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Boris Pasternak's *My Sister—Life*: The Book Behind the Verse

"You have a book in you," said Charents, listening to M.'s poems about Armenia. (This was in Tiflis—in Erivan he would not have dared to come see us.) M. was very pleased by these words: "Perhaps he's right—I may really have a book in me." A few years later, at M.'s request, I took a sheaf of his Voronezh poems to Pasternak, who, after looking at them, suddenly spoke of the "miracle of a book in the making." With him, he said, it had happened only once in his life, when he wrote "My Sister Life." I told M. about this conversation and asked: "So a collection of verse doesn't always make a book?" M. just laughed.[1]

Judging by the above quotation, Pasternak's own response to *My Sister—Life* (*Sestra moia—zhizn'*, 1922) paralleled that of his critics, several of whom have also been sensitive to its structural cohesiveness. Iurii Tynianov, for example, has compared it to a diary in verse with precise place-names and dates,[2] and another critic has singled it out among Pasternak's other verse collections as an "idiosyncratic novel" consisting of separate poems arranged in cycles.[3] On the most superficial level, the sense of unity and cohesiveness that the book conveys can be attributed, at least in part, to the following: the prevalence of the love motif—roughly two-thirds of the poems describe the various moods and settings of a love affair or affairs; the omnipresence of a certain seasonal setting, summer; and finally, the repeated allusions to the revolutionary year of 1917. Ultimately, however, the book's unity is not to be sought in its chronological or biographical faithfulness to a specific "slice" of the poet's life; rather, it results from the manifest sequence of the poems themselves and from the chapter structure that contains them. A close look at both reveals a series of intricate relationships and interdependencies which distinguish the book's separate parts and insure its artistic integrity. If Petersburg has been described as a most "intentional" (*umyshlennyi*)[4] city, then Pasternak's *My Sister—Life* might well be described as a most "intentional" book of verse.

A consideration of the underlying narrative and thematic structure of *My Sister—Life* provides a valuable contextual framework for a close reading of any one of the individual poems. Access to such a structure is, of course, gained through an understanding of the separate poems, because the syntactic and meta-

1. Nadezhda Mandelshtam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 190.

2. Iurii Tynianov, "Promezhutok," *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad, 1929); translated as "Pasternak's Mission," in *Pasternak: Modern Judgements*, ed. Donald Davies (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 126–34.

3. See L. A. Ozerov's notes to the text of "Sestra moia—zhizn'," which appear in Boris Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Biblioteka poeta, Bol'shaia seriia, 2nd ed. (Leningrad, 1965), p. 630. Unless otherwise noted, this is the edition of the text to which I will refer throughout this article.

4. Fedor Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Leningrad, 1973), 5:101.

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phoric complexity of the verses is sufficient to make any surface assessment of the book's structural unity virtually impossible.[5] But any reading of an individual poem is enriched by additional attention to the overall poetic structure that contains it. For example, one of the best and most widely quoted explications of an individual poem from *My Sister—Life* is found in Nils Ake Nilsson's study of "With Oars Crossed" ("Slozha vesla").[6] Our understanding of this poem is further enhanced, however, by the knowledge that it forms part of a poetic cycle within *My Sister—Life* which might be called the "boat cycle," since it employs a consistent cast of characters and a recurring setting—two lovers taking part in a prosaically romantic rowboat scene—in order to make contrasting statements about love and romance. Moreover, the two other poems that complete the cycle, "You played that role so well!" and "The Imitators," both *precede* "With Oars Crossed" in the sequence of poems even though they constitute a kind of *response* to the romantic "model" which it provides. Thus they form part of a poetic cycle that extends beyond the chapter divisions of the book, while at the same time playing an integral role within their separate chapters. To consider these various forms of interrelationships, both structural and thematic, is to broaden our understanding of the individual poetic texts themselves. There is, however, no implication that the analysis which follows is offered as a substitute for close reading. On the contrary, what is intended is a commentary on the narrative structure of the book, *My Sister—Life*.

My Sister—Life contains fifty poems organized into ten sections or chapters, with each chapter carrying its own title. The opening, dedicatory poem, "In Memory of the Demon," is the only poem that stands outside the chapter structure. In the 1922 and 1923 editions, however, two other poems were made typographically independent of the chapter structure: the last poem, "The End," and, more interestingly, the twenty-eighth poem, "The Replacement" ("Zamestitel'nitsa"), which in later editions appears simply as the concluding poem of chapter four, "[My] Pursuit of Philosophy." Furthermore, an author's note omitted from later editions[7] makes it possible to view "The Replacement" as a kind of transition point in the book, which has the effect of dividing it into two unequal "halves."[8] An examination of the separate poems and chapters contained in these two halves reveals that there is indeed a structural and thematic basis for viewing them as distinct yet interdependent entities.

