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THE EARLY PASTERNAK'S MYTHOPOETIC IMAGES¹

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Abstract

The article discusses some aspects of the early Pasternak's poetry, in particular of two poems, 'The Urals for the First Time' and 'Mirror'. The author discusses the device of metonymy, as well as images in these poems that can be seen as operating as the device of "making strange", as formulated by Viktor Shklovskii. Here the motif of the railroad is especially important. Other motifs can be considered as rooted in ancient mythology, in particular in ancient Oriental (Hittite) poetry. Jakobson's discussion of the statue coming alive is also relevant in this context.

Keywords: *Pasternak; 'Doktor Zhivago'; Myth; Ancient Oriental Poetry*

Pasternak's imagery is characterized by an almost paradoxical combination of the influences of the European masters of what he called recent "urban mysticism" (that he himself had found in his predecessors-Symbolists Rilke, Verhaeren and Blok) and of some archaic devices used also in the oldest known examples of poetry. As it had been discovered by Roman Jakobson (1979), whose conclusions were supported by a number of scholars (see Ivanov 2015: 508-512, 583-593), the main principle of Pasternak's style was metonymy. He concentrated on the contiguous association between the things to be described. From the point of view of historical typology this metonymic orientation may be compared to the feature of the primitive mind called "participation" by Lévy-Bruhl (Mousalimas 1990). The term "bricolage",

introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1962) refers to the same process of connecting quite different objects. Vygotskij spoke of a “complex” (opposed to the later logical thinking) in connection to such a type of irrational chains of topics in early children’s development as well as in the primitive mentality (Ivanov 2014). Pasternak’s archaic thinking at the same time may be seen as a sign of childish imagery that was characteristic of his poems. In them Pasternak speaks about the mighty “god of details”. Such gods existed in the early period of the history of religion and arts and in the initial part of a gifted child’s development: the phylogenetic point of view coincides with an ontogenetic one. But in Pasternak’s case that was not only a return to the most archaic device. It was also similar to the principle of “close-up” that became important in modern cinema. Wider typological comparisons to some specimens of visual art were suggested by the great cinema director (and Pasternak’s colleague in LEF – The Left Front of the Arts) Sergej Ėjzenštejn in his study of the archaic principles revived in the language of cinema.²

As Pasternak tried to find some general features common to the poetry of his time he came to the conclusion that the influence of the railroads had been decisive. It had made possible the juxtaposition and enumeration of different objects as they were seen from the window of a train. This idea is ascribed to Doktor Živago in Pasternak’s novel. In posthumous papers of the hero of this book there was a remark:

Беспорядочное перечисление вещей и понятий с виду несовместимых и поставленных рядом как бы произвольно, у символистов Блока, Верхарна и Уитмана, совсем не стилистическая прихоть. Это новый строй впечатлений, подмеченный в жизни и списанный с природы. Так же, как прогоняют они ряды образов по своим строчкам, плывет сама и гонит мимо нас свои толпы, кареты и экипажи деловая городская улица конца девятнадцатого века, а потом, в начале последующего столетия, вагоны своих городских, электрических и подземных железных дорог.
(Pasternak 1989: 365-366, chapter 11 of part 15 “Epilogue”)

In Max Hayward and Manya Harari’s translation: “The seemingly incongruous and arbitrary jumble of things and ideas in the work of the Symbolists (Blok, Verhaeren, Whitman) is not a stylistic caprice. This is a new order of impressions, taken directly from life. Just as they hurry their succession of images through the lines of their poems, so the street in a busy town hurries past us, with its crowds and its broughams and carriages at the end of the last century, or its streetcars and subways at the beginning of ours” (Hayward and Harari 1958).

I have heard a similar remark of Pasternak in one of our discussions of modern poets in the late 1950s (see my memoirs in Ivanov 2015: 93). Some of his best early poems may be understood as illustrations of the same idea

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