

The Marsh of Gold
*Pasternak's Writings
on Inspiration
and Creation*

Texts by Boris Pasternak,
selected, translated, edited, introduced
and provided with commentaries and notes

by ANGELA LIVINGSTONE

Boston
2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich, 1890–1960.

[Selections. English. 2008]

The marsh of gold : Pasternak's writings on inspiration and creation / selected, translated, edited, introduced, and provided with commentaries by Angela Livingstone.

p. cm.—(Studies in Russian and Slavic literatures, cultures and history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-934843-23-9

1. Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich, 1890–1960—Translations into English. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) 3. Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich, 1890–1960—Criticism and interpretation.

I. Livingstone, Angela. II. Title.

PG3476.P27A2 2008

891.71'42—dc22

2008024608

On the cover: Leonid Pasternak. Portrait of his son Boris (a fragment). Around 1917

Copyright © 2008 Academic Studies Press

All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-934843-23-9

Book design by Yuri Alexandrov

Published by Academic Studies Press in 2008

28 Montfern Avenue

Brighton, MA 02135, USA

press@academicstudiespress.com

www.academicstudiespress.com



Effective December 12th, 2017, this book will be subject to a CC-BY-NC license. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. Other than as provided by these licenses, no part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, or displayed by any electronic or mechanical means without permission from the publisher or as permitted by law.

The open access publication of this volume is made possible by:



This open access publication is part of a project supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book initiative, which includes the open access release of several Academic Studies Press volumes. To view more titles available as free ebooks and to learn more about this project, please visit borderlinesfoundation.org/open.

Published by Academic Studies Press
28 Montfern Avenue
Brighton, MA 02135, USA
press@academicstudiespress.com
www.academicstudiespress.com

Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures and History

Series Editor: Lazar Fleishman



Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>Note on transliteration and dates</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>A brief chronology</i>	xiv
<i>Note on Pasternak's connections with literary groups</i>	xvii
 <i>Introduction</i>	 1

I EARLY PROSE (1910–1919)

Some Propositions	15
[Reliquimini]	18
Ordering a Drama	25
Heinrich von Kleist. On Asceticism in Culture	32
[On the Threshold of Inspiration]	39
Symbolism and Immortality [Synopsis of a lecture]	40
[End of a Decade]	41
The Black Goblet	43
Letters from Tula	47

<i>Commentary on I (EARLY PROSE)</i>	54
--	----

"Some Propositions" (54).— "[Reliquimini]" and "Ordering a Drama" (56).— "[Reliquimini]" (56).— "Ordering a Drama" (58).— Note on names in the early fiction (60).— "Heinrich von Kleist. On Asceticism in Culture" (60).— "[On the Threshold of Inspiration]" (63).— "Symbolism and Immortality" (63).— "[End of a Decade]" (67).— "The Black Goblet" (68).— "Letters from Tula" (70).— Other early fiction (72)

II
A SAFE-CONDUCT
or "THE PRESERVATION CERTIFICATE"
(1928–1931)

Part One	79
Part Two	98
Part Three	130

<i>Commentary on II (A SAFE-CONDUCT, OR THE PRESERVATION CERTIFICATE)</i> . . .	155
---	-----

The political moment (155). — *Rilke* (156). — *Some patterns* (157). — *Part One, chapter six* (158). — *Part Two, chapter three* (160). — *Part Two, chapter seven* (161). — *Part Two, chapter seventeen* (163). — *Mayakovsky* (165). — *The title* (167)

III
FIFTEEN POEMS
(1912–1931)

February	172
Spring	174
Marburg	176
About These Verses	182
Definition of Poetry	184
Definition of Creation	186
Let's drop words	188
Inspiration	192
Here's the Beginning	194
Slanted pictures	196
Poetry	198
To Anna Akhmatova	200
To Marina Tsvetaeva	204
Lovely woman	206
Again Chopin	208

<i>Commentary on III (FIFTEEN POEMS)</i>	212
--	-----

IV SPEECHES AND ARTICLES 1930s and 1940s

Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (1934)	217
Speech at the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture (1935)	219
Speech at the Third Plenum of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers (1936)	219
On Shakespeare	224
A New Collection of Work by Anna Akhmatova	226
<i>Selected Works</i> by Anna Akhmatova	226
Notes of a Translator	229
Paul-Marie Verlaine	231
Chopin	234
Remarks on Translations from Shakespeare	238
 <i>Commentary on IV (SPEECHES AND ARTICLES, 1930s and '40s)</i>	 242
<i>"Speech at the first all-union congress of Soviet writers" (246).—"Speech at the international congress of writers in defence of culture" (248).—"Speech at the third plenum of the board of the writers' union" (249).—"Articles on Anna Akhmatova" (252).—"Articles on Translation and on Shakespeare" (252).—"Verlaine" (253).—"Chopin" (254)</i>	

V An Essay on Pasternak's Novel DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

1. "A novel in prose"	259
2. <i>Writing poetry</i>	262
3. <i>A merging of concepts</i>	265
4. " . . . some moving entirety"	272
 <i>Notes</i>	 277
<i>Selective bibliography</i>	295
<i>Index</i>	301

PREFACE

Boris Pasternak, 1890–1960, thought and wrote all his life about the nature of poetic creation and what is traditionally called inspiration; few have pondered these matters so intently or described them so illuminatingly. This book presents his major writings on these subjects. The translated texts are accompanied by an Introduction, discursive Commentaries and an essay on *Doctor Zhivago*.

Much of the book is based on my *Pasternak on Art and Creativity* (C.U.P. 1985). At all points, however, it differs from it. Looking back at that earlier book, I realized it needed not only thorough revision of the translations but also radical re-writing of the Commentaries in view of the important studies of Pasternak appearing over the last two decades and my own somewhat changed and expanded perception of his thought.

So this is a new book, with a new title. While many of the texts by Pasternak are the same ones as in the earlier book, with the autobiographical *A Safe-Conduct* still central among them, all translations have been thoroughly revised; moreover, no excerpts from *Doctor Zhivago* are included but twenty-four new texts have been added—nine prose pieces and fifteen poems. All the Commentaries are written afresh. The Introduction and the final Essay on *Zhivago* are also wholly new.

