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Shouting Through the Window

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Fleishman, Lazar. *Boris Pasternak. The Poet and his Politics.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1990. xi + 359 pp. Notes. Index. £29.95.

Pasternak, Evgeny. *Boris Pasternak. The Tragic Years 1930–60.* Translated by Michael Duncan. 'The Poetry of Boris Pasternak' translated by Ann Pasternak Slater and Craig Raine. Collins Harvill, London, 1990. xii + 278 pp. Chronology. Plates. Bibliography. Notes. Index. £15.00.

Levi, Peter. *Boris Pasternak. A Biography.* Hutchinson, London and Sydney, 1990. ix + 310 pp. Plates. Appendix. Bibliography. Notes. Index. £17.95.

Navrozov, Andrei (ed. and trans.). *Second Nature. New Translations of Poems by Boris Pasternak. Forty-Six Poems by Boris Pasternak.* Peter Owen, London, 1990. xxxvi + 83 pp. Introduction. Notes. £13.95.

Faryno, Jerzy. *Poetika Pasternaka ("Putevye zapiski" — "Okhrannaia gramota").* Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 22. Gesellschaft zur Förderung Slawistischer Studien, Vienna, 1989. 316 pp. DM 49.00.

THE CENTENARY of Pasternak's birth has brought a flood of writing about him, and it still seems miraculous that this is not just an acceleration of the Western flow of Pasternak-commentary of the past thirty years or so but includes free tributaries from the writer's own country. Soviet conferences and publications devoted to Pasternak abound and the labours of Evgenii and Elena Pasternak to promote appreciation of his work are at last free of constraint. There is no full Soviet biography as yet but we do now have Evgenii Pasternak's valuable *Boris Pasternak. Materialy dlia biografii* (Moscow, 1989). The number of biographies available in the West shows the lure of Pasternak's fairly uneventful yet event-surrounded life: in addition to the path-breaking work by Guy de Mallac, *Boris Pasternak: His Life and Art* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1981), the spiritedly non-idolizing one by Ronald Hingley, *Pasternak, A Biography* (London, 1983), and Henry Gifford's biographically organized *Pasternak. A Critical Study* (Cambridge, 1977), we now have the first part of Christopher Barnes's two-volume *Boris Pasternak. A Literary Biography* (Cambridge, 1989), a dispassionate, comprehensive treatment of the poet's life and work which is excellently researched and beautifully produced, and looks like becoming the definitive account. As well as these, there are already three more biographies in English, to be reviewed below, and we note from the jacket of Andrei Navrozov's book that he too is writing a biography.

It has been claimed far too often that Pasternak was remote from the 'arena' of history. He was not especially remote, and those who endlessly quote in his disfavour the second half of the 1917 quatrain —

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V kashne, ladon'iu zaslonias',
Svoz' fortku kriknu detvore:
Kakoe, milye, u nas
Tysiachelet'e na dvore? —

never seem to notice that it is not about seclusion but is about putting an *end* to seclusion. The poet is not saying 'I don't care about you people out there', he is leaning out from absorption in his work in order to join in with those outside it; this is the urge behind nearly all of Pasternak's work, from the headlong young poet's 'look back' at the world-in-need-of-help (described in *A Safe Conduct*) to the whole enterprise of *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak's predilection for window-imagery shows how aware he was of both the centrality and the difficulty ('ladon'iu zaslonias'') of this outward orientation, and Evgenii Pasternak nicely mentions that he often gave his characters window-names: Liuvers is 'louvres', Guichard — 'guichet', Reshetnikov (hero in an early draft) — 'resheto' (EP, p. 61). Now both Lazar Fleishman and Evgenii Pasternak reveal him as closer to the public issues of his time than we may have thought. Fleishman writes: 'The revolutionary epoch is reflected in a more profound and complex way in Pasternak's writings than in the work of many poets of his generation, including Mayakovsky and Akhmatova, Esenin and Tsvetaeva, Mandelshtam and Khlebnikov' (LF, p. x), and *The Tragic Years* presents a great deal of material, much of it new, which supports this.

