



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Kevin M.F. Platt, Konstantin Polivanov

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TEMPORALITY**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM
WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES

WP BRP 14/LS/2016

Kevin M.F. Platt¹, Konstantin Polivanov²

PASTERNAK'S 'MOZHET STAT'SIA TAK, MOZHET INACHE' AND AVANT-GARDE TEMPORALITY³

The relationship between the individual and historical processes was one of Boris Pasternak's persistent and central concerns, from his earliest lyrics, to his experiments with long-form poems and prose at mid-career, to his late masterwork, the novel *Doktor Zhivago* (Doctor Zhivago). Pasternak's oeuvre poses the questions of what the lyric poet can say about history, and how to say it. Among his earliest, most complex and perhaps least critically understood attempts to answer these questions is the 1920-23 poetic cycle "Bolezn" ("Illness"). In particular, the third poem of this cycle, "Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache" ("It can happen like that, or otherwise"), is among Pasternak's most dense and enigmatic works. To our mind, it also contains the central keys to reading the cycle "Bolezn" and to Pasternak's earliest attempts to make lyric sense of historical experience. The present article is an attempt to read this poem, the cycle that contains it, and through this, the counterintuitive potential of the lyric mode as an instrument for historical thought. Drawing on an examination of the construction of the poem and its web of allusions to Russian and world literature, as well as to the contexts of Pasternak's biography, as well as recent work on lyric and avant-garde temporality, the article describes "Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache" as an evocation of the complex fabric of temporal linkages binding Russian culture together at a moment when the temporal sequence itself had been upended in what Pasternak envisioned as a "purga" ("blizzard") of revolutionary transformation.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Boris Pasternak, Russian poetry, Russian History, Russian Revolution

¹ University of Pennsylvania. Professor in the Humanities Chair, Program in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory E-mail: kmfplatt@sas.upenn.edu

² National Research University Higher School of Economics. Faculty of the Humanities. Assistant professor; E-mail: kpolivanov@hse.ru

³ The article was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2015- 2016 (grant № 15-01-0098) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

Introduction

The relationship between the individual and historical processes was one of Boris Pasternak's persistent and central concerns, from his earliest lyrics, to his experiments with long-form poems and prose at mid-career, to his late masterwork, the novel *Doktor Zhivago* (*Doctor Zhivago*). Perhaps in a reflection of this concern, Pasternak is, as other commentators have remarked in the past, one of the most striking examples of the rather sparse category of “renowned poet who becomes a renowned novelist” (comparable, in this, to Thomas Hardy).

The problem of history was undoubtedly introduced among Pasternak's concerns by history itself—in the form of the October Revolution, which the poet, like other members of the Russian avant-garde, experienced as twinned, radical ruptures in both the political life and the aesthetic order near the inception of his own creative biography. Persistently over the course of his career from 1917 onwards, yet in many and varied ways, Pasternak's oeuvre poses the question of what the lyric poet can say about history. Among his earliest, most complex and perhaps least critically understood attempts to answer this question is the 1920-23 poetic cycle “Bolezn” (“Sickness”). The third poem of this cycle, “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...,” (“It can happen like that, or otherwise...”) is among Pasternak's most dense and mysterious lyric poems. To our mind, it also contains the central keys to interpretation of the cycle “Bolezn'.” The present article is an attempt to read this poem, the cycle that contains it, and through this, the counterintuitive potential of the lyric mode as an instrument for historical thought.

Jonathan Culler has recently proposed that modern theories of lyric commonly miss what is most important about the lyric, in part as a result of a tendency to theorize the lyric mode through other genres, such as drama or the novel. Fixated on the Aristotelian conception of mimesis, modern literary theory has described the lyric as a mode of representation of subjective experience or of the speech of a lyric persona, in something akin to a dramatic monologue. In prominent modern accounts, the lyric has been theorized in the negative—as deficient in comparison to other genres—most famously by Mikhail Bakhtin, who contrasted lyric “monologism” with the novel's capacity for polyphony (Culler, 1-3). However, as Culler explains, such an account “deflects attention from what is most singular, most mind-blowing even” about the lyric. Culler calls us to think the lyric otherwise:

Possibilities for an alternative model that treats lyric as fundamentally nonmimetic, nonfictional, a distinctive linguistic event, can be drawn from classical conceptions of lyric as encomiastic or epideictic discourse—discourse of praise or of blame, articulating values, not a species of fiction. Lyric, I conclude, involves a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements. (Culler, 7).

Culler calls us to read the lyric not as a description of a character in a novel or a play, but as a means for the ritualistic articulation and invocation of shared worlds of meaning. In what follows, we will investigate “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...,” as just such an articulation of the world of Russia in the years of the revolution—as a ritual, calling a new world into being.