While the book is designed primarily for English-readers, references are given to numerous Russian works, in the hope that Russian-readers and people studying Russian will also use it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Above all, I wish to thank Evgeny Borisovich Pasternak and Elena Vladimirovna Pasternak for innumerable instances of help received from them over the years, and for all their kind encouragement of my work. My profound gratitude goes to them for their lifelong dedication to preserving, introducing and publishing Pasternak's prose and poetry, and especially for the recent superb edition of his Complete Works in Eleven Volumes with its full and excellent annotations.

My warmest thanks are due to Lazar Fleishman for his support of this project; I am extremely grateful to him, moreover, for reading much of the typescript and responding with invaluable criticisms.

Discussion of many of Pasternak's ideas with Fiona Björling has been an important spur to my work on this book. Susan Biver, Fiona Björling and Kay Stevenson have read and commented on lengthy portions of the typescript, for which I am deeply grateful to them. I wish also to thank Leon Burnett, Herbie Butterfield, Diane Fahey and Philip Terry for their responses to parts of the book in progress. For elucidation of certain Russian words I thank Anna Chernova and Natalia Gogolitsyna; for skilled assistance with the computer I thank Stephen Doubtfire and Kristin Hutchinson.

A grant from the British Academy enabled me to attend the Conference on Pasternak organized by Perm University in July 2006, at which I was able to develop ideas relevant to this book. A great deal of the new translation for it was done at the peaceful and stimulating Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators in Visby, Gotland in the spring of 2005. My thanks to the Inter-Library-Loan section of the University of Essex Albert Sloman Library for finding and obtaining so many books for me, and to my own Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies for giving me—despite my retirement—abundant space, technology and personal support.

I gratefully acknowledge permission from the publishers of Berkeley Slavic Specialties to re-publish my translation of Pasternak's essay on Kleist and part of my commentary on it, both first published by them in *A Century's Perspective*, 2006; also permission from Stanford University Press to reprint (in shortened form) the article "How to Translate the Title *Okhrannaia gramota*" and to use parts of "Re-reading *Okhrannaia gramota*: Pasternak's Use of Visuality and his

Acknowledgments

Conception of Inspiration”, both published in *Eternity’s Hostage*, 2006. I thank also Michael Schmidt of Carcanet Press Ltd for the right to quote Donald Davie’s translation of Anna Akhmatova’s poem “Boris Pasternak” as published in Davie and Livingstone, eds, *Pasternak*, London, 1969.

My translations of “Ordering a Drama” (*Zakaz dramy*) and “[On the Threshold of Inspiration]” (*Prezhde vsego . . .*) were first published in *PN Review* 5, 4 (1978). Translations of “To Anna Akhmatova”, “To Marina Tsvetaeva” and, in earlier form, “February” and “Again Chopin . . .” were first published in *European Voices: Modern Poetry in Translation*, 18, edited by Daniel Weissbort in 2001. My earlier translation of *A Safe-Conduct* (*Okhrannaia gramota*) appeared in *Pasternak, Collected Short Prose*, edited by Christopher Barnes in 1977; the present translation of it is a much-revised version of the one included in my *Pasternak on Art and Creativity*.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATES

I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration of Cyrillic, in which problematic vowels are represented as follows: **я** as **ia**; **ю** as **iu**; **е**, **ё** and **э** all as **e**; **и** and **й** as **i**; **ы** as **y**, and hard and soft signs are both represented by the sign **'**. Except in Russian-language contexts, Russian names already familiar in an English spelling are spelt in the familiar way (thus: Gogol, Gorky, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, Scriabin, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy), the surname-ending “-skii” is represented as “-sky”, the name Aleksandr becomes Alexander, an adjectival name of a street or square is given in the masculine form, Tsentrifuga is written Centrifuga. For names of persons and places, the soft sign has been transliterated only in the Notes and Bibliography and in Russian-language contexts.

Dates accord with British usage, thus 1.2.1930 means February 1st, 1930.

ABBREVIATIONS

PSS is used throughout as an abbreviation of the title of the new and authoritative collection of Pasternak's complete works, namely:

Pasternak, Boris. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii s prilozheniiami, v odinnadtsati tomakh* [Complete Collected Works with appendices, in Eleven Volumes]. Chief editor: D.V. Tevekelian. Compiled and provided with commentaries by E.B. Pasternak and E.V. Pasternak. Introduction by Lazar Fleishman. Moscow: Slovo, 2003–05.

Reference to particular pages in its eleven volumes is done on the following model: PSS, 10, 22 for *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, volume 10, page twenty-two.

Titles of two works by Pasternak frequently mentioned in the present volume are sometimes abbreviated as follows: *A Safe-Conduct* as *S-C*; *Doctor Zhivago* as *DrZh*. Parts and chapters of these works are referred to as follows: *S-C* 2,17 for *A Safe-Conduct*, part two, chapter seventeen; *DrZh* 14,9 for *Doctor Zhivago*, part fourteen, chapter nine.

An asterisk following a shortened title means that the full title will be found in the Bibliography.

