poem and the Business about the Red Sea and the Bl. Virgin — and about God-manhood.

That I have been able to give him the consolation of understanding and appreciating what he most wanted to say is also to me a great consolation.

And then, referring to his own work:

I must, in my writing, in my prayer, in my life - take this further step and go beyond my limitations and the limitations of thought, art, and religion of our time. And this requires effort and suffering. I simply cannot sit down and *accept* my limitations — that is impossible. But I must take care most of all not to be content with merely a fanciful transcendence — going beyond my limitations in thought and imagination only. It must be a real transcendence. (SFS, p. 227-228)

Amidst what were presumed to be “bogus” public statements by Pasternak about the “present glories” of Soviet Russia (*SFS*, p. 227), for some months there was a concern around the world for Pasternak’s safety — for his own “Safe Conduct.” As we might expect, the whole situation gave Merton something to write about:

November 29, 1958

Thanksgiving Day and I finished a twenty two page article on the Pasternak affair. It is clear that he is a Christian anarchist, if any political label at all can be attached to him. Certainly the Russians want no part of a Christian anarchist. Writing the article — after the usual hesitation to attack the subject — was enlightening for me. But it is too long.

Went out into the snow yesterday afternoon after finishing the last page and walked under the icy branches of the big sycamore with Fr. Alcuin’s work shoes on — looked into the black sky of the West and thought of Pasternak in solitude at Peredelkino. (*SFS*, pp. 233)

Three weeks earlier Helen Wolff, who assumed Merton knew Russian, had offered Merton Pasternak’s poems to translate. Admitting that he did not, Merton had to refuse the project. But the proposal must have intrigued him because on December 2, 1958 he wrote in his journal that he would begin his Russian studies on Monday and Friday afternoons. “Keep up with Pasternak on Mon and Fri also . . .” (*SFS*, p. 234)

Pasternak’s ordeal was shared at a deep level by Merton. Pasternak’s artistic achievement spurred Merton on to refine his own writing and to keep it focused on matters that were worth writing about. His dedication to his art had already brought friction with his Abbot, Dom James, and now it drew the reproach of the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order. The General would not give his permission for the publication of Merton’s article on Pasternak (*SFS*, p. 250). Merton did not strongly object to this since he felt he had at least said what he had to say. But what bothered him was that no one inside the Order seemed to recognize the contemplative elements of Pasternak’s work. Merton, however, felt that there was deep spiritual significance and value in Pasternak’s work: “Something perhaps spiritually more significant than anything that has yet manifested itself in any of our monasteries.” (*SFS*, p. 250)

This helped vulcanize Merton’s broadening application of the term “contemplative” to those outside the walls of monasteries.

I do not accept this mania for judging everything according to labels and categories. Contemplative = what is in an enclosed monastery. Spiritual = what happens when you are on your knees. The “Things of God”? = pious exercises according to an approved formula. And the obsessive refusal to allow anything ever to overlap from one category into another. For instance that something outside monastery walls should be a manifestation of God, a thing of spiritual significance, something to do with contemplative life. I am getting to dislike more and more the complacent emphasis of the term “contemplative,” and its inherent capacity to encourage phariseism.

Indignation! Of course we admit there can be “contemplatives” outside monasteries. You do? But you only admit as contemplatives “outside monasteries” people who in every respect behave as if they were inside. (*SFS*, p. 250)

Then, as a sort of personal manifesto: “. . . I will follow my conscience — and my vows — and the Holy Spirit and not expect anybody else in the world to think for me and live my life for me.” (*SFS*, p. 251)

It is not only interesting, but also instructive, that scattered among these “Pasternak Pages” of Merton’s *Journal* he refers to other artists, writers, and religious figures who would influence him for the rest of his life: Reading Vallejo. *Oyes a tu masa* a terrific poem which I will translate (223), Pius XII (223), Cardinal Roncalli (226), Mark Van Doren’s *Autobiography* (223), new Bouyer book (224), some Symeon the New Theologian, Some Zen (224), Book from Alberto Girri. I like the new development of his verse. (226), Bulgakov’s *Wisdom of God* (226), To what extent is jazz spiritual? (227), Now to translate the Desert Fathers. (227), Have been reading Tu Fu — a very fine poet — one of the greatest. (220), Neruda’s works came from Argentina, a tremendously influential volume. (229), And a whole spate of books from Ecuador, including Jorge Carrera Andrade — a most charming poet. (229), Reading Mabillon’s wise and delightful book on monastic studies. (229), Reading Czeslaw Milosz *The Captive Mind* — a really interesting book. (230), Aldous Huxley’s article on drugs that produce visions and ecstasies has reached me . . . (231), A long and good letter from Jaime Andrade from Quito. (231) (All in *SFS*, pages noted)

Merton now believed that his worst fears for his friend’s well-being were being realized:

March 3, 1959. Tuesday

Yesterday received word from Helen Wolff that Pasternak had disappeared from Peredelkino and had, so the official news said, gone on a “vacation” to the Black Sea “to get away from foreign reporters.” I believe this will be the end of him. He has been fearing it, recently, so I hear (he wrote to his London publisher that the end was coming). And now all the ghastly business — the “confession” which he has denied in advance — and his total disappearance. How he needs strength now. Perhaps he is already finished. How strange it is to speak of someone one knows in such terms. (It is strange, at least, to one living in America. Many millions of others are now thoroughly used to it.)

I said my Mass for him this morning. The introit was terribly appropriate:

“I have cried to thee and Thou O God has heard me:

O incline Thine ear unto me and hear my words:

Keep me! O Lord, as the apple of Thine eye.

Protect me under the shadow of Thy wings.

Hear, O Lord, my justice — attend to my supplication.” (Ps. 16)

How like the psalms many of Pasternak’s later poems have become. May God protect him and have mercy on this great man. (*SFS*, pp. 265-66)

Merton’s last *Journal* entry concerning Pasternak contained some restrained relief:

March 25, 1959

Yesterday, obsessed with some dire need, finished revising the old article on Pasternak, having also finished a shorter and better new one the day before. Forgot to say that when P. vanished from his dacha I wrote to the General (of Merton’s order) about it and he said because of the new circumstances I could go ahead and write. Now I discover that P. went to Tiflis of his own free will. Helen Wolff heard this from Gerd Ruge whom Pasternak telephoned in Moscow before leaving. He is staying with Tabidges’ widow. His own wife has pretty much been like the wife of Job throughout the whole affair. (*SFS*, pp. 270-271)

In his letter dated October 23, 1958 Merton had written to Pasternak: “. . . the great business of our time is this: for one man to find himself in another one who is on the other side of the world. Only by such contacts can there be peace, can the sacredness of life be preserved and developed and the image of God manifest itself in the world.”²

Pasternak's last letter to Merton, which was dated February 7, 1960 just three months before his death, brings a closure to this article. The letter began with the greeting, "My highly Dear Merton." In the letter he thanked Merton for his praise and encouragement and humbly told him: "I shall rise, you will see. . ."

And so, in the developments throughout the former Soviet Union, we can perhaps witness Boris Pasternak's spirit rising throughout the homeland he loved so much.

Footnotes:

¹ See *Disputed Questions*, pp. 33-67 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) (Noted in the text as DQ), *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952-1960* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) Noted in the text as SFS, *Pasternak/Merton, Six Letters, 1958-1960*. (The King Library Press: University of Kentucky, 1973) Noted in the text as P/M: SL.

² See *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. A Harvest Book, 1994), p. 89.