Resistance to a “novelistic” conception of the lyric as a representation of a fictional character in a larger universe is crucial to comprehension of Pasternak's work on history in this poem, and, we propose, in his larger literary project. History, since the Renaissance at least, is commonly conceived in terms of narrative, and since the early nineteenth century historical and

novelistic narratives have been locked in a fertile exchange. What, then, might a “lyric history” look like and how might it configure time in distinction from narrative history—from history as a novel? Susan Buck-Morss has written eloquently of the distinctions between, on the one hand, the intuition of temporality relevant to the avant-garde, and on the other, that which was characteristic of the Russian revolutionary vanguard, which eventually dominated not only the political structures of the USSR, but the cultural life as well. As she explains:

The “time” of the cultural avant-garde is not the same as that of the vanguard party. These artists’ practices interrupted the continuity of perception and estranged the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. [...] The effect was to rupture the continuity of time, opening it up to new cognitive and sensory experiences. In contrast, the party submitted to a historical cosmology that provided no such freedom of movement. Bolshevism’s claim to know the course of history in its totality presumed a “science” of the future [...]. Constrained by the historical goal, revolutionary culture became sedate, conserving a past that appeared to lead meaningfully into the present, eschewing new primitivisms that blurred the line of progress, appealing to the masses by means of conventional art forms in order to mobilize them for movement “forward” in time. (Buck-Morss, 49).

The schematism of her explanation notwithstanding, Buck-Morss distinction between avant-garde temporalities, characterized by a conception of revolutionary temporality as an interruption in time in which a multiplicity of pasts and possible futures intersect in uncontrollable manner, and vanguard temporality, governed by programs that propel history forward from known pasts to definite futures, is an apt heuristic tool for investigation of Pasternak’s avant-garde and lyric vision of history that, as the first line of the poem under investigation announces, “can happen like that, or otherwise.”

1. The Text: Clear and Obscure

“Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...” exists in three versions—one published in 1922 and with the date 1920, a second in an undated manuscript, and the third as it was published in Pasternak’s third collection of poetry, *Temy i variatsii* in 1923 (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 178-79; E. Pasternak 1989, 39). Below, we offer the text of the poem in that final version and our translation, which is a modified version of a translation published in our previous work on this text (Platt 1999, 10-11).

Может статья так, может иначе,
Но в несчастный некий час
Духовенств душней, черней иночеств
Постигает безумье нас.

Стужа. Ночь в окне, как приличие,
Соблюдает холод льда.

В шубе, в креслах Дух и мурлычет - и
Все одно, одно всегда.

И чекан сука, и щека его,
И паркет, и тень кочерги
Отливают сном и раскаяньем
Сутки сплошь грешившей пурги.

Ночь тиха. Ясна и морозна ночь,
Как слепой щенок - молоко,
Всею темью пихт неосознанной
Пьет сиянье звезд частокол.

Будто каплет с пихт. Будто теплятся.
Будто воском ночь заплыла.
Лапой ели на ели слепнет снег,
На дупле — силуэт дупла.

Будто эта тишь, будто эта высь,
Элегизм телеграфной волны —
Ожиданье, сменившее крик: “Отзовись!”
Или эхо другой тишины.

Будто нем он, взгляд этих игл и ветвей,
А другой, в высотах, — тугоух,
И сверканье пути на раскатах - ответ
На зыванье чьего-то ау. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 178-79)

Стужа. Ночь в окне, как приличие,
Соблюдает холод льда.
В шубе, в креслах Дух и мурлычет — и
Все одно, одно всегда.

Губы, губы! Он стиснул их до крови,
Он трясется, лицо обхватив.
Вихрь догадок родит в биографе
Этот мертвый, как мел, мотив.

It can happen like that, or otherwise,
But in a certain unfortunate hour,
Stuffer than clergies, blacker than monasticisms
Madness grasps us.

Frost. In the window, night observes
As one would propriety, the cold of ice.
In furs, in an armchair is the Spirit, and purring—and
It's all the same, the same always.

And the stamp of a branch, and its cheek,
And the parquet, and the poker's shadow
Overflow with the sleep and repentance
Of a blizzard that sinned for days straight.

The night is quiet. The night is clear and frozen.
Like a puppy drinks milk,
With all the unconscious gloom of fir trees,
The palisade drinks the shimmer of stars.

As if it dripped from the firs. As if they flickered.
As if the night had melted like wax.
With the paw of spruce on spruce the snow is blinding,
On a hollow is the silhouette of a hollow.

As if it were mute—those needles' and boughs' glance
And the other, in the heights, were deaf,

And the road's sparkle in the thunder were a reply
To someone's call for response.

Frost. In the window, night observes
As one would propriety, the cold of ice.
In furs, in an armchair is the Spirit, and purring—and
It's all the same, the same always.

Lips, lips! He clenched them to bleeding,
And trembles, face in hands
A whirlwind of answers is born in the biographer
By this dead, like chalk, motif.

