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The Philosophy of Exile in the Art of Joseph Brodsky

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Joseph Brodsky opened his Nobel Prize Lecture with the reference to himself as to "someone rather private, . . . someone who all his life has preferred his private condition to any role of social significance, and who went in this preference rather far – far from his motherland to say the least, for it is better to be a total failure in democracy than a martyr or *créme de la créme* in tyranny" (1). It is truly significant that in such a rewarding moment of his life, Brodsky could not help speaking about facts which most people would consider depressing and thus would not mention in the beginning of their speech on any pleasant occasion. For Brodsky, however, his idiosyncrasy to tyrannies, the exilic condition of his life, and his readiness to alienate himself from his surroundings, i.e the points brought up in the first sentence of his Nobel Lecture, have vital importance to his art. More specifically, very often exilic condition constitutes a driving force, exile serves as a theme, and estrangement, or alienation, works as a creative method in Brodsky's literature.

There is a paradox pertaining to the position of a writer in exile. In one respect, this position should not be considered an advantageous one, or as Alfred Appel, Jr. eloquently put it referring to an "average" *émigré* writer,"the sorrows of exile were infinite: isolation, poverty, despair, disease, early death, suicide, or – if the émigré writer survived, languageless in some distant land – silence, obscurity, and the nightmare of nostalgia" (5). But in another respect, as Michael Seidel wrote about it, "so many writers have gained a kind of sustenance from actual or self-imposed states of exile . . . that experiences native to the life of the exile seem almost activated in the life of the artist" (224). In the particular case of Brodsky, as his biographical writings suggest, exilic conditions were formed and experienced by him long time before he was exposed to his first political exile. The earliest Brodsky's exiles were both spiritual and voluntary, and since that time the idea of exile has become extremely significant to him.

Of course, it is critically important in speculations like that not to make a mistake of mixing the facts of an artist's personal life with those of his art. As Carl Gustav Jung formulated, "the personal life of the poet cannot be held essential to his art," because "his personal career . . . does not explain the poet" (1089). There is an obvious contradiction between Brodsky's view on exile which he expresses in his artistic writings (his verses, his essays and even his Nobel Lecture cited above) and that which he voices in his interviews, and which, consequently, describes him as a person. While the motif of exile persistently appears in Brodsky's artistic writings, he rearly recognize the influence of exilic condition on himself as a writer in interviews. According to Galya Diment, he often states that "there is no palpable difference between writing 'at home' and 'in exile' " (360). For example, in his interview with David Montenegro Brodsky tried to estimate what the difference would it make to him as a writer if he were allowed to stay in Russia. He concluded: ". . . You perhaps break even. You end up as neurotic as you would have been otherwise" (531). One more example clearly shows that the personal reasoning revealed by the artist in interviews may have nothing in common with the aesthetic reasoning which should only be interesting for a critic. While in his essay "In a Room and a Half" Brodsky formulates his deep and substantial artistic reasons why he has chosen to record his Russian memories in English (and these reasons will be discussed below), in his interview on television he gives a quite silly or, as Diment calls them, "strangely 'adolescent' " explanations, that he did it because "there was a girl whom [he] liked very much," and whom "nothing was going to please" "no matter what [he] was going to do," so he decided "somehow [to] introduce this realm to her whether she cares or not" with the hope that it "would make [him] more palatable to her" (Diment, 360).

Jung wrote: "What is essential in a work of art is that it should rise far above the realm of personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as a man to the spirit and heart of mankind" (1086). And in his artistic writings Brodsky speaks "to the spirit and heart of mankind" even when he describes his own alienation from the socially imposed values of Stalinist Russia. Indeed, he describes in fact processes which happened to millions people in Russia (although, most people were not able to confess their feelings even to themselves, and, instead, suppressed them). Moreover, one can suggest that the Brodsky's story of creating his exilic philosophy has a verisimilitude to the alienation of a man in any totalitarian state.

To explain the genesis of his exilic philosophy, Brodsky brings us to his childhood in totalitarian Russia, when he started "to acquire the art of estrangement" by denouncing for himself the cult of Lenin, with a consequence of becoming generally resentful to any "sort of propaganda":

