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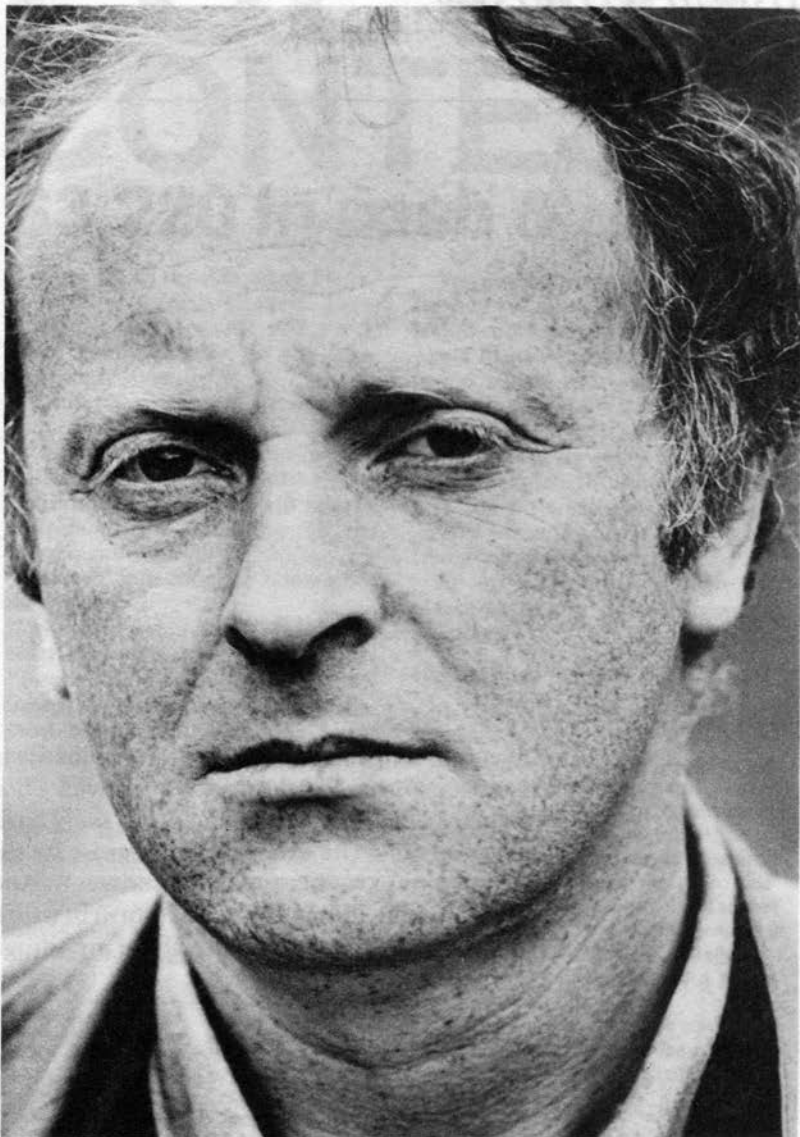
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A Conversation with Joseph Brodsky

TOM VITALE

"I think every poet has an enormous desire to justify his daily existence, so therefore, every poet envies enormously an artist who is doing sketches on a daily basis. Everybody wants to write every day, otherwise by the end of the day your existence makes no sense. . . . And Lowell picked up that idiom, found that form in which he could, technically speaking, write about anything."



by Willem Diepraam

JOSEPH BRODSKY

This interview took place on May 5, 1984 in Joseph Brodsky's Greenwich Village apartment, occasioned by the imminent publication of *Less Than One*, a book of his essays. Parts of the interview were broadcast on Tom Vitale's radio program, "A Moveable Feast."

Q: You knew Robert Lowell. What was your relationship with him?

A: I first met him in 1972, when I had just left Russia. I was invited to London, to Poetry International, and at that gathering, I had to give a reading and Lowell volunteered to read the English translations. That was the beginning of our acquaintanceship. And that was some gesture, I must say, especially for me, then. I obviously had known about him before. I had translated "For the Union Dead" and other things. And he invited me subsequently, after the reading at Elizabeth Hall, to come over to visit him in Kent. But at that time, I could make out train schedules, etc. very poorly. I went to Victoria Station and I was somewhat lost at what I saw—the timetables; therefore I telephoned him that I couldn't come, and I didn't have enough coins for the telephone, and therefore the conversation that I had with him which was in this English of mine—well, can you imagine this English twelve years ago? So, somehow it was terribly inconclusive, and Robert thought that Auden had simply influenced me not to come; there was some bad blood between them. That indicates, apart from anything else, a degree of insecurity in the man.

