CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Joseph Brodsky
a poet for our time
Joseph Brodsky, c. 1973
Joseph Brodsky
a poet for our time

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To Lapushka and Osin’ka
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Preface

If a poet has any obligation toward society, it is to write well. Being in the minority, he has no other choice. Failing this duty, he sinks into oblivion. Society, on the other hand, has no obligation toward the poet. A majority by definition, society thinks of itself as having other options than reading verses, no matter how well written. Its failure to do so results in its sinking to the level of locution at which society falls easy prey to a demagogue or a tyrant. This is society’s own equivalent of oblivion.¹

Even before Brodsky was forced out of his country (1972), he acquired the reputation of being the most fastidious and intellectual of contemporary Russian poets. In exile he continues to demonstrate wide erudition, astonishing technical virtuosity, and a profound concern with the problems of our age. His six books of poetry and a collection of essays offer one of the most searching treatments of epistemological themes and an enormous intellectual challenge for his readers.

Brodsky’s poetic world is as much a world of ideas as it is of images. It is equally a review of ideas, not so much to resolve them as to perceive and reformulate them in the spirit of our time. His poetic world reveals a paradoxical type of the poet: he is simultaneously solitary and social. Finding himself in conflict with a society which rejected and exiled him, he has retained a deep and treasured link with this society. The theme of Russia nurtures his poetry no less than world culture does. This outcast and exile is as much immersed in the fate of his people as he is in the fate of civilization as a whole. His keen sense of time forces him to see what we prefer to close our eyes to. Apart from such universal themes as life and death, faith and time, Brodsky writes about man at the end of the second millennium of Christianity.

Brodsky’s almost obsessive preoccupation with time might in itself justify the title of this book. Like every poet, he strives for the
same thing: to regain or hold time past or current time’ (L. 180). He does not declare our time to be the best or the worst. He does not reject it, but he does not accept it either. Like Eugenio Montale, he believes that ‘today all true ideals have been discredited’ and that mass man at the end of the twentieth century needs a moral alternative which can be provided by poetry. Poetry itself is seen by Brodsky as a counterbalance to what Montale called the ‘massacre of time’. Poetry for Brodsky is a unity of ethics, aesthetics, and memory. This is the only weapon we have in our struggle against time. Memory expresses itself in Brodsky’s poetry in numerous allusions, echoes, and direct quotations from the poetry of different epochs and cultures. This can be seen as Brodsky’s attempt to maintain cultural continuity in our age of mass culture.

As far as the social duties of a poet are concerned, his main tasks are: to improve the quality of his language; to inspire in his reader a desire for self-improvement; and to make society less vulgar. In an age of mass culture and the collapse of spiritual values, Brodsky defends the unique individuality of each person, his right to his own vision of the world, however much it may differ from any Herr omnes of our time. Reading Brodsky, one must bear in mind that he never gives a definite answer to his endless questioning and that he is a very uncomfortable poet because he is truthful without mercy. The emotional neutrality of his tone allows him to preserve sharpness of vision and depth of focus. A social voice resounds in the very spirit of his poetry. Like Tsvetaeva, he is convinced that ‘in essence all poets of all times say the same thing. And this same thing remains on the surface of the world’s skin, just as the visible world itself remains on the surface of the poet’s skin.’

I do not pretend to be able to unravel all the hidden references, echoes, and hints of associations, or to give a full picture of Brodsky’s poetic world. My task is to gain a preliminary insight into this world, which is complex, striking, and absorbing. My approach to Brodsky’s poetry is neither chronological nor thematic. This book is an attempt to identify the principles of organization of Brodsky’s poems by discussing his technical resources: the system of his tropes, his use of vocabulary and syntax; what makes them aesthetically unified. His syntax is either condensed and twisted or very simple and prosaic. All kinds of violations of syntagmatic links abound – inversions, enjambments, parenthetic constructions,
extrapolations of subordinate clauses into principal ones. In his
tropes, Brodsky conjures up the most surprising images that linger
in the mind. Brodsky has concerned himself with the widening and
renewal of poetic language. As a result, his vocabulary reflects all
the changes that have taken place in the modern Russian language
since the Revolution. Throughout this entire study I hope to show
that Brodsky’s use of language conveys the poet’s perception of
certain values through his language. Brodsky’s ultimate importance
as a poet will undoubtedly rest on this treatment of language and his
whole attitude towards language. I also hope to demonstrate that
Brodsky’s poetry is as much linguistically as philosophically orien-
tated. For this reason, the emphasis in the book is not on the poet’s
life or his personality, but on the language he uses.

The first chapter is not the poet’s biography in the strict sense of
the word. Such a biography would be a different task altogether.
Besides, among Brodsky’s recently published selected essays, Less
Than One, the reader can find at least three most beautifully
written autobiographical pieces. Instead, I have presented only the
most essential facts of the poet’s life in the hope that the rest will
follow from his poems, which are put under intense scrutiny in
every chapter: most of them have never been previously discussed
by Brodsky’s critics. The first three chapters are designed to
establish the poet’s literary genesis, to trace the poetic tradition
which Brodsky continues and to ascertain the extent of his depart-
ure from it. For this purpose, all the metaphors in all his published
poetic works have been detected, classified, and compared with the
metaphors of ten other Russian poets. The choice of the first seven
poets was self-evident. Every contemporary Russian poet is forced
to live and write under the constant gaze of one, at least, if not all of
the ‘magnificent seven’: Blok, Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Mandel-
stam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, and Akhmatova. They also represent
the principal poetic systems which existed in Russian poetry at the
end of the last and at the beginning of this century: Symbolism,
Futurism and Acmeism. In order to gain a more objective picture
of the Symbolists’ metaphoric system I have included Bal’mont.
Derzhavin and Baratynsky were suggested by Brodsky himself as
his link with Russian Classicism and Romanticism. The com-
parative analysis of metaphors is designed to help understand the
ways and means whereby Brodsky broke away from established
poetic systems. A thorough examination of Brodsky’s tropes helps
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to relate him to the whole of Russian literature from Derzhavin to Akhmatova. The second chapter is the first sustained effort to relate Brodsky’s work to English poetry.

