

Brotsky through the Eyes
of his Contemporaries

Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures and History

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Brodsky through the Eyes of his Contemporaries

Valentina Polukhina

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CONTENTS

<i>Photographs in the inset</i>	6
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	7
<i>Preface</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	12
 ANATOLY NAIMAN. A Coagulation of Linguistic Energy	13
YAKOV GORDIN. A Tragic Perception of the World	41
EVGENY REIN. The Introduction of the Prosaic into Poetry	65
NATALYA GORBANEVSKAYA. Subordination to the Language ..	85
BELLA AKHMADULINA. Perfection of Harmony	104
ELENA USHAKOVA. A Poet of Intense Thought	117
ALEKSANDR KUSHNER. The World's Last Romantic Poet	122
LEV LOSEFF. A New Conception of Poetry	135
VLADIMIR UFLIAND. One of the Freest Men	161
DAVID SHRAYER-PETROV. He was a Universal Poet	179
MIKHAIL MEILAKH. Liberation from Emotionality	198
VIKTOR KRIVULIN. A Mask that's Grown to Fit the Face	213
YURY KUBLANOVSKY. A Yankee in Russian Poetry	237
ELENA SHVARTS. Coldness and Rationality	251
OLGA SEDAKOVA. A Rare Independence	272
ALEKSEY PARSHCHIKOV. Absolute Tranquillity in the Face of Absolute Tragedy	293
TOMAS VENCLOVA. Development of Semantic Poetics	309
ROY FISHER. A Noble Quixotic Sight	323
DEREK WALCOTT. A Merciless Judge	341
CZESLAW MILOSZ. A Huge Building of Strange Architecture ..	357
PETER VIERECK. Rhyme and Punishment	373
 <i>Valentina Polukhina Books</i>	384
<i>Name Index</i>	385

P H O T O G R A P H S I N T H E I N S E T

Stephen Spender, John Ashbery and Joseph Brodsky, June 1972, London Poetry International.....	I
Joseph Brodsky, Leningrad 1957, photo by Alexandr Brodsky.....	I
David Rief, Joseph Brodsky and Natalia Gorbanevskaya in Stockholm, December 1987.....	II
Tatiana Shcherbina, Joseph Brodsky and Evgeny Rein, Rotterdam Poetry International, 1989.....	II
Joseph Brodsky and Czeslaw Milosz, Krakow 1991	III
Joseph Brodsky and Aleksandr Kushner at London Mandelshtam Conference, 1991	III
Aleksey Parshchikov, 1993, photo by Valentina Polukhina	IV
Joseph Brodsky, March 1980. Ann Arbor	IV
Joseph Brodsky, Autumn 1973 in Provincetown, Mass	V
Czeslaw Milosz and Valentina Polukhina, 6 October 1990, London	V
Derek Walcott, James Morton, Dean of Cathedral of St John the Divine, Czeslaw Milosz, Daniel Hoffman, poet and critic Lyn Chase, Joseph Brodsky, Rita Dove, Eliot Weinberger, Octavio Paz and Bill Wardsworth.....	VI
Peter Viereck, Berlin 1969.....	VI
Peter Viereck, title ‘The Tree Poet’, taken by Joseph Brodsky in 1982, which Peter Viereck liked	VII
David Shraer-Petrov, 2002, photo by Maxim Shrayar.....	VII
Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, Rita Dove, Derek Walcott and Octavio Paz, poetry reading at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, November 1994	VIII
Joseph Brodsky and Valentina Polukhina, Keele University, UK, 1985 ...	VIII

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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

- S Stikhotvoreniya i poemy (Short and Long Poems, New York, 1965).
- O Ostanovka v pustyne (A Halt in the Wilderness, New York, 1970).
- K Konets prekrasnoy epokhi (The End of a Beautiful Epoch, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977).
- C Chast rechi (A Part of Speech, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977).
- N Novye stansy k Avguste New Stanzas to Augusta, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983).
- U Uraniya (Urania, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1987).
- M Mramor (Marble, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1984).
- L Less than One (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1986).
- SP Selected Poems (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1973).
- PS A Part of Speech (OUP, 1980).
- TU To Urania (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1988).

PREFACE

The intention of this work is to take a fresh and challenging look at the work of the youngest of the Nobel Prize-winning poets. It is the record of my conversations about Joseph Brodsky with poets of various nationalities. It is not, however, just another collection of interviews with the famous. These are important discussions about the style, ideas and personality of one of the most original and complex poets of our time.

The choice of poets was, above all, dictated by a desire to arrive at an objective critical evaluation of the importance and significance of Brodsky's contribution to twentieth-century literature and culture. As well as the poets of the so-called 'Petersburg School' (Rein, Naiman, Kushner and Gorbanevskaya; the latter was at one time very closely associated with them), there are also poets of a different poetic tendency (Gordin, Ufliand, Loseff, Shrayev-Petrov, Ushakova), poets of a younger generation (Meilakh, Krivulin, Kublanovsky, Shvarts, Sedakova, Parshchikov) and of a very different cultural background (Roy Fisher, Derek Walcott, Peter Viereck, Czeslaw Milosz and Tomas Venclova).

A short biographical sketch is furnished for each poet. These sketches list his/her publications which have been updated for this edition, and include poems either addressed, dedicated to or inspired by Brodsky. Some of the Russian poets have shared Brodsky's fate. None of them, apart from Kushner and Bella Akhmadulina, could, until the end of the 80's, publish any of their works in their own country. Gorbanevskaya, Kublanovsky and Meilakh suffered arrest, imprisonment and incarceration in psychiatric hospitals. Shrayev-Petrov, Loseff and Venclova were forced to emigrate. Those who stayed behind became professional translators (Naiman, Sedakova), playwrights (Rein, Ufliand), historians (Gordin), scholars (Meilakh, Sedakova). All of them managed to preserve their independence and never lost the admiration or respect of their readers. The same is also true of the younger generation – Krivulin, Shvarts, Sedakova and Parshchikov – though they have nothing in common, apart from their age and the enormous popularity they enjoy at home and abroad. Of the poets of his own

generation Brodsky wrote, 'Nobody knew literature and history better than these people, nobody could write in Russian better than they, nobody despised our times more profoundly' (L, p. 29). All are extremely gifted and thought-provoking poets and it was they who were responsible for the 'poetic explosion' that took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their work forms a vast cultural stratum waiting to be properly appreciated and evaluated. In this book they are all brought together, for the first time, to give an overall assessment of Brodsky's and, in a sense, their own creative activity. All the discussions are stamped with the vivid and often profound thoughts of my interlocutors. They are linked by certain core questions which are carefully, sometimes provocatively, formulated, questions which always take the concrete world-text of each interviewed poet into account.

A number of interrelated themes and issues are discussed with the following aims: to trace the lines of the poetic tradition to which Brodsky belonged and ascertain the extent to which he diverged from that tradition; to sound out the philosophical premises of Brodsky's work, explaining his concern with the categories of language and time; to understand just what his belief in the priority of aesthetics over ethics, reason over feeling, poetry over faith was leading to; to evaluate his place in Russian culture and the extent to which he has contributed to that nation's spiritual renaissance; to substantiate the not-infrequent comparisons that are made with Pushkin; to comment on the poetic and cultural significance of Brodsky's individual poems, and his work as a whole, in the hope of bringing the discussion of Brodsky's poetic world into focus. Bearing in mind Brodsky's declaration that 'a poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his metres, rhymes, and metaphors' (L, p. 164), the emphasis has been placed upon the problems of Brodsky's poetics and not upon the peripeteia of his biography. However, these discussions do offer some psychological insights into Brodsky's personality. Most of the poets were asked to recall when and in what circumstances they met Brodsky: to give their impressions of him then and now; to assess his response to the most crucial events in his life, his arrest, trial, imprisonment, and the ultimate test of exile and fame; to tell what part he played in their lives and what influence he had on their poetry; to comment on the desirability, and possibility, of his return to Russia.