This is a difficult poem, an obscure poem—even when taken against the general complexity of the early Pasternak, and even in the context of the generally challenging poetics of the collection *Temy i variatsii* (Platt 1999, Zholkovskii 2011, 74, 78, 426). Here, Pasternak's typically complex poetic system has been taken to the brink of unintelligibility by a concerted attempt to communicate the sensations of one suffering from illness and nearly in the grip of delirium. According to Viacheslav Ivanov, “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...” is a “mysterious, but at the same time openly autobiographical poem... possibly the most fully encoded [of Pasternak's lyrics] [...] It ends with a straightforward recognition of an unconcealed, but at the same time mysterious autobiographical nature” (Ivanov, 298-301). As we will show below, the crux of its complexity derives precisely from its intertwined evocation of multiple strands of experience of temporality, from the biographical, to the political-historical, to the mythic—at a moment of radical transformation in all of these levels of experience. In our reading, we will rely on the rather sparse available biographical data concerning the poet during 1918 and 1919 and on the circumstances of the time and place in which it was written. We will adduce keys to comprehension from other texts by Pasternak—most importantly from the other poems in the cycle «Болезнь». Finally, we will indicate allusions in the text to a tradition of literary motifs and images in the works of Charles Dickens, Mikhail Lermontov, Aleksandr Blok and Vladimir Mayakovskii. Our account will attempt to disentangle, to some degree, these strands of historical, intertextual and biographical reference. Nevertheless, let us also admit at the outset that this task will in the end prove impossible: for the base significance of this poem is to articulate the interdependence and interference of these many strands of experience in the revolutionary moment in Russia, a moment in which contradictory intuitions of time and historical transformation converged to “open up” to an unmanageable proliferation of possibilities, rather than closing down towards a known path through time.

What may be said to be relatively clear in the poem? The setting is a room where a sick person lays, in which a number of overlapping visions appear—visions apparently linked to the space of the room itself—the “parket” (“parquet”) “ten' kocherga” (“poker’s shadow”)—but also via the window to the space beyond the window—“stuzha” (“frost”), “noch” (“night”), “purga” (“blizzard”). In the course of the poem, traces of the winter landscape appear within the room—the objects in the room “Otlivaiut snom i raskaian'em/ Sutki splosh' greshivshei purgi”—while the world of the room affects the external space—“budto voskom noch' zaplyla” (“as if the night had melted like wax”)—and the trees apparently come to reflect the state of the sick, feverish patient himself—“budto kaplet s pikht...” (“as if it dripped from the firs”). This presents an extraordinary realization of the typical phenomenon in Pasternak’s lyrics of all-encompassing “contact” between normally separate realms of experience, which has been described by Alexandr Zholkovskii (Zholkovskii 1978; Zholkovskii 2011, 34-39; Platt 1999). In the perceptions of the sick person, the world presents itself in transformed state of universal interpenetration and interrelationship.

Now let us enumerate as well some of the most enigmatic elements of the poem, which far outnumber and outweigh its more accessible content. We may begin with the description of “fir trees” (“pikhty”) and “spruce” (“eli”)—the first of which clearly indicates a landscape distant from that of Moscow—the location evoked in various ways in other poems of the same cycle, that mention, for instance, the Moscow Kremlin, as we will discuss in greater detail below. The greatest challenge for comprehension is presented by the poem’s mysterious “metaphysical” action: the purring “Dukh” (“Spirit”) “v shube” (“in furs”) and “v kreslakh” (“in an armchair”), the series of interlocked images of communication and echoing in the central stanzas of the poem linking together the “duplo” (“hollow”) with a “silhouette of a hollow” and unnamed and improbable speakers who are “nem” (“mute”) and “tugoukh” (“deaf”). This action appears to culminate in the final stanza, when the “Dukh” or perhaps the sick person himself “triasetsia, litso obkhvativ” (“trembles, face in hands”) in ecstasy, fear or shock, with the pronouncement that that a “mertvyi, kak mel, motif” has given rise to a “vikhr’ dogadok” (“whirlwind of answers”) in the “biograph” (“biographer”) who appears in the last line.

“Biographer” reaches forward in Pasternak’s creative career to another “lyric” character whose epithet is linked to life itself, Iurii Zhivago (“bio” is the Greek root, while “zhiv” the Slavic root for life). Whether this “biographer” is, as Ivanov suggests, a reference to Pasternak himself, or to us, his readers, is impossible to determine. Regardless of this identification this last line suggests that an appropriate starting point for comprehension will be to follow the methods of the “biographer” in order to attempt to come to grips with the internal logic of the enigmatic images of this poem. Yet the logic of our reading will follow the path of a “whirlwind of answers” that leads in circular, cyclic fashion through multiple layers and forms of associations.

2. Biographical Context

The author’s illness during the winter of 1918 in Moscow constitutes the most immediate biographical circumstances of the poem’s composition and of the metaphor of illness that structures the cycle as a whole. As Evgenii Pasternak, the poet’s son and biographer, has written:

With the onset of winter and severe cold, Pasternak became ill. This was the terrible influenza epidemic of 1918 that caused countless deaths across the world. Typically, the disease progressed to the point of lung infection. Pasternak, weakened by fatigue and malnutrition, was in critical condition. Firewood was in short supply and it was impossible even to heat sufficiently the room where he lay ill (E. Pasternak 1997, 310).

In light of the above, sickness certainly links “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...” to the concrete time and experience of Pasternak in Moscow in late 1918. Yet it is important to note that the cycle as a whole can hardly be considered completely or simply autobiographical in character. The fifth poem of the cycle is titled “Kreml' v buran kontsa 1918” (“The Kremlin in the blizzard of the end of 1918”), while the sixth is titled “Ianvar' 1919 goda” (“January of 1919”). As the poet’s biographer explains, the poet had already recovered from his illness by the middle of December (E. Pasternak 1997, 310). In this slight non-synchronicity of biographical time and social or calendrical, Pasternak’s reworking of personal experience in conjunction with broader historical events and processes is already evident.

