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ETERNITY'S HOSTAGE

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Representing Ephemerality:

Pasternak's "Гроза, моментальная навек"

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Any creative endeavor manifests perhaps above all the refusal to "go gentle into that good night." The artist may well "rage against the dying of the light," for his position is a difficult one: he senses acutely the inexorable passage of his own time-bound world of becoming from which he is vouchsafed only glimpses of an eternal realm of being, the cost of entry into which is death. The artist's capacity to endow with duration what would otherwise be lost to passage suggests a means to cheat death, and yet what the artist snatches from passage is left robbed of the evanescence from which its own particularity derives.

This dilemma, which lies at the heart of much theological, philosophical, and aesthetic inquiry, is thematized in Goethe's *Faust*. On the one hand, the prohibition against the damnable desire to arrest what must perforce be fleeting ("Verweile doch, du bist so schön") ensures the ceaseless striving that promises redemption ("Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen"). And yet it is precisely temporal passage that separates the mortal from the divine towards which that striving is directed. From within a temporally constrained world, the divine might be approximated, but not attained, and the evanescent can never be more than a semblance of the eternal: "Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis."

Faust's predicament can be seen as paradigmatic for all creative enterprise that is driven ultimately by the excruciating irreconcilability of transitory human life with the eternal toward which the mortal aspires. To be sure, the successful preservation of fleeting moments in art might be seen as a desirable victory over passage. The commonplace of *vita brevis, ars longa*, however, side-steps what has over the ages been the complex, alternately animating and de-

bilating tension between the transitory and the lasting. However successful the artist's capture of any given moment might be, the fact remains that, removed from that temporal flux whence its capacity for change derives, the moment is destined to lose both its vitality and its particularity. Thus, Lessing, writing of *Laocoon* warns:

Alle Erscheinungen, zu deren Wesen wir es nach unsern Begriffen rechnen, dass sie plötzlich ausbrechen und plötzlich verschwinden, dass sie das, was sie sind, nur einen Augenblick sein können; alle solche Erscheinungen, sie mögen angenehm oder schrecklich sein, erhalten durch die Verlängerung der Kunst ein so widernatürliches Ansehen, dass mit jeder wiederholten Erblickung der Eindruck schwächer wird und uns endlich vor dem ganzen Gegenstande eckelt oder graut. ("*Laocoon* oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie" (1766), Erster Teil, III)¹

[... since this single moment receives from art an unchanging duration, it should express nothing essentially transitory. All phenomena, whose nature it is suddenly to break out and as suddenly to disappear, which can remain as they are but for a moment; all such phenomena, whether agreeable or otherwise, acquire through the perpetuity conferred upon them by art such an unnatural appearance, that the impression they produce becomes weaker with every fresh observation, till the whole subject at last wearies or disgusts us.]²

Through the artist's representation, the transitory can be made to endure, but only by unconditional surrender of its meaning-generating context and at the expense of the potential vested in continual unfolding in time. As Lessing reminds us later in his essay, "Doch alle Körper existieren nicht allein in dem Raume, sondern auch in der Zeit. Sie dauern fort und können in jedem Augenblick ihrer Dauer anders erscheinen und in anderer Verbindung stehen." (Lessing, 5/2:116) ["All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations." Frothingham, 91.] Isolated from the fabric of the evanescent world from which its meaning derives, the captured moment remains neither here nor there—suspended somewhere between a *Verweilung* that threatens to leech it of its meaning and that inevitable *Vergehen* to which it is subject if not preserved.

This is the impasse the poet confronts. To acknowledge passage

is to admit the subject's uncapturability. Thus, for example, Keats ends his "Ode to a Nightingale" with the line: "Fled is that music— Do I wake or sleep?" Yet to arrest passage is to objectify, to lose both the context in which the moment signifies and its openness to change. Thus Keats's speaker contemplating the Grecian urn can only wonder at but not know what it preserves:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

And for all the exquisite possibility of the protracted moment represented on the urn—

For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,
For ever panting, and for ever young—

with the cessation of time this possibility can never find realization. The attempted preservation loses both the particularity of the moment and the possibility it opens, and it is this double loss that damns attempts to arrest passage.

