



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Konstantin Polivanov

“SUICIDE AND LOVE” IN BORIS PASTERNAK’S IDEOLOGY: THE NEW DISCOVERED LETTER

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM
WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES

WP BRP 04/LS/2014

*Konstantin Polivanov*¹

“SUICIDE AND LOVE” IN BORIS PASTERNAK’S IDEOLOGY: THE NEW DISCOVERED LETTER²

The paper explores the tight relation between “art” and “immortality” in Boris Pasternak’s author’s ideology on the basis of his new discovered letter to his second wife Zinaida Nikolaevna Neigauz, written in the beginning of 1931. This letter, preserved only in a copy, sheds new light upon one of the most important point of author’s ideology. In this document, Pasternak explains his views on the unacceptability of suicide. The letter is closely related to his autobiographical work *Safe Conduct*, the final part of which was written soon after the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky. It is possible to stretch a line from the letter to the late Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*. The life finals of two protagonists, Yuri Zhivago and his antipode Pavel Antipov-Strelnikov, are compared. The main protagonist dies, leaving behind his poetry. For Pasternak, it is the way of continuation, “life after death”, and the symbol of creative immortality of a poet. On the contrary, Antipov committed suicide, and it was consequential final of his life position.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Boris Pasternak, 20th century Russian literature, literary biography.

¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics. Faculty of Philology. Assistant professor; E-mail: kpolivanov@hse.ru

² This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2014.

Introduction: context and issue

1993 witnessed the publication of more than eighty of Boris Pasternak's letters to his second wife Zinaida. Spanning the years from 1930 to 1957, these letters, a considerable number of which had not been previously published, were reproduced from the original manuscripts kept in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. More than 20 of these letters were written in the first six months of 1931, when Boris Pasternak and Zinaida Nikolaevna were not yet married. Understandably, the correspondence was resumed in later years only in circumstances when the couple was separated, as happened for instance in the autumn of 1941, when Zinaida Nikolaevna was evacuated with the children to Chistopol' while her husband remained behind in Moscow.

Let us briefly recall certain biographical milestones that constitute important contexts for the letters of 1931.

At the invitation of his new friends, Irina Sergeevna and Valentin Ferdinandich Asmuses, Pasternak spent the summer of 1930 with his first wife and son in the village Irpin, near Kiev, where Geinrikh Neigauz was also vacationing with his own family. The poet struck up a longlasting friendship with Neigauz, yet simultaneously he began to discover his own strong feelings for his new friend's wife Zinaida Nikolaevna. In her memoirs, Zinaida Nikolaevna described the arrival of Boris Pasternak at hers and her husband's house in the autumn of the same year:

“He went into Geinrikh Gustavovich's room, closed the door, and they talked for a long time. When he came out, I saw by my husband's face that something had happened. The manuscript of two ballads was laying on the piano. One was dedicated to me, the other to Neihauz. Both poems pleased me tremendously. Geinrikh Gustavovich locked the door and said that he wanted to have a serious talk with me. It turned out that Boris Leonidovich had come to him to say that he had fallen in love with me and that this feeling would never come to an end. He said that he had no idea how all of this would play out in life, but that he could hardly live without me. They both sat there and wept, because they loved each other very much and were friends.

I began to laugh and said that it was all ridiculous. I asked my husband to pay no attention to this conversation. I told him that I did not believe it, and that even if it were true, everything would pass soon.” (Pisma B.L. Pasternaka k zhene... 8-9)

In January of 1931, Pasternak left his family, moving out of the family flat in Volkhonka

street. At first he lived with the Asmuses, but then shortly moved to the apartment of the writer Boris Pilniak. In May, Pasternak's first wife and son departed for Germany. Shortly afterwards, the poet began his common life with Zinaida Nikolaevna and her sons. After spending the summer together in Georgia, they returned to Moscow and settled on Volkhonka street.

In 1931, in the midst of this family drama, Pasternak finished Part Three of his first autobiographical book *Okhrannaia gramota (Safe Conduct)*, concerning Vladimir Maiakovsky and his suicide in April 1930. At the same time he began to write his new book of poems that was to receive the symbolist title *Second Birth*. The poems in *Second Birth* reflect his turbulent personal relationships of this period of his life.

