

INTRODUCTION

by Ann Kjellberg

When Joseph Brodsky got off the plane in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1972, at the age of thirty-two, imported by his friend, the Russian professor and basement publisher of censored writers Carl Proffer, who had fetched him from Vienna—the Leningrad authorities had dispatched Brodsky there in an effort to clean house ahead of an expected visit by Richard Nixon—he already had a head full of poetry in English, and of American movies and jazz, Italian painting and architecture, Greek and Roman mythology, and on and on. Although a steady diet of Soviet conformity and canned ideology had driven him from school in Leningrad while he was still a teenager, and an aversion to acquiescence had bumped him through a series of menial jobs and paycheck-pursuing junkets, ultimately landing him in compulsory internal exile in a remote farming village in the subarctic district of Arkhangelsk (for the crime of being, as a poet, technically unemployed), he had for years harbored a slow-burning, private vocation as a reader. His father preserved the ziggurat of books and bookshelves and accumulated literary artifacts with which he walled himself off from the rest of his family's *kommunalka* (communal apartment) in order to read and write into the night, conveying the jumble intact to friends who, with the lifting of Soviet censorship in the 1990s, passed it into various archives where it lingers now.

Brodsky shared this abundance of reading—as wide around the world and as deep into the past as he could go within the constraints of Soviet publishing of the time—with his peers, a generation of young Russian intellectuals peeking warily over the edge of the war’s ruins, hungering for art and knowledge and experience to press against the “trimming of the self” demanded by the State. They hand-typed forbidden books with multiple carbons and squinted at them through the dark glass of translations that had barely squeaked in by way of Poland. Brodsky writes of his peers:

This generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that . . . It started as an ordinary accumulation of knowledge but soon became our most important occupation, to which everything could be sacrificed. Books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded as either nonsense or nuisance. Compared to others, we were ostensibly flunking or faking our lives. But come to think of it, existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effort. So we thought, and I think we were right.

Amid this tumult of curiosity and aspiration, pursued in relentless reading, in late-night kitchen disputations, with stealthily befriended foreign students and travelers, by lamplight in the countryside, one realization was coming into focus: young Brodsky was a prodigy in the composition of verse. Russian poetry at the time was relatively green by European standards; its forms had stabilized in the nineteenth century, when most of the Russian elite spoke French. The charmed generation of Russian poets who corresponded to the

English and European Romantics—most famously Pushkin but also the surrounding constellation that Brodsky anthologized in a short handbook for beginners, *An Age Ago* (1988)—were pioneers who had the advantage of plowing fresh ground. While English Victorian poets like Tennyson and Browning were sounding a weary and self-conscious note, their Russian counterparts were still within view of their poetry's beginnings, and their engagement with its formal devices remained fresh.

The Russian language had additional advantages feeding the vitality of its poetic means: Russian is a highly inflected language, so word order is variable, and its system of internal stresses is much more flexible than that of English, allowing for more variety in patterns of rhyme and meter. When Brodsky's immediate predecessors, like Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, and Marina Tsvetaeva, were struggling with the murderous violence of the Russian Revolution, they looked to the resources of Russian prosody as a repository of universal and civilized values. To compose in classical measures was an expression of solidarity with a continuous tradition of artistic expression, and of solidarity with worldwide aesthetic ideals against the enforced pragmatism of Soviet ideology. Brodsky writes, "Russian poetry has set an example of moral purity and firmness, which to no small degree has been reflected in the preservation of so-called classical forms," and

verse meters in themselves are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted. They cannot be replaced even by each other, let alone by free verse. Differences in meters are differences in breath and in heartbeat. Differences in rhyming pattern are those of brain functions.

A poem was more than its semantic meaning: “Poetry amounts to arranging words with the greatest specific gravity in the most effective and externally inevitable sequence . . . It is language negating its own mass and the laws of gravity; it is language’s striving upward—or sideways—to that beginning where the Word was,” aspiring to its “highest form of existence.” The mnemonic power of musicality in verse was inseparable from poetry’s force, an awareness magnified by the fact that certain poems existed for these readers only because they had been memorized.

Into this picture Brodsky—self-educated, intense, impulsive, unmoored—emerged as a poetic virtuoso; he did things with Russian verse that no one had thought possible. His mentor, Anna Akhmatova, revered for having asserted her poetic autonomy even when threatened with death and imprisonment, immediately pronounced him the carrier of the embers of Russian verse, dooming him to unwavering attention from the authorities. Others of this cohort, precisely because their commitment was to art, had proved themselves quite ungovernable and were continually in the crosshairs of the State.

