

Safe Conduct

B.Pasternak

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This was an autobiographical attempt that Pasternak undertook as he was moving into his forties. Later on he took exception to it, as being too marred by mannerism. The English translation does not read well, but is awkward without being interesting and one finds oneself dozing as to a buzzing fly a warm summer afternoon. How much is the fault of the translation and how much the fault of Pasternak himself? In *Dr. Zhivago* Pasternak writes prose as if it would be poetry and manages to combine the best of both, at least so it comes across in the Swedish translation, I am not sure about the English. The poetic virtues do to some extent come across in the English translation of 'The Last Summer' so maybe the translation leaves much to desire, on the other hand, taken Pasternak's word for it, in his biographical attempt he may have parodied himself and carrying his special style to an extreme, after all this is the meaning of mannerism, putting an emphasis on style.

One does not get too much of a sense of Pasternak's actual life, not as to its basics, but the book presents instead impressionistic touch-downs where some ephemeral sensations are given a lot of attention. This might be quite interesting and give you a sense of presence, although most people would no doubt find it tedious. When used as a spice it certainly stimulates the imagination, however as little as a meal may consist only of spices, the imagination finds no sustained nourishment from an overflow of details as it craves an underlying structure.

Pasternak grew up in a very cultured and well connected home, part of the thin layer of the Russian intelligentsia. His mother was a renowned concert pianist and his father a professor of painting, when such activities were a species of academic craft, requiring both erudition and practical skill. In his home Tolstoy once appeared, his father was illustrating his novel - *Resurrection*, and Scriabin was a family friend. Not surprisingly Pasternak was an ambitious boy.

Pasternak was indeed an ambitious young man and wanted to be a composer. He was able, if not to be outright tutored by Scriabin at least to be advised by him. Scriabin encouraged him gently, but as all ambitious young men dreaming of glory, he worried that he did not have it in him. That he did not have that natural talent for music out of which genius flows and emerges. He became self-critical, started to doubt himself, had a hunger for reassurance that could not be satiated. He had no perfect pitch. This is not unusual among musicians nor among composers. Some of the very greatest such as Wagner and Tchaikovsky, did not have it. Big deal. But he was looking for something tangible to anchor his doubts on. Doubts grew to a decision. He decided to abolish a career to which he had brought everything, or almost everything. He decided to study law as that seemed to be the easiest. Scriabin discouraged him and advised him without delay to at least pursue philosophy. Pasternak naturally followed suit, he was after all a young impressionable man on the threshold of life, where so much can happen and be

done, so many paths to be followed. As Pasternak remarks, adolescence is boundless, no matter how many decades are accrued to it afterwards, they are unable to fill that hangar of anticipations. He studied philosophy and learned about Marburg and its school. It had rejuvenated philosophy and made it what it ought to be, a font a wisdom. Transformed it from a problematic discipline into an immemorial discipline of problems. Furthermore this repugnant condescension to the past was foreign to that school it respected it and did not relegate it to a study undertaken by archaeologists and antiquarians. The big name was Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) a neo-Kantian and non-meta-physician, who stressed pure thought and had taught there since 1873, first as Privatdozent and then a few years later as professor, and retired in 1912, about the time Pasternak appeared. About his encounter with Cohen and his philosophy there is not much said in his memoirs. Cohen was a formidable figure, of which he was in awe. He had a casual mind, Pasternak writes, by which I guess he means a rational one based on reasoning causally (i.e. logical) and it was rather frightening to chat with him, and to walk along with him was no joke. But he says very little about his philosophy and the impact it made on him. He was a good student and participated in seminars, but he speaks very little about that. He began to realize that he had not in him that would make a learned man. The activity of learning of being the good school-boy had much more appeal to him than the actual themes that learning took as its territory. I loved to read the books involved, he confesses, but not so much for instruction and edification as finding in them a font of literary passages to quote, and thus to enrich his writing with ornamentation. Yet he was set to write for his examination on the aesthetic of creativity based of two pillars of conceptions namely power and symbol. While in science, which dissects, art concerns itself with life as the ray of power passes through it. It is not so easy to see what he has in mind. What engages him in his memoirs are long descriptions of his encounter with the old medieval town of Marburg, and the visit for a few days of two well-to-do sisters on an European tour. This excited him as a young man a lot but came predictably to nothing. He finally left Marburg and Germany returning back to Moscow. With effort he managed to lower the train window and lean out as far as possible, seeing it receding rapidly into his past. He would later in the early twenties revisit the town, finding it much changed; and Cohen had long left and died.

