LITUANUS
LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 39, No.2 - Summer 1993
Editor of this issue: Robertas Vitas, Lithuanian Research & Studies Center
ISSN 0024-5089
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JOSEPH BRODSKY AND THE FICTIONS OF POETRY, INCLUDING VERS LIBRE

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In his essay "Poetry as a Form of Resistance to Reality," Joseph Brodsky, winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature, recently introduced Western readers to the life and work of the Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova *(PMLA* 107: 220-225). Brodsky's participation "in the Lithuanian dissident movement," (223) and as democratic poet whose "body is too involved in the whirlpool of history" (224)—are particularly timely because of the recent liberation of Lithuania and the Baltic states. His essay certainly stirs democratic and nationalistic feelings of pride.

Democratic and nationalistic feelings aside, I have serious reservations about the credence and rigor of Brodsky's essay. In it, the person and poetry of Tomas Venclova are ultimately reduced to propaganda instruments which Brodsky uses to disparage "modern aesthetics" and attack "Modern" movements in the arts, which he terms "extreme means of expression" (220). An apparent classicist, humanist and defender of traditional poetic forms, Brodsky as poet takes out his anger, resentment and frustrations on the apparent formlessness or organicism (222) of much of Modern verse in statements meant to inflame the opposition and gain sympathy from emerging and amateur poets. For example Brodsky writes that "the unprejudiced individual cringes at the mountain of bodies that gave birth to the mouse of verse libre. He cringes even more deeply at the demand during less dramatic times, in periods of population explosion, to make this mouse a sacred cow" (220). In such statements, Brodsky relies on emotional appeals instead of sound reasoning to sway his audience. In the heat of argument, he has seemingly forgotten that "Modern" painters, writers and poets like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and T.E. Hulme decomposed in that mountain of World War I dead.

Brodsky's anger, frustration and resentment for the "purveyors" of the so-called "vers libre" and the supposed superiority of their technical means—"Until relatively recent times, means of expression were not grouped in autonomous categories, and there was no hierarchy to them" (220)—are the real subjects of this essay, wherein Brodsky is intent upon beating up and defeating those manifestations of "modern aesthetics" which he believes have "subjugat[ed] the song of art." Brodsky believes that "every ism is both evidence, direct or indirect, of art's defeat and a scar covering up the shame of this defeat," (220) and he is bent on making these "isms" pay for roughing up "art." Brodsky's emotionalism, his failure to reason soundly, reminds one of a child who naively believes he can exist inside "the noise of history," yet remain superhumanly unaffected by it. Indeed, Brodsky believes that poetry possesses such superhuman qualities: "the twentieth century, now nearing its end, seems to have had its way with all the arts except poetry" (220). Time and history are apparently no match for poetry.

Due to poetic bias, the weakness of the emotional argument, Brodsky's essay is a confused and reductive meditation on Modern versification. Although he chooses to denigrate "the low-calories diet of vers libre," (221) Brodsky's real target is the Modernist poetic tradition as he specifically criticizes the self-defeating, abstract "act[s] of self-effacement" which necessarily distance poets from their intended audiences (222). Brodsky contends that "a poet eager to demonstrate his ability for self-effacement should not be content with using neutral diction: in theory, he ought to take the next logical step and shut up altogether" (222). Brodsky's inability to appreciate the complex techniques of Modernist poetics (for example, self-effacement and spatial form) shows itself in this essay in his superficial and sometimes contradictory statements about "Modern" poetics, statements which have been influenced, ironically enough, by his reading of the poetry and early literary essays of *T.S.* Elliot.

When writing of vers libre, for example, Brodsky considers it the antithesis of genuine poetic statement, which is shaped by meter and rhyme (221). He believes that "the poet who wishes to make his statements a reality for his audience must formulate them as a linguistic inevitability, a matter of the law of the language. Rhyme and meter are his weapons in attaining this goal" (222). In effect, Brodsky defines vers libre in negative terms—as a type of discourse which has neither

rhyme nor meter. *The* probable source for Brodsky's thought on vers libre is Eliot' s "Reflections on Vers Libre," published in 1917. In this essay, Eliot defines vers libre "only in negatives: 1) absence of pattern, 2) absence of rhyme, 3) absence of metre" (32). Brodsky apparently arms himself with Eliot's negative definition of vers libre, then reverses it to produce his prescription for poetry. Interestingly, Eliot, unlike Brodsky, was not satisfied with a negative definition of vers libre and went on to write in "Reflections" that vers libre can only be considered as "a genuine verse-form" if it has a "positive definition." Because it does not, Eliot writes that "the so-called vers libre...can better be defined under some other label" (32).

