

## From Exile to Affirmation: The Poetry of Joseph Brodsky

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Joseph Brodsky is a poet whose concern with language is a concern for the sacred. In an interview with Nataliya Gorbanevskaya he says, "If I were to begin to create some form of theology, I think it would be a theology of language. In this sense, the word is really something sacred for me" (Polukhina 9). The sacred, however, manifests itself only as something lost. The poet engages in his effort to join word and meaning not in the midst of the sacred but in a movement *toward* the sacred. The poet *in* exile thus becomes the poet *of* exile by undertaking this movement of return. He is the one who, in his homelessness, announces the homelessness of the human condition as it is defined by its distance from the sacred.

One understands, then, why Polukhina asserts that "poetry itself is its own kind of alienation, for it is the exteriorization of one's own 'I,' the objectification of the poet's emotions and thoughts. In this sense any work of art, once finished, is alienated from the creator" (244). Operating in a state of exile, the poet of exile finds that the completion of the poem precedes the condition it addresses. Thus the poet of exile is continually struggling in a time that is too late and a place that is elsewhere. "Perhaps exile is the natural condition of the poet," Brodsky comments in an interview with Giovanni Buttafava. "I feel a kind of great privilege in the coincidence of my existential condition and my occupation" (156). One will notice that Brodsky regards his exile not as a political condition but as an existential condition, one that is characteristic of his condition as a human being; it is a general condition that invades anything he writes in the capacity of poet, regardless of the particular theme addressed in a given poem. Further, the occupation he undertakes is not simply a livelihood but a means by which he may occupy or endure the condition of exile and thus establish a place for himself within that condition. Yet Brodsky's occupation with his existential condition is not so much an occupation or even a preoccupation as it is a *post*-occupation. Again, the I becomes visible to itself in its exteriorization, in its self-alienation; the man becomes a poet after the fact. What George Kline says of Brodsky is true: "Few poets have expressed the sense of loss, separation, and estrangement more powerfully than Brodsky" (78). And since what we find in Brodsky is indeed an expression of separation, the separation is sensed precisely in its expression; that is, the expression is itself a

separation. It is the separation of word from meaning, of the I from the self, of the exile from his home. Meaning lies in the word yet to be uttered. And home is the place to which we have yet to return.

Much of his poetry, as Efim Etkind points out, deals with a humanity "wandering about the planet without any goal or meaning, realizing that nothing changes anywhere and that all the notions of an earthly paradise are merely illusions" (13). It must be noted that the primary threat to the poet in his own humanity—the chief danger of exile—lies not in illusion but in the indifference that may arise in the collision with changelessness. For here arises the temptation to slip into the deadly sleep of "it's all the same" and thus be swallowed up by the law of identity that Florensky describes as "the spirit of death, emptiness, and nothingness" (27). In the process of undoing the illusion the poet not only posits a difference between reality and illusion or truth and lie; through the utterance of the poem he also transforms that difference into a non-indifference. This transformation makes a poetry of exile into a poetry of return. One example that may demonstrate this point can be found in just a few lines from Brodsky's "Kolybel'naya treskovogo mysa" ("Lullaby of Cape Cod"):

In genuine tragedy  
it's not the fine hero that finally dies, it seems,  
but, from constant wear and tear, night after night,  
the old stage set itself, giving way at the seams. (*Part 112*)

Here we see that the undoing of an illusion is the collapse of a ground: the wandering that distinguishes the state of exile is a condition of groundlessness, a distance from the ground or the soil itself. To be sure, the Russian word "bespochvennost'" 'groundlessness,' literally means without "pochva" 'being without the soil.' That the breakdown of the illusion implies a need for return is more clearly seen in the original Russian verse. There the word translated as "stage" is "kulisa" (*Chast'* 103), which may be used in the singular to mean a flat scenery that projects out from the side. Once the scenery is exposed as flat, the homeland loses its dimensions of depth, a loss that parallels the word gone flat, drained of its meaning and its sanctity.