A second basic thesis in Fleishman's book is that, in everything Pasternak wrote, there is 'an essential evasiveness, relativism and ambivalence' (LF, p. vii). This is not a negative criticism and one recalls Tsvetaeva saying of Pasternak, whom she considered one of those who 'see the coursing of the blood and hear the growing of the grass', that in his work 'we can never find our way through to the theme, it's as if we keep catching at a sort of tail disappearing beyond the left edge of the brain'. This quality transfers easily to those who contemplate it, for Fleishman writes that it 'stood in sharp contrast to the directness, straightforwardness and adherence to unquestionable truths which had been considered the supreme virtues of Soviet literature since the early thirties' — indicating that it could well bring him to grief — but continues: 'Thus the very ambivalence in statements about Pasternak in the official Soviet Press only reproduced, on a more primitive level of course, the fundamental qualities of Pasternak's work' (p. vii) — suggesting the opposite; his elusiveness is doubly catching.

What is it Pasternak so infectiously evades? To put it bluntly, he evades the obvious, the unoriginal; he confounds, even more than most poets do, the dichotomies and certainties of convention. Fleishman shows that most of his victories were 'indistinguishable from defeats', recalls him saying things like 'poetry is prose', or that he was a Communist just as Peter the Great and Pushkin were, and has an excellent page on the 'general principle of metaphoric relativity' in Pasternak's early verse, his wish to 'make it impossible to determine whether an expression is used metaphorically or not', 'to blur the distinction between trope and nontrope' (p. 106). Here we can turn to Jerzy Faryno's book for a close scrutiny of these procedures, example after example of words chosen for their implied subtle attack on stereotypes, or of an image

beckoned into a poem as the vehicle of a simile, then neatly transformed into the tenor of another.

So when Pasternak did not sign collective letters (some of them vicious, of course, though not all) but would add an idiosyncratic postscript, this was in part because they were an agreed text, the distinct, abstract and obvious thing to do. How could such a cliché-fugitive man make public speeches and boldly address the issues of the day? Yet he sometimes really did come forth, not only with a constant poetic adversion, but, especially in the thirties, standing on the material tribune of a conference, to 'shout through the window'; did manage, in his groping, apologetic way, to say something important to the children frozen out there in the Soviet ice. For instance on 16 March 1936, in a speech published for the first time in 1990 (*Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 3) and appearing in lengthy extracts in English for the first time in Evgenii Pasternak's book (pp. 86–89), he told Moscow writers, gathered for the 'discussion on formalism' which marked the beginning of the purge period: 'We have quite wrongly let the tragic spirit escape from our art', and went on, in a burst of brilliant directness, to attribute its disappearance to the view that, since everything before the revolution was 'tragic', nothing after it could be, and to suggest a true-hearted remedy: let us re-name pre-revolutionary times as, say, 'bestial' (*svinstvo*) and thus 'retain the tragic for ourselves'. He was shouted down amid general hubbub and Evgenii Pasternak (for whom this moment is central, as the title of his book indicates) comments: 'One of the most tragic epochs was guilty of a great lie in renouncing the tragic feeling' (p. 89). Pasternak was not only finding a clever way of saying 'this is a tragic age', he was also exhibiting the free, playful mentality that could still evade the immobilities of contemporary language, and this too his petrified audience could not accept. His son quotes him as saying, just before he died, that his whole life had gone into the struggle for the 'free, playing' human talent (p. 245).

He did not, then, 'evade' the public arena and confrontation with the rigours of politics? And yet at times it is as if he did, though one cannot quite know. Both Fleishman and Evgenii Pasternak quote his response to Stalin's 1936 constitution, that declaration of proposed blisses which omitted all reference to freedom of association: 'There is no force on earth that could grant me freedom ... if I myself do not take it' (LF, p. 203): was he or was he not evading the fact that there are forces that can *deprive* you of it? And again in the question of the Jews — and here Fleishman seems seriously infected with Pasternakian ambivalence, for his pages on this question seem both to confront the matter head-on and yet to avoid it. He explains Pasternak's wish for all Jews to be absorbed into Christianity as a wish to save them from Stalin's plan to absorb them into Sovietdom: but what about the paradox that Pasternak too was saying that Jews should relinquish their identity, and ignoring the moral suffering this would bring? It is all too bland to say 'If assimilation was inevitable, then assimilation to Christianity was obviously better than assimilation to Soviet Communism' (LF, p. 266). Pasternak's notion of Christianity as some kind of *bassein vselennoi* seems to me to blur the question in an unsubtle way that has nothing in common with the inspired elusions of the trite in his poems. His shouts through the window were not all equally worth hearkening to.

