

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

Gottlieb GUNTERN

Joseph BRODSKY

Poet and Nobel Laureate in Literature, Russia

Introduction by Dr. Guntern

I am happy to present the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who expresses himself, of course, in language, but at the same time creates pictures that you will not very easily forget. Joseph Brodsky has been hailed by Anna Akhmatova in the East, by Wystan H. Auden here in the West, as being the foremost voice of contemporary Russian poetry. So much praise may sometimes lie on his shoulders as quite a heavy burden. But then life has trained his shoulders to carry heavy burdens.

He was born in Leningrad where he spent his childhood. Two parents and a child shared one room and-a-half within a communal apartment. At the age of 15 he left school, disgusted by the dreariness of uninspired teaching and rote learning, which, as he put it, "bred in us such an overpowering sense of ambivalence that in ten years we ended up with a will-power in no way superior to a seaweed's." He worked then as a milling operator, had the idea of becoming a neurosurgeon and worked in a morgue. Then he understood that his destiny was to become a poet. The state, Communist Russia back then, thought otherwise; so he was sent to a forced labor camp up north in Arkhangels, near the White Sea. In 1964 a transcript was smuggled into the West, and when we read it, we get a glimpse of the kind of trial in which he was a defendant, but also of the character, the personality of the defendant. I will read a few lines:

Judge : What is your profession?

Brodsky: Translator and poet.

Judge: Who has recognized you as a poet? Who has enrolled you in the ranks of poets?

Brodsky: No one. Who enrolled me in the ranks of human beings?

Judge: Did you study for it?

Brodsky: What?

Judge: To be a poet. Didn't you try to take courses in school where one prepares for life, where one learns?

Brodsky: I didn't believe it was a matter of education.

Judge: How is that?

Brodsky: I thought that it came from God.



Joseph Brodsky was invited to be a speaker at our Symposium last year. At the last minute, for health reasons, he could not attend. I am very happy that he is with us today, and I am sure that he has as much to say about the topic of intuition and creativity as he could have said about the topic of playful imagination and creativity.

Guntern: What are settings that you find inspiring, do you have certain settings? I know that you wrote about it, that you often spend time in Venice. You said somewhere that watching the river Neva has taught you more about infinity and stoicism than mathematics and the writings of Zeno combined.

Brodsky: Water does have that effect, no question about it. Water has a peculiar property. If you look at the ocean or at the sea, you realize that for all its wrinkles, it has no memory, and you begin to wonder about those wrinkles. Many moons ago - I'm going to sell you the old perception - I remember I was looking at the water; it was in the previous incarnation indeed, in Russia, and I thought about the opening of the Bible, about God flying over creation for an undisclosed amount of time, and there was the sea. And I thought if He was flying above the sea, He was bound to be reflected in it. I have sort of a heretical notion of what the Supreme Being is. I think the notion of the Supreme Being, as it has come down to us through the centuries, is essentially the notion of time, of infinity. I thought that what we see in the surface of the water, preferably the ocean, is the reflection of time, that all those wrinkles are time's face. So essentially I believe that looking at the water gives you immediately a sense of your utter insignificance, which is a good humbling effect.

Roessler: Why do artists want to move and why does the rest of society not want to move? Where does this difference come from?

Brodsky: The difference comes from a very simple thing. The artist, by doing what he does, moves. It is up to society or the audience to join him, to catch the same train. And apparently society doesn't want to do that. So society has no way to reproach the artist. When you see something beautiful, when you see a beautiful lady or a beautifully built man, you have two options: either to approach him or her, or not to approach him or her. You elect not to approach him. Because you are already tied up otherwise, elsewhere. This is your problem.

Gschwend: I am a journalist. Two days ago I interviewed a very great, but very humble architect, whose name is Luigi Snozzi, and I asked him, "What is architecture to you? What is the difference



between just building and architecture?" And he said, "Architecture to me is a way of understanding who I am."

Brodsky: Oh, oh.

Gschwend: You said... I think that we also are a product of history, of our personal history and of the history of society. Don't you think that if we used history in the way you use literature, it could be a way of helping us understand who we are? I'm not talking of using history to become better or to progress. I don't believe in that. But I think it is as good a way of understanding our human condition as literature is.

