Philosophical Traces in Pasternak's Poems and Poetic Prose

This essay arose from thoughts prompted by an exchange of letters with Fiona Bjőrling about the philosophical in Pasternak's work. Other discussions with her in recent years, as well as her many published writings[1] on Pasternak have also been an invaluable spur to my own thinking. I am glad to record here my deep gratitude to her.

1

> Фантазируя, наталкивается поэзия на природу. Живой, действительный мир, это единственный, однажды удавшийся и все еще без конца удачный замысел воображения. Вот он длится, ежемногвенно успешный. Он все еще – действителен, глубок, неотрывно увлекателен. В нем не разочаровываешься на другое утро. Он служит поэту примером в больше еще степени, нежели – натурой и моделью.[2]

> As it fantasises, poetry comes across nature. The real, living world is the only project of the imagination which has once succeeded and still goes on being endlessly successful. Look at it continuing, moment after moment a success. It is still real, still deep, utterly absorbing. It is not something you'll be disappointed in next morning. It serves the poet as example, even more than as a sitter or a model.

That the world we inhabit is not an object, simply there for us to describe, but is a continuously changing product of the human imagination - this thought, set out more weightily by many a professional philosopher, is indicated here with the lightest of touches, the magnificently modest gesture of 'Look at it continuing' (Vot on dlitsja). The paradox – that, though a product of the imagination (zamysel voobraženija), nature is really and truly there - becomes a blithe and unproblematic one. Can such a wonder as the imagined, real world actually succeed for more than a moment? To this implicit question the answer is plain: yes, amazingly, it can and does. There is something in the tone of sustained, laconic yet delighted celebration, and something in the quick, light series of moves from random point in time (it 'comes across') through stages of past ('has once succeeded'), present ('look at it')

and quasi-future ('next morning') that prompts me to call this a piece of poetry in prose. Wallace Stevens's lines -

> The magnificent cause of being,
> The imagination, the one reality
> In this imagined world . . .[3]

resemble Pasternak's paragraph not only in the similarity of their idea but also in their being, complementarily, a kind of prose in poetry. In each writer, the one genre bends towards the other.

Stevens is thought of as a philosophical poet. Pasternak is just as concerned as Stevens - or Eliot, or Rilke - with the relation of mind to world. Although he cannot exactly be called a philosophical poet, since his meditations on this subject, more often in prose than in verse, do not have the investigative and extended form typical of philosophers' prose and typical of such poems as 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', *Four Quartets*, *Duineser Elegien*, nonetheless he is certainly a poet in whose work the philosophical has a notable place.

2

The quoted prose passage is from the sixth of 'Some Propositions' (Neskol'ko položenij, 1919). Another piece which, like that one, has rung in my head for years is the paragraph about 'salangane swallows' in *A Safe-Conduct*, 2,18 (*Ochrannaja gramota*, 1929-30). This, too, is an account of how we human beings have made our world, meaning as much the world of culture as that of nature. Still in celebratory mode, Pasternak evokes the sensation of history's creative continuity which was inspired in him by his stay in Venice in 1912:

> Я любил живую суть исторической символики, иначе говоря, тот инстинкт, с помощью которого мы, как ласточки-саланганы, построили мир, - огромное гнездо, слепленное из земли и неба, жизни и смерти и двух времен, наличного и

> отсутствующего. Я понимал, что ему мешает развалиться сила сцепления, заключающаяся в сквозной образности всех его частиц.[4]
>
> 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.

Certain swiftlets (not swallows, actually),[5] build their nests from a secretion of their own bodies, their saliva, sometimes mixing it with small twigs and feathers. Similarly, says Pasternak, we build the universe we live in from a secretion of our own minds - symbolism, imagery, figurativeness - mixing it with earth, sky and time. And just as the success of the 'project of the imagination' in 'Some Propositions' was unexpected, so too the continuation of history is thought of as improbable. The historical world could easily fall apart yet does not, being stuck together by the glue of imagery – that is, by the imagination, here called an instinct.

This piece asks to be called prose poetry because of its rhythmic compactness, the curious elation and aptness of its world-encompassing analogy (the salivary nest), and the way this whole world-vision is lyrically held aloft in the poet's love. Also because of the enigmatically unglossed 'two kinds of time, present and absent' – where the Russian word I have translated as 'present' is as odd in application to time as is 'absent': *naličnoe* means ready-to-hand, available here-and-now; it has as much a spatial as a temporal connotation. There is something lyrical, too, in the mystery of the birds, fleetingly mentioned as if we know all about them, although indeed we may not. We may have heard that some birds' nests, being made of saliva, are harvested and sold to be eaten, a fact which, of course, is not part of the analogy. Pasternak may have thought his reader would discover it and thus add to the rapturous account of our living in a home-made nest of history (a home, *self*-made) the sombre thought that it is doomed to destruction. But there is no shock of pessimism here. Any hint of it

succumbs to the idea (through which the paragraph itself surely contributes to the making of our vast and habitable nest of symbolism) that there are only two kinds of time. For the way the 'absent' kind tacitly combines past and future promotes the unique importance of the present, unconcerned as it is with ultimate demolitions.

