

A Note on Translating Pasternak's Verse¹

Ants Oras

One of the central facts about Pasternak's verse is that it is all of a piece, but not in a cameo-fashion: it is intensely alive, it moves and vibrates. Not in any sense finicky, it is superb in the richness of its nuances. His verses may move rapidly or slowly, in a straight line or sinuously – as a rule, sinuously as well as rapidly – towards their predestined end, which generally seems to be reached suddenly, without calculation, but inescapably, with a turn that to us may seem unexpected and unexplainable until we go through the poems once more: then we fully recognize their logic, which before we only felt. The impression is almost invariably one of great spontaneity and naturalness; but most certainly not of confusion or chaos. The poetry's tempo very often is torrential, but its cataracts have their definite direction, a shape determined by enclosing banks – a distinctive metrical form, a leading thought that moulds them, though often only implied – a river bed permitting some expansion as well as contraction but always forcing the poem onwards, towards a goal, frequently lying beyond the poem, only suggested by its end, which may point to infinitude.

This is essentially disciplined Romanticism – channelled but unsubdued energy. But it *is* channelled, and the source of this energy, the poet, is its guide and the inspired, unpedantic engineer of its channels. Pasternak, like any major artist, always, if at times only half-instinctively, knows what he is doing. But he gives a sufficiently free rein to his impulses to let them flow vigorously and produce their own exciting patterns. He does not force them, although he never lets them get out of hand. Here and there – very often, in fact – he perceptibly manipulates the flow without weakening it, usually with a view to intensifying its swirls and whirlpools, throwing in snags and rocks to keep it from streaming too evenly. The result is powerfully rushing, beautifully organic art retaining all the freshness of nature. Despite the wide reading, the genuine learning of Pasternak, he is not a bookish poet, not a hothouse plant like, say, his compatriot Valery Bryusov or like Stefan George in Germany. In an atmosphere of oppressive regimentation, he has learned the value of remaining genuinely and burningly alive. One of his post-*Dr Zhivago* poems states this very clearly:

¹ The manuscript is preserved in the Estonian Literary Museum, KM EKLA f. 237, m. 46:12.

But stay alive, stay boldly living,
Stay freely living to the last.

After a long career as a highly successful experimentalist, Pasternak in his latest verse utilizes the results of his experiments for forging a firm but rich manner combining much traditional strictness with great and varied intensity. In his *Zhivago* poems, and to an even greater extent in his most recent volume, *Kogda Razgulyayetsa*, he for the most part adopts formally built stanzaic structures at times closely approaching the almost eighteenth-century regularity of Pushkin. But his trend is towards a more overwhelmingly dynamic, less obviously stylized total effect than that of the majority of Pushkin's poems. The stream of Pushkin's verse is nearly always limpid and transparent, with few stretches of clouded waters, even though it may become stormy. That of Pasternak is not. His appeal to the irrational elements of the mind is more emphatic. He is quite willing to sacrifice some harmony for intensity, some perfection for spontaneity, to leave a good deal in his poems obscure, to create tangles of imagery and wording that are not easily unravelled, provided there is in them that immediacy of imaginative and emotional impact (for the perceptive reader) which is one of the basic elements of his art. Pasternak may often be writing for "fit audience though few," but he clearly wants really to move that audience, not merely to present it with puzzles, however sophisticated, ingenious, refined, rarified and flattering to the susceptibilities of a somewhat self-styled intellectual élite. He does want to get his poetry across. In this respect he does not differ from the very greatest poets of the past.

This tendency towards turbulence, even turbidity for the sake of greater emotional force might seem to link Pasternak, e.g. with Gerard Manly Hopkins. But there is an essential difference. Hopkins frequently seems far more deliberate, more feverishly labored, often somewhat too plainly overdoing the vividness of his verbal texture, and somewhat lacking in that large Pasternakian generosity of mind which tend to waive anxious perfection of detail in order to achieve great over-all unity and flow. This generosity, this willingness to follow the flow, to yield to the kindling force of what perhaps may after all quite realistically be called inspiration is what makes Pasternak such an excellent translator of Shakespeare. He seems to me less successful with Keats, who too insistently demanded of himself and others that all rifts be loaded with gold. An excess of gold would seem too ornamental, heavy and ostentatious for the more freely moving art that Pasternak prefers.

