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Footnote to an Epigraph

*Es braust der Wald, am Himmel ziehn
Des Sturmes Donnerflüge.
Da mal' ich in die Wetter hin,
O Mädchen, deine Züge.*

*[The forest rages, in the sky go
The stormwind's thunder-flights.
Then I paint into the weathers /into the storm/
O maiden, your features.]*

1.

These lines from the poem “Dein Bild” by Nikolaus Lenau,¹ chosen by Pasternak as an epigraph to “Сестра моя – жизнь” [My Sister – Life], are even more appropriate to that volume than has yet been pointed out.

In her 1988 book on “Сестра моя - жизнь”,² Katherine Tiernan O'Connor discussed the significance of this epigraph, with a particularly interesting demonstration of the relation of the elusive girl-figure in it to Helene's veil in Goethe's *Faust* Part Two, and of how this links with Pasternak's poem “Девочка” [(Little) Girl] through *that* poem's epigraph.³ But the force of the stanza's important third line was neglected. Efim Etkind, in his article “Пастернак и Лермонтов» [Pasternak and Lermontov; published 1991], rightly noted that the third line “для Пастернака – программна» [is programmatic for Pasternak] as it expresses his conviction that “поэзия – не литература . . . а природа, иначе говоря – сама жизнь” [poetry is not literature . . . but is nature, in other words life itself.]⁴ Seven years later, Elena Pasternak, though referring only briefly to the Lenau epigraph, noted, in her article “Лето 1917-ого года” [Summer 1917], that it “с удивительной точностью передает замысел книги о революционной буре 1917 года, в которую врисовывает автор черты своей

любимой” [conveys with amazing exactitude the idea of a book about the revolutionary storm of 1917 into which the author sketches the features of his beloved].⁵ The words «врисовывает в . . .» [draws, or sketches, into . . .] aptly record Lenau’s meaning and are closely related to what will be argued below. Whether the drawing is into the storm of revolution or into the storms of nature may be debatable – what is essential is that the action relates to, goes out *into* the real outside world; so this develops Etkind’s argument. Elena Pasternak does not say more about the epigraph itself.

Only after finishing a first draft of this “Footnote” did I discover the article by S.N. Broitman, “Эпиграфы в книге Б. Пастернака «Сестра моя – жизнь»”, which includes a comprehensive discussion of this very topic.⁶ Broitman discusses not only the Lenau poem whose fourth stanza became the “Sestra” epigraph but also the three other poems originally considered by Pasternak for the same purpose, as well as the Verlaine epigraph to the cycle “Книга степи”, relating this to the Lenau one. About the latter some of the main points are made which I too make, and larger related questions are searchingly addressed. In what follows I now indicate where I am in agreement with Broitman’s article and I have summarised its main argument regarding the Lenau epigraph.

2.

The unusual force of the line “Da mal’ ich in die Wetter hin. . .” has to do with two strange uses of German. First: “das Wetter” [weather] is now found only in the singular, occurrences of a plural⁷ being rare enough to surprise most present-day readers. The plural means “stormy weather”, whereby the plural form does not lose its palpability and strangeness. Lenau’s use of this form must certainly have attracted the germanophone Pasternak with his liking for so many forms of weather.

A highly inaccurate and misleading Russian translation of the stanza appears in the Notes to the 1965 edition of Pasternak’s poems⁸ and is unfortunately reprinted in the 1989 five-volume edition of the *Collected Works*;⁹ it runs: “Бушует лес, по небу пролетают грозовые тучи, тогда в движении бури мне видятся твои девичьи черты” [The forest rages, storm-clouds fly past over the sky, then in the movement of the (storm)wind your girlish features are visible (literally: are seen) to me].⁸ It could

hardly be more fault-ridden. O'Connor notes the inadequacy of this translation,¹⁰ as does Broitman, who provides a satisfactory Russian translation of the whole poem.¹¹ It would be understandably awkward to use the plural "pogody" for "die Wetter" but the Russian 1965/1989 version loses far more than that: the acclamation "O Mädchen" is absent; and so is the whole act of painting, since the passive "видятся" [are visible, are seen] not merely ignores but contradicts the action of the poet in "Da mal' ich . . ."). Worse still, the third line's supremely interesting element (the second of what I have called two strange uses of German) is simply omitted: I mean the movement implied by the accusative case - in the phrase "in die Wetter"; this was undoubtedly part of what drew Pasternak to this stanza.