Another philosophical poet may come to mind. T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' contains the often quoted phrase 'the still point of the turning world' and then:

> . . . there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
> Where past and future are gathered . . .

As in Pasternak, past and future are a single, lesser category while the existing, almost spatial present is all; and again a certain prosaic quality in Eliot's philosophical verse makes it complementary to the lyrical quality in Pasternak's philosophical prose.

How on earth do nature and history continue without gaps, despite being projections of our shifting imagination? A similar question was asked by Pasternak about human personality: in the salangane passage the very concrete word 'sleplennoe' (stuck together) recalls the surprising phrase 'without glue' in the poem 'In Memory of Larissa Reisner' (Pamjati Rejsner, 1926) which starts:

> Лариса, вот когда посожалею,
> Что я не смерть и ноль в сравненьи с ней.
> Я б разузнал, чем держится без клею
> Живая повесть на обрывках дней.[6]
>
> Larissa, now is when I shall regret
> That I'm not death, am nought compared with it.
> I would have found out how, without glue,
> A living story holds to the fragments of days.

How do a person's life and apparently integral personality cohere on the bits and pieces of time from which they are made? That the large and vital realities we exist amongst might well have never cohered, never been real at all, is a thought that seems

basic to Pasternak's lifelong affirmation of life, although he does not offer it as part of a declared philosophy nor expound it as a truth. There is one place, though, where he is explicit about it. In *A Tale* (Povest', 1929) he expresses the thought of an infinitely positive value resulting from the equally infinite possibility of its own negation. The thought is presented indirectly, through a complex narrative. A young poet writes a story about a multi-talented man who publicly puts himself, body and soul, up for auction, in order to use the money thus acquired to save women from suffering. To make sure of a high price he first performs on a stage, in front of the crowd of bidders, with music and poetry and speeches, and while he does so it seems

> точно кто попеременно то показывал ему землю, то прятал ее в рукав, и живую красоту он понял как предельное отличье существованья от несуществованья.[7]
>
> as though someone were alternately showing him the earth and hiding it in his sleeve, and he understood living beauty as the ultimate difference between existence and non-existence.

Art as salvation is one part of the theme of 'A Tale'. Another, brought to its peak in this sentence, is that art's origin, and the thing the fictional poet wishes to sell for the highest possible price, is in fact the very insight here described: the glimpsed difference between existence and non-existence, beauty's origin in near-impossibility. 'Only the almost-impossible is real', as Pasternak writes in *A Safe-Conduct*.[8]

The world is not given us as an object but is being endlessly created by our constantly renewed and remade, handed down perceptions, thoughts, usages, names and theories. Hermann Cohen, under whom Pasternak studied philosophy in Marburg in 1912, went further on this anti-realist path, arguing that even we ourselves as subjects are not stable entities. It is highly characteristic of Pasternak that in this vision of non-reality he found only benefit and marvel. Nature does continue, we do live securely within history, a human being may be nothing but fragments but look

how wonderfully they nonetheless hold together. Praise for the entirety of a human being, so strong in the Reisner poem, is later echoed many times in his praises for a person's outlined completeness.

Repeatedly Pasternak finds enormous virtue in existential gaps where others have often found horror. It is because there is 'no second universe' (*S-C* 1,6), no other world on which to get a foothold so as to look down at this first one and piece it together – or rather, as he writes, to draw reality up from it – that we are compelled to speak in symbols, to make use, that is, of whatever we can find within this single universe. Whereby all of art and all human culture are brought into being.

3

Undoubtedly there are traces of neo-Kantian philosophy in the poem 'Weeping Garden' (Plačuščij sad, 1917);[9] and there seem to be traces there of another philosophical idea as well, one of Pasternak's own. As already noted, Cohen taught that cognition is pure, unceasing movement. Moreover, just as the object of cognition is 'not at all to be thought of as fixed and motionless' (nichts weniger als starr, unbeweglich zu denken), for 'it *is* not, but *becomes*' and must be grasped 'as constantly new object-production' (beständig neue Gegenstandserzeugung), so too there exists no continuous perceiving subject. Subject and object do not exist as such; they come about only in relation to the incessant movement of cognition.[10] The other idea, which Pasternak developed on his own and which seems to spring both from this and from the theories of Paul Natorp, Cohen's colleague (whose seminars he also attended),[11] is that our inanimate surroundings are themselves in search of subjectivity. 'Subjectivity without the subject' is a term Pasternak used in his youth as a near-synonym for 'lyricism', meaning the condition in which poems are conceived

and composed. The synopsis of a lecture he gave in 1913 to a group of fellow-writers (the lecture itself has not survived) is concerned with this conception. There, carefully qualifying 'reality' in Kantian or neo-Kantian spirit as 'the reality which is accessible to us', Pasternak states that reality is absorbed in a quest for subjectivity and that 'the poet submits to the tendency of that quest, imitates it, and conducts himself like the objects around him.' People may call this behaviour 'being observant and drawing from nature', but what is really happening is the poet's submission to the real world's search for feeling and a voice.[12]