Pasternak asserts the cohesiveness of the first half of *My Sister—Life* by framing it in a cycle of poems on art and the artist. The introductory poem, "In Memory of the Demon," and the first two poems of chapter 1 ("Isn't It Time for the Birds to Sing?")—"About These Verses" and "Nostalgia"

5. This article has, in fact, been written in conjunction with my work on a book about *My Sister—Life*, which is based on Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, "Boris Pasternak's 'Sestra moia—zhizn'': An Explication" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1972).

6. Nils Ake Nilsson, "Life as Ecstasy and Sacrifice: Two Poems by Pasternak," *Scando-Slavica*, 5 (1959): 180–98.

7. In the original 1922 edition of *My Sister—Life* Pasternak appended a note to "Our Thunderstorm," the poem that precedes "The Replacement," which reads as follows: "These diversions were cut short, when, departing, she ceded her mission to a replacement."

8. Although twenty-eight poems (including "The Replacement") are contained in the first half of the book and twenty-two in the second, the second half is slightly longer than the first (twenty-five pages of text as opposed to twenty-two).

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Schema 1. *"My Sister—Life": First Half*

Theme	Poems	Chapter
art ↓	"In Memory of the Demon"	Introductory poem
Introduction to the dominant themes: art and the artist, nature, and love	"About These Verses" "Nostalgia" ("Toska") "My sister—life..." "The Weeping Garden" "The Mirror" "The Girl" "You are in the wind,..." "Rain"	Chapter 1: "Isn't It Time For the Birds to Sing?"
The love affair	"Before All This There Was Winter" "Out of Superstition" "Don't Touch" "You played that role so well!" "Balashov" "The Imitators" "The Model"	Chapter 2: "Book of the Steppe"
The lovers: SHE (her "diversions")	"Swaying [on] a fragrant branch" "With Oars Crossed" "Spring Rain" "Policemen's Whistles" "Stars in Summer" "English Lessons"	Chapter 3: "The Diversions of My Beloved"
HE (his "pursuit[s]") ↑ art	"Definition of Poetry" "Definition of the Soul" "Diseases of the Earth" "Definition of [Poetic] Creation" "Our Thunderstorm" "The Replacement"	Chapter 4: "[My] Pursuit of Philosophy"

("Toska")—all allude in one way or another to the kind of romantically exotic poetry and prose of writers like Lermontov, Byron, Poe, and Kipling that has been a source of inspiration to the poet himself. And the chapter that concludes the first half ("[My] Pursuit of Philosophy") sets forth the poet's *own* artistic credo with a series of highly metaphoric "definitions" of poetry, soul, and the creative act. The poems within this frame are thematically diverse, though each chapter has its own individual focus. The first half of the book is outlined in schema 1.

The book's opening chapter, "Isn't It Time for the Birds to Sing?," fulfills many of the same functions as the opening chapter of a novel: it introduces the major "characters" (or themes) and sketches in the outlines of their interrelationship. Its introductory function is seen in its title,[9] which poses a metaphoric question in terms of a concrete one: in asking whether it isn't time for the birds to sing (that is, for dawn to break), the poet seems to be asking if it isn't time for the book itself to begin. And begin it does with art as the first "character" introduced. Since *My Sister—Life* is dedicated to Lermontov, it is appropriate that its opening poem ("In Memory of the Demon") should pay tribute to one of his greatest heroes, the brooding, Byronic, romantic Demon.

9. The chapter's title is a line taken from its penultimate poem, "You are in the wind, . . ." The poet's and the garden's mutual desire for the night to end and the day to begin is expressed in the question, "Isn't It Time for the Birds to Sing?" The line assumes a broader significance, however, when it is used as the title of the book's opening chapter.

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"About These Verses" continues the tribute to Lermontov by including his name among the trio of Romantics (along with Byron and Poe) who have inspired "these [very] verses." "Nostalgia" adds the name of Rudyard Kipling to Pasternak's list of artistic mentors, because the exotic world of the jungle, which presumably captivated Pasternak in his youth, still fills him with nostalgic yearning. "My sister—life . . . ," the book's title poem,[10] shifts the focus from the source of the poet's inspiration to the poet himself, whose idiosyncratic delight in all of nature distinguishes him from ordinary mortals and makes him the equal of life itself, with which he enjoys a sibling relationship. The poet's relationship with nature is further explored in the rest of the chapter which comprises two poetic cycles, the garden cycle ("The Weeping Garden," "You are in the wind," and "Rain") and the mirror cycle ("The Mirror" and "The Girl"). The garden cycle portrays the garden (a metonymical representation of nature) as the poet's alter ego, his perfect reflection, able to act out his moods and share his responses. In the mirror cycle, which is closely aligned with the garden cycle, the mirror's reflection of the garden is the vehicle whereby the poet's "reflection" of life is explored. Not surprisingly, in view of the poet's peer relationship with life, the mirror and the garden are equals ("The Mirror"), as are the garden and its individual parts ("The Girl").

