

Introduction

1

One night when he was four years old, Pasternak was woken up by music. His mother (a former concert-pianist) and two friends were playing a trio. He was accustomed to the sound of the piano, but the violin was unfamiliar and made an extremely powerful impression. He felt it to be 'disturbing, like real cries for help and news of a disaster coming in from outside through the window'.¹ This incident he later regarded as marking his transition from unconscious infancy to consciousness. It is notable that what marked that transition was art, and that from the very beginning of his conscious life he associated art with cries for help.

This is one of two recollections recorded by Pasternak at the end of chapter 1 of his 'Autobiographical Sketch' of 1956. They suggest the origin of two ideas which were to remain central to his thinking about art all his life. The second is from some time later in his childhood. Following a description of how the paintings for the Itinerants' annual exhibitions used to be stored in sheds behind his home (his family lived in an annexe of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture) and were then brought out again –

A little before Easter the boxes were carried out into the courtyard and were unpacked in the open outside the doors of the sheds. The School employees opened the boxes, unscrewed the paintings in their heavy frames from the lids and floors of the boxes and carried them by hand, in twos, across the yard to the exhibition. Perched on the window-sills, we watched avidly ...

– he goes on to tell how, towards the end of the 1890s, his father (a well-known artist) was doing the illustrations for Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. The novel was coming out in serial form and the drawings had to be done in haste, racing against time, and handed at the last minute to a uniformed conductor from the railways who came right into their kitchen to fetch them. The entire chapter on childhood now culminates in the following paragraph:

On the stove, joiner's glue was boiling. The drawings were hurriedly wiped, dried with fixative, glued to cardboard, wrapped, tied up. The finished parcels were sealed with sealing-wax and handed over to the conductor.²

Pasternak was always to think of art as a response to a world in need and this seems to go back to the violins and the musical world of his mother. And he was always to describe both the production and the inherent character of art as that matter of hurry, urgency, speed, 'no time to waste', that he had observed so young in the world of his father. Again and again these two motifs recur in his accounts of the artistic process.

'Speed' is particularly characteristic of Pasternak's more youthful writings about art. The world is in fast movement and art is even faster – this seems to be his basic conception. Many of the words he frequently uses in relation to this often just elude translation. *Stremitel'nost'*, swiftness, suggests a streaking fleetness with no pause for thought; *stremglav* is headlong though not foolhardy; *razbeg* and *razgon*, two words much liked by Pasternak, both mean the large and free run-up before skating or sprinting; *poryvistyi* – fitful, gusty, making a sudden dash, impetuous – is a highly characteristic adjective, along with *zakhvatyvayushchii*, gripping, thrilling, breathtaking, seizing with sudden wonder. It is always an exhilarated speed that is meant. Two frequently used nouns, *poryv* (gust, upsurge, impulse, spur of the moment) and *pod'yom* (uplift, raised spirits, the raising of one's spirits) go into French as *élan* and suggest an affinity to the *élan vital* of Bergson,³ a philosopher whose work Pasternak was very aware of in his youth.

The fast packing witnessed in the childhood kitchen later becomes an explicit metaphor for writing. Packing implies contents, and the rapidly pressed-in contents of the suitcase are likened to the pressing content of the poem. It has been aptly pointed out that Pasternak was fascinated by the 'mechanics' and the 'locale' of creation⁴ – that is, with the actual ink, pens and blotting-paper, and with the features of the room he was in, or the shape of the tree he had climbed into, to write poetry. His lifelong fascination with the paraphernalia of travel is very similar. Platforms and waiting-rooms, engines and carriages, compartment-doors, third-class seats and luggage-racks, all are described as if they spoke directly of speed and as if they thereby evoked the special urgency of art. The metaphor of packing belongs in this series. It appears briefly at the end of the early piece 'Ordering a Drama', then it is fully elaborated in the 1916 essay 'The Black Goblet'. After this it yields (as packing must) to a more lasting imagery of travelling.

