

## How to translate the title *Okhrannaia gramota*.

Most English translations of Pasternak's *Okhrannaia gramota* hitherto have been entitled "Safe Conduct". This is unfortunate in two ways.

### I

First, it is not a correct translation. A "safe-conduct" implies a journey. According to the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>1</sup> it means: "(1) the privilege, granted by a sovereign or other competent authority, of being protected from arrest or molestation while making a particular journey or travelling within a certain region; (2) a document by which this privilege is conveyed; (3) the action of conducting in safety: safe convoy." One may talk of journeying "under" or "upon" a safe-conduct. It is to be noted that the two words should be hyphenated; the OED's example is: "He had come over under a safe-conduct and he was not detained."

But "Okhrannaia gramota" does not imply a journey. According to the Academic Dictionary of the Russian Language<sup>2</sup> it means: "dokument, udostoveriaushchii, chto litso ili ego imushchestvo sostoiat pod osoboi okhranoi gosudarstvennoi vlasti." [A document guaranteeing that a person or his property stand under the special protection of State authority.] The Smirnitskii Russian-English Dictionary translates it as "safeguard". The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary<sup>3</sup> does give "safe-conduct", as well as "pass"; the first of these, I am arguing, is incorrect (though it has, notably, the required hyphen here); the second, which can refer simply to crossing a threshold rather than to going on a journey, echoes the threshold-crossing imagery Pasternak used in some early poems; I discuss these below.

The relevant application of the term to property is spelled out by Lazar Fleishman in his book *Boris Pasternak, the Poet and his Politics*<sup>4</sup>: "The title of [Pasternak's] new book was . . . polemical in character: *Okhrannaia gramota*. This term went back to the vocabulary of the first years of the revolution, when the Soviet government issued documents confirming the inviolability of valuable private cultural collections and thus saved them from being plundered by mobs and from nationalization. By using this term, which at the end of the 1920s was already anachronistic, Pasternak was

drawing an eloquent parallel between the first years of the revolution, when even under harsh conditions art had not been degraded, and the current situation, when art seemed defenseless before the attacks of Lef and RAPP.”

This may not be the whole significance of Pasternak’s title. While he may be tacitly arguing that art in his day is unprotected and requires an *okhrannia gramota*, the title may be, at the same time, a description of the work whose title it is - not of course of its subject matter, but of its function and effect; the memoir itself being a kind of *okhrannaia gramota*, a preservation document granted either to property or to a person.

In his 1975 paper, “Ob odnom kliuche k ‘Okhrannoï gramote’”<sup>5</sup>, Michel Aucouturier gave a persuasive account of the danger from which this book would protect its author and his art. He notes that the threat to Pasternak in those years was not one of rejection, exclusion or punishment but, on the contrary, one of unwelcome acceptance, of inclusion in the Soviet canon, and therewith an obligation to fit his writing to the values of the reigning powers. “Kak vidim”, he writes, “*Okhrannaia gramota zadumana kak svoego roda ispoved’*, v osnove kotoroi lezhit stremlenie liuboi tsenoi osvobodit’sia ot prevratnykh predstavlenii o sebe, kotorye sviazyvaiut emu ruki.” Art, at any rate that produced by genius, is, according to Pasternak in this work (as Aucouturier shows), anarchic, subversive, explosive and dangerous. And this work itself is indeed anarchic and, to any coercive State, dangerous, since its narrative’s consistent orientation is to those “leaps aside made by passion” from predetermined paths. [O.g. III, 1] It is at once about, and an *instance* of, art’s non-coercibility. So if it is published and read (he may have considered) it will *ipso facto* have saved its author from the fate of being made a representative and unfree “Soviet poet”; he will have issued his own certificate of inviolability.

Certainly there is also an allusion to art’s belonging in eternity. There are several references in it to a notion of timelessness, that is of freedom from the current historical time. One is the short note about *Sestra moia zhizn’*, which “expressed utterly non-contemporary aspects of poetry” and came from “a power” that was “immeasurably bigger than me and the conception of the poetic which surrounded me”; [O.g. III, 11]; another is the section about Venice, which says that, no matter

how the authorities try to enslave art and enrol it in their purposes. it will survive them and deceive them, as if – one could add – it had a guarantee of preservation from some higher source than the State.[O.g. II, 17] Aucouturier, too, writes of this, though without Pasternak's bold certainty: his article ends with the words: "*Sauf conduit* is not an attempt to justify art in the face of the time but, on the contrary, an attempt to defend it from the encroachments of time-the-enslaver, and to secure it a path into eternity."<sup>6</sup>

If we interpret "path" as "pass", then this concluding sentence recalls early poems of Pasternak's which speak of the poet's possession of a ticket to a privileged, safe place in some dangerous dimension of existence.

