

A Turbulent Affair with the English Language



Valentina Polukhina's interview with William Wadsworth on J.Brodsky (19 November 2003, New York)

William Wadsworth served as executive director of The Academy of American Poets from 1989 to 2001, where among many other programs he created National Poetry Month and the award-winning website Poets.org. His poems and essays have been published in the *Tin House*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yale Review*, *The New Republic*, *Grand Street*, and *The Best American Poetry 1994*, among other publications.

Mr. Wadsworth is currently serving as special consultant to the Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund and teaches poetry at Columbia University and Purchase College. He is also a contributing editor of *Tin House* and *The Paris Review*, and serves on the advisory boards of The Frost Place, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, and Archipelago Press.

Mr. Wadsworth attended Joseph Brodsky's poetry seminar at Columbia University in 1984, at which time Brodsky wrote, 'In thirteen years of teaching in this country I've never dealt with intelligence as concentrated as is the case with Mr. William Wadsworth'.

— *When did you meet Joseph for the first time?*

— I met Joseph in the fall of 1984 when I was the graduate student at Columbia University and attended his seminar.

— *Tell me about your own and the other students' reaction to his manner of delivering his lectures.*

— Joseph was certainly unlike any other professor or teacher of poetry I had had, and I think everyone in the class recognized that he was remarkably different from the other teachers, most of whom were poets themselves. Joseph projected a kind of mental energy and a kind of rigorousness that was not common. He challenged the students in ways that they were not used to being challenged, and he treated poetry as a more serious endeavor than most American students ever dreamed it could be. Some students reacted strongly against his attitude, while others, like myself, thought he was the most stimulating embodiment of poetry they had ever encountered.

— *Brodsky used to speak emphatically and uninhibitedly both in his poetry and with friends. Did this manner attract people to him or the reverse?*

— Both, depending on the person and the occasion. Joseph was tremendously charismatic, but he also came across in many ways as an absolutist, and was frequently given to outrageous statements, even insults. If you couldn't roll with the punches, if you disagreed with him and your skin was thin, Joseph's manner could seem overbearing. When asked by a student about the repression of leftists in Central America and whether this wasn't comparable to Soviet repression in Eastern Europe (this was in the 1980s when the violence in El Salvador and Nicaragua was at its height), Joseph dismissed the question with one sentence: 'I don't give a damn about that part of the world'. On the other hand, one could see Joseph's tendency to be outrageous as evidence of his uncompromising honesty, as a necessary expression of his iconoclasm, his refusal to bow to any shibboleth. He had a terrific sense of humor: irreverent, sardonic, self-mocking. He was expert at seeing through the emperor's new clothes. One day at Columbia he charged into the classroom, cup of coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, puffing like a locomotive, and said, 'You won't believe what happened to me last night... I met a god'. He proceeded to recount the story of having attended a reception

the previous evening for the Dalai Lama, and made the observation that the most remarkable thing about the 'god's' appearance was the vaccination mark on his arm. Nevertheless, it turned out that Joseph and the god got along well, and at the end of the event, the god gave Joseph a special farewell. As Joseph put it, 'And would you believe it, at the end he came over to me — my humble self! — and embraced me'. A particularly worshipful female student exclaimed, 'Joseph, it must have been your aura!' Without missing a beat, Joseph responded, 'No, I think it was my tie. You see, my tie was the same color as his robe'.

— *What do you know about Brodsky's work as Poet Laureate of the USA and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress?*

— The consultant position had existed for decades as a temporary appointment and modest sinecure for eminent poets. Then, in the 1980s, Congress added the highfalutin title, 'Poet Laureate'" which most poets considered pretentious, even though the apparent motive was to bring more public notice to the position, and consequently to the art form. Until Joseph was appointed, the poets who held the title continued to treat it as mostly a figurehead position. Joseph changed all that. His inaugural lecture, 'An Immodest Proposal', re-defined the laureateship as a position of public service and a platform for literary advocacy. His proposal was a mass distribution program that would put poetry anthologies, for free, into the hands of millions of Americans by all sorts of means — in hotels, on trains and planes, at post offices, etc. This happened when I was executive director of The Academy of American Poets, and it was a terrific project, one that perfectly suited the Academy's mission to promote poetry in American culture, and we soon formed a partnership. One of the remarkable statements Joseph made in the course of his speech was that the three greatest contributions that America has made to world culture are its jazz music, its cinema, and its modern poetry. For the Academy, and for poets all over the U.S., this was a heaven-sent validation of the importance of American poetry. Joseph had taken an obscure appointment and turned it suddenly into a highly visible public post: he had made poetry 'news'. In the U.S., where poetry is generally considered an arcane art form at best, this was an extraordinary turn of events. Suddenly there was a great deal of