A fellow-poet with whom Pasternak shared this conception of

art's rapidity was his passionate friend and correspondent Marina Tsvetaeva. She put it still more intensely, as a speed that almost annihilates time: 'A reflex before any thought, even before any feeling, the deepest and fastest – as by electric current – spearing of the whole being by a given phenomenon, and the simultaneous, almost preceding it, answer to it. Command for an answer given by the phenomenon itself.' At this point she too brings in the concept of need: 'Command? Yes, if S.O.S. is a command (the most unrepulsable of all)'.⁵

The idea that art is vitally needed by the material world was fundamental in Pasternak's thought from the beginning. His first surviving accounts of what art is and what it springs from (in the notebooks containing the pieces reproduced here as 'Early prose fragments') offer a number of vivid metaphors for this, a very remarkable one being that of the interrupted trochee. The material world without art is like a trochaic foot interrupted in the middle at the end of a line of verse, in other words a single, heavily stressed syllable which irresistibly demands to be followed by an unstressed, 'feminine', one. The idea of art as the feminine syllable completing an otherwise incomplete reality is subsequently developed as the conviction that art arises in response to suffering humanity and pre-eminently to suffering women. This conviction of Pasternak's extends from the glimpse he had as a child of ill-treated Dahomeyan 'Amazons' (mentioned in *A Safe Conduct*, 1930) to *Doctor Zhivago* (1956) where Yurii first glimpses Lara in a painful scene that seems to him – and Pasternak uses the same words as he uses about the violin music in his infancy – to be 'calling for help'. When later in the novel it turns out that a feeling of compassion for the very same exploited girl, Lara, has inspired the careers of both the poet Zhivago and the revolutionary Strel'nikov, the latter's question to the former, 'And what did you *do* about it?', though unanswered in the dialogue, is tacitly answered by the twenty-five poems appended to the novel. Art is a response to suffering that is quite unlike, but related and parallel to, the political response.

An image which combines the two notions that I have called 'speed' and 'need' occurs in an important paragraph in *A Safe Conduct* describing the birth of poetry in the author's life.⁶ A two-stage process is imagined. At first, the poet is borne ahead by feeling, which is a force so strong that it seems to be racing the sun. But 'what is called inspiration' only comes when a yearning is sensed in the things which are not being borne along with him and he cannot endure this and looks back. This seems to say that art requires both intense feeling and also the interruption of it. It needs

the backward glance at all that was being ignored by absorption in that feeling, and the impulse to set those slow or static things, so far ignored, in motion. For Pasternak, 'things', when they enter poems, are always set going. And nothing is more typical of him than this exhilaration, then distress, of someone moving full speed ahead; this breathlessly performed rescue; these wild armfuls of transformed objects.

The objects are transformed by being transferred. The two senses of 'transferred' (similarly combined in the Russian *perenosnyi*, as also in the Greek word 'metaphor' itself) not only permeate the argument of 'The Black Goblet' but become a profound pun informing all Pasternak's writing on art.

2

If all things are able to be set in motion, if art and the world constitute a single disyllabic word, then everything necessary is present and no invented beings, no imaginary worlds, no *realiora*, are ever required. That nothing should be invented is a conviction Pasternak held throughout his life and repeatedly expressed – from the time when he jotted into his notebook,⁷ as a young student, that he should 'stop using these dreams as fuel' to his saying in a letter a year before his death:

I have never liked nor even understood (and I don't believe in the existence of) the fantastic, the romantic, in itself, as an independent domain, the strangeness of Hoffmann, for example, or Carlo Gozzi.⁸

This declaration continues, in a way that once again echoes Tsvetaeva who once called the condition of creation 'a state of being possessed'):

For me, art is an obsession, the artist is a man possessed, one who has been grazed, stricken by the reality of everyday existence.⁹

Whenever Pasternak praised a work of art he called it 'realistic'. His use of this word would seem to have more in common with Vyacheslav Ivanov's 'faithfulness to things as they are in appearance and in essence'¹⁰ than with the more normal definitions of realism, such as 'the undertaking to look all the relevant facts of a situation in the face'¹¹ or the attempt 'to give an illusion of reflecting life as it seems to the common reader'¹² – at least, in so far as 'relevant' and 'common' imply something already known. And he certainly did not think any illusion was involved. In his use, 'realistic' describes an exact conveying of something new, something hitherto unknown. But 'things as they are *in essence*' is after all, too abstract

to fit Pasternak's meaning, for his emphasis is firmly on that which has been experienced. If real life, somehow (he has no theory as to how), goes into a work, whether of literature or music or painting, then that work is realistic. The nymphs and salamanders he objects to in Chopin criticism, the Symbolist cosmogonies he is sarcastic about in *Doctor Zhivago*, are never matters of experience; their would-be amazingness obscures the actual amazingness of reality. So does the cult of neologisms for their own sake, and so do all clichés, slogans and general statements of belief. 'The remaking of life' is a cliché that makes him particularly angry because it implies that life is a changeless substance, whereas it is an 'uninterruptedly self-renewing principle'. This is in *Zhivago* forty years after he had said, in the same spirit, that the poet should take the external world as his example. As Wallace Stevens said, 'The world is the only thing fit to think about.'¹³ Pasternak would add: the only thing fit to model oneself on. 'Look at it continuing, moment after moment a success.'¹⁴ There may not be much humour in his writing about the relation of art to reality, but there is a great deal of joyful affirmation.