When followed by an accusative, German "in" (like Russian "в") means, not the static English "in" but a dynamic or kinetic "into", so that we have here a portrait which cannot even begin to be visualised. If the poet were to paint the girl's picture merely "in the stormy skies", we could visualise it easily enough: on a background of mobile clouds would hover the non-mobile image of a face. But Lenau speaks of an act of painting "into the weathers" - or "into the storm". At no moment can such a painting be either entire or motionless – indeed, one could presume it lost for ever. The painter's hand (and, by analogy, the poet's word) itself becomes a movement amongst nature's movements. This is a painting without a canvas or a wall, not even executed upon the air - which might perhaps have been thought of as a semi-substantial recipient of outlines and colours. One of Baudelaire's poems in *Les fleurs du mal* mentions an act of painting upon "darkness":

Je suis comme un peintre qu'un Dieu moqueur
Condamne à peindre, hélas! sur les ténèbres . . .¹²

"Darknesses" cannot be painted upon any more than weathers can. But Lenau's idea is even less imaginable than Baudelaire's because of the preposition "into".

The adverb or separated prefix "hin" is meaningful, too. "Hinmalen", though unusual and not itself in the dictionary, is readily comparable to other verbs prefixed by "hin", particularly to "hinschreiben": to write down, especially to jot down; thus - to paint or depict speedily, jottingly - a light-handed, possibly light-hearted, act of creating, with a suggestion of doing it as quickly as possible before everything changes and the chance is gone. It is a subtle usage, however, as the existence of a number of verbs in

which “hin-“ has a sense of “away” (hinschmeissen: to chuck away; hinschwinden: to vanish away) strengthens the movement implied by the accusative of “in die Wetter”, adding a hint that the painting will go far into the depths or distances of those weathers. Broitman, too, stresses the meaning and importance of the prefix “hin-“.¹³

And “Heaven” does not come into it; “Himmel” here is sky.¹⁴ The natural world and its changing weather constitute the whole of the surroundings into which the poet paradoxically and magically casts the portrait he is painting, a portrait he loses in the very process of producing it. Not only are the outward movement and speed evoked by the third line of Lenau’s fourth stanza deeply consonant with Pasternak’s way of conceiving both nature and art, but this notion of a painting thrown to the winds while being painted echoes his own characteristic welcoming of the transient, travelling and disappearing quality of reality.¹⁵ And if Lenau’s “painting into” nature meant that the poet himself goes, in a sense, “into the weathers”, himself becoming stormy and disappearing into elemental distance, this too must have appealed to Pasternak.

I had thought thus far about the epigraph when I discovered Broitman’s article, which examines all eight quatrains of the Lenau poem and arrives at highly interesting conclusions, partly different from mine.

3.

S.N. Broitman notes the erroneousness of taking Pasternak’s woman-image as static or celestial - or rather: “‘ona’ u nego sofiina i konkretna odnovenno, a potomu romanticheskaia antinomiia nebesnogo i zemnogo dlia nee nerelevantna [‘she’ is at once sophian and concrete, so that the Romantic antinomy of heavenly and earthly is irrelevant here]¹⁶ - and proceeds to demonstrate a fundamental difference between the image’s relation to nature in Lenau and its relation to nature in Pasternak. Looking closely at every line of the German poem, Broitman observes that the image of the beloved woman is regularly presented there as resembling, corresponding to, or paralleling certain aspects of nature – it is, then, essentially a metaphor. For Pasternak, however, as Broitman shows, the image is not a metaphor but a symbol, and the matter is not one of likeness but of identity. Lenau uses a poetic convention, Pasternak presents something real. Lenau, furthermore, actively imposes, “thrusts” [naviazyvaet]¹⁷ his beloved’s picture upon nature, and the fourth stanza, according to

Broitman, is virtually a declaration of this method, so that “Da mal’ ich . . .” would suggest: I am myself wilfully painting it there. Whereas Pasternak thrusts nothing, instead *finding* his beloved’s image in nature, recognising her as the world’s soul. We should therefore see in the epigraph – it is contended - Pasternak’s “svoeobraznyi dialog”¹⁸ (peculiar dialogue) with Lenau; far from acknowledging a kinship, he was marking a boundary between his own previous *activity* of wilfully adding images to nature and his later – opposite – position of *passivity*, in which he finds and recognises the image already present in the surrounding world.

