Joseph Brodsky in English

IOSIF ALEKSAKROVICH BRODSKII (1940–1996), better known in English as Joseph Brodsky, was the most visible and successful Russian literary immigrant to the United States after Vladimir Nabokov. As the winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize for Literature and the American poet laureate in 1991, Brodsky gained more official recognition than any other Russian-American writer before or since (even though, unlike Nabokov, his writings did not make him a wealthy man). Nabokov and Brodsky have a superficial outward similarity. Both were Russian-born bilingual authors who were given to strong opinions. Both insisted that literary creation was a cerebral rather than an emotional activity, and both rejected “smooth,” domesticating translations. Forced into exile from their country of birth, they created a poetic oeuvre in Russian and English of comparable proportions, with the native tongue predominating by an approximately ten-fold margin over the poetry written in the second language.² Last but not least, both Nabokov and Brodsky engaged in poetic self-translation. Brodsky translated fifty-three of his Russian poems into English on his own, in addition to collaborating with extraneous translators on many more texts.²

In spite of these parallels, there are more differences than similarities between Nabokov’s and Brodsky’s bilingual trajectories and reputations. Nabokov’s status as a major English-language novelist is firmly established, while his poetry, Russian or English, has received little attention and is generally considered of secondary importance. Most critics agree that Nabokov’s talent as a prose writer surpassed his poetic gift.³ Matters stand differently for Brodsky, who was a poet first and foremost. He did receive high praise for his English-language essays (the collection Less Than One won the National Book Critics Award in 1986), but the reception of his English-language poetry has been mixed at best. Given that for most American readers, Brodsky’s Russian poems are only accessible in translation, and in view of the active role that Brodsky took in shaping the English renditions of his Russian poetic oeuvre, the quality of his self-translations has become a source of considerable controversy and acrimony. Brodsky’s decision as a non-native speaker of
English to take the translation of his poems into his own hands, or—perhaps even worse—to edit and “correct” the work of prominent Anglophone poets who had agreed to translate his work—was bound to raise eyebrows. How could an immigrant who spoke English with a thick foreign accent dare to lecture experienced American-born and British-born poets about the finer points of English verse? To many critics, such behavior seemed, at best, presumptuous, and at worst, self-destructive in terms of Brodsky’s reputation. Some of the premises on which this criticism is based, in particular Brodsky’s alleged insecure grasp of the English language, are open to challenge. In reality, Brodsky’s command of English was more solid than what his accent suggested, or what his critics were willing to give him credit for. A consideration of Brodsky’s self-translations has to begin with an assessment of his relationship with the English language.

**BRODSKY AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Not everyone holding forth on Brodsky’s English skills, or lack thereof, is aware of the unusual circumstances under which he acquired this language. The genesis of Brodsky’s bilingualism differed markedly from that of Nabokov, or any other of the poets discussed thus far. Brodsky was essentially a self-made bilingual. Unlike Nabokov, he did not benefit from an aristocratic multilingual upbringing. He grew up in Leningrad as a “normal” monolingual Soviet child. Even though he was ethnically Jewish, there was no exposure to Yiddish or Hebrew, given the Stalinist erasure of Jewish cultural memory after World War II. Brodsky’s Baltic-born mother knew German, but did not pass the language on to her son. The English-language instruction that he received in school was of subpar quality and thoroughly uninspiring. According to Brodsky’s own account, the reading material consisted of “the standard propaganda garbage translated into English . . . A biography of Stalin, a memoir of some party faithful meeting, Lenin in his Finnish hideout.”

Brodsky’s aversion to English class was so strong that he came close to being kept back in fourth grade because of his poor grades in that subject. He quit school voluntarily at age fifteen. From then on, his education was entirely autodidactic. The first foreign language that he taught himself was Polish, which allowed him to read Western literature in Polish translation that was otherwise unavailable in the Soviet Union. Polish was followed by English—possibly under the influence of Anna Akhmatova, who had become Brodsky’s mentor.

A key moment in Brodsky’s appropriation of English was his discovery of John Donne and other poets of the English metaphysical school during his exile in Norenskaia, the small village near the Arctic Circle where he had
been banished on charges of “social parasitism.” Equipped with only a bilingual dictionary, Brodsky proceeded to translate Donne’s poetry into Russian. Donne exerted a considerable influence on the development of Brodsky’s own Russian-language poetry, not only in terms of themes, imagery, and poetic technique, but even rhythm and prosody. In addition to Donne, Brodsky studied and translated a number of twentieth-century English and American poets, in particular W. H. Auden, who became an important inspiration (and, after Brodsky’s emigration in 1972, a personal friend).

There was inevitably a huge gap between Brodsky’s passive and active knowledge of English, at least as long as he remained in the Soviet Union, where the opportunities for speaking the language were extremely limited. Clarence Brown reports that when he heard Brodsky recite an English poem by George Herbert during a visit to Leningrad in 1966, he thought that Brodsky was speaking Lithuanian. Even later, when he had achieved fluency in English, Brodsky still retained a very noticeable foreign accent. The peculiarities of his pronunciation and intonation could easily obscure the fact that Brodsky, while clearly not a native speaker of the language, had an intimate familiarity with English poetry that surpassed by far the knowledge of an educated British or American native speaker. He was able to recite hundreds of lines of English poetry by heart. We should not forget Brodsky’s Anglophile leanings that preceded his actual residence in an English-speaking environment. Motivated by literary and poetic considerations rather than biographical happenstance, Brodsky’s appropriation of the English language was essentially a labor of love.