Brodsky: Look, I am speaking only for myself. I represent absolutely nobody. And these are my idiosyncratic ideas about this. Now, as for the statement by the architect that architecture is the way for him to understand himself - it's a bloody costly way to understand himself! Well, architecture is the most social art, the purpose of architecture is to serve people. An architect in a way can't be regarded as an authority on individual choices. An architect should be regarded at best, if he is a good architect, as the servant of society. That would be the best thing to say about an architect. Now, that's one thing.

I do not remember the other thing you talked about, it's already gone.

Gschwend: History as a tool to understand who we are.

Brodsky: History may be a tool, but it's also regrettably, too often, an excuse. We think, "Oh, we failed in history, so why not fail now?" Why not, indeed? But when we come to that conclusion, we usually do so at the expense of lots of other people.

Blum: Is art the only thing in the world that comes directly from heaven?

Brodsky: I do not know whether it comes directly from heaven or not. The other things that come directly from heaven are obviously snow and rain. Sorry.

Guntern: You said somewhere that poetry is the articulation of perception into language.

Brodsky: Well, very often it is.



Guntern: Then you added that language is the best tool for this purpose, for the articulation of perception. Don't you think that a painting by Kandinsky or a sculpture by Giacometti or a nocturne by Chopin achieves the same thing?

Brodsky: I certainly do not.

Guntern: Why?

Brodsky: For a very simple reason. Poetry and literature in general, but poetry by law - and I am quoting Eugene Montale - is an incurably semantic art. It is bound to make sense. If it does not make sense, it does not exist. In painting, in music and whatever else it's possible not to make sense. In poetry it is not. And this is the best and perhaps the only hope in this life. The other arts are decorative. They appeal to your viscera, they irritate or entertain your pupil, your membrane, your senses or whatever. They are no different in the final analysis from gastronomy that entertains your bowels. Art, literature, poetry works with your mind, and that is the best thing you have got.

Q: I do not understand Russian, but what you just did with Pushkin was music, it was lovely, beautiful to listen to. It was music. So you are a musician.

Brodsky: I am not a musician.

Q: You are a poet, but you made music.

Brodsky: No, poetry, for your information, is a melic art. It started with a song. Robert Frost again used to say the aim was song. The aim of poetry is song.

Q: Why does the principle of causality emphasize logic?

Brodsky: Well, logic is impossible without causality.

Q: The artist is part of society.

Brodsky: No, no. The first question was more interesting than the second one.

Q: Let's stay with the first one.

Brodsky: If you speak about logic, you have to talk about causality. You can't really avoid it. Mind you, I'm not entirely sold on this, on logic. But insofar as I am addressing the representatives of the



rationalist culture, I have to employ or resort to the principles of logic. It's as simple as that. I would be far better off with irrationals, but then I should be sitting somewhere in India, not in Zermatt. Insofar as we are sitting in Zermatt, in this rarefied air, I may just as well address the aspects of causality, of cause and effect. Meow, what else?

Gebhardt: I have a very simple question. You suggest the poet if not as a legislator of society, at least as a model for society, for social behavior. Now we know that...

Brodsky: Social behavior I haven't said, but...

Q: ...for good behavior, for history, for progress and I am not sure that you can speak of progress in art, the way you can speak of progress in the sciences. For instance, can poetry actually widen the range of human options? Two, even given society's willingness to accept poets as models, how do we know who are the ones worthy of being models? For we know, forgive the term, that there are just as many "bull-shitters" among the poets as in any other social group.

Brodsky: The easiest thing with poetry, to establish what is what, is simply to open the book, and if it does not make sense to you, throw it away. That is the easiest thing. You cannot really do that with painting or music. I'll give you one example. I have been engaged these days in a rather unlikely activity: translating Euripides's *Medea* into Russian. I have this acquaintance, a very famous Russian director who lives in Greece, and he has decided to produce *Medea* in Greece, but in Russian. There is some money in that, so he can do it. So I have retranslated the play. He comes to me and tries to entice me back to Greece just to discuss the production scheme with the director - who is obviously nowadays far more important than the author - and with the composer and the set designer. I wrote him a letter saying that I would not be coming because of my teaching. I told him, "Do whatever you like, but for Christ's sake, I beseech you, do not use music. Because no matter how good your modern composer may be, he may be a genius, (whatever that is), what he is going to produce is non-Euripidean, anachronistic music. What is the point of it?" The point of it is, the attraction of it (a) for the composer himself and (b) for the morons in the audience who will become only more morons because of that music. Okay? Now, I am getting back to a very simple point. Poetry makes sense, or else it does not. In poetry you can tell whether it makes sense or not faster than in any other form of art which theoretically employs new means, new idioms, etc., which are not available to you. Poetry employs words, words are bound to make sense by themselves or in connection with each other. So it is easier than any place else to tell the bullshit from the jewel.



