



Camera: Lev Polyakov

Our mission is almost anthropological

Jacob GORDIN

**The barbarians are
to arrive today.**
Constantine P. Cavafy

“Waiting for the Barbarians”

In the summer of 1988 Joseph Brodsky wrote to the author of this text in Russia: “Our current mission is the mission of our generation; no one else is going to do it, the notion of civilization exists only for us. It appears that the next generation will have no time for this: they will be concerned solely with themselves, in the sense of saving their necks rather than their individuality. We have to give them some means to preserve the latter; only we, who yesterday were so humble, can give it to them. Perhaps the only way to put grit into this accelerating machine is through great literature. Ours is an almost anthropological mission: if we cannot stop the cart, then at least we can slow it down...”

Within the cultural sphere there has always been a fight to refine the human being, a desperate attempt to cast aside the barbarity that is innate to human nature. Joseph Brodsky was acutely aware that people of culture had such a mission, and later he would be one of its most effective exponents.

His translation efforts were an organic component of this constant resistance against barbarity in all its

forms — from political despotism to aggressive and primitive culture for the masses.

In order to understand the true place of translations in Brodsky's work, one needs a picture of the environment, in which he undertook this work.

For Russian poets of the Soviet era, translation of poetry was primarily a way of making money. I recall an occasion at the end of 1959 when during a discussion about poetry in the Leningrad Writer's Club, Boris Slutsky said, stroking his lapel: "It is only thanks to our translations that we are able to wear decent jackets!"

At that time there was an outstanding school of professional translators in Russia, apparently the best in the world. However, for poets it was merely a sideline. Pasternak's torment is well known, when during the years of his disgrace — long before the catastrophe with "Doctor Zhivago" and the Nobel Prize — he had to translate in order to earn his living. Nevertheless in his translations of Shakespeare and in his brilliant version of Byron's "Poems to Augusta" we are already seeing pure Pasternak.

Akhmatova's ironical attitude to such an occupation is also well known. Everyone knows Arseny Tarkovsky's tragic revelation: "my best years/ I have wasted on someone else's words".

Brodsky started translating at the beginning of the 1960s, also to earn a living. But in 1992, when publishing the first representative collection of Brodsky's translations, Victor Kulle made an accurate observation: "Establishing a borderline between the translations Brodsky did for his own pleasure and those which earned him his daily bread, is a somewhat risky endeavour"¹.

When you read, for example, Brodsky's translations from Cuban poetry, you are struck by the complete absence of any time-serving overtone. From the selection offered by Castro's "Island of Freedom", Brodsky chose the most worthwhile poems, which are often in essence entirely consistent with his own perception of the world.

Most Soviet poets accepted everything they were asked to translate in order to make money. Brodsky's case is utterly different.

At the end of the 1950s, as he took his first steps in the literary arena, Brodsky grasped avidly at everything that was then available to him in contemporary world poetry. Naturally, at that time he made use of translations.

The experience of Lorca, Nerval and Eluard had a direct influence on his early poems. Later he recalled: "...I became interested in what was going on elsewhere. Firstly neighbours, Polish, Czech, Hungarian etc., then further afield Yugoslavs, and strangely enough the French. But the French did not have anything exciting going on. And then the English came along"².

However, Brodsky was a person of directed dynamics — once he had chosen a direction, he would move like a flash and keep on going. Having realized his inner kinship with the English poetic tradition, he began searching for Russian equivalents to English poetry. At the beginning of the 1960s he read me a draft translation of John Donne, who later became a key figure for him.

He was charmed by Polish culture, most likely because of his empathy towards the fate of Poland — the tragedy of the love of freedom and the desperate struggle against powerful hostile circumstances. He started learning Polish in order to translate it and I remember his excitement, when, not long before his exile, he demonstrated his translation of Gałczyński's "Song about a Flag", reciting Russian and Polish texts at the same time. The heightened tragic tension of the Russian version of the "Song of a Flag" is not only testimony of the translator's poetic gift, but also a proof of a total identification with the spiritual world of another nation, another poet. "Song about a Flag" Brodsky recited publicly with such intensity of intonation, with such passion that the listeners felt physically sick...

Brodsky himself confirmed the selfless and purely creative significance of some of his most complicated translation experiences. "When I was already in exile, Lidia Korneevna Chukovskaya sent me a book by Donne, apparently from her father's library'. Here in the village I began gradually translating Donne and have been at it to my heart's content for one and a half to two years"³. Obviously the exiled Brodsky did not count on publishing his translations. It was important for him to adopt the great spiritual and poetic experience organically — in his own language — to put it into circulation as a specific experience. At the same time Brodsky lets slip a remarkable admission. Speaking about his translations of English metaphysicians for "Literary Monuments", he says: "Unfortunately, I have been carrying out this work with unparadonable breaks: I had to earn my living and also write something of my own"⁴. Meaning that he did not

¹ J. Brodsky *God saves everything*. M., 1992, p. 282

² J. Brodsky *The Big Book of Interview* M., 2000, p. 141

³ S. Volkov *Dialogues with Joseph Brodsky* M., 1998, p. 161

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 161

regard the translation of English poets as a way of making money.

