



Joseph Brodsky

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THE POETRY OF JOSEPH BRODSKY

During the 1990s, the *WQ* published a regular poetry feature edited by a series of distinguished poets, who selected and introduced the works of other writers past and present. After the death of our first poetry editor, the Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, Anthony Hecht, one of his successors, published this tribute in our Summer 1996 issue. Brodsky's own appreciation of Zbigniew Herbert, the inaugural piece in the poetry series, can be seen [here](#).

BY ANTHONY HECHT

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IN AN ELOQUENT TRIBUTE TO JOSEPH Brodsky, published almost exactly a month after his premature and widely lamented death, Tatyana Tolstaya, in *The New York Review of Books*, quotes some lines from the poet's early work:

In the dark I won't find your deep
blue façade
I'll fall on the asphalt between the
crossed lines

She goes on to conjecture: "I think that the reason he didn't want to return to Russia even for a day was so that this incautious prophecy would not come to be. A student of—among others—Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva (he knew their poetic superstitiousness), he knew the conversation they had during their one and only meeting. 'How could you write that. . . . Don't you know that a poet's words always come true?' one of them reproached. 'And how could you write that . . . ?' the other was amazed. And what they foretold did indeed come to pass."

Without any desire to sound mystical, I do think something prophetic can be claimed for Brodsky's poetry, or at least for two details, one of them small, the

other large and visionary. The first is from a poem actually titled "A Prophecy," addressed to an unnamed beloved, and containing these lines:

—And if
we make a child, we'll call the boy
Andrei,
Anna the girl, so that our Russian
speech,
imprinted on its wrinkled little face,
shall never be forgot.

Joseph (as everyone who ever knew him was allowed affectionately to call him) was the father of two children, a boy born in Russia, still there, from whom he was separated by involuntary exile, and a daughter, born in America to his Russian-Italian wife, Maria. The children are named Andrei and Anna.

The larger, more spacious and important prophecy is embodied in a major poem, "The Hawk's Cry in Autumn" (printed here in full), of which Tolstaya remarks in the same tribute: "He has a poem about a hawk . . . in the hills of Massachusetts who flies so high that the rush of rising air won't let him descend back to earth, and the hawk perishes there, at those heights where there are

neither birds nor people, nor any air to breathe.”

To this brief comment I would like to add some of my own. The wind with which the poem begins is the wind of the spirit (John 3:8) as well as of inspiration, the necessary (and destructive) element in which the poet tries to dwell. The bird, at the pinnacle of his flight, *guesses the truth of it: it's the end*. The Erinyes (Furies) themselves are invoked, as though the aspiration to great heights must necessarily entail retributive punishment, as exemplified in Greek tragedy. And, echoing another ancient tradition, the agony and sacrifice of the bird/poet precipitates a thing of beauty, the first snowflakes of winter, the poems of a soul that has sustained the punishing climate of Archangelic Russia. The brilliance that delights earthbound children has been purchased at the price of unendurable suffering and death. Whether Brodsky's wind owes anything to Percy Bysshe Shelley's annihilating "West wind," whether the Russian poet's hawk is any kin to Gerard Manley Hopkins's falcon, Thomas Hardy's darkling thrush or his blinded bird, each reader must determine for himself. And can it be that this assertion of Rainer Maria Rilke's played some part in Brodsky's thought?: "Whoever does not consecrate himself

wholly to art with all his wishes and values can never reach the highest goal.”

In his collection of essays, *Less Than One*, Brodsky has written so movingly about his early life that I will present here only the most meager biographical details. He was born Iosif Alexandrovich Brodsky on May 24, 1940, in Leningrad, the only child of adoring and adored parents so straitened of circumstances that the boy quit school after ninth grade to help support the family. He held more than a dozen jobs, including milling-machine operator, helper in a morgue (he once thought he might wish to become a doctor), photographer (his father's work at one time), and participant in geological expeditions. Despite his limited formal schooling, his love of poetry led him to learn Polish, English, German, Spanish, Italian, and French, as well as Latin, in a determination to acquaint himself with all the world's great poetry. He began writing his own poems in his teens, and earned money by translating Serbo-Croatian and Spanish poetry into Russian. He also translated the poems of John Donne and other Metaphysical poets, and two plays, *The Quare Fellow* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In 1964 he was forced into a "psychiatric hospital" and then arraigned at a show trial, charged

with “parasitism” and with writing “anti-Soviet poetry that would corrupt the young.” What this actually meant was absolute state disapproval of a poetic credo Brodsky expressed in his Nobel Lecture: “A work of art, of literature especially, and a poem in particular, addresses a man tête-à-tête, entering with him into direct—free of any go-betweens—relations.” What Brodsky means, of course, is not only the necessary absence of censors but also the need for a literature disburdened of ulterior (which is to say, political) motives. He was sentenced to five years of degrading hard labor, but after the sentence provoked unambiguously condemnatory outcries from all over the world as well as within Soviet intellectual circles, it was “commuted” to exile. He left behind everything he loved: parents, language, son, home, and, with the help of W. H. Auden and the Academy of American Poets, made his way to his first teaching job in America, at the University of Michigan, under the watchful care of Carl and Ellendea Proffer.