In one of his previously published letters (referred to by Pasternak as a "note"), dated February 19, 1931, the author mentioned the contents of an earlier letter that has most likely been lost or destroyed:

"It has occurred to me to attach this note the little letter I wrote to you one morning at the Asmuses and that I recounted to you later we were riding home in the hired carriage. Do you remember? I wrote it in pencil on the rough draft of *Safe Conduct*. I couldn't write it on letter-paper, because the table was near the open door where people would pass by, and letter writing could attract the attention of I.S. [Irina Sergeevna Asmuss — K.P.]. Now I'm going to rewrite that letter for you. Remember when reading this how long ago this all was. Just now I very nearly called that time a sad one. No, it was not that: it already was my true happiness in all its real power, yet as yet still in its incomprehensible, suggestive proximity. Then, only the soul could speak – no other help had yet been given to it. But now I want to throw to its aid more and more corporeal supports: myself, Georgia, the South, and my joy, and the miracle of work. My love for you, to which just a short time ago I was compelled to perform Wagner with just the mute murmuring of lips, I would now like to present with the whole Leipzig orchestra. About that letter, once again. The vow that it contained is still in force. This remains one of our possible futures, among which you are empowered to choose. How much I want you to choose life, and the mountains, and joy! Now I'll rewrite that letter. See you this evening, my friend. B."

We can only guess what the earlier letter in fact contained. However, a copy of this letter is preserved and enables us to reconstruct the author's ideology of that time in possible details.

PASTERNAK'S NEW DISCOVERED LETTER AND THE THEME OF LOVE AND SUICIDE

As Pasternak reported, the mentioned letter was written on the back of the draft of *Safe Conduct*—therefore, obviously, on the reverse side of the pages of Part Three, in which Pasternak wrote about his own poetic generation, saved from suicide by the grace of art, and in particular of the art of the 1900s and 1910s (“Scriabin, Blok, Komissarzhevsky, Biely”), and concerned with “phasing out the mystery of death”:

“Bowed as they ran, young people hurried through the snowstorm, and although each had his own reason for hurrying, still, they were spurred on by something they all had in common more than by their personal considerations, and this was their historical integrity, that is, the return of that passion with which humanity had just entered into them, rescued from the common road, for the countless time avoiding the end.

And to shield them from the duality of a flight through the unavoidable and so that they would not go mad, would not abandon what was begun and would not hang themselves over the hole globe, behind the trees along all the boulevards a power stood on guard, a power terribly tried and experienced, a power which followed them with wise eyes. Art stood behind the trees, and art which discriminates so wonderfully in us that we are always at a loss to know from what non-historical worlds it has brought its skill to see history in silhouette. It stood behind the trees and bore a terrible resemblance to life, and it the laboratories of the learned, those dedicated to the natural sciences, that is, to the gradual puzzling out of death.

What kind of art was this? It was the young art of Scriabin, Blok, Komissarzhevsky, Biely – the leading art, enthralling, original” (Pasternak. *Safe Conduct*: 84).

In these last chapters of Part Three of *Safe Conduct*, Pasternak writes about receiving news of Vladimir Maiakovsky's death, about those who gathered in the dead poet's room, about the procession from Lubiensky Walk, where the suicide had been committed, to his apartment on Gendrikov Alley. Even the city landscape, to which winter returned unexpectedly in April, 1930, is described as participating in the shock of the poet's death. The preceding chapters of the work are devoted to description of the phenomenon of the last year of a poet's life in general. Pasternak places Maiakovsky's last year in the context of with the final years of Pushkin and Blok:

“I shall tell of that eternally recurring strangeness which may be called the poet’s last year. Suddenly the projects which have not been realized come to an end. Often nothing is added to their lack of realization except the new and only now admissible certainty that they have been realized. And this certainty is handed down to posterity.

Men change their habits, busy themselves with new plans never cease to boast of their spiritual uplift. And suddenly – the end, sometimes violent, often natural, but even then, because there is no desire to defend oneself, very like suicide. <...> That it is a kind of inhuman youth which breaks asunder the continuity of the life which has gone before with such abruptness and such joy, that, since it has no name and since comparison is inevitable, its abruptness above all suggest of death. That it resembles death, but is not death, not death at all, and if only, if only people did not insist on an exact resemblance”(Ibid.: 106-107).

Finally, describing the moment of Mayakovsky’s death, that in Pasternak’s terms takes place like that of every poet in a Blokian “frightful world” the author tells about the “second birth”, which turns out to be a kind of “alter-idem” of the poet’s death.

However, for the successful coincidence of circumstances, we may not only conjecture about the content of the letter, but it seems that now we have this text available. Pasternak’s letters of 1930-35 to Zinaida Nikolaevna were left at the apartment in Moscow in haste of evacuation in 1941. Ekaterina Nikolaevna Berkovskaya on behalf of Pasternak found these letters, and rewrote them before passing them to the owner. All of the other letters of Zinaida Nikolaevna was hand over by Sophia Prokofieva to Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in 1966. Some of them were published in 1993. But among copies made by Berkovskaya there is also one more most likely the very letter mentioned above in the “note” of Pasternak.

