

Re(-)vision in Boris Pasternak's "City"

Palmer, Isobel

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Re(-)vision in Boris Pasternak's "City"

Boris Pasternak spoke frequently of the significance of the city, coming to view it, in Yury Zhivago's words, as "the only inspiration for truly modern art" (PSS 4:485).¹ Yet even as he expressed his deep admiration for those poets who were able to capture modern urban experience in verse (and particularly Alexander Blok), Pasternak remained critical of his own pre-revolutionary poetry due precisely to its excessively 'modern' manner. As he states in one 1928 letter, written as he was preparing his two earliest poetry collections, *Bliznets v tuchakh* (*A Twin in Clouds*, 1914) and *Poverkh bar'erov* (*Over the Barriers*, 1917), for republication in the volume *Poverkh bar'erov. Stikhi raznykh let* (*Over the Barriers. Poems of Various Years*, 1929): "[e]verything in *Twin* and *Barriers* that is addressed to my erstwhile literary neighbours and which might please them I now find repulsive" (PSS 1:435).

Influenced in part by Pasternak's own negative assessments of this work, scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to Pasternak's early poetic work. The poem at the centre of this article is a case in point. "Gorod. Otryvki tselogo" ("City. Fragments of a Whole," 1916), composed during a crucial period in Pasternak's development as a poet, the year during which he was stationed at a factory in the Urals and completing *Over the Barriers*, has been labelled an "impressionistic [...] fragment" (Barnes, 408)—an unsuccessful attempt to construct a *poema* on lyric foundations and one of a number of unfinished pieces from a period during which Pasternak

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Pasternak's work are from the most recent *Collected Works* (PSS) (Pasternak 2003-2005), with volume number followed by page number; translations are my own.

was still honing his craft.² Dense and fragmentary, the poem's subject matter and style certainly bear the clear imprint of the avant-garde milieu in which it was first conceived and composed. As I will argue here, however, the 'unfinished' quality of the poem as a whole should be taken on its own terms. Defying the straight line of the railway tracks at its centre, the poem generates a multiplicity of possible interpretive directions. When viewed within the avant-garde context in which the poem was first conceived, this complexity reads as not a shortcoming of the poem but its central theme. In what follows, I examine the poem as a set of reflections upon the specific qualities of poetry as an artistic medium, which the technologized urban environment, though apparently antagonistic to poetry, serves to make visible anew.

Heightened sensitivity to artistic media was a defining feature of symbolist and post-symbolist groups, whose inter-artistic experiments fostered a keen awareness of poetic technique, to which the explosion of interest in the analysis of verse forms in the 1910s attests. This was connected in part with a growth of interest in Gotthold Lessing's influential *Laocoön* (1766), in which Lessing argues that the seeming tranquillity of the Laocoön sculpture reflects the specific requirements of its medium: spatial arts such as sculpture, could not depict dynamic events or emotions in the same manner as temporal arts such as poetry. Reacting to this argument in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche contends that all art stages a battle between two opposing forces, the orderly "Apollonian" principle of visual and plastic harmony and the "Dionysian" principle of rhythmic flux. These principles are not aligned with any particular medium but are conceived as the engines of artistic expression as such.

Pasternak was familiar with many of these debates, thanks both to his involvement in modernist circles, which oriented themselves in large part in relation to Nietzsche's categories,

² Amelin's in-depth discussion of the poem is the notable exception.

and to his own study of philosophy and aesthetics. As the son of the visual artist, Leonid Pasternak, and with a formal training in music composition, Pasternak was profoundly aware of the demands and possibilities of different art forms.³ In the early 1910s, he participated in seminars at the Symbolist *Musaget* publishing house, a center of modernist debate about artistic form. He was, moreover, closely acquainted with many of those avant-garde poets and artists who were experimenting most radically with the limits of visual representation and poetic speech. He was a founding member of the literary group *Lirika*, which became the futurist group *Tsentrifuga*, and a close friend of figures such as Sergei Bobrov, the de facto leader of these groups and a visual artist by training; Nikolai Aseev, later a leading figure in the avant-garde group LEF; and Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose ‘cubo-futurist’ verse Pasternak greatly admired.

This kind of inter-artistic dialogue and exchange might seem to run contrary to the notion of medium specificity. This is particularly the case given the evident influence of visual art on Pasternak’s poetry of this period, whether the art of his father’s circle (di Simplicio) or, the cubist art preferred by Pasternak’s own generation (Roman Jakobson 1935). As even a cursory reading of “City” makes clear, prose literature, both Russian and Western European, was also an important influence. Far from disproving the poem’s interest in medium specificity, the evocation of these different media and genres demonstrate its sensitivity to the specific qualities of *poetry*, which become most clear when viewed comparatively. As I demonstrate, the poem—as it shuttles between painting, poetry, and prose; nineteenth-century realism and early twentieth-century modernism and the avant garde; city and “City”—identifies the poetic medium’s most characteristic quality as its *impurity*, always mediating between unlike things.