excitement in the press over this Russian poet laureate. Very ironically, it had taken a Russian to affirm to the American people that their literature mattered, that Americans in the 20th century had produced some of the finest poetry ever written. With that speech, Joseph initiated a transformation of the public perception of poetry's role in American culture.

— *What do you think gave Joseph such moral authority to write a poem like 'I have braved, for want of wild beasts, steel cages' with the concluding lines: 'Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, / only gratitude will be gushing from it'? Am I right to assume that such lines are unthinkable in the context of contemporary American poetry?*

— Not to take anything away from Joseph's originality, not to take anything away from his innate vision and power as a poet, but I did attend a reading once where Joseph was introduced by the poet Charles Simic, who recounted the story of Joseph's childhood, persecution, and exile, and concluded, 'No poet could ever wish for more'. Miroslav Holub once said that when things were really bad in Eastern Europe, "it is a very poetic situation". It is a terrible thing to say, but Joseph was blessed with 'a very poetic situation'. No American poet has had the opportunity to enjoy such terrible historical circumstances. Consequently, Joseph could speak with a moral authority, the authority of one who defied institutionalized evil and suffered the consequences, an air of authority that would hardly be possible for an American contemporary.

— *This echoes Akhmatova's famous reaction to Brodsky's trial, 'what a biography they are creating for our ginger-haired boy!' But Joseph, however, was very much against biography as such: he would insist that a poet's biography is in his vowels and consonants. Isn't there some contradiction here?*

— Contradiction is the essence of poetry. Yeats said that it is out of the 'quarrel with ourselves' that we make poetry. Frost said that contradiction is fundamental even to prosody, that if the rhythm doesn't contradict the meter you don't have a good poem. If Joseph had been the sort of poet who said: 'Look at my life, look at what I've done and experienced, that's why I am a great poet', the actions and experiences and their significance would have been rendered nil by the egoism of the statement. The very fact that he led the life he led, and

believed what he believed, demanded that he make language the absolute priority, one that negates the incidentals of biography. Poets deal in paradoxes, and this was Joseph's paradox, just as his insistence to the Soviet judge that poetry had nothing to do with politics or social responsibility was in itself a political act with social consequences.

— *Many of Brodsky's greatest works are homage to predecessors, John Donne, TS Eliot, WH Auden, Cavafy and Hardy, yet we find little trace of any anxiety of influence, why? Is it because they belong to other cultures?*

— From T.S. Eliot to Harold Bloom, critics have made too much of 'killing the fathers'. My own impression was that for Joseph, language subsumed time, and all poets were therefore contemporaries, not fathers and sons. The young poet's task is not to commit patricide, but to seek his or her most congenial company among the shades. Joseph was an autodidact and, as such, I suspect he didn't have to suffer the burden of a tradition academically defined; I suspect he felt somewhat isolated at the outset and more than welcomed, one might say, the "inspiration of influence".

— *Why was Brodsky so taken with WH Auden's poetry?*

— Well, of course there's the story of Brodsky arriving in Austria and saying, 'Take me to my leader'. Auden played the midwife to Joseph's passage out of Mother Russia and into the New World. Auden also, like Joseph, was a virtuoso and a *wunderkind*, an extraordinary prodigy among his generation of English poets. And he, like Joseph, had made a similar, if uncoerced, transition to the New World, and likewise to New York City. But more than anything, I believe it was Auden's poetic stance, and its philosophical and political implications, that Joseph was most drawn to. First, Auden was a thoroughly modern poet who more or less rejected the modernist dispensation of *vers libre*, who disproved any presumption that to be modern required disposing with traditional verse forms. But there's a deeper reason than prosody. The first day of class, the first thing Joseph did was to put a line from Yeats and a line from Auden next to each other on the blackboard. It soon became clear whom he thought to be the superior poet. Joseph had no patience for Yeats's sentimental nationalism and elaboration of occult systems, just as he detested

Pound's Fascism, and, one suspects, Eliot's monarchism and anti-Semitism. The modern poets he most admired — Auden, Hardy, Frost — can be seen as coming out of a tradition of classic English liberalism, in which the highest value is placed not on myth, system, theology, or ideology, but on the individual, on the intrinsic value and truth of human subjectivity. For this reason he was drawn to Shestov, just as for Auden the key philosopher was Kierkegaard. I believe this is also one of the things that attracted Joseph to America: the American tradition of 'rugged individualism', which Frost for instance so perfectly embodied.

