



AN ESSAY ON  
*DOCTOR ZHIVAGO*



## 1. "A NOVEL IN PROSE"

In *Doctor Zhivago* Pasternak is no less concerned with artistic inspiration and creation than he is in *A Safe-Conduct*. This concern is now expressed in the looser, simpler style of his later years and becomes part of a wide-ranging fictional work which contains discursive passages about the pattern of history and the meaning of existence. In sections one and two of this essay I shall look at the simpler style and its effects, in sections three and four at the overtly presented ideas; throughout there will be comparisons with *A Safe-Conduct*.

In his adolescence Pasternak admired Scriabin's highly eccentric conception of simplicity in music. His own subsequent aspiration was to a far more normal simplicity of style, a way of writing everyone would understand. In 1921 he told a friend that he had resolved, after 1917, to "make a sharp turn" away from the so-called originality of the literary milieu he was used to, the "sea of arbitrariness" lying behind its "neo-aestheticism", and to start "writing the way people write letters . . . , disclosing to the reader everything I think . . . , abstaining from technical effects fabricated beyond his field of vision."<sup>1</sup> Moves towards simplicity can be traced from the narrative poems of the 1920s and the poems of the 1931 volume *Second Birth* (one of which predicts the fall "into an unheard-of simplicity, as into a heresy") right up to the *Zhivago* poems and those which followed them. When the fictional poet Iurii Zhivago desires his originality to be "concealed under the cover of a commonplace and familiar form" and his style to be "unnoticeable", he is dreaming Pasternak's own dream.

The earlier prose (such as the texts in Parts I and II of the present book) had been very much the prose of a poet, outstandingly original, sometimes condensed and difficult to penetrate, frequently enthralling. But *Doctor Zhivago* was to be written in a straightforward, easily accessible prose. Very conscious of its prosaic quality, Pasternak referred to it as "a novel in prose".<sup>2</sup> The phrase brings to mind Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, a "novel in verse", and the fact that Gogol put the subtitle "a Poem" to his one novel, *Dead Souls*—two works which in their different ways seek to speak about "the whole of Russia". It also implies a contrast with Pasternak's own "novel in verse", *Spektorsky*, and is a reminder that writing a novel is not easy when you are a poet.

For a long time Pasternak had felt that a new style was required of him by the age he lived in. A remark he made in the 1920s—"I consider epic to be prompted by the age, therefore in my book 1905 I am moving from lyric thinking to epic,

though it is very difficult . . . ” anticipates a remark in the 1950s: “I believe it is no longer possible for lyric poetry to express the immensity of our experience . . . We have acquired values best expressed in prose. I have tried to express them in my novel.”<sup>3</sup> One value best expressed in prose was certainly that very “immensity”. While still writing the novel, Pasternak confessed to his cousin Olga Freidenberg that prose was much harder to write than poems, and yet—

only prose brings me close to the idea of the absolute which sustains me and contains in itself both my life and norms of behaviour etc etc, and which creates an inner mental structure on one of whose tiers verse-writing—otherwise meaningless and shameful—can be accommodated.<sup>4</sup>

This view of poetry half-echoes a sentence in *A Safe-Conduct* 3,5, where Mayakovsky’s poem contains “that infinity which opens out in life from any point and in any direction, and without which poetry is just a misunderstanding not yet cleared up”. Both sentences, the earlier and the later, claim that to make sense poetry needs something vast to exist within or beside—a sensation of the infinite, an idea of the absolute (or unconditional: *bezuslovnoe*).

Paradoxically, the “novel in prose” is a poetic novel and a novel about poetry. Its protagonist is a poet, its last chapter consists of twenty-five poems, it contains meditations on art and poetry, its style (when at its best) is manifestly that of a poet, and, among many other things, it is Pasternak’s demonstration, in as understandable terms as he could manage, of his central experience, the emergence of poetry from ordinary life.

Numerous passages, for instance, seem designed to point out likenesses or, more often, proximities, of things to each other which could give rise to poetic similes, metaphors or rhythms. “The drooping sack-shapes of the curtains at the windows almost resembled the drooping sack-shapes of the trees in the yard . . . ” (10,5); Iurii is gladdened by “the sameness of lighting in the house and outside it” (13,4); and there are conspicuously guiding authorial remarks such as: “something similar was happening in the moral and in the physical world, in things near and far, on earth and in the air” (6,8). Such passages, supported by the recurrent preoccupation with mimicry, imitation and the merging of one thing into another,<sup>5</sup> suggest a development—less strenuous and vivid—of *A Safe-Conduct*’s account of poetic creation in which “details lose independence of meaning” and “any one of them will serve as witness of the state that envelops the whole of transposed reality.”