> . . . I suppose, I began to despise [Lenin] even when I was in the first grade – not so much because of his political philosophy or practice, about which at the age of seven I knew very little, but because of his omnipresent images which plagued almost every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money, and what not, depicting the man at various ages and stages of his life. There was a baby Lenin looking like a cherub in his blond curls. Then Lenin in his twenties and thirties, bald and uptight, with that meaningless expression on his face which could be mistaken for anything, preferably a sense of purpose. . . / Then there was an oldish Lenin, balder, with his wedge-like beard, in his three-piece dark suit, sometimes smiling, but most often addressing "masses" from the top of an armored car or from the podium of some party congress, with a hand outstreched in the air.
>
> There were also variants: Lenin in his worker's cap, with a carnation pinned to his lapel; in a vest, sitting in his study, writing or reading; on a lakeside stump, scribbling his April Theses, or some other nonsense, al fresco. . .
>
> I think that coming to ignore those pictures was my first lesson in switching off, my first attempt at estrangement. There were more to follow; in fact, the rest of my life can be viewed as a nonstop avoidance of its most importunate aspects. I must say, I went quite far in that direction; perhaps too far. Anything that bore a suggestion of repetitiveness became compromised and subject to removal. That included phrases, trees, certain types of people, sometimes even physical pain; it affected many of my relationships. In a way, I am grateful to Lenin. Whatever there was in plentitude I immediately regarded as some sort of propaganda. This attitude, I think, made for an awful acceleration through the thicket of events, with an accompanying superficiality (Less Than One, 5-6)

Having the "art of estrangement" in his spiritual background, Brodsky was able "to go off the track", i. e. to undertake his first exile: he dropped out from the high school at the age of fifteen, ant it was not "so much a conscious choice as a gut reaction" (Less Than One, 10). That is how he depicts it:

> I simply couldn't stand certain faces in my class – of some of my classmates, but mostly of teachers. And so one winter / morning, for no apparent reason, I rose up in the middle of the session and made my melodramatic exit through the school gate, knowing clearly that I'd never be back. . . There was that vague but happy sensation of escape, of a sunny street without end (Less Than One, 10-11).

This should not be interpreted, however, that Brodsky happily approves all possible rebels and anarchies. Tony Whedon, whose class at Johnson State College Brodsky visited as a guest speaker, writes: ". . . A woman student in her mid-thirties announces proudly that she, too, is a high school drop out, to which the Russian poet responds, rather unkindly . . . 'And look where it's gotten you' " (152). Brodsky himself, however, is "immensely grateful" for what appears to be his "first free act," and considers it in the context of that general exilic attitude which he has developed later in his life:

> It was an instinctive act, a walkout. Reason had very little to do with it. I know that, because I've been walking out ever since, with increasing frequency. And not necessarily on account of boredom or of feeling a trap gaping; I've been walking out of perfect setups no less often than out of dreadful ones. However modest the place you happen to occupy, if it has the slightest mark of decency, you can be sure that someday somebody will walk in and claim it for himself or, what is worse, suggest that you share it. Then you either have to fight for that place or leave it. I happened to prefer the latter. Not at all because I couldn't fight, but rather out of sheer disgust with myself: managing to pick something that attracts others denotes a certain vulgarity in you choice (Less Than One, 13).

As a result of his "exilic" attitude, "Brodsky's critics and those who were just acquainted with him have always been struck by the fact that a 'condition of banishment' was a constant trait of his spiritual-cultural make-up," and "long before Brodsky left Russia, his reaction, as a poet, to the world around him was one of alienation" (Jane Knox cited by George Kline, 56). This can be vividly illustrated by the words of Sergei Dovlatov, a Russian writer who was a friend of Brodsky's youth (translation is mine – AK):

> Brodsky created an incredible model of behavior. He lived not in the proletarian state, but in a cloister of his own spirit. He did not fight the state regime. He simply did not notice it. He was not even sure about its existence.
>
> His unawareness about details of Soviet life looked feigned. For example, he was sure that Dzerzhinsky was alive, and that Comintern was the name of a pop-group. He couldn't recognize faces of Members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of Communist Party. When the huge portrait of Mzhavanadze was fixed to the facade of the apartment building where Brodsky lived, he said:
>
> "Who is this? He resembles William Blake . . ."
>
> By his attitude, Brodsky broke some extremely important intrinsic principle of Soviet State. So he was exiled to the Arkhangelsk province of northern Russia.
>
> Soviet government is like a touchy lady: one who offends her will be hurt, but one who ignores will be hurt much stronger (26).

As Brodsky wrote in his essay about Osip Mandelstam, "when a man creates a world of his own, he becomes a foreign body against which all laws are aimed: gravity, compression, rejection, annihilation" (Less Than One, 134). Brodsky had found himself under similar pressure by the time when his first verses get recognized by experts. During 1959-1963 he was a few times arrested, gaoled, questioned, held without formal charges, but then released. In 1964, however, the twenty-four-year-old poet was arrested again, this time trialed and sentenced on charges of "social parasitism" to five years of exile in Arkhangelsk province. There in the village of Norinskaya he lived and worked as a peasant for eighteen months. In 1965, as a result of widespread support from Soviet and foreign writers, his term was shortened and he was allowed to return to Leningrad. During his northern exile Brodsky "was able to advance substantially as a poet," "despite, or perhaps thanks to, his nearly total isolation" (David Bethea, 234). While he was still in exile, his first collection of poetry was published in the United States.