— *Was Joseph a good publicist for Russian poetry?*

— This is an interesting question, and one that goes to the heart of Joseph's paradoxical sensibility. On the one hand, for American poets and readers, he embodied Russian poetry in a way that could not have been more forceful, more remarkable, more influential. On the other, he was acutely aware of the problem of Russian poetry in English translation. While he clearly felt it was essential that his American students know Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Tsvetaeva, he openly deplored the quality of the extant translations of their work. In his essay on Mandelstam he notes that Auden couldn't appreciate why Mandelstam, on the evidence of translations, was considered a great poet. He goes on to say that if English-speaking readers want to know what Mandelstam sounds like, they're better off reciting Auden, Yeats, or Frost than reciting Mandelstam in translation. In his literature courses, Joseph had no qualms about presenting, and praising, English translations of, for instance, Rilke, Propertius, Cavafy, Milosz and Herbert, etc. — but he never, as far as I know, treated the Russian poets. He couldn't bear the fact that nearly all translations violated the prosodic structures of the originals. Moreover, there was his critical relationship to the Russian poets who had managed to thrive inside the Soviet system, particularly Yevtushenko, whom he loathed. Yet for most American readers, prior to Joseph's arrival on the scene, Voznesensky and Evtushenko were thought to represent contemporary Russian dissident poetry at its most powerful. Once Joseph arrived, one felt forced to choose between Brodsky and these slightly older poets, which made the whole notion of 'Russian poetry' suddenly more problematic.

— *Perhaps you would like to say something about Brodsky's poetry in English?*

— Of course the problem of Russian poetry in translation became particularly acute in his own work because he insisted the poems retain their prosodic structures. The result was that many American poets and critics found most of the poems in English mediocre at best. The poet and critic Robert Hass compared reading Brodsky's poems in translation to touring the ruins of a building one is told was once a beautiful edifice. On the other hand, his essays, which were written in English, have been generally acclaimed as works of genius in their own right, magnificently composed in spite of the fact that they were written in a second-hand language.

— *To what extent did Brodsky's poems written in English differ from his self-translations?*

— I am not a Brodsky scholar, nor am I a critic or an expert on translation. That said, I would say that they don't seem so different, which is telling. Joseph had a turbulent affair with the English language. The very fact that he wrote poems in English at all is surprising, though maybe not so when one considers the active hand he took in the translations. In either case, he wanted to pay homage to his adoptive language, to the poets in that language who meant most to him (for instance the elegy to Lowell, which echoes Auden's famous elegy for Yeats), he wanted to test himself "to the max" against the language, he wanted to learn it inside out and, insofar as possible, to master it. Yet, at the same time, he was terribly insecure about his English, acutely aware that his Russian accent often made it difficult to understand what he was saying, especially when his mind went into overdrive and he began to speak very rapidly. The poems written in English are usually quite short, and often strive for the simplicity of a sung lyric — with titles like 'song', 'tune', 'blues', etc. Nothing is more difficult to do well in English poetry, especially when the lines are short, say a rhymed dimeter or trimeter. The ear must be pitch-perfect, and Joseph's ear for English was, naturally enough, not. As a musician, he was more than equal to good English prose, but not to the purest form of lyric. He especially got in trouble when he tried for something idiomatic, for instance the poem 'Blues', which is truly embarrassing. The same is too often true of his tendency to use English slang in his translations,

to ‘rough them up’, as one translator put it. On the other hand, it was an approach that worked well for light verse, where the stakes are lower (his children’s book, *Discovery*, is a delight), and his poems in English can be wonderful when the lines are longer and more relaxed. One of his loveliest poems of all is the poem to his daughter, but note the ironic last line: ‘Hence, these somewhat wooden lines in our common language’. This is a perfect instance of Joseph’s flip side: his tendency to self-deprecation. I guess the fact that the poems in English don’t sound much better than the Russian poems in translation (at least to me) says it all. And yet, remark the willingness to take great risks in even trying. Joseph wanted to do all he could make his ear for English as fine as it could be.