Having now both praised and criticized it, I shall conclude by describing *Pasternak. The Poet and his Politics*, Lazar Fleishman's first book in English, as by far the most readable and informative complete biography of Pasternak yet written, and a highly valuable addition to his three previous works on Pasternak, two of which (*Pasternak v dvadtsatye gody*, Munich, 1980, and *Pasternak v tridtsatye gody*, Jerusalem, 1984) provided, with tremendous detail and documentation, the first accounts of the poet's living and writing in relation to the Soviet State. The present book tells the whole life story, concentrating on political attitudes and alignments — relations with journals, publishers, prevailing currents of thought, party pressures, the exigencies of events and of his own reputation at home and abroad. Fleishman persuasively stresses the young poet's strength as aesthetic and metaphysical philosopher, and points to a tendency to 'noncongruence' throughout his life, to what he calls Pasternak's 'eternal proclivity to legal opposition' (p. 262). Near the end of the book, in connection with Pasternak's statement in *Pravda* after the Nobel Prize award and the campaign against him, Fleishman very aptly quotes his saying (nearly thirty years previously, in *A Safe Conduct*) that a poet's biography would have to 'be assembled from inessentials that would bear witness to the concessions he made to pity and coercion' (p. 300). This could stand as an ironic conclusion to all the book's chapters which analyse Pasternak's wise evasions, helpless evasions and non-evasions of the brutal demands of post-revolutionary Russia.

Evgenii Pasternak's book is a translation, with some rearrangements, of the second half of his 1989 *Materialy*. Starting in 1930 makes sense as both of Pasternak's autobiographies stop at that point: here is their second-best extension, an account of his later life compiled from letters, poems and speeches, intertwining private and public, and given continuity through tactful bridging passages. Evgenii is silent about his own unique position, occasionally referring to 'the poet's son' and explaining in a footnote that this means himself, and certainly never broaching the 'tragic instability of the concept of fatherhood', which Fleishman identifies as one of Pasternak's themes (LF, p. 20). In this book Pasternak seems less ambiguous, and more vulnerable: how often the age made him physically ill — when he heard its pomposities, and when he saw the distress on collective farms or starvation at Lake Shartash (EP, p. 56). There is much, too, about his anguish at the inflation of his own significance under Stalin. Like Fleishman, Evgenii Pasternak finds a radical turning point in 1936 in Pasternak's relation both to the regime and to his writing.

The translation, though pleasantly fluent, has disturbing lapses: far too many errors of the order of calling Lara's departure 's Komarovskim' a 'parting from Komarovsky' (EP, p. 208): ill-chosen expressions, as when Pasternak is made to tell her cousin 'Your words about immortality were dead (*sic*) on target', ('v samuiu tochku'), (p. 163); and failure to accommodate either the omission of paragraphs from *Materialy* or the vocabulary used in some of the verse quotations. The translation of the verse is accurate and graceful, and the poems can be read with suitable rapidity as part of the story.

These two biographies add considerably to our understanding of Pasternak. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of the book by Peter Levi, which is a kind of