Brodsky returned to Leningrad as a poet of a worldwide reputation (but unaccepted officially in his own country). The period from 1965 to 1972 was Brodsky's "mature Leningrad period" (Anna Tavis, 501). He translated poetry from English, Polish and other languages, traveled accross the country, wrote verses on his own, and "had no desire to abandon Russsia." However, in 1972 the thirty-two-year-old poet "was given ten days to leave the country" (Valentina Polukhina, 29). After brief stays in Vienna and London, Brodsky came to the United States and lived mainly here since then. He published a few books in English and Russian which "moved reviewers to extravagant praise" (Helen Benedict, 12) and he never was short of teaching positions at the most prestigious universities. Then he was awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987 and named U.S. poet laureate in 1991 (Benet's, 124).

But despite this great social success he has not become a more conventionally thinking person. As Benedict writes, "just because he has been welcomed in America, showered with awards and hailed . . . as the best living Russian poet, he is not about to stop ruffling tempers" (10). His "walking away" attitude has not changed, and it "leads him to infuriate people – the Soviet authorities [in the past], the American Left, and also Western Jews, who have objected to Brodsky because he refuses to embrace ethnic identification and uses a great deal of Christian imagery in his poems" (Benedict, 20). Brodsky believes that one should identify "in a more precise fashion than race or creed or nationality" because firstly one should "figure out whether one is a coward, or an honest, or dishonest man," and "one's identity shouldn't depend on outer criteria" (Benedict, 21). So, no matter where Brodsky lives, he is always in exile from any conventional group of like-minded people where he may formally belong to.

Living in his eternal state of exile, Brodsky effectively develops the image of alienation in his poetry. Polukhina writes that "Brodsky has . . . developed the idea of alienation by fusing it with the device of estrangement" (238). This device can work in two directions: it can alienate familiar objects, or it can make contemporary of a myth. It is amazing how unreceptive to Brodsky's poetry can be a critic who fails to recognize this basic feature of it.

Whedon believes that Brodsky's essays "have a sensitivity and retrospection, a humaneness, that [is] absent from the poetry," so he would like it to be "with a softer edge, whose historical sense could be less oblique and allusive:"

> Brodsky is obsessed by history; one might say that much of his recent volume "To Urania," concerns itself with the various speakers' attempts to escape or circumvent history . . . There are several voices in the collection, all of which, to one degree or another, reflect the cynically disengaged viewpoint of the emigre with time on his hands, the expatriate poet who's been permanently marked by politics (154).

Neither does Whedon approve Brodsky's estrangement of personal experiences:

> There's almost no sense of personal memory in Brodsky's work: the past is remembered as an historical event, rather than something what happened to him, a process which represents to me a psychic distancing occuring in much of his nature writing . . . which lack the intimate personal contact characteristic of American nature poetry (159).

But in fact, Brodsky is famous for his ability to present his personal memories as something "objective and impersonal" (as "every great work of art" should be according to Jung (1089)). It is Brodsky, who, living in Leningrad, under the huge press of Soviet totalitarian reality, was able to write

> Since the stern art of poetry calls for words, I, morose,
> deaf, and balding ambassador of a more or less
> insignificant nation that's stuck in this super
> power, wishing to spare my old brain,
> put on clothes – all by myself – and head for the main
> street: for the evening paper (<u>A Part of Speech</u>, 34).

This level of estrangement allows Brodsky to deal naturally with such philosophical categories as freedom, time and death. These categories appears to be so usual in his lyrical household as cups of tea or cats in homes of other people:

> Only fish in the sea seem to know freedom's price.
> But their muteness compels us to sit and devise
> cashier booths of our own. And space rises like some bill of fare.
> Time's invented by death. In its search for the objects, it deals
> with raw vegetables first. And that's why cocks are keen on the bells
> chiming deafly somewhere (A Part of Speech, 35).

When Brodsky finds himself on another continent, his experience in alienation allows him to get very quickly in "intimate personal contact" with "American nature." He perceives the surroundings and his own position in them honestly and clearly, without any distortion of his eyesight by illusions or depression which are so usual for fresh emigrants:

> In those days, in a place where dentists thrive
> (their daughters order fancy clothes from London;
> their painted forceps hold aloft on signboards
> a common and abstracted Wisdom Tooth),
> there I – whose mouth held ruins more abject
> than any Parthenon – a spy, a spearhead
> for some fifth column of a rotting culture
> (my cover was a lit. professorship),
> was living at a college near the most
> renowned of the fresh-water lakes;the function
> to which I'd been appointed was to wear out
> the patience of the ingenuous local youth (A Part of Speech, 67).