When the word shows itself as something drained of meaning, it posits a future—and a silence—in which the poet seeks to restore its meaning. Through the word that he holds sacred Brodsky becomes the messenger of the word forever yet to be uttered, the bearer of the silence of the yet-to-be. "The radiations of the future," Andre Neher observes in *The Exile of the Word*, "are totally silent. Indeed, of the three

dimensions of time—present, past, and future—the future alone is completely identified with silence, in its plenitude but also in its remarkable ambivalence” (168-69). As the messenger of silence the poet bears the memory of the future. In this condition of exile Brodsky affirms the dearness of a home that is forever elsewhere. Thus, as we shall see, the sacred, the silent, and the elsewhere are the terms that shape the notion of exile in Brodsky’s poetry. Let us turn now to that poetry in an effort to hear the voice that issues from the core of this rupture—and perhaps to hear the cry of our own souls.

### The Sacramental Sign

One task of the poet in his endeavor to make felt the dearness of what is lost is to make visible the sanctity of what is unseen. This ability is just what distinguishes Brodsky as a poet. W. H. Auden expresses it in his introduction to Brodsky’s *Selected Poems* by noting the poet’s unusual “capacity to envision material objects as sacramental signs, messengers from the unseen” (10). This envisioning, of course, is a mode of hearing. Through the said we behold the unseen; through the seen we hear the unheard. A good illustration of Auden’s statement appears in an untitled verse from the *Selected Poems*:

In villages God does not live only  
in icon corners, as the scoffers claim,  
but plainly, everywhere. He sanctifies  
each roof and pan, divides each double door.  
In villages God acts abundantly—  
cooks lentils in iron pots on Saturdays,  
dances a lazy jig in flickering flames,  
and winks at me, witness to all of this. (81)

Where God sanctifies, man dwells. The sacramental sign is the site of human dwelling, where each fixture has its place—roof, pan, and door—and each action has its time: on Saturdays. The illusion here unveiled as a lie is the illusion of the scoffers, who are deaf and blind to the sign and therefore to the holiness of the preparation of “lentils in iron pots.” Like the word itself—like the word *pots*—such pots are the vessels of the sacred, preparing, as they do, the foodstuff that joins creature to creation and thus to the Creator. The dance underscores the harmony in this joining of word and thing, of the human and the divine. And the truth of this harmony, the truth as harmony, issues from the light of the flickering flame, calling to mind the light brought forth upon the first utterance of

the Creator in His act of creation. Calling forth a world, the poet himself imitates the Creator in his response to creation. He looks on, and God looks back, ever so subtly, with a wink from between the lines, and thus transforms the man into a witness. A witness to what? To the dwelling in villages that occurs upon the hidden but abundant action of God.

From outside the poet looks on to become a link between the villagers and those of us who, like himself, live on the outside. The villagers dwell in the village, while his consciousness, or the inscription of that consciousness, places the poet *before* the village. And as he who thus reads the sacramental signs makes us into readers of the signs, he takes us with him into the realm of exile, making strange the familiar. Consider, for instance, the closing lines to an untitled poem from *A Part of Speech*:

A morning milkman, seeing the milk that's soured,  
will be the first to guess that you have died here.  
Here you can live, ignoring calendars,  
gulp Bromo, never leave the house; just settle  
and stare at your reflection in the glass,  
as streetlamps stare at theirs in shrinking puddles. (62)

Here the milkman is made into a reader of signs, and death is presented as that form of living which is void of dwelling. Never leaving the house, the man is never at home; staring only at his reflection, he never sees himself. In these lines we have an inversion of the sign made visible in the lentils and iron pots above. Here the sacred is revealed under the inverted sign of sickness, made present by its absence: the milk sours as the man guzzles Bromo, medicating himself to death. The light that would illuminate the road into a community, through which the man may seek a return home, is swallowed up in a shrinking puddle that sullies the path. Once again, however, there is an "and yet" underlying the poem: the reflection of the light that catches the poet's eye rises upward, and in this rising upward the sanctity of the word manifests itself. The reflection is in the puddle, but the light comes from above. Poetry, says Brodsky in *Less Than One*, "is language negating its own mass and the laws of gravity; it is language's striving upward—or sideways—to that beginning where the Word was" (186). That beginning is where the poem both begins and seeks its end. What is it that negates the laws of gravity and the mass of language, levitating even iron pots? It is the sacramental sign.