The poem is linked to biography in another dimension as well—in connection with the marriage of Elena Vinograd, the object of the poet’s passionate affections. The undated manuscript copy of the poem mentioned above was in fact a gift of the poet to Vinograd (E. Pasternak 1989, 39). Pasternak refers to Vinograd’s marriage directly in the seventh poem of the cycle, “Mne v sumerki ty vse — pansionerkoiu” (“To me, in the twilight, you still seem a schoolgirl”), in a stanza that renders the intersection of the events of private life with those of political history evident via their metaphorical implications:

А ночь, а ночь! Да это ж ад, дом ужасов!

Проведай ты, тебя б сюда пригнало!

Она – твой шаг, твой брак, твое замужество

И тяжелей дознаний трибунала. (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 181)

And the night, the night! It’s hell, a house of horrors!

Come visit; let them impel you to come!

The night—your step, your wedding, your marriage

Is heavier than a tribunal’s investigations.

In a draft version of this stanza, Vinograd’s marriage is compared with an even more concrete image of the violent circumstances of the historical moment in an alternate version of the final line, “I shum mashin v podvalakh tribunala” (“And the noise of cars in the tribunal’s basements”) — a reference to practices of the Cheka (the “Extraordinary Committee”—the historical

predecessor of the NKVD and then KGB), which would run car engines during executions in order to drown out the sound of gunshots.

As the above suggests, the cycle “Bolezn” intermingles profoundly personal considerations, anxieties and reminiscences with references to social and political events and circumstances. Let us therefore turn, for a moment, to consider the cycle’s evocation of these larger contexts. They are most overtly referenced in the cycle’s treatment of the seat of political power, past and present, the Moscow Kremlin (since early 1918, the capital of the Soviet State). The Kremlin appears in the first poem of the cycle, “Bol’noi sledit. Shest’ dnei podriad” (“The sick man watches. For six days straight”), and in the fifth, “Kreml’ v buran kontsa 1918,” mentioned above—in the first together with the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great and in the fifth with the image of the Kremlin towers. In 1918-19 the Kremlin still retained traces of its bombardment with heavy artillery at the time of the Bol’shevik coup at the end of October and the start of November, 1917. This damage, it seems, forms the basis for its comparison in the first stanza of “Kreml’ v buran kontsa 1918” with a deserted, snow-covered postal or railway station:

Как брошенный с пути снегам
Последней станцией в развалинах
Как полем в полночь, в свист и гам,
Бредущий через силу в валяных. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 179)

Like one thrown from the path to the snows
As a final station, in ruins,
As a midnight field, in whistles and uproar,
Like one dragging with last strength in felt wrappings.

The Kremlin is subjected to attacks in the third stanza of the poem:

Как схваченный за обшлага
Хохочущею вьюгой нарочный,
Ловящей кисти башлыка,
Здороваящуюся в наручниках. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 180)

As a courier, seized by the cuffs

By a chortling blizzard,
That grabs hold of his cloak's tassels,
That greets him in shackles.

The blizzard surrounding the Kremlin constitutes a metaphor for revolt or revolution, in similar fashion to the imagery of Alexander Blok's influential long poem of January, 1918 "Dvenadstat" ("The Twelve"), in which the raging snowstorm communicates the dynamism and destructive force of revolutionary events yet also the transcendent character of history, that leads towards sacral goals out of the dross of human passions and violence. With its images of a cloak and a lost traveller or courier, Pasternak's lines evoke as well the opening of Alexander Pushkin's classic historical novel *Kapitanskaia dochka* (*The Captain's Daughter*), in which Pugachev appears to the lost protagonist Grinev in the midst of a blizzard—here too serving as a figure for revolt.

Yet in addition to the figure of revolt as a blizzard, bolstered by these literary references, "Krem'l' v buran kontsa 1918" also compares the Kremlin with a ship that has broken loose from its anchor in its fourth and fifth stanzas:

А иногда! – А иногда,
Как пригнанный канатом накороть
Корабль, с гуденьем, прочь к грядам
Срывающийся чудом с якоря.

Последней ночью, несравним
Ни с чем, какой-то странный, пенный весь,
Он, Кремль, в оснастке стольких зим,
На нынешней срывает ненависть. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 180)

But at times! But at times,
Like a ship, bound by a short line,
Tearing free by a miracle from the anchor
Away to the sandbanks with a rumble

That last night, not comparable
To anything, somehow strange, all foamy,
The Kremlin, in the tackle of so many winters,
Disrupts the hatred of this one.

The comparison of Kremlin with ship calls to mind yet another of Pasternak's texts from the first half of the 1920s, the long poem "Vysokaia bolezn'" ("High Sickness") of 1923-28, in which the ship serves as a metaphor for the country as a whole or the state, engulfed in revolution:

Опять фрегат пошел на траверс
Опять, хлебнув большой волны,
Дитя предательства и каверз
Не узнает своей страны. (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 258)

Once more, the frigate makes a traverse
Once more, drinking in a great wave,
The child of treason and intrigues
Will not recognize his country.