Another way to endow a moment with lasting value is to elevate it, as philosophers and artists from Plato to the Symbolists have done, to the status of an epiphanic point of intersection between the transitory world of becoming and the eternal realm of being. Such transmutation of a fleeting moment into an aperture on eternity suggests an alternative to the impossible choice between either violating the on-goingness of the isolated moment through static representation or leaving that moment unrecorded and thus losing it to the passage of time.³ Indeed, as Bettina Kaibach persuasively documents in her study *Risse in der Zeit*,⁴ the Russian Symbolists—Pasternak's immediate literary predecessors—centered their metaphysical and aesthetic discourse specifically on such epiphanic moments. How these moments might best be prepared for, apprehended, and described became a central concern for the Symbolist artist who could be inspired or daunted by the imperative that his poetry embody the temporally unbounded realm to which these moments gain him access. This momentous responsibility underscored the vast divide between the momentary and the lasting that the poet sought to bridge and exacerbated anxieties attendant on doing so from

within a temporally limited world. Indeed, it was on this crucial problem of negotiating the transitory and the eternal that, as Kaibach persuasively argues, Symbolism ultimately ran aground.⁵

The failed search for a divine ideal that might be attained from within the confines of a transitory sensible world gave way to a celebration of the here-and-now that had been disparaged by the Symbolists. Acmeists turned loving attention to the tangible world. Futurists, no longer content to remain passive witnesses of streaming time, availed themselves of aeroplanes and automobiles to speed past an old world in dazzling realization of the metaphoric "мимо-летность" (literally past-flyingness) by means of which ephemerality is designated in Russian.

This brings us to Pasternak. Noting the frequency with which words relating to velocity appear in that poet's early writing about art (стремительность, стремглав, разбег, разгон, порывистый, захватывающий), Angela Livingstone summarizes: "The world is in fast movement and art is even faster—this seems to be his basic conception."⁶ This is indeed the case. Pasternak speaks of velocity already in his early essay "Черный бокал" (1916) in connection with the Futurist aesthetic. The potentially mystic connotations of the title of this essay are quickly dispelled as the "black goblet" is revealed to be not a transcendent symbol, but a sign displayed on packing crates to indicate fragile contents. Yet even as Pasternak situates himself outside the Symbolist aesthetic with this pointedly down-to-earth image, he also distinguishes his own notion of speed from that promoted by the Futurists. For Pasternak, it is the urgency of the creative enterprise itself and not the technological advances of his age that demand the swiftness and immediacy of the artist's response to his surrounding world. The velocity in terms of which Pasternak describes the creative process has less to do with technologically enabled speed than with *мимолетность* itself.

Pasternak ends the penultimate section of "Черный бокал" with what sounds like a programmatic statement that is rooted in Symbolist notions of apprehending the eternal through an epiphanic moment and couched in Futurist vocabulary: "Вечность, быть может, — опаснейший из мятежников. Ее действия порывисты, настойчивы, молниеносны."⁷ Here Pasternak introduces a crucial difference into how the eternal and the transitory are conventionally

framed by showing the eternal engaged in lightning-quick acts of rebellion that foster swift, welcome change in the poet's world. Eternity, in other words, is construed not as a changeless state of being, but rather as a dynamic force that is responsible for precipitating the becoming that characterizes the world of passage.

Already in "Черный бокал," Pasternak senses that for all their hyperbolized enactments of breaking with tradition, the Futurists contribute nothing essentially new to that perennial question that stymied the Symbolists of how the fleeting and the eternal are to be negotiated. He writes: "Преобразование временного в вечное при посредстве лимитационного мгновения—вот истинный смысл футуристических аббревиатур" (4:357). In their commentary to this passage, V. M. Borisov and E. B. Pasternak note that "преобразование временного в вечное <...> как основная задача искусства и его оправдание составляет центральное положение эстетики Пастернака" (4:836). The fleeting and the eternal are indeed crucial to Pasternak's aesthetics (as they are also to his poetics and metaphysics), yet Pasternak significantly complicates the commonplace of the artist's attempts to translate the impermanent into the lasting, which, after all, scarcely differs from what his poetic predecessors had been about.⁸ Pasternak's formulaic summary suggests that the Futurists' position fails to open new creative territory. Yet such new territory could be gained if ephemerality itself were valued rather than impressed into the service of the eternal. This path, indicated already by Impressionist painters and soon to become central to modernist thinking about art, was one suggested also by a poet Pasternak held in great esteem as a model and teacher—Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke, who emphatically praised ephemeral phenomena *because* they would pass, sought to convey their fleetingness rather than monumentalize them in his verse. Following Rilke, Pasternak—in his own distinct way—continued to seek poetic means to interrelate the fleeting and the lasting, the ceaselessly changing and the enduring.