Although the love motif is present in the background of chapter 1 rather than in the foreground, its subsequent significance in the book as a whole is already implicit from the beginning. First, it is not accidental that Lermontov's Demon, who is celebrated in the opening poem, is a romantic hero forever associated with a fateful love. Second, fleeting references to a "darling" ("*milaia*" in "About These Verses"), a "beloved" (in "My sister—life . . ."), and an intimate "you" (in "You are in the wind, . . .") remind us of the beloved's pervasive presence, albeit in the "background" of the chapter. Third, and most important, it is especially significant that the most explicit reference to the beloved's presence to be found in chapter 1—namely, "she is with me"—occurs in "Rain," the concluding poem of the chapter. Thus Pasternak effects a transition to chapter 2, "Book of the Steppe," which is devoted almost exclusively to the love theme.

The title, "Book of the Steppe,"[11] is significant because the steppe is the primary setting of the love affair(s) which the book celebrates. The constant association of the steppe with the love affair enables it to become a replacement for love in the chapter's title. The opening poem of the chapter, "Before All This There Was Winter," is related to the love theme in its title but not in its content. The impersonal "this" is the poet's understatement for the spring-summer love affair which assumes center stage in the poems that follow.[12] Since the poem

10. The title poem is, in fact, a microcosm of the entire book, since it contains allusions which are significant but cannot be fully appreciated until the end of the book. For example, there is a reference to the Kamyshin railroad line, and Kamyshin, Balashov, and Tambov are three stops along a railway line that will figure very prominently in the poems that follow.

11. In the 1922 and 1923 editions, the second chapter of the book was entitled "The First Chapter." This further dramatized the resemblance of the book's opening chapter to an introduction. "Book of the Steppe" was the general name given to *all* the chapters, except the opening one, "Isn't It Time for the Birds to Sing?"

12. It is interesting that both Pasternak and Mayakovsky use the pronoun "eto" to refer to a love affair that they are celebrating in their verses. Pasternak, of course, does it here in "Before All *This* There Was Winter" ("Do vsego *etogo* byla zima"), and Mayakovsky does it in "About *That*" ("Pro *eto*"); italics added.

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itself depicts a winter landscape, it harks back to the preceding chapter through its focus on natural settings. Thus, by making the concluding poem of the first chapter point *forward* to what follows and the opening poem of the second chapter point *backward* to what preceded, Pasternak achieves perfect continuity between the first two chapters.

"Book of the Steppe" goes on to depict the various settings and moods of a love affair: the rented room ("Out of Superstition"), country cottage ("The Model"), and city ("Balashov") forever associated with a particular intimacy; the travel to and from these places undertaken in a mood of reflection and/or nostalgia ("Balashov" and "The Model"); the lingering memory of physical intimacy ("Don't Touch"); the poet's ironic appreciation of the skill with which his beloved played her romantic "parts," especially the prosaic "rowboat scene" favored by all lovers ("You played that role so well!"); and finally, his envy of other lovers, who appear to him as mere "imitators" when it is *they* who appear in such a "rowboat scene" and not *he* and his beloved. The chapter's concluding poem, "The Model," is a nostalgic evocation of a past love affair which is framed by allusions to the historical present (1917), thereby providing a subtle preview of the following chapter which describes his beloved's "diversions." Not surprisingly, the first two listed are romantic love and current events, specifically, the revolution in progress.

The first two poems of chapter 3, "Swaying [on] a fragrant branch" and "With Oars Crossed" ("Slozha vesla"), portray conventional lovers whose ecstasy and self-absorption are the trademark of lovers everywhere. Both poems focus on the universal love experience—typical, yet grand. The former shows a pair of raindrops so "intimately" joined that nothing can tear them asunder, and the latter portrays two lovers drifting lazily under a starry sky with their "oars crossed."[13] The beloved's interest in current events is implied in the next two poems which depict two cityscapes during the stormy days of Kerensky's Provisional Government: "Spring Rain" conveys the state of exhilaration that one experiences as a witness to cataclysmic events, and "Policemen's Whistles" evokes the social and political disturbances typical of the period, accompanied by a sense of individual pathos and vulnerability. The remaining "diversions" of the beloved are nature, specifically, a star-studded sky ("Stars in Summer") and Shakespeare, or rather, his two famous romantic heroines, Ophelia and Desdemona ("English Lessons"). It is obviously not accidental that the poem on Shakespeare, which pays tribute to Desdemona and Ophelia in terms reminiscent of the original texts, immediately precedes the chapter that describes the poet's own interests and preoccupations, which, quite predictably, pertain to art and creativity.