Gebhardt: But now poetry is supposed to be the avant-garde of consciousness, as you said.

Brodsky: There is no way of talking about avant-garde. Avant-garde is the category which could have been valid presumably somewhere in the twenties or in the thirties. Now we are sitting here, it's 1995, the end of the century, the end of the millennium. An avant-garde in comparison to what?

Q: You yourself said poetry was ahead of society.

Brodsky: I used that term mockingly in reference to the journalist or the critic billing this or that author as being ahead of society. He is not ahead of or behind his own society. He is simply following the logic, the dynamics of the evolution of the art. It may happen that the state of the art does not coincide with the state of the society. Very often, a modern reader goes to the book store, opens a book, and he does not make heads or tails of it; that's fine and dandy, as far as I'm concerned. Basically a modern reader, in relation to modern poetry, finds himself in the position of somebody boarding a runaway train; he gets on the train, looks through that window, does not know where it is going, it is going too fast, and his immediate desire is to get off as soon as he comes to the station. If he feels that way, he should.

Gebhardt: It's not poetry, I wanna get off!

Brodsky: Well, I want to get off or get on.

Q: You suggest that society should follow poetry.

Brodsky: I did not say anything so grand. But go ahead.

Osann: Somehow.

Brodsky: Yes, somehow...

Osann: You were relatively negative when you said society does not approach poets, it put its money on the wrong things. Are you completely negative, or do you have any type of small success where you could say, "That is a success, that's the way it should go!" To give a concrete example, there is one person I know today who is in politics - Havel - what's your position vis-à-vis Havel? Or any other example.

Brodsky: And yet another can filled up with worms!



Society has no obligation. There is no way to legislate in a society what you should read and what you should not. However, every man, every member of society should be cognizant of the choices he makes on a daily basis, whether he reads Robert Musil, VOLKSSTIMME or DIE ZEIT. We are in a situation where you can read a newspaper, a magazine, a novel or a poem. By and large we elect to read magazines and newspapers. But we should tell ourselves that we are reading a newspaper, we are not reading literature. We are moving away from literature. There is literature, but we prefer a newspaper or a magazine. That is, we are making this particular choice. And whatever happens to us is our own fault and not somebody else's. That's one thing.

As regards Václav Havel, when the changes began to occur in eastern Europe, I thought that was a marvelous opportunity for eastern Europe and Russia to come closer. In those countries the vertical hierarchy, the authoritarian system was still intact and I thought that if they had brains, if they only had brains, they could do the following thing: the newspapers like *Rudeprawa* in Czechoslovakia or *Esuestia* and *Pravda* in Russia could have ceased being the main central organ of the state. If the people who were running the societies there genuinely had in mind changing reality, changing human predicament, what they should have done from one paper to another, from one issue to another, is to have serialized man without qualities in search of the, well, *à la recherche du temps perdu* in order to take the entire nations into readership, to give them an entirely new sensibility, qualitatively different from the one that they had been brought up with. That is, to give them not either-or, but rather at least in the case of Musil, the genius of uncertainty. Then they could have implemented, they could have changed those societies' prospects. As it is, they didn't do so. I wrote to Havel specifically about that project because Czechoslovakia is, after all, a fairly limited entity. I was trying to convince him to run this program. The government had the money to conduct this sort of thing. Havel obviously did not do that. Havel is a politician. He was elected as a politician to go with the desires or predilections of the majority. And this is the horrendous error a politician can make. He made it. Eastern Europe therefore, not to mention Russia, is doomed to repeat the quite tremendously compromised predicament of the capitalist West. Perhaps in a far coarser, slower, more idiotic, viscious way. It is a tremendous mistake, the loss of chance. It is as simple as that. Well, they are idiots, those people who run the societies in the East; and they are idiots who run the societies in the West.

E. Blum: What do you think then about Alexander Solshenizin 's projects for Russia now, to bring back the old Russian values and the old Russian culture to the people?