³ On Pasternak and visual art, see Jakobson 1979; Lavine; Levina; Lotman; Malmstad; Roziner; di Simplicio.

In a nod to this dynamic, this article plots two separate routes through the poem—one that leads us through the tradition of depicting city which was established in nineteenth-century literature, and particularly in Russia’s “Petersburg text”; and another that sets off in the direction proposed by modernist and avant-garde visual representations of urban modernity. As I hope to show, it is precisely where the poem draws on neighbouring genres and media that it examines most intently the specific qualities of poetry itself. These include the particular ways in which poetic language works with time and space. The specificity of the poetic medium, Pasternak’s work of this period asserts, lies in its inherently mixed quality, and the continual processes of revision in which it involves the reader as it shuttles between different material strata, spheres of experience, and—as the final part of this article, which turns to Pasternak’s habit of rewriting his work, suggests—different historical periods. Revisiting this poem does more than fill a hole in Pasternak scholarship, therefore; it also points to an alternative understanding of the concept of medium specificity that bypasses problematic notions of artistic purity and highlights instead the inevitable imbrication of the medium in its context. As Grigorii Amelin writes, the train in this poem is not “a point of view, but the condition for seeing” (76). Seen ‘out of a train window,’ the poetic medium becomes visible not simply as a collection of formal devices and material constraints but as a process of mediation—as not simply a physical artifact but a “perspective for understanding” (Mitchell and Hansen xxi).⁴

Although Pasternak was born and raised in Moscow, a city he called home for much of his life, the many literary references that run through the poem align the city it depicts with the

⁴ For a helpful discussion of infrastructural media, see Peters 14-15.

apocalyptic aura surrounding Petersburg in nineteenth-century Russian literature. It is no coincidence that among the poem's multiple references to realist literature it is Petersburg's most characteristic author, Dostoevsky, whose presence is first felt—and this even before the list of his novels that comes in the third stanza. Materializing out of the landscape and the fog, the city that appears in the first lines of Pasternak's poem echoes in reverse a passage from Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*, later mentioned by name, in which the hero wonders,

“And if this fog breaks up and lifts, won't this whole foul, slimy city go with it, rise up with the fog and vanish like smoke, and leave only the former Finnish swamp, and in the middle, perhaps, for the beauty of it, a bronze horseman on a hot-breathed, overridden steed?” (135)

The quote appears frequently in the work of those Russian modernist writers who regarded Peter's city as both the beginning of modern Russian history and the site of its potential end. It illustrates the strange ontology of this city, as well as its near-total dependence on time for its existence: the day has only to burn off the fog, and the city itself will disappear. Inherited and nurtured by Symbolists certain of their status at the end of time, this temporal aspect of the Petersburg myth took on new urgency in the light of the bloody events of the 1905 revolution and their own yearning for spiritual transcendence. This linear narrative of civilizational decline echoes pan-European narratives about the decadence of the modern city. “City” evokes this tradition in order to challenge it, pointing instead to the alternative temporality made available by verse.

The poem divides roughly into three sections. The first, we realize only gradually, depicts the experience of travelling at high speed on a train towards a city. No sooner have we located ourselves—we seem to be on a train approaching Moscow (“Past, past they fly, croaking, powerful, like masts, in the wake of the train, to Podol’sk”)—the poem changes direction, introducing a flurry of references to literary, historical, and proverbial spaces that render the singular direction of the train suddenly dramatically centrifugal: first Tmutarakan’, the name of a medieval Kievan Rus’ principality and trading town that is also used colloquially to refer to something impossibly far away and unknown, “beyond the seven seas.” This city-myth then falls into an epileptic fit that evokes *The Idiot*’s Prince Myshkin and Dostoevsky himself, several of whose novels are then named before a series of references to historical Moscow, Tatars, and Siberia. The disorientation produced by this sequence is compounded by change of temporal direction that accompanies it: viewed from the future-oriented perspective introduced by the epithet “prophetic” (“veshchie,” attached to “rails” just a few lines prior), the poem-train must track backwards to stop at this series of historical milestones. The uncertainty produced by these rapid changes of location, scale, and direction leech into the next section, in which the train arrives in the city, a space of rushing activity that takes place just beyond the poem’s circle of vision (the adverb “gde-to” (“somewhere”) is repeated nine times in this section). This new section again moves from what appears to be a depiction, albeit highly stylized, of contemporary urban space to a montage of literary, historical, and mythological spaces both near and far, referencing Herculaneum, Cinderella, Madame Bovary, Maupassant, Balzac, and, obliquely,

Anna Karenina.⁵ The poem ends back on a train, now steaming towards a horizon figured as both a literal point in space and the final, symbolic border towards which all life moves.