— *How was Brodsky received by the poets of your generation?*

— When Joseph arrived in this country, Auden was considered old fashioned by many of his contemporaries, and was largely ignored. The Vietnam War was still on, the student Left was being hounded by the government, anti-American sentiment was running high, and the verse that was fashionable was mostly free verse. Traditional versification was seen by many as an expression of the academic establishment at a time when students mistrusted all ‘establishments’. On the one hand, Joseph was a heroic figure, the paradigm of the dissident writer, a tremendously romantic figure who had stood up to the Soviet “establishment”, paid the consequences, and prevailed nonetheless. On the other hand, he praised the culture that had adopted him, had no sympathy for the Left, and dogmatically rejected free verse as ‘wine without a bottle: a blot on the tablecloth’. To his detractors, he was arrogant, reactionary, and ignorant of the American modernist tradition. But to others, he was a breath — more like a hurricane — of fresh air. He did a great deal to bring attention to Eastern European poets, especially the Polish poets, and he catalyzed in a major way a resurgence of interest in traditional versification among the younger poets of the 1980s (my own generation). His disparagement of the modernism of Pound and W.C. Williams, and more so his high regard for Auden and Frost, made an indelible mark on many younger poets. The moral seriousness he brought to the art form made a good deal of ‘postmodernist’ verse look frivolous. Of course the endless dialectic of

the strict and the free, of the ivory tower and the open road, is not new, and has driven American poetry since Dickinson and Whitman. But Joseph enlivened the debate.

— *Considering that most Western readers know Brodsky’s work mainly through translations, how did he succeed in becoming a member of the so-called ‘a big league’ of poets, such as Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Les Murray and a few others?*

— Paz didn’t write in English, Paz was one of them. Milosz didn’t write in English. With all due respect, I think it is a false question. A better question would be why is it that no of American poet is part of this league.

— *Can you answer this why?*

— Not really, except to say that poets simply don’t play the same central cultural role in America that they play in other countries. No one looks to poets as public intellectuals or moral authorities. It’s not a question of the quality of the poetry, more a question of the quality of the readership, and the nature of the society at large, which has always mistrusted the role of intellectuals and artists, and arguably, for that matter, anything so immaterial as language itself. This may have to do with the Puritan legacy, it may have to do with American materialism, and it may also have to do with the variousness and relative youth of the culture, which is a blend of so many different peoples and histories. Because poets in the U.S. are marginal to the culture, they cannot speak, or write, with the same cultural authority as the “big-leaguers”. Our big-leaguers are movie people, rock musicians, athletes, and billionaires.

— *In Russian Brodsky has revolutionized the tradition of philosophical poetry by introducing a Donnean complex yet serious wit and various forms of poetic stanzas. Is this visible in the English translations?*

— Yes. The brilliance of the mind, its metaphysical cast, and the degree of prosodic invention, remain, in part due to Joseph’s firm hand on the translations. It’s the music, the accuracy of the ear for English, that too often fails. But Joseph himself said that the virtue of poetry in translation was that of a classical sculpture with its head and limbs missing: the reader’s imagination must engage in the task of re-inventing what’s missing.

Nothing compares with the experience of listening to Joseph recite his poems in Russian; the music is all there, minus the sense. Reading the translations, one must try to hear the cadence, the pitch and timbre, of Joseph reciting in Russian, to get some idea of the lyric power of the poems.