It is possible that Pasternak placed so much emphasis on realism – and he did this most strongly from the 1940s on – in response to attacks on him as a writer concerned with unreal and esoteric things. However, this would account only for the insistence, not for the view itself, which, in one form or another, he held all his life, and it is ironical that he was accused of doing the very thing he considered he was doing least of all – examining his own soul. The accusation was due to the obscurity of his early writings and to the fact that they did not adopt overt revolutionary themes.

Concern for the real brings with it a concern for precision and fidelity. 'Art is realistic in that it did not invent metaphor but found it in nature and faithfully reproduced it',¹⁵ Pasternak wrote and more than once he invoked the precision of the natural sciences. This concern also involves a view of the artist as primarily a receiver and perceiver. Devoted perception of the world around leaves no room for attention to private moods and states of soul, and what makes a person a poet is, above all, impressionability in childhood and conscientiousness (that is, fidelity to impressions) throughout life. This is stated in the 'Chopin' essay as well as in an essay on Kleist (written in 1940, not translated for this volume): 'An impressionability bordering with mediumism coloured his life with the tokens of everything that surrounded him.'¹⁶ Elsewhere Pasternak describes poetry as a sponge soaking up the nearest qualities of its environment, or as flashes of light on a ceiling splendidly but

passively reflecting the lightning of a passing storm, or as so wholly given up to recording nature's changes that 'the more randomly' it does so, 'the more true' it will be.¹⁷

Concern for the real also brings with it a concern for content. Pasternak explicitly stressed the primacy of content and scorned preoccupation with form – despite the fact that for a long time what seemed to demand most attention was his intricate language, his obtrusively strange and difficult imagery. He claimed that each one of his poems began from his wish for it to contain one whole definite thing: Venice, or a particular railway station, or, say, the atmosphere of a forest clearing at some particular moment of change of weather. Richness in content¹⁸ is all that counts; the poet is urged on by the thing to be contained and conveyed.

3

Pasternak did not sit down to work out a complete theory of art, nor did he pretend to have done so. Even the few pages¹⁹ of fairly sequential theorising in the middle of *A Safe Conduct* are presented as a part of what he *would* have said had he embarked on such a project. Moreover, his apparently theoretical statements often seem to boil down to no theory at all. Often we seem to be reading a philosophically intoxicated elaboration of a simple shout: The world is wonderful. Or – about to be. It could be said that *all* Pasternak's work is a record of happiness in response to the possibility of change in the things around him. This happiness did not leave him even at times of personal despair. It was during a year of illness, insomnia and depression (1935) that he stated that poetry 'will always remain an organic function of the happiness of the human being'.

Everything is seen in the light of its ability to change, to shift and to reveal itself as extraordinary. In *A Safe Conduct* Pasternak speaks of 'that infinity which opens out in life from any point and in any direction and without which poetry is only a misunderstanding not yet cleared up';²⁰ in 'A Tale' he suggests that art is made through the 'intercourse of rapture with the everyday';²¹ in *Doctor Zhivago* he says 'the only thing that is fabulous is the everyday when touched by the hand of genius'.²² The simple notion of 'the future' is a metaphor for this possibility, which is why *Zhivago*, which aims at simplicity, so frequently evokes a sense of the near future.

The thought that the world is about to become altogether wonderful has a strong place in Russian tradition. Russian icons are revered not as depictions of the divine or ideal, but as showing the

potential and imminent transfiguration of the ordinary here and now. Alexander Blok²³ was supported by this tradition when, in an essay of 1918, imploring fellow-intellectuals to listen to the 'music' of the Revolution, he kept coming back to one basic declaration: 'because life is splendid' – as if to say: 'Throw away your expensive, complicated, West-European blinkers, blink for once properly, take a fresh look and you'll see that it's splendid, or can be, any minute now.' This is also the message of Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where it is first put in the words of Zosima's dying brother, Markel: 'life is Paradise, and we are all in Paradise, only we don't want to know it, but if we started wanting to know it, tomorrow there would be Paradise all over the world'.²⁴ In a more moral context, this same blinking and seeing the wonderful truth is what takes place at the end of *Anna Karenina* when Levin is jolted by a peasant's words about goodness.²⁵

