BORIS PASTERNAK AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Angela Livingstone

A 'half-reluctant determination to become an integral part of his age'—thus has Pasternak's embracing of 'public' subject matter in the mid-1920s been described.[1] The combination of 'half-reluctant' with 'determined' and 'integral' makes a couple of interesting oxymorons which say something about the poet's relation to the public events of his time. 'We were an apolitical generation', he wrote in 1930, looking back to the time of the world war[2]—and explicitly referring to the 'tiny part' of the intelligentsia that he belonged to and knew—and most of his very early work is so focused on and immersed in aesthetic, perceptual and spiritual experiences that little attention is left for such matters as war, revolution, politics. Later, with effort, Pasternak changed in this respect, and by 1934 he felt able to say with a certain strange triumph: 'I have become a particle of my time and state'.[3]

The following account of Pasternak's life and writing during and in relation to the period of the First World War (with some remarks about his later literary treatments of it) is intended as part of a larger study of his place in the whole external dimension of political and social events, national and international conflict. At the end I append two poems of Pasternak's about the war, in my translation, along with a contrasting third one from the same period. (These poems have not been translated before.)

I

At the outbreak of World War I, Pasternak was twenty four years old and steeped in poetry. It was in 1913–16 that he found himself as a writer, after an adolescence spent preparing for a career in music, and student years that had taken him deep into philosophy. He was very conscious of the lateness of his arrival in literature and exhilarated by this new direction, this turn away from a career in philosophy as previously from one in music. What brought him to writing, he said, was not a youth spent absorbed in reading the classics, as it was for those who knew of their literary gifts much earlier in their lives, it was rather something Briusov had called, in a not wholly favourable review, his 'originality' (*samobytnost'*), 'strength of imagination' and 'peculiar cast of soul'.[4] In 1911 he had begun writing 'with passionate absorption' about everything around him—'the sea, the dawn, the southern rain, the coal of the Harz' (BP 1991: IV, 189).[5] He was not drawn to look beyond these things—or beyond the huge task set him by his still unexercised *samobytnost'*—to events on the national or world stage. From 1913 he was involved in publishing ventures—with *Lirika*, and then with *Tsentrifuga* (founded by Bobrov, Aseev and himself as a breakaway group from *Lirika* in June 1914 and briefly becoming a successful publishing venture); for a while he engaged quite deeply in literary polemics, even to the extent, at one stage, of challenging an adversary to a duel;[6] he was translating Kleist; after their meeting in May 1914 he was emotionally and creatively overwhelmed by Maiakovskii; and he was beginning to write literary prose and a great many poems, including some (such as 'Station' and 'Venice') that would be recognized as mature pieces. His first volume of verse, *Twin in the Clouds*, written in the summer of 1913, was published in December of that year; his second, *Over the Barriers*, was to be published in wartime, in December 1916.

Pasternak's life, in the war years, was marked above all by these concentratedly literary concerns, still new to him. At the same time he was trying to earn his living—working in 1914 as a live-in tutor at the dacha of the Lithuanian-Russian poet Jurgis Baltrushaitis, and the following year as tutor in a German family. (Many of his writings were lost when anti-German demonstrators set fire to the family's house in May 1915.) In 1916 he took on office work at a chemical plant in the province of Perm'—work connected with the war, thus both morally and practically justifying his civilian status.

In June 1914, a month before the declaration of war, Pasternak had been rejected by the call-up authorities because of his shortened leg, the result of his breaking a thighbone when, at the age of fourteen, he had been thrown by a horse. That autumn, at the same time as Maiakovskii and some others he knew, he made moves to join the army as a volunteer, but seems not to have persevered. His desire to join up diminished greatly after he was told about conditions at the front by a friend[7]

who was on leave (and who, returning to the front, was killed not long afterwards). Interestingly enough, his abandoning the patriotic idea of joining up coincides with the period in his creative life when he was withdrawing from all literary conflicts and—after *Tsentrifuga*—from all adherence to literary groups; his attitude became pacifist in both spheres. This position is indeed reflected in the title *Over the Barriers*.

In Perm the war seemed remote, but Pasternak still thought he might eventually be called up; only in December 1916 was he told this would not happen. That winter he worked in another chemical plant, at Tikhie gory on the river Kama. There were military men about as well as Austrian prisoners of war, refugees, and other daily signs of war and its hardships; Pasternak was in charge of the 'military desk' at the works, making decisions about which workers should have their army service postponed or cancelled; it appears he won exemption for a large number of men. His own exemption was once again justified by his working in a factory in the defence industry.