Purposefully eliding causal links between the events it depicts and constantly tracking backwards and forwards through time, the poem rejects the end-focused trajectory of Russia's homegrown urban myths. This ever-present threat of the End looms over the poem's references to the Petersburg myth. In the stanzas devoted to the city (beginning ("Gde-to s shumom padaet voda" ("Somewhere water falls noisily")), the abundance of rushing water recalls Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*, which chronicles one of the many floods to threaten coastal Petersburg over the course of its existence. This echo is amplified by the horses that come to life in these stanzas, seeming to leap off the stone metopes (a feature of the classical architecture so typical of the Petersburg cityscape) in a direct reference to the Falconet statue that abandons its pedestal to chase after the tormented hero of Pushkin's *poema*.⁶

The invocation of these tropes in Pasternak's poem subverts this literary myth and calls into question the historical determinism it implies. Numerous images undermine the fatalistic

⁵ See discussion in Amelin. The maxim "Honni soit qui mal y pense," which appears towards the end of the poem, also occurs in *Anna Karenina* (Part I, Chapter XVII). Amelin also notes a coded reference to Tolstoy's novel and the maiden name of its heroine in the line "fiery saltmarsh" ("ognevoi solonchak"). According to Vladimir Dal's dictionary, "oblon'e" means "broad water meadows, sometimes with saltmarshes" ("obshirnye mokrye luga, inogda s solonchakami") (93).

⁶ For more on Pasternak's engagement with Pushkin and his "sculptural myth," as Jakobson termed it, see discussion of "Marburg" (1916/1928) in Fleishman (109-110). The theme of the 'living statue' is directly tied to Pushkin in "Vozmozhnost'," another poem composed in 1916 that depicts the city in a cubo-futurist key. We might also hear an echo here of Andrei Bely's 1913 novel, *Petersburg*, which features a roaming statue of its own, also in a nod to Pushkin. Pasternak deeply admired Bely's novel and wrote a poem titled "Petersburg" in 1915

view of the city's historical destiny. The apparent finality of the eruption of Vesuvius for the inhabitants of Herculaneum is negated by the appearance of "*Cendrillon* of all the ashes," as though resurrected from the ruins of this ancient catastrophe. This sequence suggests that such threat that the city does hold may be an opportunity, a beginning rather than an end: death becomes a potentially transformative threshold. The tension between predetermination, on the one hand, and the possibility of life and action, on the other, is amplified by the museum's "suspicion" of the theatre. So, too, the numerous references to literary fiction scattered through the poem subvert the inevitability associated with their plots. If Amelin is right to suggest that the "Chimerical Novel" is a reference to *Anna Karenina*, the presence of a woman on the train journey into and past the last stanza of the poem rejects novelistic determinism: the Anna of "City" is not crushed by a train but rides it. A similar role is played by the series of conditionals that follow the line "Bovary! Without her..." ("Bovari! Bez nee b...").

This thematic resistance to the myth of the End is also realized in the structure of the poem, which begins not just *in medias res* but almost at its final destination. The final stanza of the poem, conversely, evokes the Rubicon and death only to attach these to the horizon; the point of no return recedes indefinitely, the poem's end but the start of a long journey. This refusal to bow to straightforward chronology is echoed by the jumble of seasons through which the poem moves, beginning in the damp and fog of what appears to be autumn, proceeding to the sultriness of summer thunderstorms and a "Chimerical Novel / written in autumn, in the rain", before jumping to Lenten time and spring, and thence rapidly to "foul December." The poem's considerable length works to further attenuate our sense of beginning and ending, as the condensed, momentary impressions normally associated with the intimacy of the lyric, invoked by the opening address to "you" ("ty gorish"), are supplanted by the sprawl of the ensuing lines.

Throughout his life, on various occasions, Pasternak expressed his distaste for the “iron chain of causes and effects” and the “law of sequels and retributions” so typical of nineteenth-century realist literature (“Three Letters” 4; cf. “Safe Conduct”, ch. 1, section 6). In a 1913 letter to his friend and fellow writer, Konstantin Loks, he attaches this impatience with novelistic predictability directly to Balzac (mentioned by name in the second part of this poem), writing of the temptation to “part with him at the halfway point, leaving him to wander around his invention on his own” (*PSS* 7:142). In “City”, by pointed contrast, events are unpredictable and liable to change: the museum’s suspicion of the theatre (what might it do next?); the night’s “ruined plan”; the buildings and birds that await meetings never to take place. Even the city tram struggles to follow its assigned course. The novel in this poem is open, written in the rain and the conditional tense; it, too, is swept up by the rushing floodwater that, sweeping away the distinction between animate and inanimate, brings the city in the poem to chaotic life.

