



*Seamus Heaney*

Those who knew Joseph Brodsky were well aware that his heart disease was serious and that it would probably be the death of him, but because he always existed in his friends' minds not just as a person but as some kind of principle of indestructibility, it was difficult for them to admit that was in danger. The intensity and boldness of his genius plus the sheer exhilaration of being in his company kept you from thinking about the threat to his health; he had such valour and style, and lived at such a deliberate distance from self-pity and personal complaint, you inclined to forget that he was as mortal as the next one. So his death is all the more shocking and distressing. Having to speak of him in the past tense feels like an affront to grammar itself.

There was a wonderfully undoubting quality about Joseph, an intellectual readiness that was almost feral. Conversation attained immediate vertical take-off and no deceleration was possible. Which is to say that he exemplified in life the very thing that he most cherished in poetry—the capacity of language to go farther and faster than expected and thereby provide an escape from the limitations and the preoccupations of the self. Verbally, he had a lower boredom threshold than anyone I have ever known, forever punning, rhyming, veering off and honing in, unexpectedly raising the stakes or switching the tracks. Words were a kind of high octane for him and he loved to be propelled by them wherever they took him. He also loved to put a spin on the words of others, whether by inspired misquotation or extravagant retort. Once, for example, when he was in Dublin and complaining about one of our rare heatwaves, I suggested jokingly that he should take off for Iceland and he replied in a flash, with typical elevation and roguery, “But I could not tolerate the absence of meaning”.

His own absence will be much harder to tolerate. From the moment I met him in 1972, when he was passing through London on the second leg of his journey from dissidence in Russia to exile in the United States, he was a verifying presence. His mixture of brilliance and sweetness, of the highest standards and the most refreshing common sense, never failed to be both fortifying and endearing. Every encounter with him constituted a renewal of belief in the possibilities of poetry. There was

something magnificent in his bewilderment at the sheer ignorance of the demands of the art evident in the work of many poets with big reputations; just as there was something bracing about what he called “doing the laundry list” with him, which meant going over the names of contemporaries, young and old, each sticking up for the ones he regarded most. It was like meeting a secret sharer.

But this was a personal bonus, and in the end it is less important than what might be called his impersonal importance. This had to do with Joseph Brodsky's total conviction about the trustworthiness of poetry as a force for good—not so much “for the good of society” as for the health of the individual mind and soul. He was resolutely against any idea that put the social cart before the personal horse, anything that clad original response in a common uniform. “Herd” for Joseph would have been the opposite of “heard”, but that did not lessen his passion to reinstate poetry as an integral part of the common culture of the United States.

Not that he wished to use the sports stadia for poetry readings. If anyone happened to bring up the huge audiences that attended such events in the Soviet Union, there would be an immediate comeback: “Think of the garbage they have to listen to”. In other words, Joseph decried the yoking together of politics and poetry (“The only thing they have in common are the letters p and o”) not because he had no belief in the transformative powers of poetry *per se* but because the political requirement changed the criteria of excellence and was likely to lead to a debasement of the language and hence to a lowering of “the plane of regard” (a favourite phrase) from which human beings viewed themselves and established their values. And his credentials for such a custodianship of the poet's role were, of course, impeccable, since his arrest and trial by the Soviet authorities in the sixties and his subsequent banishment to a work camp in Archangel—a socially parasitical vocation, according to the prosecution. This had turned his case into something of an international *cause célèbre* and ensured him an immediate fame when he arrived in the West; but instead of embracing victim status and swimming with the currents of radical chic, Brodsky got down to business right away as a university teacher in the University of Michigan.

Before long, however, his celebrity was based more upon what he was doing in his new homeland than what he had done in his old one. To start with, he was an electrifying speaker of his own poems in Russian and him many appearances at universities all over the country in the 1970s brought a new vitality and seriousness to the business of poetry readings. Far from cajoling the audience with a pose of man-in-the-

street low-keyness, Brodsky pitched his performance at a bardic level. His voice was strong, he knew the poems off by heart and his cadences had the majesty and poignancy of a cantor's, so his performance never failed to induce a great sense of occasion in all who attended. He therefore gradually began to be regarded as the figure of the representative poet, sounding prophetic even though he might demur at the notion of the prophetic role, and impressing the academics by the depth of his knowledge of poetic tradition from Classical times up through Renaissance and modern European languages, including English.

Still, if Joseph was uneasy about the prophetic, he had no such qualms about the didactic. Nobody enjoyed laying down the law more than her, with the result that his fame as a teacher began to spread and certain aspects of his practice came to be imitated. In particular, his insistence that students should learn and recite several poems by heart had considerable influence in Creative Writing schools all over the United States, and his advocacy of traditional form, his concentration upon matters of metre and rhyme, and his high rating of non-modernist poets such as Robert Frost and Thomas Hardy also had the general effect of reawakening an older poetic memory. The climax of all this was to come with his "Immodest Proposal", made in 1991 when he was acting as Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress. Why not print poetry in millions of copies, he asked, since a poem "offers you a sample of complete... human intelligence at work" and since that same poem also tells its readers "be like me". Moreover, because poetry employs memory, "it is of use for the future, not to mention the present". It can also do something for ignorance and is "the only insurance available against the vulgarity of the human heart. Therefore it should be available to everyone in the country and at a low cost".

This mixture of barefaced challenge and passionate belief was typical of him. He was always putting the slug-horn to his lips and blowing a note to call out the opposition—even the opposition within himself. He was, indeed, a walking, talking example of Yeats's notion that poetry comes out of that inner quarrel. It manifested itself in everything he did, from the urgency of his need to go into overdrive when rhyming to the incorrigible cheek of his duel with death itself, every time he bared his teeth and bit the filter off a cigarette. He burned not with the hard, gem-like flame that Walter Pater proposed as an ideal but rather with a kind of flame-thrower's whoosh and reach, supple and unpredictable, at once a flourish and a menace. When he used the word "tyrant", for example, I was always glad he wasn't talking about me.

He was all for single combat. He took on stupidity as eagerly as

tyranny (in his understanding, after all, the former was only another aspect of the latter) and he was as bold in conversation as he was in print. But the print is what we have of him now and he will survive behind its black lines, in the pace of its poetic metre or its prose arguments, like Rilke's panther pacing behind black bars with a constancy and inexorability set to outpace all his friends, but for them there will be an extra sweetness and poignancy in the pictures they carry—which in my own case will include that first sight of him as a young man in a red woollen shirt, scanning his audience and his fellow readers with an eye that was at once as anxious as a hedge creature's and as keen as a hawk's.

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