

Returning to “Okhrannaia gramota” (“A Safe-Conduct”).

Returning to Pasternak after some years of writing about the work of Andrei Platonov, I find myself wondering about two main differences between the two writers (about whose few but striking affinities I have published an essay in Lazar Fleishman’s “V krugu D-ra Zhivago” (2000), and written another, entitled “Hamlet, Dvanov, Zhivago”). The two differences I have been pondering are (1) that between the linguistic bases of the enigmatic quality in their styles (I have in mind Pasternak’s early style, esp. that of Okh. Gr.); and (2) their different uses of visibility.

Platonov’s enigmatics = often a matter of solecism or apparent solecism, naïve non-sequiturs, and numerous as-if-unconscious devices such as that which I have been calling the “compact genitive” **EXAMPLES**

Nothing like this in Pasternak – every sentence appears lucid and coherent, grammar normal, the author in control. One element in his style to be noted is the practice of logical ellipsis.

ELLIPSIS

Take the passage towards end of Part I, chapter 5, of Okh. Gr., starting “Я не пишу своей биографии .. я к ней обращаюсь, когда того требует чужая.”

You cannot turn to a biography which is not being written. Something is missing.

“The pronoun *ei* has in fact no antecedent. P omits to say, for example, “Something is being written instead of a biography and I turn to that when . . .”

As the paragraph proceeds, the question arises: *whose* biography is not being written? His own (as suggested by the opening of the parag) or Rilke's (suggested by its ending)?

Without explaining that "poet" is synonymous with "genius", or that "genius" implies "non-heroic" (i.e. with two further mild ellipses), the author says, or implies, that the reason a genius's biography cannot be written is that "the realm of the subconscious in the genius does not submit to measurement" [область подсознательного у гения не поддается обмеру] because his subconscious consists of all that happens to his readers. Already there are more omissions. One is that a biography ought to include an account of its subject's subconscious. And there is the unmentioned assumption (more understandable, given P's lament about the cliché-quality of the lives of the majority) that most people's subconscious *can* be measured.

So Rilke's biography (presumably) cannot be written because his subconscious consists of what happens to his readers – it would have to have in it such inessential things, P says, as "concessions to pity and to coercion". Fleishman has pointed out ("P v dvadtsatye gody") that this phrase, at first apparently unmotivated, must mean such a biography would have to contain *non-heroic* things; to this I'll add that the reason for the choice of these two items (pity and coercion) may well be that the first suggests goodness and the second – weakness; the point is that, *no matter* whether admirably or reprehensibly, in daily life what the poet (or genius) does is yield/concede (whereas in his poetry, which cannot be part of the life-story proper, he asserts, affirms and is part of a higher power).

If Rilke's biography were to contain things more essential than ordinary life's concessions and yieldings, it would have to contain everything that happens to his reader, thus everything that happens to Boris Pasternak (as well as to his other readers) since everything in a reader's life is given him by the poet he has read: this must mean that the result of his reading is a changed perspective on his life's events – by acquiring a different meaning they become different events.

SVOI POET

A digression: one poem of Rilke's P certainly knew is "Archaischer Torso Apollos" with its famous last line "Du musst Dein Leben ändern". Perhaps Rilke too meant – or Pasternak thought he meant – that all the life-changes which took place in the thousands of people who looked at that sculpture somehow constitute the subconscious of the ancient sculptor. This is a hard thought: the artist subconsciously contains in himself all possible changes (or the thought of all possible changes) that could be brought about in anyone's life by his work.

Yet (again) P is, in O.g. – writing down the events of his own life (while not calling them a "biography"), and is thus writing out the account of Rilke's subconscious, i.e. to some extent R's biogr. *is* being written. And those events are not of the concession-to-pity-and-coercion type, but are more like preparations for great creative work. So is P's own biogr also being written? The reasons why he says it is not are (a) that he humbly wishes to think of his life, or his perspective upon his life, as part of

R's biography, but at same time (b) that since he himself is a poet (therefore a genius) *his own* life-story, too, would have to consist of all that happens to his readers, for example all that happens to us.

Thus does P, in O.g., cryptically, enigmatically, paradoxically, and with all the difficulty that the matter requires (cp his saying in another context that nature holds to “той философии, что только *почти невозможное* действительно . . .”) – speak about an infinite , changing and growing universe of interweaving minds and happenings, far more complex and delicate and strange than the world of coincidences, parallels and interconnections repeatedly pointed to and held up for a far less esoteric appreciation, in his later book, his one completed novel, - of the same kind but very differently conveyed.