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

<i>Pasternak's life and major publications (poetry unless otherwise stated)</i>	<i>Other significant events</i>
1890 Born in Moscow. (Brother and two sisters born 1893, 1900, 1902.)	1880 Birth of Blok. 1881 Death of Dostoevsky. 1889 Birth of Akhmatova.
1900 Meets Rilke on a train journey. 1903 Meets Scriabin, begins six-year study of music. Thrown by a horse, breaks his leg—"getting out of two future wars in one evening".	1891 Birth of Mandelstam. 1892 Birth of Tsvetaeva. 1893 Birth of Mayakovsky.
1906 A year in Germany with his family. 1908 Enters Moscow University. 1909 Decides against a career in music; becomes student of philosophy. As pianist, joins "Serdarda", group of young poets, artists, musicians.	1904 Russia defeated in war with Japan. 1905 Year of revolutionary uprisings and changes.
1912 Summer semester at University of Marburg under Hermann Cohen. Decides against a career in philosophy. Visits Italy. 1913 Graduates from university. Gives lecture "Symbolism and Immortality". 1914 As member of moderate futurist group "Centrifuga", meets Mayakovsky. <i>Twin in the Clouds.</i>	1910 Death of Tolstoy. 1911 Assassination of Prime Minister Stolypin. 1912 Acmeism and futurism replace symbolism as main poetic movements. 1913 Belyi, <i>Petersburg</i> . Mandelstam, <i>Stone</i> .
1914–16 Works as tutor, then in management of chemical factories in the Urals. 1917 Returns to Moscow at the February revolution. <i>Above the Barriers.</i> 1918 Works as librarian in People's Commissariat of Education.	1914–18 World War I. 1916 Mayakovsky, <i>A Cloud in Trousers</i> . 1917 February and October revolutions. 1918 Blok, <i>The Twelve</i> .

A brief chronology

<i>Pasternak's life and major publications (poetry unless otherwise stated)</i>	<i>Other significant events</i>
1921 Parents and sisters emigrate.	1918–20 Civil War. 1921 Death of Blok. 1921 Execution of poet Gumilev.
1922 Marries artist Evgeniia Lur'e; seven months with her in Germany. <i>My Sister Life</i> .	1922 Mandelstam, <i>Tristia</i> ; Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i> ; Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i> ; Rilke, <i>Duino Elegies</i> .
1923 Joins neo-futurist group "Lef". Living poorly but now a well-known poet. Birth of son Evgenii. <i>Themes and Variations</i> .	
1924 Works briefly in library of People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.	1924 Death of Lenin (January); beginning of Stalin's rise to power.
1925 <i>Aerial Ways</i> (four stories: "The Mark of Apelles", "Letters from Tula", "Childhood of Liouvers", "Aerial Ways"); <i>The Year Nineteen Hundred and Five</i> .	1925 Resolution on Literature published by Communist Party. Suicide of poet Esenin.
1926 <i>Lieutenant Schmidt</i> .	1926 Babel, <i>Red Cavalry</i> . Death of Rilke in Switzerland.
1928 <i>Lofty Malady</i> .	1928 Start of first Five-Year Plan for collectivization of agriculture and for intensive industrialization.
1929 <i>A Tale</i> (prose).	
1930 Separates from first wife; marries Zinaida Neigaus. Official journey to the Urals.	1930 Suicide of Mayakovsky.
1931 Criticised by RAPP. To Georgia with Zinaida. Again to the Urals. <i>A Safe-Conduct</i> (prose); <i>Spektorsky</i> .	
1932 Adds idiosyncratic postscript to collective letter from writers to Stalin on death of his wife. Working on translations; no further original work until 1940.	1932 Union of Soviet Writers founded; all other literary groups disbanded.
1934 Telephoned by Stalin. Speaks at Writers' Union congress.	1934 First congress of Soviet Writers' Union. Arrest of Mandelstam.
1935 Insomnia, depression. Obligated to attend Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture, in Paris.	
1936 Is allotted a dacha in Peredelkino (near Moscow). Refuses to sign letter condemning generals accused of conspiracy.	1936–38 Years of state terror: show trials and executions.
1938 Birth of son Leonid.	1937 Arrest and execution of poet Tabidze, suicide of poet Yashvili (Pasternak's friends). Death of Mandelstam in a prison camp.
1939 Death of mother in London.	
1940 Translates <i>Hamlet</i> .	
1941 Evacuated to Chistopol in the Urals. Translating Shakespeare's tragedies.	1941–3 Blockade of Leningrad by the Germans.
1943 Visits the war front. <i>On Early Trains</i> .	1943 Battle of Stalingrad.

A brief chronology

<i>Pasternak's life and major publications (poetry unless otherwise stated)</i>	<i>Other significant events</i>
1945 Death of father in Oxford. <i>Earth's Expanse</i> . Starts writing the novel <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> .	1945 Soviet troops enter Berlin; end of World War II.
1946 Refuses to condemn Akhmatova and Zoshchenko; is attacked by Fadeev, Secretary of Writers' Union; meanwhile, has a growing reputation abroad. Love relationship with Olga Ivinskaia.	1946–51 "Zhdanov" repression in the arts.
1947–49 Further attacks on him by the Writers' Union.	
1947–51 Translates Goethe's <i>Faust</i> , I and II.	
1949 Supports family of Ivinskaia, imprisoned because of him (released in 1953). <i>William Shakespeare in Boris Pasternak's Translation</i> .	
1952 Heart attack, three months in hospital.	
1956 <i>Novyi mir</i> rejects <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> . Contract with State Publishing House for an abridged version; agreement with Italian publisher Feltrinelli.	1953 Death of Stalin. 1956 Khrushchev denounces Stalin at Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party. "Thaw" in literature. Suicide of Fadeev.
1957 Months in hospital. Publication of <i>Zhivago</i> forbidden in Soviet Union; Feltrinelli publishes it in Italian. <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> .	
1958 Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature; <i>Zhivago</i> translated and published in many countries; press campaign against him in USSR; expelled from the Writers' Union; forced to renounce the Prize. <i>Autobiographical Sketch</i> (prose, published abroad).	
1959 <i>When the Weather Clears</i> (published abroad). Feltrinelli publishes <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> in Russian.	
1960 Dies, in Moscow; thousands attend his funeral in Peredelkino. <i>The Blind Beauty</i> (incomplete play, published abroad).	
1970 Award of the Nobel Prize to Solzhenitsyn.	1966 Death of Akhmatova. Bulgakov, <i>The Master and Margarita</i> .
1974 Expulsion of Solzhenitsyn from the Soviet Union.	
1988 <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> serialized in <i>Novyi mir</i> .	1985 Gorbachev becomes First Secretary of the Communist Party.
1989 <i>Collected Works of Boris Pasternak in Five Volumes</i> , Moscow, 1989–92.	
2003 <i>Complete Works in Eleven Volumes</i> , Moscow, 2003–5	