In fact, Eliot states unequivocally that "vers libre does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *elan vital* and the 80,000 Russians into oblivion" (31). *To* Eliot, "vers libre" is a meaningless generalization used to sum up poetic practice which has diverged from traditional forms. Eliot deconstructs the term, concluding his essay by writing that vers libre "is not defined by absence of pattern or absence of rhyme, for other verse is without these; that is not defined by non-existence of metre, since even the *worst* verse can be scanned; and we conclude that the division between Conservative Verse and *vers libre* does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse and chaos" (36). In the same year that Eliot's essay appeared, Ezra Pound affirmed Eliot's position on vers libre in "A Retrospect": "Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, *"No vers is libre* for the man who wants to do a good job" (12).

From 1917 to 1919, Eliot and Pound wrote their rhymed and metered quatrain poems as "correctives" for the confused practioners of the so-called "vers libre." These poems, however, were anything but traditional: "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,* for example, were seminal Modernist-Cubist experiments in spatial form which technically revolutionized Modern verse practice. Brodsky's "mouse of verse libre" had, in fact, been a lion, for Imagism, Vorticism, and literary Cubism resulted in part from the attempts to free verse from the artificial constraints—in some cases, the active abuse—of rhyme and meter which Brodsky is so anxious to protect.

From the outset, by using a variety of generalized, abstract terms, Brodsky oversimplifies, prescribes and reduces "art," especially Modern poetry, to fit his artistic agenda. For example, Brodsky's statement that "the demand for innovation in art...demonstrates art's vulnerability to market realities and to the artist's desire to collaborate with them" (221) is strikingly trite, a commonplace. Interestingly, Brodsky fails to mention that mediocre, conventional artists who appeal to equally mediocre, conventional audiences represent the vast majority of "market" artists.

After considering the above, Brodsky's apparently safe contention that "the moment art relinquishes the principle of necessity and comprehensibility, it surrenders its position and dooms itself to fulfilling a purely decorative function" (221) seems less certain, more open to rigorous probing. One need only recall that one of the classical definitions for "rhetoric" is "the use of figures as decoration," and how Greek and Roman poets latched onto such figures, eventually transforming some of them into conventional forms which were passed down from generation to generation, to realize that the phrase "purely decorative function" pertains most fundamentally to conventional artists who utilize traditional forms. Does Brodsky realize that the necessity principle also applies equally to the demand for "comprehensible" new forms, and that he alone is not the arbiter of "comprehensibility"? (Isn't "comprehensibility" defined by the intelligence, education, taste, background and predisposition of the individual reader or audience on a case by case basis?) If so, he should have no trouble in rejecting tired, traditional forms, since they are, in one respect, exhausted—merely "dead content"—having absolutely nothing to do with the rejection of innovation per se. One need only recall the revolutionary forms/techniques—for example, the collage poem - of Modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound to realize "that only content can be innovative and that formal innovation can occur only within the limits of form" (221). Naturally, one takes the next step, asking, "And where are the limits of form?...and content?...and..." Aware of its limitations, the mind itself reels when asking such questions.

From this, I come to what seems the real issue of Brodsky's essay - the attack on Modern and/or Postmodern poets writing in the Modernist tradition of Eliot and Pound. Brodsky appears particularly intent on refuting Modernist poetic theory and practice, especially those aspects of Modernism rooted in Romantic thought/ideology. Through allusion and implicit reference, he takes issue with many of Eliot's earlier ideas as presented in essays like 'Tradition and the Individual Talent." Brodsky's arguments, however, are unconvincing, even inane and insipid at times because they are truly simplistic, confused, misinformed and contradictory. For example, in an obvious allusion to Eliot, Brodsky argues that "the suggestion that the modern artist's perception of the world is more complex and intricate than that of the audience (not to mention that of his creative forebears) is ultimately undemocratic and unconvincing, for all human activity, both during and after disasters, is based on necessity and subject to interpretation" (220).