Brodsky contrasted his attitude to the English language with that of Nabokov in several interviews. In conversation with David Bethea, he claimed that for Nabokov the change from Russian to English was “easy,” since, “like any civilized person, he felt at home in several languages, two or three.” Brodsky saw himself as a different kind of bilingual: “For me, the English language means nostalgia for world order. And for him English was simply one of his languages. . . . When looked at more closely, I have a pretty sentimental attitude toward the English language. That’s the whole difference.” He elaborated on this thought in an interview with an Estonian newspaper in 1995 a few months before his death:

For Nabokov, English was practically a native language, he spoke it since his childhood. But for me English is my personal position. It gives me pleasure to write in English. An additional pleasure comes from a feeling of incongruity: inasmuch as I was not born to know this language, but the exact opposite, not to know it.

Moreover, I think that I began to write in English for a different reason than Nabokov—simply out of delight with this language. If I were confronted
with a choice—to use only one language, Russian or English—I would simply lose my mind.9

Clearly, Brodsky came to see his existence in two linguistic spheres as a gain rather than a curse. Writing in English was more than a pragmatic decision prompted by the exigencies of living in an Anglophone environment—it fulfilled a genuine creative need. Having two languages at his disposal became an existential and psychological necessity that he was unwilling to part with. In conversation with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky described his bilingualism as “a remarkable situation psychically, because you’re sitting on top of a mountain and looking down both slopes. . . . You see both slopes, and this is an absolutely special sensation. Were a miracle to occur and I were to return to Russia permanently, I would be extremely nervous at not having the option of using more than one language.”10

There is evidence that Brodsky had already experimented with writing English verse at a time when his active command of the language was still extremely limited. A letter from his Arctic exile written in 1965 contains a semi-serious rhymed English quatrain:

My window is
immoral kiss
of white
twilighte11

Aside from the shaky spelling (perhaps influenced by seventeenth-century usage?), the rhyme “is”/“kiss” betrays a Russian accent, which occasionally persists also in Brodsky’s later and more confident English verse. Four years later, that is, still long before his emigration, Brodsky translated a poem by his friend Vladimir Ufliand into English. It shows that even then he envisioned his translational activity between English and Russian as potentially a two-way street.12

Brodsky’s first serious attempts at writing poetry in English were prompted by the death of two Anglophone poets who had become personal friends. His elegy in commemoration of W. H. Auden, written in October 1973, that is, only a year and a half after his emigration, appeared in the New York Review of Books in December 1974 and was later included in a 1975 volume of tributes to Auden edited by Stephen Spender. If we are to believe Brodsky, Auden was the reason why he began to write in English in the first place. In his 1983 essay “To Please a Shadow,” he writes:

When a writer resorts to a language other than his mother tongue, he does so either out of necessity, like Conrad, or because of burning ambition, like
Nabokov, or for the sake of greater estrangement, like Beckett. Belonging to a different league, in the summer of 1977, in New York, after living in this country for five years, I purchased in a small typewriter shop on Sixth Avenue a portable “Lettera 22” and set out to write (essays, translations, occasionally a poem) in English for a reason that had very little to do with the above. My sole purpose then, as it is now, was to find myself in closer proximity to the man whom I considered the greatest mind of the 20th Century: Wystan Hugh Auden.13

Brodsky’s statement, while no doubt heartfelt, probably needs to be taken with a grain of salt. In any event, his elegy for Auden is a rather weak poem that has not been reprinted in the later editions of his poetry. Brodsky himself later expressed regret for allowing its publication in the first place.14 Four years later, however, Brodsky composed another elegy for an Anglophone poet, Robert Lowell, which first appeared in The New Yorker in October 1977. This poem, the first one in English to be collected in a book, shows a greatly improved command of English verse writing, evoking Lowell’s Boston and New England “with remarkable economy and vividness,” as David Bethea has noted.15 For the sake of illustration, here is the first stanza:

In the autumnal blue
of your church-hooded New
England, the porcupine
sharpens its golden needles
against Bostonian bricks
to a point of needless
blinding shine.16

The stanza displays some of the trademark features of Brodsky’s poetic style, such as the daring enjambment “New / England,” as well as ingenious rhyming. One wonders whether the unusual rhyme “needles”—“needless,” which depends as much on graphic as on sound, would have occurred to an English native speaker. Possibly it betrays the fresh perspective of someone who is looking at the language from the outside.