Because we are dealing with a poet who belonged, at the very least, to three cultures, one who spent a great deal of each year in several different countries, and one who wrote in two languages, it seemed essential that his American and English colleagues be brought into the discussion. With Derek Walcott, Peter Viereck and Roy Fisher, I investigate the fundamental problems of translation and the influence exerted on him by the poetics of the Anglo-American tradition, in particular that of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, the English Metaphysicals. Czeslaw Milosz and Tomas Venclova, both Brodsky's friends and the authors of articles on his work, are in a unique position to comment on many topics essential to a more profound understanding of this demanding and paradoxical poet. The Russian poets are also asked whether they see English poetry as having had an influence on Brodsky's style, on his poetic forms, and are asked to evaluate the possible consequences of that influence for Russian poetry.

All the contributors have helped to pinpoint the surprising kinship that exists among poets of very different poetic schools, even of different cultures. In the course of our conversations nearly all Brodsky's major themes are touched upon. The interviewer hopes that each of the conversations, whether grave reservations are expressed or a more favourable appraisal is given, will help us to reach a better understanding of a poet who was engaged in an intense dialogue with world culture and who was, to quote Kublanovsky, conducting his own personal suit against the Creator.

All the interviews, except with Peter Viereck and David Shrayer-Petrov, were conducted and published during the poet's lifetime. They combine personal and professional recollections and opinions. It is hoped that a more balanced portrait of this major twentieth-century Russian writer will result, his being, to date, the most significant example of a world figure, functioning in the interstices of the two most important twentieth-century world cultures, the Russian and Anglo-American.

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This edition contains material that supplements the earlier edition published by The Macmillan Press in 1992. It is being published at the same time as a second volume of interviews with friends, publishers, translators and family members.

1

ANATOLY NAIMAN

Anatoly Naiman (born in 1936, in Leningrad), poet, translator, writer, graduate of the Leningrad Technological Institute, belongs to a remarkable Leningrad constellation which made its appearance in the mid-1950s, close to the ageing giant of Russian poetry Anna Akhmatova, Naiman being her literary secretary for the last five years of her life. In 1964 she and he collaborated on a translation of Leopardi. He is the author of an outstanding work of literary reminiscence, *Rasskazy o Anne Akhmatovoy* (Moscow, 1989; English translation: *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, London, 1991). He has lived in Moscow since 1968 and that is where his translations of the Provencal verse romance *Flamenca* (1983) and *Songs of the French Troubadours* (1987) were published. He has also translated Baudelaire, Hölderlin, Donne, Browning, Eliot and Pound. His mature poetry conforms to the precepts of the Acmeist school, employing classical metres, a refined vocabulary, a fastidious syntax and an architectural sense of proportion. For him, as for the Acmeists, the basic structural element is not the phrase but the word. With his lofty spirituality, his abstract imagery and in particular his elegant meditative tone, highlighted by touches of irony, his poetics are close to those of Brodsky, fed by the same springs. Brodsky said that in Naiman's work 'in the course of the last two decades the note of Christian humility has sounded with ever increasing purity and frequency, at times drowning out the sound of his early poetry's intense lyricism and polyphony'.¹ It was Naiman who wrote the first important article to address Brodsky's work 'Zametki dlia pamiati' which was published as a foreword to the collection *A Halt in the Wilderness* (New York, 1970, pp. 7–15) and was signed N. N. In the last decade A. Naiman has been a fellow at Oxford University and the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center and has lectured on Russian Literature at many universities in Europe and America. His publications include *Oblaka v kontse veka* (*Clouds at the End of the Century*, 1993); *Ritm ruki* (*The Rhythm of a Hand*, 2000); two novels: *Sir* (2001) and *Kablukov* (2005), both shortlisted for Russia's Booker Prize. His English collection *Lions & Acrobats* with translations by F. D. Reeve and Margo Shohl Rosen, was published by Zephyr Press (Cambridge, 2005). Naiman has published many short stories in *Oktiabr* and *Novyi mir*.

A COAGULATION OF LINGUISTIC ENERGY

Art Interview with Anatoly Naiman

(13 July 1989, Nottingham)

– *When did you first meet Brodsky and what were your impressions?*

– I'm almost certain it was in 1958, I might be six months out though. However, if I'm right, I would have been 22 and he 18 and, though this sounds funny, I already had something of a reputation, which for me at the time seemed rather a solid reputation, at least in that Leningrad circle which took an interest in poetry. But anyway, at just 22 I was widely known, even though the actual number of people in the know was, arithmetically speaking, far from large. And along comes this 18-year-old youth, a boy, already known for his extremely high-flown style, who is reciting his poetry here, there and everywhere; in one place they would send him packing, in another they simply wouldn't know what to do with him. I want to emphasise that he wasn't the only one like that around at the time. That's what young poets are like. I speak from my own experience, from what I have observed then and since, my whole life through in fact. A poet has this trait, generally speaking it would be called stubbornness. He absolutely must read the poem he has just written to someone, come what may. As the poet said, 'the more you drink, the more you want; your thirst remains unquenched'.² You read your poem, you get a reaction and, of course, when you're 18 or 20, whatever the response, you only pay heed to what's favourable, or at least to what's not unfavourable. So, having just this minute squeezed one person dry you're immediately on the lookout for someone else, for another fly willing to enter your parlour.

At 18 Brodsky was, naturally enough, just like that, though you have to multiply the thing several times over to take into account, well, everything we know about Brodsky from later, his extreme sensibility, his energy; and the product you obtain from those factors is that carrot-haired lad with a face that is forever turning bright red. If someone said he blanched they meant he simply appeared normally ruddy. And that's not just the outer man alone, that's the essence of the man and that's not just my impression.

Even now that's the reason I still retain a real feeling of tenderness for him.

That first time I met him, when he was 18, I saw a man for whom well-nigh all the crassness, horror, vulgarity in the world in which he lived was simply unbearable. Moreover, his own poems tormented him in a very similar way. He would read his poems and, in the course of his reading, find almost everything to be not at all to his liking. Now, all in all, he really loved those poems of his; it was clear that he loved his poetry. But at the same time he would, almost incessantly, be interrupting his own reading, with gestures, with blows; those famous blows to the forehead which would have split anyone else's wide open long before now; and his mumbling of some of his lines, because clearly he felt that they were worthless; and those shouts of his; and the strange haste with which he would scurry through some lines. In short, he was continually reacting to his reading of his own verse. But for me, at that time, his poems were too expressive. There was a lot of shouting and not much structure. I say that now, but at the time they simply seemed superfluous, to me, and to my life. I didn't need his poetry. It seems to me that he came to me from Rein. That too counted at the time; who recommended you to whom. And afterwards I said to Rein that, well, he is, of course, talented; but I feel myself that at this time I've got more than enough things on my plate. What I want to say is, at the beginning there was never any question of ardent friendship.

And so the weeks passed. Well, when one is young one is especially egotistical – everyone knows that. I want it to be understood that there was no feeling of the kind, well, here in Leningrad we have some sort of galaxy, with stars of this and that magnitude, and then all of a sudden there bursts into our heavens this new, phenomenally bright star. In fact, I remember at least three people in Leningrad then very much like the Brodsky of those days. One was even called Joseph Bein, or something similar; and there was someone else again – similarly magniloquent, stentorian Jews who read poetry. They too were always being given the push from somewhere or other. They all had reputations as people who were trying to shake the pillars of the world. So he wasn't the only one like that around at the time. He lived in an atmosphere of general non-acceptance, an unacceptable man, of whom one could only expect trouble: that,

however, was tempered by the love and devotion one or two people felt for him. For example, Olga Brodovich was very devoted to him, and there were a few others as well. Tenderness, warmth for him arose involuntarily despite, for instance, my own initial feeling of antipathy.

