Brodsky through the Eyes of his Contemporaries

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Brodsky through the Eyes of his Contemporaries

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Introduction
BRODSKY IN FORTY MIRRORS

Brodsky placed a fifty-year ban, from the date of his death, on the publication of any official biography, urging that his own writing should constitute his only biography. Never prone to discussing the details of his trial or exile, Brodsky clearly wanted to avoid being a prisoner of biography. However, already erroneous judgments are being made based on unreliable recollections. How are we to avoid losing what we remember of this great man?

As I agreed to my Russian publisher's, Yakov Gordin's, invitation to assemble a second collection of interviews, *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries*, I decided this time not to limit myself to poets. I interviewed a variety of his friends from Russia, America, and England, and of different professions: literary, ballet, art, and psychology, to name a few. There is a historian Mikhail Heifets, the first literary critic of his work, writers John le Carré and Susan Sontag, Archpriest Mikhail Ardov, Lady Spender and her son, Matthew Spender, fellow émigrés Elena Chernysheva, Ludimlla Shtern, Igor Efimov, an artist Oleg Tselkov, former geologists Genrikh Steinberg and Edward Bloomstein. Other close friends include Annie Epelboin, Zofia Kapuścińska, translators Alan Myers, Daniel Weissbort, Peter France, Aleksandr Sumerkin, Bengt Jangfeldt, and Viktor Golyshev, publishers and editors Roger Straus and Paul Keegan, former students Bill Wadsworth and Tatiana Retivov. Of these, the majority are still poets: Derek Walcott, Mark Strand, Seamus Heaney, Les Murray, Jonathan Aaron, Daniel Weissbort, Annelisa Alleva, Lev Loseff, Tomas Venclova, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Tatiana Shcherbina and Tatiana Retivov. Some of Brodsky's friends declined to be interviewed, and foreigners were often more forthcoming, furnishing me with unpublished poems, rare photographs, sketches by Brodsky, even a letter and portrait by the poet.

By nature a wanderer, Brodsky traveled a great deal almost as if he were driven to do so. It fell upon me to follow in his footsteps in order to conduct some forty interviews; this was made more possible by a grant from The British Academy. As I prepared for the interviews

I had to formulate more than five hundred questions. Some questions were used more than once, though I individualized them as much as possible hoping to extract something of general use in each case. As I formulated the questions, I had to bear in mind that what I knew about Brodsky was not necessarily known by the interviewee and vice versa. The process required much tact on my part, occasionally I had to correct obvious mistakes or suppress matters, which were too personal. I must confess that the results were not always up to expectation, and some interviews were never finished and had to be excluded. Though overall it was possible to avoid taking literally certain pronouncements, as well as steer clear of the tendency that many of us have towards generalizations.

Most of the questions were addressed under the following headings: the poet's personality, his life, exile, expulsion or emigration; friendships and estrangements; whether Brodsky the man was equal to his fate; Brodsky, the teacher; self-translation and translators; Brodsky as Poet Laureate of the USA; what the Brodsky phenomenon signifies in terms of American poetry; reasons for the animosity of certain English poets towards Brodsky; what the sources of his ideas about language were; whether he was Christian, Jewish, pagan, or a supranational poet; Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn; Brodsky's failure to return to Russia. Finally, what new discoveries have been made; what has been learnt about Brodsky's poetry and about the man as a result of these conversations.

Brodsky's Personality

Insofar as Brodsky's worldview derives from his personality, I tried to find out what were the most attractive features of his multi-faceted personality. According to Ludmila Shtern, Joseph was very handsome, with a magnetism that made women swoon and men warm to him. Others find Brodsky's charisma godly. Poet Tatiana Shcherbina first met him in 1989, in Rotterdam, and she recalls: 'It is hard for me to describe this meeting. Well, had I met with Christ, perhaps it would have been like that'. It is undeniable that his charm was not of this world: irresistible, he could persuade one to commit a crime with his 'meow-meow!' Men might resist; women, never.'Someone compared him to a snake charmer, hidden in the souls of his contemporaries,

said Mikhail Heifets. With the pipes of poetry, he summoned forth hidden passions from their mysterious darkness, making spirit dance before him'. He was shaken by talent from within (Sumerkin).

Brodsky evinced other energies and transformed them by his sheer presence. He was cultivated by many exceptional personalities. Isaiah Berlin, himself a mythic figure for Russian readers, said that in Brodsky's presence one was often made aware of being in the presence of genius. Tomas Venclova remembers how when Aleksandr Gabrichevsky met Brodsky he said: 'He is a genius, the only real one I have met in my life'. – 'Can that really be so? After all, you have met Stravinsky, Kandinsky and even Leo Tolstoy'. – 'This man is the real thing!' he repeated, unperturbed.

According to the observation of Brodsky's friend, the ballet-dancer Elena Chernysheva, he possessed the keenest intuition. He always saw what the king's new clothes were hiding. Zofia Kapuścińska, the addressee of his poem, 'Zofia', says the same thing. He had only to see the start of something to know how it would end. His character was both complex and full of contradiction, his intellect lively and original. Brodsky read a lot, never leaving home without a book in his pocket, having come up with the aphorism: 'Liberty is the right to go to the library'. Derek Walcott confesses: 'From Brodsky I learnt one important thing: if you are not thinking while writing poetry, you are not really working'. He believed that he was condemned to solitude, but was constantly drawn to people. He complained that he wasn't left in peace, but depended on these endless disturbances. It irritated and inspired him (Tatiana Retivov). Everywhere he went he was the focus of attention, making some appropriate comment. He loved light-heartedness. On the death of Brezhnev, in 1982, he wrote, in English:

> He was in charge of something large;
> Some called it hell, some paradise.
> Now that he's dead, let's drop the grudge,
> We're still alive, surprise, surprise!

We are already familiar with Brodsky's independent nature. No teachers, no great authorities were ever acknowledged. Nor did he acknowledge how terrible villains could be. 'He recognized only one torturer, M.B., and submitted only to one master, Christ'. (Tatiana

Shcherbina). He had his own opinion about everything (Oleg Tselkov). Possessing great powers of persuasion, he was a volatile talker. Igor Efimov tells of a visit to Brodsky, in exile, in Norenskaya. He remembers the following episode: 'He had a toothache and there was no doctor at hand. He dealt with the pain by going outside. We spoke for nights on end and would go outside for ten minutes or so and then return and resume the conversation at precisely the point at which he had left off'. In Norenskaya, in response to his requests, friends would bring him drink and lots of medications. They were worried about his need for so much medication, but in the village it became clear why: peasants came to Brodsky and he would treat them, committing yet another crime, practicing medicine without a license.

He liked to boast of his difficult character, calling himself 'spawn of hell'. But if you yourself said it, Susan Sontag remarks ironically, you had to prove it. He could be abrupt, foul-mouthed, breaking women's hearts, making dates and not keeping them. He might ask to be introduced to someone and then be very rude (Annie Epelboin). In youth he was often very outspoken and direct (Lev Loseff). And yet he was also a humble man, breaking out in a sweat, blushing easily, embarrassed (Annie Epelboin). 'He was arrogant and at the same time vulnerable'. (Tomas Venclova). In the space of a few moments he could pass from profound self-doubting to supreme confidence (Tatiana Retivov). He was sensitive and never burdened anyone with his problems, said Mikhail Ardov. He valued sympathy, but never demanded it of his friends. As Annelisa Alleva said, 'He was many folks rolled into one, a veritable mosaic of personalities'.

He could not lie and hated mendacity in others (Igor Efimov). He could not abide empty, social chitchat either. If he liked to argue, it was because he always saw things differently. He was plentifully endowed with arrogance and pride. If he himself could not appreciate something, he insisted that it was not worth bothering about. Hence his view of French culture (Annie Epelboin). But in his own way, he was humble, often saying: 'It is more modest and closer to the truth to see oneself as a simple foot soldier, than as a fallen angel'. Lev Loseff, who knew him better than anyone else, says that Brodsky 'lived faster than most and this may have caused embarrassment and

consternation, insofar as people living at the normal rate took it for inconstancy'.

What was most surprising about the mature Brodsky? His valor, insists Loseff. 'He was mortally ill, but did not attempt to console himself with illusions, and continued working literally to the very end'. Courageous as he was, he was still scared of policemen. Genrikh Steinberg : 'If one is to typify Joseph's character, it can be put in a nutshell: he was quite simply a man of great dignity. He always behaved in a dignified manner, in any situation. He did not conform to what society demanded, very much his own man. One can only envy him'.

He had an encyclopedic knowledge, and had assimilated the whole of Russian poetry (Natalya Gorbanevskaya). He was very knowledgeable about the Futurists, Constructivists and Oberiu, as well as about English and Polish poetry. Everything interested him; architecture and geography, jazz and politics (Aleksandr Sumerkin). His knowledge from football to Philby, from Catullus to inexpensive, factory-made Clark shoes, astonished everyone. But sometimes he needed to check his facts, e.g. 'What time of the year was it', he asked Alan Myers on the phone, 'when Belisarius started his campaign of annihilation against the Vandals?' There was no poet in the West, ancient or modern, says Myers, that Brodsky did not know of. It was enough to mention a name, and he at once gave you the titles of books, or quoted actual poems. Mark Strand recalls that when he first met Brodsky in 1972, Joseph recited from memory one or Mark's poems. 'I at once fell for him', joked Strand. He knew a huge number of poems by heart. 'He lived poetry', says Derek Walcott. Lady Natasha Spender recounts how in the early days of his stay in her home, in June 1972, Brodsky and Auden read together, in a duet, by memory, a poem by Betjeman 'Up the Butterfield aisle / Rich with Gothic enlacement…' The mixture of Auden's American accent with that of Brodsky's Russian was hilarious.

Joseph was always afraid of sounding banal, says Efimov. Therefore many of his utterances resulted from a desire to say something non-banal. Example: Brodsky wrote an article about the events in Poland in the early eighties, when the Communists suppressed "Solidarity". Brodsky was tickled by a report that western financiers had not come

to Solidarity's help, and he invented the saying that the Polish movement was suppressed not by tanks but by banks. It was the rhyme that attracted him. Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott speak of Brodsky's affinity for rhyme. He injected it into his conversation: 'Now that I am in Paris / I wish I were where my car is'. In a poem by Seamus Heaney on the occasion of Brodsky's speech in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1988, is the stanza:

> The poet Brodsky's held in awe
> For laying down the poetry law
> In these late times.
> He steals the fire and air of words
> He leaves the cliché for the birds.
> He worships rhymes.

Exile or emigration?

Not all of my interviewees agreed with the generally accepted fact that Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union. Edward Bloomstein says that Brodsky himself had long wanted to leave the USSR. Brodsky had asked Genrikh Steinberg if it would be possible to hire a fishing boat and perhaps jump overboard and swim ashore in the narrow straits. He saw no sense in remaining in the USSR. 'To leave here is impossible but to live here is unthinkable!' he remarked to Mikhail Ardov. Soviet life, as a whole, was driving him out. Whether he left of his own accord or was expelled, Brodsky's arrival in the West was like a coronation, as Susan Sontag put it: with the little volume of John Donne, along with a bottle of vodka and a typewriter he landed in Vienna, where he was met by an American professor and offered a job in an American university; together they sought out Wystan Auden, who took Joseph with him to London, to an Poetry International festival, where English translations of his poetry were read by Robert Lowell himself; Joseph was hosted by Sir Steven Spender, where he met Akhmatova's hero, Sir Isaiah Berlin and other members of the English intellectual aristocracy; he was also taken to an evening session of the English parliament, as well as to lunch with a bishop. Finally, on Auden's request, the American Academy sent him 1000 dollars and he landed in New York.