His narrative is, as noted, impressionistic. In your reverie you follow no chronological order. I would say that in the past all that what has happened take on a timeless quality; the very qualia of the past; the episodic memories assume a quality of their own, independent of how they are fit in causally by other episodes, after all after having happened, they are no longer contingent upon the other. So suddenly we find ourselves in Venice where he is traveling with his parents in an interlude during his Marburg years. He has claimed that art is more concerned with the image of man rather than man itself, now he gradually understands that he did not realize at first that what he saw was not an image of Venice, but the real thing. Venice as an entity in reality, not an image, a dream. He walks along stony mews not wider than corridors, while now and again lifted up on humpbacked stones over dirty water looking like rolled up Persian rugs jammed into crooked drawers. If asked what Venice is, Pasternak would have answered 'Light nights, tiny squares, and quiet people who seem strangely familiar'. And all those English tourists. No other European

culture has approached more closely than Italian as has the English, Pasternak tosses a random remark. The Venetian fleet was amazing already in the 15th century, the author offers some instructive remarks, the merchant ships alone numbering between three and four thousand ships, and add to that a powerful navy. That fleet of ships was the prosaic reason for its fairy-tale existence, whose very reality takes, as we already know, time for Pasternak to have it sink in. He visits art museums and muses that one needs to see Veronese and Titian to understand the real meaning of craftsmanship, but to understand genius one needs to look at Tintoretto, the Michelangelo of Venice. Pasternak continues to throw *obiter dicta* around. In Russia to lie has more the sense of exaggerate than to deceive. The Bible is really the notebook of humanity in which various thoughts of been jotted down helter-skelter; but that does not detract from its eternal truths, he hastens to add.

Having rejected both music and philosophy, what was left for Pasternak? Poetry. Here he met Mayakovsky whom he found to be a miracle. What was he in comparison with that poet? Nothing really, but having already abandoned two possible careers, there was no longer time to abandon a third. He had to stick it out. Of course had he stuck to music or to philosophy he would most likely only have cut a minor figure unknown to everyone but experts, and probably quickly fading out of the realm of relevant expertise as well. As to Mayakovsky's poetry, it contained everything: The Boulevards, the dogs, the limes and the butterflies... and Pasternak gets carried away with a long list. To truly appreciate a genius you need a lot of talent yourself, as Salivieri growing jealous of Mozart. But Pasternak was by now too chastened to allow himself jealousy, the superiority of Mayakovsky simple had to be accepted and enjoyed. He relates how Biely returned from a Swiss exile after the revolution and probably listened to Mayakovsky for the first time. How he clearly was entranced, in spite of making no show of enthusiasm, and differed so profoundly from the other who listened, well aware of being fellow poets and accordingly jealous. Only Biely listened, not as a fellow professional, but entirely lost within himself carried away by a joy which regrets nothing, including its own inferiority. But Pasternak's infatuation with the poet eventually waned and faded away. It no longer could work miracles as of those of the past. They met and tried to work together but found no common ground. Deification of mere mortals may never be sustained. It also come to a personal break, Mayakovsky had overstepped some limits, informing him that he had added his name to some manifesto, obviously without asking for permission. And then in the end Mayakovsky shot himself. Pasternak was there in the aftermath, along with friends and admirers. Outside those gates life flowed on as usual, but as the author is quick to point out this should not be confused with indifference. Finally also Pasternak broke down and cried. When he returned in the evening, the body was already put in a coffin, and there had been a change of faces around him. And there was scarcely any more weeping.

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