Rejecting the fatalistic teleology of Petersburg myth, the poem might be regarded as an assertion of the special temporality of poetry, which, as Kevin Platt and Konstantin Polivanov observe, “is free of the imperative to master time, to ‘represent’ it in a coherent, sequential pattern. Instead, the lyric enacts moments in time from within” (514). More specifically, “City” emphasizes the manner in which the lyric and the structure of the poetic line create their own temporal patterns, in which individual moments, if not sequential in a linear sense, are nonetheless importantly defined by their relation to that which precedes and follows them—what Yury Tynianov would call the “regressive” and “progressive” factors in verse structure (60-61). On this view, the “successive” quality of verse language is one of its four most essential characteristics, alongside the “dynamization” of this verbal material that is the result of the “unity” and “density” of the verse line, and indicates the processual manner in which meaning is

produced and perceived in poetry, where each new word simultaneously modifies the quality of those that preceded it and establishes new expectations of what will come next (Tynianov 76).

This dual orientation towards past and future, origin and destination, is dramatized in Pasternak's poem. The poem-train is defined by its motion, and so can have neither beginning nor end—a fact, as we have seen, that the opening and closing lines of the poem emphasize. At the same time, it does not move in a void but comes *from* somewhere and moves *towards* something else. This is thematized by the shifts of temporal and spatial perspective encountered in the opening lines of the poem, in which the speaker's gaze focuses first on what lies ahead and then, with a flick of the head, turns to rest on what recedes behind (Up to meet us, through the glowing sky, from the city, as from the sea / Enormous woods race through the air [...] Past, past they fly, croaking, powerful, like masts, in the wake of the train, to Podol'sk / Raging and murmuring.") Similarly, the end of the poem moves steadily towards the horizon even as its imagery reaches back through the poem to the origins of its journey. The image of the rowan tree ("riabina"), for example, which appears in the final stanza of the poem, transforms for a final time the images of fire and burning that extend through the poem, from the burning landscape of its opening lines to the realization of this metaphor in the eruption of Vesuvius over Herculaneum. Although the "burning" rowan in these final stanzas is on one level an ominous portent (i.e., future-oriented and fatalistic), its resurrection from the ashes of this earlier explosion, in addition to its evocation of the seasons, attach it firmly to life, renewal, and a cyclical temporality that, much like poetic imagery itself, looks both forwards and back.⁷ The

⁷ Cf. a poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, composed in August 1916: "The rowan set aflame / by a red brush / The leaves were falling / I was born..." ("Krasnoiu kist'iu / Riabina zazhglas' / Padali list'ia / Ia rodilas'...") The poem first appeared in the 1922 edition of *Milestones (Versty)*. Pasternak read this collection in the same year, an encounter

train at the center of the poem thus becomes emblematic not so much of the poetry's rejection of linear temporality as of the constant acts of re-vision that the particular type of sequential trajectory plotted by poetry both demands and makes possible. The source of poetry's dynamism—the engine of this poem's train—is the ongoing reorientation towards both past and future to which, as the poem unfurls, each new word gives rise.

“City” does not locate the specificity of poetry purely in its temporality, however. As the central image of the train already makes clear, it also examines poetry's distinctive spatial dimension. This dimension is emphasized throughout the poem, particularly in those parts of the poem that also imply some kind of visual experience. The effect is particularly stark in the poem's opening lines:

Уже за версту
 В капиллярах ненастья и вереска
 Густ и солон тобою туман.
 Ты горишь, как лиман,
 Обжигая пространства, как пересыпь,
 Огневой солончак
 Растекающихся по стеклу

that gave rise to a lengthy and affectionate correspondence between the like-minded poets. A contemporary reader of “City” will also note its recurrence in *Doctor Zhivago* (Chapter XII, “Rowanberries in Sugar”), where it is unambiguously a symbol of life (the rowan tree saves Yury from death).

Фонарей, каланча,
Пронизавшая заревом мглу.

Establishing multiple lines of sight, the spatial prepositions and prefixes that proliferate in these first lines combine with the striking series of visual impressions they describe to delineate a landscape, albeit one that is at first somewhat difficult to discern. This pictorial quality is reinforced by the layout of these lines, which draws our attention to the space occupied by the poem itself, and—perhaps more fancifully—the ‘frame’ provided by the “-u” sound with which this section begins and ends (Uzhe [...] mglU).⁸ Yet if the poem resembles a painting, what kind of painting is it? And what, more importantly, does this comparison reveal?