The elegy for Robert Lowell clearly shows Brodsky to be a capable English-language poet. Nevertheless, when questioned by interviewers in the late 1970s, he denied that he had any ambition to write serious poetry in English. Here is how he answered a question (in Russian) by John Glad, who wanted to know whether Brodsky wanted to become a bilingual poet:

You know, no. This ambition I do not have at all, although I am perfectly capable of writing entirely decent poems in English. But for me, when I write
verses in English, this is rather a game, chess, if you want, putting bricks together. But I frequently realize that the psychological, emotional-acoustic processes are identical. The same mechanisms are mobilized that are active when I compose verses in Russian. But to become a Nabokov or a Joseph Conrad, such ambitions I do not have at all. Even though I imagine that this would be completely possible for me, I simply don’t have the time, energy, or narcissism for this. However, I fully admit that someone in my place could be one and the other, i.e., write poems in English and in Russian.17

Brodsky’s answer is strangely coy and self-contradictory. Almost every sentence begins with a hedging word—“no” (but), “khotia” (even though), “odnako” (however). Essentially, Brodsky seems to be saying that, even though he has no plans to become a bilingual poet, there would be no real impediment for him to be a great poet in more than one language. The only thing that stops him is his alleged lack of ambition, or his unwillingness to become another Nabokov (which, as far as Brodsky is concerned, is not a flattering comparison). Writing poetry in English looks at first sight like a mere “game” devoid of serious artistic value. However, at second sight it turns out to be not all that different from writing poetry in the native language after all. It is not surprising, then, that Brodsky began to write poems in English on a more and more regular basis. As Eugenia Kelbert has pointed out, “while Brodsky only published one original English poem in the 1970s, fifteen were published in the 80s and this number almost doubled (28) in the short half-decade before the poet’s death in 1996. These numbers speak for themselves: clearly, Brodsky’s English career, cut short at the age of fifty-five, was only just unfolding.”18

BRODSKY’S EVOLUTION AS A SELF-TRANSLATOR

It is important to keep in mind that Brodsky’s “English career” did not only consist of poems originally composed in English. A large number of his English poems are self-translations of texts originally written in Russian. This raises a number of questions: Are these translations part of Brodsky’s larger corpus of English-language poetry, or do they belong to a category of their own?219 Is there a difference, stylistic or otherwise, between the self-translations and the poems written directly in English? Should the translations be viewed as inferior simulacra of the Russian source texts, or as English poems in their own right, which ought to be appreciated independently of their original Russian incarnations?

The history of Brodsky’s poetry in English translation evolves along the lines of a steadily increasing intrusion of the author into the translational
process. While Brodsky originally had no role at all in shaping the English versions of his Russian poetry, at the end he took complete control and responsibility. The first edition of Brodsky’s poetry in English came out in 1967 without any involvement by Brodsky. He did have a more active role in George Kline’s translation of his Selected Poems published in 1973, even though he still resided in the Soviet Union. Essentially, Brodsky answered various queries by the translator, which were delivered to him via hand-carried messages. Given his still limited knowledge of English, he did not presume to interfere in the poetic shape of the translated text. In particular, Kline’s imperfect preservation of rhymes did not seem to bother Brodsky at that time. In a note to Kline he declared himself to be “highly delighted” by the translation, adding “To hell with the rhymes, if it works out this way.”

This “hands off” attitude changed considerably after Brodsky moved to the United States. The next collection of his poetry in English, A Part of Speech, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1980. The roster of translators, in addition to Kline, included such illustrious names as Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and Derek Walcott, among others. Brodsky appended the following note to the book:

I would like to thank each of my translators for his long hours of work in rendering my poems into English. I have taken the liberty of reworking some of the translations to bring them closer to the original, though perhaps at the expense of their smoothness. I am doubly grateful to the translators for their indulgence.

In reality, the translators were not as indulgent as Brodsky’s comment suggests. His intervention in the translational process resulted in a number of bruised egos. The translators, some of them prominent English-language poets, resented Brodsky’s interference in a domain in which they felt they possessed more competence than he did. Brodsky’s insistence on the exact preservation of meter and rhyme in translation seemed to them exaggerated and misguided. They also objected to Brodsky’s cavalier attitude of treating what they considered polished poetic translations as mere drafts that could be altered, rewritten, or discarded at will by the original author.

Brodsky, for his part, did not hide his apprehensions about the quality of the translational work done by his Anglophone peers. In an interview with Grace Cavalieri in 1991, he described his reaction to reading the English translations of his poetry as a mixture of pleasure and horror: “On one hand you’re terribly pleased that something you’ve done will interest the English. The initial sentiment is the pleasure. As you start to read it turns very quickly into horror and it’s a tremendously interesting mixture of those two sentiments.” Interestingly, Brodsky claimed that his displeasure with the En-
English translations of his poetry stemmed not so much from the fact that they were inadequate renditions of his poems, but from a general concern with the quality of their English language. As he stated to Sven Birkerts in 1979:

The thing that bothers me about many of those translations is that they are not very good English. It may have to do with the fact that my affair with the English language is fairly fresh, fairly new, and therefore perhaps I’m subject to some extra sensitivity. So what bothers me is not so much that the line of mine is bad—what bothers me is the bad line in English.25

Coming from an immigrant who was faulted by native speakers of English for his imperfect or unidiomatic command of their language, such a statement was cheeky, to say the least. But Brodsky clearly did not mind being provocative and ruffling feathers. His displeasure with the translations done by extraneous translators, and probably also the fatigue induced by the need for constant haggling with them, eventually prompted Brodsky to take matters into his own hands. He suggested, semi-facetiously, that he became his own translator so that he could himself take the blame for the deficiencies of the translation:

One thing I can say is that the reason I translate myself is simply . . . it’s not because of vanity or enthusiasm for my own work. Quite the contrary. It’s simply because very often it quickly develops into a great deal of bad rub, especially if the man is older than yourself. Whereas, you can correct the translator, you change the poem once, twice, three times, a fourth time. People would say, it’s lousy English, but in the original it’s great. In order to avoid that association, I decided to do it myself, so I could be blamed. I would take the responsibility. I would rather reproach myself than what some other gentleman would say.26

This semi-jocular statement raises two points that are crucial for Brodsky’s understanding of translation: the necessity of constant, multiple revision, and the need to look at the translation as a poem in its own right rather than as the imperfect copy of an elusive original.