Pasternak's conception lacks the dialectical testing and proving given to it by Tolstoy and by Dostoevsky. Levin's moment is the culmination of a developing pattern of experiences; Zosima's idea is one side of a long argument about good and evil; but Pasternak's celebration of such moments of insight is the dominant unchallenged mood and message of all his work. A typical poem of 1917 asks: 'Where shall I put my joy?'²⁶ A typical poem of 1931 announces: 'It is easy to wake up and see afresh.'²⁷ A typical poem of 1956 is filled with the unmixed gratitude he felt once when he thought he was dying.²⁸ When the two novelists show us someone jolted by an illumination, this is presented as part of the full and unhurried account of a socially based personal life. But the poet wants to present only the jolt itself and make his poem hold on to it. As Pasternak says of a certain intense awareness, in 'A Tale', it was 'not thinkable for longer than a moment' and yet the artist could 'raise it to a constant poetic symptom'.²⁹

Pasternak's celebration also differs from that of his forerunners in that, for him, everything points to art. He shares their rejection of the supernatural, the fanciful, and the miraculous, but the corollary of this, for him, is that art itself is the miracle. *Art* constructs the 'second universe' by meditating on the first, and miracle consists in people being inspired by one another's created work, over the centuries.

4

Pasternak's use of the word 'realism' is somewhat idiosyncratic. Even more so is his appropriation of 'romanticism' for a quite

narrow and negative meaning. 'Romantic' means whatever is made up, ungentle and not experienced in real life. In 1944 he called the romantic 'a principle of arbitrariness, always unsuccessful because never verifiable.'³⁰

In *A Safe Conduct* 'romantic' has a rather more precise meaning: the idea of life in general as measurable by the poet's life, and as life on show, 'biography as spectacle'. It seems here not unequivocally pejorative, since it is shown that, in Mayakovsky at least, such a life can be lived well, though only if with suicidal earnestness. But the cult of the poet as person is something invariably argued against.

What Pasternak dislikes in the romantic conception is the fact that, for the poet's personality to be spectacular, the surrounding world has got to be mediocre, a dull background to make him visible. 'Romanticism always needs philistinism.'³¹ This he contrasts with the view held by the ancient Greeks. Greece 'knew nothing of Romanticism' – nothing, that is, of 'superhumanity as a personal emotion'.³² (Among other things, he is tacitly rejecting Scriabin's Nietzscheanism.) In Greece, the great person was accustomed to great thoughts from his very infancy and his extraordinary deeds 'were accounted ordinary' because the entire surroundings were extraordinary. This Greek nostalgia reappears in Pasternak's many attempts to convey his sense that the age *he* was living in, after the Revolution, was gigantic and extraordinary, and it is supported by his belief (expressed in *A Safe Conduct* and in *Doctor Zhivago*) that mediocrity and banality are things people choose for themselves quite unnecessarily. 'So why have the majority departed in the shape of an acceptable commonness? They preferred facelessness.'³³ Again and again he insists on the kinship of 'genius' with 'ordinary man'.

Another way of seeing the matter is that the reason why a poet cannot have a biography (as he says in *A Safe Conduct*) and why he ought to 'plunge into obscurity and hide his footsteps in it'³⁴ (as he says in a poem some thirty years later) is that the energy which makes poetry is not the inward property of any one person. Indeed, it may be called 'subjective' only with reference to Pasternak's conception of a 'free' – that is shared, suprapersonal – subjectivity (discussed in the next section of the Introduction). A poem is never about its author's feelings, it is both made by and about its own origin in something 'immensely bigger' than the poet himself or the ideas surrounding him.

Nietzsche is in many respects Pasternak's opposite, but when, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the former asks how the lyric poet – the poet who says 'I' and apparently expresses his private feelings – is poss-

ible, he is enquiring about a state of affairs that is very much Pasternak's concern too. In this work, Nietzsche has described art as the product of energies bursting forth directly from nature and has argued that the subjective artist is the bad artist; what is required of art is 'victory over the subjective, release from the "ego" and silencing of the individual will and desire'. So how is a good lyrical, subjective poet even conceivable? His answer is that his 'I' is 'not the ego of the waking, empirically real man', but it is something else which uses his voice: 'the sole truly existing and eternal self [*Ichheit*] which rests in the ground of things and through whose images [*Abbilder*] the lyric genius sees through to the ground of things'.³⁵ While he is uttering *that* (the 'ground') the poet may catch sight, as it were, of the emotions he has himself been feeling as an individual man and may make them part of the subject-matter of his utterance; they have no deeper importance.