The main argument in Broitman’s article, about an essential difference between Pasternak and Lenau, seems to me convincing and enlightening. That, for the inspired artist, the image is revealed or found, not subjectively invented or added by him to the real scene, is an experience Pasternak called “the revelation of objectivity”¹⁹ or “the organic miracle of objectivity”²⁰, while “objective”, used of a work of art, meant, to him, “written by *something* bigger than yourself”²¹ - that is, it is not he who proposes the image.

At the same time it should be emphasised that in the fourth stanza Lenau writes “*in die Wetter*”, not “auf . . .”. Not “onto”, with a suggestion of thrusting and imposing, but “into”, with its suggestion that the paintbrush and even the painter enter nature along with the painting – an idea very close to Pasternak’s own conception of the creative process. And altogether the point about a “dialogue” with Lenau is much less convincing. For Pasternak did not quote the whole poem and in the four lines he chose to quote no such dialogue can be discerned. Instead, as I have tried to show, considerable affinities with his own thought are notable in it. He might perhaps have rejected the other seven quatrains for the reasons Broitman gives, but the important fact is that he selected the one quatrain which, instead of comparing the beloved to the natural world, speaks of the poet’s creative participation in, and imitation of the workings of, that world. Even if the rest of Lenau’s poem was as alien to him as his own past style, these four lines were not.

4.

In two poems in the “Sestra” volume - “Toska” and “Dozhd”²² – “epigraph” occurs as a simile. In the first of them, powerful natural phenomena are called an epigraph to

“this book”; if the reference is to this very book (“Sestra – moia zhizn”), then those phenomena are either rivals to, or oblique re-tellings of, the Lenau quatrain. In the second, powerful natural phenomena are invited to be an epigraph to passionate love. In both, the same huge force is felt to be at work externally and internally, with neither instance of it - the natural-elemental (jungle life/ pouring rain) or the human-creative (a book/ a love) – enjoying obvious primacy. If the two “epigraph”-similes are taken in connection with Pasternak’s actual epigraph, they seem to suggest that the epigraph to his poetry is nature altogether - that his impassioned imitation of it²³ is what his work is fundamentally about.

5.

Decades later, in *Доктор Живаго*, Pasternak composed an image which in some ways recalls the one in the Lenau stanza.

В это время вместо ожидаемого снега начал накрапывать дождь. Как перекинутый над городской улицей от дома к дому плакат на большущем полотнище, протянулся в воздухе с одной стороны лесной прогалины на другую расплывчатый, во много раз увеличенный призрак одной удивительной боготворимой головы. И голова плакала, а усилившийся дождь целовал и поливал ее. [At that moment, instead of the expected snow, rain began drizzling. Like a placard on an enormous canvas flung across an urban street from one house to another, there stretched in the air from one side of the forest glade to the other a blurred, multiply enlarged apparition of an astonishing god-created head. And the head wept, and the increasing rain kissed it and drenched it.]²⁴

As in Lenau, a portrait is glimpsed as part of nature - part of a forest which, being misty with rain, is, again, thoroughly affected by the weather. This portrait, though, is stretched out in a fixed position instead of sharing the speed and spaciousness of nature into, through, and with which Lenau’s portrait went flying in the very process of being painted. This is one of many instances of the later Pasternak’s rehearsal, in milder, more considered, still heartfelt but far less excited, form, of something he once loved and welcomed with all the undaunted wildness of youth.

It would seem that the nearest the older Pasternak came to creating a comparable image was when he wrote, in English, near the end of his life, that he would like to write as if he had

. . . seen nature and universe themselves not as a picture made or fastened on an immoveable wall but as a sort of painted canvas roof or curtain in the air, incessantly pulled and blown and flapped by a something of an immaterial unknown and unknowable wind.²⁵

The desired picture is as extraordinary as the one he adopted as epigraph forty years previously in the Lenau verse, and the evocation of movement is just as idiosyncratic. But the differences are again telling. This wind is called “unknowable”, while to the poet of «Сестра моя – жизнь» it was unimportant whether the wind was knowable or not, so long as the world and his own work were fiercely blown by it. In the 1959 vision, moreover, even though the “immoveable wall” is negated, both "roof" and "curtain" must connote some kind of unmoving structure: in the later Pasternak’s mind the *dunamis*, still fully believed in, has become, though invisibly, somewhat tethered. Moreover, the whole passage is in hypothetical mode: he “would like to write” in that way. In “Sestra moia – zhizn” he did do so, and the epigraph from Lenau stands as a complex analogue to such writing.