Here is this letter (first let us put it in original):

“27/1/31 Утро

Мой друг и ангел. Ты часто говоришь, что все это добром не кончится, что конец был бы избавлением. Я давно тебе признался, что без тебя я не буду жить. Ты сейчас звонила мне сюда. Утром до твоего звонка я встал с такой вот сложившейся у меня к тебе просьбой. Нам надо кое о чем уговориться.

Если тебе станет когда-нибудь так плохо, что насильственный конец станет для тебя

единственным выходом, мы сделаем это вместе, и первым из нас – я на твоих глазах. Я не верю в такие выходы и их всей своей природой отрицаю. Но то будет совсем другой случай. Я приму это, любимая моя Лялочка, как часть твоей судьбы, от которой меня нельзя отделить. И после того, как я это сделаю, тебе можно и нужно будет остаться, потому что тогда я весь стану тобою, и тебе по-легкому и хорошему захочется побыть с этим среди людей. И новая какая-нибудь твоя жизнь, которая придет на смену этой памяти, не будет изменой, а радостным превращением твоей верности. И какое это будет ликование, когда я из веры в самоубийство переведу тебя в ту истинную, в глазах которой самоубийство – идолопоклонство. Позволь мне быть в этом союзе с тобой. В ряду знакомых форм, о которых говорит И<рина>.С<ергеевна>³. Женя и постоянно будут нам твердить другие, я не встречаю на пути к тебе ни одной, которая так бы охватывала меня, как форма брака, заключающаяся в этой просьбе и клятве. Даю ее тебе навсегда на все случаи. Где бы и зачем бы ни застало нас обоих нас обоих твое отчаянье, вспомни, вызови и дождись. Ты убьешь и оскорбишь меня, если мне в этом откажешь”.

“27/1/31 Morning

My friend, my angel. So often you say that it can't finish with something good and the end would be a rescue. I confessed you long time ago:

If you will be ever so unwell that violent end will become for you the only way we'll do it together, and I'll be the first of us – before your eyes. I don't believe in these escapes and deny whole their nature.

But I would be completely another case. I will accept it, my favorite little dolly, as part of your fate, from which I cannot be separated. And after doing that, you may and you have to stay, because then me become you, and you will want with it among the people lightly and pleasant.

And any new of your lives, which will replace the memory, will not be a betrayal, but joyful transformation of your fidelity. And what a exultation, when I'll take you across faith in suicide immediately into that true, in the eyes of which suicide shows up as

³ Irina Sergejevna Asmus.

idolatry. Let me be in the union with you. In a number of familiar forms, of which I.S., Zhenya and is others tell us, I have not met any on the way to you, what would make me so griped, as a form of marriage. It concluded in this request and the vow. Give it thee forever and just to be. No matter where and why would we be caught by your despair, remember, recall and wait. You'll kill and hurt me, if you'll refuse”.

With all overintimacy of this document, which Boris Pasternak addressed to his future wife (actually, maybe this explains, why that this letter is not preserved together with the rest), the text integrated extremely naturally into the system of Pasternak's representations about the relationship of art, life and death.

The theme of the overcoming the death with art facilities is one of the main topics of the first Boris Pasternak's book of poems *Twin in Clouds*, published in 1913. It almost completely devoted to the theme of creativity. The basis of the title and the Central poems of the book is the myth about Castor and Pollux, the myth of immortality, which is granted by one brother to the other with the price of his own death. As Ronald Vroon argues (Vroon: 342-343), the subtext of several poems from Pasternak's book is Fyodor Tyutchev's poem *Twins*, where the twins appear as the main themes of our letter “suicide and love”:

...Но есть других два близнеца —
И в мире нет четы прекрасней,
И обаянья нет ужасней,
Ей предающего сердца...

Союз их кровный, не случайный,
И только в роковые дни
Своей неразрешимой тайной
Обворожают нас они.

И кто в избытке ощущений,
Когда кипит и стынет кровь,
Не ведал ваших искушений —
Самоубийство и Любовь!

(Tyutchev 174)

The words from the letter “I don’t believe in these escapes and deny whole their nature” are related not only with the opposition between personal and literary life of Mayakovsky. The letter was written at the same time with the last chapters of the third part of *Safe Conduct*, where the death of Vladimir Mayakovsky was contrasted with the “second birth”. Pasternak will return to this subject in the middle of the 1950s in the autobiographical essay. In that essay, Pasternak tells about the canonization of Mayakovsky in the middle of the 1930s, as the first Soviet poet: “It was his second death, in which wasn’t his fault”. Significantly, Pasternak called his new book of poems written in the early 1930s as *The Second Birth*.