NOTE ON PASTERNAK'S CONNECTIONS WITH LITERARY GROUPS

Symbolism was the dominant movement in Russian poetry during the first decade of the twentieth century. Pasternak read the work of the symbolists with warm interest, especially that of Blok and Belyi. By 1912 two other major poetic movements were dominant. One was acmeism, which was represented by Gumilev, Gorodetsky, early Akhmatova and Mandelstam, and which flourished as a formal movement until 1914; it replaced the symbolists' musical suggestiveness with an architectural precision, and the symbolists' yearning for "other worlds" with "a respect for the four dimensions of this world". The other movement was futurism, which counted Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Kamensky, and David and Nikolai Burliuk among its members. Anti-mystical, anti-aestheticist, anti-traditional, the futurists cultivated modernity, virility, bold compound rhyme, word-invention. Their 1912 manifesto, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", contained such advice as "Throw Pushkin, Tolstoy, etc, overboard . . ."

Pasternak's professional literary début was with the symbolist-oriented "*Lirika*" group; this was reconstituted early in 1914 as the "innovatory" futurist group, "Centrifuga", led by Sergei Bobrov (1889–1971) and rivalling the more extreme "cubo-futurist" group of which Mayakovsky was a member. Centrifuga differed from cubo-futurism in its far more respectful attitude towards the literary tradition. (See Lazar Fleishman, "Pasternak i predrevoliutsionnyi futurizm".*)

Pasternak was not at ease in inter-group arguments or when under pressure to identify himself with group doctrine. *A Safe-Conduct* contains sharp words about the feuding among rival literary groups (see S-C 3,2), but in 1918 he was already writing: "Symbolist, Acmeist, Futurist? What murderous jargon! Clearly aesthetics is a science which classifies air balloons according to where and how the holes are placed in them that prevent them from flying." "Some Propositions"). All the same, out of admiration for Mayakovsky he remained close to futurism, and became a member of the post-revolutionary neo-futurist group "Lef". The history of Lef has been called a "fascinating story of attempts to create an avant-garde art and literature based on, and helpful to, Communism", as well as "the story of fierce literary battles and defense against the attacks of the orthodox proletarians and other groups." (Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism*, London, 1969, p. 381). Pasternak left "Novyi Lef" (as it was called in its revived form) in 1927, saying he was repelled by its "excessive

sovietism, i.e. depressing servility, i.e. tendency to riotous behaviour with an official mandate for riotous behaviour in its pocket" (quoted by Fleishman in *Pasternak v dvadtsatye gody*, 82. *)

All literary groups were dissolved in 1932 with the formation of the monolithic Union of Soviet Writers, of which Pasternak, like every writer who wished to publish, became a member. In 1934 he was elected to the board of that union. According to its statutes, drawn up in 1934, "socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands from the artist a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of socialism." (Quoted from Abram Tertz, "On Socialist Realism", translated by G. Dennis, 1960, p. 24.) Pasternak said very little about this conception but often expressed his strong dislike of slogans and prescriptive statements. At the end of 1957 he told visitors from the West (Gerd Ruge, *Pasternak. Eine Bildbiographie*. München: Kindler Verlag, 1958): "No, I did not become a socialist realist. But I did become a realist. For which I am thankful."

The Marsh of Gold
*Pasternak's Writings
on Inspiration
and Creation*

INTRODUCTION

When Boris Pasternak, as a young student, went to Venice in 1912 it was to look for a “marsh of gold, one of the primal pools” of creativity. He had just begun “fundamentally” writing poetry. Years later he wrote that “what is clearest, most memorable and important about art is its coming into being, and the world’s best works of art, while telling of very diverse matters, are really telling about their birth”. A great deal of what he wrote does indeed seem prompted by a desire to find precise words for what is conventionally called “inspiration”.

Pasternak travelled to Venice from Marburg, the German university town where he had gone from Moscow for a summer semester of philosophy. He had chosen that university because of the high value its scholars gave to authenticity and because of their characteristic quest for origins, for “how science thinks at the hot beginnings and sources of world-important discoveries”. Pasternak was drawn to origins not as causes of subsequent phenomena, and not as past moments one yearns to return to, but as occasions for knowing and celebrating the force with which something that might never have been comes into being. One of his fictional characters, speaking about art, speaks “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”.¹ Such an extreme and difficult stance of wonder is present throughout Pasternak’s work; the attempt to give an account of it is basic to his few pieces of theoretical and autobiographical prose.

2

The present book brings together a selection of Pasternak’s writings on artistic inspiration, art’s origin in life. Most are prose texts, varying in length from a couple of pages to the ninety-page autobiographical work *A Safe-Conduct*, which is without doubt the most important of all he wrote on this subject. But he was primarily a poet and, since many of his poems contain something like definitions of themselves, fifteen poems are also included in this book. The book’s five parts are arranged chronologically, Parts I to IV consisting of a text or texts translated into English and followed by a Commentary.

Part I offers nine of his writings from the period 1910 to 1919. Three of these were published soon after being written: an article from 1916 (a rare participation in literary polemics), one story (“Letters from Tula”) and the group

of statements entitled "Some Propositions" which, though written last in this early period, is placed first because it so strongly expresses Pasternak's main feeling about art and his resistance to the literary debates going on around him. The six other pieces in Part I were not published in his lifetime nor meant to be. The two long fragments from 1910 ("Reliquimini" and "Ordering a Drama"), perhaps startling at first with their excited impressionist style and their trying out of strange ideas, belong to his first attempts to pin down in words the sensation of being inspired to create something; two difficult pieces, the unfinished essay on Kleist and the 1913 lecture-synopsis, reward sympathetic reading; the two other jottings, from 1912 and 1913, are fascinating records of the poet's unusual way of thinking and perceiving. These six little-known pieces give valuable glimpses of the turbulent mind of someone finding his way into poetry after an adolescence spent first in music and then in philosophy.

Other early fictional works, though not represented in this volume, are also discussed in the Commentary to Part I in so far as they deal with art and artists.

