

TEXTUAL COHERENCY IN PASTERNAK'S EARLY POETRY

1. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM.

In an earlier article devoted to an analysis of the title poem of Pasternak's poetry cycle, *Sestra moja - žizn'*,¹ I came to the conclusion that the semantic obscurity characteristic of Pasternak's early poetry is in part due to the simultaneous exploitation of two linguistic operations, each in itself legitimate, but mutually interferential. Namely: on the one hand, Pasternak exploits the possibility inherent in language of making metaphorical substitutions; and on the other, he exploits the phenomenon manifest frequently in spoken language of making incomplete or illogical syntactic connections which, within the immediate context, are nevertheless comprehensible. These two possibilities evident in language usage are mutually interferential on the following grounds: Metaphorical substitution renders the familiar strange; it relies for coherency on precise syntactic articulation, whereby the transferences incurred in the metaphorical operation are made available to the receiver of the message.² Incomplete or illogical syntactic connections, on the other hand, assume a familiar or self-evident context; they rely for coherency on a semantic content free from obscure or, within the context, unexpected allusion.

In this paper, I propose to examine the exploitation of mutually interferential language possibilities as outlined above, and to consider whether textual coherency is in fact jeopardized. The first two stanzas of the poem "Toska" illustrate the problem:

Для этой книги на эпиграф
Пустыни сипли,
Ревели львы и к зорям тигров
Тянулся Киплинг.

Зиял, иссякнув, страшный кладезь
Тоски отверстой,
Качались, ляская и глядась
Иззябшей шерстью.³

These lines incur an inordinate amount of metaphorical substitution; notwithstanding the full-stop between the two stanzas, they comprise one period which consists of an enumeration of verb phrases defining the 'epigraph for this book', as follows:

Dlja (?)étoј knigi na épigraf -

- 1) ↑ pustyni ↑ sipli
- 2) ↑ l'vy reveli
- 3) ↑ Kipling tjanulsja k zorjam ↑ tigrov
- 4) ↑ issjaknuv, strašnyj kladez'↑toski↑otverstoj zijał,
- 5) ↑ ljaskaja* i gladjas' izzjabšej šerst'ju, (?) kačalis'⁴

Not only is the period saturated with metaphorical substitutions, but also inadequacies on the syntactic level cause further confusion: In the first place, which is the book alluded to as 'this book' in the first line of the poem? The use of the demonstrative pronoun denotes the assumption of knowledge common to the poet and his reader, whereas in actual fact the reader has no way of knowing which book the poem is referring to. If 'this book' alludes to the book of poetry, *Sestra moja - žizn'*, then the title of the poem, "Toska", is confusing (cf. the title of the preceding poem, "Pro éti stixi"). In the second place, the subject of the verb *kačalis'*, assumed through its omission to be obvious from the context, is not unambiguously identifiable.⁵ It probably refers back to the 'tigers' in 1.3.. In this case, however, the reference is obscured on the one hand by the difficulty in interpreting the intervening images, and

on the other by the fact that tigers are not normally ascribed the action of 'swaying'.

Analysis of the poem "Toska" yields the following interpretation: the poet postulates Kipling's literary works as functioning as an 'epigraph' for his own book of poems; by this the poet appears to mean that without the literary heritage of Kipling's works, his own poems would not have been possible; the images from Kipling's works now figure in the poet's own verse, but these images are alienated from their proper milieu. More broadly, Pasternak is here acknowledging himself as the literary inheritor of romanticism and defining his position as such.⁶ Accordingly the semantics of the poem are by no means incoherent; their coherence is however obscured owing to the fact that the poet first makes the familiar strange (Kipling's works are metonymically represented by individual images; moreover these images are presented as though they were part of a real (as opposed to a literary) landscape; finally the images are scrambled) and then assumes these 'strange' images to be familiar to the reader (this assumption is manifest in the 'inadequate' syntax). In other words, the poet assumes the familiarity of that which has been made strange.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM "BALAŠOV" WITH REGARD TO COHERENCY.

Having defined the problem, I shall now illustrate how Pasternak, the dual exploitation of language notwithstanding, achieves textual coherency. In particular I shall discuss Pasternak's use of connectives in organizing the argument of a poem. Analysis of the poem "Balašov" provides a concrete example of the device in question.

БАЛАШОВ *)

1. По будням медник подле вас
Клепал, лудил, паял,
А впрочем - масла подливал
В огонь, как пай к паям.

*) Name of a town in the Saratov district.