Turning to chapter 4, we are struck, first of all, by the light note of masculine condescension heard at least in the title of the chapter: *her* interests are diverse and emotional, possibly even intellectually frivolous, and therefore qualify as "diversions," whereas *his* theoretical preoccupation with art and creativity is rendered more seriously as "[My] Pursuit of Philosophy." When we see what form this "pursuit of philosophy" takes, however, we realize that there is a touch of irony not only in the title of the chapter but also in the equally scholastic sounding titles of three of its poems: "Definition of Poetry," "Definition of the Soul," and "Definition of [Poetic] Creation." As it turns out, these "definitions"

13. See Nilsson, "Life as Ecstasy and Sacrifice."

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are as metaphoric and impressionistic as their titles are dry and precise. The point that Pasternak is making, of course, is that he perceives poetry, creativity, and the soul—subjects that philosophers and theoreticians have waxed metaphysical about since time immemorial—in purely poetic terms which relate to the world of nature and feeling. Poetry undergoes various metamorphoses in the "definitions" offered: first, it emerges as the world of nature in its myriad forms ("Definition of Poetry"); then it reappears as the poet's soul, which, in turn, is described in terms of nature ("Definition of the Soul"). Pasternak chooses the allegory of a pear (*grúsha*) and its leaf, blown from a tree during a storm, to convey the symbiotic relationship between a poet and his soul (*dushá*)—poetry. The storm that assails the poet and his soul is a metaphoric one which evokes the chaotic events of current history (that is, the revolution in progress), but their ultimate ability to transcend the obstacles of historical reality is never questioned. In "Diseases of the Earth," an elaborate clinical metaphor is employed which transforms the earth during a storm into a diseased organism and the pelting raindrops into hordes of bombarding bacteria.[14] Since the poet's verses are defined in terms of nature, an exploration of the sentience of nature is tantamount to an exploration of the sentience of poetry. "Definition of [Poetic] Creation," the third and final poem of the "definition" cycle, adds yet another dimension to this sentience—namely, the capacity to *be* emotion itself, for the artist-creator is the source of the feeling or passion that passes through nature and thereby transforms it into art.[15] "Our Thunderstorm," the penultimate poem of the chapter, recalls the earlier poem ("Diseases of the Earth") because it is also a metaphorical evocation of a summer storm, but one endowed with special significance for the poet and his beloved. The poem contains the further implication that the storm itself is a metaphor for their love affair, and hence it is contrasted with that other "storm," the revolution, which has made its presence felt throughout the chapter. Thus the poet's public and communal experience as a captive of historical time provides the background for his private and highly personal "pursuit" of art and love.

"The Replacement," the concluding poem of the chapter, is an exuberant display of the animated "photograph" of the beloved which is her "replacement" in the poet's imagination and therefore in his verses as well.[16] By doting lovingly on his beloved, or, more specifically, on her photograph, Pasternak reaffirms the continuing significance of the female persona in the book as a whole and paves the way for the following chapter ("Songs in Letters, So She Won't Get Bored") where the beloved and the love affair will again be the central focus. Finally,

14. The fact that the "storm" (*buria*) described in the preceding poem, "Definition of the Soul," was a metaphoric allusion to the revolution suggests, by implication, that the "storm" of revolution is now being further metaphorized as one of the "diseases" infecting the earth.

15. This is reminiscent of another discussion of the creative act found in Pasternak's autobiography, *Safe Conduct:* "Art concerns itself with life as the ray of power [*luch silovoi*] passes through it . . . I would make it clear that within the framework of self-consciousness power is called feeling" (Boris Pasternak, *Safe Conduct: An Autobiography and Other Writings* [New York: New Directions, 1958], p. 71).

16. There is an excellent article on this poem by Iurii Lotman: "Analiz dvukh stikhotvorenii," in *Teksty sovetskogo literaturovedcheskogo strukturalizma* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971), pp. 209–24.