The Conquest of America

From his very first days in the USA, he embarked on the conquest of America – hundreds of public performances in colleges and universities, in libraries and in clubs. Everybody admired Brodsky's poetry readings – a spellbinding natural phenomenon, a kind of mass-hypnosis. People went into a trance (Ludmila Shtern). He was an absolute master of his audiences, and usually the auditoriums were packed. Seamus Heaney, not knowing the Russian language, says: 'Just the sound of his voice excited me, the sound of Russian words'. For Roger Straus, Brodsky's voice recalled that of a synagogue cantor. Annelisa Alleva: 'He read his poems by heart, in a resonant voice, with great conviction, but at the same time somewhat nervously'. Annie Epelboin regarded his way of reading even more unusually: 'When he read poems, his gaze changed, as if it was not he reading the poems, but a whole generation, speaking to us through the ages'. Its emotional power stunned people. Wherever he went, he was applauded. Americans, as distinct from the English, says Susan Sontag, are able to applaud a man who deserves it. Joseph was admired from the very start. All who got to know him more closely loved him. His extraordinary mind won the hearts of people, his energy, his valor. His presence in America was very soon noticed, both as a poet and as a teacher (Jonathan Aaron). Exile allowed Brodsky to become a world poet, to extend his influence over other poets who admired him and were, he felt, his inferiors.

For many American poets, the trial, exile, expulsion of Brodsky became a cause for envy: 'No poet could ever wish for more', they said. Brodsky defied institutionalized evil and suffered the consequences. This gave him moral authority. No single American poet could dream of anything like it, says Bill Wadsworth. Brodsky was seen as a hero or as a romantic figure. Precisely on the plane of moral authority, Susan Sontag feels that he had a chance to exert influence in virgin territory among people, audience and poets he both admired, enjoyed being with and felt superior to. And Brodsky knew his worth (Lev Loseff). When Alan Myers read out a review of his collection: 'They call you a genius'. Joseph responded with a single word: 'Again?' Genrikh Steinberg recollects how after Brodsky had read his long poem

'Gorbunov and Gorchakov' by memory, in 1968, he also remarked: 'That's something they'll give me the Nobel Prize for one day'.

Friendship and alienation

Brodsky undoubtedly had a great talent for friendship. According to Aleksandr Sumerkin, he would phone half the country to arrange a reading for Rein, or get up from his sickbed to introduce Kushner at a reading. 'Ironical about himself in poems, Brodsky was exaggeratedly enthusiastic about the poets who figured in his life' (Tatiana Shchebina). He wrote a vast number of prefaces to books by contemporaries, older and younger. But he could also be unfair and hostile, as Oleg Tselkov thought he was in regard to Yevtushenko. According to Mikhail Heifets, Brodsky 'was one of those people who never forgave either those close or distant for trying to help him'. Evtushenko did try to help him. Brodsky himself helped everyone, he would secretly send money to refugees, give away his favorite books, buy his friends clothes and airplane tickets, and pay hotel bills. But he could not accept the same from others (Bengt Jangfeldt). He often ascribed to people qualities that only he possessed (Igor Efimov).

Sir Steven Spender and his wife were substitutes for Brodsky's parents during his life in the West. His close circle of friends included such luminaries as Czeslaw Milosz, Octavio Paz, Derek Walcott, Mark Strand, Seamus Heaney and Les Murray. Brodsky was convinced each of them would receive the Nobel Prize. This has not happened yet only to Les Murray and Mark Strand, although they might still be recipients. Susan Sontag, who was also in this circle, believed that Joseph was the leader of the group, since he always had to be the leader. Why, interestingly enough was there not a single American among these stars, asks Bill Wadsworth. And he himself provides the answer: because in America, poetry occupies only a marginal place; because the quality of poetry depends on the quality of its readers. On the other hand, Brodsky could not abide those who spoke of themselves as 'the people'. He was merciless in this regard. According to Tatiana Retivov, he did a lot to alter the mindset of the leftist New York intellectuals, correcting and reconstructing them. Jonathan Aaron acknowledges that he himself had been sternly corrected under Brodsky's influence.

Brodsky, the teacher

Students went to the University of Michigan simply because Brodsky was there (Tatiana Retivov). And yet, before Brodsky, both Auden and Frost had taught there. He called his students 'boys and girls', was an extremely exacting instructor and he smoked in class. He was politically incorrect and tactless. He was permanently surrounded by female students in love with him. Apart from the fact that he made his students learn poems by heart, which he then analyzed in class, he demanded the same commitment to work that he himself had. Sometimes he overwhelmed them with his knowledge. He was impatient and not always careful about what he said. Many students were scared of him. But he admired those who had the audacity to challenge him, who would give as good as they got. The poet and future President of the American Academy of Poets, Bill Wadsworth, was one of these, arguing, wisecracking and talking about poetry. Bill tells how one day at Columbia Brodsky entered the classroom, cup of coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, puffing like a locomotive and said, 'You won't believe what happened to me last night… I met a god. And he described his meeting with the Dalai Lama, ending: 'And would you believe it, in the end he came over to me – my humble self! – and embraced me'. A female student, who adored Joseph, exclaimed: 'Joseph, it must be your aura!' Without missing a beat, Joseph responded, 'No, I think it was my tie. You see, it was the same color as His Holiness's robe'.

Brodsky in England

Brodsky was undoubtedly an anglophile. He loved English history, even the history of the British Empire. As Daniel Weissbort recalls: 'We were walking about in central London and passed the Foreign Office. Joseph said to me: 'A pity England got rid of its Empire'. My big chance and I answered: 'I don't think it was entirely voluntary'. He visited places of well-known English people, went to Wellington, whence John Donne brought cucumbers to London; Leighton Bromswold where George Herbert was a priest; sat under the apple tree where Newton had the Law of Gravity revealed to him. He visited places connected with Auden, even the most tedious ones, and as-

sured Alan Myers that this was gratifying. Alan tells how he did not at first realize to what extent Brodsky had adopted Auden's persona. He even assimilated Auden's Anglo-American accent as well as some of Auden's verbal mannerisms such as 'that would be awfully nice'. In an almost Audenesque manner, whatever he touched turned into a cigarette (MacNiece said this of Auden).

He tried to give an Audenesque finish to his long poems by means of a pointed and profound aphorism (Alan Myers), but his centrifugal thinking proliferated, like the universe itself. Hence his prolixity. Auden like Brodsky was a wunderkind, and like Brodsky he could not stand free verse. Brodsky was amazed at Auden's technical mastery, his ability to link high and low (Mark Strand). Like Auden, Brodsky was very controlled, adopting Auden's intonation and rhythm (Daniel Weissbort). Brodsky also identified with Auden's philosophical orientation; both of them revering Kierkegaard. Both could speak fascinatingly on any topic. Auden was a civilized writer and man, says Jonathan Aaron, with distinct aesthetic principles both in life and in poetry. Brodsky called Auden his twin, as he did Tsvetaeva and Tomas Venclova: Brodsky was so unique that it was hard to endure, and one was always looking for someone else like him (Tomas Venclova).

Auto-translations and translators

Russians are convinced that Brodsky's poems cannot be translated. Igor Efimov: 'It's a joke to think you can translate: 'V kontse bolshoi voiny ne na zhivot, / kogda chto bylo zharili bez sala' (At the end of the great war, which was for life or death, whatever we had we fried without fat); 'na zhivot' is not the belly but for life, and not only did they fry, but they slaughtered. He was able to assemble a metaphorical bouquet in a single line. Robert Hass, poet and translator of Milosz, compared reading Brodsky in translation to wandering through the ruins of a building, which was said once to have been beautiful. Mark Strand believes that his translators did not serve Brodsky well. At the same time, many find that even in translation Brodsky's intellectual energy was noticeable. It should come as no surprise that among his translators there were some first-rate poets: Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur, Derek Walcott. Walcott said to me that he, Brodsky and Barry Rubin once spent three hours translating one line in the poem

'Letter to the Ming Dynasty'.

Doubts about Brodsky's genius began when he started writing and especially translating his poems into English. He began to attract a lot of negative criticism. It was difficult to detach his poetry from his personality. Critics, journalists, and ill wishers placed him in a special category of 'exile poets' and pursued him with this label until the end of his days. Maliciously they picked on any unusually employed idiomatic expression, in the poetry as much as in the prose (Tatiana Retivov). According to Susan Sontag, no one in America went as far as the English poet Craig Raine. In America there was more concern not to hurt, whereas in England critics would get a kick out of insulting him. On the other hand, Sontag acknowledges that it was awkward when Brodsky apparently thought his English good enough to attempt to write poetry in it. She insists that all his essays written in English were closely supervised by his editors or friends. She herself frequently corrected his self-translations, but her corrections were ignored by Brodsky. Mark Strand jokes: 'I always took Joseph's advice; he never took mine. Just think what a poet he might have been!'

On the other hand, Brodsky's translations of two poems by Tsvetaeva, Tatiana Retivov considers, as simply genial. Because of these two translations into English, she feels, he can be forgiven all the idiosyncratic usages in his manipulation of his second language. And Retivov herself is a bilingual poet and translator of Brodsky's essay on Tsvetaeva.

The change of language involves the entire poetic system (Tomas Venclova), Brodsky insisted on keeping the metre and rhyme of the original. This placed considerable demands on the translator bordering on intellectual athleticism if not acrobatics. 'He tried to widen the scope of feminine rhyming in English poetry, but as a result his poems began to sound like W.S. Gilbert or Ogden Nash. However, he gradually improved; and did indeed begin to extend the scope of English prosody, an unusual achievement in itself. He might have succeeded where Nabokov, for instance, failed' (Daniel Weissbort).

Alan Myers, one of Brodsky's English translators, like Daniel Weissbort, rarely received any encouragement or praise from Brodsky himself, apart from an ironical 'I've been mangling your masterpieces!' to Alan. Brodsky regarded the translations made by others as rough drafts to be worked on. On the other hand, Alan Myers and Peter

France acknowledge that sometimes Brodsky did manage to improve the translation, turning them into masterpieces of their own, as for instance in the 6th line of the first verse of 'Mexican Divertimento' 'Vechernii vozduch zvonche khrustalia' Brodsky translated as: 'The crystal, be it noted, smashed to sand'. 'Quite brilliant. I'd never have thought of that', says Alan Myers. Similarly brilliant lines occur in his poems in English. Still, he never really mastered the language, even though he very much wanted to. According to Peter France, Brodsky's auto-translations will remain as curiosities, brave attempts to bring two linguistic cultures closer together.

Most American poets, says Bill Wadsworth, consider Brodsky's English poems as at best mediocre. In his view, the poem 'Blues' is 'embarrassingly bad'. But there are one or two exceptions, for instance the poems to his daughter, also written in English. Seamus Heaney singles out his poem 'Reveille', which in its rhyming, imagery, and diction "contains a mass of excellent material."

And now a few words about Brodsky's translations into Russian. Aleksandr Sumerkin who was very knowledgeable about Brodsky's poetry and has translated several of his English essays notes: 'He did not revise, but simply rewrote [...] Of my initial text, only the prepositions and conjunctions remained. Hence, by the way, the catastrophic difference between my and other translations, which were done after Joseph's death, and the translations which he was able to correct'. Brodsky's prose, Alan Myers remembers, was like a ballet-dance, closer to the language of poetry.

It was easier for translators of Brodsky into languages he did not know. Bengt Jangfeldt, Brodsky's Swedish translator, says: 'I translated his poetry and his rhyming. It is not true that one can rhyme only in Russian. Because in the West there had been little rhyming for half a century, a mass of free words are available that have never been rhymed. Brodsky, as is known, liked mixing old and new words and this works well in Swedish. It is very time-consuming but also very rewarding, because you are working all the time on the border of your own language. And it permits fewer semantic mistakes, because you are obliged to keep in mind the sense of what has been said'. Bengt Jangfeldt tried to preserve the metre of the source text, sometimes at the expense of meaning, which Brodsky had approved of. He allowed him to use the English translations as well.

