

I Remember

Sketch for an Autobiography

B.Pasternak

April 10, 2011

This is not the first time Pasternak wrote an autobiography. His 'Safe Conduct' is a full one, but one to which he took exception at the close of his life. What this book does is merely to present a few sketches, as the subtitle indicates. The idea of writing a full scale autobiography seems to daunt him at his age. He has also just finished his Doctor Zhivago, which he must have felt was his testament to posterity. There are certain things he anyway wanted to have told. Thus the account is poetic and dense being deprived of stretches of transportation, which is usually the curse of systematic accounts of a life.

The book contains some exact remembrances from his childhood. Such concrete and vivid mental pictures he cherishes. But he also feels compelled to produce more abstract generalities in order not to get bogged down in detail.

As noted we are not treated to a continuous narrative, and very little of his actual personal life is revealed (or even relived), instead we are treated to brief sketches of famous contemporaries in the art. His father was a distinguished painter and illustrator, and in the capacity of the latter he also illustrated the works of Tolstoy. The Resurrection came out in regular installments in a periodical, as was the custom in the 19th century (even longer in backward Russia?), so there were definite deadlines. He remembered as a child a railway official in full garb showing up at the crucial time at the apartment, as if it was a train, in order to deliver the latest work. His mother was a concert pianist, who had given up her professional career as a consequence of marriage. The family being highly artistic and successful he had the benefit from infancy to rub shoulders with the artistic elite of Russia. Tolstoy once visited his home when he was a child, and he went with his father to document the death of the great man, dealing with the demonstration of grief of the distraught widow who had just tried to kill herself by throwing herself into a pond. Another great acquaintance, from whom he was to profit more was Scriabin, who used to go on country walks with his father. Scriabin was full of himself, and used to dance and run, like flat stones skidding on water, during the excursions. He also encouraged Pasternak's early musical career. In fact at an early age Pasternak had chosen music. He wanted to become a composer. He pursued his vocation for six years during his adolescence to the exclusion of almost anything else. Then he suddenly decided to abandon it. Why? As a composer he made definite advances, but as to the practical he was impossible. He confessed that he could hardly play the piano, and was unable to read a score with any fluency. This discrepancy between his high-flown musical ideas and his technical mastery eventually made composing into a constant torment. How come such a discrepancy came about? Because he was an arrogant youth, and as such he despised anything that was uncreative and smacked of hackwork. *In real life, I thought, everything must be a miracle, everything must be predestined from above, nothing must be deliberately designed or*

planned, nothing must be done to follow one's own fancy. He blamed this partly on the influence of Scriabin, whose egocentric attitude was only appropriate in his case. What we have here is the confrontation between the incipient maturity of the emerging adult with the infantile megalomaniac of raw youth. Lucky he was that he made this confrontation at an early age, and not much later, when it would surely have been too late, and too much investment had been made in a mori-bound career, to be recklessly divested. After that he went to Marburg in Germany, studied philosophy until he was absorbed by poetry.

He was for some time a friend of Mayakovsky until there was the inevitable fall-out. He at first underestimated the gifts of Tsvetayeva, then changed his mind, sought and received her friendship and exchanged over the years many letters. He has things to say about poetry, or rather how to write it. He recalls his first efforts, finding the process of crossing out, revising, correcting so pleasurable that it brought tears to his eyes. However, he came to resent having published his first work of poetry - *A twin in the Clouds* as being too immature, too derivative and above all too pretentious. A censure that can be applied to almost all debuts.

However, what strikes one most in his sketch are not so much the evocations of interesting poets and writers, such tend to be rather alike bordering on the panegyric, but of nature. There was more of a contrast between city and country in his childhood and youth, the old writer laments, and gives tantalizing glimpses of how it was to leave Moscow for the countryside, where the real life of Russia seemed to take place. Unforgettable is the report on an extended sledge trip, with three horses in single line trotting through snow-country, silvery spruces having their branches dusting the vehicle travelling at a spanking pace.

Much of his work was actually taken up by translation. Especially of Shakespeare. Hence he has interesting things to say about the art of the old bard. His plays make up a mixture of prose and blank verse. As to the former it is delightfully conversational as to the latter highly metaphorical, sometimes needlessly so, becoming in the process artificial and contrived. His prose is in short finished and polished, while his verse was chaotic, shocking people as disparate in time and temperament as Voltaire and Tolstoy. It seems as if verse is Shakespeare's quickest way of putting down his thoughts, the mode most natural and immediate to him. Pasternak observes that much of his verse seems to serve as preliminary sketches for prose. But of course therein lies the secret of his genius, if anywhere. His sketchy approach is powerful, uncontrollable, disorderly and above all abundant. His imagery is not always equal to itself. It is as if the right word does not present itself unbidden to the writer, and instead he pours forth a great variety of inadequate substitutions. Shakespeare must have written in a hurry. His plays are filled with repetitions, as if he did not remember today what he had been writing the day before. Repetition when intended can of course be very effective, when hapless merely distracting. But of course with Shakespeare he is considered divine, and his defects are not usually pointed out, but explained away, I would say. What should never be forgotten is the rhythm of his language. A rhythm particularly conducive to the laconic nature of the English language. In particular Hamlet would have been impossible without it. He notes that in this play every single cluster of characters are characterized by their own peculiar rhythm. He then goes on to make comments on each of his translated plays in turn. He likes Romeo and Juliet. The poetry is at its best, having the freshness and simplicity of

prose. Of Othello he is more guarded. It is too rational, the sequence of events follow like in a logical argument. At Shakespeare's time, the concept of equality of peoples did not exist, he reminds us, on the other hand Shakespeare believed in the equality of opportunity. A man should not be judged by his origin, but by what he had accomplished.

Shakespeare wrote for the stage. This means he wrote for the audience. His plays would not have worked had the audience not readily understood all those classical references, which modern readers need to be instructed on. Pasternak claims that people were more educated then. That Latin instead of being a sign of sophistication was at the time considered the lowest rung of learning, something you had to be thoroughly drilled in before you can step higher on the ladder. Pasternak also briefly discusses the authenticity of Shakespeare. Did he really exist, as some people have doubted. He points to his favour the uniformity in style of his plays, as well as the obvious weaknesses, which would not have been allowed, had there been some conspiracy of sorts. Why are such doubts sown, he ponders, maybe due to the peculiarly passionate interest of ungifted people in those who are very great; imposing on the latter their own misleading yardsticks. Shakespeare simply does not measure up, hence there must be something else in play. The sloppiness of Shakespeare is due to his fresh conception of how to depict life, of rejecting the notion that art must be artificial and remote from life. If anything the art of Shakespeare depended on being close to life, to pander in a sense to the demands and tastes of the real public, not an idealized version of it.

Are the plays of Shakespeare really categorized as comedies or tragedies. No, Pasternak claims, elements of both are always present, and things can turn one way as well as the other. In King Lear the good guys flounder as people do most of the time, only the villains are of one piece, never contradicting themselves. The murders of Macbeth likewise stem from too much reliance on rationality. To kill is an act that has to be planned perfectly in order to be able to get away with it. Macbeth muses that once he will become king and the law he is inviolable. He does not reckon with forces beyond the calculable. And the wife of Macbeth, far from being his evil genius, as she has so often been portrayed as. Her sin is that of loyalty to her husband.

April 10, 2011