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Schema 2. *"My Sister—Life": Second Half*

Locale	Poems	Place	Chapter
Moscow	"Sparrow Hills" "Mein Liebchen, Was Willst Du Noch Mehr?"		Chapter 5: "Songs in Letters, So She Won't Get Bored"
Train poem	"Collapse" ("Raspad")	Balashov	
The steppe (Poems of Balashov and its environs)	"The Steppe" "A Sultry Night" "An Even More Sultry Dawn"	Romanovka	Chapter 6: "Romanovka"
	"Muchkap" "Flies of a Muchkap Teahouse" "Wild was her welcome,..." "An attempt to separate my soul"	Muchkap Rzhaksa	Chapter 7: "An Attempt to Separate My Soul"
Train poem	"How soporific is life!"		Chapter 8: "The Return"
Moscow	"Back Home"		

given the context of chapter 4 ("[My] Pursuit of Philosophy"), the poem's title, "The Replacement," assumes another metaphoric dimension: Is not the beloved herself the only "replacement" for the Muse that the poet allows himself during his "pursuit" of art? Moreover, the picture of her that he carries with him in his poetry is the "replacement" which the Muse makes possible.

Thus concludes the first "half" of *My Sister—Life*, which, as noted at the beginning of the discussion, is framed by poems on art and the artist. The contours of the frame are made even more obvious when we consider that the appearance of what Lotman describes as the Caucasian lexicon of "The Replacement"[17] recalls the same Caucasian tone found in the dedicatory poem, "In Memory of the Demon." In this way art in general and Lermontov in particular help to delineate the boundaries of the first half of the book, which begins with a portrait of the Demon, Lermontov's romantic hero,[18] and ends with a photograph of the beloved, Pasternak's own romantic heroine.

The title of the chapter that begins the second half of *My Sister—Life*, "Songs in Letters, So She Won't Get Bored," harks back to the preceding two chapters and suggests a kind of resolution through synthesis: heretofore the beloved had *her* "diversions" and the poet had *his* "pursuit," but now it is his "pursuit"—that is, songs (poetry)—which he sends her in letters as a "diversion."

An examination of the sequence of twelve poems (contained in four chapters) that immediately follows "The Replacement" reveals an elaborate substructure that results from the poet's manipulation of specific geographical locales. This substructure works independently of the chapter structure and yet complements it. This is outlined in schema 2.

17. Ibid., p. 223.

18. The text of "In Memory of the Demon" suggests that Pasternak is recalling the famous studies of the Demon done by the Russian painter Vrubel'. It is noteworthy that Alexander Blok, who also paid poetic tribute to Lermontov's "Demon," delivered a eulogy at Vrubel''s funeral (1910) that paid particular attention to his studies of the Demon. The eulogy was entitled "In Memory of Vrubel'."

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The four chapters containing these poems are enclosed by an *outer* frame of three Moscow poems: "Sparrow Hills," "Mein Liebchen, Was Willst Du Noch Mehr?" (the first two poems of chapter 5), and "Back Home" (the last poem of chapter 8). As the title shows, the wooded outskirts of Moscow are the focus of "Sparrow Hills" and the occasion is a romantically festive stroll through the woods on Trinity Sunday. In "Mein Liebchen . . ." the same general locale reappears but it is viewed this time from a rustic dacha which the poet shares with his somewhat hysterical beloved. The emphasis is once again on physical surroundings as the poet tries to brighten his beloved's mood by calling her attention to the natural beauty that surrounds them. Since Moscow is left far behind in "Collapse" ("Raspad"),[19] the train poem that follows (and concludes chapter 5), there is the illusion that Moscow is the point of *departure*, where journeys originate. Later, in "Back Home," the poem that completes the Moscow frame, the city reappears, but this time it is the point of *return*, where journeys end, and the poet is seen after he returns home exhausted from a train trip. Not surprisingly, the poem that precedes "Back Home" ("How soporific is life!") describes such a trip and, with "Collapse," forms an *inner* frame of train or journey poems.

"Collapse" conveys a mood of impatience and expectation characteristic of journeys *to* a goal. The poem's allusions to the revolutionary turmoil plainly in evidence in the Povolzh'e region suggest that the poet's impatience with the slow passage of time relates specifically to historical time. "How soporific is life!," the poem that completes the frame of train poems, creates a contrasting mood of contemplation and nostalgia characteristic of journeys *back*, when experiences are recalled rather than anticipated. This poem is the longest poem in *My Sister —Life* and it conveys the multiple impressions associated with long trips: the inside of a train is described in detail as is the outside landscape seen through its windows; the poet's mood is one of isolation and quiet anguish which seems to be provoked by his separation from his beloved.