The numerous lines of sight suggested by these lines’ many spatial prefixes are perhaps most reminiscent of cubism and the multiplicity of perspectives associated with this movement in visual art. Pasternak himself later emphasized the importance of cubism for his work during the period 1914-16 (Maslenikova 170-71), which he characterized above all by reference to its “painterliness” (*zhivopisnost*) (Pasternak 1989, 286). Malmstad highlights in particular the time Pasternak spent at the apartment-studio of Aristarkh Lentulov, a meeting place for a wide variety of avant-garde and establishment figures during these years (301-02); as he ventures, Lentulov’s 1913 paintings, “Moscow” (“Moskva”) and “Saint Basil” (“Vasilii Blazhennyi”), both exhibited at the Jack of Diamonds exhibition in Moscow in February-March 1914, appear to have been the immediate inspiration for two of Pasternak’s earliest published poems, “Cupronickel”

⁸ I have followed the layout used when the poem was originally published in *Liren*’ (Aseev et al., 15). Such graphic experimentation is rare for Pasternak, even at the height of his futurist phase; its use here is therefore notable.

(“Mel’khor”) and “On Ivan the Great” (“Ob Ivane Velikom”), which appeared that same year.⁹ We might also discern the shadow of these paintings in the opening lines of “City”, in which the city, as in Lentulov’s pieces, looms red and fiery out of the gloom. The cubistic style of these lines and their references to fire and a “fire watchtower” (*kalancha*) also invokes Ol’ga Rozanova’s paintings “City” and “City on Fire” (“Pozhar v gorode”, first exhibited in 1915 at the “Tramvai V” exhibition in Petrograd).¹⁰ More generally, we might think of the vivid crimsons of cubo-futurist poems such as Mayakovsky’s programmatic “Night” (1912) or the scarlet scenery of his *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*, first staged in 1913, where red colouring evokes both the excitement of nighttime entertainment and, more ominously, the apocalyptic dawn that the degeneracy of such urban attractions threatens to usher in.¹¹ In Pasternak’s poetry, Jakobson writes, as in cubist painting, we find “[t]he mutual penetration of objects (the realization of metonymy in the strict sense of the word) and their decomposition (the realization of synecdoche)” (426/311).¹² Such traits are in evidence in the opening lines of “City”, where qualities migrate between features of the landscape: the image of the “fiery saltmarsh,” in which the lights of the city or the sunset leech into the surrounding land, is one straightforward

⁹ These poems appeared in *Rukonog* in 1914 (a volume put out by Sergei Bobrov under the banner of the newly-formed futurist group, *Tsentrifuga*) and had never been republished during the poet’s lifetime.

¹⁰ More generally, as John Bowlts notes, “it was a speeding train which informed many of the key works of the avant-garde, from Natalia Goncharova’s *Aeroplane above a Train* (1913) to Ivan Kliun’s *Landscape Rushing Past* (1914) and from Kazimir Malevich’s *Simultaneous Death of a Man in an Aeroplane and on a Railroad* (1913) to Liubov Popova’s *Traveling Woman* (two versions, both 1915)” (Bowlts 101).

¹¹ Terekhina. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for these suggestions.

¹² For all quotations from this essay, page numbers for the German original (Jakobson 1979) are given first, followed by page numbers for the English translation (Jakobson 1987).

example. This sense of “mutual penetration” is intensified by the almost ubiquitous, though somewhat unusual, use of enjambment in this section, whereby lines appear to stand on their own until, retrospectively, their relationship to the next line comes into view. The frequent repetition of the assonant “-u”—the sound that ‘frames’ the section as a whole—in both line-end and internal positions adds to the impression of overlapping frames created by these run-on lines. The lack of conjugated verbs, meanwhile, simultaneously lends solidity to the individual features of this landscape and obscures the syntactical relationship between them, further preventing a coherent, unified picture from emerging. These effects also serve what Yury Lotman regards as Pasternak’s larger project, namely to reveal the underlying unity of all things: freed from the constraints of traditional perspective or the conventional (fixed) relationship between signifier and signifier, the objects in Pasternak’s poetic world instead exist in their true dynamic relation to one another (Lotman 223-38).