2. И без того душило грудь,
И песнь небес: "Твоя, твоя!"
И без того лилась в жару
В вагон, на саквояж.
3. Сквозь дождик сеялся хорал
На гроб и в шляпы молокан,
А впрочем - ельник подбирал
К прощальным облакам.
4. И без того взошел, зашел
В больной душе, щемя, мечась,
Большой, как солнце, Балашов
В осенний ранний час.
5. Лазурью июльской облит,
Базар синел и дребезжал.
Юродствующий инвалид
Пиле, гундося, подражал.
6. Мой друг, ты спросишь, кто велит,
Чтоб жглась юродивого речь?
В природе лип, в природе плит,
В природе лета было жечь.

According to my analysis, the poem may be segmented into three parts: stanzas 1-2, stanzas 3-4 and stanzas 5-6 (thesis, antithesis and synthesis). The first two stanzas consist of images expressing *summer, heat, love, ardour*; the middle two stanzas consist of images expressing *autumn, rain, death, parting*; and the final two stanzas confront the two semantic fields by showing that the element of decay is contained in the moment of flourish, that heat, be it climatic or emotional/erotic, is part of a process which necessarily leads to its extinction.

As in the case of "Toska", the semantics of the poem are revealed as being coherent and well organized. But how has this neat argument been developed? Let us reconstruct

the argument of the poem in its progressive aspect by giving a close-reading.

1.1-1.2 The poem begins with a straightforward exposition in the past tense; it is written in the form of a direct address and promises to comprise the recreation of a past shared by the poet and his addressee. The first two lines contain no metaphorical substitutions.

1.3-1.4 The use of the connective phrase *a vpročem* signals the immanent, negative qualification of the statement in 1.1-1.2. This qualification takes the form of an idiom, the idiomatic status of which, however, is jeopardized owing to the proximity of its imagery to the concrete description in 1.1-1.2 (i.e. the suggestion seems to be that the blacksmith literally threw oil onto the fire!). The idiomatic qualification is in turn qualified by means of its comparison to another idiom which second idiom in actual fact duplicates the first. That is to say that the second idiom is presented as though it were an explanation for the first, whereas it is merely a parallel. This is an example of what is meant by 'illogical syntactic connection': one detail is related to or predicated onto another detail in a way which does not correspond to the semantics of the two. Ostensibly the purpose of a simile is to elucidate by showing one detail in terms of another; essential to the functioning of a simile is that the two details compared belong to different semantic areas. In the present case, however, the two details compared have both been reduced to lexicalized idiomatic expressions which, owing to their identical status, are virtually synonymous. The effect of explaining one idiom in terms of another is, in the present instance, to undermine the idiomatic status of the first thereby confirming its concrete, literal meaning.

This series of connected images is further complicated by an ingenious use of paronomasia: the second idiom *kak paj k pajam* connects to the concrete situation of the

first two lines through its phonological, but not semantic, association to *pajal* in 1.2. As a result, even this second idiom appears to be part of the concrete situation (on the lines that the blacksmith 'souldered and souldered'); sound similarity persuasively suggests semantic similarity. Owing to this word-play both idioms associate specifically to superfluous heat (cf. their normal denotation of unspecified superfluity).

2.1-2.2 The second stanza is connected to the first by means of the connective phrase *i bez togo*, which in retrospect hints at a causal, intended connection between the blacksmith's activities and the suffocation which in 2.1 is assumed to be physical, but in 2.2 shifts to denote 'emotional erotic ardour'. The imperceptible shift from one type of heat to another together with the assumption of a causal, intentional connection between separate phenomena (blacksmith, summer heat, passion) is typical for Pasternak's poetry from this time.⁷

2.3-2.4 The connective phrase *i bez togo* is repeated at the beginning of 2.3 where it directly introduces the notion of 'climatic heat'. The images *vagon* and *sakvojaž* are metonymical representations of the notion of 'journey' which in turn, within the context of the cycle, is closely associated with the notion of 'summer love affair'.⁸

3.1-3.2 The connection between the first two stanzas and the third is given no direct expression, either on the semantic or the syntactic level. On the contrary, the imagery in stanza 3 has nothing in common with the 'heat' imagery in stanzas 1-2. Neither is there any orientation concerning time and place, while the reference to *molokane*⁹ suggests a specific context. Lack of connection to the preceding stanzas is aggravated by the internal scrambling of the image whereby the appropriate subject of the verb *sejalsja* (i.e. *doždik*) is relegated to the adverbial phrase *skvoz' doždik* and replaced by *vorat*.