We should note, as well, that the title of this poem, "Vysokaia bolezn'," refers to the revolution itself. All of which suggests, in sum, that the figure of illness in the cycle "Bolezn'" as a whole and in "Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache..." in particular, as well as the interlinked metaphors of blizzard, journey and ship, refer not simply to physical illness or to the biography of the author, but rather are figural condensation points that tie together the individual, the Kremlin, Moscow and even Soviet Russia—all of which are forging ahead as a messenger, ship or journey by train in a difficult journey, undergoing a transformative moment in which consciousness and world itself are subject to radical revisions experienced as a delirium or vision. In distinction from the literary works that Pasternak references with his own deployment of these figures—Blok's metaphysically charged *Dvenadsat'* and Pushkin's novel *Kapitanskaia dochka*—Pasternak's poem interlaces the biographical and the historical in tight, multiply mediated relationships and equations that offer little purchase for conclusions that reorient experience of temporality. This is history and biography as whirlwind.

3. Historical and Literary Allusions

So let us return, following this cyclic motion, to the biographical references that propelled us out into the blizzard of history—those relating to Vinograd. Another poem in *Temy i variatsii*, the last in the cycle “Razryv” (“The break”) is also linked to the end of Pasternak’s relationship with Vinograd. It concludes with the lines: “V nashi dni i vozdukh pakhnet smert’iu/ Otkryt’ okno, chto zhily otvoriat” (“In our times the air itself smells of death/ Opening the window is the same as opening your veins”). Here, as in the cycle “Bolezn’,” the poet’s painful romantic experiences are intertwined with his impressions of the social-historical context in precisely the sort of intersection that Pasternak would several years later refer to as an “intimization of history” (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 7: 707). As we have observed, the cycle contains not only impressions of present biographical circumstances, but also references to more and less remote moments of the past—as is attested by the title of “Mne v sumerki ty vse — pansionerkoiu,” for instance (Pasternak had first met Vinograd in 1909 when she was still a schoolgirl). In this same poem, the first in the cycle, the past appears not only in reminiscences concerning his beloved, but also in the details of everyday life and the sounds of the city:

[...] Помнишь время? Лавочниц?
Палатки? Давку? За разменом денег
Холодных, звонких, - помнишь, помнишь давешних
Колоколов предпраздничных гудень? (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 182)

[...] Do you remember the times? The shopgirls?
The stalls? The crowds? Changing money
Cold and ringing, — remember, remember the long past
The bells’ pre-holiday ringing?

Turning from this last poem to the first, at the very start of the cycle, there, the ringing of bells, real or imagined, is connected with the winter of 1918-1919 and with the figural cluster we have already observed of Kremlin, blizzard, ocean and illness:

Больной следит. Шесть дней подряд
Смерчи беснуются без устали.
По кровле катятся, бодрят,
Бушуют, падают в бесчувствии.

Средь вьюг проходит Рождество.

Он видит сон: пришли и подняли.

Он вскакивает: «Не его ль?»

Был зов. Был звон. Не новогодний ли?

Вдали, в Кремле гудит Иван

Плывет, ныряет, зарывается.

Он спит. Пурга, как океан

В величьи, — тихой называется. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 176-77)

The sick man watches. For six days straight

Whirlwinds rampage without tiring.

They roll across the roof, invigorate,

Rage, and fall in torpor.

Christmas passes in blizzards.

He has a dream: they've come and lifted him up.

He leaps up: "Is it him?"

There was a call. There was ringing. Was it New Year's?

In the distance, in the Kremlin, Ivan resounds

It sails, and dives and plunges.

He sleeps. The blizzard, like an ocean

In scale, may be called pacific.

This initial poem of "Bolezn" establishes its temporal scene as the end of the year 1918 and the start of 1919—the weeks of Christmas and New Years. Let us recall that, as a result of the Bolshevik introduction of the new civil calendar, these holidays passed for the first time in a new order, with the celebration of Christmas coming before New Years, on December 25 for western churches, and afterwards, on January 7, for Orthodox churches.

The possibility suggested here of somehow “missing” Christmas, as well as the sick sufferer’s dream of a mysterious night time visitor, suggests an additional key to decipherment of “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...,” for in this context the “Dukh” sitting in the armchair evokes the ghost of Jacob Marley, or perhaps of the spirits of Christmas past, present and future, who visit Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. The ghost of Marley appears to Scrooge, we note, not sitting in an armchair himself, but when the latter is sitting in his own armchair. Pasternak refers to Dickens’ work in other early works as well (Sergei, 98), and it is openly named in the first stanza of the sixth poem of the cycle, “Ianvar’ 1919 goda”:

Тот год! Как часто у окна

Нашептывал мне, старый: «Выкинься».

А этот, новый, все прогнал

Рождественскою сказкой Диккенса. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 181)

That year! How often at the window

The old one whispered to me: “Jump.”

And this one, the new one, chased it all off

With the Christmas tale of Dickens’.