A reader new to Pasternak would do well, however, to start with Part II, which presents the unconventional autobiography *A Safe-Conduct*, written 1928–30 and published 1931, the best known of Pasternak's work except for *Doctor Zhivago*. An exact translation of its title would be "A (or The) Preservation Certificate", which I am introducing as a sub-title. My Commentary concentrates on the four chapters which set out a theory of art in relatively defining terms, and on the relation of two other poets, Rilke and Mayakovsky, to that theory. But really the whole of *A Safe-Conduct* is about the events, impressions and thoughts which led to a life in poetry.

The fifteen poems, with their Russian originals but with minimal commentary, constitute Part III. They form a supplement to I and II, as they cover the same years and resemble the early prose texts in their fervently precise style.

The 1930s and '40s were a time of unprecedented interference in literature by the ruling Communist Party and of damaging pressures from Party-influenced critics and editors. It was a time in which Pasternak, producing less of his own work, devoted himself largely to translation, including that of eight plays by Shakespeare and both parts of Goethe's *Faust*, as well as numerous lyric poems from several languages. Part IV presents some of his articles and speeches from this period, in the hope of showing his attempts to sustain and communicate his unchanged concern with inspiration and originality, in circumstances now hostile to such thoughts. The Commentary includes discussion of his response to the Communist Party's subtly oppressive 1925 decree, its first statement about literature. It also includes discussion of his intervention in the "anti-formalist campaign" of 1936.

Part V is an essay on *Doctor Zhivago*, differing from I to IV in that no text by Pasternak is presented. His one novel (written 1946–55, published abroad

in 1958) is well enough known. Longish passages from it are quoted, however, to show the very much wider meaning he gave to art and inspiration as his views evolved.

3

Pasternak himself indicated some biographical origins of his conception of art. He recalls being woken one night, at four years old, by music: his mother (a concert pianist) was playing a trio with two friends and he was frightened by the sound of the stringed instruments which was “like real calls for help and news of a disaster coming in from outside through the window”.² He was to think of that moment as the transition from unconscious infancy to consciousness; a transition, then, through art, the first conscious meaning of which was cries for help. He also recalls later in his childhood watching his father (a well-known artist) packing up the illustrations he had drawn for Tolstoy’s novel *Resurrection*; the novel was being serialized, so there was a race against time and a uniformed railwayman would come right into their kitchen for the drawings. Pasternak recalls the details: joiner’s glue boiling, the drawings being hurriedly wiped and glued, the sealed parcels speedily handed over.

If a sense of art as a mysterious response to external need began with a crying violin and the creative life of his mother, the association of art’s production with excited speed began with his observation of the artistic work of his father.

These two motifs recur repeatedly. The sense of need appears, for example, in the extraordinary image of a truncated trochee, in the fragment “On the Threshold of Inspiration”. Without art, everything is like a halved trochaic foot at the end of a line of verse, that is to say a stressed syllable demanding an unstressed one to follow it. The longed-for lightness of the unstressed is not a mere question of versification: the lighter syllable is the “feminine” element completing an otherwise incomplete reality. Elsewhere this is reversed and the creative impulse becomes a response to women’s suffering, as in the glimpse of ill-treated “amazons” in the first part of *A Safe-Conduct* and, much later, in *Doctor Zhivago*, in Iurii’s first glimpse of Lara in a scene which seems to be “calling for help”—the very same phrase is used as about the violin in the infancy episode.

Meanwhile, the packing up of paintings in the kitchen becomes a metaphor for writing; rapidly pressed-in contents of a parcel represent the compressed content of a poem. Such an image appears at the end of “Ordering a Drama”, and is elaborated in “The Black Goblet”.

The two recalled experiences—external need, internal speed—are combined in the S-C narrative of the birth of poetry in the poet’s life (1,6). There, a force of feeling is said to be racing the sun, but it is only in the compassionate look back at things left behind and needing to be included that “that which is called inspiration” occurs. Nothing is more typical of the youthful Pasternak than this

exhilaration in fast movement, interrupted by distress on account of everything that is unexhilarated, this hint of a breathlessly performed rescue, wild armfuls of transformed—transferred—objects.

4

Pasternak's adolescence was devoted not to poetry but to music. Another childhood recollection records the origin of his study of music. Going out one day from the family dacha, he found himself enchanted by sounds filling the woodlands; the new neighbour playing the piano turned out to be Alexander Scriabin, the composer; Scriabin became his hero and he resolved to become a composer himself. That winter, when Scriabin, by then a friend of his parents, had set off from their house for a long stay abroad and Pasternak's mother began playing one of Scriabin's pieces, the thirteen-year-old Boris—"as soon as the first sixteen bars had formed themselves into a sentence full of an astounded readiness unrewardable by anything on earth"—rushed hatless and coatless outdoors to try to bring the composer back. "Astounded readiness", "unrewardability"—concepts equally applicable to his own adoration of Scriabin—express not mere passive openness but the heady refusal of closure which would always characterize art for him. It is the subject of his fragmentary essay, "Heinrich von Kleist".

After six years of studying to be a composer, and despite the fact that "more than anything in the world /he/ loved music, and more than anyone in music—Scriabin", despite also the fact that Scriabin himself had praised the then nineteen-year-old's piano compositions, saying he had much more than a mere gift and could "say something of his own in music", he quite suddenly gave it all up. Later he said that a musical career would have been a constriction, but he also said, later still, that giving it up had been a "direct amputation, the removal of the most living part of /his/ existence"; he remained tortured by a "burning need for a composer's biography."³

From music he plunged into philosophy, no less ardently, and again successfully, being encouraged by the famous Marburg philosopher Hermann Cohen to make a career as a philosopher. Then, just as he had abandoned music at the moment when the highest authority assured him of his exceptional talent for it, he did the same with philosophy: merely brought his studies to their conclusion and made a wholly fresh start, this time in poetry.