NOTES

1. German poet (born in Vienna of German and Hungarian parentage), 1802-1850.
2. Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, *Boris Pasternak's "My Sister Life", The Illusion of Narrative*, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1988.
3. Its epigraph is taken from Lermontov's «Утес» [The Cliff] and in fact the very title «Девочка» echoes Lenau's prominent word «Mädchen».
4. In *Norwich Symposia in Russian Literature and Culture*, vol. 1, Russian School of Norwich University, Vermont, 1991, pp. 105-22 (p. 112-3).
5. *Pasternakovskie chteniia*, ed. M.L. Gasparov *et al.*, Moscow, Nasledie, 1998, pp. 100-115 (p. 100).
6. S.N. Broitman, «Epigrafy v knige B. Pasternaka "Sestra moia – zhizn'»», *Izvestiia akademii nauk, Seriiia literatury i iazyka*, 63, no. 2, 2004, pp. 23-32. [This article is an extension and development of an earlier article by S.N. Broitman, 'Epigraf k "Sestre moei – zhizni" Borisa Pasternaka', in *XX vek i russkaia literatura*, Alba Regina Philologiae, Sbornik nauchnykh statei, Moscow, 2002, pp. 190-201.]
7. See examples in J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 29, p.700.
8. Boris Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Biblioteka poeta, Moscow-Leningrad, 1965, footnote to page 110.
9. Boris Pasternak, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh [Sobr. soch.]*, tom I, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1989, footnote to page 109.
10. Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, «Elena, Helen of Troy, and the Eternal Feminine: Epigraphs and Intertextuality in "Sestra moyia – zhizn' »», in *Boris Pasternak and His Times*, papers delivered at the Pasternak Symposium in Jerusalem in 1984, edited by Lazar Fleishman, Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1989, pp. 212-223.
11. His translation of stanza four goes as follows: «Bushuet les, po nebu tianutsia / Gromovye kryl'ia buri, / Togda ia vrisovyvaiu v nepogodu, / O devochka, tvoi cherty.» (Broitman, 2004, p. 25, column 1.)
12. Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, Paris, 1869, p. 140 (the first of four poems headed «Un fantôme»).
13. Broitman, p. 27, col. 2.
14. A view of Pasternak's Elena in «Сестра моя - жизнь» as ethereal and transcendent with the poet «looking up to the heavens» to create her «presence» would

not fit with the dynamophile Pasternak of those years, nor with his Elena. (See O'Connor, 1988, pp.18 and 21.)

15. An early example of this is the passage in the July 1914 letter to his parents where he writes that “originality” (meaning a property not of the artist but of art itself) consists in the fact that “poka ty nazval ego, /iskusstvo/ uzhe stalo drugim na svete – no ono ostalos' iskusstvom, t. e. sposobnym i v etot moment uskol'znut' ot skhodstva s samim soboi'”. *Boris Pasternak ob isskusstve*, ed. E.B. and E.V. Pasternak, Moscow, “Iskusstvo”, 1990, p. 305.

16. Broitman, p. 28, col. 2.

17. *ibid.*, p. 27, col. 2

18. p. 29, col. 1.

19. Letter to M. Tsvetaeva of 25.3.1926 (*Pasternak ob iskusstve*, p. 318).

20. Letter to S.D. Spasskii of 3.1.1928 (*op.cit.* p. 326).

21. Letter to Tsvetaeva of 25.3.1926 (*op.cit.* p. 319).

22. Respectively, pp. 111 and 119 in B. Pasternak, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. E.B. and E.V. Pasternak, 1989.

23. See also Pasternak's 1919 statement: “Zhivoi, deistvitel'nyi mir . . . sluzhit poetu primerom v bol'shei eshche stepeni, nezveli – naturoi i model'iu.” *Sobr. soch.* IV, 1991, 369f.

24. Boris Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago*, Milan, 1957, p. 378.

25. From letter of 22.8.1959 to Stephen Spender, published in *Encounter*, No. 15/2, 1960, pp. 4-5.