A number of assertions in *Doctor Zhivago* (made by author or by characters) seem parts of *A Safe-Conduct* re-written. Sometimes almost the same words are used. Mayakovsky—described (in 1930) as having taken “an amazing initial run” into life, and as seeming to have behind him “a decision after it has been acted on, when its results can no longer be revoked” (S-C 3,3)—re-

appears in the novel's account of Lara, who moves and lives "as if, long ago in childhood, she had taken a general run towards life and now everything in her life came about from the impetus of the run, all by itself, with the ease of a logical consequence." (8,13) The form the run-into-life image takes in the novel is simpler than in *A Safe-Conduct*. Other rehearsals of former motifs also show simplification. This includes the many statements about art. A notable example is the re-writing of the often quoted sentence in S-C: "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 (*sila*)."

This re-appears in the novel without the reference to "power": "Works of art speak in many ways: through their themes, propositions, subjects, heroes. But above all they speak through the presence of art in them. The presence of art on the pages of *Crime and Punishment* is more stirring than Raskolnikov's crime" (9,4). *A Safe-Conduct* tells us new works of art come about from a desire to "re-say" existing ones, whereby repetition is avoided through passion's "leaps aside"; *Doctor Zhivago* paraphrases the first part of this ("a step forward in art is made according to the law of attraction, from the desire to imitate, follow and worship well-loved precursors" [9,7]) leaving out any allusion to passion's leaps. The seminal piece in *A Safe-Conduct* (about poetry being born when a force competing with the sun glances back at everyday, past or static things) makes a simpler, more concrete re-appearance in the novel when after a funeral the young poet literally walks ahead of the others at the graveyard and, glancing back at them, thinks of composing a poem into which he will put random images of everyday, past and inanimate things, such as the dead woman's best features and a monastery washing-line (3,17). Meanwhile, the difficult notions of racing the sun and hearing a plea from left-behind objects no longer figure.

One might ask which is preferable: the ecstatic, sometimes esoteric, exactitude of the *Safe-Conduct* style, or the widely accessible, toned-down approximation of the *Zhivago* style; the fast flinging across of an insight in the very form it demands at its turbulent inception, or the novel's patient analysing of it into quieter parts; the ecstatic instant or the measured, reflective recollection. There is an extraordinary generosity in the older Pasternak's attempt to pin down and exhibit his once so elusive flights of inspiration. Often, as he well knew, the attempt meant giving up flying for walking. Some of his remarks show that he was aware of a stylistic decline. The increasingly urgent "aspiration to write modestly, without special effects or stylistic coquetry", he said, "has probably taken me too far, into the realm of virtues which are opposed to art, and, giving up the strenuous, energetic kind of writing obligatory for an artist, I have adopted a loose watery circumstantiality that is ruining my best intentions."<sup>6</sup> Yet his chief motive was undoubtedly a wish to share the wealth

he possessed—a lifelong acquaintance with inspiration and the consequent “happiness of existence”—with those who lacked it or did not know they possessed it. This was not just an instinctively humane gesture but also a way of being in “contact with the masses” and actually furthering the once genuine ideals of the revolution. It would not be understood as such, however, and he must have known it would not be, hopeful though he was about the book’s publication. So he was throwing his talent at once upon the whole bright world and upon darkness.

## 2. WRITING POETRY

In the novel there is only one direct description of poetic inspiration: this comes in Part 14, chapter 8, “Again in Varykino”. Here Zhivago, in briefly blissful circumstances, sits down to look through old poems and start writing new ones. There follows an account of the “approach of that which is called inspiration”—the last five words are practically identical to those used in *S-C* 1,6,<sup>7</sup> while the word “approach” (*priblizhenie*), an important one for Pasternak, is the same as in the poem “Inspiration” and in the 1910 letter to Olga Freidenberg (quoted in Introduction, 6).

After two or three verses which poured out easily, and several comparisons which surprised even him, the work took hold of him and he felt the approach of that which is called inspiration. The relation between the forces which govern creation stands, as it were, on its head. Primacy goes not to the person and the state of soul for which he is seeking expression, but to the language with which he wants to express it. Language, the birthplace and repository of beauty and meaning, itself begins to speak and think for the person, and becomes all music, in respect not of its external, acoustic sounds but of the swiftness and power of its inner current. Then, like the rolling bulk of a river’s current which by its very movement moulds the stones of its floor and turns the wheels of mills, the pouring speech, by the force of its laws, itself creates—along the way and in passing—metre and rhyme and thousands of other forms and formations still more important but as yet unrecognized, not taken into account, not named.

At such moments Iurii Andreevich felt that the main part of the work was being accomplished not by himself but by that which was higher than him, which was situated above him and governed him, namely: the condition of world thought and poetry and what was destined for it in the future, the next sequential step it was to take in its historical development. And he felt himself only a pretext and a pivot, for it to start this movement.