– *And how did he come to join your group?*

– It wasn't as if we had some kind of special committee meeting to discuss his joining us. Some time passed and it turned out we were constantly seeing one another and knew everything there was to know about one another. Although we were all getting married at that time and we went off on our various travels, had our various enthusiasms and so on, I still have the impression that we spent a great deal of time together. First of all there were the poetry readings in small groups which, at certain times of the year, took place almost every evening, but apart from all that there was also this craving to read our poetry to each other. We lived, roughly speaking, in the same part of town. Rein lived five minutes walk away from my place and Brodsky live about four or five tramstops away; his was a sort of halfway house between ours and Bobyshev's. I seem to remember our ringing each other up several times a day; I'm talking of myself and Brodsky. And he had, for example, this rather 'droll' practical joke he used to play on me. He would ring – and knowing that the telephone lines were tapped and, sometimes, especially when we had foreign visitors there would be people hanging around the entrance to our block – well, he would ring up and say, 'Hello, is that Naiman's apartment? This is the KayGayBay calling.' And we would read our poetry over the phone as well as when we met. In my book I've described how he read the 'Great Elegy for John Donne' (S, pp. 130–6) to me, just after it was written, still hot from the pen, so to speak, in the booking office of a railway station, to the horror of everyone standing in the queue waiting for tickets.³

It has to be said, there was no feeling of animosity between our various groups then. It goes without saying, though, that we rated our own little group the best. For example, I remember saying to someone. 'If I wanted to write poetry like yours then I would write poetry like yours. But I write poetry like I do because that's the kind I want to write.' Take one group: Eryomin, Ufliand, Vinogradov and Loseff. We treated them as friends, gave them their due. For a long time

I thought, and I wasn't alone, that at the time the undisputed leader in poetry, and really there could be no argument about it, was Stas Krasovitsky – a Muscovite. They were three very talented poets, Krasovitsky, Khromov and Chertkov. I certainly don't want to get involved in any arguments with anyone about this. I just simply consider them to be remarkable Russian poets. It's another thing that Krasovitsky, at the beginning of the 1960s, gave up writing poetry. Khromov went on writing. Chertkov met up with every kind of misfortune known to man; that's not counting his ending up in a labour camp, and then becoming an émigré. We regarded each other with a certain haughtiness, but everyone knew that was the convention. Really, we sincerely wished each other well. To be honest, we were rather taken aback by the 'mining' group. They held these courses on how to get into print. And they all, very quickly, did get into print.

– *Who was in that group?*

They were indisputably very talented people – Britanishsky, Kushner, Ageev, Kumpan, Bitov, Korolyova, Gorbovsky. We liked Gorbovsky a lot. As you and I both know, talent in general is a very rare commodity. And talent has its charms. And Gorbovsky was and, I think, still is exceptionally talented. There's no need to rack one's brain to like his poetry. We simply loved it, just as we loved the way he behaved. As for the rest of the 'miners' – that's to say the other members of the Literary Association of the Mining Institute – as in a good college, they were kept in seclusion somewhat, so that they couldn't mix with the ordinary man in the street, though they liked to give the appearance of being just that – street-wise at least. But they could have been infected by us and our utter contempt for everything that could, in the slightest way, have been seen as somehow official. In those days, and up until very recently, it was impossible to publish anything that didn't contain the poison of officialdom in however attenuated a form.

Kushner occupied a rather special position because he had managed to stake out his claim with the publication of his first books; had, from the very first, acquired the right to use his own voice, his own timbre, his individual, very restrained intonation. As for the others, well, conventionality gets the better of what they've got to say. When I meet up with one of them I know that he's more or less one of us. You can say an awful lot by implication without spell-

ing it out, but somehow I've never been able to read their work, it sticks in my craw. To be honest, I found it extremely boring as well. What were we talking about? When you're 23-4-5-7, things change focus quite rapidly. And, somehow or other, the four of us became inseparable. We understood... we could express our opinion of one another's poems either with a sort of mumble or with some unusually resonant but precise phrase, and so, later, it only required some gesture, a boo-boo, a moo-moo or some such thing, for us to understand exactly how we each felt about what the other had written. And so it went on until 1964, when events in our private lives disrupted our cohesion as a group. Whatever it was that had tied us together a few years earlier was no longer there. And apart from that, our destinies gradually, pushed us in separate directions. It was not because destiny ordained that for us, but because it is the most natural thing in the world; when four individuals come together they are, given time, bound to part. The one amazing thing is how close those individuals, for a time, were.

– *Given that none of you were short of intellect or talent, when did Brodsky begin to stand out noticeably from the rest of you, and in what way? When did you become conscious of what Brodsky was?*

– Here we come to the crux of this interview. He grew very quickly, as they say; I use 'grew' in the metaphysical sense. There was still that four-years age difference, but all the same, after, say, three or four years we were equals in every sense of the word. We did not feel that he was in any way younger than us. From now on I'm only speaking for myself. Next came what they call fame; first, the well-known court case. He became a figure in the spotlight. During the trial he behaved irreproachably. He demonstrated something that I found very touching, the way he acted was somehow so appealing to me that it made my heart ache. All along he was a defenceless human being but, at the same time, he was up there on the heights that a human being is capable of reaching. And seeing his conduct during the trial – and all through that period – it suddenly dawned on one what it means to be a man. This is what men can be like, not just the usual, ordinary, everyday, dishonourable, ignoble creatures. Suddenly one saw this defenceless man, willing at any moment to lay down his life, stand his ground with dignity. And the radio started to chime in with the same theme. You know, at that time the BBC or the

Voice of America were like voices from on high, and now the Voice was saying 'Brotsky ... Brodsky ... Joseph Brodsky'. So that particular aspect of fame started to get into its stride. The overwhelming majority of people then began to exclaim, 'Fame has come! She's here in person!'⁴ It was those people who began to say, 'You know, he writes such remarkable poems!' He hadn't started writing poetry that was any more remarkable than what he had written before the BBC and the Voice of America began to repeat his name. It wasn't that there was some sort of qualitative change. It was just that after the Voice of America had passed judgement on them suddenly his poems turned out to have been remarkable. That had, as they say nowadays, its flip side. It had its effect upon Brodsky himself. Well, I know what happens from my own experience: somehow you have to live up to the image people have of you.

I can confirm that Joseph did not have a high opinion of those around him. And he didn't hide that. He even made sure that they knew exactly what he thought of them. And what is amazing is that people apparently like it, they seem to need their Stalin, in every walk of life. I just couldn't take any of that at all. And, what's more, when you see everyone rooting for the same person, then you come more and more to feel yourself wanting to buck the trend. Of course, I was very conscious of that process and kept that popular ferment separate from the kind of poetry he was writing. But I do remember when I was first distressed by one of his poems which was, right from the word go, just simply unacceptable, as far as I was concerned. The poem I'm referring to is 'A Halt in the Wilderness' (O, pp. 166-8). There was this sort of didacticism thrown in with the poetry. And poetry just cannot serve two masters; naturally the didacticism destroys the poem. But leaving that aside, there's the 'we' that sticks its head in there, 'From which are we the more remote: / Orthodoxy or Hellenism?' (O, p. 168). What is this 'we'? Who's this 'we'? I understand Akhmatova when she writes 'we' – it's Mandelstam, Gumilyov, Narbut, Zenkevich. But when 'we' means, 'Come on lads! We think alike', well, first of all it gives rise to unnecessary speculation as to who this 'we' refers to: on the one hand you're convincing people that you are in the right, sort of taking them by the shoulder and saying, 'we want the same thing', and on the other hand, there they all are happily joining the band. And it turns out 'we' refers to people who

have no place in poetry. After all, it's not an epic, it's a lyric poem. There was something unavoidably Soviet about that poem. There is no need to deny it, but you have to be aware that it's there. (I'm not singing any praises now, I'm more concerned with pointing out what I think should be pointed out.) Now it seems to me, you asked when we started to be aware of just who Brodsky is. Well, I repeat I'm speaking only for myself, I really don't know what you mean by 'become aware' or 'who is Brodsky?'. 'Who is Brodsky?' is certainly not the same for me as it is for you. I can tell you that the power of his poetry was already evident in 1962. If I'm not mistaken this poem is from 1962, give or take a year: 'Let it not be my fate to die far from you / in the dove mountains / echoing the bandy-legged boy.'