What does the Brodsky phenomenon mean for American poetry?

After Nabokov, Brodsky was the first Russian to take an active part in the literary life of the West: he wrote in English and fully participated in discussions and conferences. He became Poet Laureate of the USA, a position, according to Bill Wadsworth, scarcely noticed before he occupied it. He expressed a high regard for Americans in his 'Immodest Proposal', stressing that the American contribution to world culture was not confined to movies and jazz, but also included poetry. He suggested that poems should be distributed in huge editions and made available, for free, in hotels, subways, trains, and airplanes. This soon became the talk of the town: 'Did it have to be a Russian to show us that poetry was important and essential, that Americans in the 20th century had written some remarkable poetry?' According to Bill Wadsworth, Brodsky changed the perception of the role of poetry in American culture. And for a while poetry collections were in fact available in hotel rooms together with the Bible. 'But soon the poetry collections were stolen, while the Bibles remained', jokes Mark Strand.

Can Brodsky be called an American poet? Mark Strand: 'It is more that he combined American and English locutions; his English poetry never sounds natural; all his rhymes are approximate and sound like rhymes only if one pronounces them with a Russian accent'. His tropes are hyperbolic; his metaphors and conceits are of British derivation. On the other hand, Bill Wadsworth comments, not Pound or Eliot, but it is Auden, Frost and Hardy who are poets of the English tradition of liberalism, emphasizing not the system of myths, theologies, ideologies, but individualism; the latter are Brodsky's poetic masters. In this sense, Brodsky was more an English poet than American, says Bill. And the most important thing, from the American point of view, is that Brodsky belongs to Russian literature and not English. Living in America, he loved New England, Massachusetts, and New York, but not Middle America or the South. He always preferred Emily Dickinson to Walt Whitman. Poet Jonathan Aaron feels that 60-70 of his own poems translated by Brodsky are absolutely first-class. Though according to Aaron, the remaining translations should also be of interest to students and for poets, as one can learn from

them something about one's own language, namely because Brodsky subjects English to the kind of treatment that no American poet would ever dream of.

But not all who judged him were so well disposed. Brodsky's fame irritated poets. For them Brodsky was too self-confident, almost reactionary. Sneering at the left, not respectful of American modernism, dogmatically rejecting free verse. Neither Chinese nor Japanese influences on American poetry interested him. Nor French. These people did not approve the appointment of a Russian as Poet-Laureate of the USA. Mark Strand defended him, Brodsky having succeeded him in this position: "I do not think one has to be born here to be American. One has to feel oneself American to be American, and I think that Joseph felt himself American." Roger Straus sarcastically remarks that once in a while American intellectuals make the right decision, one being to choose Brodsky as Poet-Laureate of the United States.

It is different with Brodsky's prose, which contains the greater part of Brodsky's thinking and exemplifies the enormous breadth of his knowledge and originality of his thought. Jonathan Aaron believes that Brodsky is one of the great American writers of the 20th century because of his prose. He particularly values *Watermark*, where Brodsky brought together prose and poetry. Nothing of the kind has ever been written about Venice.

Not all cultures are disposed to accept Brodsky. French culture, for instance, is completely indifferent to him. The French and Brodsky were foreign to one another. But at least those French people who read Brodsky, says Annie Epelboin, had some sense of his measure. Tatiana Shcherbina, who lived for several years in France, says that many poets were amazed that so much fuss was made over Brodsky, and that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize.

What is the origin of his idea about language as an end in itself?

It is arguable that Brodsky was affected by the linguistic epidemic of the twentieth-century. Brodsky reaches his own conclusions about language. The very nature of a writer predisposes him to love language. All real writers are focused on language (Susan Sontag). Why

did Brodsky make language the centre of his worldview? Bill Wadsworth: because he did not want to make himself and his life the centre of his poetic world; 'Look at my life, look at what I've done and experienced, that's why I am a great poet'. Instead of this, he gives language priority. Tatiana Shcherbina: 'Because it is the main thing. What Brodsky writes is a mediation between man and God. Not insignificant is the fact that Brodsky had a special gift not only to make language absolute, but also to express his thoughts about language with vehemence and passion, categorically, unafraid of superlatives, so that it becomes hard to ignore, even if one does not agree. Hence his authoritativeness, his maximalism, like the voice of language itself'.

His teleology was language, thinks Bill Wadsworth. One can call Brodsky a logotheist. 'For many, this seemed characteristic of Jewish thought, says Tatiana Shcherbina, his being an interpreter of the higher understanding and therefore an authority. Many, however, were irritated by it, thinking him arrogant and authoritarian. For me Brodsky's tone was natural, and if he taught it was because he had something worth conveying'. Brodsky had things, which he formulated and they seemed prophetic. Shcherbina envies him his unbending gaze, such as will dream up formulae. The Gospels are written in formulae, which cannot be altered by translation into Russian. Mikhail Heifets observes that Joseph reveres language, which, as it were, led him, whereas, in fact, he taught Soviet readers to live in a different way. Derek Walcott: 'For Brodsky, an almost medieval devotion to his craft was natural, hence his devotion to language, hence his writing poetry, which was conceived of like the interior of a medieval cathedral, along with arches and columns'. In this he sees the similarity between Brodsky and Dante.

One should remember that Brodsky created the Russian equivalent of idiomatic, 20th century Anglo-American poetry, in the first place, of course, Auden's. In general, this is a highly artificial, lyrical-ironical fusion of ordinary speech and intellectual discourse, magically made to seem natural. And the sources of the notion of language as an end in itself can be found in the Bible. As can the sources of his maximalism and authoritativeness. We may reiterate Solzhenitsyn's rhetorical question: 'What is the role of religion in Brodsky's world view religion?'

Christian, Jewish, pagan or supranational, universal poet?

Bengt Jangfeldt: 'He belonged to Christian culture; for him Christianity is not a religion but a civilization'. He presented Aleksandr Sumerkin with a collection of 'Christmas Poems' with the inscription: 'To Aleksandr from a correspondence-student of Christianity'. This inscription, to some extent, describes his position. Of course, he was not an atheist, and it is enough to read his 'Roman elegies' to convince oneself of that: 'Lean over, and I shall whisper something in Your ear: 'I am grateful for everything.' But as an extremely independent person and freethinker, stubbornly freethinking in fact, he found any kind of organized worship inimical. Tatiana Shcherbina: 'Our entire civilization is based on what Christ brought to it, and this is what distinguishes it from the rest of the world. It does not matter whether a man believes or does not believe, he is still a Christian. From my point of view, Brodsky was just such, an apostle of Christianity'. Aleksandr Sumerkin: 'insofar as he was a Jew by national origin, which he never denied in public, he could not call himself a Christian'.

In an interview, Brodsky said: 'My work, for the most part, is in praise of God'. Tatiana Shcherbina: 'Even Brodsky's fear of God was not so much as fear as service'. And Natalya Gorbanevskaya considers that Brodsky's spirit worshiped the Lord, even in the most unlikely poems. He was a heathen, says Mark Strand. Brodsky retorted to both of this: 'Neither Paganism nor Christianity are sufficient in themselves, taken individually: neither can completely satisfy the spiritual needs of man'. Igor Efimov sees a similarity between Brodsky's religious searches with that of one of the religious sects of Cromwell's England, 'the Seekers', who were not to find satisfaction in either church. And Brodsky was, as it were, one of them. Zofia Kapuścińska: 'He was always searching [...] for that beyond which man could not see'. When Igor Efimov tried to pin him down to a specific circle, he said: 'My dear Igor, my relations with God are more complicated than that'.

Tomas Venclova once quoted Chesterton to Brodsky, saying that he would accept Calvinism, with its dogma of predestination, when he saw a Calvinist who considered himself predestined not for salvation, but for death. 'You are just such a Calvinist', said Tomas to Brodsky.

Brodsky did not argue. Venclova considers Brodsky's Nativity poems proof enough of his being a Christian poet.

Brodsky was buried according to Christian rites. Several of my interlocutors were present at the memorial service held for Brodsky in New York, at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, which holds 3000 people. The very number of those who came to commemorate the fortieth day from the death of Brodsky speaks for the love and veneration in which he was held. 'His voice of high quality', says Mark Strand, 'in an ocean of mediocrity and familiarity'.

I have tried to touch also on the important parallel between Brodsky and Dante. According to Elena Chernysheva, Brodsky was always reading Dante. He regretted that he had not written his *Divine Comedy*, to which Tatiana Shcherbina responds: 'He did write it, but in the form of frescoes'. But why frescoes, I asked. Because time was on the move. Not so long ago a century was the measure, whereas now a decade suffices to change the world entirely. Today's world is not monolithic: discrete events, fragmented thinking and perceptions, ideas of good and evil are so confused that the only proper response is apocalypse. What worried men before? Emptiness, the nuclear winter, which would destroy everything, but Brodsky always said that emptiness was not the worst of it; worse still was the degradation which is now universal: 'After us, not the deluge / where there are enough oars, / but the people flooding in, the plurality of them'. Will it be possible to find a system in these frescoes of Brodsky? His system is yet another renewal of the Gospels, to which the contemporary world has been added. Tatiana Shcherbina considers Brodsky an envoy of Christ. His poetry and essays constitute a recommendation to today's Christian (the inhabitant of our civilization). If she is right, then Brodsky is utterly unrecognized as a preacher, not understood, and not accepted. It is up to us to identify and describe these frescoes.

Where was he moving?

He was moving towards a philosophical understanding of life, contradicting his lyrical gift. Hence his complex form and complex formulae. He was codifying existence. According to Tatiana Shcherbina, if Pushkin discovered a new Russia in anticipation of the integration

of Russia and Europe, Brodsky went a good deal further; summing up the twentieth century, Christian history, the Roman empire, being a precursor of the 21st century, both in language, combining the Empire style and barbarism, barbarism and neoclassicism, and Empire style as neo-barbarism. He drew a line between the hot points of history: Roman Empire and Soviet barbarism, beginning to construct a Christian civilization and the people, in their multitude, which cheapens our unique achievements. He foresaw 'a new ice-age, slavery's ice-age'. Brodsky wrote the personal into the social, and the social into a general project of the universe. That is, Brodsky sent the Russian language (insofar as he wrote in it) into the cosmos, into space, where it constituted another dimension. He situated the author (not just himself but anyone who writes) in the position of an all-seeing eye; he cultivated the optics, placing himself, like a telescope, in orbit; he built a time-machine – more correctly, this was not an enrichment of Russian culture by means of another regional culture: he already lived in the period of globalization, a period in which our long history has been put into single storage.

Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky

One can speak of the incompatibility of their artistic worlds. Both were navigators in the ocean of the spirit, which was crisscrossed by various routes over various individual seas. And each brings back tales of his own travels. However, we must remember that they are sailing different seas (Igor Efimov). Nevertheless, Aleksandr Isaevich can compete with Brodsky's judge Saveleva, as far as the injustice of his accusations against him are concerned. According to Mikhail Ardov, Solzhenitsyn's article is 'impotent really [...] damaging only to Solzhenitsyn himself, showing him up for a rather mediocre man'. Brodsky, for his part, gave Solzhenitsyn his due, as a writer and prophet, valued this Shakespearian figure in him, the Soviet state acquired its Homer.

