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“MY VERY DEAR MR. SVENSSON...”:  
THREE LETTERS FROM BORIS PASTERNAK  
TO HIS SWEDISH PUBLISHER

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During the autumn of 1959 and winter of 1960 Boris Pasternak wrote three letters to his Swedish publisher, Mr. Georg Svensson (see appendix). The letters are kept in the Nobel Library of the Swedish Academy together with two signed photographs of Pasternak that Mr. Svensson asked the poet to send him. All three letters are written in English. Mr. Svensson's own letters to Pasternak may be preserved in the Pasternak archive, but have not been located.

Mr. Georg Svensson (1904–1998) was a legendary publisher, throughout his life affiliated with the Bonnier Publishing House. In 1957 he procured the rights to *Doktor Zhivago*, which was immediately translated into Swedish and before Christmas 1958 had sold 95,000 copies.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Svensson was thus “in charge of” Pasternak within the publishing house, which explains his correspondence with the poet.

As we know, Pasternak received an enormous quantity of mail during the one-and-a-half years from the Nobel Prize to his death. The total amount has been estimated as somewhere between twenty and thirty thousand letters. In his first letter to Georg Svensson, of September 11, 1959, Pasternak complains that the large correspondence, in fact, takes up too much of his time:

I must make complaints against myself. Never was I working so little and so idly. Am I pampered and spoiled by my broad correspondence? By the much easier attainable pleasure of deeply felt, perceptible mutual penetration and communion with so many excellent young lives in the far world of the West, esp. in West Germany and America?

Then Pasternak proceeds directly to the question of *Slepaja krasavica*, the play he was working on during the last year of his life and the main subject of his correspondence with Georg Svensson, who had heard about the work in progress and was interested in publishing it as soon as possible.

Pasternak had always had a deep passion for the theatre, and not only as a spectator or a translator. “Вся его мечта в театре,” says Pasternak in the poem, “Staryj park” (1941) about the hero of the poem. And Aleksandr Gladkov recalls several conversations with the poet on this subject, like this one from February, 1942: “Тяга

Б. Л. к театру сейчас очень велика [...] По тому, как он говорит о театре, чувствуется, что для него это искусство кажется важным непосредственностью своих отдач, запахом успеха. Как зритель на спектаклях он необычайно непосредственен. [...] Он часто говорит, что он мечтает написать пьесу[....]"<sup>2</sup>

In March of the same year Pasternak speaks to Gladkov of a play on the theme of "преемственность культуры," in which he wanted to "возродить [...] забытые традиции Ибсена и Чехова" and for which he had already received an advance fee from the theatre in Novosibirsk.<sup>3</sup> It was supposed to be a play about the war — the wounded hero turns up in a hospital accommodated on the estate of his ancestors. In the autumn of 1942, Gladkov asks once again about the play, and gets the answer that Pasternak "не кончил ее, и даже, пожалуй, не начинал, но еще вернется к этому замыслу."<sup>4</sup>

This play was never written, although the theme of the wounded hero being attended to on his ancestors' estate was treated in the poem "Staryj park." In its stead came another play, fifteen years later. Gladkov recalls a conversation with Pasternak, which must have taken place in the spring or summer of 1957 and in the course of which Pasternak said: "[...] снова думаю о пьесе." Two years later, in 1959, Pasternak writes to Gladkov: "Из состояния безразличия, с каким я подходил к мысли о пьесе, она перешла в состояние, когда баловство, или попытка, становится заветным желанием, или делается страстью..."<sup>5</sup> The subject of Pasternak's "passion" was *Slepaja krasavica* — a blind girl serf, Ljusja, but also a metaphor of Russia, blind to its beauty — a play which takes place in the Russia of serfdom, from 1835 and on.