Now Pasternak does not ever use the sort of language that can speak of 'the ground of things'; and he differs from Nietzsche here in that he welcomes and loves the process of time, transience itself, and so is free of the melancholy of tragedy. Nonetheless he has in mind a similar pattern regarding the poet's emotions. They are occasions for, prompts to, the feeling which, as a force or energy beyond all individuals, takes over and fills the poem; they remain marginal to it, at most mere aspects of its subject-matter.

That a great work is not attachable to its ostensible individual author is something Pasternak is at pains to repeat. Once, in a letter to Tsvetaeva he related how he had been trying to explain to someone learning to write that

what creates a writer and a text is a third dimension – a depth that raises³⁶ what has been said and shown vertically above the page and, more important, separates the *book* from the author.³⁷

Pasternak makes unusual claims for certain abstract terms. In 'The Black Goblet' we see him trying to raise 'originality' to what he dignifies as an 'independent postulate', an 'integral principle', an 'ideal'. Another favourite abstraction related to creativity is 'identity'. This comes up in a variety of contexts, of which a notable example is the cryptic piece in *A Safe Conduct* about the 'identity of depiction, depicter and depicted object'. Another prominent remark about this concept comes in a letter to Tsvetaeva written a little before the one quoted above. Telling her how he had reacted to a poem of hers, he says it made him long to

abandon you, abandon my work, abandon my family, sit down with my back to you all and write endlessly about art, about genius, about the revelation

of objectivity, which has never yet been properly discussed by anyone, the gift of identity with the world.³⁸

'Subjectivity' and 'objectivity', too, seem to become quite unmoored in Pasternak's usage and to float about until we are dizzy. Noticing the oddness of his own use of 'objectivity' in this passage, he adds:

With this term I am designating an elusive, rare, magical feeling which is known to you in the highest degree . . . But as you read, try the word on, call to mind what you yourself have felt, help me.

This points to something more important than the oddity of particular usages: a general implication of the non-fixity of all abstract naming. The words we propose for the nature of the real are provisional, he seems to say, and can always be exchanged for others. Call it what you like, so long as you convey the thing itself – is an attitude fundamental to Pasternak's thoughts about art. It recurs in *A Safe Conduct* as the 'interchangeability of images'; at the end of the 'Chopin' essay where we read that Chopin's *études* teach us 'history, or the structure of the universe, or anything whatever that's more distant and general than how to play the piano'; and in a guiding passage in *Doctor Zhivago* which says that the level where all human lives cohere could be called 'the Kingdom of God', or it could be called 'history', or it could, again, be called 'by some other name'.

This is not to say that language cannot cope: just the contrary. It is remote from Tyutchev's 'A thought once uttered is a lie',³⁹ or Schiller's 'Should the soul *speak*, then, alas! it's no longer the *soul* that speaks.'⁴⁰ For Pasternak, provided the speaker is attentive to the real, any words will do. They have to convey something, not to fix it. (Indeed, if the 'right' and final words were ever found, poetry would disappear, and reality itself would have become static.)

Viktor Frank⁴¹ writes that had Pasternak lived in the Middle Ages he would have been a strong anti-nominalist, that is, he would have rejected the theory that regards abstract concepts as mere names not corresponding to realities. Pasternak, he says, is a 'realist in the old scholastic sense of the word', a person who 'gives primary reality precisely to general metaphysical concepts'. For the anti-nominalist there really existed essences corresponding to words like 'virtue' and 'justice'. Similarly, Pasternak does often seem to be trying to evoke the dynamic essences corresponding to words like 'epoch', 'revolution', 'energy' and, above all, 'life'. The word 'art', too, for him corresponds to something irreducibly real, for it is 'not the name of a category, not an aspect of form, but a hidden mysterious

part of the content. When a *grain* of this force enters into the composition of some more complex mixture', it 'turns out to be the essence'.⁴²

Accordingly, in his poems Pasternak often seeks to conjure up a sense of how two different orders of reality hold together: the abstract wholeness of something, conceived as palpably existing, and the concrete details of the parts of that whole. He will combine wheels, bells, rooks and 'February' in one poem,⁴³ or the 'year of war' with spokes of rocking-chairs;⁴⁴ he points out that 'to cross the road' is 'to step on the universe',⁴⁵ and he describes a whole town, Venice, as floating in the water 'like a sodden bread-roll':⁴⁶ a deliberate mixture of definite and diffuse, of evoked whole with scrutinised particular. This preoccupation is perhaps most succinctly expressed in a poem that starts:

Larisa, this is when I shall regret
That I'm not death and am zero compared with it.
I'd have found out how, without any glue,
A living story holds to the fragments of days.⁴⁷

'Abstractions' are real. Complementarily, the world in its constant movement keeps bringing into existence new combinations of properties, new and hitherto nameless wholes. These 'cry out' for names and for poems. The main theoretical statement in *A Safe Conduct* begins:

We cease to recognise reality. It presents itself in some new category. Except for this condition everything in the world has been named. It alone is unnamed and new. We try to name it. The result is art.