On his non-return to Russia

Tatiana Shcherbina: 'What would he have done here? Given advice on how to reconstruct Russia? Greeted enthusiastic crowds of admirers? Given speeches in the Writers' Union of which he had never been

a member? Probably, he would not have been able to find a suitable way of returning'. He would have liked to arrive without pomp and circumstance; he wanted no official receptions. Aleksandr Sumerkin: 'He dreamt of arriving in Petersburg with Maria and his daughter and simply wandering around and showing them the town. Bur he knew that, alas, he was no longer a private citizen'. He was pleased and even quietly proud when the possibility of being published in Russia had arisen. He knew perfectly well that he was a Russian poet and that his reputation was confirmed both by the Russian language and a Russian readership. But he did not favor either Russophiles or Russophobes. He never surrendered to the authorities his concept of the fatherland, even if they took and profaned it (Igor Efimov). At the end of August 1991, he said to Efimov: 'It is true, my dear Igor, for the first time, we are not ashamed of the fatherland'. He was worried for the fatherland. He did not feel he was a traitor. A man, who lives in the empire of language, can never betray it (Igor Efimov). 'For Brodsky, the fatherland was the people whose sufferings he shared in the madhouse, in the convict transport, in the kolkhoz fields, in the pliancy of the Russian tongue, Russian literature, and Petersburg architecture. From this homeland it was impossible to separate him, his poetry, his flesh and blood' (Lev Loseff).

If Russians blame Brodsky for never visiting Russia, Jews for never going to Israel, saying you are a Jew and must go to, he refused, because he was afraid that it all might be used there (Bengt Jangfeldt). He was afraid to be confined to too narrow a category, was amused when he was included in a book of 'Famous Jews', although he accepted his Jewishness as a fact that would never change. (Edward Bloomstein).

Brodsky's last days

Seamus Heaney saw him on January 7, in New York. Joseph had driven from Brooklyn Heights to Manhattan in a dreadful snowstorm, his paleness showing how sick he was. He refused to join them in a meal, but twice left the restaurant to go out into the street to smoke. On the eve of his death, in the evening of January 27, he telephoned Elena Chernysheva. "I never heard him so happy. A certain lightness and sense of liberation in his voice. A young, young man's voice. 'What's

happened Osenka? You sound like a little boy'. He answered: 'You know, Lena, I've just worked on my archive and found a couple of not half bad verses. Now I can die'.

To return to the question of a biography, we should ask ourselves whether the oral tradition is capable of preserving the circumstances of Brodsky's life, which by its very nature is the stuff of legends. Of course, Brodsky, more than once, declared against biographies. Summing up the facts of the private life of a poet contributes nothing to an understanding of his poems, Loseff reminds us. But as soon as he himself tried to sum up Tsvetaeva's poetry, or Cavafy's, or Frost's and that of others, he made use of biographical material. What we often take for Brodsky's biography are myths, which he himself nurtured, and a collection of myths, which according to Akhmatova were made for him ('What a biography they are making for our red-headed boy!') Before his exile from the USSR, Brodsky told Andrey Sergeev that he would make exile his personal myth. Brodsky, in this sense, succeeded (Tomas Venclova). The myth created itself, so to speak. Akhmatova was right.

One can envy his life. Bengt Jangfeldt, who witnessed the whole Nobel ceremony, says, 'You know, at that moment, I felt the whole fate of this man very powerfully. The entire terrible fate of a Russian poet'. Brodsky repeated: 'Fate can be different, but a man is answerable for his own'. This was his relationship to his fate from the start. Let us hope that the prohibition on a biography will be lifted. 'To hide from us a poet's journey in the spiritual world, says Efimov, is the same as hiding Columbus's journey, Magellan's, Marco Polo's, Amundsen's. And if a few people are going to be upset or even hurt by the new facts, so be it. The literary world is replete with slander, deliberate, purposeful, and we would like to remain unsullied. But this is purism! It is not practicable, and simply leaves the field open to dishonorable interpreters and biographers'.

I shall end with Tomas Venclova's words: 'As regards Pushkin's, Blok's or Akhmatova's personal life, some mystery remains. That is how it should be, and I hope will ultimately be for Brodsky'.

List of Photographs

Photographs in the inset

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I

1

John le Carré

John le Carré (the pseudonym of David Cornwell) was born in 1931 in Dorset. He studied at Berne University (Switzerland) and at Lincoln College, Oxford. In 1956–1958 he taught French and German at Eton; in 1959 he joined the Foreign Office and was stationed in Bonn, West Germany when the wall was erected. In 1959 he wrote his first novel *Call for the Dead* followed by *The Spy who Came in from the Cold* (1963), which enjoyed a huge success. He has published 20 novels, many of them have been adapted for the screen. All his novels are superbly written and complex. His recent novel is *The Most Wanted Man (2008).*

A Great Talent that was a bit of an Orphan

An Interview with John le Carré (28 May 1996, London)

– Is it true that you and Joseph were having lunch in a Chinese restaurant, here in Hampstead, in October 1987 when the news about Brodsky's Nobel Prize for literature was announced? How exactly did this news reach you two in the restaurant? What was Joseph's reaction to the news?

– Yes, I was with him at that moment. I took him to the Chinese restaurant, which is gone now; I'll show you where it was. It was a lousy little restaurant anyway, but it was quite good food and I used to go there. When I invited Joseph there for lunch, he said 'yes', I think, for two reasons: first, Rene Brendel[1] would not let him drink, not much, not as he liked to drink, and also of course he was killing time while he waited to hear the news. I had no idea of this. I actually didn't know that the Nobel Prize winner was at that moment being selected. I don't like the so-called literary community. I am not that kind of English writer. My wife Jane joined us, and we three sat, just talking about this and that (silly Joseph talk, girls, life, anything), and then Rene Brendel appeared in the doorway. She is big, German, tall, lots of authority, still speaks with a slight German accent, and she said, 'Joseph, you must come home'. And he said, 'Why?' He had had two or three large whiskies by then. And she said, 'You have won the Prize'. He said, 'What prize?' And she said, 'You have won the Nobel Prize for Literature'. I said, 'Waiter, a bottle of champagne'. So, she sat down and accepted a glass of champagne, and I said to her then, 'How do you know?' She said, 'The whole of Swedish television is waiting for Joseph outside the house'. I said, 'Well, you know, there are three or four candidates; they may be outside every door. We need more than this before we can drink the champagne in comfort'. Joseph's publisher, Roger Straus, was in London, so Rene telephoned him at his hotel, and he confirmed that he had received official word from Stockholm that Joseph has got the prize. So, we drank the cham-

pagne. Joseph didn't like champagne, but accepted it as a symbol. He wanted more whisky, but Rene said he must come home.

– Did he display any joy?

– Wait, wait. He looked miserable. So, I said, 'Joseph, if not now, when? We've got to be able to celebrate our life at some point'. – 'Ya, ya', he murmured. Then we went outside and he gave me a big Russian hug and produced a great line: 'Now for a year of being glib', he said, which was beautiful. Then he marched off to do his stuff, but of course, the other side of Joseph was that he was a great professional. He knew how to massage people.

– But did you know that he had been nominated for the Nobel Prize as early as 1980?

– No.

– I was in the USA at the time working on my first book on Joseph's poetry, when one day he mentioned it almost in passing; 'There is a smell of Nobelevka in the air'. But, as you know, Czeslaw Milosz got it that year, and Brodsky again, as you said, was extremely professional, and very happy for Milosz.

– So, actually he wanted it.

– O, yes, he wanted it and he was very sure even in 1963 that he would get it one day.

– I must have asked him whether he wanted it, because he looked so miserable. But of course, there is a Jewish prayer, which says, 'May your prayer never be answered'.

– I presume this wasn't the first time you met Brodsky? When and where did you meet him the first time?

– I met him at Rene Brendel's house, but he wasn't staying at the Brendels, he had either rented or been given somebody's house down at the bottom of the hill, in South End Green, and after dinner at Rene's (we had a lot to drink, and were very happy) we walked down to his place, and we drank alone there. He had an impressive selection of whisky. This was before I went to Russia. After that I met him perhaps a dozen times. We talked of nothing important, nothing very intellectual. He enjoyed my company, I could tell, and I enjoyed his. We laughed a lot.

– Do you remember any bits of amusing conversation that you had with Joseph?

– Yes, I once told him about an interview I never had with Svetlana Stalin. It was when she was in secret exile in America. Norman Mailer, Truman Capote and I were supposed to be flown to a secret place to ask her questions. It was a very controlled affair, controlled by the CIA, and a big propaganda coup. She been living in India and nobody knew she was in America. It was going to be presented here in *The Observer*, in advance, in *Paris Match*, and in *Spiegel*. The organizers asked me to submit two sample questions. Well, I thought, I knew nothing about Russia at the time (none of us knew anything about Russia, and certainly not then), but I would ask the two questions I would have asked any exile; number one: 'What circumstances in the country of your adoption would have obliged you to leave it?' and 'What circumstances in the country you have left would oblige you to return?' Joseph got quite hot under the collar.

– *Did he answer the second question?*

– Not really, no. You know, how inarticulate he could be when he was hiding.

– *Yes, because he was quite an emotional man despite his reputation of being cool and rational. He could also become inarticulate even in Russian because he always preferred to avoid cliché whatever the subject of conversation. One could almost see how he was thinking of an original way of putting his thoughts. Had he read any of your novels?*

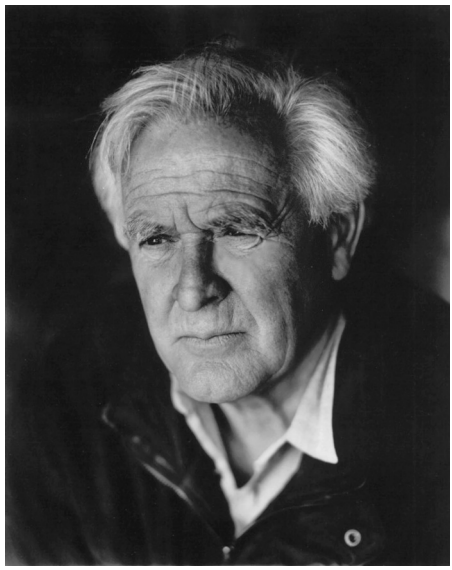
– I have no idea. I shouldn't think so.

– *He must have done, because in the essay, 'Collector's item', there is a direct allusion to one of your novels in his phrase: 'it certainly was much colder. At least for the spy who came in from the warmth'. Had you read his poems or essays prior to the first meeting?*

– I read most of his essays from *Less Than One*. I especially like the ones on Akhmatova and Leningrad.

– *Do you think any of his essays could have been written by an English writer? Or is there something in them that gives his Russianness away?*

– Yes, in a sense that Conrad wrote in English. I never was able to make the bridge between the Brodsky I knew, whom I regarded as inarticulate in English, and the Brodsky writing apparently in English on the page. I was very suspicious of what I suspect was an intricate



John le Carré (David Cornwell; no date, received from le Carré)

process of translation that must have gone on. He writes with fineness, but with a slight foreign accent. His prose is syntactically and grammatically beautiful, just as Joseph Conrad's was. If you have German, which I think was for Conrad the most influential language, you really can read him with a German accent and it is still beautiful. And Conrad comes closer that anybody to the great, big, multiple-storey-paragraphs of Thomas Mann. I am no judge of Joseph poetry. I read a lot of his poetry, but in translation, it's terribly hard to judge. How many of the judges could read Russian?

– Do you believe that only second-rate poets can be improved in translation?

– I suspect that a good translation can make a bad poet look good and vise-versa. I was suspicious at my response to his poetry. I respected it, but the wind didn't whistle in my ears when I read it. But with the prose it was remarkable and I always wanted to ask him (but we never talked about anything seriously) what the process was. And I think he was quite secretive about it. Do you know what the process was? He didn't command English that way.

– His written English is much, much better than his spoken English. When I interviewed Derek Walcott, who translated one of Joseph's poems, 'Letters from the Ming Dynasty', he admitted that 'Joseph is too

generous attributing the translation to me; it is his own translation; I don't know the language. We simply got together and Joseph would explain every line to me in English, doing an interlinear and when I suggested a poetic translation he would reject it every time, as not needed; sometimes Joseph would groan with anger and exasperation and in the end he would produce himself what he demanded from me'.[2]

– How interesting!

