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## SOME PROBLEMS OF SEMANTICS IN PAINTING AND IN POETRY: MAIAKOWSKII, PASTERNAK AND THE ITALIAN MANIFESTO OF FUTURIST PAINTING

This paper endeavours to show how an idea first conceived and formulated in one domain of art—painting—may be more profoundly perceived and more successfully realized in another domain—poetry.

The problem, of course, is not new. From the beginning the association between the verbal and the other arts has existed as a consequence of an inherent relationship between the aesthetic and communicative properties of signs, colours, sounds, etc. Within this framework of reference one can speak of a kind of general or comparative semantics of art. Unfortunately, up to now the methodology of a comparative analysis has not been agreed upon, although quite a few observations and proposals, mostly of a general nature, have been made.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, certain periods show a more intimate contact between the arts, a more intense interest in “transposing” concepts and ideas from one domain to another. The Baroque, for example, was a period when striking effects were achieved in literature by an imaginative adaptation of ideas originally developed in the figurative arts.<sup>2</sup> The most striking “literariness” of painting, sculpture, music, etc. can be observed during

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, T. Munro, *The Arts and their Interrelations* (New York, 1949). The most promising in this respect seems to be the semiotic approach. A concrete example (though limited to one criterion, namely, the “point of view” from which the structure, whether narrative or visual, develops) is B. Uspenskii's *Poetika kompozitsii*, published in the important series, *Semioticheskie issledovaniia po teorii iskusstva* (Moscow, 1970), English translation *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> See F. Strich, *Die Übertragung des Barockbegriffs von der bildenden Kunst auf die Dichtung* in R. Stamm (Ed.), *Die Kunstformen des Barockzeitalters* (Bern, 1956), pp. 246-265.



the periods of Realism and Symbolism. Although mostly thematic, the influence often went deeper; certain structural elements, so spectacularly developed in the narrative forms during these periods, entered the area of "structuring" paintings, sculptures, or musical compositions. They often used the "language" of the narrative, telling their "story", organizing a "plot" conveying a "fabula".

At no time, perhaps, has the interpenetration of ideas, concepts, and techniques been so intense as during the period of the various Avant-Garde movements that swept through Europe and the Americas at the turn of the twentieth century. Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Vorticism, the various Spanish and South Americanisms, are all movements where this contact can be seen.

In Russia the interrelation between poetry and the arts at that time was no less intimate than in Italy, France, or England, although the main preoccupations in poetry were naturally highly logocentric.<sup>3</sup> Such poets as Maiakovskii and Pasternak, although they did not represent identical tendencies, often resorted in their works to concepts and techniques characteristic of the figurative arts. They differed however quite considerably, both in the theory and in the practice of this artistic "transposition". Actually Maiakovskii rarely went much deeper in this respect than rearranging his text syntactically and morphologically - even if often merely by means of typography - so as to give it new shape, new dynamic rhythm, and in some instances unusual semantic nuances. Pasternak, though technically much more conventional, managed to penetrate deeper into the sphere of semantics. A closer look at his poetic practice reveals a surprising presence postulated by the Italian Futurists in their "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting", of the idea of "vision in motion".

While it would be a gross exaggeration to claim the realization of this idea as a deliberate goal of Pasternak's poetry in general, I hope to demonstrate, on the basis of some concrete examples, that due to his uncanny artistic instinct and poetic skill, Pasternak was one of the very few artists who succeeded in reaching the apparently unreachable goal of this imaginative theory of dynamism in art. Of course, I am not talking about any direct "influence" here, but simply of the spontaneous manifestation in the practice of the Russian poet of the "discovery" first claimed and theoretically formulated by the Italian painters.

<sup>3</sup> See N. Khardzhiev et al., *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm, 1976), or J. E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde* (New York, 1976).