With his outstanding ability to estrange personal experiences, it is not difficult for Brodsky to connect them with historical images. In "Letters to a Roman Friend" and other poems Brodsky visualizes himself in "Empire" which externally resembles that of Rome, but internally has very much in common with one where Brodsky used to live. And once again Brodsky chooses exile, this time in his "Roman" existence:

> If one's fated to be born in Caesar's Empire
> let him live aloof, provincial, by the seashore.
> One who lives remote from snowstorms and from Caesar
> has no need to hurry, flatter, play the coward
> (A Part of Speech, 53).

In the beginning of 1972, when Brodsky was anticipating his eventual eviction from Russia, he wrote several poems, where he identified with certain major historical figures, in particular: Dante, Mary Queen of Scots, and Marshal Georgi Zhukov. What these figures had in common was "mistreatment - disgrace, exile, imprisonment, execution – by the city or country which they had served and which eventually 'rehabilitated' them, restoring their honour and reputation" (Kline, 71).

Interesting that many of the poets whose art had a great deal of influence on Brodsky's poetry were also exiles: Yeats was an Irish nationalist writing in English, Eliot was an American who had emigrated to England and Anglicanism, Auden was an Englishman who had emigrated to America (Bethea 234). Another, more recent, literary interest of Brodsky is Cavafy, "a Greek poet who lived in Alexandria, Egypt all his life, writing poems that celebrate as much as they mourn his permanent exile" (Whedon, 153). Brodsky wrote essays devoted to great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and to his widow Nadezhda. In one of them he employed a mythological assosiation to sketch the story of these exiles:

> He was, one is tempted to say, a modern Orpheus: sent to hell, he never returned, while his widow dolged across one-sixth of the earth's surface, clutching the saucepan with his songs rolled up inside, memorizing them by night in the event they were found by Furies with a search warrant. These are our metamorphoses, our myths (Less Than One, 144).

Sometimes Brodsky presents his very specific personal experience in the context of historical associations. The first quatrain of "Plato elaborated" manifests the mixture of cultures and Brodsky's allusion to the external image of his native city:

> I should like, Fortunatus, to live in a city where a riv-
> er would jut out from under a bridge like a hand from a sleve,
> and would flow toward the gulf, spreading its fingers
> like Chopin, who never shook a fist at anyone as long as he lived.
> (A Part of Speech, 129).

The poem ends, however, by Brodsky's only as yet description of his unfair trial in 1964:

> And when they would finally arrest me for espionage,
> for subversive activity, vagrancy, for *méange*
> *á trois*, and the crowd, boiling around me, would bellow,
> poking me with their work-roughened forefingers,
> 'Outsider, we'll settle you hash!' –
>
> then I would secretely smile, and say to myself, 'See,
> this is your chance to find out, in Act Three,
> how it looks from inside – you've stared long
> enough at the outside –
> so take note of every detail as you shout, 'Vive la patrie'
> (A Part of Speech, 131).

Here Brodsky managed to reduce "the charges to absurdity by placing the obviously trumped-up charge of capital crimes (espionage, subversion) in the same list with the true but trivial charge of unconventional sexual behavior (meange a trois), and the tendentious and irrelevant charge of social parasitism (vagrancy)" (Kline, 77).

In some cases, however, Brodsky has to protect his feelings through additional estrangement device – "twisting a language." Brodsky's choice of English as a language for his biographical writings may seem paradoxical, but as Diment noted, "like Nabokov, Brodsky wanted to use his English in order to build a sanctuary for his parents, protecting them from inhumanity of trivialization and allowing himself to take at least some edge off his pain" (354). By this choice Brodsky attained some additional degree of estrangement. Replacing the native language by another had an effect of defamiliarizing his experiences:

> No country has mastered the art of destroying its subjects' souls as well as Russia, and no man with a pen in his hand is up to mending them; no, this is a job for the Almighty only, this is what He has all that time of His for. May English then house my dead. In Russian I am prepared to read, write verses or letters. For Maria Volpert and Alexander Brodsky [his parents who died in Leningrad, not being allowed to leave the country and to see their son], though, English offers a better semblance of afterlife, maybe the only one there is, save my very self. And as far as the latter is concerned, writing this in this language is . . . therapeutic (Less Than One, 461)

With all the bitterness of his life, on the day when he was forty, Joseph Brodsky wrote a poem, where he went through the experiences of his exilic life, found "the bread of exile" to be "stale and warty," but yet expressed in the last two lines of the poem the very old human idea:

> Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
> only gratitude will be gushing from it (To Urania, 3).

This idea, probably by the energy of its contrast, brings the living power to Brodsky's exilic philosophy.

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