In some respects this account of inspiration resembles the accounts in *A Safe-Conduct* and other early writings; in other respects it differs greatly. It is similar in presenting inspiration as a definite event, the approach of which is

always recognised; similar also in that the main agent is not the poet as a person but something bigger which is characterized by swift, powerful movement. But it differs from those earlier narratives, firstly in that there is now not a single force, but two forces, and secondly in that the indescribable and elusive *sila* as to whose name the young Pasternak was “utterly indifferent” (S-C 3,11) is not one of them. One is the poet himself, as person, the other—now confidently described and named—is “language”. It differs further in that the way language acquires primacy is asserted in a new, “simple”, explanatory manner. Now the expected reader is one who has not read either *A Safe-Conduct* or, indeed, many another poet’s report on inspiration, and who is likely to assume that the poet himself is the central actor in the drama of inspiration; this reader must be explicitly told that the poet as person is not the sole actor: “the relation between the forces which govern creation stands, as it were, on its head.”

The sensation that something other than the poet is doing the work does indeed reflect Pasternak’s old way of thinking. And yet, without the excited, demanding concepts of a “displacement of reality” and of a force or “feeling” as real as the forces studied by physics, one’s attention does turn to the person of the poet. For to say “not the man uses language, but language uses the man” is still to keep the man in clear view; he it is who experiences the reversal of emphases and who, instead of using language as a tool, is being used by it.

Further, although later in the quoted passage language is described as something dynamic (“a river’s current”), it first appears as something settled, almost monumental: “the birthplace and repository of beauty and meaning.” In S-C 2,7 the link between inspiration and language was a link between two utterly fleeting things (“there is nothing but the mobile language of images for power to express itself by, the fact of power which lasts only for the moment of its occurrence . . .”), but now, with the sensed permanence of “birthplace” and “repository”, such evanescence is forgotten. Even the subsequent river is rather heavily magnificent. Altogether the grand has ousted the precise. It seems that, writing now for a less receptive readership, Pasternak has slipped into more traditional, classical conceptions of art which really have nothing to do with his own. But—is it in fact slippage, or a deliberate change undertaken for the sake of at last being understood?

In the next paragraph, the governing force which takes the lead receives a second name: “that which was higher than him”. This does not mean “God”, as might briefly be supposed, but “world thought and poetry” and their, or (as is written here) its, historical development. Somehow on this level of vastness the poet becomes indispensable to history.

The focus is far wider than in the past. Instead of an intensely perceived transformation of immediate surroundings, this version of inspiration embraces (as the whole novel does) universal and universally intelligible matters: the

movement of history, the world's cultural condition, language conceived not as the molten or racing words of the present moment but as a general "repository" of meaning and the source of "thousands of forms". The shift to this larger scale of things involves Pasternak in the "loose" style he was aware of. One sign of that style is a lavish use of near-tautologies: "acoustic sounds", "along the way and in passing", "forms and formations", "higher than him and above him", "next sequential . . ." At the same time one may well wonder how a repository may begin to speak, how language can create *pre-linguistic* forms, how the (horizontal) river leads to the (vertical) dimension of "that which was higher", and why the water images of paragraph two disappear into the dry, abstract "state, step, pretext, pivot . . ." of paragraph three. A remarkable, if more esoterically dismaying, lapse is the allotting of the singular pronoun "it" (*ei, ona*) to the plural "thought and poetry" (it cannot apply to the neuter noun "condition"), which erases in a flash the strict distinction once drawn, in the essay on Kleist, between "philosophy" and "lyricism".

Nevertheless, the following chapter gives a compelling account of the composition of a poem. "Fable" (or Fairy Tale [*Skazka*]) is the thirteenth of the twenty-five poems and thus the central one. It has often been remarked that its hero, Saint George, not named in the poem, bears Zhivago's name, since Iurii is a form of "Georgii". Saint George as solitary, dedicated wanderer, dragon-slayer and maiden-rescuer, who, after his exploit, swoons and disappears into a chant of "years and centuries", parallels aspects of Zhivago's life story,<sup>8</sup> while the vigorous, laconic ballad-form indicates that the exploit which for a warrior-knight takes the form of a physical slaying and rescuing takes for the poet the form of writing the poem. With its rapidity of movement, sharp vision and intense force of feeling, the poem *is* his contribution to history. Here is the passage:

In his drafts of the day before, he had wanted to express—by methods so simple it was almost a babbling and was close to the intimacy of a lullaby—his mixed mood of love, fear, yearning and courage which should pour forth all by itself, as if independently of the words.