– *'Stanzas for a City'* (S, p. 69).

– Yes. There's that line, 'echoing the bandy-legged boy' which I remember in my own way, incidentally. Later, of course, there comes that drone, captured in the 'Great Elegy to John Donne', when he really became Brodsky. That's a poem you can take even now, 27 years later, and say, 'here's Brodsky'. And later, there's the unique, for its period, 'Isaac and Abraham' (S, pp. 137–55). Subsequently he took that further, used it again and again and, as is always the case when you do something again and again, it lessened the magnitude of the achievement; nothing has been gained, only lost. 'Isaac and Abraham' is language racing through a thousand lines, through five thousand to eight thousand words – and all on such a high note as well. Later there's nothing to better 'Königsberg' ('Einem alten Architekten in Rom', O, pp. 144–7). I know nothing better in the whole of Brodsky: 'Cheek, cheek, cheereek. Cheek, cheek. – Look up' (O, p. 147) and so on. That music of his voice has lived with me all my life; and will, I think, live with me to the end of my days. When I say I know of nothing to surpass it in the whole of Brodsky that does not mean that I know of nothing to equal it. 'The Hawk's Cry in Autumn' (L, pp. 49–52) is an absolutely remarkable poem about which I may say one or two words on some other occasion.

– *You can say them now. Every one of the poets I've interviewed has picked that poem out – but nobody has said why.*

– It seems to me that in our youth, for Brodsky and myself at least, Baratynsky's poem, 'Autumn' held a special place of honour. We always felt it to be the very apex of Russian poetic achievement. Its

sound was a translation of the roar of the universe. Having ‘Autumn’ in mind I tried to achieve something similar myself. I approached the theme once, twice ... and one of those attempts was even, I think, successful; on an altogether different plane, it has to be admitted. I hadn’t, as the saying goes, got to grips with Baratynsky’s ‘Autumn’, but I had got a hold of something, even if it was a little different to what I had set out to do. I think that the poem, ‘The Hawk’s Cry in Autumn’, is a variation on that theme, a version of Baratynsky’s ‘Autumn’. Now, when they talk in such elevated tones about Brodsky, I don’t want to do so (as you know I have the right to, the grounds for doing so, after all it was I who, 25 years ago, brought together in one sentence the two names of Brodsky and Pushkin),⁵ but maybe that poem stands equal to Baratynsky’s ‘Autumn’, and, for that reason, I won’t talk at too great a length about it, simply because I don’t want to add one more voice to the already inordinate chorus of praise.

– *It’s widely known that Anna Andreevna urged all of you to brevity, and, it is alleged, Brodsky succeeded in convincing her otherwise. Was that really the case? What did she feel about his long poems?*

– It seems to me that that is just a legend, that she urged us to brevity. You don’t recall who told you that?

– *It was Bobyshev in his article ‘Akhmatova’s orphans’.*⁶

– It seems to me to be, as they now say, a late interpolation. She didn’t urge any of us to anything. Or rather, that without doing so – at least in words – she did in fact urge us to brevity, but in her own way. That would be more correct. She accepted us just as we were, that’s why we were capable of such unalloyed love for her. She didn’t impose anything at all; absolutely not. If someone wanted to stretch out, or if someone wanted to follow their own bent, or write badly, she would let them do it; everything was permitted. I know what Bobyshev has in mind, but I can’t back him up on that one. I can say this about Akhmatova and on the topic of length, and all that, she rated ‘Isaac and Abraham’ highly, although, as you can well understand, the poem was completely alien to her own way of writing. But she really wasn’t someone who needed any lessons in spotting poetic talent. She could hear it from miles off. And when I, fresh from Norenskaya, I think, brought her some poems of Brodsky’s on a biblical theme she said to me in irritation, ‘You can’t exploit that theme. On a biblical subject, you can write just once and once only.’ That is,

I think, a comment that goes right to the heart of the matter, but it's rather more typical of Akhmatova than Brodsky.

– *What do you think, did Brodsky follow the rules of the Acmeist canon? Some people do consider Brodsky to have been the last Acmeist.*

– You know, that's all nonsense in my opinion – the last Acmeist, the penultimate Acmeist. We all went through an Acmeist phase. And you cannot deny that Acmeism gives you an excellent schooling. You know, somewhere in his book, Vasari comes to the defence of Michelangelo, who was commissioned to make a statue of Hercules and Cacus, and speaks of another sculptor, I can't recall his name (Baccio Bandinelli), who made a horrible mess of some marble. You have to pay a lot for Carrara marble, and then you have to make sure you don't spoil it – otherwise you go bankrupt. But with words, it's assumed, if you mess one of them up then you simply take another. Acmeism, though, teaches us that words are like Carrara marble, you mustn't spoil them; if you do you won't get any more. Every man who feels some pride in his work has to learn that lesson. We learnt it. The difference between us and a lot of our contemporaries is that we don't write in sentences, in idiomatic phrases, we write by the word. After we had learned how to use words, we could, if we wished, begin to write in slang. Anyway, that's what Joseph very often does, and he's a virtuoso at it. But to start with, we learnt how to respect our material – words. If Acmeism is not just simply a cult of the beautiful word, something to show ourselves and our friends that we are old hands at this game, but really does have some meaning, then one has to come to the conclusion that Brodsky is in no way an Acmeist. But, all in all, Akhmatova – and I talked about this yesterday at the conference⁷ – did not teach us poetry, or the poetic craft, and yet she did, because in the course of things, in passing as it were, anyone who needed to learn, learnt. It wasn't compulsory. Brodsky, there's no denying it, did go through Akhmatova's school: but only in the sense I'm speaking of. She didn't give us lessons. She simply created an atmosphere, a certain spiritual atmosphere. That's how I'll answer your question.

– *And how, do you think, can one justify Brodsky's prolixity? Can it be justified? What inner need compels him to cover such huge linguistic space?*

– Those so-called long poems and all that prolixity of his in general, about which so much, bad and good, has been said, is the essence of Brodsky. He forced language to work for his poetry. That can be said of only a few poets, and even then one has to stretch the point. But in his case one doesn't have to stretch anything, he has found all of Russian grammar's concealed power-sockets – forgive me this complex metaphor – and he plugs himself into the electrical system and receives that initial impulse which sets him on his way. He just has to make sure the charge doesn't run down. Of course, that sort of stratagem requires a terrific internal charge, attentiveness, a huge amount of energy. The grammar is working, the structures of language are working. In short he gives the Russian language the same freedom a good rider does a good horse; he keeps it on a loose rein but, at the same time, he makes sure the animal goes the way he wants it to.

– *Speaking of language, I would like to quote Brodsky himself: 'the biography of a writer lies in the way in which he shapes language'.⁸ What matters most in his linguistic biography?*

– Well, you see, in Brodsky's case one can't talk of his 'shaping the language'. Of course every poet moulds the language. But I have to go back to what I was just saying. If one can say of Mandelstam, or of Pasternak, that they shaped the language, one can't say that of Brodsky. I don't want to dismount from my metaphor. He gives the language, trained by him to perfection, the freedom to gallop – along the road he wants it to take.