This conception lies behind the strange event narrated in 'Weeping Garden':

Ужасный! – Капнет и вслушается,
Все он ли один на свете
Мнет ветку в окне, как кружевце,
Или есть свидетель.

Но давится внятно от тягости
Отеков – земля ноздревая,
И слышно: далеко, как в августе,
Полуночь в полях назревает.

Ни звука. И нет соглядатаев.
В пустынности удостоверясь,
Берется за старое – скатывается
По кровле, за желоб и через.

К губам поднесу и прислушаюсь,
Все я ли один на свете, -
Готовый навзрыд при случае, -
Или есть свидетель.

Но тишь. И листок не шелохнется.
Ни признака зги, кроме жутких
Глотков и плескания в шлепанцах
И вздохов и слез в промежутке.

Dreadful! It drips and listens -
whether it is still alone in the world
crushing a twig like lace at the window
or – is there a witness?

Audible, though, the pressure
of porous earth's taut swellings
and far away, as happens in August,

midnight grows in the fields.

No, no sound, no witness.
Convinced that no one's there,
it starts its old game up again, rolls
down roofs, over gutters.

I'll lift it to my lips and listen –
whether I am still alone in the world
ready to break into sobs if I need to
or – is there a witness?

Quietness. Not a leaf shifting.
No dot of light, except weird
gulps, splashings about in slippers,
lulls full of sighs and tears.

In this poem the word 'rain' is not used, but it becomes clear that 'it', despite an initial ambiguity, cannot refer to the (also masculine-gendered) 'garden'. So it is a poem about rain in a garden at night, ready, after a lull, to pour down again unrestrainedly provided it has no witness, and paralleled by someone at (one surmises) the window mentioned in stanza one, who is ready to burst out in equally unrestrained sobs provided *he* has no witness. We bear in mind that bursting into sobs was used by Pasternak more than once as a metaphor for writing poetry.

Rain, normally an object of perception, here behaves subjectively (despite having a third-person pronoun): it pauses to listen, for example, to find out if it is alone. When the apparent presence of nothing but garden, distant fields and night convinces it that it is indeed alone, it bursts out, crashing over roof and gutters. One might suppose that if rain can do such things as listening and noticing it could surely also realise that someone *is* there, namely the 'I' whose mood is about to be conveyed; doubtless the reason why it does not is that that person is in a sense *not* there, as he is wholly absorbed in imitating the rain - 'submitting to the tendency of reality's quest'. He imitates both the rain's question - is anyone else there? - and the rain's wetness – by a gesture of drinking and a readiness to shed tears. The curious thing is that, if what the window-person drinks is, as it seems to be, rain, then he is

drinking the asker of the question about whether there is a witness, as well as the answerer of that question in the negative; so he imbibes his annihilator, drinks in the denial of his own existence. When *he* asks the same question the implied answer is again 'no', so now he is denying the presence of the rain (sole candidate for witnesshood at this point), in just the same way as it was denying his. He denies it, presumably, because the rain is becoming him.

The second negative answer, given implicitly in the fifth quatrain, is what makes it possible for him to burst out in sobs, and if that means to write a poem then 'Weeping Garden' is surely the very poem he writes: the self-referencing is intense. And yet this facilitating answer is provided by sounds of wetness, sounds caused by the rain. The reader may want to call out 'You're wrong! There *is* a witness - the wetness!' Both of them – rain and 'I' – are mistaken, for on each occasion there is indeed a witness. At the same time each is right, since the questions and the answers confirm that the two have merged into each other - not just as a transparent metaphor (like the plan, in an earlier poem, to 'write sobbingly of February') but, as it were, physically.

Because he has not been observed (having become rain), the poet, if he is a poet, can sob forth as much as he likes. Outside the poem he will write the poem, and will close it off with familiar imagery of slippers and gulps to reduce the fearful seriousness of the merging of subject and object. For only humans wear slippers and only humans are likely to gulp and to shed tears, so these now seem ordinary similes for the ordinary sounds in a garden after a downpour, echoes of the (more powerful) images in stanza two. Or perhaps 'I' has gone striding about outdoors, weeping and splashing? That too, however, would be a normalising and domesticating closure.