– *Let us talk about two particular essays of his: 'Cambridge Education' and 'Collector's Item'.*

– I have read both of them and I thought they were the only area where I felt Joseph's limitations. He is not very good on the West. The whole point about Blunt and his group was that they had been educated to power and had been fascinated by the attraction of power itself, and the use of it. If you cannot exercise power yourself, you start looking for other people's.

– *He seems to be blaming the Cambridge education system for producing three or four of the most famous Soviet spies, in saying that 'in the absence of ecclesiastical teaching' history is 'our only available source for an ethical education'. Do you accept this criticism?*

– The men he was writing about lived in a condition of secrecy. They saw themselves as people apart, people in a conspiracy – a political and sexual conspiracy. They'd had all the ecclesiastical teaching they needed, but they were naturally alienated from the orthodox structure of society. They saw a distant paradise that would include them. That wasn't Cambridge's fault.

– *Why, do you think, so many Western intellectuals, people prominent in European and American cultural life, became Soviet agents or willingly gave their help when it was needed? In most cases it was nothing to do with homosexuality.*

– The very first book that was published about Philby in this country, which broke every official secret act we have, was written by a group of journalists from the *Sunday Times*. I wrote an introduction to that, which I reread the other day. It is a bit flawed, but it still makes a point, I think. Firstly, it was one of the best-kept secrets of the Soviet Union of just how primitive, how inefficient, how repressive that system was. It is always a mystery to my generation that the show trials did not

open the eyes of people like Philby. Then, as one gets older, one realizes that they loved the restructuring of society, the ethnic cleansing; they saw it as great sweep of history, producing demotic changes that were essential to a perfect society. So the more they read about the persecutions, repressions, the more they believed that something was really happening in a world that seemed to them inert and boring.
Joseph makes the point very well that spying could be fun; it doesn't take a lot of time; it gives you a sense of your own significance; it's a way of putting oneself at the centre of human affairs, or seeming to. And the spying institutions themselves are very conventional and orthodox, looking up to all the right things. In a curious way, sometimes, to become a spy is to adopt another orthodoxy in defiance of the one that wishes to embrace you.
– What do you think motivated Brodsky to write a piece on Philby and other spies? 'To quell the sensation of utter disgust' at the sight of Kim Philby's face on the stamp, as he put it? Or to use it as a case study of one more manifestation of the 'vulgarity of the human mind'? Or something else altogether?
– I don't know, but I met Andrey Sakharov, whom I enjoyed hugely, in what was then still Leningrad. He asked me the same questions about spies. With Sakharov it was very clear to me, that here was a man, like Joseph, of huge personal courage, who had taken on an oppressive society single-handedly, and stood up in a world where it was very dangerous to stand up. Whereas Philby and Claus Fuchs, the British atom spy, who was a particular object of Sakharov's interest, had taken the deceitful course in an open society. Our so-called open society is of course limited. It has all the faults I know about, and you know about. Nevertheless, if you've got a grudge, you can stand up and shout about it, you can write it and nobody is going to put you in prison. But the Philbys of this world didn't do that. I think that fascinated Sakharov, particularly, because in his life it would have been a very soft option if he had simply become a spy as well as a professor. He could have had all his privileges, could have made a sensible marriage, sent his children to Party schools, and been the greatest physicist of all time. Maybe Joseph was thinking in the same way, because exile gives you too much time to think about loyalties. I always thought of him as an exile. I was very interested in the problem he

must have faced of returning to Russia. In that way alone, perhaps his death was providential. It would have been a very difficult last act.

– He once stepped on his own tail, when in 1983 he was asked, 'Will you ever return to Russia?' he said, 'I will return to Russia on one condition: when they publish all my work'.[3] *When they published all his work, he had to invent a hundred excuses, playful, plain and serious ones for not going back.*

– I think it must have been difficult for him. As we all know, Solzhenitsyn wrote so badly about the West. I don't really know what Joseph thought about the West, but he wrote so wonderfully about Russia.

– But he was in love with England, with English language. What is your explanation for Brodsky's life-long love affair with everything English?

– He loved self-irony. He was always very pleased to put himself down. He liked coded relationships and the English are good at coded relationships. I think he liked a lack of emotional display, because it left his imagination clear to imagine people's feelings. And at our best, we <u>are</u> very nice people. At our worst, we are frightful. I can fall in love with Russia for the same reasons, for comparable reasons. But, at the same time, I often wondered how strange we were for Joseph, how much of it was 'abroad' still for him. I was very conscious of a great talent that was a bit of an orphan, a little bit wandering in search of parents. One thinks of him as a women's man, but actually he was extremely spontaneous in male friendship. In this sense he perhaps missed the male group, missed his youth.

– Yes, the quality of Russian friendship could never be found in the West, it is so close and demanding.

– Yes, I know, it is intense.

– But Joseph was always surrounded by people and friends, especially in America where he liked the democratic way of meeting people.

– Provided he was boss.

– Joseph was also in love with the language itself. Once he said that if he had to give up either Russian or English; it would drive him crazy. The very process of writing an essay in English was such an important exercise for him, it gave him such a pleasure that he could not do without it. He also attempted writing poems in English and at the end became his own translator.

– My enthusiasm for him and my admiration for him were of course in the first instance not so much poetical but political. I loved the guts, the courage that he displayed in 1964.
– It was indeed something he had plenty of, guts I mean.
– Also, when you meet somebody like Joseph you feel something; you see something behind the eyes and in the energy of the man.
– Have you ever listened how he read his poetry?
– No, I haven't.
– Can you recognize a KGB man inside or outside Russia?
– It was easy to recognize them in Russia in 1987, because those who were put alongside me had the veneer of Western manners and spoke unnaturally good English, and made fatal mistakes, like trying to talk like sophisticated Europeans. It's very funny when somebody pretends that he knows whiskies or something like that. I don't know whiskies, but I know this man doesn't.
– We seem never to be able to produce a realistic portrait of each other. Another fatal mistake that Western writers make in trying to depict a Soviet person.
– And vice versa. I just wonder how Joseph saw the rest of his writing life, where it was going to take place. What was the grit in the oyster. Where would he get his aggravation from?
– But he knew that he was dying; in fact he was courting death well before he was forty, since his first heart attack, if not before. I remember our conversation after his first open-heart surgery, I said: 'Provided, you stop smoking, Joseph, you are guaranteed ten more years'. And he replied: 'Valentina, life is wonderful precisely because there is no guarantee, none whatsoever'. If you didn't know Joseph at all, what would you have made of him after reading the essay 'A Collector's Item'? Is it written by a poet, a university professor, a philosopher or an amateur-psychologist? Are his analyses of the phenomenon correct, profound or superficial?
– I was fascinated that Joseph got into the spying business, because it raises all the literary questions: who am I? To what am I responsible? Where do my loyalties lie? What is the true me? You are deliberately contrasting behavior with emotion. You may detest being in my company but I would never know, because the courtesy of our existence tells otherwise. You may be reporting me to the new KGB, I will never know. In a sense, the Russians knew more about psychology before

Freud than ever since.
– *Because it was a matter of survival.*
– Yes, it was a matter of survival and their literature was so perceptive. They have by instinct a greater understanding of human nature than can ever be given to a scientist. I think, Joseph probably knew more about me than any analyst would after 20 years.
– *If this is true, then it is also because he is a poet. You have just formulated what Joseph said in one of his interviews, 'I always believed, and I still do, that a man, a human being, should define himself in the first place not in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, philosophical convictions, the citizenship or geographic, whatever it is, situation. But first of all one should ask oneself: 'Am I a generous man? Or am I a liar?'*[4] *I understand, when you went to Russia for the second time, in 1993, you were looked after by Pussia. Who gave you Pussia?*
– He works a bit for Bitov, but he was supplied by PEN Club, by Vladimir Stabnikov.
– *Oh, yes, Vladimir is married to Olga Sedakova's sister Irina.*
– That's right, and Olga is wonderful.
– *Yes, she is very beautiful, both spiritually and physically.*
– Have you stayed in her dacha?
– *No, I've never been to her dacha. Your 'Russia House' and 'Our Game' are almost exclusively about Russia. What do you find so fascinating about Russia?*
– Everything. Alas, I am ashamed I have no Russian. Isaiah Berlin said to me that I could learn it very quickly; it could easily be done. What fascinates me about Russia? The cultural superpower. The amazing, unbelievable suffering shared. An unequalled capacity to shoot themselves in the foot. An incredible inefficiency, alongside a genius for improvisation and huge energy. And equally huge laziness. You never know what you are getting. Unpredictability. No such thing as collective decision taking. And impulsive actions that can only be explained retrospectively, if at all. Is that not right?
– *Unfortunately, you are right. If Rainer Maria Rilke is right, that Russia is sharing a boundary with God, then Russian are paying the price for this privilege.*
– I met in Russia so many wonderful people. Every encounter in all four visits has been so electrical, so unpredictable. You just never know whether you are going to walk into a palace or a thief's tent.

I was shocked when I went in 1987 for the first time and took my own interpreter, which disconcerted everybody; then we went again in 1993 and I couldn't believe that Estee Lauder had replaced GUM in Red Square. The capitalization of Russia is as disconcerting to me as it is for Russians. Money is utterly mysterious. It seems to be in all the wrong hands.

– *You also perhaps notice that the KGB and the Party knew where the money was and is.*

– Nobody else does.

– *Their sons and grandsons are now in business.*

– Yes, the Branch secretaries are the Bank managers and the District secretaries are the Bank presidents. Everything has restructured itself in the new capitalism. The level of criminality, I suspect, is no greater than it was with the party. All that has happened is that the cover has been removed. There were criminals within the law; for example, cotton growing in Kazakhstan was the work of one particular mafia inside the Ministry of Agriculture, they wanted to sell cotton to Indian crooks across the border.

– *Who did you meet amongst Russian writers?*

– I met Bitov, Iskander, Chingiz Aitmatov, and the painter Kabakov, who also wrote.

– *What do you think of the state of Russian literature today, I mean prose?*

– I am afraid I don't read very much of it.

– *And of course the translation would be four-five years behind.*

– Yes, I am aware of the problem that you had generations of writers who had to write in coded form in order to be published. So it all became a game. Symbolism became a passionate preoccupation, reading between the lines: 'ha-ha, I got that one through'. Now they are faced with what we are faced with – translating experience from life to the page. During the Communist era, people in the West imagined that, all through the time of the oppression, great manuscripts were gathering dust. It doesn't seem to have been the case.

– *It is not only the content; the style is also no good. I wanted to ask you about your own writing, what is your prime concern as a writer: style, plot, or characters?*

– For myself I begin with people. Then I want a context for a certain kind of conflict: a cat sat on the mat is not all that extraordinary; a cat

sat on the dog's mat is getting extraordinary.
– I am asking this question because some of your lines could be the beginning of a poem. You can write with a Nabokovian stylistic relish, using exquisite metaphors and almost poetic attention to details, and at the same time you stay within the popular genre of the spy-thriller. Would you ever sacrifice psychological or realistic truth for a beautiful phrase?
– Of course I love the beauty of the language, like Joseph. I love my language, but I would never wish the reader to stop in the narrative – cor, that was good! – I want the music to fit the dancing; I don't want the music to overpower the dancing and vice versa.
– How do you write? Do you use computer, or do you dictate your novels to your secretary?
– O, no, no. I do it all by hand. In the end, it's all about story. There may be beautiful phrases, but finally, it's a question of why did he do it, what is the consequence, what did he do, whom did he love, whom did he hate? The reason why the great XIX century writers remain so international is that even when they were butchered in translation, they delivered wonderful characters and hold a wonderful story.
– I have promised to let you know why you are so popular among the Russian intellectuals. 'Who done it?' is a favorite English genre, but for the Russians 'Who is guilty?' and 'What to do?' are the two unanswerable questions. And you are moving into Russian territory in all your novels.
– I am so proud. But I would like to add: it is not so much 'Who is guilty', we are all guilty, but who is the guiltiest? Who must be sacrificed? And then, what is the result?
– Russians wouldn't go that far because they cannot solve the first problem. Did you go to Chechnya?
– No, I tried, but they wouldn't let me. I made a mistake trying to get there through Moscow. Kostoev, the policeman who interrogated and brought to his death Chikatilo, the murderer, is an Ingush. He was going to take me with a bodyguard, but he said it had simply become too dangerous.
– What did you expect to learn that you didn't know already?
– The war had not officially begun. I would have tried to do what I did in 1981/82 in South Lebanon: share the Palestinian life a little – or in this case, the Chechen life – and see the smoke.