– *That is not yet the whole picture because, for Brodsky, language is not only, and not so much, the poet's instrument but, as he himself affirms, it is 'the poet who is the instrument of language'.⁹ Moreover, for him, language is a metaphysical category which additionally figures as a poetic persona. He uses grammatical categories, sounds and letters in the way one would ordinary words. I have noticed that happens in your poetry too. Let's start with you. What is language for you?*

– You know, I can still beat you at this game. First let me answer you about Brodsky, and then I'll tell you what it means for me. You're quite right. Language for Brodsky is precisely what he said, exactly as you quoted just now. But, tell me – I think the simile I've just thought of is very apt – who gains ground, the horse or the rider? Just let the horse go and he'll run to his own or another's stall, and the

rider will lose the race. In a sense language for Brodsky is, in part, himself; it is a centaur, rider and horse. Brodsky really is just such a centaur. We were, the day before yesterday, talking about *Doctor Zhivago* and he made this joke.¹⁰ He is one of those who doesn't consider the novel to be a masterpiece. He doesn't like it. (I just happen to be one of the minority who do. But he was making out that I too really ought to dislike it. And I know exactly what I ought not to like about it. None the less, the work has such a delicate feel about it which wins me over. And there again I have a liking for the not-quite-successful, for things that don't quite come off, that have flaws; the flaws just serve to underline the authenticity of the thing. All this is by the by.) I noted that he had in mind not just the novel but the film as well; fortunately I haven't seen it. Well, Joseph said, 'But you know, Tsvetaeva said Pasternak is at one and the same time like the Arab and like his horse. And so Zhivago is played by Omar Sharif, the Arab.' In that sense, in the sense that Pasternak is at one and the same time the Arab and his horse, and giving it a somewhat different twist, I can say the same of Brodsky himself. We have the influence which this wild animal one may call language exerts upon its rider. Incidentally, I think Joseph would quite like the comparison, for in my scheme of things, he's a poet only as far down as the waist, everything below that line I attribute to that wild beast, language.

– *And what is language for you?*

– I would distinguish two attitudes, the first being the most recent in date. Ten or fifteen years ago I finally understood what sort of pole it was that casts its magnetic influence upon my language and thereby gives it direction: the desire to formulate everything exactly. You obtain such exact formulations, not approximate but exact formulations, when academic language, let's say the language of science, becomes poetry. You have, for example, the articles of the remarkable sinologist Alekseev who died in 1950 or thereabouts. I was reading his books and several of his pages are, quite simply, poetry of the highest order, although he was never accounted a member of the poetic fraternity, was never a professional poet. There you have that exactness where, strictly speaking, there is not so much a need for an exactness in choice of words, but rather a need to fit them into your construct with exactness. In my case that is felt more strongly in my prose. The book I brought out for Akhmatova's cente-

nary I regard – and I can no longer pretend that it is simply a book of reminiscences – as a sort of prospective prose – prose with some sort of future, not concretely for me personally, but for the foreseeable future in general terms, in the same way as Pasternak's *Safe Conduct* or Mandelstam's prose could have been seen in their time. A rather earlier attitude to language, and one which continues to exist, is to be found in that mishmash, that jumble which is the language of the people where, in the course of use by whole hordes of mankind, language is constantly being transformed, and the poet forces his way in like some powerful magnet which attracts the steel particles from out of those hordes, those tribes, and correspondingly redistributes them, reorientates them and momentarily creates, in the amorphous solution, a crystal. Here, to cut things short, I'll simply quote some lines of Eliot's which I regard as an epigraph upon my work of these past 25 years. They come from the 'Four Quartets', from 'Little Gidding'; they were written in tertiary form. I'll quote it in my own, Russian version:

Коль наше дело — речь, и нас толкнула
Она очистить диалект толпы,
А разум наш впредь и вспячь провидеть...

[Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight...]

Those words embody my attitude to language. Eliot wrote those lines but, nevertheless, you'll agree that it is I who say it in Russian. Our business, our profession is speech. We poets speak. And, in our singular state as poets, that speech prompts us and compels us to purify the dialect of the tribe and, for that reason, gives us sight of the future and, well, so as not to overload the line, of the past too. That is, we begin to see into that amorphous mass that forms the crystal, into its lattice structure.

– *In Brodsky language has another aspect. Sometimes it seems as if he finds much more of a spiritual anchorage in language than he does in faith. Do you feel that? If so, how much of that can we attribute to the fact that he lives in an alien linguistic environment?*

– I think that you're quite right. This is not speculation on my part, it's the result of our conversations on this very subject. You know, creatively speaking, he is a man with a very well-developed set of muscles. And that keeps him in good shape when a man in his position should, strictly speaking, be at death's door – not because he's an émigré but simply because he has only himself to rely on. And as that self is a coagulation of linguistic energy you are, of course, right. He relies on what he does with language, and on what language does with him. Well that's the case – he speaks and that's why he lives. To rephrase Descartes, 'I speak, therefore I am.'

– *Do you know when Brodsky first directed his thoughts towards God? And how would you describe his relationship with his Creator – because it's not unambivalent, not lacking in opacity, is it?*

– I'm not about to take that task upon my shoulders – simply because there's something of everything there. It's very serious matter and it demands a great deal of responsibility. I can only say that, in Brodsky's case, I would not necessarily feel that I could really use such words as Creator or, in more general terms, the precise names used by this or that religion to designate the Supreme Being. I would use the word heaven though. He does, in essence, know in what direction heaven lies at any given moment. That is the most one can say with any certitude when one talks about the particular subject. The rest really isn't my affair and I don't really understand it all that well. In a recent conversation we touched on this very subject and it merely confirmed what I'd already suspected. You know he read the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Mahabharata* before he read the Bible – he told me so himself. He differs from me in this: every book he reads he calls a book. For me the Bible is not just a book.

– *It's only in connection with language that I dared touch upon that subject. He once said that language has so many aspects to it, so many facets, is such a complex organism that it could never have been the creation of man. He who gave it to us is greater than us. And in that sense, language for Brodsky has two directions – two ends or two beginnings: a word is simply a word and, also, the Word, the Word which leads to God.*¹¹

– Well, now I could leap in and declare that use of the Word, in that context, inexact. And if you were to insist upon its exactness, that, for me, would be quite unacceptable. In fact, it's simply a bad trans-

lation, a linguistic confusion. You have, 'In the beginning was the Word'. There is a mass of speculation about that. Gumilyov wrote, 'And in the Gospel according to St John / It is said that the Word is God' – just as if that were our word. Then, as now, Word is used because we have no better way of understanding that our world was created by God's Word, for the sake of God's Word. We simply use that term 'word' in the same way as when we say: hell is the frying pan in which sinners burn. Maybe it is a frying pan but it is something different to the frying pan we know and use, many, countless light-years different. In precisely the same way we use the expression, 'In the beginning was the Word'. But that is the Word of God, it has no connection whatsoever with our earthly words. We are simply told that it was by this Will, or Word, or Logos, or Act that the world came into being. That is what we call the Word.

As for Brodsky's statement that language was not given to us by our progenitors, our forbears, but handed down to us from somewhere on high, that seems, to me, to be a truth that has long since been accepted as a commonplace. Science itself now tells us that we don't learn language from our parents in childhood. We simply drag it out of some sort of genetic storehouse in our brain. What is more, all languages are to be found there. In Russia we learn Russian, but surrounded by Englishmen we drag the English language out of that store, and so on...

