



## **The Energy of Pasternak**

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## The Energy of Pasternak

Review of Boris Pasternak, *Selected Writings*, *Partisan Review* 17 (1950), 748–51; repr. in Victor Erlich (ed.), *Pasternak: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1978)

BORIS LEONIDOVICH PASTERNAK was born in Moscow in 1890. His father was a well-known painter, his mother a musician. He published his earliest poems during the First World War towards the end of the renaissance of Russian poetry which began in the nineties and ended with the death of Esenin. By 1919 Pasternak's poetry began to be read beyond the literary coteries of Moscow and Petrograd and today, at the age of 60, he is recognised as a poet of genius upon the quality of which no serious critic has ventured to cast any doubt. Although attention was drawn to his work by D. S. Mirsky, who admired his gifts and wrote about him with great understanding (in English) in the twenties, it was not until recent events stimulated a new wave of interest in Russia that any systematic translation of his work into English was attempted. Verse translations by Professor C. M. Bowra and by Miss Babette Deutsch (which form the last section of this book) – in particular the former – convey something of the heavily charged and twisting rhythms, the tormented yet luminous vision of the original; in particular, of the depth and unity of his world in which men, things, relationships, emotions, ideas, sensations, situations are conceived within a kind of universal biological category. Within this orbit the force of nature flows with a violent almost self-conscious energy, at many interpenetrating levels; sometimes it flows in rich, enormous overwhelming waves of feeling moving freely and in many dimensions. Sometimes the stream is arrested or compressed into narrow defiles, in which it forms knots and gathers into violently condensed globules of extreme intensity; Pasternak's verse is in the first place a vehicle of metaphysical emotion which melts the barriers between personal experience and 'brute' creation.

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The poet himself remarked somewhere that poetry or art is the natural object informed by, or seen under, the aspect of energy – the all pervasive *vis vivida* whose flow, at times broken and intermittent, is the world of things and persons, forces and States, acts and sensations. To attempt to give more precise significance to this kind of vision may be perilous and foolish, save by discrimination from what it is not: it is neither a pathetic fallacy whereby human experience is projected into inanimate objects, nor yet is it the inversion of this, to be found, for example, in the novels of Virginia Woolf, where the fixed structure of human beings and material objects is dissolved into the life and the properties of the shifting patterns of the data of the inner and the outer senses, sounds, smells, colours, real, imagined, and recollected. There is, on the contrary, a sense of unity induced by the sense of the pervasiveness of cosmic categories (perhaps derived from the poet's neo-Kantian days in Marburg) which integrate all the orders of creation into a single, biologically and physiologically, emotionally and intellectually, interrelated universe; this world in which clouds and flowers, the earth and the sky, the actively burning rays of the sun and the cold mountain water and the shape of a sound or a human limb or a continent, or a half articulated movement – physical or mental – and the stresses and pressures of inanimate objects and of human sensations, emotions, perceptions, images, and passions, all penetrate one another and strain against one another, both act and suffer; the words communicate this by means of a kind of violent and unexpected modulation to which Pasternak is as prone as Donne or Hopkins. Nor is this a consciously bold device or technical method of juxtaposing opposites to secure a spark or an explosion; it conveys a directly experienced vision of a single world-wide, world-long system of tensions and stresses, a perpetual ebb and flow of energy, rising to a climax in the painful frustration, but in the end, triumphant agony of individual centres of consciousness – the life of personalities, solid men and women, vis-a-vis solid material objects. Both persons and things are related to each other by real and not symbolic relationships heightened and transfigured by an extreme

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concentration of a vision which reveals the inner outline – the permanent bony structure – and does not transmute them into elements of an other worldly language, or become attenuated into a succession of vaguely relevant emotions of verbal patterns. As always with great poetry, these systems of tensions resolve themselves at their greatest height into passages of noble simplicity and repose, moments of serenity and harmony towards which the discords inevitably tend and in terms of which alone they acquire their significance and purpose.

Pasternak grew up during the Symbolist phase of Russian poetry, when problems of philosophy and theology dominated the thoughts of some among his most gifted contemporaries. He originally set out to be a composer, was a pupil of Skryabin, but became a poet profoundly influenced by Andrey Bely and the other writers of the Moscow circle. Between 1915 and 1924 he composed half a dozen short stories, and in 1930 his autobiography appeared. The stories, to be properly assessed, must be understood in the historical context of his life. His prose is of that painfully over-elaborated and euphuistic kind in which the maximum and sometimes more is squeezed out of every word; and owes much to the precious, sometimes unsuccessful, at other times dazzling brilliant technical method of Bely, a great innovator of language, who before Joyce invented new methods of using words, and generated a world of his own, filled with the fitful memories of half understood German metaphysics, choc a bloc with treasured mysteries drawn from Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Wagner, French and Belgian Symbolist poets, the anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner – a queer amalgam of profound inspiration, insight and astonishing flights of imaginative virtuosity, in which moments of tranquillity, beauty and innocence mingle with mere neurosis, extravagance, hysteria, genuine madness, and at times a particularly false and irritating aesthetic exhibitionism.

The prose style which Pasternak created during the period of literary and spiritual turmoil, is, to say the least, not easy to convey into another language, and it is almost at its most obscure and artificial in his autobiography, which he called *Safe Conduct*. Hence

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the translator, Mrs Beatrice Scott, was clearly most courageous to have attempted it at all; courageous or blind, for, more often than not, she gives the impression of having surrendered the resources of the English language without a struggle to the untranslatable Russian original, and we get strange collocations of words which leave the reader perplexed.

Nor do Pasternak's stories fare better in Mr Robert Payne's renderings. And although the heroic martyrdom of these translators may entitle them to our respect, the author remains unlucky. The selection of stories seems open to question. 'The Childhood of Lyuvers' is a masterpiece and well worth inclusion, but 'Arial Ways' and 'Letters from Tula' are so intimately connected with a particular period and manner and literary atmosphere that their value to the untutored reader without an apparatus of commentary may be doubted. The editing is slovenly to a degree; Mr Schimansky's references to his introductory essay published in the original English edition are left intact in his Preface, although the essay in question has been omitted from the American compilation. Of the two-score or so translations of the author's poetry, five at least are somewhat surprisingly given in the versions both of Professor Bowra and Miss Deutsch – as if the translations had been independently chosen and carelessly allowed to overlap. And why does the second part of 'Lyuvers' appear as a completely separate story under the title, 'The Stranger' (this is only a chapter-heading in the original and is given quite correctly in the English edition)?

Nevertheless one should not cavil too much; everything which throws light upon the creative activities of an artist of rare genius about whom too little is known (and all facts are valuable) is to be welcomed. Mr Lindsay Drummond (who has published these works in England), and the editors of *New Directions*, as well as Mr Schimansky, have performed a service to literature by this act of homage to a noble poet and one of the few men of authentic genius of our time.

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