The question of exemption from military service seems to have been an anxious preoccupation of Pasternak's for a long time. Twice he describes an incident from his time with the Baltrushaitises in which as a non-soldier he came into close contact with soldiers. Just a few days before the July 19 declaration of war, a barge carrying grenadiers came up the River Oka to moor for the night at the edge of the Baltrushaitises' land; the officers were invited into the house. This episode is recalled in one of Pasternak's last works, the autobiographical *People and Propositions* (1956), but a longer, fictional and slightly different account of it was given by him in 1922, in the unfinished 'Three Chapters from a Story' (BP 1991: IV). In each version the main feature is the slow strange sound of military music improbably drifting up out of the mist before tugboat, then barge, appeared. But in the 1922 account, in which the music is further described as 'incomprehensible' and 'melancholy', there is an additional fragment of dialogue between two young men, one of them called Spektorskii (like the hero of the later *poema*). They discuss the imminence of war, and the need to keep secret, it seems, their having joined up in advance of it. This is followed by three pages containing a series of quasi-indirect references to military exemption and to an injured leg: someone has fallen three times from a belfry; Spektorskii's war service is over because of a shattered leg—no permanent crippling but a shortening; one Spiridon has been exempted because of flat feet; in the night 'nineteen-twentieths of a leg made their way upstairs' (Spektorskii is arriving back). These bare fragments are held together by allusions to the weather: a blizzard. The 'blizzard' of war was to recur in later writings and had been the main metaphor of the 1914 poem 'Bad Dream' (see Appendix). Altogether, so little is said that it is as if the matter cannot quite be looked at. Yet Pasternak is evidently trying to sort out his position.

Another unfinished piece, 'Patrick's Notes'[8] (BP 1991: IV), written in the late 1930s but set in 1916, renews the theme of non-participation in the war. Here the civilian hero reflects that, whereas he had once wanted to volunteer for service so as to 'share the military exploits of my contemporaries', he now regards joining the army as a good way of ending the confusions and failures which have overtaken his domestic life. He is thus a forerunner of Pasha Antipov in *Doctor Zhivago*, who plunges into World War I for just this reason, going into battle as into an alchemical crucible, to emerge as another man with a new name.

There is only one finished work about non-participation in the war—the 1929 story entitled 'A Story' (BP 1991: IV). It has three parts: the first and third are again set in 1916 and constitute a kind of frame. Not much less fragmentary and indirect than 'Three Chapters', they narrate the uneasy contact Serezha, a civilian and a poet, has with men who are about to experience fighting or have already experienced it. Within this frame stands the main narrative, the poet's dream-recollection of a pre-war time when he was just beginning to find himself as a writer. We see here Pasternak's first firm presentation of the idea that writing is an equivalent of fighting (a theme to be developed in the relationship of Zhivago and Strel′nikov in the later novel). To write is as good as to fight—in three ways. First, it is altruistic: both the writing of the story within 'A Story' and the writing by the writer within this inner story have as their purpose the production of wealth with which to rescue women from distress. Secondly, it is self-sacrificial: in the story being written within 'A Story', a writer auctions himself, body and soul, for his purchaser to use as he likes, even to enslave or kill; his is no less a sacrifice than the soldier's. And thirdly, it is unique: it conveys insights not discoverable anywhere else. Around all this implicit, nervous argument in favour of the civilian poet's value in a time of war, there stands, however, the framing narrative, in the first part of which Serezha has to hear his sister's surprise that he has been discharged—'there's no sign of any limp!'—as well as her reproach that he has forgotten one Lemokh, a man whose brother, glimpsed two years before in the street, is now about to set off for the front. (As I have mentioned, it is all strangely full of indirection: one wants to ask why Lemokh is not himself the fighting man, and why there is a time lapse of two years.) In the third section (the second part of the 'frame'), waking from his long dream of a time preceding all question of military call-up, Serezha sees that very Lemokh enter the house as 'a manifestation of the masculine spirit of fact'. This reduces Serezha to nothing; he learns, moreover, that Lemokh's brother is back from the war, wounded in the leg. The brother, who does not appear in the story and remains an abstraction, thus resembles Serezha in that he is both at home and leg-injured, so that the essential difference between them is made the more conspicuous: the one has been writing, the other fighting.

The recurrent motif of injury to the leg is used as a passing but most interesting analogy in the autobiographical *A Safe Conduct* (1930) (BP 1991: IV). There, of his starting to write poetry after his long preparation for a career in music, Pasternak writes: 'My fifteen years of abstinence from words, which I had sacrificed to sounds, doomed me to originality as certain kinds of maiming doom a person to acrobatics'. (BP 1991: IV, 162)[9] Although he has already mentioned his fall from the horse, there is no sense here of his recollecting that fall, and the analogy appears merely inventive and illuminating. How clearly, one wonders, did Pasternak intend a link between the metaphor of maiming and the real limp he had kept from his childhood accident? For, tacit behind the sentence written, hovers another, unwritten, one: maimed is what soldiers are at war, so I was like them, and in just the same way as it made them heroes, so it made me an unusually original writer.