– Like Vladimir Makanin, the author of 'The Captive of the Caucasus', you almost predicted the Chechen war.

– It was so easy to predict. Listening to Pussia about Abkhasiya, then hearing Kostoev about Ingushetiya and then – when I came back to England, making a few phone calls to journalists – it seemed inevitable. But what really fascinated me was just that how little it meant for the Western conscience. We like to think, my generation at least, we prefer the victim to the bully. The Ingush and the Chechen were once more about to be bullied.

– This was exactly Joseph's reaction when the first war in Chechnya broke out, he said, 'what happened to the simple human ethics: the big do not attack the small'.

– We always protect the big against the small. We protect the rich against the poor; we protect the bully against the victim. It is quite extraordinary.

– What do you think is the main reason for the war?

– Religion; historically it is religious. In Tsarist times, the Tsars preferred Christian tribes. So people like the Ossetians converted to Christianity in order to escape the persecution of the Terek Cossacks, and to curry the sympathy of Moscow. The Muslim tribes were perceived as heretics and invaders, and the Chechen and Ingush group have remained second-class citizens and worse in the eyes of Moscovites. Nobody knows, thank God, how racist Russians are.

– Are you pleased with what you see on the screen based on your novels?

– Almost never.

– If Pasternak could have seen what they did with 'Doctor Zhivago', he would have died for the second time. Omar Sharif played this most sophisticated Russian intellectual. It is so vulgar. And at the same time it is nothing to do with his poetry, but the film made Pasternak famous all over the world.

– Yes, I know. If you were to look at the book-sales that followed the release of the film, you would just say: 'Thank God.'

– But nobody from Pasternak's family benefited from it, neither here nor in Russia. David Lean admitted that 'Doctor Zhivago' brought him more money than all the rest of his films put together.

– And they never had a penny. I heard that the same thing had happened to Rybakov with the publication of his *The Children of Arbat*.

– You have been lucky with 'Tinker, Tailor, Solder, Spy' and 'Smiley's People', Alec Guinness alone was fantastic.
– It was beautiful. Enchanting.
– Would you agree with those people in the Foreign Office and in the Higher Education authority that Russia is no longer important, therefore that British universities don't need so many Russian Departments? My own Department is about to be cut by half.[5]
– When has the Foreign Office ever been right?

Notes

1 Rene Brendel was a wife of a famous musician Alfred Brendel. Brodsky has dedicated a poem 'The Fly' to both of them.

2 Valentina Polukhina, *Brodsky through the Eyes of his Contemporaries*, vol. I, p. 30 (Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008).

3 Joseph Brodsky, interviewed by Dmitry Savitsky, Brodsky, *Kniga intervyu*, ed. by V. Polukhina (Moscow: Zakharov), 2007, p. 230.

4 Brodsky, interviewed by David Bethea, ibid, p. 566.

5 It was closed down after my retirement in 2001 as so many other Russian and Slavic Departments in the UK.

2

Mikhail Heifets

Mikhail Heifets (1934) was born in Leningrad but now lives in Israel. He spent 6 years in the camps (1974–1980) for writing an introduction 'Brodsky and our generation' to the five volumes samizdat collection of Brodsky's poetry. During his exile he wrote three books about the Soviet camp system. After completing his term, he was exiled from the USSR. He now works at Jerusalem University and writes for the newspaper *Vesti* (*The News*). He is the author of more than a dozen books, among them about *Hanna Arendt* (2006) and *Arabs and Jews* (2007).

The Empire he was Loyal to was the Russian Language

An Interview with Mikhail Heifets (July 2004, Moscow)

– When do you remember first hearing Joseph Brodsky's name mentioned?

– In my young days I had a friend, the closest person to me at one time, Vladlen Travinsky. Especially gifted, Vladlen was a retired policeman, a journalist, and the author of, then, quite popular books about Black Africa. He possessed an absolutely astonishing natural talent as an organizer. Orbiting around him there was always this group of unusually interesting people, so attractive was the man's disposition – commanding, as he did, such a feeling for talent and promise – that people would remain in his circle a long time. I was constantly dropping in on him at the apartment he leased on Pioneer Street and found myself in that company…

Through Travinsky I became acquainted with Boris Strugatsky (at that time merely the co-author of *The Land of Red Clouds*) – with Mikhail Shemiakin (for the latter artist, Vladlen organised, through the magazine *Zvezda*, the first ever public showing) and with other people who later made names for themselves.

One day Vladlen brought to work, in the *Zvezda* editorial offices, a dozen or so poems by an unknown author, handwritten on little bits of paper; holographs really. How he got hold of them, I didn't ask: I think through Sandy Konrad (Aleksandr Kondratov, that is). This was, roughly at the end of 1959 or the beginning of 1960. Glancing through them, it took me only a moment to realize that here was the work of a poet such as any generation dreams of having in its midst. These were the juvenilia Brodsky later contrived any which way to hide from the light of publication. His poetic mentor Evgeny Rein once said of them: 'The customary doggerel of geology'. But, really, Rein himself immediately, at a first reading, sensed the originality of the author's personality, his singularity; how unlike any of the other poets then writing in Leningrad he was. That was why he gave him his time, why he picked him out immediately – he'd say as much

himself: 'Farewell, forget me and do not judge. And burn those letters like a bridge'.

– What did you see as unusual in Brodsky's early poems?

– Well, nobody would have used that trope 'like a bridge' in a love poem. It sounds like something bursting in from a completely different world. War poetry, perhaps… That genre, and others, we were used to; but this mixing up smacked of the 'Simple Simon' effect… The poem concluded: 'I am happy for those who are, perhaps, going your way'. That unexpected doubt 'perhaps' agitated us back then. As Yakov Gordin put it later, 'we managed to scramble (jump) onto that train'.

– What sort of impression did Brodsky make at the start?

– I'm afraid, today nobody would understand it. We lived in a supposedly completely normal world, a Socialist Space; that's to say a world deemed to be harmonious and consequently, in theory, conflict-free. It was normal for people to pride themselves on their 'life-long service'. In other words, throughout their lives they worked in the same place and lived, more often than not, in the same 'domicile'! Trips abroad, to other countries, even other regions of their own country were seen as the high life – accessible only to a lucky few. As a rule any sort of novelty was a one-off, unexpected gift. All the concerns of their (of our) lives were the general, run-of-the-mill, human concerns, the getting by from payday to payday, the constant vying to live up to the ideal of the New Woman (New Man), the making of a career and, just maybe – that would be good wouldn't it? – Some glory for oneself… Brodsky's poetry wrenched us away from that flat, conflict-free living space, away from the vulgarity (conventionality) of that normal, day-to-day existence. We remembered that Time, Spirit, God exist. We were cautioned, so to speak, that there is a boundary to ordinary desires, to the normal avidity of humanity and that its name is Death. Other variants of life exist besides our own discombobulating Soviet vanity of vanities… Joseph sang the praise of Language, which, apparently, had governed him. Though I would never have dared say this to him in his lifetime, he taught his Soviet readers (and not only his Soviet readership it turns out) to live their lives differently… He himself never – even in the face of death – dared, or even wanted to believe that! But that is clear to me – that's how it was.

– Later on Brodsky was very proud of the fact that he had reintro-

duced the word 'soul' into Russian poetry. Did he, himself, touch the souls of his coevals?

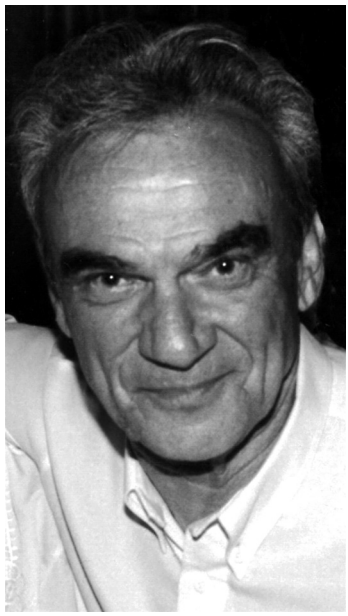
– Someone once compared him to a 'snake charmer' hidden away in the souls of his contemporaries – of both sexes. With the flute of poetry he would call the hidden passions out of the darkest of inner recesses – forcing souls to dance before him.

I remember that in that first selection I read was 'Pilgrims'. For us those verses which today seem ordinary (that too is difficult to understand) sounded an astonishing new note with their glorification not of the active toilers of this world which decades of inculcation by the Futurists, Constructivists, Socialist-Realists, by Mayakovsky, Lugovskoy, Tikhonov, Selvinsky had accustomed us to… Brodsky gave us fleeting glimpses into a marginal world where the salt of the earth was hidden away in the eccentrics, the holy fools, in one who walks by himself like Kipling's cats! I also remember in that 'A poem about Miguel Servete' whose protagonist, a heretic not burned by the Inquisition but by the very people the Inquisition was in the process of liquidating, charmed me from my college desk… A memorial to the fate of kindred stubborn souls!

Travinsky also brought in a later collection, I recall 'Each man before God is naked, / pitiful, naked and wretched'. There was a constant stream of manuscripts passing through my hands!

– And when did you get to know Brodsky personally?

– Personally I met him quite by chance – I think at the *Zvezda* offices. He kind of dropped in. We really just bumped into one another… Later on we used to see each other at the Public Library, on the wide landing at the upper entrance that leads to the Reading Room and to one side in the Manuscript Department where the 'chatterboxes' usually gathered – a band of friends exchanging opinions and information. I remember the three of us would stand together – the late historian Boris Kogan (one of the authors of the *Dictionary of Mythology*) and Dmitry Balashov – more recently known as a writer of history – then a fellow student at the same college… Joseph would approach, silent, gloomy and would sleepily listen to our stories. He didn't get involved in the talk of the learned historians… and we would spin stories, preen, each trying to win the good opinion of the others. Boris Kogan says 'And there is another such hypothesis; the pyramids in Central America were built by the lost tribe of Israel…'. I hear



Mikhail Heifets

a strange noise somewhere to the side: Joseph has roused himself. He lets out an abrupt, 'Oh!' and once more falls silent. But in that split second I saw another, more lively face!

– Almost everybody who knew Brodsky has some amusing tale to tell. Is there anything of that kind that you can recall?

