

Note on 'Salangane swallows', mentioned by Pasternak in the following paragraph from 'A Safe-Conduct'(1930), part 2, chapter 18:

“I loved the living essence of historical symbolism, in other words that instinct with whose help, like salangane swallows, we have built the world: a vast nest, glued together from earth and sky, life and death, and two kinds of time, present and absent. I understood that what prevents it from falling apart is the force of cohesion contained in the figurativeness permeating all its particles.”

/transl. A.Livingstone/

Nests made of pure saliva are evidently what interest Pasternak here. As swiftlets make their homes solely from a secretion of their own bodies, so we human beings have made (and are still making) our symbolic home, the universe we mentally and perceptually live in, from a secretion of our own minds – from sciences, arts, perceptions, feelings, all projected values.

It is unlikely Pasternak would not have known that some of these nests are sold and eaten, although this is quite clearly not the point of his analogy. Perhaps he was leaving it to his reader to discover this fact and to add to the rapturous account of our being at home in a home-made nest of “history” the darker thought that this nest is, in the end, destructible.*

**Salangane swallows: A further note, based on information received with gratitude from Dr Mike Wilson of the Department of Zoology, University of Oxford.)*

The birds referred to are actually not swallows but swiftlets, of the genus *Collocalia*. Swiftlets are small swifts formerly placed in a single genus but now allocated to the tribe *Collocalini* of which there are some fifteen species, mainly to be found in South-East Asia and Polynesia. While all swifts use saliva to bind the materials of their nests, some species of *Collocalia* build nests purely of saliva. The latter are known as “swallows’ nests” (*lastochkiny gnezda*) and are harvested, traded and used for food.

Pasternak would doubtless have heard of them as an interesting phenomenon, even though no swiftlets are to be found in Russia. They interested him as creatures whose homes are made of a secretion from their own bodies.