— *What is his place in American poetry? Was he an English or a Russian poet?*

— Joseph was without a doubt a Russian poet. There is no poet like him, and no poetry like his, in the English language. On the other hand, one might ask, to the extent he wrote in English, was he an American writer or an English writer? To this I would say that, in spite of the fact that he made his home in America, Joseph's sensibility was in many respects more English than American. It may be most accurate to say that his adoptive culture was *New England*. When Joseph would leave New York and wasn't headed for Europe, the place he went to was his second home in Massachusetts near the Vermont border, in the very heart of New England. New England is a region of America with its own distinct history, which is reflected in its name: the ties to English Puritanism go deep. I don't think of Joseph as someone fascinated with, or well acquainted with, the American West or the American South. He had no time for the free verse tradition, the modernism of Pound and Williams, the West Coast legacy of Rexroth and the Beats, the influence of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry that informs so much American poetry in the twentieth century. He apparently didn't have much use for the strong vein of French influence in American modernism, from the symbolists to the surrealists, so present in poets from Eliot and Stevens to Merwin and Ashbery. Between Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman — the mother and father of American poetry — Joseph chose Emily categorically. The poets he was most sympathetic to who wrote in English were either New Englanders — Dickinson, Frost, Lowell, Wilbur — or they were English (Hardy, Donne, Crashaw, etc.). Auden, the poet who influenced him most, was an Englishman transplanted to America — quite literally, a "new Englander". To push the point further, Joseph's chosen city, New York — in spite of its cosmopolitanism — is historically the most anglophiles of American cities, one that still retains its roots in Toryism. So, from an American perspective, I would say that Joseph was a "New English"

poet. But first and foremost, he belongs to Russian literature, not English.

— *Why did Brodsky claim such power for poetry?*

— Because he himself possessed such a powerful spirit. Poetry was his god-given gift. It so happened that he had this gift, that he was a genius, that his personality was a force of nature. He was irrepressible, and he took things quickly to their logical extreme; he had no fear of the superlative, and fearlessness was one of his most outstanding qualities. He would not have chosen poetry if he didn't feel it had chosen him, that its claims were absolute, that language is what makes us human, and the stronger and more elevated the language, the stronger and more elevated our humanity. Many poets feel this, but Joseph had a preternatural gift for articulating this claim as forcefully, as convincingly, as categorically, as possible.

— *Brodsky rejected the authority of the state, and asserted the authority of the individual.*

— I remember him saying in class, "the poet is the man who always says *no*". I think that his notion of individuality was in many respects defined in terms of contradiction, especially the contradiction of arbitrary authority. After all, he was an autodidact, someone who had to assert his own authority without external validation, someone who had not grown up inside any institution he cared to identify himself with. For Joseph, it was the duty of the individual, as such, to disregard authority.

— *Even American authority?*

— O, yes. He had the highest regard for American individualism, but not for American conformism. American society in many respects depressed him. In a conversation about American popular culture, he once observed that human beings were becoming 'just another species of moss'.

— *Was he an uncomfortable person to be with?*

— Joseph could be intimidating, and as I said earlier, arrogant, dismissive, impatient. Some students felt his demands, his assertions about poetry and the way it should be written, were oppressive. Often he terrified them. What those students failed to see was that such assertions were Joseph's way of asserting the value of individuality: at best his intention was to incite the same assertiveness in

his students. His technique was in some respects to ‘bait’ his students, to provoke contradiction in return. He respected those students who could and would disagree with him, match wits with him, stand up to him, show the same qualities that got him into so much trouble when he was young and defiant. He enjoyed the contest, the sport, of literary discourse. The flip side was that Joseph could also be extraordinarily generous, humorous, and down to earth — great fun to be with, charming, full of mischief and jokes. When you visited his apartment, he sometimes made his entrance by sliding into the room in his slippers like a kid on a skateboard. He hated snobbery and pretension, and truly enjoyed the company of his students; in fact, as a rule, he often preferred it to the company of academics and professional intellectuals. He treated his students as equals, which was the reason he could be so hard on them. Above all, he was a tremendously loyal human being, who never let you down once he took you up.

— *Do you read his poems as the genuine, heartfelt testimony of an extraordinarily intelligent human being or as cold, intellectualizing statements about everything?*

— ‘Cast a cold eye’ (Yeats): the sublime can be cold. You know the poem, ‘The Hawk’s Cry in Autumn’. This seems to me to recount Joseph’s vision of the sublime: the poet ascending in a flight of words to an altitude where the air is frigid and there’s barely enough oxygen to survive, but where the view — as Joseph would say, ‘the plane of regard’ — is as high and wide, as godlike, as possible. Eliot coined the term ‘dissociation of sensibility’, meaning the tendency in modern culture for intellect and feeling to go their separate ways. Joseph was divinely ‘undissociated’; I’ve never encountered a more passionate intellect. A common intellect grows cold in its pretension to objectivity, whereas JB affirmed, in every line, the primacy of *subjectivity*, of the individuality of consciousness. Again, we’re in the territory of Shestov and Kierkegaard.