The theme of *Slepaja krasavica* as a new major work is repeated in other letters from the period. "Я успел полюбить работу над пьесой и в нее поверить," he writes to Nina Tabidze in October, 1959. "Если я доживу и не помешает что-нибудь непредвиденное, это будет вещь не хуже и не меньше романа... Пьеса какое-то живое будущее вместе со всем, что от этого ответвляется и с ним связано, *моя единственная страсть и забота* [italics mine — B.J.] Остальное меня совершенно не интересует, точно оно было двести пятьдесят лет назад."<sup>6</sup> The same thought is developed in a letter to Chukurtme Gudiashvili of January, 1960.

The work on the play had taken a serious turn in the summer of 1959, and was in full progress at the time of Mr. Svensson's first inquiries about it in September. Pasternak writes:

I'll write a play in prose on a stuff taken from the history of the Russian past in the nineteenth century, on the eve of the liberation of the peasants from servitude, about the year 1860. There will appear serfs formed and brought up to [be] actors, artists in bondage, family complications, duels etc. etc. But this subject, though intended to be shown in true realistic verisimilitude, is partly a pretext to a more general attempt.

Then Pasternak goes on to compare his play with *Doktor Zhivago*:

Again I will try to find, to form, to give and to present a breath, a conception of life in general, of life as such, of historical being or existence. It will be the same



endeavor like it was in the novel, but yet a little deepened, and in all probability it shall dash upon a similar acceptance and bad luck.

The comparison was not accidental: just like the poetry-writing doctor, the main hero of *Slepaja krasavica*, the serf Agafonov, is in conflict with society; he flees to Sweden and returns to Russia as an actor; according to Pasternak's plans, he was, at the end of the play, supposed to bring a doctor from Europe who would cure Ljusja/Russia of her blindness. However, the play was far from finished, and Georg Svensson should not expect any manuscript in the near future:

[...] in a term of a year or a little more it will not pass you in translation. But it is still dishonestly [sic] and untimely to speak about the early rough draft just only begun.

Pasternak's misgivings about the fate of his play are echoed in an interview he gave to the *New York Times* correspondent the same day he wrote the letter to Mr. Svensson, September 11: "He hopes to complete it within six months, [Pasternak] said, but added: 'It will be no more happy for me personally than my novel.'"<sup>7</sup>

Pasternak's second letter to Svensson is dated December 1, 1959. The poet again touches upon his "new conception and its execution," "in the full pains" of which he is "submerged." Mr. Svensson had heard that the director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm and the future member and permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Karl-Ragnar Gierow, had been in contact with Pasternak about the play. Pasternak writes that Mr. Gierow "was the first to write" him "before all proper time about the intended play" and therefore "I replied him that he will be the first to learn from me about its finishing." Then Pasternak proceeds to calm Mr. Svensson, who is obviously anxious to procure the rights to the play: "That," he writes, "is all I meant and nothing more." He assures Svensson that only an agreement about the first performance has been reached: "But let us be silent," he writes, "let us not argue and refute. Everything is so insignificant in comparison to the difficulties and hardships of a true real work!"

There is a second matter of concern in Pasternak's letters to Georg Svensson: Leonard Bernstein. Pasternak's first letter to Svensson was written on September 11, the same day he attended a concert in Moscow with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. While in Moscow, Bernstein and his wife had visited Pasternak in Peredelkino as well, "in spite of obstacles and embarrassments," as the poet writes to Georg Svensson.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of October Bernstein was going to give a concert in Stockholm. Pasternak therefore asks Mr. Svensson to buy "a big bunch of dark violet and yellow (or blue and white) flowers and kindly let them be sent from me to this distinguished couple on the evening of their first concert." And he encloses a letter to Leonard Bernstein, which he asks Svensson to deliver together with the flowers. Since Mr. Svensson had to go to the Frankfurt Book Fair and could not attend the concert, the letter and the flowers were handed over to Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein by Mrs. Svensson, who remembers: "[...] when [Bernstein] saw the letter, he flew up: 'Oh, the dear handwriting!', kissed the letter, opened it, read it aloud to us. Pasternak had written it the morning after the concert and was 'overwhelmed' as

if a 'thunderstorm' had passed through him, 'art must be like this,' and he saw his two friends 'before [his] mental eye.' They were both moved, Bernstein clearly happy and stimulated as well."<sup>9</sup>