In this connection, we may note as well that in Dickens’ novel Scrooge’s business is repeatedly referred to repeatedly as a “counting-house”—a detail that may underpin the images of changing “cold, ringing” money in the pre-holiday season of commerce and gifts in the stanzas from “Mne v sumerki ty vse — pansionerkoiu” cited above. Pasternak’s evocation of Dickens with the “Dukh” and the personifications of the Old and New Years in the stanza cited here inscribes the biographical scene of “Bolezn” into an additional construction of temporality, in addition to the biographical and political-historical that we have already noted—that of timeless moral imperatives reiterated in cyclic patterns of human life and death, patterns which reecho the divine promise of spiritual salvation and rebirth encoded in the Christmas story. Yet we cannot but recall that Pasternak’s “Christmas tale,” unlike Dickens’, is a tale of revolution, too: the ringing of coins in “Mne v sumerki ty vse — pansionerkoiu,” linked to the ringing bells in the Kremlin, ties Dickens’s parable about the evils of capitalist greed to the anti-capitalist revolution of Pasternak’s present, tying personal experience and Christian salvation to Marxist horizons of historical thought as they appeared in the social cataclysms of the twentieth century. Here, then, is Pasternak’s version of the intersections of Christian and revolutionary eschatology, emerging out of the chaos of the blizzard, just as in Blok’s “Dvenadtsat’.” Yet in distinction from Blok’s vision of the transformation, volens nolens, of the forward drive of revolution—“Vpered, vpered, vpered/ Rabochii narod!”— into the way of Christ, Pasternak’s revolutionary blizzard follows

the cyclic and circular path of the whirlwind, that brings us chaotically into a present, charged with a palimpsest of reminiscences and anticipations.

The whirlwind of reminiscences and anticipations propels us into a new trajectory into the intersections of the biographical and the political referenced in “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...,” that like Pasternak’s evocations of his intimate biography refer to the more and less distant pasts of political experience, as well as to its cyclic returns in the future. Consider stanzas four and five of the poem, that describe a winter night of glimmering stars and a landscape of “eli” and “pikhty” that has melted like wax. These may well be linked with Pasternak’s recollection, many years later, of his impressions “skvoz' son” (“in sleep”) of a journey by horse-drawn transportation from Tikhie gory on the Kama River, where the poet had been working in the office of a chemical factory, to Moscow at the very start of the events of the revolutionary year, in March, 1917. Pasternak’s mysterious depiction in his 1956 sketch “Liudi i polozheniia” (“People and situations”) of a winter night-time journey, undoubtedly connected in many and various ways with experience of the eve of a novel era in Russian history, includes nearly the same group of images as the central stanzas of “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...”: the twinkling of stars, branches of fir trees weighted down with snow, a gleaming, snowy landscape and a burning candle:

When we heard at the factory in March, 1917 about the outbreak of revolution in Petersburg, I departed for Moscow... From Tikhie gory we drove in a wagon, a covered cart on runners, all evening, through the night, and part of the following day. Wrapped in three *aziam* caftans and sinking into the hay, I rolled back and forth in a heavy bundle on the bed of the sleigh, deprived of any ability to move. I dozed, nodding my head, dropping off and waking, closing and opening my eyes. I saw a forest road and the stars of a frozen night. High snowdrifts were piled like mountains across the narrow trail. Frequently, the roof of the cart ran up against the branches of overhanging fir trees [“pikhty”], shaking the hoarfrost from them and dragging with a crunch beneath them pulling them along. The whiteness of the snowy coverlet reflected the glimmering of stars [“belizna snezhnoi peleny otrazhala mertsanie zvezd”] and illuminated the path. The gleaming snowy mantle menaced us from the depths, the interior of the woods, like a candle placed in the middle of the forest. Three horses, harnessed in a single file, one after the other, rushed the sledge along. Now one, then the other would pull to the side, getting out of line. The driver had to straighten them out every minute and, when the cart would tilt to the side, leaped off of it, ran alongside and supported it with his shoulder to keep it from falling over. [...]

The camp of the drivers in the forest, just like one from folk tales of robbers. A little fire in the hut. A samovar hisses and a clock ticks. While the driver takes off his coat, warms up after the frost, and quietly talks with the camp-mistress, in the hushed tones of night out of respect for those sleeping behind the partition, another wipes his mouth, buttons up his heavy coat and goes out into the frost to harness a new troika.

Then once again: driving at full speed, the whistle of the runners, dozing and sleep (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 3: 328-29).

Here, in Pasternak's reminiscences four decades after the events described, we find a similar mysterious locale, the atmosphere of which is created not only by the snowy landscape but also by the driver and the "tales of robbers." This, in turn, evokes once again Grinev's encounter with the mysterious guide, the future Pugachev himself, on the eve of the eighteenth-century rebellion that is remembered with his name in Pushkin's *Kapitanskaia dochka*, as discussed above.

Let us note, too, that approximately the same landscape, also colored by Pushkinian associations, yet now in connection with the Russian Civil War, is described in *Doktor Zhivago*:

There was something inaccessible, unexpressed about the locale. It exuded the atmosphere of the Pugachev Rebellion as refracted through Pushkin, or of the Asiatic in Aksakov's descriptions.

The area's secretive air was complemented by the ruination and diffidence of the few remaining inhabitants, who lived fearfully, avoided any new arrivals from the train and did not communicate with one another out of fear of informers (B. Pasternak 2003-2005, 4: 258).

Whether this complex of images, reminiscences of revolution and references to classic Russian literature is filtered, in 1956, through Pasternak's earlier ruminations on these experiences in the cycle "Bolezn'," or whether we should see this as a representation of the author's longstanding sense of his core perceptions relating to the revolutionary year, as expressed in all of these texts, is impossible to answer. Yet in reading to "Bolezn'," we must recognize how, for us, this text persists in maintaining its position in time as a nodal point in which multiple threads of pasts and futures intersect in non-linear fashion. This deployment of the lyric mode grabs hold of history not as a representation of a "chapter" in the narrative, a slice out of the unidirectional flow of time, but as a window into a moment of temporal openness, witness to the chaotic interplay of multiple pasts and futures.