The condition of exile is rarely easy, but Brodsky, fortified by a temperament both cheerful and mordantly sardonic, taking now as his domain the global landscape, the cold galactic

emptinesses, the whole range of human history, set about his poetic task with fierce and undiscourageable industry. In the course of only a few years, he acquired an international audience of admiring readers, among them the members of the Swedish Academy. This recognition was accompanied by a blissful marriage to a beautiful woman, half-Russian, half-Italian, and the birth of a daughter, named Anna, probably in homage to Brodsky’s “discoverer” and poetic heroine, Akhmatova, and in fulfillment of a pledge. But these blessings were of the briefest duration, cut short by his death at the age of 55.

His poems are not easy; nor are they difficult in the familiar manner of, say, John Donne or William Empson. In their original Russian, they observe demanding formal patterns combined at times with an informality of diction that can be witty and irreverent, and are usually filled with unexpected, almost balletic leaps of the imagination. The Russian also evokes a playfulness that no English version can quite as gracefully convey. So richly furnished are the rueful and the comedic aspects of his work, his irony and bravado, that a willing reader will find enormous delights, enviable gifts, large spans of imaginative life that have

not been lost in translation. In the time allotted to him, cut short by addictive smoking that endangered a heart already badly damaged by penal servitude (and for which he had undergone two bypass operations and was scheduled for a third), he managed somehow to acquaint himself as an intimate with the greatest

poets of all periods, to feel at home (if, as an exile, nowhere else) at least in their demanding company, and able to sustain companionship with their best work in what must be thought of as a widely comprehensive multilingual anthology that he was apt to have almost exactly by heart.

LETTER TO AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

Citizen, enemy, mama's boy, sucker, utter
garbage, panhandler, swine, *refujew*, *verruucht*;
a scalp so often scalded with boiling water
that the puny brain feels completely cooked.

Yes, we have dwelt here: in this concrete, brick, wooden
rubble which you now arrive to sift.

All our wires were crossed, barbed, tangled, or interwoven.

Also: we didn't love our women, but they conceived.

Sharp is the sound of the pickax that hurts dead iron;
still, it's gentler than what we've been told or have said ourselves.

Stranger! move carefully through our carrion:

what seems carrion to you is freedom to our cells.

Leave our names alone. Don't reconstruct those vowels,
consonants, and so forth: they won't resemble larks
but a demented bloodhound whose maw devours
its own traces, feces, and barks, and barks.

ON LOVE

Twice I woke up tonight and wandered to
 the window. And the lights down on the street,
 like pale omission points, tried to complete
 the fragment of a sentence spoken through
 sleep, but diminished into darkness, too.

I'd dreamt that you were pregnant, and in spite
 of having lived so many years apart
 I still felt guilty and my heartened palm
 caressed your belly as, by the bedside,
 it fumbled for my trousers and the light-

switch on the wall. And with the bulb turned on
 I knew that I was leaving you alone
 there, in the darkness, in the dream, where calmly
 you waited till I might return,
 not trying to reproach or scold me

for the unnatural hiatus. For
 darkness restores what light cannot repair.
 There we are married, blest, we make once more
 the two-backed beast and children are the fair
 excuse of what we're naked for.

Some future night you will appear again.
 You'll come to me, worn out and thin now, after
 things in between, and I'll see son or daughter
 not named as yet. This time I will restrain
 my hand from groping for the switch, afraid

and feeling that I have no right
to leave you both like shadows by that sever-
ing fence of days that bar your sight,
voiceless, negated by the real light
that keeps me unattainable forever.

ODYSSEUS TO TELEMACHUS

My dear Telemachus,

The Trojan War

is over now; I don't recall who won it.

The Greeks, no doubt, for only they would leave
so many dead so far from their own homeland.

But still, my homeward way has proved too long.

While we were wasting time there, old Poseidon,
it almost seems, stretched and extended space.

I don't know where I am or what this place

can be. It would appear some filthy island,
with bushes, buildings, and great grunting pigs.

A garden choked with weeds; some queen or other.

Grass and huge stones . . . Telemachus, my son!

To a wanderer the faces of all islands

resemble one another. And the mind

trips, numbering waves; eyes, sore from sea horizons,
run; and the flesh of water stuffs the ears.

I can't remember how the war came out;

even how old you are—I can't remember.

Grow up, then, my Telemachus, grow strong.
 Only the gods know if we'll see each other
 again. You've long since ceased to be that babe
 before whom I reined in the plowing bullocks.
 Had it not been for Palamedes' trick
 we two would still be living in one household.
 But maybe he was right; away from me
 you are quite safe from all Oedipal passions,
 and your dreams, my Telemachus, are blameless.