Now, looking through these attempts the next day, he found they lacked a thematic link to unite the fragmenting lines. Gradually crossing out what he had written, Iurii Andeevich began to set out the legend of George the Brave in the same lyrical manner. He started with a broad pentameter which gave a lot of space. A euphony belonging to the metre itself, independent of the content, irritated him with its conventional melodiousness. He abandoned the pompous metre with its caesura and compressed the lines into tetrameters, the way one fights verbosity in prose. Writing became harder and more alluring. The work grew more alive, but still an excessive garrulity was getting into it. He made himself shorten the lines still further. In the trimeter the words felt cramped, the last traces of sleepiness flew



### 3. A merging of concepts

from the writer, he woke up, caught fire; the narrowness of the lines' spaces itself suggested what to put in them. Objects scarcely named in words began to stand out in earnest in the frame of references. He caught the sound of the horse's movement as it stepped over the surface of the poem, just as a steed's irregular amble is heard in one of Chopin's *ballades*. George the Victorious was galloping on his steed over the boundless space of the steppe; watching from behind him, Iurii Andreevich saw him getting smaller as he went into the distance. Iurii Andreevich wrote with feverish haste, hardly managing to write down the words and lines which appeared just at the right place and the right moment. (14,9)

All this accords with the theory of inspiration sketched out in the previous chapter. There are indeed two forces—first the poet, then language; and we see the relation between them being overturned. At first the poet (the person) has the primacy, as he expresses moods, crosses out drafts, rejects pomposity, chooses a metre. Then comes the phase of inspiration ("he woke up, caught fire")—which, as in 14,8, commences not before the writing begins but after it has begun—and the primacy switches to language. Verbs of personal action ("he started . . . abandoned . . .") yield to actions taken by the language itself ("the lines' narrowness suggested . . ."; "objects scarcely named in words began to stand out . . ."). This must be the moment where language "begins to speak and think for the person". It is the closest this prose-novelist will bring his reader to the enigma of creation. In the end the poet-as-person, with his name and patronymic now mentioned twice as if to reassure the reader that nothing superhuman is going on, regains equality with the force of language, just managing to get the words down.

Particularly interesting here is the release of strength when utterance is reduced to a minimum. Shortening the lines is the last word, as it were, in the novel's long argument against debilitating empty talk—symbolists' etheralities, journalists' clichés, politicians' pomposities, revolutionaries' slogans. All these are contrasted in the course of the book with voices of birds and cows, people "speaking in tongues" when stirred by great events, words of love, silences, poetry.

### 3. A MERGING OF CONCEPTS

Is there one universe, or are there two? *A Safe-Conduct* states that there is no "second universe" and even that its non-existence is the *raison d'être* of art:

since there was no second universe from which reality could have been lifted up out of the first . . . the manipulations /reality/ itself called for required a representation of it to be made, as in algebra which, in respect of magnitude, is constrained by a similar singleness of plane. (S-C 1,6)

But that kind of thrilling, opaque logic has now been placed out of bounds and in the novel a "second universe" is mentioned. It does not contradict the earlier statement, however, as at first it seems to. That earlier one alluded to an ethereal level not made by humans and, by implication, the opposite of artistic creation; there was no such other level, it asserted. The second universe said to exist in *Zhivago* is not the ethereal one negated in *A Safe-Conduct*; rather, it is a human-made one, moving onward in time and conceivable as a great work of art in the course of its creation.

The words "second universe" occur only once in the novel. Nikolai Vedeniapin (whose views coincide with the narrator's and are undoubtedly to be taken as Pasternak's own)<sup>9</sup> is said to be writing books about

history as a second universe, which mankind was erecting in answer to the phenomenon of death, with the help of the phenomena of time and memory. The soul of these books was a new understanding of Christianity, their direct result a new idea of art. (3,2)

The previous exact and exacting style for philosophical statements is exchanged here for a new style, less enraptured and more expository. Its special feature is that it repeatedly brings together certain abstract conceptions in such a way that they tend to overlap, to replace each other or to merge. For example, of the eleven or so major abstract nouns in the quotation three recur regularly, often together, in philosophical assertions throughout the novel. "History—Christianity—Art" becomes a single compound motif with the purpose, it seems, of focusing on all of reality at once. In the "new understanding" sought by Vedeniapin, ostensibly different conceptions turn out to be different names for one and the same thing; all of them in various ways overlap in meaning with "life". One could extend the list of all-important, quasi-magically reiterated concepts to include life, immortality, symbolism and parables, genius, Christ, happiness.

By the time of *Zhivago*, Christianity had become very important to Pasternak. Barnes writes of his "increasingly active religious belief in the post-war years". Fleishman says "it is no accident that Pasternak drew close to the church precisely when the regime's unfavourable attitude toward it was becoming more pronounced . . . The moral values cherished by the church formed . . . the sole alternative to the oppressive political atmosphere". Mikhail Polivanov observes, somewhat differently, that the Jewish Pasternak was drawn to Christianity since his childhood, his new relation to it in the novel suggesting some intense personal encounter in the 1940s: "Pasternak then entered Christianity," he writes, "like someone returning home."<sup>10</sup>

