

## Editorial: Feeding on Pickles

'I'm not fond of philosophical essays. I think a little philosophy should be added to life and art by way of spice, but to make it one's speciality seems as strange to me as feeding on nothing but pickles'.

Thus Larissa Fyodorovna Antipova, Lara, in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Zhivago himself, whose name means 'life', becomes a passionate advocate of individual freedom and humanity, against the soul-destroying practice of those who seized the levers of power in the chaos of post-1917 Russia, and their rhetoric, all the more hateful for the way it treated individual human beings as members of bloodless categories. There were plenty of philosophical essays in Russia and elsewhere at the time, which substituted idealist and post-idealist 'claptrap' (as Lara has it) for anything recognizably human, and not only those in praise of the revolution and the demonic regime and its blood-letting abstractions.

According to Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (212d-218b), anyone listening to Socrates would not hear abstractions, murderous or otherwise. They would hear talk of pack asses and blacksmiths and shoemakers and tanners, and the same old thing in the same old way. Only, when you opened up his arguments and really got under the skin of them, you would realise that these seemingly common-place things were the only arguments that had any sense in them at all. Under the skin of them: Alcibiades had earlier compared Socrates to the satyr Marsyas, who, in an image dear to Iris Murdoch, was flayed alive by the divine Apollo. Socrates, an ugly satyr on the surface, was beautiful under the skin; and under the skin his arguments were, according to Alcibiades, godlike, getting the seeker on the way to the goal of true nobility. In this sense there is something Socratic about Pasternak's own reflections, as mediated in his great novel through the voice of Yuri Zhivago.

Socrates did not, of course, write any philosophical essays, so he would not have fallen under Lara's anathema. But our business, in *Philosophy*, is that of the philosophical essay. Idealism may have had its day, but pickles do not derive from only one source. In fact they flourish in any environment where professional scholasticism rules, as it surely does in our own, dominated as it is by technologists, networkers and fashion followers.

The trick of the essay which is not a dried up pickle, and which might have heartened Lara, is to have something worth saying,

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something a little different from accepted patterns and ideology. It should be said in a way that does not bludgeon those who are not prepared to think. It should not seek impact by meretriciously confirming the prejudices of those whom George Orwell (in 'Inside the Whale') referred to as being of 'ordinary education'; those, in other words, who had been taught to turn the values of their forebears 'inside out in three minutes'. Nor, finally, does being different and humanly worth saying imply being original in any sense recognizable by academic auditors. It can, as Renford Bambrough, a distinguished former editor of this journal, once had it, be a matter of reminding people of things they had forgotten. And sometimes they need to be reminded of the very things they would rather not be reminded of.