The two chapters ("Romanovka" and "An Attempt to Separate my Soul") contained within the double frame of Moscow poems and train poems are set in the area around Balashov. This is seen in the very title of chapter 6, "Romanovka," the name of a town northwest of Balashov on the Balashov-Tambov railroad line. The first poem of this chapter ("The Steppe") celebrates the area's most memorable landscape, the rolling "sea" of the steppe. Since this setting is so firmly associated in the poet's mind with a particular intimacy, it is fitting that the introduction to the steppe take the form of a love poem. In this, one of the most beautiful poems in *My Sister—Life*, the steppe is immortalized in words and images that are both solemn and sensuous, and the lovers themselves take on the form of the world's first lovers, Adam and Eve. The two poems that follow, "A Sultry Night" and "An Even More Sultry Dawn," share the at-

19. According to the Biblioteka poeta edition (1965) of Pasternak's poetry, "Raspad" is the name of a railroad stop, presumably on the same Balashov-Tambov line referred to in the poems that follow. A search of available maps and railway schedules, however, fails to locate such a stop, although this may be due to the fact that the name has been changed. "Raspad" is, of course, used in a twofold sense: it designates a railroad stop (or so we are informed) and its lexical meaning is "collapse" or "disintegration." In its latter meaning it evokes the destruction and chaos of the revolution that pervades the air as the poet enters the Balashov region by train.

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mospheric mood suggested by their titles. In "A Sultry Night" the poet is inside, reflecting on the world outside his window. Like the surrounding steppe, he succumbs to the immobilizing heat and closeness of the night, which are unrelieved by a sudden rainstorm. His mood is one of anxiety but not of isolation, for the nature that envelops him is as acutely sensitive to his presence as he is to nature's.[20] The dawn greeting him in the following poem, "An Even More Sultry Dawn," brings no physical or psychological relief. However, the poet now appears to be viewing his surroundings from without rather than from within, keeping an impatient vigil outside his beloved's dwelling until the moment she awakes. A comparison between the "clouds filing through the marketplace" and a procession of Austrian prisoners of war further reinforces the palpable grayness of the setting and serves once again to call attention to the historical framework of the poems.

Just as two companion poems conclude "Romanovka," so two companion poems begin the following chapter, "An Attempt to Separate My Soul": "Muchkap" and "Flies of a Muchkap Teahouse." Muchkap is a town northwest of Balashov that comes *after* Romanovka on the Balashov-Tambov line. The importance of this railroad line as the poet's means of transportation in the Balashov area is emphasized by the fact that the towns and villages which appear are mentioned in the order in which they occur as stops along the line. For example, in the title poem of the chapter there is even a reference to Rzhaksa, the village that comes *after* Muchkap on the same line. In "Muchkap" the poet is alone, viewing the town as a still life against the background of the steppe. Its many windmills resemble sailships and remind the reader of "The Steppe," in which the steppe was described as a seascape. The heat and sultriness that pervaded chapter 6 are felt here as well, and the overall mood is one of listlessness and apathy. The poem also contains a reminder of the familiar railroad line, when the poet reflects that he still has an hour left before the train leaves. In "Flies of a Muchkap Teahouse," the poet is in the local teahouse with his beloved, taking in the myriad sights. A reference to a book (or notebook) belonging to the poet suggests that he is perhaps jotting down his impressions. "Wild was her welcome . . . ," the penultimate poem of chapter 7, describes a specific interchange between the poet and his beloved in which she responds to him with coldness and indifference. This contrast in mood from the ardor and ecstasy of "The Steppe" paves the way for the separation motif which characterizes the chapter's final poem, "An attempt to separate my soul." Here the emphasis is on separation in both spatial and emotional terms: the poet's physical departure from the settings and locale that have dominated the preceding poems is interwoven with his emotional and physical separation from the woman forever associated with these settings. The way has been paved, in other words, for the journey of transition and the subsequent return to Moscow, both of which are celebrated in "How soporific is life!" and "Back Home," respectively.

The last two chapters, "To Elena" and "Afterword," offer what might be described as a double conclusion to *My Sister—Life* (see schema 3). This is indeed fitting in view of the dual profile that the book reveals. "To Elena"—in

20. Reference to a "horrible, *talking* garden" echoes the earlier poem, "The *Weeping* Garden" (italics added), but now the garden's animation takes on a kind of conspiratorial air which seems to intimidate the poet and cause him anxiety.

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Schema 3. *"My Sister—Life": Double Conclusion*