Pasternak's openness of mind to all expressions, all experiences – a goal Keats aimed at but did not live long enough quite to achieve – is reflected in the Shakespearean vastness and variety of his vocabulary. All elements of everyday

language, including technical and technological terms as well as slang and dialect, seem to fit easily into his verse side by side with the more strictly poetical diction of the Romantic age and the Symbolists or with the solemn Church Slavonic of the Russian-Orthodox Bible. He has a full command both of the familiar and the sublime and knows how to embed even the seemingly low or vulgar in contexts dignifying and ennobling it. No difficulties of tone deter him, any more than difficulties of rhythmical accommodation. The Russian language abounds in forms of six or seven syllables or more. Since each word has only one strong accent, the secondary stresses being much weaker than in most Western languages, there would appear to be insuperable obstacles to the use of such recalcitrant polysyllables, except in very free meters of the kind that, e.g., Mayakovsky employed. Most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian poets avoided them. Pasternak does not seem to feel these difficulties. The strong over-all current of his rhythm carries everything along with it, the billowing surface of his verse being only brightened and enriched by these struggling swirls. This is a feature no translator could hope to reproduce with a comparable naturalness of effect, particularly as in English the longest words are mostly of Latin origin and generally either too highly technical or too markedly literary to fit into diction of predominantly Anglo-Saxon derivation without standing out very sharply. Russian, with its far greater lexical homogeneity, in employing even the most strikingly sesquipedalian terms runs less of a risk of becoming stiff and stilted.

The vividness of Pasternak's verse is greatly enhanced by the virtuosity of his phonetic orchestration, his 'instrumentovka', his management of sound, onomatopoeia, innumerable echoes, both at line end and within the line. Echoes, immediately perceptible or half-concealed – seldom very self-consciously hidden – sprinkle his poetry, much as they fill the verse of Hopkins or of the later sections of T. S. Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday". On the face of it completely effortless, even casual, they yet perform an essential function in the creation of atmosphere and tone – frequently a singing tone with many ripples and waves, but genuine *bel canto*, in places reminiscent of Rilke, whom Pasternak knew and admired and to whom he may owe something. They may occur in the most realistic passages, otherwise entirely colloquial but raised high above prose by their sound. Such echoes may completely fill a stanza or verse paragraph, possibly to be continued in the next stanza, with transitional elements leading up to a new echoing sequence; or the echoes of contiguous stanzas may be sharply contrasted. In this respect, too, no translation will do full justice to Pasternak's art. These striking arabesques of sound may occasionally verge on the fanciful, but they invariably, to my mind, add to the pulsating

vividness of the whole. Here and there one may feel that the poet has curtailed or slightly distorted his meaning for the sake of sound: his verse *must* sound.

Pasternak's mastery of rhyme is almost unequalled. In his special manner of using it he has no serious rivals. Here, too, he always steers clear of pedantry, freely opening his cornucopia. Boldly choosing the means serving his immediate purposes, he yet never neglects the need for music. His rhymes may be very approximate near-rhymes but their decisive phonetic elements always stand out in vivid relief, impressive as well as expressive. In this area also he has means at his disposal with which English is only very scantily provided. Since Russian suffixes are often stressed, and in many instances long, they can be used for disyllabic, trisyllabic, tetrasyllabic and even pentasyllabic rhymes, all of which types Pasternak makes use of to add to the richness of his sound effects and to produce those sinuous line-end rhythms which in English seldom occur in serious verse, largely because they tend to sound labored or savor too much of studied ingenuity. This attitude of writers of English verse is probably not fully justified, since it would seem that the potentialities even of only disyllabic – "feminine" – rhyme are largely unexplored. Robert Graves's total rejection of any but masculine rhymes as cheap jingle is a typical example of that increasing taste for stern dryness in verse – if seldom elsewhere, viz. Graves's own prose and his mythological theories – which appears to be dominating the now prevalent school of poetry. This is plainly not Pasternak's way. He is a poet of abundance in his manner as in his matter, but he puts his translators in a difficult position: his practice can be profitably imitated only up to a point. In no instance was I able to carry through an entire poem his sequence of dactylic rhymes, although I have tried to keep his feminine rhymes wherever feasible. The play of wit, the complete absence of pompous solemnity seemed to make it permissible to indulge even in occasional Gilbertianisms. In longer poems, e.g. "The Star of the Nativity" where there is a regular alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes, I tend to reserve the feminine rhymes for passages of special musical intensity, elsewhere introducing them only now and then at carefully spaced intervals in order to break the un-Pasternakian monotony of monosyllabic line endings.