Brodsky illustrates this point very effectively in the last few lines of his "Ekloga 4-aya: Zimnyaya" ("Eclogue IV: Winter"), where we read:

That's the birth of an eclogue. Instead of the shepherd's signal,  
a lamp's flaring up. Cyrillic, while running witless  
on the pad as though to escape the captor,  
knows more of the future than the famous sybil:  
of how to darken against the whiteness,  
as long as the whiteness lasts. (*To Urania* 81)

In this poem the sacramental sign that flares up is not simply the iron pot or the streetlamp but is the poem itself, made of the imposition of black on white, as if the flame that burned were a dark one. Nonetheless, it is the dark letter carved into the wilderness of white that makes the wilderness visible, transforming it from an expanse of emptiness into a *page*. The pastoral presence is eclipsed by the Cyrillic scrawl that signifies an absence; it is as if the very letters of which the word is made get in the way of its contact with meaning. The word thus struggles to escape the letters that confine it, struggles, in a sense, to escape itself in the poet's effort to capture it. The scrawl takes on the significance of sacramental sign, however, not so much in its making visible a lack or an absence as in its opening up the yet-to-be: it knows more of the future—that is, it bears a deeper memory of the future, of the *afterward*—than the sybil. Like the Word that was in the beginning, the end of the poem about to be written precedes it. Here one may recall Brodsky's statement in *Less Than One* that "words, even their letters—vowels especially—are almost palpable vessels of time" (125). The capacity of the word to contain this time is its capacity to convey meaning. Meaning, then, happens in transit, eternally on the way to a place where it has yet to be fulfilled. The poet in exile, however, has no star to guide him as his word carries him along this path. The flaring up of the poem takes the place of a star, as we see upon an examination of the Russian version of these lines. There the lamp replaces not the shepherd's signal but the "svetilo," which means 'light' or 'star'; taking the place of this light, the poem takes on the sacred. What the Cyrillic knows, moreover, it knows through a "greshnym delom" or through a 'sinful affair' (*Uraniya* 123), because it usurps the signal or sign that is forever yet to be revealed. The prospect of redemption arises from the realization of this usurpation; the light is perceived as a presence displaced; and the return homeward that always comes *after* happens from within a condition of exile.

What is perhaps most striking about these lines from Brodsky's "Eclogue IV: Winter" is that the Cyrillic stuff of writing has a certain life of its own. The word is sacred for Brodsky because it is alive; it speaks and is not merely a tool used by the speaker. Brodsky makes this explicit

in *Less Than One*, where he declares, "Writing is literally an existential process; it uses thinking for its own ends, it consumes notions, themes, and the like, not vice versa. What dictates a poem is the language, and this is the voice of the language, which we know under the nickname of Muse or Inspiration" (124-25). It is the voice of language that sanctifies the sign, not the other way around, and in its sanctification the sign signifies the living presence of another—the Muse or the Spirit—who casts the poet at a distance from himself. Announcing his distance, the voice of the other in the midst of language proclaims the poet's distance from a world in which he might dwell. Thus in "Venetsianskie strofy 2" ("Venetian Stanzas II") the exiled poet writes:

I am writing these lines sitting outdoors, in winter,  
on a white iron chair, in my shirtsleeves, a little drunk;  
the lips move slowly enough to hinder  
the vowels of the mother tongue,  
and the coffee grows cold. And the blinding lagoon is lapping  
at the shore as the dim human pupil's bright penalty  
for its wish to arrest a landscape quite happy  
here without me. (*To Urania* 94-95)

The poet's distance from himself, from the sacred, and from a dwelling place is proclaimed in images of disjuncture: shirtsleeves in winter, cold coffee, a landscape there without him. The time is out of joint and the man is out of place, drunk enough so that the vowels that might be the vessels of time, and therefore of the sacred, elude him. Like the eye that would arrest the landscape, the word would capture meaning, but the verb is no sooner off the tongue and onto the page than the man has slipped behind.