“Mostly I have been translating from all existing and non-existing languages”, he said, half in jest. Indeed, he was translating from English, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croat. And as a rule, the outcome was the appearance of versions that intersected with his original poems. This was mentioned by Victor Kulle in the fine and illuminating foreword to his compilation “God Saves Everything”: “The translations collected in this book signal his original poems...An attentive reader will definitely detect the connection between translations of Cavafy and the “Roman Cycle”; will appreciate the “Butterfly’s” gracefulness that flew into our poetry not without the help of the English “metaphysicians”; will be glad to hear Lowell’s echo in “Lullaby of Cape Cod”; will be surprised at the depth and intensity of the dialogue between Brodsky and Venclova. I could go on but let’s finish the list here”.

There is no doubt that this list could be extended. One may recall the kinship of John Donne’s love poetry and Brodsky’s love poetry of the 1960s. Furthermore, Brodsky himself testified in speaking of his poems about Mexico, that significant strata of his poetry were a unique alloy — Russian poems, which have absorbed the foreign poetic tradition: “I was trying to use the traditional Spanish metre. The first part about Maximilian starts as a madrigal. The second about Juarez, “1867”, has been done in chocallo, i.e. Argentinean tango. “Merida”, the third part, is written in metre employed in the 15th century by, I think, the greatest Spanish poet of his time — Jorge Manrique. This is an imitation of his elegy commemorating the death of his father, it is so to speak a tribute to the culture in question⁵”.

“A tribute to culture”. Translations — including those from the Spanish — were a transitional form, a system of connecting vessels, stimulating the levy and the offering of this tribute.

But it is not only about a meaningful correlation between poets. Nor is it about the great significance of this persistent exploration for the moulding of Brodsky’s own poetic world. The only analogy for this in Russian poetry is Pushkin’s exploration of the world’s poetic experience.

However, the point lies elsewhere. Poets of such zealously intensive individuality cannot carry out translations in the exact sense of the word.

I have already mentioned Byron’s “Poems to Augusta” in the Russian exposition by Pasternak.

Когда время мое миновало

И звезда закатилась моя,
Недочетов лишь ты не искала —
И ошибкам моим не судья.

Не пугают тебя передраги,
И любовью, которой черты
Столько раз доверял я бумаге,
Остаешься мне в жизни лишь ты...

Есть в пустыне родник, чтоб напиться,
Деревцо есть на лысом горбе,
В одиночестве певчая птица
Целый день мне поет о тебе.

Though the day of my Destiny's over,
And the star of my Fate hath declined,
Thy soft heart refused to discover
The faults which so many could find;

Though thy Soul with my grief was acquainted,
It shrunk not to share it with me,
And the Love which my Spirit hath painted
It never hath found but in Thee.

Then when Nature around me is smiling,
The last smile which answers to mine,
I do not believe it beguiling,
Because it reminds me of thine;

The Russian version is surely not Byron of 1816. It is a brilliant poem by Pasternak in his prime.

The same holds true for Brodsky’s translation output. Looking at its primary examples — it is not only contiguous to the world of his poetry, but is an organic part of it.

⁵ J. Brodsky *The Big Book of Interview* p. 60

Donne, Gałczyński, Cavafy⁶, Umberto Saba, Norwid, Thomas Venclova, living in their own languages as great poets, are in Russian astonishingly dualistic; the powerful figure of Brodsky showing through the poetic substance that results from the mingling of two traditions. And the mysterious Horatio and Faust by H.Pluzik, completely unknown to the Russian reader before Brodsky, align themselves with Russian characters in the world's culture.

Though a significant body of translation has already been published in the compilation "God Saves Everything" and reproduced in the "Works of Joseph Brodsky" published by the "Pushkin Fund", a separate, much more inclusive collection of Brodsky's work, greatly expands

our understanding of the 5th Nobel laureate of the Russian literature.

Everything that Brodsky did — his poetry, his essays, his lectures — was designed to create a barrier against the intrinsic barbarity of the universe. He knew only too well the brutality of the Soviet era with its ruthless repression of people's souls and it seemed to him that poetry and fine literature provided an ark for those who wished to remain human. A persistent aspiration — following the footsteps of Pushkin and Mandelstam — to embed the high European tradition in the realm of the Russian poetry was one of the objectives of his "anthropological mission" — the salvation of humanity. ■



Grave of Joseph Brodsky in San Michele cemetery, Venice, Italy

⁶ A Russian analogue to Cavafy was undertaken by Brodsky together with his friend and outstanding literature expert Gennagy Shmakov