Brodsky took a medium, formal poetry—capable of high lyricism, polished to an imperial shine by the wryly skeptical Pushkin and his circle, molded to the agonies of war and oppression by Akhmatova and her generation—and lashed it to a modern sensibility. His idiom embraced classical poise, biblical gravitas, philosophical disenchantment, and street slang. In his little nest in the *kommunalka*, he searched the world for models and peers, coming to rest on English as a needed counterweight: a tonality that was quotidian and anti-hysterical, a mighty tradition cradled in a gentle landscape. He wrote early poems eulogizing T. S. Eliot and John Donne. But it was in the simple farmhouse of his exile in the far north, where a friend sent him Oscar Williams’s *New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*, that

he forged during long nights of reading his two most enduring poetic kinships: with W. H. Auden and Robert Frost. He assimilated their practice, using poetic form to undermine grandiose effects, to access a more chastened, open-eyed humanity, into a lifelong poetic position. He later wrote of Auden, “The way he handled the line was telling, at least to me: something like ‘Don’t cry wolf’ even though the wolf’s at the door. (Even though, I would add, it looks exactly like you. Especially because of that, don’t cry wolf.)”

When Brodsky left Russia as an involuntary exile, he at first feared that, severed from the daily encounter with spoken Russian, he would not write another poem. His vector had in a sense been inevitably international—in another direction, he had always yearned for Italy, the grandeur of its classical proportions and fragmented inheritance—but history dictated that his passage from home be one-way. In the event, within moments of his arrival as a rather improvisatory literature professor at the University of Michigan, he embraced the American demotic and became a presence in American poetry, offering a riposte to the anti-intellectualism and colloquialism of the 1970s and a revitalizing assurance of the ascendancy of art in a society that often associated learning with elitism. The Brodsky who arrived with one suitcase in Ann Arbor in 1972 was nobody’s establishment.

Brodsky confronted the situation of exile as an amplification of the existential charge that motored his sensibility. He was a poet of absolute awareness, who had no patience with consolations. To be lonely, to miss your family, your friends, your love, your language, your streets, your known sensations, was to be thrown into the reality of the solitude that is the universe’s message. His exile took his twin themes of travel and time and fused them: the past is a place to which you cannot return; the future is a place of infinite emptiness. His love for Italy, where the past is everywhere around you, offered a

glimpse of refuge, most poignantly expressed in the comprehensive elegy “Vertumnus,” where art is “some loose / silver with which, occasionally, rich infinity / showers the temporary” and where “a sellout-resistant soul / acquires before our eyes the status / of a classic.” If his task, and his poetry, became more difficult, it was because it was driven to a more difficult truth. Only in his very last poems does the possibility of home and arrival flicker on the horizon.

Brodsky wrote four books of poetry in Russian while in America (he published in exile two books of poems written previously and censored). The first book in English that he was able to oversee as author, *A Part of Speech* (1980), was an elaborate symphony of collaboration. Editors at Farrar, Straus and Giroux secured literal versions of many of the poems and sent these to the poets with whom Brodsky felt the greatest affinity—Derek Walcott, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Howard Moss—who rendered them in an English that Brodsky subsequently, with his own growing command, more and less recast. Other translations were the product of long negotiation. By the time of *To Urania* (1988), Brodsky was taking a greater hand in the proceedings. His approach to his poetry in English has come under fire. He used to reply that his Russian critics (often Soviet) leveled similar complaints—that he forced the outcome, that he overran conventional uses of language, that he was dissonant. I’d advise readers to consider this analogy and dispel the enforcer within—Brodsky’s English may challenge the reader’s ear in ways that invoke unfamiliar powers in poetry and reward the challenge.

In 1983 Brodsky wrote the essay “To Please a Shadow,” in which he describes buying a Latin-font typewriter in order to close the distance between him and his beloved Auden. Proffer had taken Brodsky to visit Auden when he landed in Vienna at the moment of his exile, an encounter that punctuated an internal dialogue that remained un-

ceasing. Brodsky used to quip that he was a Russian poet, an English essayist, and an American citizen. His English essays, published in two volumes in his lifetime as *Less Than One* and *On Grief and Reason*, in addition to a long prose reflection on Venice called *Watermark* and some scattered uncollected pieces, offer a window into a restless mind in which the converging vectors of English and Russian are constantly unfolding, viewed through the atmospheres of still other languages and milieus.

We now live in a time of which Brodsky was an advance scout—a time when many writers operate beyond their original borders and outside their mother tongues, often, like Brodsky, bearing witness to violence and disruption, often answering, through art, to those experiences, in language refracted, by necessity, through other language. In Brodsky's moment there was a cluster of poets, some from the margins of empire, some, like Brodsky, severed from their roots—Walcott, Heaney, Paz, Milosz, to name a few—who brought with them commanding traditions, as well as the imprint of history's dislocations. We would do well now to attend to their song, standing as they did in our doorway between a broken past and the language's future.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This book follows the texts established for *Collected Poems in English* (2000), and readers are referred to that volume for annotation and bibliographic information. Where no translator is given, Brodsky composed the poem in English. He prefaced his first book, *A Part of Speech*, with thanks to Ann Frydman, Masha Vorobiova, and Stephen White for preparing interlinear versions of his poems, and thanked Jonathan Aaron, Nancy Meiselas, Margo Picken, David Rieff, Pat Strachan, Peter Viereck, and, “above all,” Barry Rubin and Derek Walcott, “for their suggestions, proofreading, and assistance with certain references.” He noted, “I have taken the liberty of reworking some of the translations to bring them closer to the original, though perhaps at the expense of their smoothness. I am doubly grateful to the translators for their indulgence.”