— *Did Brodsky become at the end of his life ‘a NY-based cultural guru who felt entitled to sound off about anything that took his fancy’? (G. Smith).*

— Joseph was not a ‘cultural guru’, whatever that is. He was a poet with intense likes and dislikes, full of ideas and opinions, as any poet should be. I suppose once he received the Nobel Prize,

and again in the U.S. when he was appointed Poet Laureate, there was a surge of media interest which put him even more in the spotlight, or under the interrogator’s light, however you want to see it. The notion that he was ‘sounding off’ only reflects the level of public interest in what he had to say. This is an uncommon position, to say the least, for poets in the U.S. In fact I would assume he would have been asked to sound off more if he had been residing in a culture that holds its poets in higher regard. Consider Octavio Paz: in Mexico he was expected to sound off regularly precisely because he was the great poet. This sort of criticism sounds all too much like an expression of envy. As a major Russian poet, as a moral hero, as a charismatic genius, as a Nobel laureate, etc. I suppose there was a great deal to be envious of in Joseph. ‘NY-based cultural guru’ is the expression of someone who trades in caricature and cliché, someone whose small-mindedness is reflected in their own readiness to lower “the plane of regard”.

— *Like Mandelstam and Pasternak, Brodsky in his poetry had bridged Christian and Jewish culture. Yet, many critics treated Brodsky as a Christian and he was buried in the Christian tradition. Where do you stand in this respect?*

— In an interview once Joseph called himself a Calvinist, which not incidentally alludes to a New England sensibility. He also added that there was a great deal in Protestantism he disliked, and that he wasn’t sure that he was even a religious person. But what drew him to Calvinism was the emphasis on individual responsibility, which was at the core of Joseph’s moral outlook and at the core of New England values — Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance’ — the toughness one finds in Frost. There’s also a good deal of the Old Testament in Calvinism, which must have appealed to Joseph’s Judaism. But Joseph’s attitude, his morality, was certainly Christian, and he clearly considered the Christian West culturally and ethically superior to Byzantium and the East, whether Near or Far. But I would say he was a Christian not in the theological sense, but morally and existentially. Typically, I think his mind was divided on the question of God. If anything, the subject and object of his theology was language. He was a logothest.

— *Brodsky’s experience of exile and bilingualism has been compared with Nabokov’s by many of*

his scholars. Shouldn't we be contrasting rather than comparing a poet and a writer of prose and seeing the difference rather than similarities?

— Absolutely. I don't claim any expertise on Nabokov, but Nabokov was an aesthete in a way that Joseph wasn't, and an extraordinary master of English prose in a way that Joseph wasn't (though the power of JB's intellect more than made up for this in his essays). He was also a Russian aristocrat, a White Russian émigré. Joseph was cut from rougher cloth, born to an outsider culture, an autodidact who detested any air of entitlement. He was a moralist, and took seriously the existence of evil. Forget exile and bilingualism; the novelist he would be best compared to is Dostoevsky.

— But again and again Joseph would make the same statement that aesthetic is the mother of ethic, not the other way around.

— There's a rather crucial difference between a mother and a virgin. A pure aesthete doesn't venture beyond beauty into the more grown-up realm where such questions as human evil and individual responsibility are taken seriously. When Joseph said this, he would also compare the aesthetic faculty to the judgment of a child, who can only say "I like this, I like that" without being able to say why. For Joseph, the aesthetic child may be father — or mother — to the ethical man, but the child must eventually grow up and confront such difficult questions as "why"? The point is that for JB the aesthetic and the ethical were indelibly linked. 'Art for art's sake' was not his credo.

— Do you agree that there is a Jewish quality in some of Joseph's statements?

— I suppose, I never thought of it that way, but JB's ferocity of temperament, his tendency to moral and aesthetic absolutism, could be considered Old Testament. Job, the prophets, Jehova Himself: they had a lot of JB in them. Also his mystical regard for language, for the shapes of the alphabet itself, is reminiscent of Jewish mysticism.

— Why did critics and journalists make such a big deal of Brodsky's exile while he himself said many times that 'from tyranny one can be exiled only to a democracy'?