What views on the war did Pasternak express? In July 1914 he wrote to his parents of how shocked he was by the actions of the Germans (by contrast with which Napoleon's acts seemed a genius's forgivable caprices): 'No, really papa, what scoundrels, for goodness' sake! The duplicity with which they've fooled diplomacy, Wilhelm's speech, the attitude to France! Luxemburg and Belgium!' The strong tone of indignation, of moral offence, has its personal basis in a further level of German duplicity: Pasternak spoke fluent German, had studied in Marburg, loved German literature and philosophy, was translating Kleist, regarded Rilke as his chief mentor—and it is with something of the grief and anger Marina Tsvetaeva was later to express, in her Second World War poem 'To Germany'[10] that he exclaims: 'And this is the country we have been visiting, to study the theory of culture!' He now sees, beside the rich cultural traditions, 'standing there like a nightmare /*stoiachii kak koshmar*/, a whole impenetrable chaos' (BP 1992: V, 83).

Evgenii Borisovich Pasternak writes that for his father the war was a national and universal catastrophe.[11] Yet Pasternak does not actually say very much about the national situation. Instead of reflective or analytic comment he offers figurative perceptions of the changed atmosphere. In these, certain groups of images appear again and again, particularly images of violent weather and of trains. In the July letter he projected his sense of catastrophe into the very trains he saw departing for the front: he felt they were mourning the last train which went by before the terrible change, before this 'dead thought'; mourning, too, the last pre-war day on which 'reality still existed and people went out of their houses and then came back home again' (BP 1992: V, 84). He describes the scene at the station, with soldiers behaving like schoolboys before a Greek lesson, a woman bringing a handful of green apples, cavalrymen holding mock fights, horses' faces peering out through gaps in the wagons; then the women's keening as they saw their loved ones off; his own delighted observation of how delicately the young men behaved towards the women, and his awed realization that this 'everyday heroism' was taking place everywhere—'at all the stations': he was witnessing the signs of something truly universal. All these motifs recur in subsequent works: the Greek lesson in the poem 'The Artilleryman' (Autumn, 1914); the horses' faces in 'Tenth Anniversary of Presnia' (1915); the deceived certainty of continuity (the coming home again) in 'A Story'; the women with apples, the keening and the soldiers' behaviour, in *A Safe Conduct*; and so on.

Two statements by Pasternak about the war date from 1916. In 'The Black Goblet' (BP 1991: IV), an essay about rival literary groups, reality, as it 'disintegrates', divides into two kinds: the Historical and the Lyrical. Poets, too, are divided into two kinds: there are those (the Futurists) whom he calls 'soldiers of absolute history' and sees as having—at the end of 1914—'roused the years with an unprecedented clamour'; and there are those ('us', the lyricists) who 'will not touch the time, just as we have never touched it'. The two principles are 'equally a priori and absolute', even though his preference, his choice between them, is confident. (This is, of course, just what he later depicts in the opposite careers of Strel'nikov and Zhivago.)

The other 1916 statement is in a short piece (untitled and not published until 1991) starting 'It was a strange year' (BP: 1991, IV, 439-40). The 'root of the evil' of the time is defined by Pasternak as the way people began to think in terms of masses instead of in terms of individuals. The year's 'strangeness' is certainly reflected in the strangeness of Pasternak's way of expressing it. What happened, he writes, is that 'dangers' began to behave in a way that only 'prosperity' (*blagodenstvie*) ought to behave—they began to unite people in 'regiments, companies, nations, committees and sanitary units'. A similar criticism of the perennial human inclination to collectivize, generalize and theorize would become—with far greater lucidity—the underlying theme and impetus of *Doctor Zhivago* and, as Evgenii Pasternak has pointed out (BP 1991: IV, 860), is concentrated in Lara's saying, about the war years:

> Then falsehood came into the Russian land. The main disaster, the root of future evil, was the loss of faith in the value of one's own opinion. People imagined they had now got to sing in unison and live according to others' ideas which were forced upon them. This social aberration was all-embracing, contagious (BP 1990: III, 398).

While abhorring the neglect of the individual in all the abstractions about large numbers, Pasternak was nonetheless fascinated by the relation between, on the one hand, a given person or thing and, on the other, an abstraction or unifying conception, a general state of affairs: the latter palpably exists in some way, he felt, containing and influencing (as weather did) individual persons and things. Unlike Tolstoi, who, especially in *War and Peace*, wanted to oust generalities and instate sheer detail and discrete instance (perhaps only keeping his own generalities about the falsity of generalization), Pasternak, no fighter but a witness and watcher, sensed and precisely noted the weird coexisting of objects with concepts, of persons with impersonal 'events'. So, at the races, in a year of war, 'The war year rose behind the jockeys, / Horses and spokes of rocking chairs' (BP 1989: I, 306). This idiosyncratic slant of perception determines the content of many of his poems. Even the fine 1917 poem 'Davai roniat' slova' (BP 1989: I, 167), which argues for the sole reality of details and is filled with detail after delicate detail of autumn, is structured by a repeated rhetorical question about the general cause of everything ('Do you ask who ordains all this?'), so that it turns out to propose the very question it claims to reject, and the relation between the vast general question and the detail of, for instance, leaves falling on a doormat becomes paradoxically the main subject of the poem. Probably this fascination lies behind Pasternak's readiness to go along with and be part of the Revolution and the new State. But it did not reconcile him to the war.