Brodsky did end up assuming total responsibility and control over the English versions of his poetry. In his collections To Urania (1988) and So Forth (1996), the majority of translations—20 in the first and 31 in the second book—are executed by himself without any external collaborator. Even when he was not the sole translator, he remained firmly in charge of the translational process. A note informs the reader that all extraneous translations in To Urania were “commissioned and revised by the author.” The note to So Forth suggests an even stronger involvement on Brodsky’s part:
“Translations, where not made by the author, were commissioned by him and executed under his direction.” It looks as if Brodsky, when he retained an extraneous translator at all, preferred not to rely on the “big name” poets of his earlier collection, but on people who were more pliable to his own wishes.

While Brodsky could be quite ruthless and dictatorial in his dealings with translators of his work, he was not completely unreasonable. In some instances he was willing to listen to the advice of English native speakers. George Kline reports that in “infrequent cases . . . Brodsky made unacceptable suggestions for revision because he misunderstood an English word” or because he mistakenly “assumed that certain kinds of Russian word-order, in particular inversions, will work in English.” In those instances Brodsky usually backed down and deferred to Kline’s judgment. The same holds true for questions of prosody—Brodsky accepted, for example, Kline’s contention that “here” and “near” cannot be treated as two-syllable words. Over-all, Kline remained diplomatic in describing his collaborative relation with Brodsky, which he summarizes as follows:

Working closely with a Russian poet who has a deep and subtle, even if fallible, command of one’s own language—the language into which one is struggling, with that poet’s help, to transpose his work—is a unique experience, always stimulating, sometimes illuminating, occasionally humbling or frustrating.

Other translators who collaborated with Brodsky were less reticent than Kline in expressing their frustration with the poet’s interference in their work. Daniel Weissbort writes that “the main problem . . . was that Brodsky found it hard, or impossible, to accept his translator’s notion of what was tolerable in English. He was constantly, it seemed to me, trying as it were to transform English into Russian, to colonize English and oblige it to do things I did not believe it could do.”

Did Brodsky’s interference in his translators’ work enhance or damage the quality of their translations? In order to arrive at a conclusive judgment about this issue, one would need to compare their initial versions with Brodsky’s revisions. Making use of the Brodsky papers at Yale’s Beinecke Library, Zakhar Ishov has done just that by painstakingly collating the multiple drafts of George Kline’s translation of the poem “A Second Christmas by the Shore” with Brodsky’s suggested emendations. The textual evidence supports Ishov’s claim that Brodsky’s intervention resulted in an improved translation. Ishov shows that Brodsky’s version, as opposed to Kline’s original drafts, matches the original more closely in both content and form while also resulting in a more compelling English poetic text. Daniel Weissbort arrived at a similar conclusion with regard to Brodsky’s substantial reworking of his
translation of the sequence “A Part of Speech.” This is worth noting, given that originally Weissbort had been so piqued by Brodsky’s dismissive treatment of what he considered a polished translation that he asked to have his name withdrawn from the published version, for which he wanted to assume no responsibility as co-translator. Yet, when revisiting the text after Brodsky’s death, Weissbort conceded that “with all its imperfections” Brodsky’s version was still “patently superior” to his own. He now admitted that Brodsky, after all, may have been “right about translation.”33 What precisely, then, was Brodsky “right” about?

**BRODSKY’S THEORY OF TRANSLATION**

Brodsky’s insistence on preserving meter and rhyme, while a common feature of English-to-Russian verse translation, went very much against the grain of prevalent contemporary practices in the United States. This attitude put him on a collision course with established American translators of Russian poetry. As early as 1973, long before he engaged in his own self-translational project, Brodsky had begun to attack the American translation industry. In reviewing the work of English-language translators of Russian poetry, he did not hold back in castigating what he perceived as a fundamental abdication of the aesthetic, and even ethical, task of the translator. Here is how he commented on Stanley Kunitz’s translation of Anna Akhmatova’s poems:

. . . in order to translate, one must . . . have some conception of not only the author’s complex of ideas, his education, and the details of his personal biography, but also his etiquette, or better the etiquette of the poetry in which the poet worked . . .