While Brodsky may have the ability to perceive the sacramental sign, the sacred itself necessarily escapes him. The poet in exile, the poet of exile, is forever adrift. Commenting on the poet in the *Phaedrus*, Plato asserts that there is a "form of possession or madness of which the Muses are the source" (492). In this case the poet has much in common with the madman, especially as Michel Foucault describes him when he writes, "Confined to the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger *par excellence*: that is, the prisoner of the passage" (11). What Foucault articulates Brodsky illustrates in these lines from "Lullaby of Cape Cod":



Preserve these words. The paradise men seek  
is a dead end, a worn-out, battered cape  
bent into crooked shape,  
a cone, a finial cap, a steel ship's bow  
from which the lookout never shouts, "Land ho!" (*Part 116*)

The poet sketches the signifier, but the signified remains beyond the horizon of his vision; the homeland, like the word beneath the word, remains forever hidden in silence. Hence it is sacred. In the Russian text the term rendered as "Land ho" is the single word "Zemlya" (*Chast'* 108), which means "earth," as well as "land." As the Passenger *par excellence*, the poet is continually in search of this center, or this origin and organ of life, of the mother and the mystery: the earth. That is what the signifiers of exile struggle to signify. And that is what abides in the silence of the "other" language, the silence of all tongues, to which the poet strives to give voice and which gives it voice to the poet. The bearer of the sacramental sign thus bears something more than the sign can bear: he is the messenger of silence.

### The Messenger of Silence

We have seen that the sacramental sign signifies not only the sacred but a distance from the sacred, and that the sign positions the sacred beyond the horizon of the yet-to-be. This beyond is the realm of silence, where the voice of language no longer speaks—or rather speaks in the mode of silence, in the mode of non-speaking: in the mode of death, for death is the one certainty situated in the yet-to-be. Death defines and delineates the realm of exile. In his article "Variations on the Theme of Exile" George Kline comments on Brodsky's poetry, saying, "The increasing deafness of the old is a rehearsal for the non-speaking which is death, the silence which is eternity" (69). If words are the vessels of time, then silence is, indeed, the vessel of eternity, the path to which leads through death. Brodsky, of course, is aware of this element not only in his own poetry but in any art that might bespeak this non-speaking. "Art," he asserts, "'imitates' death rather than life; i.e. it imitates that realm of which life supplies no notion: realizing its own brevity, art tries to domesticate the longest possible version of time" (*Less* 104). That realm of which a life steeped in language supplies no notion is the realm of silence; imitating death, the poet becomes the messenger of silence.

"Death as a theme," Brodsky notes, "always produces a self-portrait" (*Less* 100). In the condition of exile, moreover, the portrait of the self is sketched along the lines of separation from the other; home is

made not only of familiar places but of familiar faces. The separation from those human relations determines a certain relation of the poet to his poetry. The messenger of silence is the messenger of separation and thus of infinite longing for the other, for silence is the stuff of which separation and exile are made. A poem about the end of love, for example, may have its links to a deeper existential concern, especially when it appears not only in the context of two lovers but in the context of exile, which Brodsky himself, again, identifies as the "natural condition of the poet" (Buttafava 156). As a lover he separates; as a poet he writes of the separation that has deeper implications. Consider, for instance, a poem titled "Stanzas" from Brodsky's *Selected Poems*:

Let our farewells be silent.  
Turn the phonograph down.  
Separations in this world  
hint at partings beyond.  
It's not just in this lifetime  
that we must sleep apart.  
Death won't bring us together  
or wipe out our love's hurt.

. . .

As our union was perfect,  
so our break is complete.  
Neither panning nor zooming  
can postpone the fade-out.  
There's no point in our claiming  
that our fusion's still real.  
But a talented fragment  
can pretend to be whole.

Swoon, then, to o'erflowing,  
drain yourself till you're dry.  
We two halves share the volume,  
but not the strength, of the wine.  
But my world will not end if  
in future we share  
only those jagged edges  
where we've broken apart.

No man stands as a stranger.

But the threshold of shame



is defined by our feelings  
at the "Never again."  
Thus, we mourn, yet we bury,  
and resume our concerns,  
cutting death at its center  
like two clear synonyms.

Let our farewells be silent. (67-69)

The parting from the other is a tearing away of the self from its soul and a rending of meaning from the word, and the messenger here conveys what he has retrieved from the bleeding silence of that gaping wound. Separation hints at a parting beyond because the volume constituted by self and other contains a world, a time yet to come, and therefore a home. The separation is silent because it is a form of death, and, as Brodsky says, this death culminates in a portrait of the self left to the frayed edges of itself. The poet of exile moves along this jagged edge that traces the silhouette of death. The difficulty confronting him is to fetch the word from that grave without tumbling into it.