3.3-3.4 The use of the connective phrase *a vpročem* at the beginning of 3.3 turns out to be as illogical as was its use in 1.3. It posits 3.3-3.4 as the negative qualification of the esoteric description in 3.1-3.2. But in actual fact it does not qualify this description, but continues it. The use of *a vpročem* is illogical in that it suggests that two details which in actual fact are related to one another syntagmatically (in sequence) are related to one another paradigmatically (as alternative definitions of the same thing).

Lines 3.3-3.4 illustrate the two-way exploitation of language elaborated at the beginning of this article: on the one hand the image is connected 'illogically' to the preceding lines, and on the other it is complicated in itself containing an inordinate amount of metaphorical substitutions:

(doždik) ↑ podbiral el'nik ↑ k proščal'nyĭm ↑ oblakam

However, if the function of *a vpročem* is quasi from the logical point of view, its function on another level is of the utmost significance. Namely, as a repetition of the same phrase in identical position in the first stanza (i.e. beginning of the third line), it signals a parallel between the first and the third stanzas which will help us to identify the theme or argument of the poem.

4.1-4. 4 The connective phrase *i bez togo* which introduces the fourth stanza is illogical in that it postulates a relationship between the imagery in stanzas 3 and 4 respectively which does not correspond to the semantics of the two sets of images (cf. discussion of stanza 2). In addition incoherency arises from the fact that both sets of images are saturated with esoteric metaphorical substitution (i.e. metaphorical substitution which is coherent only within the private world of the poet and his addressee)¹⁰.

However, just as the use of *a vpročem* signals a parallel between the first and the third stanzas, so now the repetition of *i bez togo*, in the same position as in stanza 2, signals

a parallel between the second and the fourth stanzas. Further, since the second stanza is predicated onto the first, and the fourth stanza is in turn predicated onto the third, there emerges a clear grouping of the stanzas into two and two: stanzas 3-4 parallel stanzas 1-2.

The formal parallel between the two pairs of stanzas provokes comparison on the semantic level. While the imagery in all the stanzas is esoteric and it is difficult to identify the referent of each image, two opposing semantic fields emerge from the two pairs of stanzas: on the one hand *heat, summer, passion*; and on the other *rain, autumn, death, parting*.

The function of the repeated connective phrases in forcing the opposition should not be underestimated. These connectives provide the stimulus for seeking out the connection; without their persuasive insistence it is likely that the reader would be bewildered by the obscurity of the images and fail to appreciate the coherency of the text.

5.1-5.4. There is no formal connective to introduce the fifth stanza. Nevertheless, against the background of the opposition heralded by the formal parallel of stanzas 1-2 and 3-4, it is possible to posit the images of stanza 5 as a point in the development of the poem's theme or argument.

Lines 5.1-5.2, referring to summer heat, associate as well to the summer love experience presumably shared by the poet and his addressee. They connect to stanzas 1 and 2 and must refer to an occasion which chronologically precedes the events described in stanzas 3-4. This break in the logical time progression of referred events signals the fact that the argument of the poem is moving into a new stage: from exposition of the facts of a remembered past, the poem now moves into its conclusive stage, towards a summing up of the significance of those successive events.

Into the description of summer heat in 5.1-5.2, the images of 5.3-5.4 inject a jarring note: each word of these

lines expresses a note of discord (*deformity/invalid; pretence/jurodstvujuščij, podražaja; discordant sound/pile, gundosja*). Although this note of discord is not directly expressed in the imagery of stanzas 3-4, it is nevertheless within the opposition *heat, summer, passion / rain, autumn, death* etc. that the images in 5.3-5.4 assume significance.

Thus stanza 5 divides into two halves, the first two lines affirming 'summer', 'heat' etc, and the second two affirming its lack. Whereas initially the images of the two sides of the opposition were presented both formally and semantically in sequence (i.e. in succeeding stanzas and as part of the seasonal sequence 'summer/autumn'), in stanza 5 they are presented, both formally and semantically, in synthesis (within the same stanza, as a single, complex situation). The two sides of the opposition confront one another; on the concrete level we may interpret these lines as affirming the fact that not only does summer lead to autumn, love to death and parting, but that the summer experience and the love experience contain the seeds of their own destruction.

6.1-6.4 In the final verse, the poet directly addresses his beloved attributing to her a future, hypothetical question which summarizes the opposition elaborated in the poem. The question implies a fundamental "Why?" - specifically: Why should joy be sullied with pain? Why are summer and love not absolute? Lines 6.3-6.4 purport to answer the question and thereby resolve the opposition. They express the belief that the coexistence of love and pain is not accidental; the two are part of a single process.