River barges were the first approach of the war, trains its first definitive action. Passages about the war in *A Safe Conduct* describe 'the passenger trains by which the local men travelled from the volost to the assembly centres' with 'a surge of lamentation rolling in pursuit of/ them/', and with 'grief introduced all along the line like an emergency measure'; the trains where soldiers 'jumped down onto the sand from the high goods trucks' near a platform which 'was giving away no apples'; (BP 1991: IV, 221-22)[12] and the trucks 'exporting large consignments of fresh indigenous population, night and day, in haste, with songs, in exchange for damaged batches coming back in the hospital trains' (BP 1991: IV, 225).[13] In all this, Pasternak is observer and recorder, restrained judge and self-conscious mourner, as well as craftsman, binding these strands into a strongly coloured, strongly outlined tapestry.

The two chief prose works which look back at World War I—*A Safe Conduct* from fifteen years on, *Doctor Zhivago* from forty—rehearse the old worry about exemption from war service and finally put it to rest. The feeling of inauthenticity which (for all his inner defences) overwhelmed Serezha in 'A Story', becomes in *A Safe Conduct* the atmosphere of Moscow itself, the guilt not of one man but of a whole 'city in the rear':

> The place for authentic positions was the front, and the rear would have fallen into a false one in any case, even if, on top of this, it had not grown skilled in voluntary falsehood. The city hid behind phrase-making like a cornered thief (BP 1991: IV, 225)[14]

The events of 1917 oust the topic of war from *A Safe Conduct*, as also from his poetry and it becomes clear that Pasternak wanted to write only about what he found exhilarating. Indeed he had told his parents, in December 1916, that there were now two kinds of life—on the one hand, the habit of living in wartime, and coming to terms with it; on the other, living as if in the 'new era'—and he adds that he is not seeking a gleam (*prosvet*) in the war's prolonged darkness, as many were, because he knew that, rather than a gleam, 'there will all at once be light'. Significantly, he linked this expectation with the feeling that his own position was no longer ambiguous; 'its ambiguity has passed, and I am again I' (BP 1992: V, 96).

The ambiguity is conclusively overcome in *Doctor Zhivago*, where the poet protagonist is also a doctor, one, that is, who contributes indispensably to the 'war effort' and who is actually contravening an international code when, caught in battle, he picks up a gun and starts to shoot. *Doctor Zhivago* shows the same pattern as *A Safe Conduct*: the misfortune and falsehood of war are replaced by the Revolution's reality and hope. Some twenty four pages are devoted to the war period, but they present it as a prologue to that far more important event. All the war chapters, moreover, are marked by a marginalizing of the issues of the war itself and a systematic turning to other, more life-giving, issues. Military facts are bleakly recorded, typical horrors are described, but, each time, our attention is drawn to something else—to the birth of a child; to a discussion of Jewishness and nationhood; to the beginning of a great love; to reflections on how chance and coincidence alter our lives. The military is made to yield to the nonmilitary, just as it was, even more explicitly, in the early story which was probably a first attempt at the novel that would become *Doctor Zhivago*, 'The Childhood of Liuvers' (BP 1991: IV). There Zhenia at one point suddenly realizes that men she had watched at their drilling were not a mere uniformed mass called 'soldiers' but were individual persons, each with different feelings. In the novel, Pasternak looks at the military as such only when, as it were, he can point to a personification of it in his own existential opposite—in Strel′nikov, the 'shooting' man. The war is firmly condemned in Lara's reminiscence towards the end of the novel. Polarizing peacetime and wartime in a way that recalls the remark in *A Safe Conduct* that the 'peacetime mind' can never make the jump to conceiving of wartime, Lara says:

> And suddenly this jump from unrebellious, innocent, measured existence, into blood and wailing, universal madness and the savagery of daily and hourly legalised lauded slaughter (BP 1990: III, 398).

II

In *A Safe Conduct* Pasternak recounts a bad dream he once had in Marburg (Germany) in 1912 and which he took to be a premonition of war. He had dreamed of soldiers on a deserted exercise field (so this 'soldiers drilling' scene precedes the one in 'The Childhood of Liuvers'), with everything 'in Frederick the Great style, with fortifications of earth and entrenchments'. What gave the dream its uncanny nightmarish quality was not merely that its time was 'some dark hour of daytime', but that people were

> tangibly enveloped in a kind of silence that does not happen in reality. It pulsed in the air like a blizzard of loose earth, not merely standing there, but *taking place*. It seemed to be constantly being tossed up from spades. This was the saddest dream of all the dreams I have ever had. I probably wept in my sleep (BP 1991: IV, 191-92).[15]

The special oneiric awfulness is well recognizable, and one sees again how Pasternak's war images, springing visibly from moments in his life (letters, dreams), spread over from one work to another: the phrase 'not merely standing' (things such as weather or months *can* 'stand' in Russian), must recall the phrase *stoiachii kak koshmar* in the 1914 letter (see p. 12). And the description of the dream's sensation of air as 'a blizzard of loose earth' was to be expanded into the opening figures of the 1914 poem 'Bad Dream', his one extant poem about the first world war that is more or less successful (BP 1989: I, 63).