The struggle of life with death, of exile with homeland, is a struggle of the word with silence. One poem in which this struggle unfolds most explicitly and most thoroughly is "Gorbunov and Gorchakov," which is an extended dialogue between two patients in a psychiatric hospital outside of Leningrad. In this poem the messenger of silence joins his voice to the voice of the madman to make silence itself speak. Listen:

"And nothing can be more impenetrable  
than veils of words that have devoured their things;  
nothing is more tormenting than men's language."  
"But if we view things more objectively  
it may be that we'll come to the conclusion  
that words are also things. And thus we're saved!"  
"But that is the beginning of vast silence.  
And silence is the future of all days  
that roll toward speech; yes, silence is the presence  
of farewells in our greetings as we touch.  
Indeed, the future of our words is silence—  
those words which have devoured the stuff of things  
with hungry vowels, for things abhor sharp corners.  
Silence: a wave that cloaks eternity.  
Silence: the future fate of all our loving—  
a space, not a dead barrier, but space

that robs the false voice in the blood-stream throbbing  
of every echoed answer to its love.

And silence is the present fate of those who  
have lived before us; it's a matchmaker  
that manages to bring all men together  
into the speaking presence of today.

Life is but talk hurled in the face of silence." (*Poems* 146-47)

It bears repeating: silence is not a barrier but a space, the place of exile, the poet's point of departure and return. And in silence we are gathered together with him, confronted with our own exile. Just as the theme of death ends in a self-portrait, the pursuit of silence leads to a collision with the self. And yet, once again, the thing that posits the separation also implies a union: silence is a matchmaker that brings us together in a speaking presence, and the poetic word enables us to hear it. Like the death that accentuates life, silence calls forth the spoken part of the human being, as part of speech, that vibrates on the breath of life. Human presence is a speaking presence that harbors a non-speaking.

"The absence of response," says Brodsky, "has done in many a poet, and in so many ways, the net result of which is that infamous equilibrium—or tautology—between cause and effect: silence" (*Less* 173). The silence that threatens the poet is not the silence that gathers human being unto human being but the blank silence born of the collapse of difference into indifference. The one who is faced with the translation of silence into utterance is faced with the transformation of this emptiness into eloquence. Recall in this connection Brodsky's lines in "Pen'e bez muzyki" ("A Song to No Music"):

the embrace's stifling blindness  
was in itself a pledge of an  
invisibility that binds us  
in separations: hid within  
each other, we dodged space. . . (*Part* 28-29)

Once again the lover separates from the beloved, but the poet pursues deeper implications of the separation. Seeking the word hidden beneath the word, the silence beneath the vocable, the poet seeks the other within the self, the one who is drawn into the self in the act of embrace. This movement, this response of non-indifference, creates the proximity that might, if only for a moment, dodge space and span the distance that constitutes exile. The point is perhaps better made in the Russian line,

“my skryvalis’ of prostranstva” or ‘we were hiding from space’ (*Konets* 78), suggesting a hiddenness in a place beneath the word or beyond the word where meaning happens—silently. In that place beyond space the silence of emptiness is transformed into the silence of eloquence. From the place beyond space the messenger of silence bears his message of embrace.

And yet, in his exile, the poet is invariably thrown back to the message of what has been lost to exile, of what is felt only as pain. One passage in which the pain of isolation is most strongly felt appears in the last two lines of “I Sit by the Window”:

I sit in the dark. And it would be hard to figure out  
which is worse: the dark inside, or the darkness out. (*Part* 42)

For “dark” and “darkness” we may read “silence.” This is the darkness that the flaring up of the lamp of poetry endeavors to illuminate; this is the silence, the non-speaking, that drives the poet to speak or die, or to die in the speaking. What is left of the messenger’s message? Brodsky tells us in “Chast’ rechi” (“A Part of Speech”):

... and when “the future” is uttered, swarms of mice  
rush out of the Russian language and gnaw a piece  
of ripened memory which is twice  
as hole-ridden as real cheese.