Well, at any rate, in 1975 when I was teaching at Smith College, all of a sudden the phone rings and Cal calls and invites me over to Boston, to Brookline, and over the telephone talks about things that were rather pleasant, and terribly moving things. So I went, I visited him there in Brookline. I remember that day very clearly because, apart from anything else, it turned out that I had miscalculated the date. It was on Thursday, either the previous Thursday or the following Thursday that I came, not on the Thursday that was scheduled, but all the same, we had a terrific day. The reason I remember it is because that was the most meaningful conversation about Dante's *Divina Comedia* that I've participated in since the days with my friends in the Soviet Union. The man knew the *Comedia* quite intimately—he had his own particular characters, etc., he knew that, indeed, it was almost a private notion of horrors, or rather, the netherworld.

It was quite a spectacular thing because he had some problems. Apart from anything else, his circulation was poor and the doctors had told him to quit smoking, and he had cup after cup of coffee brought

in. And he was smoking like two cruisers. He was terribly kind, terribly soft-spoken, in terms of voice obviously. What he was saying was frequently, more than frequently, terribly biting, in fact.

Since then, we'd see each other on a fairly frequent basis. I remember, for instance, one day we were going to Elizabeth Hardwick's apartment on 67th Street in New York. We spent the afternoon going through the entire agenda of American poetry, listing the people we cared for, and simultaneously we arrived at a poet who is generally overlooked by the public: Weldon Kees. We exclaimed that name almost simultaneously.

He was terribly generous; at one point, not long before his death, he again suggested himself as a translator for one of my poems, a poem about Florence, "Wind in Florence," and he did several versions, about which we had our arguments. Then he left for England, and then he returned, landed at Kennedy, and he was dead when the taxi arrived at the door. Well, it's not telling you very much about how well I knew him.

Q: I saw Lowell read just once, at Stony Brook University in 1976, and I was caught by how soft-spoken and how broken he seemed: somehow, as if life had wasted him. For you as a poet, was it frightening to see a sensitive man, a poet, get used up? Is this the poet's fate?

A: I don't think he was, although I think sometimes Lowell would give you that impression, especially in his physical appearance: the movements of the body, the posture, kind of stooped and tentative. He could give you the impression of somebody who was ostensibly emaciated. As a man, as a poet, he was anything but that. He was certainly doing something which I found terribly attractive. I know there is a great deal of disagreement among the people in my profession, all the critics, about, for instance, his later books. I have my own theory of what happened in the histories, Lowell's rhymeless fourteen-liners that are sonnets, as it were. I think every poet has an enormous desire to justify his daily existence, so therefore, every poet envies enormously an artist who is doing sketches on a daily basis. Everybody wants to write every day, otherwise by the end of the day your existence makes no sense, you have no right to exist. And Lowell picked up that idiom, found that form in which he could, technically speaking, write about anything. I like those things enormously, precisely for the randomness, for the equivalence to daily existence, to the arbitrariness of thought.

Sometimes these things can be off, but I like the "offness" as well,

not that I like realism in art to the extent that art starts to suffer. But in a great poet, one learns to like the weaknesses as well, because they give you a sense of proportion, because they show you the way one goes, literally. Well, I'm terribly fond of him. And frankly, I prefer his earlier stuff, that is, *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanagh's*, for the Marlovian vigor of his diction. I personally regret that he shifted to an idiom which seemed to him perhaps more contemporary. I suppose it had to do with the market situation of poetry that emerged in the late sixties, beginning of the seventies, the influence of the West Coast—to be on a par with that, not to be made dated by the idiom which was prevalent on the West Coast. Still, when you like somebody, you like the entirety of his work, simply because every poet is, after all, a myth. And the poems are simply the exploits of the poet, like Hercules with his twelve exploits. In a gospel, its entirety is what matters, I think.

Q: You chose to write your elegy to Lowell in English. That's the only poem that you wrote originally in English in *A Part of Speech*.

A: I thought about writing it in Russian, of course, but then I thought that he would like it better if I did it in English. I've done it simply to please him, as it were.

Q: It's a very good poem. Are you writing more poems in English?