– *How do you explain Brodsky's preoccupation with the category of time which is, in his work, a counterweight to the category of language: you have only to look at the impression made by that line of Auden's, 'Time ... worships language', to see that?*¹²

– I have to refer you to my book. I have thought a lot about that, in connection with Akhmatova, and it's all there, in that book. My thoughts about time, about memory, about immortality as a kind of contraband and about true immortality; you will find those in the chapter in which I quote Pushkin's lines, 'And my fame will last just as long as in this sublunar world one poet remains alive.' I don't take fame to mean 'outstanding'. What it means is that as long as there is still one poet at least left alive I will still live on; that is, as long as one poet speaks the word that has been spoken by a host of other poets.¹³

– *In that sense your position and Joseph's aren't so far apart. He too plays with the opposing values of time, language, memory and culture. In particular, he says of your generation that they are people for whom Christian culture is the most precious thing there is; nobody else can lay claim to such devotion to the concept of culture (L, pp. 28–31). Do you agree?*

– Those words, 'Christian culture', have two, quite opposing meanings. It depends whether it's a Christian speaking or someone who is a mere spectator, on the sidelines. When, earlier, I spoke of our differences I didn't mention the most essential and, for a whole host of reasons, I'm not prepared to speak of them. I've learned a great deal over the last 20, 25 years. And I spent many a long year trying to forget what culture means, Christian culture included, to someone looking in at it from outside. I fought against culture. Now, when it appears that I have a deeper conviction of my own, culture is gradually merging in some sort of harmony with something that can only be described as antagonistic to culture. For a Christian, Christian culture is simply an integral part of Christianity and, therefore, of his life, whilst for the outsider, the non-Christian, culture can become an idol to be served or, at the least, a guiding principle of some sort in life. When I say the words 'Christian culture' I put the emphasis on the first of those words, because Christianity can lay claim to things more precious by far than anything culture may claim for itself, whilst, it seems to me, Joseph would place his emphasis on the second word.

– *Of course, you know his play 'Marble' in which there are, essentially, two anachronisms. It portrays not only a pre-Christian empire but also a post-Christian empire, where culture, though allowed a place in society, is spiritually anaemic. Your comments please?*

– I feel a deep dislike for that play. It is very disagreeable just in itself, even if you manage to abstract yourself from all its implications. Really, what you have is this monstrous construction where there was no need for anything more than one brick and, to my mind, that's all. The play does have a certain dose of wit. The plot can be summed up by saying that a man of culture succeeds in breaking out of his prison by chucking his culture down the garbage chute. There is a certain amount of wit there but, in essence, I'm opposed to it, absolutely. However, I really don't want to use big words... nobody has done

away with Christianity. And if Christianity has ceased to play the role it has been playing for the last two millenia, it cannot be said to have ceased to exist; it has, rather, returned to a past stage of its existence, but at a different level. So, if we really are convinced that Christ is the son of God, if we are at all capable of pronouncing the words, 'I believe in that', it would be ridiculous if one were to say, 'I believe in Joseph Brodsky, who considers Christianity finished.'

– *Doesn't it seem to you that the play deals with the 'after the end theme'? A theme he touches upon time and time again, which runs like a thread through his work – after the end of love, after the end of life in Russia, after the end of Christianity. How do you explain the persistence of the theme and Brodsky's attempts to take it to its logical conclusion?*

– Again, I can only look at it from my own particular vantage point. The situation one finds oneself in when the thunderstorm is over is immeasurably more attractive than the one one is in during the storm. In that sense we are drawn towards it, either to remember the storm or to find out how we withstood the storm. That's one thing. The 'after' situation allows us to sort out what comes 'after', allows us a maximum of calm to sort out what is there, 'at the time'; that aspect I find very attractive, it demands responsibility and so on. The other aspect is less responsible – it's indulging in prophecy and I am no friend to prophets.

– *In one of his essays on Tsvetaeva Brodsky said, 'The more often a poet takes this next step, the more isolated a position he finds himself in' (L, p. 187). Do you feel that Brodsky's whole evolution has been driven by the need to take that next logical step?*

– Oh, yes. Here, he is, of course, being absolutely honest. It's what drew me to him from the very first. All the time he's trying to take that next logical step, and the poet really is always out there on his own in that respect. In the very nature of things he can't expect any assistance.

– *And where does the next logical step take him? How far has Brodsky moved, away from us his readers, away from you the poets of the same generation?*

– I wouldn't look at it in that way. You see, he tells us, every time, exactly where he is heading, so we're always out there with him.

He doesn't move off and leave us to watch his progress. We always know where he is.

– *If you know where he is, give us a brief account of his poetic world.*

– No. I'm not going to refuse, I'm quite simply going to remind you of what Tsvetaeva said: 'A poet starts speech from afar. A poet is led far by speech.' Far. I'm not a critic. I can't say whither. Maybe there are other questions I can answer in more detail. That I can't.

– *Well, answer in part then. What general cultural questions does he have clearly in mind? Which of those questions has he answered or is in the process of answering?*

– In Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, Gavin Stevens says, 'Well, I'm off, now it's up to you to hold the fort.' In that sense Brodsky is holding the fort against vulgarity, against chaos, against those who are trying to bring the walls of the lofty towers tumbling down. They aren't, perhaps, the towers upon which Brodsky himself takes his stand, but he knows who is up there and he's taking some of the pressure off their defenders, his gaze is directed towards those high towers. There, in essence, is his mission. Incidentally, it may well be that it is towards those high towers that he is gradually making his way, with each one of those next, logical steps.

– *Could you possibly say a few words about the English strain in his poetry? What, with his love of the English language, has he brought that is new to Russian poetry?*

– I think you've formulated the question quite correctly. The sort of direction Brodsky has taken is, it seems to me, new to Russian poetry. In the past it was, let's take Pasternak as an example, somewhat schematic. As for English poetry, when you first happen upon some, even in translation – not to mention one's first encounter with a poem in English – you realise what aspects of Russian prosody have to be adjusted, what constructions have to be brought in to achieve that harmony, to find that wide harmonic range in the Russian.

– *Please name those poems of Brodsky's you consider to be masterpieces.*

– I think I've already mentioned them here and there, in passing. I don't want to call them masterpieces. I could add to the list of poems I've mentioned ... No, in general, it's a thankless task naming the poems of a good writer, because you want to go on including more

and more poems. I could add 'Burning' (U, pp. 145–7) to my list; 'The North crumbles metal' (C, p. 78). You see, since his departure I must confess only a few of his poems have moved me. I always look at the poems first of all to see whether they move me; quite remarkable poems often fail to move one and then as far as I'm concerned they no longer have any interest. I have to confess very few poems at all have moved me. When I was young it was another matter. I've mentioned 'Königsburg' and, in my opinion, that poem should be called 'Königsburg', because 'Einem alten Architekten in Rom' is a bit high flown. 'The Hawk's Cry in Autumn' and 'Burning' I would single those out, and 'Isaac and Abraham'. I don't want to draw up a whole catalogue of them: of course, I'd be bound to leave something out, and regret the omission later.

– *It's interesting that you should name 'Burning'. According to some people it contains the most shocking lines to be found in Russian poetry.*¹⁴ *'If the Nazarene had possessed such passion / then indeed He would have arisen!'* (U, p. 146).

– Yes, I reacted very unfavourably indeed to those lines and I told him so. You see, there was this episode, people really wanted me to quarrel with Brodsky; I had, allegedly, said that he was an atheist. Of course, I had not said that; I don't think that. It even led to an exchange of letters, to explain how things stood. The fact is that those two lines are quite unacceptable, in every sense; apart from anything else, they are tasteless. But the whole of that poem can't be summed up in those two lines. It's a powerful, impassioned poem. Well, I'm not Brodsky's mentor. I'm not going to say to him, 'You need to free yourself from such and such.' He wrote it, and I'm talking about the poem as a whole. I repeat, I find those lines hurtful but I'm not the sort of man to be made blind by my hurt to the merits of the poem as a whole.

– *Did Brodsky's departure from the Soviet Union affect you in any way?*

– No. As I've already mentioned earlier, we'd been at odds with one another for years before that. And when you get down to it, it's no great shakes when two people have fallen out and one of them is living in Moscow, the other in Leningrad, and then one of them goes and moves to New York. And, anyway, whatever they say, *omnia mea porto mecum*. Brodsky's going is beside the point. Really,

around that time, life in general had become rather lacklustre. It had been brighter. In some ways a lacklustre life is a godsend; there are no distractions. But it was an unnatural way of life. And for that reason when Brodsky and a few others left the 'scene life became lacklustre'.