very personal hymn. Professor Levi's liking for Pasternak and verve in saying so are certainly a good thing, and the impulse of his book is impressively generous; had he written an essay-length tribute to the poet we would surely have read it with delight. But it was injudicious of him to essay a biography, as he is not interested in getting any of the facts right, even facts about the works he loves. On the one hand, he frequently declares his ignorance of something or other. He will quote, for example, the (English edition's) epigraph to 'A Tale', which anyone reading the work can see is taken *from* it, only to add 'I am not sure who wrote that (Gorky?)' (p. 24), so that one has to wonder how carefully he has read anything: he discusses two works called 'Essay in Autobiography' and 'People and Situations' (sometimes changing the latter to 'People and Places'), apparently unaware that these are two titles for one and the same work. On the other hand, he pretends to an initiate's knowledge by putting himself on diminutive-first-name terms with Pasternak's relatives, to the extent of repeatedly hailing as 'Sasha' Pasternak's brother who was actually known to the family as 'Shura'. (Even fictional characters seem to be his buddies: Vedeniapin is always 'Kolya'.) It would be a sad task to list all the book's errors, but among them are: 'Theme and Variations' (every time) for 'Themes and ...', 'Above the Barricades' for '... Barriers', 'A Slap in the Public Taste' rather hilariously for '... in the Face of Public Taste'; Zamiatin is invariably 'Zemyatin', Zhivago's wife Tonia is always 'Tanya', Socialist Realism is often confusingly shortened to Social Realism, and we learn of the show trial of 'a certain Shakhty' (p. 153), meaning the 'Mines' trial of 1928; the whole range of errors reappears in the index and bibliographical notes. There are also many mistakes of a less laughable kind: Akhmatova is slanderously called 'homosexual' (p. 194), von Salomé is called Nietzsche's 'mistress' (p. 20), and a photograph of Pasternak's son is unfunnily reproduced as 'Boris Pasternak close to the time of his death'. What can have made a respected professor of poetry so slapdash? How can he, all in one breath, complain that too much fuss is made about Rilke, praise the 'mysterious depth' of his poem 'Herr, es ist Zeit: der Sommer war sehr gross', and (grossly) mistranslate this as 'Sir, it is time, the summer was so gross' (pp. 39–40)?

The carelessness which serves biography so ill becomes a more acceptable carefreedom in Levi's descriptions of the works, where we seem to hear a traveller, back from a tour of a country he has fallen in love with, excitedly telling a friend everything he has seen. There are things Levi does not like: *A Safe Conduct* is virtually dismissed with the wild *non sequitur* 'Since I am not deeply in sympathy with this purpose [to show life being transformed into art — A.L.] I must be forgiven for thinking he has not accomplished it' (p. 156); but he does like a lot of the prose, the 'epic' poems, the poems for children, and most of the later poetry, and his accounts of these, as also of *Doctor Zhivago*, are filled with this touristy love and liveliness, refreshing if chaotic.

Andrei Navrozov severely prefers Pasternak's early poetry, finding the later (including the very poems Levi finds awe-inspiring [PL, p. 275]) plodding and banal (AN, pp. 69, 67). All the poems he offers in his book of translations are from the early collections: five from 'Twin in the Clouds', four from 'Over the Barriers', twenty from 'My Sister Life', and seventeen from 'Themes and Variations'. His Introduction and Commentary take up more space than the

poems. In them, the voice is as personal as Levi's; while Levi talks to his friends, however, or perhaps to his undergraduates, Navrozov talks directly to us, his expected critics, and is not chatty but fierce.

He produces titles like poems. 'Second Nature' means that Pasternak's poems are second nature to Navrozov and, in Navrozov's opinion, second only to nature; through 'natus', it must also tacitly invoke Pasternak's 'Second Birth'. We get, too, a spirited explanation of the Introduction's title: 'metaphor', 'translate' and 'transport' are akin, and 'stikhi' is akin to 'stikhiia', so 'Transporting the Elements' is a poetic translation of 'Translating the Poems'. The elemental and the transported (enraptured) are the two things Navrozov cares most about — vulnerable concepts nowadays, but to be welcomed from a writer as unslovenly (not one misprint) and as sophisticated as Navrozov shows himself to be. We are regaled with a grand and witty defence of good translating, an equally sharp defence of rhyme, compelling remarks about translating Pasternak (one should have Donne and Milton in mind), Emily Dickinson's verse as an analogue, and a few promised clouts over the head should we think of playing Edmund Wilson to Navrozov's Nabokov, that is, of criticizing his Russian or doubting the wisdom of his more surprising versions. One therefore has to hold tight to one's (actual) gratitude for these translations, not to pay back his mistrust with hole-picking. I do query the wisdom of some parts: why substitute 'I was too late' for the important 'pro menia' in 'Stifling Night' (p. 34) or 'time' for 'age' ('Ia slykhal pro starost'') in 'Sparrow Hills' (p. 33); and quite a few of the poems, including the first, 'February', seem to me to have bought their rhyme at a cost of some clumsiness or over-inventiveness. But on the whole I am transported by these translations and would class the best of them among the best Pasternak-renderings available.