The philosophical idea of the interdependence and the transitoriness of subject and object really is contained in this poem, while its opening adjective – 'Dreadful!' (Užasnyj!) – casts an uncanniness, an unexplained dread, over the whole relationship of human and elemental. To give up one's subjectivity to objective things is all but unthinkable for most of us. We can be rescued from the strangeness of it only if now we re-read the poem in a different way: relishing its aesthetic excellence instead of following its invitation into the uncanny.

We have here, after all, an extremely fine choreography of exuberant sounds (for example the evocative repetition of vowels in lines one and two of the second quatrain and the perfectly handled sibilants in the fifth [only, alas, in the Russian]), along with a powerful uniting syntax: the poem is one single thought.[13] And altogether it is a brilliant evocation of the quality of a lull between two showers of rain, that sense of a quiet alertness and imminence, along with the suggestion, familiar enough and not scary, of how the lull's qualities may conduce to the writing of a poem: the whole scene is as much soaked in lyricism as in water, and the reader can enjoy all this without going into the philosophy.

4

A comparable switch of subjectivity from subject to object happens in other poems of *My Sister Life* (Sestra moja - žizn', 1917), notably in 'Mirror' (Zerkalo) and 'Stifling Night' (Dušnaja noč')[14] - in the first much less uncannily, in the second much more so. The large garden in 'Mirror' enters the tall mirror so physically that the reader is expected to expect the mirror to break and to be surprised when it does not. This could be a poem about the amazing capacity of mirrors. Instead it easily simplifies into the thought that the mirror represents poetry – for poetry, too, can take in every detail of the immediate environment without breaking. This is externally

reinforced by the theory set out twelve years later in part two of *A Safe-Conduct* which stresses that absolutely everything experienced under the effect of inspiration gets altered in the same way; everything acquires the same unprecedented new quality, to the extent that the tiniest detail picked out will speak of the alteration of the whole scene. Similarly 'Mirror' states that *all* objects reflected in it are identically changed, glazed. As in 'Weeping Garden', the person becomes the scene he is describing, the scene becomes his mind.

Far more unnerving is the exchange of subjectivity in 'Stifling Night'. The scene's components are similar to those of 'Weeping Garden': a garden, at night, under rain, with a solitary first-person observer whom the garden's features (fence and twig) *could* notice but as yet do not. Here, too, there is prominent use of the adjective 'dreadful': 'the dreadful talking garden' (užasnyj govoriaščij sad). Not noticing the man, the garden goes on and on talking, while he, overhearing it, realises that it is talking *about him* ('pro menja') and that, should it once notice his presence, he would be eternally bewitched.

In 'Stifling Night' the 'dreadful' result of a transfer of subjectivity to an inanimate object, and of the latter's consequent awareness of the human being, would be the human being's permanent bewitchment. In 'Weeping Garden', the dreadful result would appear to be the composition of a poem. The two results can be understood as one and the same: composing is a timeless state of total absorption, from which one cannot imagine ever getting back to ordinary reality.

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References and Notes

All translations of prose and poetry in this article are my own – A. Livingstone.

1. Above all: ‘Speeding in Time. Philosophy and Metaphor in a Presentation of Okhrannaja gramota, Part One, 6’(in *Eternity’s Hostage. Selected Papers from the Stanford International Conference on Boris Pasternak, May, 2004, In Honor of Evgeny Pasternak and Elena Pasternak,* ed. Lazar Fleishman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 285-302), and ‘Blind Leaps of Passion and other strategies to outwit inevitability. On Pasternak and the legacy from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century” (in *On the Verge. Russian Thought Between the 19th and the 20th Centuries,* edited by Fiona Björling. Lund: Lund University, 2001).

2. Pasternak, Boris. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij v odinnadtsati tomach s prilozheniiach*, ed. E.B. and E.V. Pasternak, Moscow: Slovo [hereafter PSS], 5, 318 (‘Simvolizm i bessmertie’).

3. Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 21 (‘Another Weeping Woman’).

4. PSS, 5, 26-7.

5. Birds of the family *Apopidae*, whose saliva-built nests are known in Russian as *lastočkiny gnezda* (swallows’ nests) - information from Mike Wilson, University of Oxford.

6. PSS, 1, 226.

7. PSS, 3, 137.

8. PSS, 3, 177.

9. PSS, 1, 117.

10. See Fleishman, Lazar, *et al*. *Boris Pasternaks Lehrjahre. Neopublikovannye konspekty i zametki* (2 vols), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 67.

11. Fleishman, Lazar. *Boris Pasternak, the Poet and his Politics*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 35-6.

12. PSS, 5, 318 ('Simvolizm i bessmertie').

13. As noted by Peter France in *Poets of Modern Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 83.