

'Pasternak on Verlaine and Chopin'

Pasternak presents Verlaine as a 'realist' by grounding his notoriously 'musical' and indefinite poetry firmly in space and time and asserting that his work is all 'content', not form. Here 'realism' is associated with a sense of the 'rightness of being upon the earth', which interestingly echoes Mandelstam's commendation of the Acmeist poets (in his essay of 1913) for their being - unlike the Symbolists - at home in the four dimensions of this existence.

The image of things flying in from the street through the poet's window and into his verse is one that combines Pasternak's perennial motif of fast impetuous movement with his later view of the artist as responding to his own 'historical' epoch. It modifies the window imagery often appearing in Pasternak's poetry before this time, in that these airborne images' place of origin is the urban street instead of garden or sky. Although Pasternak does talk of Verlaine as a particular man and poet, he also takes the movement of the urban traffic, and of the modern city altogether, as a symbol for what happens when any modern genius is at work. Exactly the same flying-in-at-the-window is repeated by him elsewhere to describe the work of other poets, most notably that of Blok and that of Pushkin.

Now, Chopin, too, is described as a 'realist'. But how can 'realism' apply to music? The series of epithets that spell out the concept in the course of the 'Chopin' essay seem chosen to make its application to music as unlikely and unexpected as possible: not only 'sobriety' and 'seriousness' but 'definite, exact, verifiable; cognition, a developing thought, biography, actual experience'.

It is hard not to think that Pasternak means: it is *as if* the cognitional content of music were verifiable; and you *seem* to hear a rational idea developing in a piece of music and to be in contact with someone's real-life experience. But he rigorously leaves out the 'seems' and the 'as if' in order to identify the force we feel coming from the music with the force the composer felt coming from the reality he experienced.

Opposed to those epithets is (throughout the essay) a series of words associated with criticism of realism's opposite, 'romanticism': 'arbitrary; stilted pathos; false depth; false emotion; playing; inventing; fantasy; artificiality; amusement; conventional and evasive; nymphs and salamanders'; and so on.

Pasternak would not be disturbed to be told that he is narrowing the meaning of 'romantic' and stretching that of 'realistic' to points where these words almost lose meaning. It is clear enough that, by 'romantic', he means only one aspect of what the word generally means, and that this aspect is viewed by him with an unanalysed antipathy. Meanwhile, by 'realistic' he has in mind that order of accuracy, of objectivity, that Marina Tsvetaeva meant when she described the poet as listening with intense concentration to hear the words of the poem he is about to write, to *get them right* - as if the poem were already written and hovering somewhere and, should a phrase be missed, it would be gone for good and the lines would have to be padded out with invented stuff. Such 'stuff' is what Pasternak means by 'romantic'; only, in *his* conception the romantic stuffing is wilful, rather than necessitated by an unfortunate mis-hearing.

'Realism' is stressed through the familiar motif of the 'biographical' figure of the musician. He is the vehicle which carries the force. Typically, he is dwelt on at the moment when he gets up,

'phenomenally definite', from the piano, to face the material world 'after music', like Shestikrylov in 'Ordering a Drama' (and recalling the 'reader' in a poem by Rilke who looks up from his reading with his eyes still full of the book and therefore giving, instead of taking).

A less familiar idea is mockery, and its cousin mimicry (a theme to be developed in *Doctor Zhivago*). In Chopin's return to the recital room with tie disarrayed, to perform what might be called a piece of 'mimic relief', the histrionic theme of the early stories and of *A Safe Conduct* has developed into a 'Bacchanalian' theme: laughter at oneself begins to seem to Pasternak inseparable from the sobriety of great art. And something that is not quite laughter but is at least a certain beyond-a-joke lightheartedness about the business of propounding definitions, a sense of the 'interchangeability' of abstractions, characterises the essay's concluding statement, which tells us what Chopin's *études* are *about*, what they 'teach': they are an investigation into the 'theory of childhood', an introduction to 'death', they teach 'history or the *structure* of the universe or anything whatever that's more distant and more general than how to play the piano'.

It may seem contradictory that a large part of the essay is devoted to the visual and tactile images suggested to Pasternak when he listens to Chopin's works. Is his 'realism' after all reducible to 'programme music'? No, it is not, because these waterfalls, bumpy roads and snowfalls are not supposed to prevail over the other, so carefully indefinite, names for music's 'content'. Why, then, does he include them?

These are the experienced details which the literary listener to the music imagines were for the composer the signs of the force that made him compose. Even when a 'cavalry squadron gallops' down from stage onto the audience (as if this is what the musical sounds *represented*) we do not so much have a picture called up by the music as an idea of the force the music is called up *by*. It is significant that all the imagery is of forceful movement: collisions and bumpings and crashings, and again the flinging open of a window.

These pictures also hint at an idea similar to that in Schopenhauer's account of music: 'This deep relation which music has to the true nature of all things also explains the fact that suitable music played to any scene, action, event, or surrounding seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears as the most accurate and distinct commentary upon it. This is so truly the case that whoever gives himself up entirely to the impression of a symphony, seems to see all the possible events of life and the world take place in himself; yet if he reflects, he can find no likeness between the music and the things that passed before his mind.' In this paragraph, the 'distinct commentary' parallels Pasternak's 'gradually unfolding story', and the way Schopenhauer finds music both wholly like and wholly unlike 'events of life and the world' recalls Pasternak's giving highly detailed images for music while simultaneously declaring it to be about 'anything. . . more general'. But Pasternak replaces Schopenhauer's 'will' with a power, the most important thing about which is that it is unnamed.