Particularly interesting in stanza 6 is the use of the verbs *žeč'sja* and *žeč'*: these words activate the negative aspects of heat which notion, within the context of the

poem so far, has been associated with the positive summer/love experience. The verb *žeč'sja* has both an active and a passive meaning. Used to denote a sound, it would normally be translated as "to grate", but may otherwise mean "to be scorched, to singe oneself". In the present context its use retains a certain ambiguity (the invalid's voice caused, but may also have received, hurt). When the poet answers his addressee's agonized question with philosophical acceptance ('that is the way things are') his answer hinges on the word *žeč'* which deliberately associates back to the ambiguous use of *žeč'sja* in the preceding line. Again, the verb *žeč'* may be used in two ways, either transitively (i.e. it is in the nature of the lindens etc. to set light to things, i.e. to be destructive) or intransitively (it is in the nature of lindens etc. to be aflame, i.e. to be beautiful, glorious).

Thus the final stanza effects a synthesis of the two sides of the opposition. By means of a play of ambiguity around the two verbs *žeč'sja* and *žeč'* (in the first case: active or passive? In the second: transitive or intransitive?), the poem activates the notion of heat in its dialectical aspect. Heat is both constructive and destructive; heat is energy both released and consumed; that which burns eventually burns itself out; that which gives heat eventually grows cold. Accordingly, autumn is not merely the successor of summer but its necessary consequence; in the same way parting and death is the inevitable sequence to love. The opposition between summer and autumn, love and parting, is now resolved revealing a single dialectical process.

The following diagram illustrates the composition of the poem as it has been described here:

<u>A + HEAT/SUMMER/LOVE</u>	<u>B - HEAT/SUMMER/LOVE</u>
<p>1. По будням медник подле вас Клепал, лудил, паял, <u>А впрочем</u> масла подливал В огонь, как пай к паям.</p>	<p>3. Сквозь дождик сеялся хорал На гроб и в шляпы молокан, <u>А впрочем</u> ельник подбирал К прощальным облакам.</p>
<p>2. <u>И без того</u> душило грудь, И песнь небес: "Твоя, твоя!" <u>.И без того</u> лилась в жару В вагон, на саквояж.</p>	<p>4. <u>И без того</u> взошел, зашел В больной душе, щемя, мечась, Большой, как солнце, Балашов В осенний ранний час.</p>
<p>A + B</p>	<p>5. Лазурью июльской облит, Базар синел и дребезжал. Юродствующий инвалид Пиле, гундося, подражал.</p>
<p>Why A+B? A=B</p>	<p>6. Мой друг, ты спросишь, кто велит, Чтоб жглась юродивого речь? В природе лип, в природе плит, В природе лета было жечь.</p>

3. CONCLUSIONS.

From the above diagram it is quite clear that the argument of the poem is organized around the use of the repeated connective phrases, *a vpročem* and *i bez togo* respectively. Without the use of these connectives it seems likely that, in the face of the manifold and esoteric metaphorical substitutions incurred in its imagery, the poem would dissolve into a series of fragmentary images lacking in specific mutual relevance (that is not forming a coherent text).

There does exist a type of poetry whose principle of organization is precisely that it lacks organization in the sense of coherent argument. Such poetry relies on the free

association from one word to the next, when by 'free' we mean that the images are not related to one another according to the principles of discursive syntax.¹¹ But the point is that Pasternak's poetry is not impressionistic in the sense of evoking a visual or emotional impression; notwithstanding the superficial similarity of Pasternak's images to for example those of Fet, we should not overlook the fact that in Pasternak's poetry those images are used to prove a point, not merely as ends in themselves. Pasternak's poetry is poetry of argument.

In my interpretation of the poem "Balašov" I have shown how Pasternak achieves the level of argument in his poetry through activating the syntactic aspect of language: that is to say he does not merely create images (i.e. name the object) but predicates one image upon another, thereby establishing relationships of cause and effect, likeness etc. The fact that the relationships postulated in Pasternak's poetry may not correspond to the real situation, does not make them less persuasive or less effective. Significant in the composition of "Balašov" is the fact that between the three groups of stanzas, that is at the poem's crucial turning points, there are no connectives. It is precisely at such points that the function of connectives is motivated, their purpose being to relate different segments of a coherent text to one another. Thus Pasternak's poem makes use of connectives where their function is equivocal, and fails to make use of them where they would function most naturally.¹²

We may sum up as follows: we assume that the poet's intention is to postulate a certain relationship which exists in the real world and not just in the fictions of language.¹³ In order to relieve his postulate of banality, the poet makes it strange: he saturates his imagery with (frequently esoteric) metaphorical substitutions. Then, in order to persuade the reader of the universal relevance of his postulate, he projects it back onto the level of familiarity

by means of a syntactic articulation which assumes a familiar or self-evident context. In other words he assumes the familiarity of that which he has made strange. As we expressed it in the beginning of this article, he exploits simultaneously two mutually interferential possibilities of language.