Nonetheless, we should be cautious of aligning Pasternak’s work of this period too categorically with cubism. As Dasha di Simplicio argues, effects such as fragmentation and the interpenetration of space are not the sole preserve of cubist painting but are also found in the impressionist art developed in Russia by, among others, Pasternak’s father.¹³ And indeed, the scene described in these opening lines does not resist perspectival organization as thoroughly as

¹³ Levina also regards impressionism as the more important influence on Pasternak, citing what she interprets as a veiled criticism of the *Jack of Diamonds* group in *Safe Conduct*: “Like all hypocrites, Moscow lived an intensified external life and was vivid with the unnatural vividness of a flower-shop window in winter” (PSS 3:224/Livingstone 142). *Jack of Diamonds* was originally the name of an exhibition of French cubist paintings in Moscow in 1910. Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, and Kazimir Malevich also showed work at this event. The group continued to put on exhibitions until 1917; Rozanova and Lentulov are among the list of participants.

at first appears. At first, certainly, the two halves of the comparisons through which the opening of the poem sketches the landscape refuse to settle into a coherent image: “you burn, like a coastal salt lake / scorching space, like a barrier spit.” Here, the “like” (“kak”) that functions linguistically to link the two halves of each simile only highlights the fundamental difference between fire and water, the elements compared. This paradoxical quality persists when the two are brought together in the next line’s “fiery saltmarsh,” although already a more legible scene—a landscape bathed in sunset, perhaps—is beginning to emerge. Eventually, the tension is fully resolved as the final lines of the stanza bring into focus the glass window through which the speaker looks (“of streaming out across the glass / lamps”). “Fire” and “water” are revealed to be separate elements and the reason for their coupling becomes clear: the lights of the distant city are seen through the condensed fog or rain on the windowpane. In other words, the scene turns out to be described from a single, fixed perspective, even as it appears—as in cubist painting—to be viewed from multiple points simultaneously.

In this sense, the poem is more closely aligned with more traditional, pre-cubist art, when “the viewer, like the painter, could stand, as it were, inside the canvas, occupying a place within its perspective, while, of course, standing outside the picture and viewing it from that vantage” (Malmstad 318). This is made most clear by the prominent position occupied in the poem by the horizon, which, although present in these opening lines only by implication (the lights of the city in the distance), brings order to the poem’s visual plane both here and at the end of the poem. This is in contrast to the experience of viewing cubist paintings, where “no internal or external vantage point can provide the unique simultaneous view displayed in the planarity of the surface of the canvas” (Malmstad 318).

Other aspects of the poem also invite comparisons with impressionist painting, particularly the manner in which impressionism temporalizes the traditionally fixed space of the painting. This is also an effect of cubist painting, but whereas the latter seeks to replicate the durational aspects of perception on the flat surface of the canvas by presenting multiple perspectives simultaneously, impressionist painting instead draws attention to the provisional quality of its own framing—to the ambiguous relationship between the segment of landscape depicted and its frame or lack thereof. As Brian O’Doherty writes, with the emergence of impressionist art,

“Pictures begin to appear that put pressure on the frame. The archetypal composition here is the edge-to-edge horizon, separating zones of sky and sea occasionally underlined by beach with maybe a figure facing, as everyone does, the sea. Formal composition is gone [...] What is left is an ambiguous surface partly framed from the inside, by the horizon.”
(n.p.).

The transitional time of day such paintings capture amplifies the impression “of an eye scanning” that the equivocal nature of their framing and our awareness of the space outside the picture also produce. Placing a question mark over the notion of a self-contained landscape, whole unto itself, the import of such paintings lies at their edges, at the place where the canvas opens onto the space beyond it.

We have already observed the manner in which “City” pushes against its own beginning, as well as the striking openness of its final stanzas, cut through by the same expressive horizon that O’Doherty identifies as a central feature of impressionist painting. The fiery scenes with

which it opens and closes place it clearly at sunset. Extracting individual features of the landscape from the ordinarily sequential flow of linguistic description, moreover, the lines we have been examining here highlight the parenthetical, provisional quality of each line's "frame," an effect that is emphasized by enjambment and reinforced graphically, here and throughout the first part of the poem, by frequent changes in line justification. While the varying length of each line draws attention to their status as distinct units, this graphic segregation is tempered by the manner in which these borders are blurred by fractured rhymes and anagrammatic echoes: so, for example, segments of the final word of the first line, "**verstu**" ("verst") are picked up not only by "**vereska**" ("heather") and "**tuman**" ("fog"), the final words in the two subsequent lines, but also by "**gust**" ("thick"), the first word of the third line; "**peresyp**" ("barrier spit") then reaches back, via "**vereska**," to "**verstu**" again. In this way, the lines emphasize the dual effect of fast motion, which both generates a rapid series of new frames for vision and renders these frames radically provisional. As such, they recreate in exaggerated fashion the "temporal quickening" associated with the impressionist landscape, drawing attention to the sequential quality of visual experience and to the dynamic relationship between the depicted scene and its surroundings.