Chapter	Poem	Theme	Content
Chapter 9: "To Elena" the conclusion to the affair	"To Elena"	love	- the beloved
	"Like Them"		- lovers whom the poet and his beloved resemble
	"The Summer"	summer and the steppe	
	"A Thunderstorm, Instantaneous Forever"		- the summer and the various settings associated with the affair
Chapter 10: "Afterword" the conclusion to the book	"Darling, it's an awesome sight!..."	the poet	- the poet in love
	"Let's shed words"		- the poet as creator
	"What Was"	the affair	- love and summer past
	"To love,—to walk,..."		- the poet and his beloved
	"Afterword"	the end	- the end of the summer, the affair, and the book
	"The End"		

which the woman long familiar as the intimate "you," the "beloved" of the preceding poems, is first addressed by name—marks the end of the love affair, whereas "Afterword" marks the end of the book that celebrates the affair. In the opening and title poem of chapter 9 ("To Elena") the poet gives vent to the psychological frustrations of his relationship with Elena and yet basks in memories of their intimacy. The overall tone is one of resignation and acceptance. The healing effects of time are suggested in the chapter's second poem, "Like Them," which is a celebration of romantic intimacy per se expressed through the medium of nature, as in the earlier poem, "Swaying [on] a fragrant branch." The "lovers" are now an azure sky and the river that reflects it, and the sight of their "love" elicits only feelings of kinship and identification on the part of the poet rather than the envy provoked earlier by the "imitators" of him and his beloved (in "The Imitators," the penultimate poem of chapter 2).

If the opening two poems of chapter 9 pay a parting tribute to the affair itself, then the concluding two poems could be said to immortalize the specific settings, seasonal and otherwise, forever associated with the affair. "The Summer" conveys the poet's sensuous impressions of the fading summer while simultaneously making passing reference to the political and social issues of the day. The love affair now terminated is thereby placed within a particular historical context, just as it is also aligned with a specific seasonal and geographical setting. In "A Thunderstorm, Instantaneous Forever," the final poem of the chapter, Pasternak bids farewell both to the summer and to the railroad stop (*polustanok*) forever associated with the affair.[21] Through an elaborate meta-

21. The noun "railroad stop" (*polustanok*) appeared first in *My Sister—Life* in its title poem where the poet was seen traveling on the Kamyshin branch line (between Kamyshin and Balashov), presumably in order to visit his beloved. There the poet gave vent to his disappointment when the train pulled into "the *wrong* railroad stop" (*ne tot polustanok*), that is, not that special one that he was awaiting with impatience. Here in "A Thunderstorm, Instantaneous Forever" that special "railroad stop" has become a memory to be recalled rather than a delight to be anticipated.

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phoric transformation, the lightning flashes of a thunderstorm become the means whereby a keepsake photo of the summer and the familiar railway stop is taken.[22] Having preserved the moment forever, the poet is now free to draw down the curtain on the summer and on the affair that highlighted it.

All the themes found in *My Sister—Life* are brought to a conclusion in the final chapter, "Afterword." Appropriately enough, its thematic diversity makes it reminiscent of the book's opening chapter, "Isn't It Time for the Birds to Sing?" The similarity is seen immediately in the first two poems of chapter 10, "Darling, it's an awesome sight! . . ." ("Liubimaia—zhut'! . . .") and "Let's shed words" ("Davai roniat' slova"), where the poet emerges once again as a poet rather than as the male persona in a love affair. What it is to be a poet and to be in love—a sight as magnificent as it is awesome—is the subject of the first of these two poems. By reintroducing the theme of the creative personality per se, the man as poet rather than the poet as man, Pasternak re-creates the tone of assertiveness and even self-pride that was absent from some of the preceding poems. "Let's shed words" likens the creation of poetic beauty by the poet to the creation of nature's beauty by the Creator, "the omnipotent god of details, the all-powerful god of love."[23]

"What Was" ("Imelos'") and "To love,—to walk,—the thunder did not cease," the middle two poems of chapter 10, take up the love theme once again. "What Was" evokes the sights and smells of a fading summer landscape in terms that suggest the end of a love affair. It is textually linked to "The Summer," an equally nostalgic poem from the preceding chapter, because it employs the same image (the "smell of a wine cork") to capture the sensuous distinctiveness of summer's end. "To love,—to walk, . . ." singles out a romantically memorable day in the summer love affair and exalts it as a kind of final testament to their love.

Just as the book *My Sister—Life* closes with *two* concluding chapters, so its final chapter ends with *two* concluding poems, "Afterword" (the chapter's title poem) and "The End." In the former the poet offers a lyrical defense of his own blamelessness in the love affair. By protesting that not he, but everything—the elements, nature, summer, his beloved's beauty—conspired to make it all happen, he implies that the very notion of blame is banal in regard to their relationship. The poem thus serves as a kind of companion piece to the earlier "To Elena," in which the poet tried to resist the temptation to blame her for the frustrations that the relationship caused him. The final poem of *My Sister—Life,* "The End," replaces this tone of lyrical resignation with one of weariness and exhaustion. The poet still succumbs to the familiar visions of the steppe and the summer, but now he seems to want to free himself from them and to seek instead the soothing oblivion of a deep, dreamless sleep. By separating himself from the steppe and the summer, and hence, from the love affair that

22. Thus the photo of a special railroad stop takes its place alongside that of a special woman, whose photograph is displayed in "The Replacement."