In the poem 'Bad Dream' it is not clear who is saying 'Listen', nor to whom; nor who is the one named in line 10 as the 'Celestial Faster' (*nebesnyi postnik*). Let us suppose that the poet is instructing himself to attend to the general condition of things, and that the 'Faster' is in some sense God, who for once (in face of world war) is 'fasting', not eating, not, that is, enjoying his creation. He is, one might say, 'abstaining'; Christopher Barnes translates the phrase as 'the Celestial Abstainer'.[16] Instead of being close to the created world, God is sleeping, in fact is imprisoned by sleep, unable to move. Meanwhile the general state of things is not a 'state' but a rushing movement (again, not 'standing' but —'taking place'): the uncontrolled racing of a blizzard over a countryside. A sleeping God dreams of a terrible blizzard. Apparently the word 'dream' does not imply 'unreal'; rather, the title is a literalization of our common way of calling some real, horrible happening a 'nightmare'; and the emphasis is not on his imagining it but on his being unable to take part because it is all so ungodly. Indeed, were it not for a more explicit verb within the poem, the title on its own could be translated 'Bad Sleep' ('sleep' and 'dream' being the same word in Russian: *son*); the reality of the surrounding horrors would then be the more emphasized. Dreams do not necessarily suggest passivity and 'Bad Dream' contrasts strongly in this respect with an action-provoking dream in the first poem of the 1915 'Petersburg' cycle (BP 1989: I, 68) where Peter the Great is made by Pasternak to say, in urgent and powerful voice,

'I've had a dream and I shall square accounts with it right now, immediately'; he goes on to found a great city.

God's fasting has a parallel in the extended metaphor of the poem's first two parts—a filtering through gums in the absence of teeth. The result of the world's toothlessness is not only, however, an inability to eat but also an inability to speak: the castles hiss, the estates lisp. Meanwhile, persons and things connected with the war *do* keep their teeth: pilots and seamen do, the Carpathian mountains (important in a later period of the war)[17] also do.

A different reading of 'Celestial Faster' is offered by Evgenii Pasternak,[18] who suggests that the poem presents not 'the living God' but the 'ritualistic idol' which people have begun to revere, and supports this by noting elements of popular pre-Christian myth in the poem. He mentions, too, the superstitious belief that a dream about teeth falling out foretells a death. I will suggest yet another interpretation: rather than (or as well as) God gone passive, or dread pagan idol, the faster may be the poet himself. The biographical Pasternak was indeed an 'abstainer' from the war, not joining in the feast of atrocity, and he does seem to be describing his own dream, his own nausea and horror. While it is unlikely that he would call himself 'celestial', he could simply have in mind the traditional view of the poet as someone more in touch with truth, and mean that here the poet is for once unable to respond to earthly happenings, being paralysed and muted by them.

The poem's second part sees the earth flattened by war. Pasternak is perhaps referring to the Germans' invasion of neutral Belgium in August 1914. The sky loses its—not teeth, now, but tongue—that is to say, the moon, which is gone forever, transformed into a hideous wound, the stump of a shot-off limb. Both the earlier knocking out of teeth and the amputation of the tongue lead to an inability to enunciate; the first to hissing and lisping, the second to 'tongue-tied, hoarse and nasal' speech. Before (meaning before the war), the moon had been—in a serene and lovely image, rare in this poem—'like a bell on the crossbeam of distance'. What was a chiming bell is now a bleeding stump. I suggest that this may be read as Pasternak's *necessarily tongue-tied* confession, or rather declaration, that poems cannot be written about such horrors as world war, also as his half-cryptic warning to us not to expect to find war poems amongst his work—there will only be a few hoarse and hissing ones such as 'Bad Dream' itself and 'The Artilleryman'.

The image of thrusting a hand into whirling gravel (whirling like the 'blizzard of earth' in the *Safe Conduct* dream) and finding a fleshy stump roll out onto it (lines 28-31) prefigures the incantations of the sorceress Kubarikha in *Doctor Zhivago,* especially these words: 'I'll plunge you a knife in that whirl of snow, and out of the snow I'll pull it all red and bloody' (BP 1990: III, 361). Doubtless it derives, as those words do, from folklore, and is one of the pagan elements meant by Evgenii Pasternak; indeed, the whole dream is summed up as a *skazka* (folktale) six lines from the end. The folk element does not add beauty. The poem as it proceeds only grows in ghastliness and the vocabulary of war becomes more frequent, with 'shot off—battle—artillery—cannon-plates—gun-carriages' and, finally—there being no hint of heroism here but only the blind infliction of injuries—the 'bandages', 'xeroform', 'signals' and 'brakes' of a 'hospital train'.