. . . Then there will be no temptation to omit some things, emphasize others, use free verse where the original is in sestets, etc. That is, the translator must have not only the technical but also the spiritual experience of the original. . . . In translation, some loss is inevitable. But a great deal can be preserved too. One can preserve the meter, one can preserve the rhymes (no matter how difficult this may seem each time), one can and must preserve the meaning. Not one of these things, but all together. Images exist, and one must follow them—and not propound fashionable theories in the introductions.34

Brodsky took an even sharper tone in his review of the translations of Osip Mandelstam’s poetry by W. S. Merwin, Burton Raffel, and David McDuff, which he characterized as “the product of profound moral and cultural ignorance” resulting in translations that “bear the imprint of self-assured, insufferable stylistic provincialism.” As he elaborated:
Translation is a search for an equivalent, not for a substitute. Mandelstam is a formal poet in the highest sense of the word. For him a poem began with a sound, with a “sonorous molded shape of form,” as he himself called it. Logically, a translator should begin his work with a search for at least a metrical equivalent to the original form . . . A poem is a result of a certain necessity: it is inevitable, so is its form . . . Form too is noble . . . It is the vessel in which meaning is cast; they sanctify each other reciprocally—it is an association of soul and body. Break the vessel, and the liquid will leak out.35

It is interesting to contrast Brodsky’s approach to that of Nabokov, who could be equally uncompromising in his attack against American translators of Russian poetry. Both Nabokov and Brodsky were absolutists, and both shared a common contempt for what they called “smooth” translations. At the same time, Brodsky’s formal absolutism is the polar opposite of the semantic absolutism that Nabokov propagated in his later years. In his preface to Eugene Onegin, Nabokov writes:

In transposing Eugene Onegin from Pushkin’s Russian into my English I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity. To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth.36

This stubborn “in-your-face” attitude, presenting the translation as a challenge to the philistine tastes and prejudices of the presumptive audience, also characterized Brodsky’s approach to translation. Like Nabokov, he was not willing to make any concessions to public preferences and established practice in his pursuit of what he considered the only legitimate and “true” translation method. Valentina Polukhina’s description of Brodsky’s (self-) translational approach as a series of stunning “sacrifices” in the service of a stubbornly pursued ideal sounds rather similar to Nabokov’s declaration, as long as we substitute form for semantics. As Polukhina put it: “He was willing to sacrifice rhetorical figures to rhyme, syntax to prosody—everything, including meaning, to form. And he did.”37

Of all the poets discussed thus far, Brodsky’s method of self-translation comes closest to that of Marina Tsvetaeva. This is probably no accident: Brodsky considered Tsvetaeva the greatest poet of the twentieth century, not only in Russian, but in any language.38 Neither Tsvetaeva nor Brodsky had any patience for free verse in the translation of formal poetry. As Tsvetaeva did in her French version of Mólodets, Brodsky was willing to introduce significant semantic alterations in his self-translated poems for the sake of preserving the formal energy of the original text. Moreover, both Tsvetaeva and
Brodsky were ready to violate the norms of the target language when it suited their purpose, creating a “Russified” version of French and English that left some of their readers baffled or indignant.

Many of Brodsky’s self-translations are a tour de force seemingly designed to prove the presupposition that formal equivalence between Russian and English is an achievable goal. Rather than picking “easy” texts, he gravitated toward poems that presented a particular formal challenge. Thus, the first poem that he translated on his own in 1980, “December in Florence,” is written in triple-rhymed tercets, a feature preserved in the English version. The poem “Portrait of Tragedy,” first published in 1996, presents an even greater tour de force, featuring twelve stanzas with AAAABBB rhymes. The English text maintains not only the rhyme scheme of the Russian original, it even preserves the feminine nature of all the rhymes, a feat not easily achieved in English. A listing of the rhyming words in the English translation of the poem demonstrates Brodsky’s verbal creativity (words in italics designate the lexemes that also rhyme in the Russian text):

Stanza 1: “creases-rhesus-rises-wheezes,” “lately-lazy-lady”
Stanza 2: “senseless-lenses-else’s-pretenses,” “heroes-eras-chorus”
Stanza 4: “Gorgon-golden-burden-broaden,” “fashion-ashen-crush on”
Stanza 5: “ardor-under-fodder-founder,” “cartridge-courage-garbage”
Stanza 6: “feces-faces-save this-laces,” “cheer up, cherub, stirrup”
Stanza 7: “hidden-heathen-mitten-smitten,” “decent-distant-instant”
Stanza 8: “statues-much as-catch is-matchless,” “martyrs-starters-tatters”
Stanza 9: “evening-beginning-being-grieving,” “vowels-bowels-ovals”
Stanza 10: “gargle-ogle-ogre-goggle,” “of us-sofas-surface”
Stanza 11: “stir it-Spirit-serried-buried,” “badly-buggy-ugly”
Stanza 12: “torrent-warrant-weren’t-worried,” “oven-cloven-open”

Aside from occasional slant rhymes, the consistent “femininity” of the rhyming is produced more than once by means of compounds. Such rhymes have a tendency to sound comical in English, although several compound rhymes also occur in the Russian original, with similar implications. The scansion of “weren’t” as a two-syllable word possibly betrays the peculiarities of Brodsky’s oral performance in English. The potentially comic implication of the compound rhymes is not necessarily a distraction here—they serve to underline Brodsky’s tragicomic representation of tragedy as a grotesque female character. In terms of phonetics, some of the English rhymes manage to reproduce the hissing sound characteristic of the Russian original (“creases-rhesus-rises-wheezes” corresponds to “morshchiny-muzhchiny-chertovshchiny-prichiny”). The reproduction of form in translation, espe
cially such a challenging one as a stanza consisting of quadruple and triple feminine rhymes, necessitates inevitable semantic shifts. Natalia Rulyova, in her detailed comparison of the Russian and English versions of the poem, has observed that the autobiographical references to Brodsky’s Soviet past are toned down in English, where tragedy is represented in more abstract than historically concrete terms and the irremediability of tragedy is less pronounced than in the Russian original.41

