

BORIS PASTERNAK AND GOETHE

In March 1909, nineteen-year-old Boris Pasternak once met his idol Aleksandr Scriabin to show his attempts in musical composition. Despite Scriabin's praise and encouragement, their meeting led Pasternak to the decision to stop pursuing the career of a composer. During that conversation, Skryabin also advised him to abandon his law studies and take up philosophy instead. That fall Pasternak did so, and was soon drawn into the circle around the newly founded Musagetes publishing house.

In his 1956 autobiographical sketch, Pasternak described Musagetes as "something of an academy" in which the leading Moscow Symbolists "and the enthusiastic youth discussed rhythm, the history of German Romanticism, Russian lyrical poetry, Goethe's and Richard Wagner's aesthetics, Baudelaire and the French Symbolists, and ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosophy." He emphasized that Andrey Bely was the "soul" and "authority" in all these endeavors, the same Bely who, now that Pasternak had switched to philosophy and literature, was perhaps taking the place of Scriabin in his life.

Pasternak visited two circles created by Musagetes publishing house – one on history of philosophy led by Fyodor Stepun and the other devoted to "studies of the problems of aesthetic culture and Symbolist art," the so called Young Musagetes, that held forth in Konstantin Krakht's sculpture studio.

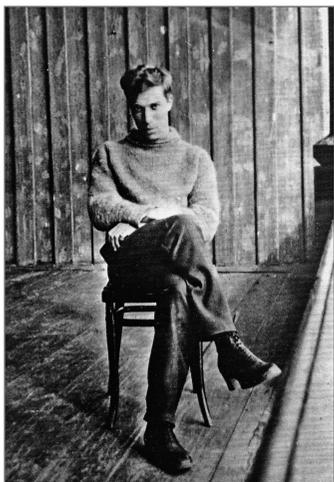
In May 1912, Pasternak went to Marburg to study under Hermann Cohen. What brought him there, besides Cohen's highly theoretical solutions to the problem of knowledge, was the Marburg school's broad view of cultural history, which resonated with the interests of the Young Musagetes.

After his return from Germany, Pasternak joined a group of young Musagetes poets. In June of 1913, they brought out together an anthology, *Lyrical Poetry*, within a new publishing house with the same name (Lirika).

In February 1913, Pasternak held a talk at Young Musagetes entitled "Symbolism and Immortality." This was his first attempt to express his aesthetic creed. In it he attributed a universal significance to the artist's extreme subjectivity, maintaining that this is the vehicle through which artists convey their creative inspiration to posterity and thereby become immortal. Subjectivity, it turns out, is supraindividual.

Lirika had a distinctly German profile. Besides a collection of Pasternak's essays entitled *Symbolism and Immortality*, planned publications in the fall of 1913 included translations of Rilke's poetry, an interpretation of Goethe's unfinished poem "The Mysteries," and a translation of Novalis' novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (of these plans, however, only Rilke's *The Book of Hours* and Goethe's poem were actually published). Lirika was undergoing a split caused by the clashes around Anthroposophy. As a result, in early 1914, Pasternak, Sergey Bobrov, and Nikolay Aseev, left Lirika and founded Tsentrifuga (The Centrifuge). Pasternak was faced with a situation in which all of his former authorities and friends seemed to be choosing Theosophy or Anthroposophy. Scriabin and his composition teacher Reinhold Glière were the first, followed, among others, by Bely and Pasternak's close friend of several years, the poet Yulian Anisimov. Pasternak shared Bobrov's skepticism toward esotericism. In May of 1914, Bobrov, Aseev, and Pasternak published a futuristic volume with the strange name *Rukonog (Brachiopod)*, which was a kind of manifesto. Pasternak was not, of course, a genuine Futurist, but merely a Symbolist who had been influenced by a new formal language.

In the summer of 1914, Pasternak worked as a tutor for the family of the Lithuanian-Russian poet Jurgis Baltrušaitis in Petrovskoye on the Oka River. In July he met another guest, the other major theorist of Symbolism—Vyacheslav Ivanov. Over several weeks they conversed daily about the antagonisms within the new art. One of Ivanov's topics concerned occult clairvoyance,



Boris Pasternak, 1916.

a subject for which Pasternak had little sympathy.

While visiting his parents in Molodi in September, Pasternak read Emilii Medtner's recently published *Reflections on Goethe*. The work had a strong polemical edge, for it was intended to rescue Andrey Bely from occultism and attacked the entire Anthroposophical idea.

According to Medtner, Steiner's faculty of reason is incapable of dealing with symbols, and he is therefore unable to get any real grasp of Goethe. Our symbolic act of knowing would be inconceivable if, in accordance with

Steiner's monistic model, we were able to establish and decipher everything. Goethe did not deny the objective existence of other dimensions of life, but merely took exception to arbitrary and systematic encroachments upon them. As he once declared, it is not given to us to grasp the truth, which is identical with the divine, directly—we perceive it only in reflection, in example and symbol.

After his trip to Italy, Medtner goes on, Goethe was in a war of love with nature. He felt he was nature's "fiancé" the moment he ceased being afraid and quit trying to violate it with theory, that is, as soon as he felt separate from it rather than vaguely fused with it. It was an act of necessity and therefore also of the highest freedom. His "marriage" with nature was perhaps the most harmonious union of private and public, personal and universal, in human history. He became godlike by heeding the exhortation of the Apollonian sun god: "Know thyself!" and penetrating deep within himself to the very core of his being. For Goethe, knowledge of the world was identical to knowledge of self.

Pasternak was utterly carried away by these comments. In the early fall of 1914, he sent Medtner a spontaneous letter in which he expressed his enthusiasm over the author's "youthful ardor and devilish sangfroid." Medtner's epistemological distinctions

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obviously must have appealed to him, as did his at once passionate and matter-of-fact scrutiny of Anthroposophy's monism. Here were Pasternak's own objections to Steiner in black and white. Surely even more important, however, was the fact that Medtner's portrayal of Goethe coincided with Pasternak's own view of art as expressed in "Symbolism and Immortality": at his most subjective, the artist becomes suprapersonal and touches upon experiences common to an entire generation.

To Medtner, who at the moment was on the brink of a breakdown, cut off from his native land, and watching the transformation of his cherished cultural synthesis into a horrific war between Germany and Russia, the letter meant a great deal. He found it not only lofty and sentimental, but also articulated with "talent and insight."

Medtner's difficult situation had prompted him to begin daily therapy with Jung. What was remarkable was that Jung and Pasternak seemed to be chiming in with each other. Sensing a kinship between Russian Symbolism and his own studies of symbols and myth, Jung was inclined to view Medtner as a kind of prophet. In his writings on Goethe, Medtner seemed to be moving toward Jung's own notion of the individual as the bearer of a hidden supraindividual experience.

Thus from different points of departure, Pasternak and Jung appear to have been attracted to the same thing in Medtner. Pasternak was looking for support of his idea about the immortal dimension of art, while Jung sought confirmation of his notion of a collective unconscious that speaks through art and myth. Both of them at this particular juncture in the fall of 1914 were in need of Medtner's ideas. In Jung's case all this eventually took shape in a psychological theory that was distinct from Freud's. As for Pasternak, the notion of immortality rooted in the Symbolist worldview became embodied in one of his crowning achievements, *Doctor Zhivago*. Written at the end of his life, at the same time when he was translating *Faust*, the novel was originally subtitled "Attempt at a Russian Faust."