The position Pasternak assumes vis-à-vis the temporal constructs of passage and eternity reflect a clear understanding of the Symbolist crisis. Rather than simply discount his predecessors' anguished efforts to negotiate the momentary and the enduring, Pasternak shifts his focus of attention to the disparity between the magnitude

of the creative imperative and the brief time allotted for the poet's response to it. To confront this disparity, he turns specifically to the wherewithal of poetry. Thus, for example, in "Замечания к переводам Шекспира" he writes:

Метафоризм — естественное следствие недолговечности человека и надолго задуманной огромности его задач. При этом несоответствии он вынужден смотреть на вещи по-орлиному зорко и объясняться мгновенными и сразу понятными озарениями. Это и есть поэзия. Метафоризм — стенография большой личности, скоропись ее духа (4:414).

Distinctly at odds with the ineffable transcendental moments of the Symbolists, the "instantaneously comprehensible illuminations" of which Pasternak speaks here reflect the poet's pressing need to convey in maximally condensed form his own revelations. In this way of thinking, ephemerality is not resisted, but is instead engaged as essential to the poetic enterprise and thus becomes energizing rather than anxiety-producing. The brevity of the poet's life stands in analogical relation to the brevity of the lyric poem. In his attempts to maximize—via metaphor—what might be accomplished in the brief spans of life and text, metaphysics and poetics coincide.

Turning now to an intense lyrical manifestation of this far-reaching aesthetic and philosophical concern, Pasternak's "Гроза, моментальная навек" from the "Елене" section of *Сестра моя — жизнь*, we can observe how this concern informs the specifics of the poem.

Гроза, моментальная навек

А затем прощалось лето
С полустанком. Снявши шапку,
Сто слепящих фотографий
Ночью снял на память гром.

Меркла кисть сирени. В это
Время он, нарвав охапку
Молний, с поля ими графил
Озарить управский дом.

И когда по кровле зданья
 Раслилась волна злорадства
 И, как уголь по рисунку,
 Грянул ливень всем плетнем,
 Стал мигать обвал сознания:
 Вот, казалось, озарятся
 Даже те углы рассудка,
 Где теперь светло, как днем! (1:165)

The perennial question of how passage and eternity might be reconciled is signaled already in the title of the poem. “Моментальная” describes the swift onset and brief duration characteristic of thunderstorms. “Навек” suggests the capture of this transient meteorological phenomenon in the poem. At the same time, however, the oxymoronic “моментальная навек” startles us out of the complacency with which we accept that ephemeral events be made to endure in poetic form and leads us to ask whether “моментальная навек” presupposes the sort of epiphanic moment of intersection between the fleeting and the eternal privileged by Symbolists. This expectation sensitizes us to Pasternak’s significant departure from his predecessors’ constructs. The tension between “моментальная” and “навек” provides the impetus for the lyric about to unfold. In the atmosphere of this tension, the adjective “монументальная” can be sensed in “моментальная,” but this acoustic suggestion underscores the fact that monumentality is precisely what Pasternak’s poem is not about.

The poem opens with leave-taking. Indeed, an earlier title for this lyric — “Прощальная гроза” — linked the fleetingness of the storm with the fleetingness of the human situation that demands parting. This title promised a poetic documentation of a storm that coincided with or was, perhaps, a metaphor for an emotionally charged farewell. It was thus insufficient to alert the reader to what are, as we will see, the more complex temporal dynamics of the poem.⁹