On a biographical level, the poem's debt to impressionism may seem less compelling than its links with cubism and cubo-futurism, the defining aesthetic styles for the circles with which Pasternak was most closely involved at the time of writing this poem. By the same token, however, the fact that the influence of this earlier style is nonetheless discernible here is important. "City" does not so much attempt to mimic a particular style of painting as to evoke visual art *in general* as a foil to poetry itself. This point is reinforced by the impression created by the numerous landscapes through which the poem-train moves, which resemble nothing so much as a series of traditional artistic genres: the landscape, the seascape, the cityscape, even the

historical panorama. This goes some way towards clarifying the poem's confused chronology: as in representational landscape painting, each scene is depicted at a specific time of the year. It also confirms that "City" is concerned not simply with representing an urban scene as with the nature and conditions of representation as such. Much as the poem invokes urban prose in order to differentiate its own trajectory from that inscribed by this tradition, the most important effect of these references to painting is to highlight the fact that "City", for all it borrows from visual art, is itself not a painting but a poem.

As Jakobson points out, while the futurist groups with which Pasternak was aligned during the 1910s at first regarded painting as the most important art form, they quickly came to view poetry as the definitive artistic medium (417/303). It is no accident that his own discussion of Pasternak notes his links with cubist visual art in the context of an investigation into the nature of *poetic* images and their functioning, and particularly the manner in which Pasternak's preferred poetic figure, metonymy, "transforms spatial distribution and temporal succession" (425/310). We saw above some of the ways in which "City" subverts the notion of linear temporal progression, much as, in the manner of a cubist or impressionist painting, it calls into question assumptions about spatial distribution. The opening lines make clear the extent to which this latter effect is a conscious device. The prominence of the repeated "like" ("kak") in these lines draws our attention most insistently not to any specific visual intertext but to the mechanisms of poetic figuration itself.

Poetic figures generate new meaning precisely by creating, and asking us to resolve, tensions: between tenor and vehicle, between literal and metaphorical interpretations, between "identity and difference in the interplay of resemblance" (Ricoeur 247). Or, as Jakobson writes, "[t]he essence of poetic figures of speech does not simply lie in their recording the manifold

relationships between things, but also in the way they dislocate familiar relationships” (425/310). Ordinarily, this moment of difference is resolved, held in check by “the convention of metaphorical coherence”—the idea that “one should attempt through semantic transformations to produce coherence on both levels of tenor and vehicle,” that is, to find the characteristic that the two parts of the comparison share in common (Culler 115). Pasternak’s “like”—hanging awkwardly at the end of the line, suturing two fundamentally unlike things—exposes this contrivance. Yet this is not so much an exposé of the poetic image as a celebratory display of the dual vision it makes possible.

A similar effect is felt on the level of the whole poem, in which the city seems now to be Moscow, now Petersburg, or now some third—Herculaneum, say, or even Usol’e, that “heavily salted place” (“ochen’ nasolennoe mesto”) in the Urals where Pasternak was living at the time of the poem’s composition (*PSS* 7:254).¹⁴ Such layering plays with similarity and distance, superimposing places that are temporally as well as spatially distinct to confound both the notion of linear movement through time and that of a single point of departure and a fixed destination. In this sense, the city in the poem is *both* Moscow and St. Petersburg, and neither—it is both ends of the train line, as well as the innumerable ends to which life and its branching network of tracks lead. The poem’s interest in edges and overlapping frames complements its repeated negation of temporal ends and beginnings to foreground above all moments and spaces of transition. Indeed, rather than urban space itself, it is the contrast between city and non-city that is perhaps most important in this poem, as the disorienting disjuncture between its title, “City,” and the natural landscape of its first lines already suggests. Poetry is “a suburb, not a refrain” (“prigorod, a ne pripev”), as one of Pasternak’s later poems—in which poetry is once again

¹⁴ The Urals are a center of salt mining in Russia.

likened to travel by train—declares; it comes into being in the place where the city street hits the countryside, that space between life as we know it and the unfurling expanse of life as, through poetry, we are about to discover it.