5

The above central statement⁴⁸ formally introduces the concept of a 'force' or 'power' active at the origin of art. On other occasions where he uses the word *sila* ('strength', 'energy', perhaps best translated here as 'power', with a connotation of 'force' coming from the reference to 'theoretical physics'), Pasternak implies that there is nothing worth explaining about it. For example, of the book of poems he wrote in 1917, he says: 'When *My Sister Life* appeared, I became utterly indifferent as to the name of the power that had given me the book.'⁴⁹ Here, however, he does set out to explain it, unluckily in such charged and concentrated prose that by no means all parts of the idea fully emerge from the fertile obscurity of the moment.

It is indeed a matter of the 'moment'. Pasternak is concerned to

distinguish art from science by the fact that, whereas science deals with principles and numbers, which express the permanent or repeatable qualities of things, art deals with the unique and transient 'presence' of something, its 'voice', what it *feels* like, *now*. 'Art is interested in life at the moment when the ray of power is passing through it.'

The view – or vision – expressed here was held by Pasternak long before, and also long after, *A Safe Conduct*. It is the basis of his accounts of art in *Doctor Zhivago*, and it has been shown⁵⁰ how it developed from ideas he had held at the very beginning of his career as a poet and expounded in a lecture in 1913 entitled 'Symbolism and Immortality'; it also derives in part from his period of study in Marburg.

Our reading of the *Safe Conduct* passage may be helped by reference to what is extant of that lecture.⁵¹ The main points in it seem to have been as follows: that our subjective sensations and perceptions (which are something other than the objective oscillations producing them) are 'not an attribute of the individual human being but are a suprapersonal, racial quality; they are the subjectivity of the human race'; that 'every person leaves behind him when he dies the part of this undying racial subjectivity which was contained in him during his life'; and that 'perhaps this utmost-subjective and universally human corner and portion of the soul is art's everlasting field of action and its main content'.⁵² The conception of immortality adumbrated here is taken up in *Doctor Zhivago*. What is developed and stressed in the *Safe Conduct* passage we are looking at now, is the insistence that what we usually consider unreal because it is subjective is actually objectively real. Indeed, the main burden of the *Safe Conduct* statement is that art records a real change in the real world brought about by a real force. This force 'is called feeling' – which does not mean 'is reduced to feeling'.

Just as in naming abstractions such as the 'structure of the universe', or sensations such as that of 'identity', Pasternak feels free to switch from one term to another and invites others to do the same, so, in his theory, the poet, responding to reality altered by the force of feeling, is free to call it by whatever names he likes, i.e. to use as images whichever of its details he may choose: all will serve his purpose, since all have been equally altered by the same force. In fact, art is defined as 'the interchangeability of images'.⁵³

This is a most important idea to Pasternak and we should dwell on it for a moment. Images are 'interchangeable' because a work of art is not to be regarded as containing particularly valuable and indispensable bits called 'symbols', but, if we are to use the word

'symbol' at all (that is, a device meaning something beyond itself which cannot be indicated except thus indirectly), then it is the *whole* work that is symbolical, indeed it is art as a phenomenon altogether that is symbolical: it *all* means something 'else'. 'By the figure of its whole pull art is symbolic'. The something else is the changed world and the changeability of the world. This is really the only thing Pasternak wants to draw our attention to.

To return to the poet's freedom to choose his images – what Pasternak appears to mean is this. When I am moved by passion, the whole world seems different. I write about a leaf, a cloud, a face, a hope, *anything* – and all of them seem quite different from how they would have seemed before my seizure by passion. This is surely the essence of the experience. So what is new about it? Firstly, that we are being asked rigorously to remove the word 'seems', along with all idea of 'seeming', and to replace 'experience' with 'event'. Secondly, that we are being told to realise that the poet's freedom is not freedom at all, for he is categorically *not* free to diverge from reality into fantasy. 'Art is more one-sided than people think. It cannot be directed at will, wherever you wish, like a telescope.' Should the poet attend to anything other than passion-altered reality, he will cease to be a realist – and realism is a *sine qua non* of art. Pasternak's argument with 'romanticism' (caprice, invention, and what Tsvetaeva calls 'self-will') is thus written into the very heart of his theory.