23. The epigraph to "Let's shed words" is taken from the earlier poem "Balashov." There the poet had expressed his exasperation with the heat and sultriness of summer by asking who it was that made everything "burn." He then answered his own question by saying quite simply that "it was in the nature of summer to burn." Here the poet responds to the same question in a slightly different way: he says that the "omnipotent god of details and love," the *artist* of nature made it so.

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immortalized them, the poet is now free to extricate himself from his book as well, for it too is over. So does art follow and frame life.

The fact that poems about art and the artist frame the first half of *My Sister—Life* and then recede into the background until the final chapter of the book means that they occupy three strategic positions—the beginning, end, and approximate middle—in the linear unity of the book. Since the poems falling within these boundaries relate to the settings and moods of a love affair(s), it is as if Pasternak were calling our attention to the fact that what follows is not a "slice of life" with claims to autobiographical and chronological exactitude but, rather, love viewed through the prism of art. Our introduction to the love theme in the book's first half is certainly diversified. In "Book of the Steppe" we are given a broad sweep of the entire affair (it is likely that more than one "real life" relationship has gone into the artistic creation of *the* affair)—the conflicting emotions that it evoked in the poet and the various settings that it imprinted on his memory. The individual portraits of the lovers that follow focus on their separate interests and preoccupations, enabling the poet to explore a wide variety of topics. If love is viewed within a thematic or topical context in the book's first half, then it is viewed within a spatial and temporal one in its second half. Diversity of theme gives way to virtual uniformity of setting. We are led on a sensuous exploration of *one* season (summer), *one* primary locale (Balashov and its environs), and *one* atmospheric mood (heat and sultriness). As if to emphasize further the importance of the setting, the compositional structure that encloses the Balashov poems is itself based on manipulation of specific settings and locales. To see the poet in love is to see him perceive the natural and material settings of his love affair. Love awakens him to nature and to all of life, and the poetic portrait that results is his ultimate tribute to the passion that made such a portrait possible.

It is the summer of 1917 itself with its heat, its rain, its revolution in progress, that constitutes the book's unifying presence. The poet moves from the city to the steppe and from the steppe back to the city, from the height of passion to its ambivalent conclusion, and yet all his movements are delimited by the summer itself, just as the motion of a train is bounded by its point of departure and its destination. The book itself invites this comparison because trains are a frequent presence in *My Sister—Life*. The summer of 1917 is the temporal space that the book covers, and the train is the "vehicle" that makes travel along it possible. The presence of trains is felt most obviously in the so-called train or journey poems, "Collapse" ("Raspad") and "How soporific is life!," although they appear less obtrusively but no less significantly in other poems as well. Of particular interest is the positioning of train allusions throughout the text and their corresponding role as one of its major integrating forces. Of the fifty poems in *My Sister—Life*, there is at least a fleeting reference to trains and/or railroad stops in ten of them: "My sister—life . . . ," "Balashov," "The Model," "Collapse," "Muchkap," "An attempt to separate my soul," "How soporific is life!," "Back Home," "A Thunderstorm, Instantaneous Forever," and "The End." Included among them are the book's *title* poem, its *longest* poem ("How soporific is life!"), and its *concluding* poem. Train journeys mark the various transition points in the summer and the affair—the trips *to* that evoke beginnings, the trips *back* that evoke ends. Moreover, because

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references to the Balashov-Tambov railroad line occur at what appears to be the height of the affair, trains can be said to mark the middle of the continuum as well. Like most people, the poet is open to reflection and reminiscence while he is traveling. Train journeys reflect, therefore, the whole gamut of emotions evoked by the summer and the affair. Likewise, they provide the occasion for references, either oblique or direct, to the revolution. In other words, the train provides access, in spatial and contextual terms, to all the settings and moods of the summer of 1917.

The ending of *My Sister—Life* is orchestrated on many different levels—thematic, spatial, and temporal. It coincides with the *end* of the affair, which coincides with the *end* of summer, which, in turn, coincides with the poet's *departure* from the locale associated with the affair. Furthermore, the poem that concludes the book, "The End," shows the poet wishing for the oblivion of a dreamless sleep, the *end* of consciousness. Given the ever-present challenge of the ending in prose composition, many a novelist might well admire the way in which it has been met here. We need only recall the debate engendered by Bazarov's death, Raskolnikov's rebirth, or Natasha's reincarnation as a fat matron in the first epilogue to *War and Peace*, to appreciate that the major difficulty attached to the ending, namely, its plausible integration into the text that precedes it, has been solved with brilliance in *My Sister—Life*. Little wonder that it is a special occasion indeed when a collection of verse *does* make a book.

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