Leave-taking is fraught with temporal anxiety and emotional distress. The sense of impending separation heightens awareness of the ever-diminishing span of time separating those who are about to part from the moment of the parting itself and from the loss subsequent to it. (In this situation it is not difficult to recognize an ana-

logue to life itself as it streams toward the ultimate departure effected in death.) In such densely anticipatory conditions, the present is subsumed by the overwhelming need to carry over into the future that which is felt to be on the verge of loss. This creates a situation Katherine Thiernan O’Connor describes as “a sense of the transformation of the present moment, the *instantaneous* into the *permanent* photo or picture caught by the mind’s eye. The present is in the process, as it were, of becoming a memory.”¹⁰ Using this formulation as a point of departure, we can go on to explore the complexity Pasternak introduces into the commonplace of art preserving evanescent phenomena, for in this lyric the poet is less concerned with capturing a moment than with the oxymoronic desire to preserve its fleetingness. Indeed, Pasternak’s efforts to redraw the relationship between the ephemeral and the lasting hinge to significant measure on giving evanescence its due. It is on this particular aspect that my discussion of this virtually inexhaustible poem will focus.

In “Гроза, моментальная навек” we observe Pasternak take into the world of the lyric the age-old quest to reconcile the fleeting and the eternal. Rather than serve as a mystically construed conduit to another realm, the poem becomes itself the space wherein the transitory and the lasting are comprised. The lyric is energized by the poet’s disconcerting refusal to distinguish between temporalities that are conventionally held to be antithetical. As we will see, concerted vacillations between sequence and simultaneity destabilize the categories of passage and duration and, by analogy, the distinction between the linear temporality of the transitory world and the synchronicity of the everlasting.

The “А затем...” with which the poem opens suggests that it continues a sequence begun earlier, and this indication of its successive-ness off-sets the discreteness of the lyric itself. The image of a sudden flash of light has served for centuries as the metaphoric indicator or a privileged moment through which the eternal reveals itself to the world of mortals. In Pasternak’s lyric, however, the flashes of lightning draw attention to the sensible world. Most immediately, the metaphoric conjunction of flashes of lightning and the flash gun of a photographer suggests the possible preservation of the momentary. Yet Pasternak complicates the situation in an

interesting way. The hyperbolic hundred flashes insist on sequence—the flashes necessarily following one another in swift succession. At the same time, however, Pasternak's application of the epithet "blinding" to the photographs rather than to the flashes conflates the process of taking pictures with the photographs that result from that process, creating thereby a simultaneity of what is normally seen in terms of cause and effect. As causality is thus superseded, becoming and being are indistinguishably conflated.¹¹

Attendant on the notion of translating the ephemeral into the lasting is, as I have noted, the isolation of a moment that is privileged by this isolation, and yet also deprived of its contextual moorings and thus also its distinctiveness. The selection of the moment to be thus singled out is fraught with anxiety.¹² In "Гроза, моментальная навек" the randomness entailed in the furiously sequential hundred flashes of light acts in concert with the collapsing of cause and effect to avoid these pitfalls attendant on isolating a particular moment. We can add here that the two successive sentences that comprise the opening stanza describe simultaneous action and thus participate in the poem's insistent interrelation of simultaneity and sequence.

The second stanza opens with: "Меркла кисть сирени," an image reminiscent of the storm-scorched lilac of the opening line of "Наша гроза," an earlier lyric of *Сестра моя — жизнь*: "Гроза, как жрец, сожгла сирень" (I:138). In the poem under discussion, the cluster may have been broken from the bush by the storm or was perhaps plucked for a farewell bouquet from which it has dropped. Alternately, the cluster may be isolated by flashes of lightning that illuminate only a part of the bush on which it grows. The imperfective verb "меркла" indicates a gradual waning of brilliance and, in its figurative meaning, suggests the waning of power or significance. In Pasternak's lyric this waning signifies in a variety of possible temporal constructs. The fading lilac signals the end of summer to which the storm bids farewell, and yet also suggests its fading into darkness in between the flashes of lightning by which it is sporadically illuminated. Following as it does the photography metaphor, it reminds us that although the lilac can be captured on film, the process of its fading cannot. If we construe the lilac as a photographed image (it is, after all, one of the few concrete visual

images in the poem), its waning might be seen as the consequence of its being fixed on a snapshot that arrests change and, as Lessing would have it, leeches it of its vitality.