Home, or "at home", is the concluding motif of Vedeniapin's first main speech. Since Christ, human beings have been able to die, he says, "not under

a fence but *at home in history*" (my italics—A.L.). Given that Christ is the starting-point, it is particularly noticeable that "at home in history" (rather than, say, "at home in God") is the culminating moment. Here is the speech, made, typically, to someone who cannot understand it (reminding us of Pasternak's own difficulty in getting his thought across to contemporary readers). Vedeniapin tells his unreceptive listener:

it is possible to be an atheist, possible not to know whether God exists and what he is for, yet at the same time to know that man lives not in nature but in history, and that history, as we understand it today, is founded by Christ, that the Gospels are its basis. And what is history? It is the setting up, throughout the ages, of works that are consistently concerned with the solving of death and with overcoming it in the future. For this, mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves are discovered, for this symphonies are composed. Without a certain elation no forward movement is possible in this direction. These discoveries need spiritual equipment. The things necessary for it are contained in the Gospels. This is what they are. First of all, love of one's neighbour, this highest form of live energy filling the human heart to the brim and demanding to be let out and lavished; and, secondly, the chief components of modern man, without which he is inconceivable, namely the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice. Bear in mind that all this is still extremely new. Among the ancients there was no history in this sense . . . Only after Christ did the centuries and generations begin to breathe freely. Only after him does life in one's posterity begin and man does not die in the road by a fence but at home in history, at the height of all the works dedicated to the overcoming of death; he dies while he is himself dedicated to this theme. (1,5)

As several commentators have noted, the idea of "overcoming death" calls to mind the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, according to whose influential book *Philosophy of the Common Task* mankind's sole and concerted task ought to be precisely that: the overcoming of death.<sup>11</sup> Pasternak's "there will be no death" (Iurii's words to the dying Anna), though attributed to John the Divine, author of the Book of Revelation, may also appear to hint at Fedorov. But Fedorov meant a rational, physical conquest of death, something scientists would achieve. They would work out how to extend our lives for ever and, furthermore, how to bring about the bodily resurrection on earth of all deceased human beings. Pasternak's "overcoming of death" does not mean that.<sup>12</sup> He might agree with Fedorov that death is our chief problem and that an eternal after-life is no solution. But the solution, for him, is to build here and now the symbolical, mutable, never-completed "home" of "history".

This idea sounds abstract and difficult, but in the account of Iurii's thoughts after the funeral, an account which exactly exemplifies "work dedicated to the overcoming of death", it appears easy, natural and light-hearted.

Iurii was walking alone, getting ahead of the others with his fast walk, stopping now and then to wait for them. In response to the desolation death had produced in this company stepping slowly behind him, he felt—as invincibly as water twisting into funnels and streaming down to a depth—the wish to dream and think, to work hard at forms, to produce beauty. Now as never before, it was clear to him that art is unceasingly occupied with two things. It persistently meditates upon death and through this it persistently creates life. Genuine, great art—that which is called the Revelation of Saint John and that which goes on writing it. (3,17)

The last book of the New Testament is the starting-point for art to create history in this sense, both because it *is* the last and because of its announcement “death is finished”; nothing implies that the works which continue it are ones with a Christian orientation. Indeed, it could be said that death is already overcome in the passage just quoted, since it is death that gives rise to the wish to create something beautiful. As Schopenhauer said: “Death is the actually inspiring genius”.<sup>13</sup>

Vedeniapiin’s is a highly special view of history. Not history as an attempted account of all that has happened, let alone “a written narrative constituting a continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events” (O.E.D.); instead, history as a collective aspiration, a single, complex human creation, impelled by talent and love. It is indubitably temporal: operative phrases are “throughout the ages”, “in the future”, “forward movement”. Time is welcomed, transience not in the least lamented, attainment of an end unnecessary; to die “at home in history” is already salvation. Moreover, “with the help of time and memory”, we “live in our posterity”—that is, still in time. This is a larger, perhaps more intelligible, version of the human-built world which Pasternak once likened to a nest built by the birds known to him as “salangane swallows”: “a vast nest, glued together from earth and sky, life and death, and two kinds of time, present and absent”, prevented from falling apart by the “figurativeness permeating all its particles” (S-C 2,18).<sup>14</sup>

You do not need to be a Christian, says Vedeniapiin/Pasternak, in order to think and feel in the way he is commending. An “atheist” can view history this way, even if it is a way made possible by energies derived from Christianity: love, self-sacrifice, symbolism. Just as Pasternak is concerned to make his experience of art available to everybody including the non-artistic, he is, I believe, concerned to make his experience of Christianity available to everybody including non-believers. The link between them is the second universe called “history”, of which the essential component is art and its symbolical thinking.

Talking about the Gospels to a visiting Tolstoyan, Vedeniapiin combines the concepts “life”, “symbolical” and “immortal”.

For me the chief thing /in the Gospels/ is that Christ speaks in parables from everyday life, elucidating the truth with the light of everyday occurrences. At the basis of this lies the thought that communication (*obshchenie*) between mortals is immortal and that life is symbolical because it is meaningful (2,10).