This belief in the superiority of the Modern artist's perception is certainly undemocratic, and in a democratic age, surely to be attacked. Notwithstanding such attacks, couldn't the belief be true in certain cases? Isn't necessity itself necessarily subjective, experienced individually in all times and places?

Brodsky continues to attack this belief in a second paragraph: "The proposition that the artist feels, comprehends, and expresses something unattainable by the ordinary person is no more convincing than the suggestion that the artist's physical pain, hunger, and sexual satisfaction are more intense than those of a commoner." Indeed not, and the reverse proves just as untrue - one would not expect the sexual drive of a common rapist to be any more or less intense than that of a Catholic artist like Francois Mauriac or Paul Claudel. Brodsky continues: 'True art is always democratic precisely because there is no denominator more common, in either society or history, than the sense that reality is imperfect and that a better alternative should be sought" (221). Although reductive, this is a profound sentiment, one worthy of belief - yet

how could it be true in all cases? Artists are individuals who respond to a variety of complex motivations, not just the Utopian one.

Brodsky's polemics against the Romantic view of the poet lead me to affirm that point of view because certain poets from antiquity to modernity - Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Rilke, Eliot and Yeats, among others - did have more complex and intricate perceptions than their audiences. I am not suggesting that the ordinary individual cannot attain to the same feelings and perceptions of such artists because all these artists are "ordinary" in several senses of the term. Nevertheless, because of certain life experiences (including personal hardships and physical suffering), these poets developed exceptional feelings and perceptions which they successfully expressed in poetic discourse. The same can be said for religious and social "poets" like Martin Luther, Buddha, Mohammed, Nietsche, Freud, Marx, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King. These individuals must have undergone radical transformations of feelings, experienced incredible integrations of personality, which in some ways account for the emotional power of their speeches, writings and deeds. How else can one account for their brilliance and wisdom on one hand, and their extremism on the other? They must have sensed "something" which the ordinary individual did not.

In the latter part of his essay, Brodsky contradicts his earlier prescriptions and precepts for Modern poetry, thus confusing his purpose and leaving himself open to challenges on nearly every point. (One might argue that Brodsky's use of a generalized, abstract vocabulary - for example, his tendency to use abstractions like "democratic" and "traditional" when more specialized terms would better suit his purpose - produces semantic confusion which leads to textual misinterpretation on key points, but this does not seem to be the case.) For example, Tomas Venclova may have written a "democratic" poetry, yet Venclova's noble background (223) and penchant for traditional verse forms (221) argues for an "aristocratic" side to his verse practice which Brodsky unconsciously gives credence to in the very language of his essay. Brodsky even admits to the unique quality of Venclova's feelings and experiences in statements such as "Venclova's poems could only have been written by him" and "they [poems] are dictated by language and by the uniqueness of the human being who writes them" (224). Finally, Brodsky states that "the lyrical quality of his [Venclova's] poetry is fundamental, for as a poet he begins where normal people give up..." (225). Venclova's lyricism is obviously derivative of his poetic sensibility, that complex of feelings which he is able to express "where normal people give up." Again, by certain slips in diction - "unique," "lyricism," "normal people"—Brodsky unconsciously contradicts his poetic precepts. Could such slips suggest poetic anxiety, even the anxiety of influence (233) which David M. Bethea brings up in "Exile, Elegy, and Auden in Brodsky's 'Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot,'" a related article which appears in the same issue of *PMLA?*

To summarize, I have written this essay as a direct response to Brodsky's essay alone, which is biased, inaccurate, reductive and confused on the topic of Modern versification. Had Brodsky written an essay championing Modernist poetics at the expense of Classical or Renaissance poetics, I would have been compelled to defend the latter traditions. As Mr. Brodsky well knows, all self-conscious poets participate in a historical tradition that they feel in their bones, and use out of necessity. Brodsky writes that they are aware of their debts to their predecessors, that "this debt is expressed in the feeling every more or less conscious writer has, that he should write in such a way as to be understood by his ancestors - those from whom he learned poetic speech" (222). In "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot has written explicitly about this feeling which is based on historical need:

> the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (4)

Paradoxically, the poetry of one generation achieves timelessness as it takes its place within a greater historical tradition that proceeds from generation to generation. Had Mr. Brodsky considered the truth of this paradox, he would not have had to worry about freeing Modern poetry from history since Modern poetry has always been free-history being its ally as well as its enemy.

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