The “denial” of the suicide of the poet is present and in Pasternak’s poem written in 1926, faced Marina Tsvetaeva’s poem «Не оперные поселяне...»:

Послушай, стихи с того света
Им будем читать только мы,
Как авторы Вед и Заветов
И Пира во время чумы.

Но только не лезь на котурны,
Ни на паровую трубу.
Исход ли из жизни мишурной?
Ты их не напишешь в гробу.

Ты все еще край непочатый,
А смерть это твой псевдоним.
Сдаваться нельзя. Не печатай
И не издавайся под ним.

(Pasternak, *Sobranije*: 243)

The poem was written at the moment when Tsvetaeva was tensely asking Pasternak in theirs correspondence about the circumstances of the Sergey Yesenin’s suicide, because she was going to

write poem about Yesenin. The circumstances of the death of Yesenin was probably included in the lines «Но только не лезь на котурны, / Ни на паровую трубу» (But don't come on the buskin, / Or on a steam pipe). This poetic appeal was obviously designed to protect the recipient from thoughts about suicide. This issue is the central to the most prominent Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*. Let us consider it in the following part.

ART AND IMMORTALITY IN *DOCTOR ZHIVAGO*

In *Doctor Zhivago* the idea of connection between art, life and death is shown in the most consistent way. Not only the art plays the role of a warning for a suicidal one, not only it leads step by step to unriddle the death (as it was defined in *Safe Conduct*), but essentially it becomes one of the forces and events that are able to surmount death, such as Christianity and the concept that Pasternak in his novel expresses with the word “history”:

“...man doesn't live in a state of nature but in history, and that history as we know it now began with Christ, and that Christ's Gospel is its foundation. Now what is history? It is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death, with a view to overcoming death. That's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves, that's why they write symphonies. <...>

It was not until after Him that man began to live toward the future. Man doesn't die in a ditch like a dog – but at home in history, while the work toward the conquest of death is in full swing, he dies sharing in this work” (Pasternak. *Doctor Zhivago*: 10).

These are the words of Nikolay Nikolaevich Vedeniapin, an uncle of the main character, but Yuri Zhivago himself in his mind phrases the aims of the art in the same terms:

“More vividly than ever before he realized that art has two constant, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus always creates life. All great, genuine art resembles and continues the Revelation of St. John” (Ibid: 90).

We should notice that both Zhivago and his uncle see a connection between this belief in surmounting of death using the art and the era that came with the Advent. Thus he opposes in a letter “the true faith in Life” to the idolatry: “**What an exultation will it be when I lead you from the faith in suicide to that true one for which suicide is an idolatry**”. And love turns out to be the essential principle of this faith as it is for Christianity.

In his novel Pasternak chooses for a protagonist who is a poet a character Zhivago. The victory of the art over death is verified by the composition of the novel where after the description of the death of the main character in prosaic part there is the last part with his poems showing the superiority of the art over death and “ending” with the strophe about the Resurrection and the Last Judgement (“continuation of the Revelation”):

Я в гроб сойду и в третий день восстану
И как сплавляют по реке плоты,
Ко мне на суд, как баржи каравана,
Столетия поплывут из темноты

I shall descend into my grave. And on the third day rise again.
And, even as rafts float down a river,
So shall the centuries drift, trailing like a caravan,
Coming for judgment, out of the dark, to me.

(Pasternak. Doctor Zhivago: 558)

In the novel, Pavel Antipov (Strel'nikov) who is opposed to Yuri Zhivago commits suicide which gives us reason to remember the suicide of Mayakovsky as well as the death of a Georgian poet Paolo Yashvili, a close friend of Pasternak.

We could take a risk of an assumption that the letter itself therefore should be read not only as an episode in correspondence but extensively as a literary text.

Works Cited

Pasternak, Boris. *Safe Conduct*. Transl. by Babette Deutsch. New York, 1959.

Pasternak, Boris. *Doctor Zhivago*. Transl. by Max Hayward and Marina Hayward. New York, 1997.

Pasternak, Boris. *Polnoje sobranije sochinenij*. Vol. 2. M., 2004.

Pisma B.L. Pasternaka k zhene Z.N. Neigaus-Pasternak. M., 1993.

Tyutchevm Fyodor. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenij*. L., 1987.

Vroon, Ronald. *Znak bliznecov: Opyt interpretacii pervogo sbornika stikhov Pasternaka // Pasternakovskije chtenija*. Vol. II. 1998.

Konstantin Polivanov

National Research University Higher School of Economics. Faculty of Philology. Assistant Professor; E-mail: kpolivanov@hse.ru

Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.

©Polivanov, 2014