– There was an amusing episode about a year later (maybe later still?) I had just collaborated with Travinsky on a script – our first – for the film, 'Nikolay Kiballchich' directed by V. Melnikov. The film got a good press, first class with knobs on. And I was summoned to Len-Science-films by the editor, V. Kirnarsky: 'Mish, our distinguished director wants to talk to you'. (His name was Gaivoronsky, it seems – though it's all so long ago I may have got that wrong somehow, the details don't matter all that much! Anyway he wanted to get acquainted, he wanted…). The VIP had a request 'It's boring working with old writers. It would be great to have a script from some young talent. Can you make any suggestions who in Leningrad, from amongst our talented youth, is worth inviting to the studio?' Oh! I was always prepared for that question! And I started singing hymns of praise about friends in need of work, a crust of bread and such. Every character sketch would naturally climax with their present coordinates – their

address and telephone number. Towards the end I said to him: 'The most talented man in our city is Joseph Brodsky. If you could help him, that would be a really good deed. He's a very young man. He didn't graduate from High School. He's been making some money as a labourer on geological surveys; in his family they think of him as a lost cause… If you could give him something to do… Believe me there's no better, no more talented man to be found anywhere in Peter! And, at the same time, you'll help his situation at home!' It was like the song of a nightingale and I felt that I had my man! I honestly did not realize – because of my own particular gift – that there existed people like Joseph who cannot write to order… What I did in broaching this was strictly practical. I simply had to help a gifted person 'break into' Soviet Cinema! It is funny talking about these things, but history cannot be rewritten. The director listened and then said, 'No need for the address and telephone number. Brodsky is my nephew. Our family really does think of him as a lost boy; however, if a man like yourself values him…'. Later this amusing conversation went right out of my head and I remembered it only when, by chance, years later in 1973, Maramzin sent me the three–volume collected works so that I could write the preface. I saw in one of the volumes the script for, if I'm not mistaken, 'The Pavlov Gardens' and an editorial note (quite clearly from Maramzin) that apparently the script had been filmed and had been highly appreciated by the Ministry, but that there had been one quibble: the Ministry of Cinematography requested Len-Science-Film to replace the voice-over script! And they had young people working in the Ministry, people with a feel for the arts! You know Brodsky's name wasn't on a black list. And nobody knew his name as yet – except for a handful of people in Peter who appreciated his poetry in manuscript. But the bureaucrats in Moscow, enthusiastic about the film, felt somehow there was something not quite to their taste in this young author's rhythms. And so they asked for it to be dumped! Which, of course, in its own way only goes to prove that they were talented people, in their own field.

I met up with Kirnarsky and, laughing, he said how difficult it was to work with a new writer. For example, showing up at a preview, Brodsky had bawled, 'So you're the director? You ought to be nailed to the screen!'

– *How would you describe your relations with Brodsky then? Were you*

a friend or just a close acquaintance?
– We were not at all what you could call 'hand and glove'. That's why; today, just disjointed scenes rise to the surface of my memory. There is this graduation evening at the Toksovskaya postal school. I shouted at my pupils, apprentice railway workers; 'Remember you are living in the age of Joseph Brodsky! Remember that name today!' They laughed. Well, teacher has had a drink on the last day – who doesn't? I also remember how Joseph gave the first reading of 'Procession' in Travinsky's apartment. It was reckoned something of an event by the literati gathered there; Joseph's first epic poem. (Am I mistaken in that? Was 'Isaak and Abraham' written earlier or later than that? I do definitely remember that 'Procession' was the first reading of a poem in a grand genre. It was in a way his 'Ruslan and Liudmila'.) The place was packed with people – from wall to wall (I, being at home there, was simply sitting on the floor…), Joseph recited in a singsong voice like a shaman and I hardly understood any of it. I do, however, definitely remember I felt disenchanted; I decidedly disliked the poem…and this is why I remember the event… In the interval Brodsky suddenly said, 'Lads, I am now going to read a terrifically anti-Soviet piece'. So I was listening to his singsong all-ears because I loved anti-Soviet stuff, however, I didn't make out anything interesting in it…
– *But in the tapestry of 'Procession' are interwoven Tsvetaeva, Dante, Pushkin and Shakespeare. And the questions of the soul, of good and evil come from Dostoevsky. And, if you want, there's also quite a bit of anti-Soviet feeling in it too.*
– I think that that reading played a fateful role in his destiny. It was simply not possible in those times that at such a large 'illegal gathering' the KGB didn't have somebody on hand, a bit shop-soiled maybe, but still an informer! An informer, of course, wouldn't be able to make much of the text, given the delivery, but he would have heard 'terrifically anti-Soviet piece'. After the denunciation there commenced the working up of a scheme to rid the city of freethinking spirits – they were being labelled parasites. The KGB are not idiots and when they appeared at his home with an order for his arrest and a search of the premises, of course, the people who were acting at one remove, behind the backs of the 'agents in the field', those who had planned the whole operation to deal with 'parasitism', were already certain that such

a popular author was bound to have some anti-Soviet lines somewhere in the house. The whole 'game' went according to the script dictated by 'Socialist Humanitarianism' – he may well land a five years stretch for anti-Soviet propaganda – but it will be 'cut back' to internal exile… Humanitarians! 'These aren't the days of Stalin!' Something of that sort was said at a board meeting of the Writer's Union to Efim Etkind when he spoke on Brodsky's behalf. Yes, and maybe it would be best if you passed a vote of thanks to the KGB for their humanitarian approach. However, that didn't pass muster – Etkind rightly objected to that. 'Humanitarianism wasn't a part of their routine'. Good God, we knew them and if they had found something political in Brodsky's possession they certainly wouldn't have kept silent about it, even if they didn't cite the incriminating lines in their judgment… No, they had been fundamentally mistaken in their estimate of the operation's target. They had been led into error thanks to the usual professional deficiency; too much faith in their operational sources of information. In reality, even a man as inexperienced in conspiracy as I am can win against them – thanks to the crude disinformation supplied by their 'operational sources'. Usually they are so untrusting but there is this one weak point where they become as naïve as children. And that is where they are caught out…

– *Were you in court at Brodsky's trial in February and March of 1964?*

– Of course I wanted to attend. But, to be frank, I was afraid. I was not long married, loved my young wife and, of course, knew my own nature – if I had been there I wouldn't have been able to restrain myself. I'd have done something silly and ended up following Joseph to prison. That, in point of fact, is what did happen – a decade later! Somewhere or other my one-time timidity was maturing into a festering boil and it burst the moment I made the proposal to Maramzin to write the article/preface about Brodsky.

– *And what sort of a relationship did you have with Brodsky after his return?*

– We never met up again in Leningrad after his sentence ended. There was no desire to on my side. Brodsky had already made it into the ranks of celebrity and, consequently, I started to avoid meeting him. I think he too had cooled towards me; strange as it may seem he hadn't forgotten about the Pavlovck script affair. In my view, Joseph

belongs to that part of humanity that never forgives either those close or distant for trying to help them, especially helping them to 'make' something of themselves – and the greater the effort made the less forgivable it is. There's a lot, in my opinion, that crystallizes in that feeling; possibly fear of being tempted, of taking a bite of the apple of Soviet success (he was human after all)… and, again, the cold shouldering of a talent that senses itself primordially superior to what surrounds it, the feeling of shame at the patronage of those he feels to be small fry. The well-wishing 'lucky ones' who, of course, make it in their career – the price of it all, their conformity to the everyday-soviet model of behaviour. An analogous type of genius one comes across from time to time in history – Richard Wagner, for example. Remember how the genius behaves to all his 'benefactors' – the conductor Von Bulow, the King of Bavaria, Meyerbeer, together with the Jews in general in the world of music, who discovered him, enthused over him and raised him to heavenly heights 'the talent known to no-one'. Unforgivable behaviour.

That was the conclusion I came too much later on – in 1988, in the States, in Amherst whither the indefatigable Yuz Aleshkovsky had taken me as Joseph's guest. In the U.S., Joseph no longer seemed the rather savage estranged young man he had been in Leningrad but a bluff and benevolent host. Almost the first thing he said at meeting, after many years separation was, 'Misha, have you brought anything of yours over here to America? If you want, I can put in a good word with my publisher'. I, personally, wouldn't have thought of bringing that up – I wasn't used to that sort of thing, but here he was making the running… I did happen to have with me in America the manuscript of 'The Journey from Dubrovcamp to Ermak', and a day later 'his' publisher was on the phone to me. Nothing came of the project – which is par for the course (that book isn't one that would appeal to America), but I recall the eagerness and pleasure with which Joseph extended his patronage to me. He was in his element there! But when it was the other way round, he couldn't stand it…

– *Tell me how did you circulate Brodsky's poetry in samizdat form*?

– In the interval between his exile and his expulsion from the Soviet Union we didn't come into contact – only at readings. But it was in those very years that I became what was called a 'samizdat activist'. Joseph's most recent poetry was supplied by my friend and colleague

Maramzin, the main source of my uncensored reading. And, in that way, I found myself on one 'long unending course' of study…

– How did the idea of publishing all of Brodsky's Russian poems arise?

– When they shoved him out of Russia I was afraid that he was finished as a creative force. How would he be able to write on a comparable level, when he had lost the linguistic element in which he swam, the 'wild field' of the Russian lexicon, lost the readers capable of feeling all the layers of cultural association, deprived, quite simply, of all those charged passions of which we were the generator – whether he himself was aware of that source or not. 'Over there' he would be an alien: 'over there' who put any value on Spirit! (As you can see I make no attempt at concealing the scale of our ruminations at that time – on the situation in the world in general and in poetry in particular. When it came down to it we were normal Soviet folk, force-fed with rumours about émigré writers starving in alien lands – especially young poets.) In short Joseph's destiny was seen as that of a poet cut off at the height of his creative powers. There was not a great deal of difference between our reckoning and that of our coevals in the KGB; only our starting points were opposite – they wanted to stifle the voice of a poet through banishment, while we were attempting to preserve that voice for the future, for history (historically, we already believed in Brodsky's immortality).

– Tell me about Maramzin's part in the collecting of Brodsky's work.

– In 1972 I moved into a new cooperative apartment block on Novorossiyskaya ulitsa belonging to the Writer's Union. There were comparatively few writers living there. They were basically apartments designated for sale to the children of writers. My family became friendly with a young group in the block that gravitated around the Vakhtins Boris Vakhtin was the leading light of the Leningrad 'Young Prose' writers, founder of the literary association 'Gorozhane' ('Towns people') and also Masha Etkind, daughter of Professor Efim Etkind. About a year after my move, in the spring of 1973, I met up with Vladimir Maramzin, another member of 'Gorazhane'; in the empty dining room of the House of Writers (formerly the Sheremetev Palace) I should really say something here to define my 'unofficial' connection with Vladimir. In the USSR, there an anarchic network of samizdat distribution had developed. Maramzin was one of its Lenin-

grad 'agents' (I think that's right, even now, but I don't really know). Anyway, I would receive from him, on a regular basis, a dozen or so transcribed items: short stories, novels, documents, and articles. I can't even imagine who Maramzin's sources were, but, having read everything, I had to return all the material. What Maramzin did not know, however, was that I would take all I got through him to a reliable typist (Liudmila Eisenhardt) who made five more copies. Four of these, I would give to acquaintances, each paying 20% of the cost (the copies would be switched around in such a way that overall quality was the same. I, myself, as the 'organizer', would always take the first typed copies as my honorarium. The network was uncatcheable. I repeat, Maramzin knew nothing of my clients. To him I was simply a reader. And I, in my turn, couldn't swear that anyone in my 'co-operative' wasn't doing much the same in their turn for their circle…

And so I met Volodia in the Writer's Union (evidently, it was the usual thing but whether I was taking back or receiving I don't recall) and he shared his news with me. 'A letter has come from the States. Joseph Brodsky has become a big man…'. And he showed me the letter, which told of Brodsky's success in America. The signature on the letter Maramzin took care to conceal with his hand (Maramzin liked to play the conspirator. Much later KGB Major Riabchuk, truly radiant with delight, would inform me 'It was from Kiselyov!') Then Volodia said, 'I'm collecting all Brodsky's writings. When he went, he did not take a single page with him. We have decided that before they were lost we'd collect them all – from his women, his relatives, close friends, acquaintances…. There'll be a collected works. It's been agreed there would be commentaries, dates, dedicatees, etc. He had turned out to be an awfully productive writer! We'd collected enough for three volumes. We were now setting up another two, occasional verse, children's verse, translations, various other writings… It's all trifles, but for a complete edition they have to be included. The problem is that nobody would take it upon himself or herself to write a preface. Not because they were afraid of anybody but because they were afraid of the responsibility'.