It is well known that at the early stage of his poetic career, Boris Pasternak was quite actively involved in the artistic ferment in Russia in the centre of which was the Futurist movement. He did not belong to the most vociferous "Hylaea" group which propagated Cubo-Futurist ideas, but he certainly was no stranger to some of those ideas, such as "painting with sounds", attempting new poetic qualities by means of euphonic and "semantic" alliterations, neologisms, etc. As a member of the "Centrifuge" group he represented a moderate position vis-a-vis the Cubo-Futurist wing, and he mediated "Centrifuge's" conflicts with the "Hylaeans". He acknowledged his fascination with Vladimir Maiakovskii and admitted that it took an effort not to succumb to this influence. It should be stressed that the part of Maiakovskii's poetry that Pasternak considered the real achievement was the early "pure Futurist" poetry, free from propaganda elements.

Although not an active exponent of Futurism himself, Pasternak was naturally quite familiar with the main premises of Futurism. He knew firsthand both the Russian and the Western debates, manifestoes, and experiments with the other arts was intimate, he was certainly familiar not only with Marinetti's concept of simultaneity and dynamism in poetry, but also with the ideas proclaimed in other areas, especially those concerning music and painting. Most of the Italian manifestoes were translated into Russian; the ones most widely known and discussed concerned Futurist poetry. As is generally known, the ferment in the visual arts in Russia was also exceptionally strong though there were hardly any direct acknowledgements of one of the most important and original Italian manifestoes, namely the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting" issued in 1910 by Boccioni, Carra, Russolo, Severini, and Balla.

What this manifesto proclaimed was the idea of dynamism which was more far-reaching than concept of dynamism formulated by the Cubists or even that of Marinetti. This "plastic dynamism", as Boccioni termed it, was based on the perception of the world as "vision in motion", not only the individual "absolute motion" of separate objects, but their interaction and even mutual interpenetration. It was a somewhat bold and far-fetched theory and thus there were few artists who were able to demonstrate its validity in their creative work; but such paintings as, for example, Umberto Boccioni's *The Street Enters the House* or *Forces of the Street* (both 1911), exemplify the concept in an impressive way. Their lasting impact is evidenced by the fact that they have been more and more frequently exhibited in recent years and even reproduced on



postage stamps (as for example Boccioni's commemorative stamp issued in 1981 by the Italian Post Office). Here is an excerpt from the Italian Manifesto which gives a "plastic" illustration of this concept of dynamism:

The sixteen people around you in a moving streetcar are in turn and at the same time: one, ten, four, three. They sit still, yet they are moving; they come and go, jolted by the street, suddenly swallowed up by the ray of sun; then they come back and sit before you like a persistent symbol of universal vibration... Our bodies penetrate the benches upon which we sit, and the benches penetrate our bodies. As the car rushes towards the buildings, the buildings, in turn, rush into the car and blend with it...<sup>4</sup>

The unique quality of Pasternak's poetry, with its richness of metonymy and "opened-ended" metaphor, which seems to be free from normal semantic limitations and often produces the effect of intense dynamism, is well known. Marina Tsvetaeva called Pasternak's *Sestra moia zhizn'* "a downpour of light".<sup>5</sup> Tsvetaeva, like Pasternak, never fully embraced the poetics of Futurism. But both these poets were nevertheless strongly affected by this poetics. Roman Jakobson emphasized the intensity of metonymy in Pasternak's style and drew attention to its dynamic quality, pointing out "the mutual interchangeability of images".<sup>6</sup>

In the early poems Pasternak is more preoccupied with the image-evoking qualities of sounds. The early period yields many examples of Pasternak's attempts at creating sound images and sound metaphors.

Храмовой в малахите ли холэн  
Возледеян в сребрель косогор -  
Многодольную голь колоколен  
Мелководный несет мельхиор.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> U. Apollonio, *Futurismo* (Milan, 1970), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> M. Tsvetaeva, *A Downpour of Light*, in Donald Davie and A. Livingstone (Eds.), *Pasternak: Modern Judgements* (London, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> R. Jakobson, *The Prose of Poet Pasternak*, in *ibid.*, p. 146. In the most recent book on Pasternak, G. de Mallac, *Boris Pasternak: Life and Art* (Norman, Okla., 1981), the author duly records the poet's preoccupation with dynamism, but he does not go beyond some general statements on Pasternak's attitude towards life, history, and literature as being "inspired by the intuition of a dynamic generosity operating and manifest in life-creating artistic activity" (p. 339).