– *What I really had in mind was your poetic life. For all the dissimilarities, your two poetics do intersect at certain points, you have drawn your water from the same wells. ... Did his presence and, later, those poems that came your way, have any stimulating effect upon your own poetry?*

– Of course, when there's someone there close to you, provoking you, tantalising you, or the reverse, entrancing you, captivating you, then, of course, that's all to the good. But I saw his poems, they reached me. But, you know, there is this reflex. Say a poem reaches you that you don't like, that leaves you cold, then, not without a certain feeling of satisfaction, you come to some sort of conclusion, such as, 'Well, if that's how it is, then' it doesn't matter a jot if he's over there, rather than over here – there's no difference.' Of course you say that to make things easy on yourself. But those poems did reach us and, I repeat, they very rarely moved me. His long poems written in stanzas are in general not to my taste. A train should really have a limited number of carriages to pull, because somewhere around the middle of the train, the points somehow get switched and you start to get a pile up; the second half, the last third of the train starts to go off the rails, when you have those stanzas, those carriages one like the other ... I know what it was leading up to, what he has achieved in that way. For a professional poet like Brodsky – and Brodsky is a professional poet and one who's set new standards – there's a period when, in order to be a record-breaker, you need to master all the techniques of your chosen sport, you need to spend hour after hour practising your punches, your jumps, your putts and so on. There's this period of working out in the gym, this steady build-up, practise, practise, practise. And so there were these years of practising which, possibly, coincide with some particular psychological problems, hang-ups, during which he tries to resolve the formal tricks of his trade; and in the end he's built up hard, firm muscles. There's this poem of his, 'The Butterfly' (C, pp.32–8). It's one of my favourites. However, in mentioning it, I ought to add my name to the host of those who do

not like his long poems, even though I don't see myself as really belonging to that army. But I ought to because, though the troubadours whose poems I translate also wrote stanza after stanza after stanza, they wrote eight or maybe ten stanzas, not eighty or a hundred.

– *Having been a friend of Brodsky's for so long, how have you managed to preserve your own stylistic independence, in the face of such powerful influence?*

– Well, there was a period at the beginning of the 1960s when I did try and write in the style he was telling us we ought to be writing in. At that time he was telling scores of people, 'Write stories in verse.' And I wrote them. There's a poem of mine, called 'Verses on a private occasion', which I wrote following a visit to see him in his northern exile. Later I discovered it was Brodsky's syntax I'd used in that poem. That didn't last long. But talking of coincidences, last September in New York we were talking and, suddenly, he read some lines to me and said, 'Yours or mine, A.G.?' And, of course, those coincidences are there. A mutual friend of ours said to us, 'Listen, in one of your poems [my poems] there's this line, 'Sometime when we will no longer be', and there's this line of Joseph's 'Sometime when we have ceased to be.' Joseph said, I wrote that in such-and-such a year.' I was taken aback and I said, 'That means I wrote my poem later.' You know, that's how it is ... I asserted, though Joseph denied it (his denials were rather luke-warm), that in his essay 'Less than One', when he tells the story of the boy who crawled under the desks to see the colour of his teacher's panties, the boy was in my class and his name was Oleg Knyazev. It's one of those banal stories you hear when you hang around with the same crowd and you end up telling the story, not thinking about who first told it and, generally, you come to think of it as your own. It's as if we'd taken two gherkins from the same pickle jar. I repeat, it only lasted a short time and it wasn't so much his influence as an attempt to do something in the same spirit.

– *Could you name those Russian poets – from Simeon Polotsky up until the present day – who have helped Brodsky to realise his potential as a poet?*

– Again, one would have to have something in front of one, one could analyse, well. ... I know, of course, that there was Baratynsky, but the others? No, this is what I want to say to you. The name of Push-

kin doesn't come to mind without reason when you think about Brodsky. The fact is they both possess this epigrammatic ease with which they react to events as they happen. This lightness of touch is loaded with meaning, unlike certain 'stagey' poetry. Let's take this example, from Pushkin's time at the Lyceum. Myasoedov was given the task of writing a poem on the theme 'Sunrise', and he wrote, 'In the West arose the red-cheeked king of Nature', and Pushkin added, 'And the people, struck dumb, did not know what to do, go to bed or get dressed.' That is very much Brodsky's way of looking at things. He's quick on the draw and has bags of talent. That's a concrete example of what I mean.

– *Couldn't you continue that comparative study, using other criteria? How universal is Brodsky's poetry?*

– All in all, that is the really important question. I've thought about that and, somehow, I haven't been able to come to any decision. And this, perhaps, is the most vital thing I'm going to say today. If we feel a need for 'mandelstam' poetry, I'm using a small 'm' there, we go to Mandelstam. And the same goes for Akhmatova, for Tsvetaeva, for Pasternak. Now here's the situation. We feel a need for, well, I don't know, let's say, tra-ta-tama's poetry, we go to Brodsky. We feel a need for bal-ba-lama's poetry, we go to Brodsky. He's got it, all of it. Not to mince matters, I don't go along with those people who criticise Brodsky's so-called 'poetic industry' – you will recall, we both of us had a glance at an article entitled, 'The Magic Industry'¹⁵ – I didn't read it right through, as I should have done. But that word 'industry' is an insult. When, in the course of my interview on the Voice of America, they asked me in connection with Brodsky, 'What distinguishes the poetry of the present day from poetry as it was back then?', I said that, at that time, rightly or wrongly, we were able to see Akhmatova, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, etc. as being all on the same level, but who can we put next to Brodsky? There is nobody. On the one hand, that does show you his standing in the poetic hierarchy, but, on the other, it's an unhealthy situation because a poet can't be syncretical. On the contrary, the narrower the furrow he ploughs the greater the poet he is. With one exception, that is, if, like Pushkin, he is a universal poet. Well, I leave that question open.

– *I would like you to say a few words about the originality of his lyricism. He himself has made two statements on the subject. First,*

*he affirms that 'A Halt in the Wilderness' is his last lyrical book and, secondly, he declares that, at the end of the twentieth century it's just not possible to speak point-blank about love or God.*¹⁶

– As a rule, a poet's declarations about his art are indicative of the state of his art. And if he says that at the end of the twentieth century it's not possible to speak point-blank about God or love, then that statement is only valid until someone does talk about God or love in that way. I think it is possible if the need arises; the vital thing is that it has to be poetry. In general terms, I think I know of poems of the twentieth century, the middle twentieth century, the late twentieth century, that deal with God and which are, at the same time, good poetry. And his lyricism? Well, 'Burning' is after all a comparatively late piece of work.

– 1981.

– And 'The Hawk': isn't that lyricism?

– *And the theme of love?*

– Ah! The theme of love! Akhmatova took two stupendous lines of Knyazev's, the only two decent lines he ever wrote: 'Love has passed and mortal features become clear and close.' That takes in an awful lot of things. We have to go back to what we were discussing before. On the one hand, there's poetry after love: 'clear and close'. On the other hand, 'love has passed', one is incapable of love and then the mortal features become clear. Maybe Brodsky is passing through just such a period.

– *In that case we are witnessing something of a paradox. We have his collection, 'New Stanzas to Augusta', made up of poems addressed to the same woman over a period of 20 years. It's unique in the history of Russian poetry.*

– Yes, and I'm very fond of it. It's remarkable. But I have to allow that, perhaps, it's stretching things a bit to say all the poems are addressed to the same woman.

– *Apart from 'Nunc Dimittis' which was, initially, dedicated to Akhmatova, all the poems are addressed to Marina.*¹⁷

– One has to have in mind the difference between 'addressed' and 'dedicated'. Dedicated – of that there's no doubt! But is she the person addressed in every one of those poems? One can discover a second, hidden aspect in some of those poems – and it's not so easy to see. It will be revealed in that world where all will be revealed. I need to

read the whole book through thoroughly. I repeat that, all in all, it's one of those things that draws me irresistibly closer to Brodsky.