Even now I do not know who, actually, Maramzin meant when he said 'we'. One of those in the know was an art historian, Mikhail Milchik. Later on, right after the searches, at my and Maramzin's apartments, Milchik came to our place and told me about his participation in the

project – of course not in the flat itself, but on the landing by the elevator. It was from him that I learnt that all the Brodsky volumes of the collected edition were 'already there!' And not long ago I happened to read that all publications of Brodsky's Russian poetry were based on the so-called Maramzin collection.

– *And how did your writing career run its course?*

– Around that time my writing career got into a strange situation. This lasted several years. From roughly 1971, I could no longer get my writing published anywhere at all! Trying to extricate myself from that, in its way, mystical net (it did not enter my head that the K.G.B. was already interested in me), I tried new and different genres – for example instead of prose and current affairs I wrote scripts or in-house reviews. Maramzin knew about these 'experiments' and in his sally about nobody being willing to write a preface, he was sending out an indirect challenge to me. I realized this and put myself forward to do the necessary thing and write the introductory article.

In the summer of 1973 Maramzin sent me the raw materials necessary for my work – the basic corpus of Brodsky's lyrical poetry. As it turned out samizdat had done its work well – long familiar literary objects were put into a context.

– *Did you know in 1973 that Gleb Struve, Pierre Emmanuelle, Olga Carlisle, Wolfgang Kazak, George Kline and Auden himself had written about Brodsky?*

– Today, of course, it's well known that, at about that time major writers in the West were writing about Brodsky, including W. H. Auden himself. But in the Soviet Union we had no idea of that. Young people in Leningrad considered Brodsky to be a samizdat writer, that is to say a poet outside the normal parameters of literature. And now you can see the significance of my task. Here was something, which had frightened off all the other 'candidates', and, apparently, I was to be the very first researcher into the work of a great poet! (I recall with a tremor, not in the figurative but in the literal sense of the word, how I came to give Brodsky that epithet in my article. I felt myself terribly, unavoidably bold in according such a title to a contemporary. Possibly I really was the first Brodsky researcher in Russia? The article, the author's copy of which is preserved in the archives of the Leningrad K.G.B. will, I hope, give professional researchers in the field of poetics a clue as to how Brodsky's early poetry was received.

Of course a novice critic was not up to the task of making a professional analysis of Brodsky's poetry. I soon came to understand that. But how could I refuse the task, let Maramzin down; disrupt the appearance of the five-volume edition? What was needed was a grasp of the way in which the writer M. Heifets could make himself interesting to the reader as the author of the introduction to the first collected edition of a great poet's works, tell the reader how Brodsky's poetry arose in Leningrad as an historical phenomenon… Why, in the bright constellation of the Leningrad School of poetry (S. Kulle, G. Gorbovsky, A. Gorodnitsky, E. Rein, A. Kushner, L. Loseff, V. Ufliand, V. Britanishsky, S. Stratanovsky, V. Leikin, T. Galushko – I am recalling here the names of the poets of that time that come immediately to mind) Joseph was without dispute the first.

– *Could you give us a short summary of your article's contents as scarcely anyone has access to it*?

– Its essence could be summed up in this way. Joseph Brodsky is not a political, anti-Soviet writer; transitory historical phenomena, like Soviet power, did not interest him at all. But any poet lives in the midst of his contemporaries. Although he considers himself to be a tool of language, language is the creation of a people and Lenin was correct in saying, 'one cannot live in a society and be free of that society – that is an impossibility'. No ivory tower protects the artist from the bustle and vulgarity of the world, or can cut him off from contact with people, with, for example, that language. Admittedly, for instance, the poet Brodsky of the years 1969–1970 was really carried away by the specific literary-artistic task of following the examples of Martial and Catullus in a Roman cycle bereft of any political allusions whatever.

– *But how is it that that particular creative notion arose in Brodsky's mind at that particular point*?

– My belief was that, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, there was a rupture in the society in which he found himself, or more accurately, communism lost its ideological pivot (in its various forms – including any communist opposition to the Soviet regime). Communism had its own inner logic and ethic, its own system of ideas – however, the occupation of a small communist country by a communist Imperial Power was a phenomenon which had no place in a communist ethical system. Action of that kind could not be carried out without

severe damage to the system – whatever the conditions! After 1968, in the Soviet Union what remained was a naked imperialism bent on the conquest and subjugation of other peoples – and it manifested itself in a supremely untroubled form. Naturally Brodsky's concern was neither with communism nor with imperialism, but the poet could not but feel the deep shift in a society in which the KGB of this world had its being. In the Roman Cycle he unwittingly reflects the coming ruin of an indolent, vulgar Imperial idea, which is decomposing through lack of spirituality – and inertia. Of course, that thesis is demonstrated by the use of quotations and comparative analysis of the poetry – 'before' and 'after'.

– *Well, weren't you simply asking to be put behind bars?*

– The bit on Czechoslovakia later did incriminate me – according to the investigator, V. P. Karabanov (I, personally, failed to see the consequences of my articles' analysis. But he was right, there's no denying it, the article was, no doubt, anti-Soviet). That is why the person who had commissioned it when he had it in his hands Volodia (Maramzin) was, quite naturally, scared: 'Misha, you'll put us all in prison and our Brodsky cultural enterprise will be ruined'. I could, of course, put myself personally at risk but not the enterprise and all its participants. So I agreed to rewrite the article – 'depoliticise' it, as the investigator, subsequently, delicately put it. But the effort ended in failure – either it was beyond my power to write a literary article or it was simply uninteresting redoing it… and I did something very careless. I started showing the manuscript to acquaintances, both critics and writers, who were perhaps capable of giving advice about a rewrite. Nobody gave me any useful idea at all, but there did turn out to be an informer amongst them…

– *In what way did E. G. Etkind contribute to your article?*

– I gave the manuscript to Masha Etkind to read. I won't lie to you; behind that action lay the hope that she would perhaps, if she liked it, show it to his renowned father. Etkind was then considered the most knowledgeable person about poetry in Peter in general and Brodsky's poetry in particular. My calculation paid off: one day Masha rushed over to our apartment: 'Papa has come, he wants to talk with you'.

So, I met up with Efim Etkind for the first time. The Professor liked my article so much that he did not limit himself to words of praise, but added to my text a piece of paper written in his own hand – his

own survey. However, he did have one essential objection and we discussed it together there and then. Etkind had written that he knew that Brodsky had actually said that the Imperial essence of communist power had been something that he had become aware of not in 1968 but in 1956, after the Hungarian uprising. Despite my respect for Etkind's authority I rejected his correction. Even if I were to accept the fact that Brodsky had said something akin to what Etkind alleged (and it was true!) I was analysing the texts and not the reported opinions of the poet. I clearly felt the shift in the poet's outlook after 1968, no earlier.

– Did you surmise that all this would become known to the KGB?

– As it turned out I made two fatal mistakes. Puffed up by the high opinion of a professional critic, I pinned his critique to the top copy of my manuscript. I then rang Maramzin: clearly I was unconsciously seeking revenge for his rejection of my manuscript (we are all human, after all!) Over the phone I boasted: 'Masha's father has read it and he likes it'. But Maramzin's phone was already being tapped, as I came to realise later, which meant that I involuntarily gave the Leningrad KGB additional and important information.

Another blunder was my showing the manuscript to a neighbour, a friend, the writer V.V., who wasn't a bad person but, alas, was weak and very much corrupted by his closeness to those in power and the state's bribery of writers through granting privileges. At the very moment that he returned my manuscript, I immediately suspected he was an unofficial aide of the KGB. However stupid it might sound I did not attribute any particular significance to my suspicions. A snout is no idiot – that was my way of thinking. Why should he snitch on a neighbour, a friend, a person whose children go for walks with his children? Surely he would find someone to snitch on further away and therefore, less dangerous. My reasoning does sound quite sensible, but hiding away in there is a fatal miscalculation in my approach to life. People are frequently incapable of calculating the best line to take in life, even in their own interest. It is this lack of reason (sometimes even insanity) in a partner or an opponent that leads to miscalculation and even extreme reactions in the game of life.

– But isn't it true that Maramzin had already, sort of, found a new writer?

– Yes, some time later, I learned from a reader of my manuscript

(a friend of Masha Etkind, Dr. V. Zagreba), that Maramzin, tired of waiting for a new version, (and possibly no longer believing me capable of writing one) had ordered and received a new preface (I recall Zagreba mentioned the name of a poet I knew – Igor Burikhin). That was a relief: now I no longer had to beat my brains out correcting my text, which, right from the start, I had prepared exactly as intended. Somebody else was fulfilling the necessary social task – thank God! I hid the text away. All the copies had been typed up on an Optima electric typewriter; these were put in the archive drawer of my writing desk… I forgot about them. I would like to remark, in parenthesis, that Maramzin, apparently, was being tormented by several complexes brought on by his rejection of my article and later on actually promised to collect my text and give it to the editorial board of the samizdat journal *Jews in the USSR*. Thus it was that I first learnt of that particular journal. It interested me that for that, or for some other reason, the Leningrad KGB thought it necessary to include the editor of *Jews in the USSR*, – Professor Aleksandr Voronel – in our prosecution. Voronel got off comparatively lightly – he was thrown out of the USSR.

– *Please tell me about your arrest.*

– On the morning of the 1st of April, 1974 my wife woke me: 'Misha they have come for you'.

A muscular male was towering over my pillow: 'We've come for you from the KGB, Mikhail Ruvinovich', and he shoved his ID under my nose: 'Senior Lieutenant KGB Egerev'. With him were Lieutenant Nikandrov and their reliable witnesses.

Today it seems strange but I wasn't in the least surprised. Everything looked the same as it did in the cinema. – 'Raika, I called, give me my pants', – that was how my gulag career began.

At that time I had, practically speaking, forgotten about my old article about Brodsky. There was something lying in the archive drawer… Firstly, the person who had wanted it hadn't collected it; consequently the document was part of my personal collection of writings. By the criteria of that time, therefore, not something that ought to land one in court. And, generally, I would simply forgot about something I had written six months ago. I did a lot of work I had written more dangerous manuscripts than that. So dangerous, that this was the only one I hidden in that drawer. That was the only one I was afraid it might be

found! But chekist Nikandrov was holding it in his hands (in disguise) and… put it to one side. Thus began my astounding 'good fortune' in playing conspiratorial games with the KGB (the climax came with the appearance in print in Paris of two books written in the zone and in internal exile).

When the chekists extracted Brodsky from my writing desk I was disturbed, truth to tell, not about myself but about Etkind. You see, I had got a complete stranger mixed up in the affair! The chekists were delighted with their find but, somehow, puzzled. They did not arrest me following their search, though strictly speaking something of the sort should have happened… from which I concluded that I would not be arrested at all. As it turned out this was incorrect: I was led away to the inevitable solitary confinement three weeks later. On Lenin's birthday.

During that three-week interval I met with Etkind for the second time. He came to my flat and took me for a stroll in the park opposite that belongs to the Forestry Institute. We discussed some legal niceties… I set forth the tactic I had chosen at my interviews (they had already questioned me several times – as a witness): I had said that I had asked various specialists how I should go about depoliticising the article (a term which I would later hear from Senior Lieutenant V. P. Karabanov). From a legal point of view, no breaking of any laws took place since I had not distributed copies of my work. On the contrary, I had wanted to render it harmless… Etkind, therefore, had nothing to feel guilty about. When he was given the article he did not know its contents and read the text as a consultant in poetics and, when he did read it, he pointed out my mistakes. But the position of our intermediary, Masha Etkind, seemed to be legally vulnerable: she had given her father the article to read and thus committed a clearly illegal act – 'dissemination with the aim of undermining and weakening…' And I agreed with Etkind that we would never, in any way, mention Masha's part in the affair. I would lie and say I had given him the article myself…

I failed to grasp the seriousness of my situation and, even more so, Etkind's. So, he had read my article – what of it?

– *But Etkind understood*?

– You see, he explained in the park (and he did seem experienced in these matters), they aren't in a position to understand that we acted