4. Conclusion. Revolution and Temporality

The blizzard not only connects, but disrupts, and so it is with Pasternak's perceptions of revolutionary transformation and temporality. Among the most marked and enigmatic features of the landscape, as noted above, is the theme of disturbed communication between mysterious speakers linked with life on earth and life "above," between the "mute [...] needles' and boughs' glance" ("Budto nem on, vzgliad etikh igl i vetvei") and the deaf "other, in the heights" ("A drugoi, v vysotakh, — tugoukh"), while the "road's sparkle in the thunder" ("sverkan'e puti na raskatakh") appears to reply to "someone's call for response" ("vzyvan'e ch'ego au"). The deafness of the "other" in the heights and the lack of response recalls Pasternak's line in his 1917 poem "Opredelenie poezii" ("Definition of Poetry"), "vselennaia mesto glukhoe" ("the universe is a soundless place"). In combination with the image of speaking and hearing stars, these lines in "Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhет inache..." evoke an analogous set of images from the conclusion of Mayakovskii's 1914 "Oblako v shtanakh" ("A Cloud in Trousers"):

Я иду
Глухо
Вселенная спит положив на лапу
С клещами звезд
Огромное ухо. (Maiakovskii, 1: 108)

I'm coming
Soundless
The universe sleeps, setting down on a paw
A star-infested
Enormous ear.

Both Pasternak's and Maiakovskii's lines represent variations on Lermontov's canonical 1841 poem "Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu," ("I go out alone on the road"):

Выхожу один я на дорогу;
Сквозь туман кремнистый путь блестит.
Ночь тиха. Пустыня внемлет богу
И звезда с звездою говорит.

В небесах торжественно и чудно!
Спит земля в сиянье голубом...
Что же мне так больно и так трудно?
Жду ль чего? Жалею ли о чем? (Lermontov, 2: 83)

I go out alone on the road;
Through the fog the stony road glimmers.
The night is quiet. The desert watches God.
And one star speaks with another.

The heavens are awesome and miraculous!

The earth sleeps in a bright blue glow...

Yet why is it all so painful and hard for me?

What am I waiting for? What am I mourning?

Likely, the first line of the fourth stanza of “Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache...” is an allusion to Lermontov’s poem, as are the series of subsequent images relating to communications involving stars and the reflections and glimmering of starlight on the snowy ground. Pasternak’s images draw on Lermontov’s conception of the poet, isolated from a meaningful and spiritually charged universe, and project them into a landscape that is suffused with significance—yet significances that cannot quite bring the earthly and the heavenly together (Platt 1999, 18-19).

Pasternak’s redaction of Lermontov’s Romantic motif of abandonment by an uncaring universe, one may propose, may also be connected with Pasternak’s conception of Russia itself as abandoned by God in the revolutionary year—a conception that surfaces in a separate poem by Pasternak of 1918, which was never published and preserved only by an accident of fate:

Боже, Ты создал быстрой касатку,

Жжется зарей, щебечет, летит,

Низясь, Зачем Ты вдунул десятку

Приговоренных Свой аппетит?

Чем уголю? Как заставлю зардеться

Утром ужасным, когда – Ничто

Идол и доля красногвардейца

В это ужасное утро – То?

Стал забываться за красным желтый

Твой луговой, вдохновенный рассвет.

Боже, на чьи небеса ушел Ты

Здесь над русскими, Здесь Тебя нет. (В. Pasternak 2003-2005, 2: 225).

God, You created the swift swallow;

It burns in the sun, twitters, flies,

Diving low; Why did you inspire ten

Condemned men with Your own appetite?

How can I slake it? How can I force

A blush on a horrible morning, when—as nothing

Are the idol and the lot of a Red Army Man

On this horrible morning—and so?

Oblivion is overtaking, beyond the red, your yellow

Meadowlark, inspired dawn.

God, to whose heavens have you departed

Here above the Russians, here You are absent.

Here, Pasternak's intuitions of humanity, orphaned in revolutionary cataclysm, finds a maximal expression.

Yet "Mozhet stat'sia tak, mozhet inache..." also refracts the Romantic tradition in a more hopeful key. The unique relationship of the poet, of the artist, to the course of events is emphasized in its second line, "No v neschastnyi nekii chas" (But in a certain unfortunate hour"), which alludes to yet another canonical poem of the Romantic tradition, Fedor Tiutchev's 1989 lyric "Videnie" ("Vision"):

Есть некий час, в ночи, всемирного молчания,
И в оный час явлений и чудес
Живая колесница мироздания
Открыто катится в святилище небес. (Tiutchev 79)

There is a certain hour, at night, of silence the world over,
And in that hour of epiphanies and miracles
The living chariot of the universe
Openly rides across the sacred heavens.

As for Tiutchev, so too for Pasternak, the poet or artist has the ability to see that which is hidden from others. Pasternak's poem enacts this transcendent insight, and while he describes the visionary hour as "neschastnyi" ("unfortunate"), it nevertheless reverberates with Tiutchev's spiritual uplift.