FROM “OCTOBER SONG” TO “OCTOBER TUNE”

How did Brodsky’s emigration to the United States affect his attitude towards his earlier poetry? In order to explore this question, I propose to analyze Brodsky’s self-translation of the brief poem “Oktiabr’skaia pesnia” (“October Song”). Written in 1971, the year before Brodsky left the Soviet Union, “October Song” evokes an evening spent with a female companion in a house by the seaside. The atmosphere moves from an initial mood of lifeless stasis—evoked by the “objective correlative” of a stuffed quail on a mantelpiece, the chirring of an old clock, and the depiction of a morose nature scene in late fall—toward a sort of domestic idyll. The speaker’s request to the female addressee to put aside her book does not, as one might expect, lead to an erotic scene (Dante’s line “that day we read no further” comes to mind) but to housewifely needlework, with the female character mending the speaker’s linen. The poem ends on a note of romantic sublimity with the evocation of the female character’s radiant golden hair illuminating the dark room. While the seascape setting, gloomy weather, and references to time and inanimate objects are trademark features of Brodsky, the poem is uncharacteristically simple and straightforward—there are no daring enjambments, virtuoso rhymes, or other rhetorical fireworks.

Октябрьская песня
Чучело перепелки
стоит на каминной полке.
Старые часы, правильно стрекоча,
радуют ввечеру смятые перепонки.
Дерево за окном — пасмурная свеча.
Море четвертый день глухо гудит у дамбы.
Отложи свою книгу, возьми иглу;
штопай мое белье, не зажигая лампы:
от золота волос
светло в углу.42
A literal English translation of the poem would look as follows:

October Song
A stuffed quail
Stands on the mantelpiece.
The old clock, regularly chirring,
Pleases in the evening the crumpled membranes.
The tree behind the window is a dull candle.
The sea for the fourth day roars hollowly at the dike.
Put your book aside, take the needle,
Mend my linen without lighting the lamps:
from the gold of the hair
it is bright in the corner.

Brodsky’s English translation of the poem was first published in The New Yorker on October 5, 1987, under the title “October Tune:"

October Tune
A stuffed quail
on the mantelpiece minds its tail.
The regular chirr of the old clock’s healing
in the twilight the rumpled helix.
Through the window, birch candles fail.

For the fourth day the sea hits the dike with its hard horizon.
Put aside the book, take your sewing kit;
patch my clothes without turning the light on;
golden hair
keeps the corner lit.43

As in all of his self-translations, Brodsky tries to preserve as much as possible of the original form. In the case of “Oktiabr’skaia pesnia” this is more easily achieved with the meter than with the rhymes. The two five-line stanzas are written in a relatively loose dolnik with generally increasing lines in the first stanza and progressively decreasing ones in the second stanza. This feature is highlighted by the graphic arrangement of the English text, which presents the lines centered rather than flush left. Given that English words have fewer syllables on average than Russian words, the English lines tend to be generally shorter.44 There is one significant exception, however: line 6 stands out by being longer in English than in Russian. “More chetvertyi den’ glukho
gudit u damby” (“The sea for the fourth day roars hollowly at the dike”) becomes “For the fourth day the sea hits the dike with its hard horizon.” We can clearly see that the increased line length in English is the result of semantic expansion.

The re-creation of rhymes was a major priority for Brodsky when he translated his poems. In the case of “Oktiabr’kaia pesnia,” the Russian AAbAb CdCEd scheme is slightly altered in the English version, and Brodsky also replaces feminine with masculine endings and vice versa, producing the scheme aaBBa CdCed. One peculiar feature that carries over from Russian to English is the fact that line 9, evoking the addressee’s golden hair, does not rhyme with anything. Making the line stand out in this way underlines a semantic point: just as the golden hair of the female companion is able to illuminate the room on its own without any other source of light, the word “hair” does not need a rhyming partner in order to “shine” in the text. In consequence, both the Russian and the English versions feature the same lexeme in this (non-)rhyming position.

Aside from the identical word at the end of line 9, only one other lexeme in rhyming position is the same in Russian and English: “perepelki”/“quail” in line 1. In addition, the rhyme words “iglu” (needle) and “sewing kit” (line 7), “lampy” (lamps) and “light on” (line 8), and “v uglu” (in the corner) and “keeps the corner lit” (line 10) have a similar effect. Overall, though, Brodsky engages in considerable semantic adjustments in his pursuit of English rhymes. How much do they alter the poem? The first two lines look like a rather forced attempt to introduce a rhyme at any price. “Chuchelo perepelki / stoit na kaminnoi polke” (“A stuffed quail / stands on the mantelpiece”) becomes “A stuffed quail / on the mantelpiece minds its tail.” Purely for the sake of rhyme, it seems, the English version ascribes agency to what is presented as a lifeless object in the Russian original. Other English rhyming solutions are more ingenious. In lines 3 and 4, “healing” rhymes with “helix.” These words more or less convey the semantic information given in the Russian text, where the chirring of the old clock is said to be pleasing to the speaker’s “crumpled membranes.” To be sure, “helix” focuses on a different part of the human ear than the Russian “membrane,” but both images refer to the auditory sense. While “healing” is more explicit than the Russian “pleasing,” given the apparently damaged state of the speaker’s ear, it is plausible that the sound of the old clock would have a soothing effect.