Brodsky: You cannot regalvanize the corpse. You may try to do that, but you have to remember that the old Russia he is trying to revive, to bring back, was precisely what resulted in 1917; it's the Russian Church and the Russian nobility that lost the country. They can't be forgiven. And the efforts to revive those things are idiotic.



Q: I have two different questions: first, have you ever met a politician who had the intellectual capacity to memorize a poem? Second what comes first in creating a poem, the idea of the subject or the first pictures you want to paint? And may I kindly ask you not to reply, "First comes the first word," thank you.

Brodsky: I met such a politician, in fact two, in the United States. One is the Representative in Congress from North Dakota and the other is the Senator from New York. Such people do exist.

As for the second part of the question, according to my experience, a poem starts not as an idea, but as a certain hum, a certain noise; the noise which is not free from the meaning, the noise that somehow contains the idea. And as you proceed to write, it's like playing the keys, like trying to - by this or that word or this or that grammatical operation - to approach that noise to find an equivalent in meaning. It's like playing the keys, it's like trying to pick up the tune that already exists in your head. My beloved Auden used to say about the young poets, "I don't believe when a poet comes to me and says, 'Oh, I want to write about this and that and the other.' I believe rather a man who comes to me and says, 'I like this word or that word.'"

Guntern: Shelley once said that the mind is a fading coal and sometimes a gust of wind begins to make it glow. And that the poet runs after this glow, and that the best poetry has never been written because once the poet starts to write, many important things are already gone. What about this?

Brodsky: No, the best poetry has been written, I hate to contradict Percy Bysshe Shelley, but the best poetry has been written. It has been written.

(recites)

WHEN YOU ARE OLD [1893]

How many loved your moments of glad
grace,
And loved your beauty, with love false
or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in
you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing
face.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)



The best poetry has been written.

Guntern: Okay. I think that we have come to a closure of Gestalt?

Brodsky: Gestalt? I love the word, never understood what it meant.

Guntern: The closure of a structure, a coherence where the end meets the beginning.

I have two things to do now. First, I would like to thank you very much for giving us a glimpse of your....

Brodsky: Do not thank me for anything. I am sitting here, not exactly myself, I am the sum total of what I have read and of what I remember. The moment I do not remember those things, the moment I am on the streets, anybody can knife me and that would not be a great loss. But the moment I remember, I am a treasure. I remember some lines, the lines that will perhaps go down with me, not only with me, they will stay with the others, but they will go, my idiosyncratic choice of the lines will. The whole point is that a human being should know certain lines. Not so much because they may brighten your day or help you along in this and that, but imagine yourself at the end of the road, lying down in pain perhaps, or not in pain, numb by drugs in some hospital. You may find yourself, to your great astonishment, mumbling the lines which bear no relation whatsoever to your predicament right then, mumbling the lines of certain poets. And these lines will help you to meet your last hour, will help you to die or will help you in your pain. Without those lines you will be simply scared. So you better know some poetry by heart.

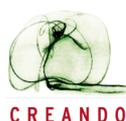
Guntern: What kind of incantation will you choose?

Brodsky: Odd things. It may be Auden, in my case, or it may be Frost, it may be this. The title of the poem is : PROVIDE, PROVIDE. It can be any other poem by Frost, but I like this. (recites)

PROVIDE, PROVIDE

The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pail and rag
Was once the beauty Abishag.

The picture pride of Hollywood.
Too many fall from great and good



For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call you crone.

Some have relied on what they knew,
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
With boughten friendship at your side
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

Remember these three lines

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Meow.

Gun We have had a look at your tremendous exercise in uncertainty. You have transmitted to us your passion for this art, for the handicraft, for the whole world that goes with it. It was a beautiful moment. If I could choose an epitaph for myself, I would like to have a haiku by a modern Japanese writer who died some time ago. The lines go:

Tell them he is out - back in five million years.
So I hope you will be back here in Zermatt.



CREANDO

Brodsky: There is a friend of mine in Venice. His name is Geronimo Marcello. He comes from the old Marcello family that gave the doges and the composers and all sorts of things to the city of Venice. One evening, not that long ago, we were having dinner and he said, "Joseph, I composed a terrific epitaph for myself." I said, "What is it?" - "Here lies Geronimo Marcello, the enemy of ideology, the enemy of conventions." I said, "Well, all right, that's okay." He said, "What do you mean that's all right, that's okay? What would you come up with for your own?" And I replied, "Here lies Joseph Brodsky. I hope you can read."



CREANDO