...  
What gets left of a man amounts  
to a part. To his spoken part. To a part of speech. (*Part* 105)

In the Russian text the penultimate line contains an important word left out of the English translation. It is a dative of the second-person pronoun *vam* (*Chast’* 95): what is left of a man for you is a part of speech, that part which remains of the soul that the poet offers to you, his reader. And it is not his spoken part, exactly, but “chast’ rechi voobshche” ‘a part of speech in general,’ of speech as such. The messenger of silence is one who, in the end, cannot deliver his message. Brodsky reiterates this lament, this message, in “Dekabr’ vo Florentsii” (“December in Florence”), where he writes:

A man gets reduced to pen’s rustle on paper, to  
wedges, ringlets of letters, and also, due  
to the slippery surface, to commas and full stops. (*Part* 120)

Hence we see the poet addressing in his poetry the very thing that threatens it. The message is that the word is inadequate to the message, that the You who is addressed must find some way not to stop at the full stop, some way to dodge space and step through the ringlets of letters that occlude the word.

These, then, are the signposts of exile: wedges and ringlets of letters, commas and periods of punctuation. But, just as the word that comprises a poem bespeaks the silence from which it is born, so do the signposts pointing in one direction posit another. Brodsky etched such a sign for himself on 4 June 1977, the fifth anniversary of his exile from his homeland, when he wrote:

I don't know anymore what earth will nurse my carcass.

Scratch on, my pen: let's mark the white the way it marks us. (*To Urania* 35)

The poet is marked by the white in his marking of it; the sign he imposes on the emptiness is imposed on him, making him into who he is: a poet. Recall in this connection the lines from his "Litovskii noktyurn" ("Lithuanian Nocturne"):

. . . nobody stands to inhabit  
air! It is our "homeward!" That town  
which all syllables long  
to return to . . . .

. . .  
That is why it is pure!  
In this world, there is nothing that bleaches  
paper better (except  
for one's dying) than air.  
And the whiter, the emptier, which is  
homelike. Muse, may I set  
out homeward? (*To Urania* 15-16)

The very thing that the poet would convey on his page places it under erasure, "bleaches" it back into silence. Here we see that the shore from which the messenger sets out is precisely the place he seeks: it is a certain elsewhere hidden in the emptiness of the air, for even the emptiness has its secret side. It is home. Looking at the Russian text, we notice that in both of these stanzas the word "Domoi" 'homeward,' is immediately followed by the word "vosvoyasi," which is translated as 'town' but means home or go home (*To Urania* 63-64). Home takes on its sense

through the movement toward it, and yet it recedes as it is approached, 'bleached' into a distant elsewhere. It should also be noted that the word rendered as "emptier" is "beschelovechnei," which in usage means "more ruthless" but literally means "without human beings": the emptiness is the signifier of exile, while home is where humaneness and humanity dwell.

The exile's absence from home, then, must come to signify and thus affirm the presence of a home in a place that is eternally elsewhere, forever under erasure. Brodsky himself makes this point when he writes, "Absence, in the final analysis, is a crude version of detachment: psychologically it is synonymous with presence in some other place and, in this way, expands the notion of being. In turn, the more significant the absent object, the more signs there are of its existence" (*Less* 261). Let us consider more closely now the significance of the absent home and the poet's affirmation of the elsewhere that harbors it.

### The Affirmation of the Elsewhere

Polukhina points out that "as the material means and goal of poetry, the word becomes the bearer of the spiritual content of human life" (177), and, in the words of Jacques Lacan, "the spirit is always somewhere else" (34). Why? Because the material means of capturing the spiritual invariably ends by displacing it. For the material traces the spatial, and the spatial is the opposite of the spiritual. Where dwelling happens, space is transformed into spirit. That is why, in the human realm, it is the body that brings the spirit to bear: a spiritual dimension of life can be an issue only for a creature of flesh and blood, only for one who eats. The absence of the body that Brodsky proclaims in *K Uranii* (*To Urania*), then, is a spiritual absence; that is, the poem uses a material means to declare that the spirit is elsewhere, particularly where we read:

And what is space anyway if not the  
body's absence at every given  
point? That's why Urania's older than sister Clio! (70)

Urania is the Muse of the heavens and the contemplation of the heavens, while Clio is the Muse of history. Urania is older because it is the longing for the heavens that gives rise to history. History is the tale of the human effort to reach the heavens in the vain construction of one Tower of Babel after another. The heavens comprise the realm of the Great Elsewhere that reveals to us where we are *not*.