<sup>7</sup> Mel'khior. Published in the Centrifuge pamphlet, *Rukonog* (Moscow, 1914).



While Pasternak's fascination with "painting with sounds" is less pronounced in his later poems, his perception of reality as an interaction of forces, a concept in which more or less direct echoes of the Italian Manifesto of Painting can be heard, actually becomes more acute with time. Pasternak translates, better than anyone to my knowledge, the "language" of painting into the idiom of poetry, elevating to a metaphysical level Boccioni's still basically materialistic formula of "plastic dynamism". As Boccioni saw it, "plastic dynamism is the simultaneous action of the motion characteristic of an object (its absolute motion) mixed with the transformation which the object undergoes in relation to its mobile and immobile environment (its relative motion)".<sup>8</sup>

The limits of this paper permit only a concise analysis of a few examples to illustrate the phenomenon, but the underlying idea can be traced through most of the volumes of Pasternak's poetry; not only the early ones, but also the later mature volumes.

In a poem *Slozha vesla* in the early volume *Sestra moia zhizn'* (written in 1917, published in 1922) the whole structure is based on interaction, interpenetration, or what Jakobson called "interchangeability of images". The very first line, which is the keynote, as it were, to the entire poem, has caused a great deal of difficulties for both the commentators and the translators. This, I think, was partly so because the interpreters hesitated to take the poet on his own terms and tried to read into his poem more - or less - than the poem actually contained.

The line goes:

Лодка колотится в сонной груди...

The notion of a boat throbbing in one's breast apparently bothered some of the interpreters by its seeming semantic incongruity. Some translators tried to paraphrase the poet while some commentators theorized on the supposed real significance of the image and tried to find equivalents in the target language. It is interesting to see that the poet's sister, Lydia Pasternak Slater, "corrected" her brother and gave the rendering based on the earlier, subsequently discarded, version of the poem, without mentioning that it differed from the definite version given by the poet in the volume (which she quotes as her supposed source) as well as in the text eventually prepared for the *Collected Works*. That first version is somewhat less marked by bold "interchangeability". However,

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U. Boccioni, *Plastic Dynamism*, published in "Lacerba" 13, 12, 1913, quoted here from: U. Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes* (London, 1973), p. 92.



since Pasternak himself changed it, the more daring image must have been his poetic aim. The first version read "The boat is throbbing in the breast of the lake" (v ozernoi grudi).<sup>9</sup> The subsequent change was apparently too "futuristic" for the translator, but then what about the poet himself who wanted it this way? Some other translators, too, hesitated to render the unusual metaphor. Phillip C. Flayderman, for example, conventionalized the image by making the line read like a line of realistic prose.

A boat knocks at a sleepy breast.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most penetrating analyses of this poem can be found in an article by Nils Ake Nilsson, *Life as Ecstasy and Sacrifice: Two Poems by Boris Pasternak*.<sup>11</sup> Nilsson's analysis of the quoted line (and of the whole poem) is an attempt at uncovering the deeper semantic sense of the metaphor. He puts the main emphasis on the device of ellipsis and sees the essential element of the image in the association between the slaps of water against the boat and the rhythm of the heart-beat of the two lovers lying in the boat.<sup>12</sup>

Dale Plank's equally ingenious analysis in his excellent study of *Pasternak's Lyric*,<sup>13</sup> concentrates on euphonic considerations. Like Nilsson, Plank also maintains that "the metaphor of the first phrase is based on the substitution of boat for heart thus evoking the more common idiom, *serdce kolotitsia* ("the heart throbs"). The difference is that for Plank "the strongest justification for this substitution is the sound design" (*lot-ka: ka-lot*).<sup>14</sup> Both these analyses are penetrating and suggestive, but they involve a considerable degree of speculation about the poetic motivation. Somehow neither of them is content to take the line as it actually reads, i.e., the throbbing of the boat literally physically reverberating "in the drowsy breast". Yet, in terms of poetic semantics the interpenetration of the two "objects" is perfectly natural. The sensation of a boat throbbing in a breast is certainly within the range of