There is no perfect English word for "*obshchenie*": the word used in the published translation, "communion", has spiritual connotations not present in the Russian word, which covers ordinary social intercourse and trivial as well as spiritual conversations; "relations" is better but covers too wide a field. I am using "communication", despite its sounding rather mechanical, while keeping "relations" in mind as well.

The second sentence in the quoted piece of speech presents two statements as a single thought: (1) "though individuals die, the communication between them does not", and (2) "life is symbolical". Their connection becomes clear if one adds (3) "communication is of meanings, through symbols" and (4) "to be symbolical is to be immortal". So: "although as individuals we are mortal, our communication (our life of everyday relations with one another) is meaningful, therefore symbolical, and therefore immortal." This is a softer (less rigorous, more accessible) form of a thought Pasternak has expressed before. Its formulation actually resembles that of a basic idea in *A Safe-Conduct*. What is immortal, he says here (in *DrZh* 2,10), is not the individual person but the *relations* between individuals, their communication; similarly, in *S-C* 1,6, poetry was born not from any individual episode or experience but from the *relations* between episodes and experiences—from their speeding ahead and lagging behind, their yearning to join one another—in a sense, then, from their communication.

The word "immortal" comes up again and again. Some time before the remark about parables, Vedeniapiin opines that one of the few things that deserve loyalty is "immortality, that other, slightly strengthened, name for life." He adds: "we must preserve loyalty to immortality, we must be loyal to Christ!" Again, very large concepts—immortality, life, Christ—are placed in apposition, made virtually synonymous; and, if "life" means not my individual life but (as in the parables passage) everyday human relating and communicating, then this injunction about loyalty re-enacts the same thought: "human individuals die but human relationships do not." The paradox is emphasized by the direct equating of (mortal) "life" with "immortality". That Christ is part of the equation does not imply an expectation of after-death resurrection, as Pasternak has made it abundantly clear that he does not believe in an after-life. By "immortal" he surely means not "living for ever" but "deathless, without death", felt to be outside time. Whereas in the young Pasternak's long-ago lecture "Symbolism and Immortality" timelessness was a special experience of the inspired poet,

now this is extended to lives in general: everyone can be free of time through communication (*obshchenie*) with others.

This thought is supported by a passage (in the narrator's own voice) which is also a supreme example of the carefully deliberate merging of concepts: the passage concludes with an unequivocal intimation that there really is only one thing, one essence, one complex moving and flowing event, one human home—merely given different names by different people:

All the movements in the world, if taken separately, were deliberate and sober, but taken all together they were unaccountably drunk on the general flood of life that united them. People laboured and bustled, set in motion by the mechanism of their own concerns. But the mechanisms would not have worked if their main regulator were not the feeling of a higher and fundamental carefreeness. This carefreeness came from a sensation of the connectedness of human existences, a conviction that they flowed into one another, a feeling of happiness because everything that happens takes place not only upon the earth into which the dead are buried but also in something else, which some call Kingdom of God, others call history, and yet others name in some other way. (1,7)

The tone is carefree and the linked abstractions at the end repeat the robust vagueness which (like Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth, beauty . . .") is found in other Pasternakian linkings, such as his calling Chopin's *études* lessons in history or in cosmic structure or in anything at all. Now "Kingdom of God" is offered as an alternative for "history", which can also be called something else. The third name could well be "art", or art's characteristic means, "symbolism".

Since the passage is of central significance, it is worth noting that the English translation published in London is misleading in two places. "On the earth which buries the dead" fails to record Pasternak's stress on the materiality of the earth "*into which* the dead are buried"; and instead of the original's carefully nondescript "in something else" the translation gives "on some other level", whereas Pasternak does not speak of "levels" here. His "second universe" is not another "level", but is right here with us, embedded, unispatial with our familiar first universe (of matter and facts), its symbolical equivalent. In the amended translation of the novel published in New York, these phrases are corrected to "in which . . .", and "in some other region"; but "region" remains curiously unsatisfactory.<sup>15</sup>

As for Vedeniapin's celebration of dying in the midst of continuing history, it has a parallel, perhaps more musical than logical, in two other celebrations, not of dying but of being born in the midst of continuing reality. Both include reference to artistic work—genius, paintings, picture-galleries. One is Vedeniapin's brief vision of Christ's arrival:

### 3. A merging of concepts

And look, into this heap of marble and gold vulgarity, came that light one, clothed in radiance, emphatically human, intentionally provincial, Galilean, and from that moment nations and gods ceased and man began, man the carpenter, man the ploughman, man the shepherd amid his flock of sheep at sunset, man not sounding the least bit proud,<sup>16</sup> man gratefully dispersed through all the cradle-songs of mothers and all the picture galleries of the world.