In a poem titled "Meksikanskii romansero" ("Mexican Romancero"), Brodsky affirms the elsewhere of home by way of this "nowhere" when he writes:

Something inside of me went slightly  
wrong, so to speak—off course.  
Muttering "God Almighty,"  
I hear my own voice.

Thus you dirty the pages  
to stop an instant that's fair,  
automatically gazing  
at yourself from nowhere. (*Part 83*)

While the English phrases "slightly wrong" and "off course" imply a loss of direction, the corresponding Russian words in the original are much stronger. They are "sorvalos" and "raskololos," meaning 'torn apart' and 'broken to pieces' (*Chast* 68). The soul has not just gone off course; it has lost the wholeness of what it is. It has lost itself and therefore is broken off from the divine: in the outcry of "God Almighty" that would make heard the voice of God the man hears only his own voice. And there is no deeper, more dreadful isolation. To be nowhere is to hear only your own voice; that is what defines the condition of exile. And yet the self upon whom the man gazes from nowhere is . . . elsewhere. Although the soul has lost its home, something of the home remains in the soul, "radi melkogo chuda" 'for the sake of a small miracle,' as the Russian line reads; in the English text it is rendered by the much weaker "to stop an instant that's fair." The invocation of the small miracle entails an affirmation of the elsewhere from which the miracle stems; it amounts to the declaration that even though I am nowhere, there is a place of presence somewhere, a place where God dwells in lentils and iron pots in a land that a man can regard as native.

For the poet, however, that place remains elsewhere as long as he is a poet. Exile is his essential condition, as Brodsky has said, because there is always a distance between word and place; the exile of the man is an exile of the word. As a poet, all he has is the native tongue that strands him in a strange place from which he affirms the elsewhere. Recall, for example, the lines from Brodsky's "1972," the year in which he was sent into exile:

Listen, my boon and brethren and my enemies!

What I've done, I've done not for fame or memories



in this era of radio waves and cinemas,  
 but for the sake of my native tongue and letters.  
 For which sort of devotion, of a zealous bent  
 ("Heal thyself, doctor," as the saying went),  
 denied a chalice at the feast of the fatherland,  
 now I stand in a strange place. The name hardly matters. (*Part 65*)

In this poem it is not so much the fatherland as the feast that designates the elsewhere. To be at home, on one's native and natal soil, is to sit at the table and consume the bread born from that soil, the bread that joins the man to the native land. The poet in exile and of exile is hungry. Hunger makes the place strange. It is a hunger that derives not only from what might be received but from what might be offered to the other. The distance from home is a distance from the other, from one's brother. Reaching for the chalice forever out of reach, the poet extends a hand to his fellow human being, seeking that proximity to the human reality that is the opposite of irreality. For the bread we break and share at the feast of the fatherland joins us not only with the native soil but with our brethren, those with whom we share our native tongue and for whom we answer.

Again, the affirmation of the elsewhere lies not just in the articulation of emptiness but in the stretching forth of the hand. The hand that descends to the page to grope for the word reaches up for the elsewhere and for the other. Consider how these images work in "Iork" "York," a poem written in memory of W. H. Auden:

The emptiness, swallowing sunlight—something in common with  
 the hawthorn—grows steadily more palpable  
 in the outstretched hand's direction, and  
 the world merges into a long street where others live. (*Part 127*)

Once again we see that the distance from home lies in the distance from others; home is constituted by a human community. The emptiness described in these lines is the emptiness of the outside, of exteriority, of being left to a place that has no proximity to the human other. To be sure, the word translated as "emptiness," *pustota* (*Uraniya* 79), is a cognate of *pustynie*, which means "wilderness." The wilderness is that place which is external to the human community where others live. The affirmation of the elsewhere, then, is the affirmation of an interior, the kind Levinas refers to when he says, "Isn't . . . the alienation of man primarily the fact of having no home? Not to have a place of one's own, not to have an interior, is not truly to communicate with another, and thus

to be a stranger to oneself and to the other” (109). And: “There is no salvation except in the reentry into oneself. One must have an interiority where one can seek refuge . . . . And even if ‘at home’—in the refuge or in the interiority—there is ‘terror,’ it is better to have a country, a home, or an ‘inwardness’ with terror than to be outside” (190). This is the interior that the poet seeks through his affirmation; it lies not in the isolation within oneself, where all a person hears is his own voice, but leads through the other. Interiority is to be found in the space *between* self and other.