In this connection, the figure of the purring "Dukh" "v shube, v kreslakh" of the second stanza, that we have linked above with the transformed vision of the sickbed and the visitations of Marley and Christmas spirits to Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, evokes Tiutchev's poem as well. Yet we might speculate that this image refers to a whole series of mutually interlinked "visionary scenes" in the works of previous poets and authors. Perhaps the earliest of these is Derzhavin's 1782 or 1783 "Videnie murzy" ("Vision of the Mirza") which might be signaled here by the

“parquet” (Derzhavin’s poem begins with an image of moonlight reflections on a lacquered floor) as well as by Derzhavin’s self-portrait in his poem “Tonchiiu” (“To Tonchi”) “skutannyi shuboi” (“wrapped in a fur coat”) and “v zhestokii mraz s ognem dushi” (“in cruel misery and with flame in the soul”), where just as is the case with Tiutchev, the poet, chosen by the muses, occupies a special place in the cosmos: “filosofiia i muzy – oni nas slavnymi tvoriat” (“philosophy and the muses—they bring us glory”).

The topos of the mystical figure appearing in nighttime vision may return us once more to the revolutionary appearance of the guide Pugachev out of Pushkin’s blizzard. Yet there are other resonances of the “Dukh” in the armchair with Pushkin’s works. “Noch’ tikha” (“The night is quiet”) evokes not only Lermontov’s poem, but also, in the context of the Christmas and New Year themes of Pasternak’s poem, the well-known Christmas hymn “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,” written in 1818 by Franz Xaver Gruber with lyrics by Joseph Mohr. Let us note, however, that until 1855 there was considerable confusion concerning the authorship of the hymn—in particular, some attributed the poem to Johann Michael Haydn, the younger brother of Joseph Haydn, whose *Requiem* was thought to have exerted a considerable influence on Mozart’s *Requiem*. In light of these debates concerning the authorship of “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,” one may propose a peculiar refraction of the many intertexts and images assembled above, evoking in sum the mysterious figure who orders Mozart’s requiem in Pushkin’s *Mozart and Salieri*—yet another spirit, like Marley or Pugachev.

Yet Christmas and New Years, revolution and transformation—neither these elements of Pasternak’s vision, nor “Bolezn’” as a whole may be reduced to dark premonitions of death. The poem is populated with images evocative of the creative potential of art in the world, itself figured as creation, familiar from the works of the Symbolists. Pasternak’s oxymoronic “Ekho drugoi tishiny” (“echo of another silence”) evokes Briusov’s “zvonko-zvuchnaia tishina” (“roundly-resounding silence”) in his 1895 programmatic poem “Tvorchestvo” (“Creation”), while the “bezum'e” (“madness”) that afflicts Pasternak’s poetic consciousness is potential not only an affliction, but also a state of creative uplift, as in Blok’s 1914 poem “O ia khochu bezumno zhit” (“Oh, I want to live madly”). And the revolution itself is linked to creativity, as well. A few years after the publication of “Bolezn’,” in the long poem of 1926 “Deviatsot piatyi god” (“The Year 1905”), Pasternak will compare the Revolution to an “artist, unhappy with himself” (“nedovol'nyi soboi khudozhnik”). Winter and the winter holidays are times both of ending and of rebirth, and as with Yuletide fortune-telling, one looks forward to optimistic and hopeful turns of fate. As Pasternak explains in the last lines of “Ianvar' 1919 goda,” “Na svete net toski takoi/ Kotoryi sneg by ne vylechival” (“There is no anguish on Earth/ That snow could not cure”). And in that same poem, we recall the positive outcome of Pasternak’s overt deployment of the *Christmas Carol*, in which the New Year “chased off” the morbidity of the old with Dickens’ work.

Both the sick speaker and the surrounding world are fated to recover, it seems. This dual perception of this complex historical moment reflects Pasternak’s “ambivalent” reception of the revolution, which has been described many times by Lazar Fleishman (Fleishman, 336-68). All of which leads us back towards the poem’s penultimate lines, following blizzard, visions and delirium, in which “Vikhr' dogadok rodit v biografe/ Etot mertvyi, kak mel, motiv” (“A whirlwind of riddles is born in the biographer/ By this dead as chalk motif”). We, Pasternak’s

biographers, face the task of locating the poet in the flow of history and cosmos, alone at a time of holiday transformation, in the face of death and the whirlwind of revolution.

And so we may conclude that the poem «Может случиться – может иначе...», as well as the cycle “The Illness” [«Болезнь»] and to some degree the entire collection was one of Pasternak’s most important steps towards the lyric representation of historical and political reality—something like an experiment in the creation of a “lyric epic.” The next steps in this creative path were the long poems “High Illness” [«Высокая болезнь»], “The Year 1905” [«Девятьсот пятый год»], “Spektorsky” [«Спекторский»], and eventually, *Doctor Zhivago* [Доктор Живаго].

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Konstantin Polivanov

National Research University Higher School of Economics. . Faculty of Humanities . Assistant professor; E-mail: kpolygonov@hse.ru

Kevin M.F. Platt

University of Pennsylvania. Professor in the Humanities Chair, Program in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory E-mail: kmfplatt@sas.upenn.edu

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