

Reviews

Karantin by V. Maksimov, Possev, Frankfurt, 1973, 364 pp. French translation : **En Quarantine** by Vladimir Maximov, Grasset, Paris, 1974, 304 pp. 34 F.

It is intriguing, though not perhaps surprising, to note that nearly all the longer works of poetry and prose fiction emanating from the Soviet Union since 1956 and widely acclaimed in the West were written by believers (for instance, Akhmatova, Sinyavsky and Solzhenitsyn) or at the very least are seriously concerned with religious (and not "simply" philosophical) problems. Opinions seem to differ on whether Boris Pasternak can legitimately be called a Christian, but his *Dr. Zhivago* is clearly connected intimately with the traditions of Christian culture, however defined. Similarly, however tenuous Mikhail Bulgakov's links with the Russian Orthodox Church may have become, his novel *The Master and Margarita*, with its unforgettable depiction of Jerusalem and its original treatment of the crucifixion story, obviously belongs to the main line of Russian fiction begun by the deeply religious and deeply despairing Gogol.

It is of Bulgakov's novel rather than of Camus' *The Plague* that one thinks when reading *In Quarantine*. In the late summer of 1970 there was an outbreak of cholera in the south of the Soviet Union, and Maksimov has the excellent idea of stopping a trainload of all manner of Soviet passengers on their way from Odessa to Moscow in order to see how they behave during the week of isolation, or purgatory, when they have the time, if they so wish, to reflect on themselves, their present and not least their past (for we are the children of history as well as products of our immediate milieu), and then grasp the opportunity of being "spiritually reborn" and entering into a "new life" in a transfigured world. How can one make this pilgrim's progression convincing to the sceptic, who is probably left stone-cold by the sudden conversion of the hero in Tolstoy's third big novel *Resurrection*? Only, perhaps, by the skilful application of "fantastic realism", as suggested by Sinyavsky, to show that our "mundane" lives *are* in fact full of marvels, that the world *is* miraculous, that there *are* more things in heaven and on earth than most of us have dreamed of.

Once one is induced to accept this and realizes that fairy-tales are probably true, any materialistic philosophy appears flat, hollow and insipid and soon collapses, leading not to contempt but to active love and pity

for the overwhelming majority of one's fellow-citizens (victims of "spiritual castration", as the poet Iosif Brodsky put it) who are leading such shallow, two- or even one-dimensional existences chasing after "real" but in fact ephemeral or empty goals. Dazed by the heat, peering through a drunken haze, Maksimov's hero and heroine, Boris Khramov (= Temple) and Mariya (Mary), perceive and comprehend this new reality and, thus transformed, go out into the world which is itself transformed.

It seems that slowly and surely a very great reappraisal of values is taking place in the USSR. In particular a growing aversion to superficial doctrines, a process from which we in the West have much to learn. One can do harm when wanting to do good but, as Goethe's Mephistopheles knows, the forces of evil themselves cannot help but continually do good, however paradoxical and undesirable they may find this. The Devil (doing God's work?) in Bulgakov's novel and Stalin in Maksimov's *In Quarantine* make one think that something good might even come out of the hideous experiences of Russia since 1917 and that there is positive meaning and value to be found in the appalling sufferings that have been inflicted on the Soviet people.

MARTIN DEWHIRST

Red Star Over Tibet, by Dawa Norbu, Collins, London, 1974, 254 pp. £3.50.

This is an excellent book by a most unusual young Tibetan, Dawa Norbu, the second son of a Tibetan peasant family living in an isolated village near the famous monastery of Sakya, the second oldest Buddhist sect in Tibet. The story begins with the author describing the little-known world of Tibet before the arrival of the Chinese communist army and colonisers, and then goes on to describe the take-over, its effects and his eventual escape to India.

His account of the clash between the two cultures is first-class, his personal involvement interestingly interlaced with the historical and religious events taking place in the country at large. His maternal grandfather was a distant descendant of a famous tantric practitioner, with considerable yoga powers, and himself head of a roving mission from the Sakya monastery. The account of the Buddhist "missions to the heathen" is illuminating :

The Sakya sect had reached its greatest period of influence in the thirteenth century, a time of remarkable intellectual and spiritual development in the history of Tibet . . . These expensive monasteries were not simple shrines; they were