Navrozov plays nothing down but applies great energy to reproducing the unsentimental ecstasies of Pasternak's poems, as well as their characteristic density and tautness. Compare his lines from 'Definition of Poetry' (p. 28):

> It is peas run to seed sweetly raw.
> It is tears of the universe, pod-clad ... (AN, p. 28)

('Eto sladkii zaglokhshii gorokh. / Eto slezy vselennoi v lopatkakh ...') — with Levi's:

> the cradled pods of the sweet peas
> and what tears of the cosmos fell ... (PL, p. 103)

Levi makes two very flowing and very English lines, but he not only gets the wrong plant, loses the image of peas as tears, and forfeits the definitional 'It is', he also adds a courtesy and a tenderness which should not be there. Navrozov, as well as getting all this right, records the metre, some of the alliteration and even the oddity of 'v lopatkakh' in *his* odd 'pod-clad', while still making good poetry. All his versions convey the metre, and many the rhyme as well, which is no mean achievement. All display a consonantal music and lexical wealth: these spiracles, swipples, minium, smalt and archil resemble Pasternak's own explorings of the dictionary, and there are wonderful things like 'Rather asleep than aslope roofs' ('Skorei so sna, chem s krysh', p. 35). Especially good are the

versions of five poems from the crazily difficult cycle 'The Rupture' (pp. 45–49), and the poem 'Margarita' (p. 43), with such lines as these:

> Tearing twigs on herself like a snare of rays gone awry,
> Margarita's tight clench so much more lilac lipped,
> So much more hotly white than the white of her eye,
> The nightingale shone, and warbled and reigned and clipped.
> .....
> And it seemed, with the rains and branches so helmed,
> An amazon, breathless, lay fallen on that forest margin.

Jerzy Faryno, too, looks closely at Pasternak's poetry, not as translator but as endlessly patient investigator; he devotes a chapter to each of the thirteen poems of the 1936 cycle 'Iz letnikh zapisok', treating them to the structural and intertextual analysis that we found deployed in his *Mifologizm i teologizm Tsvetaevoi* (Vienna, 1985) — intertextual, that is, mainly as within the work of one poet. An author's work makes up a unified system, the whole can be known only through the details, the details can be understood only through the whole. Thus poems far apart play deeply into one another, and there are no loose ends. Working through webs of mythological and etymological motifs, Faryno arrives at coded biblical references, quasi-re-enactments of the world's creation, the creation of art from it, and the transition of world and art into something higher. For these larger things to happen, a thousand fine details have to be perfectly placed: stereotypes must be dislodged, texts freed from old contexts and linked up anew: Pasternak's 'bednyi iug' is elaborately revealed as 'ne-tekst o iuge ili iug bez (vne) teksta' (p. 10); the first line of the poem 'Ia pomniu griaznyi dvor', in recalling Pushkin's 'chudnoe mgnoven'e' and in being linked (as elsewhere demonstrated) with shipping, takes us — via a fascinating excursus through the meaning of 'flot' for Pasternak — into a twenty-four-page study of the 'Safe Conduct' sections about filthy fleet-dominated Venice, that 'iskusstvogennoe nachalo' visited by Pasternak the not-yet-poet, Dantesque seeker of poetry's pool of origin. Faryno can be boring, and he can be far-fetched, as when the Latin for a word of Pasternak's yields more meaning than the word itself, but I find my reading enhanced by his method, and there is no need, after all, to take it all in at one sitting.

This book has a relation to each of the others reviewed here. It defines something of what Levi must find so alluring in Pasternak; it counterposes a dense texture of commentary to Navrozov's densely recreated textures; it confirms the importance of Georgia and the 1930s stressed in Evgenii Pasternak's book; and, above all, it underpins two of Fleishman's main theses: that Pasternak's work is 'philosophical', and that his characteristic innovation is to have removed the 'distinction between trope and nontrope'. It does not, though, say anything about Pasternak's relation to history, and it takes us miles away from the sphere of 'coercion and pity' — towards the heart of creativity, in fact.