Following this deceptively simple statement about the fading lilac is the enjambed "В это/Время..."¹³ that insists on action simultaneous with the fading. Thus, to summarize what transpires: While the branch of lilac is gradually fading, a "he" whose antecedent is not immediately apparent, but turns out to be the thunder of the preceding stanza, having gathered an armful—not of lilac, as the reader might expect, but of lightning bolts—uses them in his attempts to illuminate an administrative building. The wealth of possibility this stanza creates is virtually inexhaustible, but if we remain focused on the temporal issue I have raised, we can see that, once again, simultaneity is presented in conjunction with sequential action while cause and effect are disrupted—now by a thunder that hurls lightning bolts. We can add that the просторечное "графил," an imperfect rhyme for the "фотографий" of the preceding stanza, hints at the acoustically similar "графарет." Like the hint of "монументальность" we perceive in the title of the poem, this acoustic suggestion also leaves us with a sensation of something that the lyric moves beyond—in this instance mere reproduction.

The third stanza of the poem accelerates perceptibly—in part because it is the first half of the sentence which the final stanza completes, and in part because of the enumeration suggested by the "and" that opens its first and third lines. The sudden onset of rain is described with a perplexing metaphor: "И когда по кровле здания Разлилась волна злорадства" that is reminiscent of the lyric "Июльская гроза" from *Поверх барьеров* where we find not only the images of an illuminating thunder storm and a wattle fence, but a similar melding of metaphor and personification:

Стоит на мертвой точке час
 Не оттого ль, что он намечен,
 Что желчь моя не разлилась,
 Что у меня на месте печень?

The static equilibrium ("мертвая точка") described in the earlier lyric is upset by the "волна злорадства" that spills together with the rain over the roof in "Гроза, моментальная навек." Here the

situation is dynamic. The “and when” with which the stanza begins sets the scene for what *then* happens in the concluding stanza. The “and” with which line three begins, however, indicates simultaneous rather than successive action. The onset of the rain itself is described in terms that again vacillate between the sequential and the synchronous. Thus, in the fourth line the rain is described as coming down all at once, the verb “грязнул” (frequently used to describe a sudden peal of thunder) emphasizing the suddenness and intensity of the downpour. “Всем плетнем” can be read as a description of the rain crashing down along the entire fence and as a metaphor comparing the lashing rain to a fence whose woven wattles closely resemble the cross-hatchings of a charcoal drawing. Yet the simile in which this line participates: “И, как уголь по рисунку, Грязнул ливень всем плетнем” compares the rain that comes down all at once to what are of necessity the sequential charcoal strokes that fall one after another onto a piece of paper when the scene is sketched. This suggested picture-in-the-making contrasts with the all-at-once-ness of both the rainfall and of a “моментальная фотография” of it.¹⁴ At the same time, however, it leads us to recognize that once the process of sketching is completed, the strokes lie in simultaneity on the paper, and although the downpour itself may find adequate representation, its onset is left out of the finished drawing which, like the photograph, ultimately succeeds in capturing the rain but not its precipitousness.

In the fourth and final stanza of the poem we encounter—presumably—what happens after the “and when” with which stanza three opened. The first line presents the beginning of a series of blinks that are metonymically related to the sequential flashes of lightening seen earlier in the poem: “Стал мигать обвал сознания.” Here we find sequence and simultaneity conjoined in the word “обвал” which designates both a process—an avalanche in progress, and its consequences—the rubble that results from the collapse. The onset of blinking creates a sense of anticipation and hints at a possible causal relation (“Стал мигать” and “Вот, казалось, озарятся”). As the promise of illumination is intensified in the midst of this glimmering, the word “плетнем” that ends the preceding stanza and rhymes with the exclamatory ending of the poem (“светло, как днем!”) suggests an expression that indicates intentional ob-

fuscation: “навести тень на плетень.” It is on such intentional obfuscation that the “blinking avalanche of consciousness” is trained.¹⁵ This is a consciousness that does not simply retrieve “snapshots” taken by the storm, but rather *reenacts* in its own space what the storm *does*. The attempts to illuminate (“озарить”) the administrative building with flashes of lightning in stanza two are echoed here in stanza four in anticipation of the figurative illumination of even those parts of the intellect that are already “bright as day”:

Вот, казалось, озарятся
Даже те углы рассудка,
Где теперь светло, как днем! (1:165)

The “углы рассудка” so illuminated are metonymically linked to the “управский дом” of stanza two onto which the rain crashes in stanza three. Following on the avalanche of blinking consciousness is a re-formed space of reason newly brightened not by retained images of the storm, but by the myriad interconnections that storm enables both within this lyric itself and with other lyrical and worldly experiences beyond it.