A: I've written several poems in English but I have no ambition to do that in any kind of substantial way. If it's good, it is partly because it exploits several of Lowell's own tropes. But I have no aspiration to become a poet of the English language. That is, I translate quite a lot of my own into English, and that's enough for me.

Q: In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes says that reading a translation is like looking at the back of a tapestry. Do you feel that your translators have to compromise at all, if they can't find the same nuance?

A: It's a rather complex thing. I have my own ideas about translations; I don't have theories. I doubt a theory could exist. I think it has to do with practice or the empirical process. You simply learn from what you can do, and from what you can't. I think it's dangerous to generalize about the very phenomenon. . . . What a successful translation requires is not simply craftsmanship on the part of the translator, but some congeniality, obviously. I could be quite congenial to what I've

done in Russian [laughs]. I can't find a more congenial guy for that. The other thing is, it requires a certain intensity of attention, which, in terms of the language, could be called, simply, love, a kind of obsession. I am a sucker for the English language.

The thing is, you obviously stand to lose in translation. But when you know that, you are not discouraged by it. You may lose, in the case of this or that rhyme, but while knowing that you've lost it here, you try to make it up in another line. Therefore, what you're trying to do is sustain a certain esthetic balance, which does exist in the original, and if it does exist, you simply try, by different means, to resurrect that balance.

Q: So you're writing in Russian, primarily. How has your Russian been affected by spending a dozen years in an English-speaking milieu?

A: Well, that's not for me to say, obviously, although I don't think it is or was affected in any fashion. The only thing I've noticed as a result of living in an English-speaking world is that sometimes when I'm writing, I experience a greater lucidity, or a greater degree of the presence of the rational operation than I would have had I been sitting in Russia, writing in Russian. The thing is, Russian is not an analytical language. When you say something, especially in poetry, you do it in an automatic fashion. Things can be suggestive enough, and you just don't bother to qualify. I've discovered that I begin to qualify my statements, not simply because I'm uncertain about the net effect. There's something in English that compels you to elaborate sometimes. In that sense, some of my poems or some of my lines, if I can freely assess that sort of thing, are more laborious. But on the other hand, I like it. I like the precision of statement, basically. I like taking things to the illogical, which means absurd, end. That is, writing becomes less a chirping than indeed writing. Therefore, a poem may suffer in its naivete, or ease, original ease. But then again, the more accurate you are in what you're saying, the better. Maybe it's not as fluid, but then, there are no deceptions.

Q: For the spoken quality of Russian, you'd have to rely on your memory for the idiom or dialect.

A: It's not so bad. In the first place, I have quite a crowd of people with whom I speak Russian on a daily basis . . . So there is no way, really, to forget the spoken idiom. I left Russia when I was thirty-two, by which time I think everybody is shaped by the language he speaks. I don't

think there is any possibility of undoing it, unless one elects to forget, to forgo, one's previous identity. Well, blissfully, I never had such an ambition or necessity.

Q: How about the thematic essence of the material? In the 1980 review in *The Nation*, the critic said that you were writing fewer love poems, based on the collection *A Part of Speech*, and that when you were in Russia, you were writing more love poems.

A: Garbage, pure garbage. In fact, what I've noticed, with a great deal of displeasure, I must say, is that the frequency of lyrical poems, nearly thirteen poems that do deal with the subject of love, is almost increasing. The etiquette of a poet, as I understood it in my early years in Russia, is *not* to write about love, because it's almost unmanly for the modern poet, you see. But it turns out that there are a great deal of love poems, in retrospect, and I don't think the observation of that critic was in any way correct.

Things really can't change. Sometimes I deal with this or that detail of pure Americana; however, it's not terribly easy, yielding to the Russian language, in the first place, because very frequently there are not sufficient synonyms for this or that phenomenon. Basically, one writes not about what surrounds or happens to one; it's a very Marxist attitude that the actual living conditions determine the operation of the consciousness. Obviously, it's true, but only up to a certain point, after which the consciousness, or conscience, starts to determine the nature of the living conditions, or the attitude toward them, anyhow. If I would be able to winnow the subject, the theme, it's mostly what time does to a man, how it chisels the man, how it sort of chips him away, and what's left.

Q: Let's talk about environment a little more. When I spoke to you last year about Auden, you said man's anthropological goal was poetry, in that the mark of evolution is being able increasingly to use language to express higher thoughts.