It is not a great poem, yet its lack of greatness can be interestingly forgiven if we perceive its own argument about the war's destruction of teeth and tongues. Two other poems about the war were attempted by Pasternak. One is lost, no more than an insignificant quatrain remaining from the military censor's hacking (BP 1989: I, 457). The other, 'The Artilleryman' (BP 1989: I, 456), published in 1914 and criticized for its pessimistic and pacifist stance, is still more tongue-tied and still more of a confession that its author, or poetry altogether, cannot say anything about worldwide catastrophe. In his early, 'maimed' and 'acrobatic', period Pasternak was not able to call on the kind of understating simplicity which might conceivably have been a way of approaching such a subject.

The second poem is all complication. An artilleryman is in charge of a ship, which is the earth, which is rushing onward into numberless atmospheres, and is also going down into a horrid depth; the nice modest young soldier has no idea what he is doing and is unaware of the danger, of the captain's (the tsar's?) instructions, of the night failing an exam because it cannot conjugate 'I live' in Greek, of the fact that the earth (the same earth as is rushing downward) is revolving around a Japanese cannon; nor is he aware that the universe is billeted in smashed heads, whose dampness it senses for the first time and which (the heads) it (the universe) cannot hear, since they are alive... So many metaphors are mixed together that it is hard to discern a meaning other than that war is a disaster, with everything felt to be out of control.

Per-Arne Bodin, however, in an essay on this poem,[19] as well as setting it firmly in its futurist context and interestingly seeing a 'black sun' in the Japanese cannon, round which the earth revolves, offers a persuasive reading of the poem as combining two kinds of despair: historical and religious. First, the artillerist himself, argues Bodin, can be seen as the humble and tragically isolated tsar Nicholas II. Secondly, and simultaneously, the verb 'I live' (Zao) may be read as the difficult word of the almost imperceptible Christ (Bodin quotes from Saint John's Gospel 14: 19, 'Because I live, ye shall live also;')[20] in this reading the captain of the earth-ship becomes 'God', so that we have again (as in 'Bad Dream') 'a cosmic image of the gap between the Creator and his creation' and, to quote Bodin further, 'the poem emerges as a reproach to God for not allowing Himself to be heard and seen in his creation'.[21]

I have added a third poem, to show Pasternak writing at the same period more typically about natural events, rather than political-military ones. Like 'Bad Dream', this rarely noticed poem, 'Happiness' (BP 1989: I, 86), describes violent weather. Meteorological turbulences were not, though, something Pasternak ever regretted, they always brought him inspiration, epiphanic understandings, stirrings of rapture, and were experienced far more often as something like the passion of love than as something suggesting warfare. In 'Happiness' the war is in fact alluded to—its third quatrain begins: 'There, peace is concluded'—a passing comparison of the end of the thunder to the hoped-for ending of the war. Mostly, though, this is about extreme and unbridled moods of man and of sky: the downpour *exhaustively* received by gardens, the *exultant* mood of streets after a rainstorm, drops turning woodlands *wholly* into 'sieves'. Everything is raging, excessive and passionate, but the focus is on nature. Even love cannot equal the honeysuckle's engagement with the stars.

1. Дурной сон

Прислушайся к вьюге, сквозь десны процеженной,
Прислушайся к голой побежке бесснежья.
Разбиться им не обо что, и заносы
Чугунною цепью проносятся понизу
Полями, по чересполосице, в поезде,
По воздуху, по снегу, в отзывах ветра,

Сквозь сосны, сквозь дыры заборов безгвоздых,
Сквозь доски, сквозь десны безносых трущоб.

Полями, по воздуху, сквозь околесицу,
Приснившуюся небесному постнику.
Он видит: попадали зубы из челюсти,
И шамкают замки, поместия с пришептом,
Все вышиблено, ни единого в целости,
И постнику тошно от стука костей.

От зубьев пилотов, от флотских трезубцев,
От красных зазубрин карпатских зубцов.
Он двинуться хочет, не может проснуться,
Не может, засунутый в сон на засов.

И видит еще. Как назем огородника,
Всю землю сравняли с землей на Стоходе.
Не верит, чтоб выси зевнулось когда-нибудь
Во всю ее бездну, и на небо выплыл,
Как колокол на перекладине дали,
Серебряный слиток глотательной впадины,
Язык и глагол ее, — месяц небесный,
Нет, косноязычный, гундосый и сиплый,
Он с кровью заглочен хрящами развалин.
Сунь руку в крутящийся щебень метели, —
Он на руку вывалится из расселины
Мясистой култышкою, мышцей бесцельной
На жиле, картечиной на́прочь отстреленной.
Его отожгло, как отеклую тыкву.
Он прыгнул с гряды за ограду. Он в рытвине,
Он сорван был битвой и, битвой подхлеснутый,
Как шар, откатился в канаву с откоса
Сквозь сосны, сквозь дыры заборов безгвоздых,
Сквозь доски, сквозь десны безносых трущоб.