— The romance of exile is powerful and presents an easy, reductive definition. JB was not a man given to easy definition. He did not want

to be put in the victim's box. The fact was that he *was* an exile, twice-over: first to the Gulag, then from Russia altogether. But in both instances, the condition strangely suited him. Not to be glib, but one can say that for Joseph, though exile was an involuntary act, it was in a way liberating; it offered a kind of condition of existential freedom, at the very least a stoic's freedom, versus the imprisonment of the spirit in a repressive society. And the vehicle of this freedom, including the translations he did in the labor camp, was the English language. Joseph did not return to Russia when he could have, and he wanted his daughter to be raised in the U.S. with English as her first language. But his attitude towards exile contradicted the cliché.

— How are we to reconcile the grandeur and modesty of Brodsky's stance in American literature?

— JB, as I've said, was a walking contradiction. This is the true mark of a poet. He will not be reconciled. That said, Joseph deeply loved aspects of American culture, and he loved the English language and English poetry intensely. The proper stance of the lover is one of humility before the beloved. The grandeur is in the quality of love itself, not the lover's stance.

— Some critics see JB as a paradigm of polarities: victimized exile or ruthless ambitious careerist; modest man or vaunting egotist; a loyal and generous friend or unforgiving and vindictive rival; a deeply religious man or intellectualizing cynic lacking human warmth, and so on and so on. Is such an approach justified?

— Yes. But only once the prejudices of the critic have been set aside, the ego of the critic quelled, and the polarities are seen for what they are: the two sides of one psyche wrestling with itself. Many critics are themselves careerists, egotists, vindictive, and cynical. The point is that Joseph was more honest about himself than most critics, who write from under the mantle of the interrogator rather than the interrogated. Joseph's virtues were as real, and far rarer, than his flaws.

— Do you remember your last contact with Joseph?

— Yes. We spoke on the phone three days before he died. I was still at the Academy and we were continuing to work with Joseph on the project of

distributing poetry anthologies around the country. Joseph called me at the Academy, and said, 'Bill, do you know what American poetry is all about?' — 'No, Joseph, I don't. Please tell me'. — He said, 'American poetry is all about *wheels*, it's about the Open Road. It's all about *wheels*'. — I said, 'OK'. — He said, 'So, you know what you have to do?' — 'No, Joseph, what do I have to do?' — 'You have to call up the Teamsters. We have to get poetry on the trucks. So when milk is delivered in the morning to the grocery stores, they deliver poetry with the milk'. — Now the Teamsters' Union is the most notoriously corrupt union in the U.S. I said, 'Joseph, are you telling me that The Academy of American Poets should collaborate with organized crime?' There was a pause.

Then Joseph said, 'Bill, one thing about organized crime. It's *organized*' This was the last thing he said to me.

— *How did he play the last act of his drama — return or not return to Russia?*

— I didn't know Joseph well enough to really know. I would guess his refusal to return had a good deal to do with that fact that he was not able to go back before both his parents died. This, I'm sure, was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

— *Do you have a poem dedicated to Joseph? May I use it here?*

— Yes, you can have 'Bloom's Photograph'. ■

BLOOM'S PHOTOGRAPH

for J.B.

In Reykjavik that year the bomb talks failed, but we survived among the sweet dead leaves that lay along the esplanade before Grant's Tomb.

They spiraled into wind-banked heaps between the benches and the faded grass; the season escalated elsewhere, but here the clever hopes

blew lightly down. Safe beside each other, we were reading James Joyce when across the street a white Rolls Royce pulled up outside a church. A bride

walked out into the light, exalted — as if the future, gowned in white, had made a sudden promise in spite of Reykjavik. This vision, guilt

by autumn light, had interrupted Molly Bloom's adulteries, had stopped the fading of the leaves, until the newlyweds abruptly

went their way. That faded shot of Mrs. Bloom her husband keeps adulterates this bride: one sweep of the wind and the greenest leaf

does not survive. The scene must change. Ulysses Grant, in the heat of battle, was known to sit absorbed, cool as stone, composing letters home to Mrs.

Grant, to say all he privately believed was going up in smoke. Puffing on a cigar, he soaked the fields with blood in Tennessee,

buried his conscience in each glass of whiskey, and finally told Lee at Appomattox that victory was sad -- he did *not care to pass*

humiliation on -- he lived without illusions. So grant us all another cold and golden fall, and knowledge as to how to leave

the scene. The bride took off her dress that night as gangs of boys played ball against the mausoleum wall. We shut the book on Molly's *Yes*.