A: Not exactly higher thoughts, but more profound, perhaps.

Q: So in the end, poetry is the highest form of human expression. But here in the United States, it seems that we're evolving in the other direction. Reading is less and less a part of American life. You paint such a bleak picture of the Soviet Union in "Less Than One," a memoir moving from school to cannon factory, to the hospital morgue,

to prison, but you talk about the importance of reading in your generation, the best-read generation of Russians in history. Have you traded one oppressive environment for another?

A: Not really. In the first place, when I was talking about my generation, that is, my friends, a certain circle—well, it wasn't terribly broad. Obviously, we are living in a civilization that is shifting from words to numbers. But I think it would be dangerous to make the generalization that American society is basically abandoning reading. For instance, here in the Village, of all places, the bookstores are closing, one after another. It has to do with the gentrification of the area, and people read more magazines than books these days. But I think the impression American society can make along these lines has to do with the great deal of decentralization that exists in the United States, of everything, including culture. Those who can read are terribly dispersed. There is no such thing as a bohemia in this country: bohemia is the phenomenon that has to do with the traditional centralized government. The artists kind of float to the seat of power. Even Washington can't boast such a thing. Therefore, in this country, one doesn't have a sense of coherence vis-à-vis the nation. Russians obviously do read more; the question is, what do they read? In general, the famous scene on the subway in Moscow, when everybody reads a book, is actually quite true even for New York, especially when you take the local line, from Columbia to down here. By and large, the quality of literature in Russia and in America is not comparable, except on the level of pulp, where they are quite equal. On the level of great literature, I think this country is quite ahead.

Q: In availability, but how about the audience for great literature?

A: The audience for great literature is always quite small and constitutes a very small percentage in respect to the rest of society. Speaking of poetry, for instance, I think historically it would be very generous of me to say that, in general, about one percent in every society is interested in poetry. And this is why poetry used to flock, in the good old days, to the courts; presently, it flocks to the universities, which play the role of Renaissance courts. What perhaps is disquieting is the advent of the TV screen, that simply steals a great deal of time away from individuals. In Russia, TV is of such quality that obviously a person would prefer to read a book than to watch a movie. Give them American TV programs and I don't know what would be the net result in terms of reading in the Soviet Union today.

Q: In “Less Than One” you say that an existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effort. There was an article in the *Times* two weeks ago about reading having decreased. The standards professed in literature are being ignored in the United States on a mass scale and it would seem to be more so than in Russia where there is probably more of an emphasis on books because there are fewer materialistic things.

A: Maybe you’re accurate. I would be somewhat cautious about making those broad comparisons. At a certain stage or age, one gravitates to some sort of insulated existence, by which I mean that one surrounds oneself with people or things more congenial to one’s own inclinations. I, for one, live in a milieu where the standards of reading haven’t dropped so drastically. And I think that milieu would survive everything: a consumer-oriented society, or an ideological, centralized state.

Q: As someone who comes into contact with students and other young poets in the United States, do you think that we are going to have a new generation of fine poetry produced in this country?

A: What produces poetry, and fine poetry, is not so much education, but the language itself, and English is a terribly interesting language, terribly alive and robust. You’re bound to have that. On the basis of what I’m seeing in the schools, rather rotten things do take place. Apart from anything else, the level of literacy is down considerably. Of all things, a Russian-born, I find myself correcting my students’ English, which is a scream. I think what’s happening is that education in the high school is basically a disaster. I think the money has been stolen from the people, from the parents, and therefore, from the children. The emphasis is not on literacy, but on computer literacy; I think it may have rather nasty consequences for the nation. But all along, I do bump into two or three students in every group who are terribly taken by and dedicated to literature. If there is any ground for optimism, it precisely has to do with the volume of technology of consumerism, because every excess breeds reaction.

Q: What are you working on now, and what trends do you see in your own work for the future? Are there any experiments that you want to do in form, or a subject matter you want to deal with?

A: I really can’t tell you anything about that, not because I have any secrets, but because I never have a clear sense of what’s lying ahead. In

terms of form, I really don't know. I'm nearly forty-four. I think, by this time, I've tried all sorts of things—not all of them, but all sorts of things. So the issue is not the formal experiment, nor is it the liberation from form. As for the subject matter, as for the themes, I simply regard myself as a guinea pig of my own ideas, and I see what happens to them, and I try to record it.