Brodsky provides us with a poem about the poetry’s affirmation of an interior elsewhere, once again, in his “Lullaby of Cape Cod.” In connection with the matter at hand we note particularly those lines where he writes:

Preserve these words against a time of cold,  
a day of fear: man survives like a fish,  
stranded, beached, but intent  
on adapting itself to some deep, cellular wish,  
wriggling toward bushes, forming hinged leg-struts, then  
to depart (leaving a track like the scrawl of a pen)  
for the interior, the heart of the continent. (*Part* 114)

Here we acquire a better sense of the terror of the interior. In order to initiate a movement of return toward the elsewhere, toward this other place, the man himself must become other than who he is. This process of becoming, of course, links the elsewhere to the yet-to-be that was discussed above. And the two are linked by silence. As Brodsky puts it in his “Strofy” (“Strophes”):

You won’t receive an answer  
if “Where to?” swells your voice. (*Part* 141)

If there is an answer or, better, a response to this question, it is “elsewhere.” Since the approach toward, and affirmation of, the elsewhere entails taking on a new being, the terror that lurks in the interior is the terror of non-being, of the loss of what I am in order to become other and thus to become my own answer to the question of “Where to?” And in order to sustain that process of becoming, I must overcome the fear of no longer being who I am. The elsewhere is not only *where* but *what* I am yet to be.

Brodsky demonstrates his insight into this aspect of the condition of exile in the closing lines of "Na vystavke Karla Veilinka" 'At Karl Weillink's Exhibition,' where we read,

This, then, is "mastery": ability  
to not take fright at the procedure of  
nonbeing—as another form of one's  
own absence, having drawn it straight from life.  
(*To Urania* 121)

From the depths of these lines the abyss into which the man gazes peers back into the man. For here he discovers that not only is he *in* exile, but he *is* exile: not only is his home elsewhere, but he is himself elsewhere, clutching at mere traces of himself along the jagged edges of his art. The poet struggles to regain his soul by offering it up to the other, both human and divine, through his song, but the song ends by eclipsing the offering. Thus the poet no sooner speaks than he is thrown back to that position of absence from which he must once again listen for the voice that comes both from within and from beyond. In this eternal repetition, this repeated affirmation of the elsewhere, we catch a glimpse of the infinite at work in poetry. In *Less Than One* Brodsky explains: "Love is essentially an attitude maintained by the infinite toward the finite. The reversal constitutes either faith or poetry" (44). A poem, like the home that the exile seeks, is a finite vessel of the infinite; home, like a poem, is the place where iron pots can contain the Infinite One. And love opens up the path to the elsewhere that is home, where the life of the soul unfolds in the affirming embrace of the other.

Perhaps now we may have a better sense of that life which silently abides in the sanctity of the elsewhere. The sacramental signs that go into the making of Brodsky's poetry silently convey a message that is otherwise left to mere silence. And even if the message tells us that we have no answers to the question of "Where to?" it nonetheless affirms the urgency of the question and of what is at stake in it. "When it comes down to it," Brodsky raises the question for himself, "where am I from?" (*Less* 443). This is the question that points to a place where he has yet to arrive. It is the question for which the poet expresses his defiant gratitude in a poem written on his fortieth birthday titled "May 24, 1980":

I've admitted the sentries' third eye into my wet and foul  
dreams. Munched the bread of exile: it's stale and warty.

Granted my lungs all sounds except the howl;  
switched to a whisper. Now I am forty.  
What should I say about life? That it's long and abhors transparence.  
Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me vomit.  
Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,  
only gratitude will be gushing from it. (*To Urania* 3)

This, then, is mastery: to give thanks for the thing that wounds the soul. For the soul is animated and known by its wounds, by the questions that emerge, like life, from broken eggs, and not by answers which, in this poem, are omelettes. The soul is punctuated not by full stops but by question marks and speaks through the howl it holds back. Thus it transforms the howl into words and silences that breathe words like a whisper. Here we see poetry's link to faith and gratitude's link to poetry: I shall sing my song even—or especially—when, by every right, it should not be there. I shall affirm the sanctity of the silent elsewhere even from within the confines of this noisy, alien nowhere.

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