Slater, Maya (ed.). *Boris Pasternak: Family Correspondence 1921–1960*. Translated by Nicolas Pasternak Slater. Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2010. xxxi + 439 pp. Illustrations. Genealogical charts. Notes. Index. $25.00 (paperback).

This collection of Pasternak's letters to his parents and sisters after they left Russia offers a vivid sequence of insights into what it was like for so gifted and honest a poet to live and work in Soviet Russia. We see Pasternak coping with everyday survival; looking after other people; trying to understand history; alternately enduring and forfeiting 'the terrible forbearance of the authorities' (p. 238); and preoccupied with attempts to write something utterly new. It is stirring to re-encounter aspects of his life in this peculiarly convincing mode of eavesdropping upon his own vulnerable private voice.

The great majority of the letters have not been translated before. Now, in Nicolas Pasternak-Slater's excellent translation, they will occupy a distinguished place alongside other major publications of Pasternak's letters in English translation — *Correspondence with Olga Freidenberg 1910–1954* (New York, 1982) and *Letters Summer 1926: Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Rilke* (London, 1986 and New York, 2001).

Leonid and Rosalia Pasternak left Moscow in 1921 for medical treatment in Berlin and never returned to Russia. Their daughters — Lydia (mother of this book's translator) and Josephine — also moved to Germany; Boris and his brother stayed in Moscow. After one visit in 1922–23 Boris never saw them again; on his forced visit to Paris in 1935 he was too ill to call on them. With the rise of Hitler they moved to England. There Rosalia died in 1939 and Leonid in 1945, their two daughters remaining settled in Oxford.

Besides three genealogical charts and fifty-eight photographs, the book contains 220 letters: four from 1921, then an irregular but powerful stream from 1924 until 1946. There is a ten-year gap (post-war terror and 'iron curtain') before another stream of letters (mostly to Lydia) takes us up to Pasternak's last illness in 1960, thus covering the period of *Doctor Zhivago* and world-wide fame. Altogether there are ninety-four letters from Boris to his parents — often to his father alone; some eighty to his sisters (mainly to Josephine up to the 1930s); and forty-five from Leonid to Boris.

A constant theme in Boris's letters is his need to write something worthy of the revolutionary age. We see him moving away from what was originally of supreme importance to him: the experience of poetic inspiration. One cause for this is that 'what our times demand is certainly not poetry' (p. 12). *1905-yi god* is, he says, his 'service to the State' and *Spektorsky* is 'a prose piece in verse, a genre fundamentally pointless and compromised, possible only in a period [. . .] when art [. . .] never rings out from the belfry of genius' (p. 85). But a more positive cause is his sense that the right response to the times is not lonely lyricism but a new 'historicism': unprecedentedly realistic and truthful prose about the events in Russia. In 1936 he writes: 'The absurdities of life here, the obstacles they create for writers and artists, are beyond belief. But this is how a revolution has to be, as it grows and grows to become the event of the century. [. . .] As soon as people acquire the freedom to detach themselves from it just a little bit, so as to recall it as a whole [. . .] what could

possibly appear then, if not great realist art?' (pp. 298–99). In these words we surely catch the future voice of the endlessly hopeful Iurii Zhivago. We catch it too in other, less buoyant statements, such as when Pasternak tells his father that 'that Apocalypse which you long ago escaped from has only become more complex and hopeless' (p. 236). His new aspiration, to write a great realist work of prose, and the obstacles presented to it by the 'requirement to see our present reality from one compulsory viewpoint' as well as by his own 'gilded captivity' (p. 289) — his burdensome and dangerous reputation as representative Soviet poet — are recurrent motifs in the letters to his parents.

A parallel theme is that of the relations between a talented son and his talented and immensely successful father. When Pasternak writes (forgetting the fame of *Sestra moia zhizn´* and *Temy i variatsii* and all the achievements of his early prose): 'I'm thirty-six years old and I haven't achieved anything yet' (p. 69), his words seem laden not only with his newly-conceived task but with the weight of comparison with a genius father. In the letters there are occasional outbursts of criticism of his parents, though within what was clearly an unusually loving relationship. Thus, writing to Josephine in 1932, he blames them for an authoritarian 'Tolstoyan' kindness (p. 203). This is in the context of his efforts to explain the break-up with his first wife, Evgenia, his painful loyalty to her, his anguished love for his son Zhenichka and the happiness of his relationship with Zinaida.

Frustration from not being able to talk face to face was compounded by the difficulty of making his parents realize how life in Russia had changed. He could not properly make clear to them how cramped Moscow living conditions had become, how impossible it was to move house; why Soviet journalists would not report his father's 1927 Berlin exhibition, or why he could not intercede with Lunacharskii to get Leonid's monograph published. Nor could he write, in the 1930s, about arrests, executions, his own loss of friends. Repeatedly we read: 'Things aren't at all as you imagine' (p. 106); 'topics that are hard to explain from a distance' (p. 296); 'certain peculiarities of the newspapers here' (p. 104); 'the Jesuit College' — meaning the Soviet government (p. 191). A friend's execution by firing squad in 1930 is referred to as his dying of meningitis (p. 252); a cousin is given an invented surname, 'Konfaind' ('Confined'), to allude to his arrest (p. 331).

Nonetheless the letters are vibrant with thoughts, feelings and descriptions. Pasternak was an exceptionally good letter-writer and the people in his epistolary accounts (especially Evgenia, young Zhenichka, Zinaida and her family) are conveyed to his readers very vividly indeed. Evgenii Borisovich Pasternak ('Zhenichka') is, of course, still living in Moscow with his wife Elena Vladimirovna, and it is on their Notes to their Russian editions of the letters (*Pis´ma k roditeliam i sestram*, Stanford, CA, 1998) and volumes 7–10 of the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v odinnadtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 2005) that much in the linking commentaries to these translated letters is based.

The commentaries are indispensable. They explain names and circumstances, clarify obscurities, mention other relevant letters, and identify shifts towards intolerance in Soviet cultural politics. They also keep us reminded of the many arrests and premature deaths of people Pasternak knew, which must

have greatly contributed to the lack of humour his father so gently chided him with, and to his severe depression in 1935.

Pasternak's style, sometimes meditative, more often impetuous, always original, comes across in this translation most convincingly, as does his occasional explicit avoidance of clichés. An example of the latter is his saying, of Josephine's baby: 'I can't even think of writing about Alyonushka until the miserly and offensive element always present in any pre-prepared expression of familial tenderness at a distance has been replaced by that inevitably great thing that exists within her and in everything around her, and that I shall see. And — why should I be shy of saying it — I have eyes and heart enough not to diminish her enormous and mysterious charm, and her right to an enormous and mysterious acceptance of her manifestation and her existence [. . .] and you, Mama, don't be cross and don't think that I'm complicating things — God knows, as they say, that my complication is simpler than many simplicities' (p. 147).

Sixteen of the letters written during the war and the late 1950s are in Pasternak's own English — impressive, but imperfect. One imagines he might well have recognized a both impressive and perfect English version of himself in the present volume.

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