<sup>9</sup> B. Pasternak, *Fifty Poems*, tr. Lydia Pasternak Slater (London, 1963), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> B. Pasternak, *Sister My Life* (sic), R. Payne (Ed.) (New York, 1967), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> "Scando-Slavica", Vol. V (1969).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> D. Plank, *Pasternak's Lyric: A Study of Sound and Imagery* (The Hague, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.



common sensibility; it is familiar to anyone who has had the experience of lying on the bottom of a boat on a lake rippled by the wind. The supposed "substitution" of boat for heart, for reasons of "sound design", is not required for the image to function. Indeed, it would weaken the metaphor based on the principle of the organic, dynamic interrelation of the two worlds (i.e., the lyrical "subject" and the surrounding reality).<sup>15</sup>

Examples of an even more far-reaching realization of the idea discussed above can be found in the subsequent poetry of Pasternak. Especially striking are the following stanzas from the cycle *Volny* in the volume *Vtoroe rozdenie* (1932).

Мне хочется домой в огромность  
Квартиры, наводящей грусть.  
Войду, сниму пальто, опомнюсь  
Огнями улиц озарюсь.

Перегородок тонкоробость  
Пройду насквозь, пройду как свет,  
Пройду, как образ входит в образ  
И как предмет сечет предмет.<sup>16</sup>

The key to the imagery of the above stanzas is the element of light. It is introduced in the first stanza as the source of the dynamic mutual relationship between the lyrical subject and the surrounding reality. The dynamic nature of this relationship manifests itself to the fullest in the second stanza.

As in the case of *Slozha vesla* there is a possibility of a dual perception at the first reading of certain lines, especially the last line of the first stanza, "Ogniami ulits ozarius" which I translate: "I'll be set aglow by the lights of the streets". This line is indeed somewhat ambiguous since it may be interpreted as a strictly passive construction. Dale Plank rightly points out that the verb *ozarius'* should be seen not as a passive, but as an intransitive form. He sees the noun *ogniami* as an instrumental of comparison ("I will light up like the lights of the street").<sup>17</sup> Both grammatically and stylistically this reading is correct. However, in terms

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The additional evidence can be seen in the earlier version which shows that the basic element from the beginning was the throbbing of the Boat "in the breast of the lake". In the final version the image is intensified by the "substitution" of the human breast for the breast of the lake.

<sup>16</sup>

B. Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1965), p. 344.

<sup>17</sup>

Plank, *Pasternak's Lyric*, p. 103.



of poetic semantics, and in the light of what is happening in the following stanza, the construction can be seen as reaching beyond the level of a comparison in which the two elements are put side by side. The force of light can be seen here not only as an "instrumental of comparison", but as an agent, a force which fuses the two worlds, i.e., the lyrical subject and the surrounding reality, in a dynamic relationship. The poet is set aglow by light and he himself acquires the properties of light.

It is only on this level that the unusual semantic structure of the next stanza makes sense. What happens here is that mysterious process of what the Italian manifesto called "universal vibration": *image enters into image, object cuts through another object*. The idiom of painting finds its realization in poetry. It is impossible not to recall in this context Boccioni's picture, *The Street Enters the House*. However, in Pasternak's poetry the interaction operates not merely on the physical level but enters the sphere of what perhaps can be called "surreality" where the borderline between the physical and the spiritual (emotional) sensation ceases to exist.