Since Pasternak's simple – and unachievable – purpose in his writings about art is always to say what art 'is', his views apply to art in general and they say nothing about different cultures, different genres or the potencies of different themes. In any case, the apparent theme of a work is never its real theme:

When we suppose that in *Tristan, Romeo and Juliet* and other memorable works a powerful passion is portrayed, we underestimate their content. Their theme is wider than this powerful theme. Their theme is the theme of power.⁵⁴

That is to say, art is not interesting for its particular themes but for the way it reminds us of how it originates in the power (or force) that 'is called feeling'.

What is clearest, most memorable and most important about art is its origination, and the world's best works of art, while telling of the most diverse things, are really telling about their own birth.⁵⁵

It has often been remarked that all Pasternak's own work can be read as being in some sense about the way art originates, especially

the way it originates in the course of something very ordinary and day-to-day. This is notably the case with *A Safe Conduct*, and hence the whole text of this autobiography is included here. Paradoxically, this very preoccupation is often – as in *A Safe Conduct* – the overt subject of a work, so that the work appears to spring directly from his thinking about art, while *what* he is thinking about art is that it springs directly from reality.

6

There is no exact analogue to Pasternak's conception of art among his contemporaries. The closest to him is Marina Tsvetaeva. She speaks of an elemental force outside the poet, whom she sees as having to make a faithful copy of the features of what has been experienced;⁵⁶ she is also concerned, much as Pasternak is, with trying to define 'genius', and 'art'. But the similarity is limited. Tsvetaeva's force comes *upon* the poet, it attacks her and, while it destroys her as a private person, there is a stress on the fact that it is *she* who is destroyed, she is the one it comes upon, there is a recurrent cry of 'I' both in her poems and in her theoretical writings. She differs further from Pasternak in the violence and 'alienness' of the force she conceives of. By contrast, Pasternak is reflective and philosophical and is, above all, a spellbound observer of the event of art taking place, as it were, in nature.

He has strangely little in common with his other very great contemporary, Osip Mandelstam, and these two poets have chosen to express their experience of the artistic process in opposite terms. For Mandelstam 'the only thing sweet to us' is the 'moment of recognition';⁵⁷ the creative moment is one of recollection. It is a cultural moment, the finding of one's place in an ancient familiar pattern, a connection through time. His writing often evokes a European whole, like some lost or forgotten landscape. This is reflected in the way he treats actual landscapes. These, in his poems, are full of mysterious shadows of antiquity and mythic story; the geography suggests a spatial history.⁵⁸ But Pasternak's relation to gardens and landscapes (and they are his commonest subject) is quite different. They are not mysterious to him but simply each time unprecedented, never encountered before. In them, instead of a slow recalling of the past, there is a sudden grasp of the present; and instead of people going out into it, the garden itself comes indoors – knocks branches against windows, stamps at the porch, invades rooms with herbal scents, gets into the mirror; doing these things it becomes unrecognisable. While Mandelstam's moment of art

involves the mystery of perfect recognition, Pasternak's involves the astonishment of complete loss of recognition.

Another comparison that suggests itself is with Mayakovsky, since Pasternak at first felt he was so like him that he had to make a conscious effort to differentiate himself. But the comparison again leads to sheer contrast. Although the two poets coincide in their insistence that art is a product of everyday reality, their views of what everyday reality itself is like are not at all the same. To Mayakovsky, it is sober, matter-of-fact, urban, political and battling, and poetry's task is to engage with it and try actively to alter it; transfiguration is an irrelevant concept here. To Pasternak, reality is intoxicated as soon as he looks at it – or is it *he* that is intoxicated? The uncertainty makes any militant engagement with it seem out of the question. For Mayakovsky, the poet is self-assertive and self-expressive; for Pasternak, he is self-concealing. As Tsvetaeva put it, 'Pasternak is absorption, Mayakovsky is projection'.⁵⁹ And Mayakovsky's later view,⁶⁰ that a poem has to start by answering a 'social command', parallels but is wholly other than the compassion which Pasternak always took to be art's initial motive. It is the masculine to Pasternak's feminine, and the passionate admiration these two poets felt for each other produces one of the pleasures of literary history.