In his second letter to Svensson Pasternak thanks him for his "generous service", i.e., for having bought the flowers for Leonard Bernstein, and then asks worriedly:

Was there a short separate letter for Mr. L.B. in the great envelope with the photographs [Pasternak had sent Svensson two signed photographs with the first letter — B.J.], or was it withdrawn and removed out of the cover before reaching you? I had no signs of its delivering, neither from you or from the recipient. Perhaps it is my guilt (a great letter of Mr. Bernstein from Basel remains unanswered by me till now) that I had no reply in return to my enclosure.

Obviously, Georg Svensson had not said anything about the letter he had been asked to forward to Bernstein; however, as we know from Mrs Svensson's memoirs, his worries were unfounded.

Another point of interest in Pasternak's letters to Svensson concerns the American edition of Pasternak's poetry in English, *The Poetry of Boris Pasternak*, translated by George Reavey. As we know from a letter to Reavey of December 10, 1959, quoted by Ivinskaja, Pasternak was utterly disappointed with the book.<sup>10</sup> He thought Reavey had included too many inferior and what he called "dead" poems along with good ones. This complaint is repeated in Pasternak's letter to Svensson:

Have you seen the terrible American edition of the poems? To what end is set such an ugly caricature on the cover? What is meant therewith? Do you not think such an issue can undo, overturn and frustrate everything attained before?

The third letter from Pasternak to Svensson is dated February 20, 1960. Svensson had written to congratulate the poet on his seventieth birthday on behalf of himself and the publishing house,<sup>11</sup> and had also expressed his worries concerning rumours circulating about Pasternak. I have not had access to Mr. Svensson's letter, but it is safe to suggest that the rumours emanated from a notice in the Stockholm evening paper *Expressen* (February 6) announcing that Pasternak had finished his first work since *Doktor Zhivago*, a play about a serf and a brilliant violinist which the writer hopes to get over to his publisher in London. According to the newspaper, "Some people see the play, which appears in time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of serfdom 1861, as an attempt by Pasternak to regain the favour of the rulers." But it is also possible that the writer has chosen this form in order to criticize "in a subtle way the predicament of the creative artist in the Soviet Union during the past decades." Pasternak answers Mr. Svensson that the news is "naturally false" and complains that "the necessity of answering the rising inquiries and refuting the mistake," "apart from other obstacles," adds to his troubles. This letter is shorter than the other two, and contains no further information about the play.

As we can see, Pasternak's correspondence with Mr. Svensson confirms the general picture of the poet's predicament during the last six months of his life: burdened by the pressure from without and an enormous correspondence, he tries to bring his



last great creative conception to a conclusion. What is new is that there were plans to stage *Slepaja krasavica* at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. The plans did not materialise, for the simple reason that Pasternak died before he had finished the play. Max Hayward and Manya Harari translated into English and published the prologue and parts of Act One in 1969. Notwithstanding Mr. Svensson's great interest in the play and its partly Swedish theme, it never came out in Swedish.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Svensson Georg. *Minnen och möten. Ett liv i bokens tjänst*. Stockholm, 1987. P. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Gladkov Aleksandr. *Vstrechi s Pasternakom*. Paris, 1973. P. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Pasternak E. B. *Boris Pasternak. Materialy dlja biografii*. Moscow, 1990. P. 654.

<sup>7</sup> Conquest Robert. *The Pasternak Affair: Courage of Genius*. Philadelphia, 1962. P. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Boris Pasternak's son, E. B. Pasternak, gives interesting details from Bernstein's visit to Moscow in his commentary to the correspondence between Boris and Evgenija Pasternak: *Suščestvovan'ja tkan' skvoznaja*. Moscow, 1998. P. 560.