– *You see why I brought our discussion round to the question of lyricism. On the one hand, lyricism includes love and similar such sentiments but, on the other, Brodsky has an unusually restrained tone, all his emotions are pushed out towards the periphery of a poem, sometimes right out of it completely. Don't you think that that is the result of the English influence upon his poetry?*

– It's a question of inclination. It's also a question of talent. Mandelstam can make a lyric out of two words. He takes your beating heart into the palm of his hand and starts to pound it. Brodsky's approach is different. I don't know how exactly that links up with English poetry.

– *It does seem problematic because in 1962, when it was even harder to suspect any English influence, there appeared the poem 'I embraced these shoulders and looked at' (O, p. 77), from which all the lyricism has been squeezed.*

– Yes, yes. That is brilliant! Besides it's one of my favourite poems

– I forgot to mention it earlier. I refer to it very frequently. Everything that came later is really a reworking of that poem; the passionate heart and the cool head.

– *In that sense you agree with Loseff when he states that Brodsky, both as a poet and a man, matured very early and later just further developed those ideas that were already there, in the poems he wrote in youth?*¹⁸

I haven't come across that remark of Loseff's, but, of course, that is the case. The only thing he says that's new is the word 'early' because, in general, each and every poet rewrites the same poem again and again; any poet, any poet you care to mention. When you look closely it turns out to be a variation on the same theme he's already touched upon at some time or other in the past. That doesn't mean his poems are simply recapitulations. They can be a lot better the second time around but, in essence, they are rewrites of the first poems, and Brodsky is no exception to the rule. Another thing Loseff has got right is that he did mature early. The poems of 1962, the year he was 22, were marvellous. I think that by about 1965 he had written everything he was going to write. If he had died then,

disappeared from the scene, whatever, stopped writing, it would be no matter, we would have our Brodsky.

– *You said that he behaved irreproachably at his trial. You visited him several times when he was in exile in Norenskaya. The poems he wrote in exile give one the sense that there too his behaviour was exemplary, that he somehow knew how to divorce himself from what was happening to him. How did he take exile?*

– With remarkable dignity and courage. There was only one thing which affected him personally, which gave him no rest. Just one. I am only telling you what I myself observed. Perhaps there was something that was hidden from me, something I didn't notice, perhaps there really was, and I'm prepared to be contradicted, but the exile itself, the imprisonment, the work, he took it in an exemplary manner; almost because it was so difficult. You know, in my book there is a passage somewhere where I say that the main thing was not his isolation from home, the harshness of the conditions, of everyday life there, but the fact that he simply had to be there. If he had gone there of his own accord or one of his friends had advised him to go there, he would have spent as much time there as he wanted to. But he did not have the right to leave... One time, when I arrived I found him not just an exile but also a prisoner. I've written about it in my book.¹⁹ I went to the jail and Brodsky was just coming out, carrying two buckets, one marked 'bread', the other marked 'water'. I would have said he looked quite content, after all they had let him out on the streets and so on...

– *Please, tell me what your meeting with him in America was like after such a long time, even after some cooling of your friendship, as you mentioned earlier?*

There were no barriers. I entered his apartment just as I had entered the apartment on the Liteiny a thousand times and, as has already been said many times, it was rather like the old Leningrad apartment. Of course, he wasn't the same person. His sentimentality had quite vanished – at least at first glance. We had both been sentimentalists. But there was something new I noticed in its place. It was very, very good. There was just one difficulty. The fact is that there's always someone asking him for some favour or other. That takes up, first, a lot of his time – he had to disconnect the phone just so that we could talk – and secondly, it meant I couldn't really say what

I wanted to. For example, I might want to ask him something and from my questions, from our conversations in general, he was very good at fishing out requests which I hadn't made. He found them. It's like in the Caucasus when you tell them you like this fork and they insist you take it as a present.

– *He just wanted to please you.*

– He did. He showed me everything. I don't want to go into that. That would spoil it.

– *I know you have a couple of poems dedicated to Brodsky. Which one do you want to see included in this collection?*

– I can offer you the one I wrote during one of my visits to see Brodsky in exile.

VERSES ON ETERNAL YOUTH

J. B.

The body's clock's always slow by
 the third of the twenty-four given
 to dreaming; and so I'm convinced
 my ghost will walk here in the future,
 unable to do any ill;
 for pain is unknown to a spirit
 which is itself harmless. Then you
 will probably envy my lot.
 Meanwhile, being still a third slow,
 eventually slow by a lifetime,
 I'll die where I am when I must
 but I shan't die in my own country.
 I suppose we had the idea
 of freely inhaling our sadness
 like a wind which blew from out there,
 while all one did there was sleep soundly.
 The sunset, the sunset invites
 the stranger who trips on the stubble
 to melt his life in its lava
 and trickle it over his finger;
 and he wants no soaring balloon
 his path through the forest to shorten

by a third; for here skies abound
 with only the merest horizon.
 The crown of thorns I thought I saw
 was a hedge, a dead thicket unlayered;
 the nestling leaf, now fledged and flown,
 is fluttering above the cold aspen.
 Away it bears your voice like smoke
 from the bird-box of truthful wisdom,
 sounding now like a deaf-mute's howl
 and now like a biblical triphthong.

Norenskaya, 1965

Translated by Robert Reid

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Brodsky, an afterword to the *Poetry of Anatoly Naiman* (Tenaflly, N.J., 1989).
- ² A line from a poem by N. Aseev.
- ³ Anatoly Naiman, *Rasskazy o Anne Akhmatovoy*. Iz knigi 'Konets pervoy poloviny XX veka' (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1989) pp. 72–3; *Remembering Anna Akhmatova* (London: Peter Malban, 1991) p. 6.
- ⁴ A line from a poem by Akhmatova.
- ⁵ Anatoly Naiman has in mind his introduction to Brodsky's second collection, *Ostanovka v pustyne. Stikhotvoreniya i poemy* (New York: Chekhov Publishing Corporation, 1970), which was signed with the initials N.N. (pp. 7–15).
- ⁶ Dmitry Bobyshev in his article 'Akhmatova's Orphans' writes, 'running ahead, it ought to be said that in the course of the first phase of our acquaintance with her she did urge us every time to brevity, that was until Brodsky had 'convinced' her otherwise with his long *poema* (*Russkaya mysl*, 8 March 1984, pp. 8–9).
- ⁷ Naiman's paper, 'Analysis and Interpretation of Anna Akhmatova's "Tvorchestvo"', presented at the Akhmatova Centenary Conference, University of Nottingham, 11–14 July 1989; published in W. Rosslyn (ed.), *The Speech of Unknown Eyes: Akhmatova's Readers on her Poetry* (Nottingham: Astra Press, 1990) vol. n, pp. 225–9.
- ⁸ Joseph Brodsky, interviewed by the author, 10 April 1980, Ann Arbor, Mich., unpublished.
- ⁹ Joseph Brodsky, interviewed by Natalya Gorbanevskaya, *Russkaya mysl*, 3 February 1983, p. 9.

- ¹⁰ Brodsky was in London in July 1989 and he and Naiman met there, just before the Akhmatova Centenary Conference in Nottingham.
- ¹¹ Brodsky's seminar, conducted at Keele University, 8 March 1978.
- ¹² More on this subject is to be found in one of Brodsky's essays on W. H. Auden (see *Less than One*, pp. 359–65).
- ¹³ Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, pp. 91–106.
- ¹⁴ Yury Kublanovsky, interviewed by the author for this collection, p. 242.
- ¹⁵ Derek Walcott, 'Magic Industry', a review of Brodsky's collection *To Urania* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), in *New York Review of Books*, 24 November 1988, pp. 35–9.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Brodsky, interviewed by the author, 10 April 1980, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ Marianna Pavlovna Basmanova is the addressee of the poems in Brodsky's fifth collection, *Novye stansy k Avguste (Stikhik M.B..., 1962–1982)* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Ardis, 1983).
- ¹⁸ Lev Loseff, a paper, 'Poeziya Iosifa Brodskogo', presented at London University (SSEES), 30 March 1984.
- ¹⁹ Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, pp. 130–5.