The switch from philosophy to poetry is explored in the incomplete "Kleist" essay as an escape from intellectual system into the freedom of the unsystematic. Little is said about this in *A Safe-Conduct*, nor is there much in that work about the switch from music to poetry except that "fifteen years of abstinence from words, which had been sacrificed to sounds, meant being doomed to originality, the way certain kinds of maiming doom a person to acrobatics". That he had

a permanent limp after a fall from a horse makes the analogy a poignant one, and its ironic modesty stands in curious relation to the speed and power evoked only three paragraphs later in the poetry-initiating race against the sun. But several notebook-writings from shortly after the break with music reflect the pain of it. In "Ordering a Drama", all of life is seen chasing after music "as if music had arrived in the town and had put up somewhere and everyone were fighting their way toward music as if to a hotel with a celebrity . . . , where to find music, where is it staying, *haven't you seen music*". Meanwhile it is interesting to note that in the same work the music teacher is named "Shestikrylov", which means "Six-Winged" and undoubtedly refers to the seraph in Pushkin's 1826 poem "The Prophet": the seraph meets a wanderer in the wilderness and makes him a poet by giving him fiery speech and preternatural senses. So was music, after all, the angel who set the poet on the right path? Two years later, in "On the Threshold of Inspiration", an urban winter day is still felt to be leaning "like a plank, towards music" and, soon after that, music is referred to in the lecture-synopsis "Symbolism and Immortality" in terms that suggest it was indeed the motivating angel. The poet is "symbolized by rhythm", and rhythm is "music's sole symbol". Then one of the clauses runs: "Inspiration is the syntax of poetry", and syntax is "concrete in alliteration"; one may surmise that alliteration and syntax, rather than, say, metaphors or ironies, are chosen to represent inspiration here because these forms—repeated sounds, organized phrases—are fundamental to music too. Indirectly, the chief power in poetry is identified as a musical power, not at all in the sense of the mystical melodiousness beloved by the symbolists, but as organization and rhythmic pattern. The overwhelming importance Pasternak always gives to the felt force of inspiration may well be due to his having first met it in the more immediately stirring medium of music. It therefore seems appropriate to include in this book one of his (rather few) poems about music, "Again Chopin . . ."

5

When the infant was woken by the piano trio, he found "the whole range of vision flooded with music". When the teenager heard a symphony in the forest he felt the sounds were as much *in* the forest as were light and shadow, twigs and birds. In both memories the visible is saturated with the audible, the tangible with the intangible, matter itself seems penetrated by lyricism. In a similar way, a kind of drenching or invading of the real surroundings by feeling is central to the account of inspiration in *A Safe-Conduct 2,7*, Pasternak's most direct piece of theorising on this subject.

The feeling spoken of there is not one we all often have, nor is it one that appears as the subject-matter of great drama: the real theme of *Romeo and Juliet*, says Pasternak, is not the passions portrayed in that play but the artistic power

which created it. T.S. Eliot, too, said something like this when he wrote: "The episode of Paolo and Francesca employs a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed emotion it may give the impression of . . ." and: "The difference between art and the event is always absolute".⁴

The elusive experience of a feeling which is more properly called a "power", and its need for symbol, for allegorical language, since it cannot be named literally, are the main elements in Pasternak's short theoretical statement in *A Safe-Conduct*, 2,7. Only in *Doctor Zhivago* does that power (sometimes called a "feeling") exchange its elusiveness for a different kind of mysteriousness, one that may also be called "religious".

6

Traditional ideas of inspiration correspond to the "breathing in" implicit in the word—the invoked Muse, God as inspirer of the Bible, Nature's influence, the wind on the cliffs at Duino—but considerable emphasis usually falls on the poet himself, the one breathed into by the external agent.

Pasternak not only renounced the "romantic manner" (as he declared in *A Safe-Conduct* and described in "Letters from Tula"), he also tacitly renounced romantic and ancient conceptions of inspiration as breathed by some higher or vaster being into the poet. He describes a different movement, that of a power striking outward into the surrounding world, which wants it and is changed by receiving it. Since an alternative name for the power is "feeling", it would seem to come from the poet. Yet he so consistently avoids saying "*my feeling*" and so regularly withdraws attention from the person of the poet that the event could appear to take place outside, the poet merely joining in. Strength, power, force, even energy—all these words have been used to translate the Russian word "*sila*", a word Pasternak uses as often as Wordsworth mentions "power" in his investigation into the origin of poetry in life, *The Prelude*. But when, noting sounds of earth and winds, Wordsworth states "Thence did I drink the visionary power", he expresses the romantic view which Pasternak rejects. Both the stress on "me" and the notion of "drinking" (drawing something in from outside) are absent from his view of the matter. The person is scarcely present in the event, or ceases to be as the event proceeds. Again there is a coincidence with Eliot who writes (in the essay already quoted) that the "progress of an artist is a continual *extinction of personality*."

Inspiration, for Pasternak, happens as much to a place as to a person; it takes place. In 1910, when he was twenty and just starting to be a poet, he wrote a long, meditative letter to his cousin Olga Freidenberg which shows something of the origin of this thought. He reminds her of a sensation they had shared on an evening walk together: they had felt that their surroundings were, somehow,

strangely “approaching”. Or—“impending”: the verb “*nastupat*” is used here idiosyncratically. It means “to begin”, with a connotation of “impend” or “be imminent”, and is normally translated “approach” when the subject of the verb is, say, evening or autumn or the new year. Here, though, it is the physical surroundings that are said to “begin” or “approach”, or even “become”. He writes: “I knew that you . . . were feeling the *approach* of the surroundings, something even more agitating than beauty; and that welling over in you was a devotion, almost dedication, to the tread of that approach [imminence]; which we so briefly call lyricism—when one feels that one is oneself approaching [imminent] . . .” From the very beginning of his life as a poet, Pasternak experienced lyrical inspiration as a definite event, as something happening, and happening not primarily in the person but outside and all around him, characterised by a movement of its own; in the quoted letter he mentions its (almost animate) “tread”. And it is “even more agitating than beauty”: one commentator has pointed out, with citation of this passage, that the concept of beauty, so important in traditional aesthetics, is not important in Pasternak’s theory, but yields its usual centrality to the concept of power (*sila*).⁵

