

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

**Boris Pasternak, My Sister Life and The Zhivago Poems**  
**Translated from the Russian by James E. Falen**

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**Northwestern University Press**  
**Softbound, 164 pages, \$17.95**

*Review by Zvi A. Sesling*

Translations from some foreign languages with which we have some smattering of familiarity are less difficult for the translator-reader relationship. Spanish and French come to mind. Other languages, because of multiple meanings of words (or characters) leave a reader to wholly depend on the translator. Russian and Chinese jump out, as do some Eastern European languages, Hebrew, Arabic, where the reader cannot connect in any way with the original, even when it is printed on the facing page.

Once, a long time ago, I owned a book of Boris Pasternak's poetry. Most people remember him as the author of Dr. Zhivago, but it is his poetry that brought him fame in his native land. My copy was borrowed by some forgotten person and never returned. That was one of the books that "disappeared" and led to my "do not lend" policy.

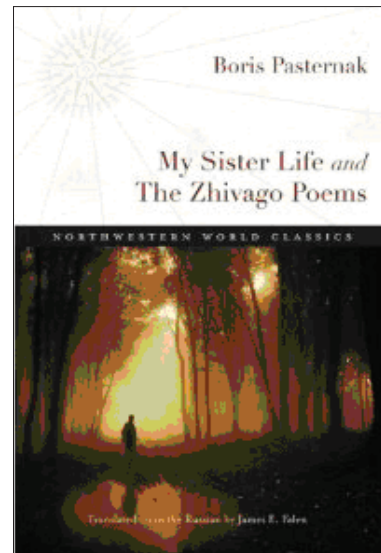
Anyway, I discovered a brand new translation of Pasternak's My Sister Life and The Zhivago Poems in one volume, translated from the Russian by James E. Falen. Falen has previously translated Pushkin and Akhmatova, two very difficult writers to translate, so I was not worried about Pasternak being hacked up.

In fact, I was pleasantly surprised at his ability to bring what might be considered archaic words and forms to the page with ease and elegance. Even the rhyming schemes, when used, work well. Falen has done an excellent and enjoyable translation of Pasternak's work. One of the book's strengths for me is the lack of facing page original language. That leaves 164 pages of English translation and a totally readable book.

One example from My Sister Life is "How Well You Played that Role" in which the poet bemoans a past, unfaithful love:

*How well, how well you played that role!  
While forgot my cues!  
Forgot that you'd sing other roles,  
As someone else's muse.*

*Along the clouds the boa sailed on  
Through field of new-mown hay,  
And oh, how well you played that role,  
Like sighing ripples play!*



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*And leaning low above the oar,  
A swallow on one wing,  
You played that role far better, dear,  
Than all the rest you'll sing!*

From the same sequence is another of Pasternak's love poems. Though one would gather from the novel *Dr. Zhivago* that there exists deep passion in him, it is the poetry which reveals his most passionate writing.

### *Crossing The Oars*

*Rockaway boat in a somnolent breast,  
Willows sweep down over collarbones kissing  
Elbows and oarlocks ... but, oh, take a rest,  
This is what nobody sensible misses.*

*This is a song for more than a few.  
This is a song ... of ashes of lilac,  
Splendor of chamomile crushed in the dew,  
Lips upon lips to be bartered for starlight!*

*This means embracing the vault of the sky,  
Wrapping your arms around Hercules, clinging ...  
This means to squander—and never day die—  
Night after night on the nightingale's singing!*

In *The Zhivago Poems*, the second part of the book, we find Pasternak still writing about romance and love. Take the first two stanzas of "White Night" for example:

*I dream of a far-distant time,  
Of a house on the Petersburg quai.  
A landowner's daughter from Kursk,  
You came as a student on day.*

*You were charming and had your admirers;  
And the two of us all the white night  
Found a place at the window enclosure,  
Looking down from your skyscraper height.*

Or there is this stanza from "Autumn"

*At one we'll sit, at three we'll go—  
I with a book, you with your knitting,  
And in the dawn we'll never know  
What time it was we left off kissing.*

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Clearly, for me, Pasternak is a poet of passion. His subtle metaphoric references of love and romance, love making and separation, the elegance of his writing is what many poets who toss a cup of it in your face, or let it spill out to expose themselves and most often former spouses or lovers leave little for the imagination. No, there is nothing explicit here like those who write about body parts, bones, sexual prowess, cheating, etc.

Pasternak, who lived from 1890-1960 is more closely aligned with the Romantic poets than with our confessional poets, though in his own way, Pasternak's confessions unfold in a more alluring manner.

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Zvi A. Sesling

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