In the third and the fourth chapters every one of Brodsky’s metaphors has been considered on three levels: its grammatical structure, its semantics, and its part in the conceptual model of the poet’s world. Such an approach has provided me with the most adequate possible account of the correlation between the grammar and the semantics of metaphor. I shall argue that the originality of Brodsky’s metathetic system lies not only in the grammar of his tropes but also in the character of his metathetic transformations and the types of interrelations between the real world and the poetic world. Brodsky’s tendency to depict abstraction by abstraction, in order to penetrate into the very essence of things, forced him to create metathetic formations in which associations by similarity give way to relations of cause and effect, of space and time; in other words, metaphor approximates to metonymy. This is a part of a poetic conflict between Brodsky’s prosaic speech and the fabric of his verse. The further he moves towards the metonymic pole of language, the more need there is for compensations, whether by strict metre and precise rhymes or by saturating his poems with tropes.

The fourth chapter is mainly concerned with the conceptual functions of metaphor. The conceptualization of time, things, and man is achieved by various kinds of alienation of meaning in the trope. The classical triad, ‘Spirit–Man–Thing’, is widened by including number and language as equivalent terms. Language, as one of the principal characters of Brodsky’s poetry, is subjected to the same semantic transformations in his metaphors as ‘thing’ and ‘man’. The desire to comprehend the ontological essence of language is what motivated these processes. As a result, the traditional opposition ‘man–thing’ is neutralized. This new correlation between ‘word–man–thing’ constitutes a specific cluster of Brodsky’s metathetic network, which can be seen as the key to interpretation of his poetic world.

The inquiry into the system of Brodsky’s metaphors will bring all his principal themes into sharp focus. They will be considered in the last two chapters. The paramount theme of his poetry is the theme of time. The intricacy of Brodsky’s treatment of this theme is due to the close interrelated connection with other themes such as
Preface

Empire, faith, love, creativity, and language. He has a deep awareness of man’s painful existence and its futility. It is the image of a man in exile, both political and existential, which pervades the poet’s universe. The theme of alienation appears in his poetry not only as the imaginative centre of meaning (or meaninglessness), but also as a source of dissociation within language itself – a disjunction of syntactic and semantic links, which both manifests the estranged meaning in tropes and serves the needs of rhythm and rhymes. The device of metonymic representation of man is also loaded with the function of alienation. The destruction of an integrated perception is a characteristic feature of our time.

All Brodsky’s major themes are also discussed in an unobtrusive way throughout the book, from the very first chapter, in the context of the poet’s complete works. I have not attempted a close analysis of Brodsky’s versification. Doing him any justice at all would have led to complexities and detail beyond the scope of my study. However, I describe briefly the metre and rhyme scheme of every poem I discuss. I am only too aware that whatever method of analysis one employs, there will always be something left out which is beyond our reach, e.g. the poet’s sagacity, his gift of foresight, his acute feeling of orphanhood, or his deep apprehension of the mediocrity of our dispirited time. Any analysis of poetry is only a dance around the Spirit. The Spirit in Brodsky’s poetry is identified with the language itself, with the Word. The poetic word puts us in touch with our inner self, uncomfortable, frightened, intrigued, and humbled.
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I owe more than I can say to my friends Joan Heath and Fiona Gaunt for being my most patient listeners. I especially thank Vladimir Maramzin for allowing me to copy Brodsky’s early unpublished poems from his samizdat four-volume collection of Brodsky’s poetry. I also warmly thank Natalya Gorbanevskaya for letting me use Brodsky’s letter to her from exile. My deepest gratitude is reserved for Brodsky himself, for patiently answering my numerous queries during the last nine years and for permission
to quote his work as much as I need. Finally, I am very grateful to Nicola Pike, who typed the entire manuscript.

Acknowledgement is made to Penguin Books for permission to quote from Brodsky’s Less Than One: Selected Essays. Some of the material has previously appeared in articles in journals: Essays in Poetics (1979, 4/1; 1985, 10/1); Wiener Slawistischer Almanach (1985, 17), and in the collection of articles, Brodsky’s Poetics (1986). In this book, selections from these articles have been modified or substantially changed. I wish to thank the editors and publishers of the above works for permission to re-use some of that material here.
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for those works of Brodsky’s repeatedly cited in Russian and in English:

C. Stikhotvoreniya i poemy (Short and Long Poems)
O. Ostanovka v pustyne (A Halt in the Wilderness)
K. Konets prekrasnoi epokhi (The End of a Beautiful Epoch)
Я. Chast’ rechi (A Part of Speech)
H. Novye stansy k Avguste (New Stanzas to Augusta)
У. Uriniya (Urania)
L. Less Than One: Selected Essays
Transliteration

The following system is used: the letters е, ё, ю, я are transliterated as ye, yo, yu, ya at the beginning of the word, after ь, ъ and after vowels; in any other position these letters are transliterated as e, io, iu, ia respectively. Exceptions are made for such well-known names as Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam.

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