A sense of the person as less important than the place, and the whole of the place as changed by an approaching “power”, is felt by Pasternak not only in the case of inspiration but also in the case of love. In his youth the awareness of a power (or “feeling”) more outside than within him led to intently focused ideas about art (the main subject of the present book); in his later years the same awareness is likely to be expressed as characterising the experience of love. Thus in *Doctor Zhivago* we read that Iurii and Lara loved each other not because they were “consumed by passion, as people wrongly say”, but “because everything around them wanted this”. Earth, sky, clouds and trees all wanted it, we read, and then, with only the word “perhaps” to modify the extraordinary statement: “Their love was a pleasure to the surrounding /strangers, distances and rooms/ perhaps *even more than it was to themselves*.” (*DrZh* 15,15, my italics—A.L.)⁶

Pasternak does not speculate as to how the inspirational power is generated, but it is evidently neither divine nor an emanation from nature. *Somehow* subjective being ceases to adhere to the writer and becomes the “free subjectivity” of a place and its objects. Thus in “Reliquimini” the features of the town square grow animate, while the poet drops to the ground in sympathy with them; in “Ordering a Drama” the very furniture is about to dance; in “Symbolism and Immortality” poetry is called “madness without a madman”; in “Letters from Tula” a shift towards creativity begins with the words “there will no longer be a poet”. By the same token, a poet cannot have a biography, and a work of art is not attachable to the ostensible author. Pasternak relates how he once tried to explain to someone who hoped to be a writer that “what

creates a writer and a text is a third dimension—a depth that raises, vertically above the page, whatever is said or shown, and—more important—separates the book from the author.”⁷

Disappearance or separation of the poet from the poetic process has featured prominently in literary-theoretical discussion in the twentieth century; Pasternak’s experience corresponds to some of the ideas put forward, while also greatly differing. Maurice Blanchot’s belief, for instance, that in the writing process a moment comes “which annuls the author” recalls Pasternak’s conception of it, while the sheer fervour of Blanchot’s concern with the “origin” of a work is comparable to Pasternak’s. Blanchot, however, puts the “emergent work” and “the space of composition”, as well as a kind of “nowhere”,⁸ at the centre of the event, whereas Pasternak invariably invokes “reality”, not with mimesis in mind but with a conviction that the whole of reality is transformed by the poetic force. Such emphasis on the whole surroundings is related to the device of metonymy (imagery based on the proximity of things to each other, rather than on their similarity) which has often been seen as typical of his work, a device which he himself once called a preference for “contiguity” over metaphor (see end of “Black Goblet” commentary). Whatever is there, spatially or temporally contiguous, is the real entirety which inspiration shifts.

It should also be said that in all Pasternak’s writing about the origin of poetry there is a spirit of affirmation and delight which leaves no room for any nothingness or for, say, Blanchot’s belief that the writer desires to reach the “point which *cannot be reached* and yet is the only one which is worth reaching” (my italics—A.L.)⁹ For Pasternak the elusiveness of the creative moment does not mean a failure to capture it. “I love—and perhaps this is my only love—”, he wrote, “life’s truth in the form it naturally takes for a single moment at the very crater-edge of artistic forms, to disappear the next moment into them.”¹⁰ Even his 1935 speech, made when he was in the grip of chronic insomnia, illness and depression, stated that poetry would “always remain an organic function of human happiness”.

7

None of Pasternak’s contemporaries thought about art quite as he did. In the severe conditions of later Soviet intellectual life, his views seemed to many dangerously eccentric or wrong. But even in the 1920s and earlier, when his experience of poetry was to some extent shared by equally gifted fellow poets, his view of art still stood out as strongly distinctive. Closest to him was Marina Tsvetaeva, with whom, after her emigration, he conducted an intense correspondence, much of it concerned with the nature of creativity. Tsvetaeva shared his sense of inspiration’s tremendous rapidity and of its being a response to a need in the external world; in fact she went further than he did, saying it is

a reflex before thought, even before 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. Command? Yes, if S.O.S. is a command (the most unrepulsable of all).¹¹

Tsvetaeva is just as concerned as he is with trying to define genius, inspiration and art, and she too writes of an indefinable force. But she calls that force “elemental”, a word Pasternak does not use, and for her it comes *upon* and into the poet, as in the more traditional theories.

He has strangely little in common with his other great post-symbolist contemporary, Osip Mandelstam. “Strangely”, because Mandelstam-the-acmeist’s conception of the “enormously compressed reality” in a poem bears a similarity to Pasternak’s imagery of speed and packing: Mandelstam writes that, like a mathematician easily “squaring some ten-figure number”, a poet quietly “raises a phenomenon to the tenth degree”. His anti-symbolist delight, moreover, in actual existence and identity (“A = A: what a splendid poetic theme!”) is also a Pasternakian delight.¹² But his admiration for perfect construction (in fugues, in cathedrals) and for the solid tension of “the word as such” is quite unlike Pasternak’s ravishment by nature’s moods and changes, and where for Mandelstam creation is linked to recollection and to rediscovery of one’s place in a classical pattern, Pasternak finds the world’s phenomena repeatedly unprecedented.