"Pro eti stikhi", the first poem in the first cycle of *Sestra moia zhizn'*, alludes in its final stanza to the imagery in "Pamiati demona" (the only poem which precedes it) of nightmarish, grief-causing danger, exposure and strangeness, and of the poet's inscrutable identification with the demonic powers of nature:

Poka v Dar'ial, kak k drugu, vkhozh,  
Kak v ad, v tseikhgauz i v arsenal,  
Ia zhizn', kak Lermontova drozh',  
Kak guby v vermut, okunal.

The dangerous element in which the poet dips his life is Lermontov's Hell, and the references to weaponry presumably hint at Lermontov's violent death, but the likening of his own experience to drinking absinthe suggests that our poet, for all his actual entry into that nightmare world and intoxication by it, will come out again safely; he is, after all, "kak k drugu, vkhozh" and friends do let you go home.

The idea of special admittance occurs again in "Krasavitsa moia, vsia stat" (written in 1931) where "rhyme" (synecdochic for "poetry") is called not just a repetition of sounds but:

. . .Garderobnyi nomerok,  
Talon na mesto u kolonn  
V zagrobnyi gul kornei i lon.

A ticket – even if it is a “nomerok”, “talon” or “bliashka” – does indeed suggest a kind of “gramota”, and in exchanging for it the heavy coat of everyday illnesses and fears, says the poet, one gains “vkhod i propusk za porog” . . . The implied concert or theatre represents the other world, life after death, a realm of danger, and also indicates that the person with the ticket will remain unscathed there.

There is no obligation to relate these images to the title of Pasternak’s autobiographical memoir. Yet “Krasavitsa moia” was written the same year that *Okhrannaia gramota* was published, and *Sestra moia zhizn’* is mentioned in the latter as the first experience of indubitable elemental inspiration, so it would seem that, in addition to the protection of the non-conformist artist which Aucouturier points to, the *gramota* of the title also speaks of the poet’s protected sojourn in other dimensions of being.

In an even more famous poem of 1931, “Il’ ia ne znaiu . . .”, Pasternak mentions, in a now explicit and objective way, the “place of the poet”, but here this has a different sense: “the place allotted to the poet” by those in power. The poem’s final stanza -

Naprasno v dni velikogo soveta,  
Gde vysshei strasti ot dany mesta,  
Ostavlena vakansiia poeta:  
Ona opasna, esli ne pusta -

- surely asserts that if the poet should occupy the place allotted him by the State he will inevitably endanger the State as he will bring with him the explosive and subversive energy proper to that other privileged place he occupies – in Hell, in Daryal, in Eternity.

## II

The second way in which “Safe Conduct” is an unfortunate rendering of the title “Okhrannaia gramota” is that this phrase is ambiguous and misleading. Without any definite or indefinite article, “conduct” can all too easily be taken to mean “behaviour” (rather than, as is intended, “guidance” or convoy); it then suggests the cautious, self-preserving behaviour of one who wishes to protect himself from something. Such a mistaken reading, even if it happens in the back of the reader’s mind, is damaging to Pasternak, who experienced art as danger and yet chose it, and

who did not spend the first half of his life (nor indeed the second half) doing the kind of comfortable work that would keep him safe.

In my 1985 translation of this work<sup>7</sup>, feeling that the phrase “Safe Conduct” had become too strongly associated with it for a completely new title to be proposed, I went only so far as to eliminate the “behaviour” reading by adding an article (“behaviour” is not normally preceded by one) and calling it “A Safe-Conduct” – from which the editor removed my hyphen. As I noted above, a “safe-conduct”, in the sense of a document guaranteeing safe convoy, does require a hyphen and its omission in translations of this work hitherto, including, unintentionally, my own, is an error. “A Safe-Conduct” would remove the worst of the error, still leaving, though, the two wrong implications – that the document has to do with a journey and that it relates only to a person, not to a thing, consequently not to “art”. Or perhaps “The Safe-Conduct” would be better. Lazar Fleishman once wrote<sup>8</sup>:

“ . . what Boris Pasternak invests in this term would require rather the definite article. It is not one among others but /is/ the really life-saving document.”

These last four words may even be the best translation of all for the title *Okhrannaia gramota*.

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### References

1. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, O.U.P., 1973.
2. *Slovar' russkogo iazyka*, Akademiia nauk SSSR, Institut russkogo iazyka, Moscow, 1981.
3. Edited by Wheeler and Unbegaun, O.U.P., 1993.
4. Harvard University Press, 1990, page 158.
5. In: *Boris Pasternak. Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle, 11-14 Septembre, 1975*, Paris, 1979, pp 337-349.
6. “. . .popytka zashchitit' iskusstvo ot posiatel'stv vremeni-porabotitelia . . .”
7. In: Angela Livingstone, *Pasternak on Art and Creativity*, C.U.P., 1985.
8. In a letter to me of 13.4.1990.

*Appendix.* (Poetry as a special "pass" or "ticket" to a protected place.)

The first poem in the first cycle of *Sestra moia zhizn'*, "Pro eti stikhi", alludes in its final stanza to the imagery in "Pamiati demonu" (the only poem which precedes it) of nightmarish, grief-causing danger, exposure and strangeness, and of the poet's inscrutable identification with the demonic powers of nature:

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