At issue here are not the hundreds of random “photographed” images, but rather the poet’s interactive experience with the storm and the energy it generates. Pasternak, who pointedly neglects to supply static images in this poem, has left the metaphor of photography undeveloped in favor of considering how fleeting moments might be conveyed rather than captured.¹⁶ Indeed, the very notion of capturability, as we have seen, is subverted by the poem’s disruptions of causality, by its vacillations between the sequential and the simultaneous, and, by its complex configurations that, far from fixing any particular image, serve as ever new points of departure for still further interconnections. There are no stills in “Гроза, моментальная навек,” which makes patently clear that more would be lost than gained by isolating discrete images of this complex storm on film.

In any event, no actual photographs can result from the metaphoric picture-taking in this lyric, and “на память” of the opening stanza signals the imprint of the evening in question not on film but on memory. Far from suggesting similarity, the photographic metaphor underscores the radical difference between consigning some-

thing to memory and consigning it to photographic film. Indeed, it is this difference that alerts us to the highly satisfying possibility offered by the mother of muses to foster a reconciliation of the ephemeral and the lasting. A photograph can stimulate recollection, but like any other such mnemonic—be it a madeleine or the smell of rotting apples—cannot itself be equated with memory. Associative and dynamic, memory both engages and is engaged by the imagination and, like the poem we have been considering, remains always in motion. There is no such thing as “a memory” in the sense of an image fixed with immutable photographic precision. Memory enables not the arrest of a fleeting moment (a metaphor realized by the technology of photography) but rather a potential for duration in which what is preserved remains in flux—affected both by forgetting and by the imagination and colored by preceding and subsequent events, by what triggers the recollection, by the various contexts in which the recollection takes place, and by the ever-new configurations into in which the recollection is drawn.

In a discussion of Pasternak’s aesthetics in light of classical *ars memoriae*, Erika Greber perceptively observes that

[i]n Pasternak, as in classical mnemotechnics, an almost literal illumination is required to light up the *imagines* so that they become recognizable. However, for Pasternak, the illumination does not result from the system of order, but from chance intuition.¹⁷

Pasternak, in other words, subverts classical attempts to direct memory, preferring to give it free reign so that it can guide him to chance discoveries. In “Гроза, моментальная навек” we find an emphasis on randomness as memory is supplied not with images selected by the poet who experiences the storm, but with images that are randomly illuminated by the storm he experiences. This chance illumination becomes a metaphor of memory—both in the sense of what is retained and what is recalled—in which ephemerality remains inviolate. It is the poet’s receptivity to such “illumination” that defines his creative capacity and enables him to convey the fleetingness of what he sets down.

In the lyric under discussion Pasternak recreates a potential like that vested in memory. In “Гроза, моментальная навек” he provides not stored replicas of what transpired during the storm but

rather an environment in which the possibility for ever new configurations of what has been retained remains in full effect. The carefully crafted temporal indeterminacy of the lyric precludes both the stasis attendant on capture and the erosion of particularity attendant on reproducibility. As in memory, so too in this poem, the potential for duration combines exhilaratingly with evanescence. (We can observe parenthetically that such “having it both ways” is in the very nature of the lyric poem, whose brief text exists in a lasting form and yet is with each reading drawn into the fluid process of becoming.)

Beyond energizing “Гроза, моментальная навек,” the coexistence of temporal constructs conventionally regarded as antonymous has far-reaching metaphysical implications. To make the fleeting endure without arresting its capacity for continued unfolding is to interrelate change and permanence, becoming and being, and thus to obviate the conventional opposition of life and death. The suggestive points of intersection between “Гроза, моментальная навек” and Pasternak’s later translation (1929) of Rilke’s requiem “Für Graf von Kalckreuth” (1908) can be no mere accident. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to develop the connection, it is well worth noting here that Pasternak introduces words that play a prominent role in “Гроза, моментальная навек” (e.g. миг, молнии, охалка, and озарение) into his translation of the Rilke text, where they stand as less than exact renderings of the original. Especially intriguing is Pasternak’s translation of Rilke’s “wenn dieser Ruck ein Blitzlicht in ihr Hirn wirft” as