In the progression from carpenter and ploughman to the suddenly pictorial “shepherd with flock of sheep”, and from there to “all the picture galleries of the world”, Christ, humanity and art overlap in meaning and almost merge.

The other celebration paralleling Vedeniapin’s idea is of the two 1917 revolutions. Each, because of its bold optimistic suddenness, is said to have “genius”; once again a kinship with great art. Thus, speaking of the February revolution, Zhivago leaps in thought from “socialism” to “life”, whereby he explicitly means *life transformed by art*:

Everyone has come alive, been reborn, in everyone there have been transformations. It seems to me socialism is a sea of life—the life that can be seen in paintings, life changed by genius, creatively enriched. (5,8)

Speaking later of the October revolution, he evokes a surgeon-cum-artist—like himself and like the long-ago Shestikrylov in “Ordering a Drama”—and again connects the revolution with art and with “genius”, by alluding to two great writers:

What magnificent surgery! To go and cut out the old stinking ulcers at once, artistically . . . There’s something /in this/ of Pushkin’s unequivocal radiance and Tolstoy’s unswerving fidelity to the facts . . . This unprecedented thing, this miracle of history, this revelation, is sent slap into the very thick of everyday life as it goes along . . . not at the beginning but in the middle . . . on the first weekdays ready to hand, at the very busiest time for the trams plying about the town. This, above all, is genius. Only the very greatest is so out of place and out of time. (6,8)

Such are passion’s “sideways leaps” off the common path of inevitability, to which Pasternak remained forever loyal. The intensity of his memory of that year did not alter, even though subsequent developments made him change his view of the revolutionaries.

That a name or theory should not fix feelings in an unchangeable mould was always of the highest importance to Pasternak. To a friend to whom he was posting the just-finished first part of his novel he wrote: “If it should seem to you that my manuscript sets out any dogmas, puts limits to anything or seeks to incline people towards something—it means the work is written very badly. Everything genuine should set people free, be liberating.”<sup>17</sup> He himself

certainly resisted being forced by anyone or any tradition into accepting ideas which were not his own, and he called the atmosphere of the novel his own Christianity. "The atmosphere of the work is my Christianity, somewhat differing in its breadth from the Quaker or Tolstoyan sort, and starting out from other aspects of the Gospel in addition to the moral aspects."<sup>18</sup> The relaxed tone of the assertion itself conveys a belief in mental freedom.

Historical change is compared to the work of artistic genius, and another name for kingdom of God is history. Pasternak wants to show that, just as an "atheist" can believe history started with Christ, a Christian can see that living in God may be called living in history; believer and non-believer can be united through symbolical thinking. Many motifs in the novel support such uniting, or bridging. To mention some instances from early in the book: Vedeniapin at once a priest and not a priest (unfrocked at his own request); his search for an idea at once "winged" and "material"; Lara "not religious" yet attending church for the sake of an "inward music"; music the force that raised man from the animals; the adolescent Iurii having "nothing like piousness" in his feeling of kinship with earth and sky (3,15); and his telling a dying woman that there is no death because "life fills the universe in innumerable combinations and transformations" and that our consciousness, which goes only outward, will not cease to be out there in it all. What does it matter, he asks (gesturing towards Pasternak's idea of alternative names for one essence)—if you will then be called a "memory"? There is no death and no after-life, there is only life, our miraculously evolving home in history. We cannot fall out of the universe we have made. To support his profoundly optimistic philosophy Iurii quotes from the New Testament. But the non-Christian reader will take heart from a report that (in 1958) Pasternak claimed to have put religious symbolism into his novel as one puts a stove into a house—to warm it up—and that he objected to the way "some people would like me to commit myself and climb into the stove".<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. " . . . SOME MOVING ENTIRENESS"

Great common abstractions and images overlap: "Kingdom of God" is a way of saying "history"; "immortality" and "Christ" are names for "life"; symbolism merges with parable; "that which is called inspiration" (but could be called something else?) creates not only art but historical change, revolutions. If there are puzzles—such as "kingdom" sounding more static than "history"—this is (I suggest) because Pasternak's purpose is somehow to include *everything*: the potentially surveyable entirety, all versions of it there at once, yet also its internal, interminably mutable and mobile detail. In his account of "everything", analogies with artistic creativity are central.