Somewhat paradoxically, the English version of the poem is more explicit and yet at the same time more difficult to understand. The line “Derevo za oknom—pasmurnaia svecha” (“The tree behind the window is a dull candle”) becomes “Through the window, birch candles fail.” The Russian original features a nonstandard use of the adjective “pasmurnyi.” Meaning something like “dull,” “gloomy,” or “overcast,” this word usually qualifies the
weather. Using it to describe a candle is clearly unidiomatic. In the present case, the gloomy weather semantically “infects” the tree in front of the window and spreads from there to its metaphorical representation as a candle, resulting in a quasi-oxymoronic “dull candle.” In other words, what should be a source of light becomes instead a focus of darkness in the poem.\(^{45}\) This dark candle fulfills a specific purpose in the poem’s economy: it stands in contrast to the woman’s hair in the second stanza, which is able to illuminate the room better than a lamp. In the English version, the tree in front of the window is explicitly identified as a birch tree. The common essence of whiteness or brightness helps to motivate the metaphorical presentation of the tree as a candle. However, the English text does not really make clear that “candle” is used as a metaphorical stand-in for the tree (“birch candles” rather suggests something like candles made of birch wood, or candles placed on a birch tree). The fact that these candles “fail,” prompted by the rhymes with “quail” and “tail,” lacks the oxymoronic energy of the original image and creates a rather enigmatic impression for a reader who is unacquainted with the Russian original.

The most significant deviation between the original and the translation occurs in the already mentioned line 6, where “The sea for the fourth day roars hollowly at the dike” becomes “For the fourth day the sea hits the dike with its hard horizon.” The “hard horizon” in the English version is nowhere to be found in the Russian original. Did Brodsky simply add these words because he needed a rhyme with “light on” (similarly to the “tail” added to the “quail”)? In general, he was not averse to introducing semantic material into his self-translations for the sake of rhyme—something that, if done by a translator other than the author, would almost certainly be condemned as illegitimate “padding.” However, the need for a rhyme is not a sufficient explanation for what is happening here. Alexandra Berlina has made the interesting observation that “the horizon as a source of pain, a hard or sharp thing, is one of Brodsky’s favorite images.”\(^{46}\) This image is realized with greater intensity in English than in Russian. Depictions of a hard horizon appear in nine of Brodsky’s published English translations, but only in three of the corresponding Russian originals (three more source poems contain the word “horizon,” but without further qualification). “October Tune” is one of the three poems where the word “horizon” is absent in the Russian version, but has been added in the English one. Interestingly, all three of these self-translations date from 1987, the year when Brodsky received the Nobel Prize. Berlina argues that the image of the “sharp horizon” represents the ocean separating the United States from Russia and at the same time indicates the irretrievable temporal abyss between Brodsky’s American present and Russian past. It is not by accident that the self-translation of “Oktiabr’kaia pesnia” seemingly bridges the gap between Brodsky’s pre-emigration Russian and post-
Joseph Brodsky in English

Emigration English oeuvre. In 1987, thanks to the political changes affecting the Soviet Union, Brodsky could have returned for a visit to his homeland. By inserting the crucial image of the “hard horizon” into the English version of his poems that he self-translated in that year, Berlina argues, “it is as if he was reminding himself that he could not return: even if he went back in space, he still could not go back in time.”

As we can see, “October Tune” is more than a simple reconstruction of the Russian original in English. It also functions to some extent as a self-commentary, expressing Brodsky’s changed attitude toward a poem that he composed while still living in the Soviet Union and was now revisiting in America sixteen years later. In that sense, the English self-translation becomes an “American” poem. The slightly altered title, substituting a “tune” for the Russian “song,” puts the translation in dialogue with other poems from Brodsky’s American period, all of them written directly in English, such as “The Berlin Wall Tune” (1980), “Belfast Tune” (1986), and “Bosnia Tune” (1992). All of these poems exist in a tension between the soothing musicality suggested by the title and the violent world of war and ethnic conflict evoked in the text. By the same token, the seemingly idyllic world of “October Tune” hints at an underlying darker reality. Overall, Brodsky’s rather uncharacteristically simple Russian poem gains an increased complexity through its transposition into English. Paradoxically, as Berlina has argued, this transformation may make “the self-translation more characteristic of the poet than the original.”