The rhymes of the translations are more regular, phonetically more exact than in the originals, at least according to standard British pronunciation, which still remains more familiar to me than the more varied American usages. This may seem contrary to the present fashion of inexact rhymes, widely observable even in translations of such meticulously rhymed verse as that of Baudelaire, Valéry or Rilke. The reason for my approach lies in the difficulty of producing near-rhymes as striking and convincing as those of Pasternak. Near-rhymes in present Anglo-American practice frequently are

hardly rhymes in any phonetic sense. They have a way of becoming vague echoes, barely sufficient to indicate links between lines, to suggest some sort of stanzaic structure. They may organize the rhythm, but their quality of immediate expressiveness seems on the point of dwindling almost to nil. In the case of Pasternak the effect on the ear seemed too important to be disregarded: hence the choice of the unfashionable alternative of greater phonetic strictness.

Among the means used by Pasternak to ensure musical unity for his poem – especially in those with stanzas of varying form – his long rhyme sequences play an important part. The same rhyme, mostly a masculine one, may be carried through long passages as a series of ever-repeated echoes, varied by interwoven shorter sequences. Thus one stanza or paragraph is linked to the next, and possibly to one or two more, creating unity of musical tone. Here the structure of Russian helps Pasternak, since it abounds in identical stressed monosyllabic endings, often with a final vowel not followed by any consonant. In such instances, the classical rule for Russian rhyme, as for French, is that the identical vowels have to be preceded by identical, so-called ‘supporting’ consonants, producing ‘rich rhyme’. Pasternak uses the device of following up long series of such rich monosyllabic rhymes with other sequences ending in the same vowel but with a different supporting consonant thus prolonging the reverberation almost indefinitely. He does this with great effectiveness, e.g. in “Passiontide” and “The Star of the Nativity”. In this matter it seemed possible to imitate him only to a limited extent. Paragraphs often had to be linked in a more economical fashion. Inevitably, something of the ampleness of the originals thus got lost. Some slight compensation may have been provided by the greater semantic weight which English rhymes generally have, particularly if mere suffix rhymes are avoided.

Meter was another vexing problem. In his *Zhivago* poems Pasternak throughout uses syllabo-accentual rather than only accentual meters, precisely counting the number of syllables in each line, save for some effective variation in the rhyming positions, where a trisyllabic ending sometimes may rhyme with a tetrasyllabic one. The measures he uses are often in triple feet – anapaests, amphibrachs or dactyls – which are notoriously difficult to employ consistently in English without falling into metronomic sameness and severely restricting one’s available resources of expression. While I have kept the triple feet in most cases, I have resorted to some of the traditional English licenses, such as varying the number of unstressed syllable or omitting such syllables altogether, that is, mingling amphibrachic beginnings with anapaestic and dactylic ones. In some poems – notably “The Star of the Nativity”, “Indian Summer” and “Evil Days” – I have made the meter accentual, keeping the stressed but sometimes omitting the unstressed syllables, in the manner

reintroduced by Coleridge in "Christabel", with greater fullness of syllabism at focal points. In only one instance, "The Miracle", did I completely abandon the triple lilt. Here the decisive line, the line containing the central idea, had, in my opinion, to be translated literally, if at all: "No chudo yest' chudo, I chudo yest' bog": "But miracle is miracle, and miracle is God". In English this is an iambic fourteenner of the well-known ballad type. The rest of the poem had perforce to be built around this verse, that is, necessarily in iambics. By using the jog-trot of fourteenners throughout the poem, I felt I should have utterly ruined its tone, so I chose pentameters as the basic meter, interspersing a few Alexandrines at points of special intensity in order to prepare the reader's ear for the culminating length of the most important line, which comes shortly before the end.

Such were the stylistic and prosodical considerations and compromises guiding my procedures. They emerged as I went along. There is no theoretical panacea for translation, particularly for translation in verse that wants to be poetry. All one can do, it seems, is plunge into the work, soak oneself in the originals, understand them as fully and feel them as intensely as possible, and then try to write them again in another language in such a way as to reproduce as much of their characteristic features, their distinctive beauty, their individual force as one's personal resources in the language chosen for translation permit. "Beauty is audacious," says Pasternak, and some audacity on the part of the translator consequently seems indicated. Of course not foolhardiness. The translator sometimes may be unable to distinguish between the two. In that case others will soon show him the error of his ways. The method can be judged only by its results. Yet some comments on that method seemed necessary, if only because lately there has been much theoretical discussion of problems of translation, frequently leading to diametrically opposed but very categorical precepts for future workers in the field. I know I have disregarded much sage advice – *mea culpa*.