It is of course not a systematic philosophy and the Pasternak speaking here is still the one who delighted in the "never-beginning of a synthesis", as he so aptly put it in 1911. As David Bethea writes: "he sought meaning not in a closed system but in life as openness, surprise, spontaneous revelation."<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless these ideas show a consistent pattern in their likening the universe, man-created as it is, to a work of art. Pasternak wrote to an English correspondent in February 1959, in his own English: "The objective world in my habitual, natural grasping is a vast inspiration, that sketches, erases, chooses, compares, and describes and composes itself".<sup>21</sup> In August of the same year, the year before his death, he wrote similarly, again using the word "inspiration", to another Englishman, the poet Stephen Spender (and again in English):

there is an effort in the novel to represent the whole sequence of facts and beings and happenings like some moving entirety, like a developing, passing by, rolling and rushing inspiration, as if reality itself had freedom and choice, and was composing itself out of numberless variants and versions.<sup>22</sup>

I have dwelt largely on ideas about life and art expounded as such in the novel. Analysis of descriptions and structural forms has not been my purpose, nor is it needed now that so many and such varied discussions of the formal principles underlying the novel have been published. But I will say that among those discussions I have found Boris Gasparov's "Temporal Counterpoint as a Principle of Form in *Doctor Zhivago*" particularly illuminating. Recalling that Pasternak spent his youth as a musician, Gasparov suggests an analogy between the novel's structure and musical polyphony. "The whole of *Zhivago* is structured on the 'contrapuntal principle' of the irregular movement of time and the relativity of various events progressing at different speeds."<sup>23</sup> This principle is at work not only in the starting, finishing and interweaving of individual lives, in the evolution of ideas and forms of language, as well as in the spatial movements of trains and trams, it is at work in even the most insignificant happenings. For example (not Gasparov's example), Vedeniapin and his friend walk down a garden path:

as they walked, the sparrows which teemed in the guelder rose bush kept flying out ahead of them in equal swarms and at equal intervals. This filled the bush with an even noise as though water were flowing through a pipe along the hedge in front of them. (1,5)

Two kinds of movement, a slow forward-walking and a quick outward-flying, sound together like two voices in a fugue, something like a slow bass and a more rapid alto. As the walkers repeatedly catch up with the sparrows, a single sound results from the two kinds of movement, as when one attends to the harmonies

in a continuous polyphony. The pattern of flying ahead, interrupting and overtaking—like many other, both small- and large-scale, motifs in the novel—distantly recalls the irregular, interruptive movement of objects trying to catch up with the speeding-ahead poet in *A Safe-Conduct* 1,6.

The polyphony in *Doctor Zhivago* includes the minute and the cosmic. That he wished to describe “everything” Pasternak makes clear in the letters quoted above and makes even clearer in an earlier letter to Spender that same August, which expresses this wish in the extraordinary and memorable metaphor of “everything” as a sort of painting:

To attain a true resemblance between the imitative efforts of art and the truly tasted and experienced order of life . . . I would pretend [surely meaning “claim”] to have seen nature and universe themselves not as a picture made or fastened on an immovable wall, but as a sort of painted canvas roof or curtain in the air, incessantly pulled and blown and flapped by a something of an immaterial unknown and unknowable wind.<sup>24</sup>

The image is developed further in a letter to Jacqueline de Proyart: the painting being buffeted is itself a depiction of turbulent movement, and the unknown wind has torn the painting off and is carrying it away.<sup>25</sup>

That all reality is a work of artistic genius, a painting depicting powerful movement while itself being powerfully moved: to demonstrate this was Pasternak’s conscious purpose in writing *Doctor Zhivago*.

“Garden of Gethsemane” is the last of the twenty-five poems making up the novel’s last chapter and is one of the nine on Christian themes. After closely following the Gospel of Saint Matthew for twelve quatrains, it ends with two that move into Pasternak’s own imagery.

*You see, the course of the ages is like a parable  
And can catch fire while in movement—  
In the name of its terrible greatness  
In voluntary torments I shall descend into the grave.*

*I shall descend into the grave and rise on the third day,  
And, like rafts floating down a river,  
Like a convoy of barges, the centuries  
Will float to me for judgment, out of the dark.*

Ages, centuries . . . the concern is emphatically with time. But how is their course “like a parable” and how does it “catch fire”? Surely it is like a parable in that, as “history”, it is a second universe co-spatial and co-temporal with

4. "... some moving entirety"

the first, material, one, re-telling it in symbolical form. Then, "catching fire" is the same word (*zagoret'sia*) as in the account in 14,9 of what happens to the poet as he starts to write. So is not this the sudden kindling of inspiration (the "hot axles" in *A Safe-Conduct*)? Revolution breaking out like a conflagration in the midst of common nonchalant events? Our minds flaring up with an ecstatic awareness? And also the birth of Christ? Significantly, it catches fire when it is "in motion" (*na khodu*), the same phrase as in S-C 2,3: "The image of man can be engendered only in motion".

The poem—and the whole novel—ends with history moving to a bright destination. There Christ will give a judgment; the tone of the poem suggests that the judgment will be gentle. Less obvious from the translation is the fact that "its" in the third line refers not to "course", "fire" or "movement", but to "parable". Christ's suffering is undertaken "in the name of the greatness of the parable". It is for the parabolic, *the symbolic as such*, that this poem presents him as sacrificing his life. He dies for these very "rafts and barges", that is to say, for the fragile, shared, unlikely awareness which makes human beings able to write and paint figuratively and thus to create history and the whole habitable universe.