While scholarship usually emphasizes the avant-garde desire to break down barriers between verbal and visual representation, Pasternak's poetry draws our attention to the differences between them (differences we ourselves in fact acknowledge whenever we say that a poem is *like* this or that painting or, for that matter, a city). In the particular case of "City" and the artistic context out of which it emerged, this play of similarity and difference emerges as the defining feature of the poetic medium and the key to its specificity. Much like the train, "City" seems to imply, poetry plays a vital infrastructural role in our perception and experience of the world. The "cubist" aspects of Pasternak's work are located in the specific way in which his images—and poetic figures in general—triangulate the verbal, semantic element of poetic language with its sonic qualities, on the one hand, and its visual stratum, on the other. Poetry, in this sense, always involves us in a series of dynamic transitions: between the different material strata of poetic language, on the one hand, and between objects and concepts that are distant but "alike," on the other, and in this manner reveals the provisional nature of the labels and status we attach to them. Whether bringing these parts of reality into contact metaphorically (as in figures of speech), or connecting them more concretely, by highlighting the shared sonic, visual, or semantic qualities of the words attached to them, "City" repeatedly draws our attention to the specific qualities of poetry as an artistic medium. In so doing, it seeks to account more generally for the new angles of vision that poetry—*like* train travel, the modern city, or (cubist) painting—opens up: to understand the "miracle of transformation which, in poetry, reality undergoes" (Al'fonsov 331).

“It contained everything,” Pasternak writes of Mayakovsky’s 1913 play, *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy (Vladimir Maiakovskii: Tragediia)* in his 1931 autobiography, *Okhrannaia gramota (Safe Conduct)*. “Here there was that profound animation without which there is no originality, that infinity which opens out in life from any point and in any direction and without which poetry is just a misunderstanding not yet cleared up.” (*PSS* 3:218/Livingstone 105).¹⁵ While scholars frequently note Mayakovsky’s influence on Pasternak’s urbanism, it is perhaps this principle that most profoundly unites these two poets. As in “City,” Pasternak’s poetry opens up a multiplicity of possible interpretive routes, attaching the start and end of any reading to the same ever-receding horizon as that towards which the poem-train moves.

The many directions in which “City” sends us as we search for the appropriate artistic, historical, biographical, or geographical context within which to understand it multiply yet further when we take into account the revised versions of the poem, first published in the futurist almanac, *Liren’* in 1920 under the title “City. Fragments of a Whole.” In 1928, a completely new section was published in *Novyi mir* under the title “Return. Postscript to ‘City’”—a heading that retrospectively casts the original poem as not fragments but a whole to which a postscript (“pripiska”) may be added. The two parts appear together for the first time in the 1929 *Poems of Various Years* in the section “Epic Motifs,” where the original text is subject to some minor changes, as well as the more major change effected by the insertion of “Return”. Inserted before the stanzas dedicated to the city and thus prolonging the train’s initial *approach* to the city, this new section adds a further twist to the confusion of directions that defines the beginning of the

¹⁵ Translation modified.

poem. Added to the middle of the poem rather than the end, this “postscript” also makes literal the poetics of overlapping frames noted above. The revised version of the poem, in other words, only emphasizes further the poem’s interest in the specific qualities of the poetic medium: its complex patterns of sequence and return; the manner in which poetic figures ‘rearrange’ time and space; the “multiplicity of meanings and diversity of relevant contexts” in which “the power of poetry lies” (Khitrova 285).

In this sense, “revision” is as an inherent quality of poetry, rather than merely a quirk of Pasternak’s poetic practice. Still, Pasternak’s special passion for revising his poetry is clearly significant, not least for what it tells us about his youthful involvement with the avant garde. Some take the extent of the revisions carried out while preparing his pre-revolutionary verse for republication in 1928 as proof of Pasternak’s abiding antipathy towards avant-garde art and particularly his own work of this period, an interpretation that appears to be confirmed by the increasing emphasis Pasternak placed on simplicity and clarity of expression in his later statements on art. Yet, as Lazar Fleishman points out, these revisions in fact do not simplify the poetry in these volumes; on the contrary, they only make it *more* complex, supplying it with additional interpretive contexts. The point here is not to establish whether Pasternak did or did not disapprove of his pre-revolutionary work and avant-garde art more generally, but to recognize his deep sense of art’s attachment to its time.

The train journey at the center of “City” is important not so much for what it tells us about the experience of travelling by train as for what it reveals about poetry’s own infrastructure: the structures and techniques by means of which poetry “packs” the world and experience in its *coffres volants*. Combining the analytic gaze of the cubo-futurist avant garde with an impressionist’s sense of the underlying contiguity of experience, urban themes and

nature, contemporary reality and the “ancient, primordial cosmos” (Drozda 224), Pasternak’s work not only embodies the complex dialectic of tradition and innovation out of which modernist and avant-garde art emerged, it also reminds us of the inevitably provisional nature of representation as such, where the fragment (a scene glimpsed out of the train window) must continually be situated in relation to the whole (the panorama that endlessly unfolds). It is thus this poem-locomotive’s orientation towards the *motif* that we should understand as its guiding principle. The recurring patterns of the motif counterbalance the linear progress associated with the epic narrative, making the case, instead, for the epic potential latent in the multitude of perspectives that the present moment contains.

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