< . . . > в миг, когда отдача
забрасывает молнии в их мозг (2:341)

For we observe here that Pasternak renders as “молнии” the word “Blitzlicht,” which means not lightning, but a photographer’s flash. The affinity Pasternak’s translation suggests between his lyric and the requiem he translates is rooted in Rilke’s own creative efforts to interrelate rather than oppose the transitory and the lasting.¹⁸

By way of conclusion we can now turn to a metaphor for lyric poetry that, its apparent simplicity notwithstanding, encapsulates the reconciliation of becoming and being, of the sequential and the simultaneous, and of the ephemeral and the lasting that has been at

the forefront of this discussion. Not coincidentally, this metaphor arises in a letter Marina Tsvetaeva wrote to Pasternak in February of 1923, in response to the poems of *Сестра моя — жизнь*. Tsvetaeva's wonder at the inexhaustibility of Pasternak's creative gift leads her to a singular definition of lyric verse:

Лирические стихи (то, что называют)—отдельные мгновения одного движения: движение в прерывности. Помните в детстве вертящиеся калейдоскопы? Или у Вас такого не было? Тот же жест но чуть продвинутый: скажем — рука. Вправо, чуть правей, еще чуть и т.д. Когда вертишь — двигается. Лирика — это линия пунктиром, издали — целая, черная, а взглядишь: сплошь прерывности между [пропуск] точками — безвоздушное пространство: смерть. И Вы от стиха до стиха умираете. (Оттого “последность” — каждого стиха!)¹⁹

Accomplished by Tsvetaeva's kaleidoscope²⁰ metaphor is a compelling synthesis of the wholeness of eternal being and the ceaseless change of the transitory world. In this image becoming is not presented along the continuum of an arrow of time that leads inexorably to a border crossing into other worldly timelessness. It is seen, rather, within the successive simultaneities of the endless configurations enabled by the poet's hand. The wholeness of the kaleidoscope—this self-contained realm in which becoming and being coexist—depends, moreover, not on the dissolution of the particularity of its constituent parts, but rather on the ceaseless reconfigurations of these discrete units. The role allowed chance in their incessant reordering obviates causality and teleology, thereby maximizing openness to possibility and to multiplicity of meaning. In light of this metaphor we can more fully appreciate both Pasternak's own insistence on the interchangeability of specific details (“взаимозаменяемость подробностей”) and Tynianov's trenchant observation about the poet for whom: “случайность оказывается более сильной связью, чем самая тесная логическая связь.”²¹ Important, too, is that it is precisely in terms of such dynamic reconfiguration that memory, metaphor, and metonymy are best described.

The kaleidoscope metaphor that is a tribute to Pasternak is also a tribute to Tsvetaeva's poetic acuity, for in the lyrics of *Сестра моя — жизнь* in general and in “Гроза, моментальная навек” in particular, the focus of creative attention is emphatically shifted

from figuration to configuration. It is to this end that the photographic metaphor of “Гроза, моментальная навек” is absorbed into a dynamic that goes beyond the mere arrest and reproduction of a moment to achieve the interanimation of momentariness and duration signaled by the “моментальность навек” of its title. In effecting such interanimation, the poet escapes the Symbolist impasse by overriding the opposition of the ephemeral and the lasting and—by extension—of life and death.

Notes

¹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. “Laocoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie,” in *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990), Band 5/2, SS. 32–33. I am grateful to Gerda Panofsky for alerting me to this passage in the course of our discussion of representations of ephemerality in the fine arts.

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, tr. Ellen Frothingham (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), p. 18.

³ We might speculate that Bernini's enduring marble representation of the ecstasy of St. Theresa might be acceptable to Lessing because, although this sculpture captures a fleeting moment, the significance of this moment derives from the apprehension of the eternal divine it vouchsafes and not from the passing moment itself.

⁴ Bettina Kaibach. *Risse in der Zeit: Zu Bedeutung des Augenblicks im Werk von Vladimir Solov'ev und Aleksandr Blok* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002).

⁵ *Risse in der Zeit*. Relegating the ephemeral and the lasting to two separate realms allowed the Symbolists only the insufficient choice, as Kaibach summarizes with formulaic elegance, between the “Verewigung des Flüchtigen” or “Verzeitlichung des Ewigen” [The “eternalization of the ephemeral” or the “temporalization of the eternal”], p. 102.