If we look further back in time, to Russian Symbolism, we find important similarities and differences. The idea of a transfigured, transformed reality is as basic to the Symbolists as it is to Pasternak. However, for them this idea is linked to belief in 'other worlds': reality is transformed by something other being revealed from within or behind it. The most systematic Symbolist thinker, Vyacheslav Ivanov,⁶¹ distinguishes 'realism' from 'idealism'⁶² in very much the same sense as Pasternak distinguishes 'realism' from 'romanticism' (and as Tsvetaeva distinguishes 'given' lines from 'self-willed' ones); Pasternak follows Ivanov in being utterly serious about art's responsibility, in decrying all inventions and individual caprice; and Ivanov's view that 'realism' is a feminine, receptive principle is like Pasternak's view of the artist's role as receptive, perceptive, impressionable, and art's action as feminine, or the result of contemplating the female condition.

But Ivanov's depiction of the creative process brings in thoroughly unpasternakian 'gods' and an indescribable otherness. He presented his idea in a diagram:⁶³ a tall right-angled triangle rising to a sharp angle at the apex. 'Dionysian' frenzy lifts the poet up, on the steep diagonal, from the level of ordinary life to the high point where he loses individuality and receives a timeless

'epiphany'; to create, he must descend again; his vertically downward fall is briefly arrested by an 'Apollonian' dream-recollection of the epiphany, then he plunges to the ground, back to the 'pathos' of individual existence, and writes the always inadequate poem.

This Dionysian frenzy could be likened to Pasternak's ray of force 'called feeling'. But Pasternak does not include or need any mythological link with time-honoured human remembrances, instead there is a deliberate modernity and novelty in his language. And, most important, if we were to draw a diagram of his idea it would have a horizontal, not vertical, dimension – it is a run along the ground and through time. This is why there cannot be a fall: there is nowhere to fall to, or from. There is no other world, and it is because he is concerned with this world, its changes and its potentialities, without seeing them as hazily explicable by reference to another system or realm, that he is so prone to the state of amazement that produces his poetry.

In some respects Pasternak might be likened to an English poet whose classification as a Romantic he might not agree with: Wordsworth. Some critics have indeed suggested a resemblance here, although none has yet followed it up. The initial point of the comparison would surely have to be the certainty both poets had of a benevolent energy working throughout nature, never ceasing its movement, and inscrutably bringing about a sensible coherence and wholeness – Wordsworth's experience of 'A motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things'⁶⁴ – and its vital importance to the poet, whose contact with it is the source of his poetry, for 'Visionary power / Attends upon the motions of the winds.'⁶⁵ By no means all that Wordsworth said on this subject can be assimilated to the beliefs held by Pasternak, who did not, for one example, dwell greatly on the moral inspiration coming from this source. Nonetheless, many of Wordsworth's formulations can be brought close to his own.

The moods of shadowy exultation, from which Wordsworth kept lifelong 'an obscure sense / Of possible sublimity';⁶⁶ all those raptures which lead to such assertions as 'Wonder not / If such my transports were, for in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was good';⁶⁷ and, along with these, his tendency to see 'affinities' wherever he looked, his possession of 'the great social principle of life',⁶⁸ resemble Pasternak's conviction of the miracle of universal connection. For both of them this experience was the inspirer of poetic creation.

Pasternak's idea of art from the very beginning could be summed up in his phrase about 'the intercourse of rapture with the every-

day'; in his later years he comes still closer to Wordsworth when he affirms his kinship with the 'ordinary' people around him and, as it were, echoes Wordsworth's commendation of 'the looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives ... who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires';⁶⁹ he too increasingly wishes to 'remove poetry in the first place from the realm of fantasy, and in the second from that of polite or oversophisticated amusement'.⁷⁰

Despite his 'metonymic' habit – of presenting himself only through the details of the world around him and shrinking from all dramatism, all inclination to see himself as 'priest' or 'prophet' – Pasternak was as interested as Wordsworth was in the 'growth of the poet's mind', and *A Safe Conduct* may be likened in this respect to *The Prelude*. Not only is each work a mixture of description, meditation and autobiographical narration, with a comparable general message of celebration, gratitude and an unspecific religious vision, but, above all, *A Safe Conduct* is like *The Prelude* in being an account of how its author grew into being a poet.

Pasternak does not continue Wordsworth's opposition of city and countryside nor join him in disparaging science and the intellect and their more technological products, but his devoted and rapturous love of nature is very like Wordsworth's, and he too speaks endlessly 'with grateful voice' of those whom Wordsworth addresses as 'Ye Mountains and Ye Lakes ... Ye Mists and Winds'⁷¹ – only usually without the capital letters, and always without the 'Ye'.