<sup>9</sup> Levin Elena. *Nine Letters of Boris Pasternak*. Harvard Library Bulletin. Vol. 15 (1967), No. 4, p. 327.

<sup>10</sup> Svensson Cecilia. "Ett Bernsteinminne," ms., Svenska Akademiens Nobelbibliotek.

<sup>11</sup> On February 10 the Bonnier publishing house ran an advertisement for Pasternak's books in Swedish translation in the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter*, congratulating the poet on his seventieth birthday.

#### APPENDIX:

##### THREE LETTERS FROM BORIS PASTERNAK TO GEORG SVENSSON

###### 1.

Sept. 11, 1959

Dear Mr Svensson,

it is with the sentiment of deepest intimacy and kinship, that I thankfully ran through your dear lines.

I must make complaints against myself. Never was I working so little and so idly. Am I pampered and spoiled by my broad correspondence? By the much easier attainable pleasure of deeply felt, perceptible mutual penetration and communion with so many excellent young lives in the far world of the West, esp. in West Germany and America?

I'll write a play in prose on a stuff taken from the history of the Russian past in the nineteenth century, on the eve of the liberation of the peasants from servitude, about the year 1860. There will appear serfs formed and brought up to [be] actors, artists in bondage, family-complications, duels etc. etc. But this subject, though intended to be shown in true realistic verisimilitude, is partly a pretext to a more general attempt. Again I will try to find, to form, to give and to present a breath, a conception of life in general, of life as such, of historical being or existence. It will be the same endeavor like it was in the novel, but yet a little deepened, and in all probability it shall dash upon a similar acceptance and bad luck. So in a term of a year or a little more it will not pass you in translation. But it is still dishonestly and untimely too speak about the early rough draft just only begun.

I take it for mere honour and pleasure for me to sign and send you the photographs you are asking for.

At the beginning of October the American Orchestra will give concerts at Stockholm. Their conductor Mr Leonard Bernstein and his wife were extremely kind to me, sought after me and found me in spite of obstacles and embarrassments. Do me the favour, buy (or let be purchased) a big bunch oof dark-violet and yellow (or blue and white) flowers and kindly let them be sent from me to the distinguished couple on the evening of their first concert along with the enclosed letter of mine. Don't be angry of the troubles I make bold to bore you with. With my best wishes and regards.

Sincerely yours

*B Pasternak*

2.

*Dec. 1, 1959*

Dear Mrs and Mr Svensson, please accept kindly my belated thanks for your generous service. Was there a short separate letter for Mr. L.B. in the great envelope with the photographs, or was it withdrawn and removed out of the cover before reaching you? I had no signs of its delivering, neither from you or from the recipient. Perhaps it is my guilt (a great letter of Mr. Bernstein from Basel remains unanswered by me till now) that I had no reply in return to my enclosure.

I am submerged in the full pains of my new conception and its execution. As Mr. K.R. Gierow was the first to write me so before all proper time about the intended play, I replied him that will be the first to learn from me about its finishing. That is all I meant and nothing more. It is far from being concluded an agreement was entered about the first performance etc. etc. etc. But let us be silent, let us not argue and refute. Everything is so insignificant in comparison to the difficulties and hardships of a true real work!

*"MY VERY DEAR MR. SVENSSON..."*

Have you seen the terrible American edition of the poems? To what end is set such an ugly caricature on the cover? What is meant therewith? Do you not think such an issue can undo, overturn and frustrate everything attained before?

I send to you and to your dear Mrs all my heart is capable to emanate of affection and veneration.

*B Pasternak*

3.

*February 20, 1960*

My very dear Mr Svensson, the news is naturally false. Having arisen, I think, in News Chronicle it spread over other countries. Apart from other obstacles and wasting of time the necessity of answering the rising inquiries and refuting the mistake removes additionally the true termination through the troubles brought by the presumed one.

I take the opportunity to renew the tokens of my devotion and respect to you and dear Mrs Svensson.

Sincerely yours,

*B Pasternak*

Thank you and the house Bonniers for your kind congratulation.