Прислушайся к гулу раздолий неезженных,
Прислушайся к бешеной их перебежке.
Расскальзывающаяся артиллерия
Тарелями ластится к отзывам ветра.
К кому присоседиться, верстами меряя,
Слова гололедицы, мглы и лафетов?
И сказка ползет, и клочки околесицы,
Мелькая бинтами в желтке ксероформа,
Уносятся с поезда в поле. Уносятся
Платформами по снегу в ночь к семафорам.

Сопят тормоза санитарного поезда.
И снится, и снится небесному постнику…
1914

1. Bad Dream (1914), (BP 1989: I, 63)

Listen to the blizzard, which is filtered through gums,
Listen to the snowlessness nakedly running.
They have nothing to shatter against, and the drifts
Rush past in a cast-iron chain, low down
Over fields, over open-strip farms, in a train,
Through the air, through the snow, in the echoes of wind.
Through pines, through the holes in nail-less fences,
Through boards, through the gums of noseless backwoods.

Over fields, in the air, through surroundings of senselessness,
Dreamed of by the Celestial Faster.

He sees: the teeth have dropped out of the jaw,
Castles speak hissingly, estates have a lisp,
It's all been knocked out, not one remains whole,
And the Faster feels sick from the knocking of bones.

From the ratchets of pilots, tridents of seamen,
The red-coloured tines of Carpathian tooth-hills.
He would like to move, but he cannot wake up,
He can't, he's been shoved into sleep, bolted in.

And he sees: like the soil of a vegetable plot,
All the earth levelled flat like the earth at Stokhod.[22]
He does not believe that the height will ever
Yawn to the size of its total abyss,
Or that onto the sky there will float—like a bell
On the crossbeam of distance, a gullet's silver
Ingot, its tongue and its word—the new moon
Celestial. No, tongue-tied, nasal and hoarse,
It is swallowed with blood by the gristle of ruins.
Thrust your hand in the snowstorm's whirling gravel
And it rolls out onto your hand from some cleft

As a fleshy stump, a useless muscle,
Attached to a sinew shot off by grapeshot.
It has been burned off like an over-ripe pumpkin.
From its row it jumped over the fence. In a rut.
Torn off by battle and, lashed on by battle,
Like a ball, it has rolled down a slope to a ditch,
Through the pines, through the holes in nail-less fences,
Through boards, through the gums of noseless backwoods.

Listen closely to the hum of untravelled spaces,
Listen to their crazy criss-cross running.
Artillery sliding in all directions
Fawns on echoes of wind with its cannon-plates.
Who can they be friends with, measuring in miles,
These words of black ice, darkness, gun-carriages?
And the folk-tale crawls, and tatters of senselessness,
Flashing their bandages in xeroform[23] yellow,
Are rushed away from the train to the field,
By trucks over snow into night towards signals.

The brakes of the hospital train keep snorting.
And the Celestial Faster dreams and dreams....

2. Артиллерист

Артиллерист стоит у кормила,
И земля, зачерпывая бортом скорбь,
Несется под давленьем в миллиард атмосфер,
Озверев, со всеми батареями в пучину.

Артиллерист-вольноопределяющийся, скромный
и простенький.
Он не видит опасных отрогов,
Он не слышит слов с капитанского мостика,
Хоть и верует этой ночью в бога.

И не знает, что ночь, дрожа по всей обшивке
Лесов, озер, церковных приходов и школ,
Вот-вот срежется, спрягая в разбивку
С кафедры нá ветер брошенный глагол:
Ζαω[24]

Голосом пересохшей гаубицы, —
И вот-вот провалится голос.

Что земля, терпевшая обхаживанья солнца

И ставшая солнце обхаживать потом,
С этой ночи вращается вокруг пушки японской
И что он, вольноопределяющийся, правит винтом.

Что, не боясь попасть на гауптвахту,
О разоруженьи молят облака,
И вселенная стонет от головокруженья,
Расквартированная наспех в размозженных
головах,

Она ощутила их сырость впервые,
Они ей неслышны, живые.

1914

2. 'An Artilleryman...' (1914) (BP 1989: I, 456)

An artilleryman stands at the helm,
And the earth, its board scooping up sorrow,
Rushes under pressure into a milliard atmospheres,
Becoming a brute, with all batteries into the deep.
The volunteer artilleryman is a simple, modest fellow,
He doesn't see the dangerous spurs,
He doesn't hear the words from the captain's bridge,
Although he does believe in God this night.
He doesn't know that night, trembling in all its planking
Of forests, lakes, church parishes and schools,
Is about to be failed for conjugating at random
The verb flung onto the wind from the rostrum:
Ζαω...[25]
With the voice of a dried-up-throated howitzer -
And at any moment the voice may break down.
Nor that the earth, having suffered the sun's encircling,
And then having started to circle the sun,
From this night on turns round a Japanese cannon,
Or that he, the volunteer, is in charge of the screw.
Or that, unafraid of being sent to the guard-room,
The clouds are praying for disarmament,
The universe is groaning from giddiness,
Being hurriedly billeted in smashed-to-bits heads;
It has felt their dampness for the first time ever,
And they are inaudible to it, alive.