Victor Shklovskii, speaking of "thrusting image into image" by a poet, who "uses methods of contemporary painting", addresses his remarks to... Vladimir Maiakovskii.<sup>18</sup> Shklovskii is of course correct in linking the phenomenon of using methods of painting by Maiakovskii. However, it may be questioned whether the idea of "thrusting image into image", in its deeper sense, is fully applicable to Maiakovskii. It is interesting that Shklovskii himself invokes Malevich's opinion that some of Maiakovskii's poems, especially *Iz ulitsy v ulitsu*, were "the most successful experiments in poetic Cubism". Here we enter the difficult question of the concept of dynamism as understood by the Cubists and by the Futurists. How difficult and controversial this question was can be seen in the famous polemic between Apollinaire and Boccioni. Apollinaire claimed with some justification the priority in catching the sense of dynamism for the French Avant-Garde and especially for Cubism. Boccioni conceded some priorities to Cubism, but pointed out that the idea of dynamism, as conceived by the Futurist painters, went beyond the Cubist technique of breaking up the linear composition. Indeed, the following remarks from Boccioni's article *Plastic Dynamism* are fully applicable to Maiakovskii's technique in poetry:

Certainly decomposition and distortion in themselves have dynamic

<sup>18</sup> See V. Shklovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 3 (Moscow, 1974), p. 30.



value insofar as they break up continuity of a line, increasing interaction and indicating possible directions (...).<sup>19</sup>

“However” - Boccioni’s argument went on - “this is not the Futurist concept of dynamism”. As expressed in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* quoted above, this concept envisages not only the interaction but the interpenetration of forces. The vision of passengers’ bodies “penetrating the benches” of the fast moving streetcar and “the benches penetrating the bodies”, “the car rushing towards the buildings and the buildings rushing into the car and melting with it”, those are perceptions translatable into poetic images entering images and objects cutting through other objects.

While my present paper is of a somewhat tentative and speculative character, I think that at least certain points it tries to make will prove of some validity and scholarly usefulness. Although dynamic features of Pasternak’s poetry have been given some attention, no one, to my knowledge, has observed and discussed the presence in Pasternak’s poetics of certain elements or tendencies which can be seen as a successful realization of the ambitions demands formulated by the Italian Futurists in their *Technical Manifesto* quoted above.

At the same time, I hope that the few examples analyzed here can be seen as an illustration of the applicability of an interdisciplinary approach in the study of art and the need for more uniform criteria.

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<sup>19</sup> See Boccioni, *Plastic Dynamism*; on Apollinaire-Boccioni, see also Z. Folejewski, *Futurism and Its Place in Modern Poetry* (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 15-16.



NIEKTÓRE PROBLEMY SEMANTYCZNE MALARSTWA I POEZJI:  
MAJAKOWSKI, PASTERNAK I WŁOSKI MANIFEST  
MALARSTWA FUTURYSTYCZNEGO  
(Streszczenie)

Badania nad związkiem (wzajemnym oddziaływaniem) malarstwa i literatury nie są nowe w nauce i krytyce europejskiej. Między innymi zwracano uwagę na „literackość” malarstwa prezentującego w swych układach figuratywnych zjawiska zdarzeniowe, niemal „fabułę”, układy znane i nadal stosowane w utworach literackich.

Zmiany zachodzące w samej koncepcji sztuki na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, funkcjonujące wówczas różne koncepcje awangardowe wpłynęły na szczególne powiązanie idei malarstwa i poezji (kubizm, futurizm, ekspresjonizm). W Rosji owych czasów związki malarstwa i poezji nie były tak silne jak we Włoszech, Francji i Anglii. W Rosji poezja niemal z zasady była „logocentryczna”. Relacje te pogłębiały się w następstwie włoskich manifestów nowej sztuki, tłumaczonych w Rosji. Szczególne znaczenie miał *Manifest Techniczny Malarstwa Futurystycznego* (*La pittura futurista. Manifesto tecnico* - U. Boccioni, R. Russolo, C. Carrà, G. Balla, G. Severini, 1910). Z różnych współzależności duże znaczenie miała koncepcja „dynamizmu” oraz jego realizacja w plastyce i w poezji.

Przedmiotem obecnej rozprawy jest właśnie interpretacja tych koncepcji w poezji Pasternaka i W. Majakowskiego. Badanie ich utworów na tle malarstwa ich epoki może operować niektórymi analogicznymi kryteriami.