As for Vladimir Mayakovsky, whom Pasternak once felt he was so like that he had radically to redefine himself, comparison again leads to contrast. The two poets may coincide in thinking art a product of everyday reality, but their views of that reality differ. Pasternak discerns in reality a need to be saved by art, as well as a model for art to copy, while Mayakovsky discerns social commands and sees poetry’s task as active engagement with them;¹³ his verse thus flourishes on the rhythm of decisions and challenges rather than sensations and impressions. In an essay on the two of them, Tsvetaeva constructed a series of antitheses, such as: “Pasternak—absorption, Mayakovsky—projection”; “Pasternak—magic, Mayakovsky—broadest daylight”; “Mayakovsky—a poet with a theme, Pasternak—a poet without a theme; the *theme* is: poet.”¹⁴

8

If all things can be set in motion, and if world and art link up like a single disyllabic word, then everything necessary for transformation is present and no invented beings or imaginary worlds, no *realiora*, are required. Dislike of invention is something Pasternak often expressed, from the time when he told himself to “stop using these dreams as fuel” (“Ordering a Drama”), through the explicit break with “romanticism”, to his saying a year before his death:

"I have never liked or understood (and 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." This continues: "For me, art is an obsession, the artist is someone possessed, seized, by *reality* and carried away by everyday existence . . ." ¹⁵ Czesław Miłosz aptly summed him up as "a man spellbound by reality". ¹⁶

Whenever Pasternak praised a work of art he called it "realistic". Naturally, this did not mean it was based on an "undertaking to look all the relevant facts of a situation in the face" or that it was an attempt "to give an illusion of reflecting life as it seems to the common reader"—not, anyway, if "relevant" and "common" imply something already known; ¹⁷ he meant that the work conscientiously conveyed a new experience. The "nymphs and salamanders" he objects to in Chopin criticism, the symbolist cosmogonies he is sarcastic about in *Doctor Zhivago*, are not matters of experience, and their would-be amazingness obscures the actual amazingness of reality. He would have said, with Wallace Stevens, "The world is the only thing fit to think about." ¹⁸ Of course it is possible that he placed so much emphasis on "realism"—which he did most strongly from the 1930s on—as a response to the uncomprehending attacks then being made on him as a writer supposedly concerned with unreal matters (although his "realism" was very far from the "socialist realism" imposed upon writers from the 1930s onward). This, though, would explain only the insistence, not the view itself.

Concern for the real brings with it a concern for precision and fidelity. It also brings a concern for content. Although what seemed to demand most attention from his early readers was the power of his language—the vigorous, colloquial syntax and sometimes difficult imagery—Pasternak always stressed the primacy of content, and scorned preoccupation with form. Each of his poems, he said, began from a desire for it to contain one whole individual thing, whether it was February, or a certain railway station, or the soul accepting danger like a pear falling from its tree. The poet is urged on by the real thing needing to be packed and conveyed. Accordingly, he was (after 1916) reluctant to discuss literary periods and movements, or genres, styles and poetic devices; this is made very clear in "Some Propositions".

9

In seeking words for the force (or: power, energy, strength, *sila*) which he has encountered, Pasternak often seems to be trying out a number of appellations. In "The Black Goblet" he elevates the concept of originality to an "independent postulate", an "integral principle". Writing to Tsvetaeva in 1926 he experiments with "identity", along with "objectivity", in an attempt to define the sensation of that force: he says that reading a poem of hers has made him long to do

nothing else but “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.” Uncertain of his chosen word, he goes on: “With this term I am designating an elusive, rare, magical feeling known to you in the highest degree . . .”, and then: “as you read, try the word on, call to mind what you yourself have felt, help me.”¹⁹

It is remarkable that he felt he was talking about something “never yet properly discussed by anyone”—something neglected, then, by Plato, by Longinus, by the German Romantic thinkers so well known to him, and by the Russian contemporaries of his youth with their many discussions of art and inspiration. But also remarkable is his begging his addressee to “try the word on”. Rather than insist on his preferred word, he wants her to know what feeling he is using it to mean, and to find her own word for that feeling. Words we propose for the nature of the real are provisional, he seems to say; use what name you like so long as you convey the thing meant. This position is often encountered in his remarks about art. Thus Chopin’s *études* teach “history, or the structure of the universe, or anything whatever . . .”, and (in *Zhivago*) the dynamic cohering of human lives could be called “Kingdom of God” or “history” or “something else”. This is not to say that language cannot cope: just the contrary. It is remote from Tiutchev’s “A thought once uttered is a lie”, or Schiller’s “Should the soul *speak*, then, alas! it’s no longer the *soul* that speaks.”²⁰ For Pasternak, all uttered thoughts can be true, and the soul can speak even if it is called something else.

He has been described as a latter-day anti-nominalist—that is, one who believes that abstractions correspond to realities.²¹ He does indeed seek to evoke dynamic realities corresponding to such words as “epoch” or “power” or “life”. The word “art”, too, corresponds, for him, 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” (*DrZh* 9,4). His poems will often combine something concrete with something abstract, as if that too were concrete; a season, a situation or a city can mix with the particulars it consists of or contains. A “year of war” combines with spokes of rocking-chairs, “to cross a road” is “to step on the universe”, a century crashes down onto a named quarter of a city. Definite mixes with diffuse; scrutinised particular with conventional generality. The preoccupation is finely embodied in the opening lines of “In Reisner’s Memory”: “Larisa, 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.”²² Abstractions are somehow in the world.

But Pasternak must also be called a nominalist, in that for him names are *only* names and one abstract word can be replaced by another when both seek

to name the same thing. Feelings, forces and essences need not be named conclusively, and it may be better if they are not. In the poem "Let's drop words" he imagines someone asking who it is that ordains the details the world is made of, and he answers, as if with an evasive smile: "the god of details". Nor does it matter, in that poem, whether names have been found for life's biggest mysteries—whether, say, "the riddle of the grave" has been solved: the only thing that matters is that "life is detailed". In a similar assertion William Blake, objecting to Joshua Reynolds' calling the minuteness of beautiful forms their weakness, declared (c. 1808): "Minuteness is their whole Beauty".²³

Pleasure in the freedom and mutability of language lasted for Pasternak all his life. *A Safe-Conduct* states, in a wonderfully offhand quasi-definition, that art "is the interchangeability of images". In a poem of around the same time he wrote: "Call it what you like, but the forest covering everything ran like a narrative . . ." ²⁴ This "call it what you like" comes up again and again in many forms. Even when speaking to the Board of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1936, Pasternak declared: "You see, comrades, I am deeply indifferent as to the separate components of any integral form, so long as it is primal and genuine." The same "call it what you like" underlies the world-view set out in *Doctor Zhivago*, his one novel and the most important to him of all his writings.

I

EARLY PROSE