The purpose of this article was to see whether, in the face of this two-way exploitation of language possibilities, textual coherency is jeopardized. In the case of "Balašov" we have demonstrated that, in spite of a certain resistance, the text is finally revealed as coherent. My suggestion is that this is usually the case in Pasternak's poetry, that is the poems do contain a coherent argument. However, exploitation of the metaphorical process in conjunction with inadequate or illogical syntax results in a linguistic situation where the balance between coherency and incoherency is very finely drawn.

F O T N O T E S

- 1 "Aspects of Poetic Syntax. Analysis of the Poem "Sestra moja - žizn' i segodnja v razlive" by Boris Pasternak", *Boris Pasternak. Essays*, ed. Nils Åke Nilsson, Stockholm 1976 (= Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature 7), pp. 162-179.
- 2 Cf. Owen Thomas, *Metaphor and Related Subjects*, New York 1969, p. 23: "In a metaphor, certain features of one word which are logically and linguistically incompatible with one or more features of a second word are nonetheless transferred, in a particular context, to the second word... To put the matter another way: in literal usage some features of a word are occasionally ignored since they are incompatible with other words in a particular sentence; in metaphorical usage, certain incompatible features are transferred to the definition matrix of another word."
- 3 The texts of Pasternak's poems are quoted from, Boris Pasternak, *Stixotvorenija i poemy*, Moskva-Leningrad 1965.
- 4 (?) before a word denotes the inadequacy of the syntactical status of the following word; ↑ denotes the fact that the following word stands in metaphorical relation to the word(s) according to which it is syntactically defined. * The verb *ljaskat' / ljasknut'* is defined in *AN SSSR SLOVAR' RUSSKOGO JAZYKA V 4-EX TOMAX* (Moskva 1958, Tom II, p. 288) as "*prost. ščelknut', ljazgnut' (zubami)*". It is not listed in Ožegov or Ušakov.

- 5 Cf. Ju. I. Levin, "O nekotoryx čertax plana soderžanija v poëtičeskix tekstax", *Struktura i tipologija jazykov*, Moskva 1966, p. 211.
- 6 Cf. the first two poems in the cycle, "Pamjati demona" and "Pro èti stixi".
- 7 Cf. I. P. Smirnov, "Pričinno-sledstvennyje struktury poëtičeskix proizvedenij", *Issledovanija po poëtike i stilistike*, Leningrad 1972, pp. 212-247.
- 8 See for example the title poem of the cycle, "Sestra moja - žizn'"... and my analysis thereof, op. cit.
- 9 *Molokane* denotes members of a Russian christian sect.
- 10 In stanza 4 two images are confused: on the one hand, the pain and restlessness experienced by the poet, and on the other the passing of time marked by the sequence of days as the sun rises and sets over Balašov. Accordingly the autumnal Balašov, huge like a sun, rises and sets in the oppressed soul of the poet.
- 11 Cf. Fet's much cited "Šepot, robkoe dyxanie" and "Burja na nebe večernem"; the same principle is manifest in much modernist poetry. Nils Åke Nilsson in his book *The Russian Imaginists*, Stockholm 1970 (= Stockholm Slavic Studies 5), documents such poetry at length.
- 12 The use of connectives in Pasternak's poetry' is not always 'illogical', cf. the poem "Toska" mentioned in the introduction to this article. The poem consists of a collection of obscure images involving multiple metaphorical substitutions as well as syntactic ambiguities. These images are organized into a coherent argument thanks to two crucial moments which signal an opposition between past and present, namely lines 1,1 and 3.1: *dlja ètoj knigi na èpigraf* and *teper'*. These two phrases function as the central points of the argument around which all the images of the poem must be grouped if the theme is to be understood. Were we to remove the connective *teper'* the argument of the poem would be obscured; the argument is exposed through this connective which refers back to the poem's opening words (*dlja ètoj knigi...*) thereby drawing attention to the change in tense (from past in stanzas 1-2 to present in stanzas 3-4) as well as to the fact that *stixi vne ranga* are to be identified as those poems which compose *èta kniga*.
- 13 The question of "linguistic fictions" in Pasternak's early poetry is discussed at length in my forthcoming article.