3. Счастье

Исчерпан весь ливень вечерний
Садами. И вывод—таков:
Нас счастье тому же подвергнет
Терзанью, как сонм облаков.

Наверное, бурное счастье
С лица и на вид таково,
Как улиц по смытьи ненастья
Столиственное торжество.

Там мир заключен. И, как Каин,
Там заштемпелеван теплом
Окраин, забыт и охаян,
И высмеян листьями гром.

И высью. И капель икотой.
И — внятной тем более, что
И рощам нет счета: решета
В сплошное слились решето.

На плоской листве. Океане
Расплавленных почек. На дне
Бушующего обожанья
Молящихся вышине.

Кустарника сгусток не выжат.
По клетке и влюбчивый клест
Зерном так задорно не брызжет,
Как жимолость — россыпью звезд.

1915

3. Happiness (1915) (BP 1989: I, 86)

The evening's whole downpour, exhausted
By gardens, lets us conclude:
Happiness causes us torment
No less than a gathering of cloud.

This turbulent happiness looks like
—Most likely—in face or in form—
The milliard-leaved exultation
Of streets washed clean by a storm.

There, peace is concluded. There, thunder
Is stamped with the warmth—like Cain—
Of suburbs, derided by laughter
Of leaves, then forgotten, defamed.

And by laughter of heights. And by hiccups
Of drops. And they're all the more clear
Since the groves can't be counted: their siftings
Have merged—one sieve, single and sheer.

On flatness of leaves. On an ocean
Of melted buds. On the level
Of the ground of the wild adoration
Of those who are praying to heaven.

The thick isn't wrung from the bushes.
No crossbill in love behind bars
Splashes ryegrain as pertly as does this
Honeysuckle the scatter of stars.

(More literal version of poem 'Happiness')

The evening's whole downpour is used up
By the gardens. And the conclusion is this:
We'll be subjected by happiness to the same
Torment as by the gathering of clouds.

Probably, turbulent happiness
Is similar in face and appearance
To the hundred-leaved celebration
Of streets after a washing of bad weather.

There peace is concluded. And, like Cain,
There the thunder is stamped with the warmth
Of suburbs, is forgotten and defamed
And derided by the leaves.

And by the height. And by the hiccuping of drops.
And—all the more audible because
Even the groves can't be counted: their sieves
Have merged into a continuous sieve.

On the flat foliage. On an ocean
Of melted buds. On the bottom
Of the raging adoration
Of those who are praying to the height.

The bush's thick is not wrung out.
Even an amorous crossbill does not
Splash its grain so pertly over its cage
As honeysuckle/splashes/the scatter of stars.

NOTES

1. Christopher Barnes, *Boris Pasternak. A Literary Biography*. II. *1928–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.
2. Angela Livingstone (ed.), *Pasternak on Art and Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 125.
3. Barnes, *Pasternak*, II, p. 100.
4. Evgenii B. Pasternak, *Boris Pasternak: Biografiia* (Moscow: Tsitadel′, 1997), p. 202.
5. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, p. 102. Throughout the text, references are given to Boris Pasternak (abbreviation: BP), *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, I 1989, II 1989, III 1990, IV 1991, V 1992).
6. Pasternak, *Boris Pasternak*, pp. 185-86.
7. Sergei Listopad, a musician, son of the philosopher Lev Shestov.
8. Translated by Christopher Barnes as 'Fragments of a Novel' (In Boris Pasternak, *The Voice of Prose*. II. *People and Propositions* [Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990]).
9. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, p. 75.
10. The poem 'Germanii', in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannye proizvedenia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Biblioteka poeta, 1965), p. 333, contains, for example, the lines 'Vstar′—skazkami tumanila,/ Dnes′—tankami poshla' ('Once you clouded us with tales, / Now you've started off on tanks').
11. Pasternak, *Boris Pasternak*, p. 207.
12. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, p. 132.
13. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, p. 135.
14. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, pp. 135-36.
15. Livingstone, *Pasternak*, pp. 104-105.
16. Christopher Barnes, *Boris Pasternak. A Literary Biography*. I. *1890–1928* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 181.

17. Pasternak slightly revised 'Bad Dream' in 1928, introducing references to events later in World War I.
18. Evgenii B. Pasternak, *Boris Pasternak: Materialy dlia biografii* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1989), pp. 230-31, or Pasternak, *Boris Pasternak*, pp. 210-11.
19. Per-Arne Bodin, 'God, Tsar and Man. Boris Pasternak's Poem *Artillerist*', *Scottish Slavonic Review* 6 (1985), pp. 69-80.
20. Bodin, 'God, Tsar and Man', p. 71.
21. Bodin, 'God, Tsar and Man', p. 72.
22. Stokhod: a river in the Volyn province, which in May–June 1916 was the border of the attack by General Kaledin's Eighth Army, part of the operation of the South-West front known as the Brusilov breakthrough.
23. *xeroform*: a healing yellow powder applied to wounds.
24. Жить (греч.)—*Ред.*
25. Greek: I live.