THE HAWK'S CRY IN AUTUMN

Wind from the northwestern quarter is lifting him high above
 the dove-gray, crimson, umber, brown
 Connecticut Valley. Far beneath,
 chickens daintily pause and move
 unseen in the yard of the tumbledown
 farmstead; chipmunks blend with the heath.

Now adrift on the airflow, unfurled, alone,
 all that he glimpses—the hills' lofty, ragged
 ridges, the silver stream that threads
 quivering like a living bone
 of steel, badly notched with rapids,
 the townships like strings of beads

strewn across New England. Having slid down to nil
 thermometers—those household gods in niches—
 freeze, inhibiting thus the fire
 of leaves and churches' spires. Still,

no churches for him. In the windy reaches,
undreamt of by the most righteous choir,

he soars in a cobalt-blue ocean, his beak clamped shut,
his talons clutched tight into his belly
—claws balled up like a sunken fist—
sensing in each wisp of down the thrust
from below, glinting back the berry
of his eyeball, heading south-southeast

to the Rio Grande, the Delta, the beech groves and farther still:
to a nest hidden in the mighty groundswell
of grass whose edges no fingers trust,
sunk amid forest's odors, filled
with splinters of red-speckled eggshell,
with a brother or a sister's ghost.

The heart overgrown with flesh, down, feather, wing,
pulsing at feverish rate, nonstopping,
propelled by internal heat and sense,
the bird goes slashing and scissoring
the autumnal blue, yet by the same swift token,
enlarging it at the expense

of its brownish speck, barely registering on the eye,
a dot, sliding far above the lofty
pine tree; at the expense of the empty look
of that child, arching up at the sky,
that couple that left the car and lifted
their heads, that woman on the stoop.

But the uprush of air is still lifting him
higher and higher. His belly feathers
feel the nibbling cold. Casting a downward gaze,
he sees the horizon growing dim,
he sees, as it were, the features
of the first thirteen colonies whose

chimneys all puff out smoke. Yet it's their total within his sight
that tells the bird of his elevation,
of what altitude he's reached this trip.

What am I doing at such a height?
He senses a mixture of trepidation
and pride. Heeling over a tip

of wing, he plummets down. But the resilient air
bounces him back, winging up to glory,
to the colorless icy plane.

His yellow pupil darts a sudden glare
of rage, that is, a mix of fury
and terror. So once again

he turns and plunges down. But as walls return
rubber balls, as sins send a sinner to faith, or near,
he's driven upward this time as well!

He! whose innards are still so warm!
Still higher! Into some blasted ionosphere!
That astronomically objective hell

of birds that lacks oxygen, and where the milling stars
play millet served from a plate or a crescent.

What, for the bipeds, has always meant
height, for the feathered is the reverse.

Not with his puny brain but with shriveled air sacs
he guesses the truth of it: it's the end.

And at this point he screams. From the hooklike beak
there tears free of him and flies *ad lumen*
the sound Erinyes make to rend
souls: a mechanical, intolerable shriek,
the shriek of steel that devours aluminum;
"mechanical," for it's meant

for nobody, for no living ears:
not man's, not yelping foxes',
not squirrels' hurrying to the ground
from branches; not for tiny field mice whose tears
can't be avenged this way, which forces
them into their burrows. And only hounds

lift up their muzzles. A piercing, high-pitched squeal,
more nightmarish than the D-sharp grinding
of the diamond cutting glass,
slashes the whole sky across. And the world seems to reel
for an instant, shuddering from this rending.
For the warmth burns space in the highest as

badly as some iron fence down here
brands incautious gloveless fingers.
We, standing where we are, exclaim
“There!” and see far above the tear
that is a hawk, and hear the sound that lingers
in wavelets, a spider skein

swelling notes in ripples across the blue vault of space
whose lack of echo spells, especially in October,
an apotheosis of pure sound.

And caught in this heavenly patterned lace,
starlike, spangled with hoarfrost powder,
silver-clad, crystal-bound,

the bird sails to the zenith, to the dark-blue high
of azure. Through binoculars we foretoken
him, a glittering dot, a pearl.

We hear something ring out in the sky,
like some family crockery being broken,
slowly falling aswirl,

yet its shards, as they reach our palms, don't hurt
but melt when handled. And in a twinkling,
once more one makes out curls, eyelets, strings,
rainbowlike, multicolored, blurred
commas, ellipses, spirals, linking
heads of barley, concentric rings—

the bright doodling pattern the feather once possessed,
 a map, now a mere heap of flying
 pale flakes that make a green slope appear
 white. And the children, laughing and brightly dressed,
 swarm out of doors to catch them, crying
 with a loud shout in English, “Winter’s here!” ■

ANTHONY HECHT (1923-2004) was a poet, critic, and university professor. The author of many books of prose and poetry, he won numerous honors, including a Pulitzer Prize, and served as Poet Laureate Consultant to the Library of Congress from 1982 to 1984. He was a poetry editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* from 1994 to 1999.

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