⁶ Angela Livingstone, “Introduction,” in *Pasternak on Art and Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 2.

⁷ Борис Пастернак, “Черный бокал,” *Собрание сочинений в пяти томах* (Москва: Художественная литература, 1991). Vol. 4, p. 456. All citations of Pasternak's works will be from this edition. Hereafter the volume and page numbers will be given after the quoted material.

⁸ Indeed, it would seem that Pasternak's subsequent reference to “платоно-шопенгауэровские идеи” indicates those two philosophers' struggles with the same problem and their own emphasis on the intersection of the transitory and the lasting in epiphanic moments.

⁹ Another, slightly different version of the title was “Гроза, моментальная навеки.”

¹⁰ O’Connor, p. 151.

¹¹ We can observe here that the storm, which, as E. Pasternak documents, raged on the night before the departure of Pasternak’s beloved from Romanovka, is extended beyond meteorological fact to become a metaphoric representation of the poet’s own emotional state. E. Пастернак. *Борис Пастернак. Материалы для биографии* (Москва: Советский писатель, 1989), стр. 305.

¹² Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that Faust is threatened with damnation not simply for his desire to arrest a moment, but for his presumptuous desire to seize for himself the divine prerogative to determine which moment should be thus prolonged rather than wait for the epiphanic moment to be granted him.

¹³ Note here that the enjambment places exceptional weight on the word “time,” which is, moreover capitalized because of its placement in the line.

¹⁴ The designation “моментальная фотография” distinguished newer photographic technology that made it possible to capture an image instantaneously from earlier methods that demanded prolonged exposure for an image to be preserved. I am grateful to Alexander Dolinin for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁵ Here we are reminded of Marina Tsvetaeva’s statement that lyric poetry conceals the obvious and reveals what is hidden.

¹⁶ In one manuscript of the poem Pasternak includes two additional stanzas that refer overtly to the “greedy eye of a Kodak” and include references to the chemicals used in the process of developing film. Pasternak, however, chose to leave specifically these stanzas out of the published versions of this poem. See the commentary in *Собрание сочинений*, т. 1, стр. 667.

¹⁷ Erika Greber, “The Art of Memory in Boris Pasternak’s Aesthetics,” *Russian Literature*, XLII (1997), pp. 33–34.

¹⁸ Here we can observe that in *Новогоднее*, her requiem for Rilke, Marina Tsvetaeva focuses expressly on the interdependency of the ephemeral and the eternal that much of Rilke’s poetry upholds.

¹⁹ Марина Цветаева. *Неизданные письма* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1972), стр. 278–279.

²⁰ Greek: *kalos*—beautiful + *eidos*—form.

²¹ Юрий Тынянов, “Архаисты и новаторы.” *Поэтика. История литературы. Кино* (Москва: Наука, 1977), стр. 185.

Relativity of Time, Space, and Language in Early Pasternak

(Revisiting “Степь”)

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Various aspects of Pasternak’s “Степь” have been thoroughly scrutinized, in particular its allusions to the Old Testament¹ and its place in the overall narrative structure of *My Sister—Life*.² One vital stylistic trait of “The Steppe,” however, deserves special attention since it is one of the most central and identifying features of Pasternak’s poetic style, and is omnipresent in this poem, in *My Sister—Life*, and in much of Pasternak’s early poetry. This trait is what Pasternak, alluding to Albert Einstein, once called “a general principle of poetic relativity.”³ We must be careful in avoiding anachronism—although Einstein first published it in 1905, we know that Pasternak came in contact with the theory of relativity much later and certainly after this poem has been written and after the period that one usually denotes as early Pasternak. Moreover, he later admitted to lacking the mathematical background required to understand Einstein’s theory.⁴ We will therefore not use Einstein’s theory to understand why Pasternak used the term *relativity* to describe his literary approach. Instead, we will use the “The Steppe” to formulate the poet’s views on the perception of time, space, and language.

Степь

Как были те выходы в тишь хороши!
Безбрежная степь, как марина.
Вздыхает ковыль, шуршат мураши,
И плавает плач комариный.

Стога с облаками построились в цепь
И гаснут, вулкан на вулкане.
Примолкла и взмокла безбрежная степь,
Колблет, относит, толкает.