BRODSKY’S ENGLISH OEUVRE AND THE CRITICS

While Brodsky is undoubtedly the most canonical Russian poet of the second half of the twentieth century, the validity of his English oeuvre remains an issue of ongoing controversy. In a 2015 review published on her blog The Book Haven, Cynthia Haven, a former student of Brodsky’s and the editor of his collected interviews in English, opined that Brodsky’s reputation in the English-speaking world is “marred by the ambitious, ill-advised self-translations that would have torpedoed a lesser genius.” Haven’s remark prompted a reply from Ann Kjellberg, Brodsky’s literary executor and the editor of his collected English poetry, who argued that “Brodsky’s effort to enliven and expand the formal repertoire in English, which met with considerable resistance at the time, can surely now be judged a success.” The disagreement between Haven and Kjellberg replicates a dispute that has persisted for decades at this point. The most vociferous attacks against Brodsky’s English-language writings came from two well-established British poets and critics, Christopher Reid and Craig Raine, in the 1980s and 1990s. The titles
of their reviews—"Great American Disaster" and "A Reputation Subject to Inflation"—speak for themselves.\(^{52}\) Reid's complaints about the "generally 'un-English' quality of Brodsky's performance" were amplified by Raine's claim that Brodsky, a "world-class mediocrity" in his opinion, was "unable to achieve more than a basic competence in his adopted language." While Raine's dismissive characterization of Brodsky's English skills is demonstrably wrong, Reid was on somewhat more solid ground when he pointed to the "un-English" quality of Brodsky's performance. However, in an age that values "foreignization," one has to wonder whether the non-idiomatic handling of the target language is a sufficient argument to disqualify a translation. Moreover, the perception of traditional meter and rhyme as an expression of conservatism, which had led some American critics on the Left to attack Brodsky on political grounds,\(^ {53}\) has given way to a more tolerant and pluralist attitude in recent years. It now seems permissible again to use forms other than free verse in English-language poetry without being labeled a reactionary.

Nevertheless, even among critics sympathetic to Brodsky who acknowledge his ability to write compelling poetry in English, one can find a certain apprehension about his self-translations. David Bethea, in his monograph *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, leaves no doubt that, in his opinion, Brodsky was able to write great poetry in English.\(^ {54}\) Yet, when discussing the poem "May 24, 1980," one of Brodsky's most famous texts, Bethea adds the following qualifier: "It is an exceptionally powerful poem in Russian, especially if one has heard Brodsky read it aloud. Sadly, much of that power is lost in translation (the author's own)."\(^ {55}\) Bethea does not elaborate in what ways he considers the translation deficient. Others have done this job for him: in their anti-Brodsky sallies, Reid and Raine (neither of whom knew Russian) honed in on that particular text as an especially egregious example of Brodsky's mishandling of the English language. Skeptical assessments of Brodsky's self-translation have also come from more balanced critics who were able to compare the English version with the Russian original, such as Charles Simic or Valentina Polukhina.\(^ {56}\)

The most extensive comparisons of "May 24, 1980" with its Russian source text have been undertaken by Daniel Weissbort and Alexandra Berlina.\(^ {57}\) Berlina sidesteps an ultimate judgment about the quality of Brodsky's self-translation. Her main point, which corresponds to the overall argument offered in her monograph *Brodsky Translating Brodsky*, is that the English version makes the poem more "Brodskian." As she observes, the translation adds trademark features of Brodsky's personal style that are missing in the Russian source text such as enjambments, switches in register, punning references to idioms, and compound rhymes. Weissbord's discussion of "May 24, 1980" is yet more extensive, taking up a total of thirty-eight pages of his book.
From Russian with Love. Weissbord keeps coming back to this text again and again in an almost obsessive manner. The poem develops into a cornerstone of his attempt to come to terms with Brodsky’s method of translation, which at one point had led to a serious rift between himself and the poet. Written in the form of a diary, Weissbord’s account traces the evolution of his own shifting attitude, which vacillates between disapproval and cautious respect for Brodsky’s translational enterprise. He never arrives at a conclusive judgment, but does allow for the possibility that Brodsky may have been more right than wrong after all.

The question of whether the idiolect of Brodsky’s self-translations is a viable or attractive form of English poetic discourse ultimately remains a matter of personal taste. It is interesting to note that the most positive assessments of Brodsky’s English-language poetry and self-translations have all come from Russian-born scholars (Zakhar Ishov, Alexandra Berlina, Eugenia Kelbert) rather than from native speakers of English. This creates another parallel with Tsvetaeva’s French version of Mólođets, which has drawn more praise from Russian than from native French readers. In her Ph.D. thesis devoted to Brodsky’s self-translations, Natalia Rulyova—another Russian native speaker—concludes that Brodsky’s English texts should be read not as if they originated in English, but “with an awareness of the value of their foreignness.” This may be good advice, but it is worth pointing out that it is not necessarily what Brodsky intended, or hoped to achieve. Rather, he wanted his translations to be appreciated as self-standing English poems. In consequence, he published his self-translations in monolingual English-language editions rather than in a bilingual version that would facilitate a comparison between source and target text. Whether he was right or wrong about this is a question we will need to come back to.

The ambiguity surrounding Brodsky’s achievement as a self-translator is perhaps best conveyed in the comment of his fellow Nobel Prize winner and friend Seamus Heaney, who shall for now have the last word here:

So, in spite of his manifest love for English verse, which amounts almost to possessiveness, the dynamo of Russian supplies the energy, the metrics of the original will not be gainsaid and the English ear comes up against a phonetic element that is both animated and skewed. Sometimes it instinctively rebels at having its expectations denied in terms of both syntax and the vellieities of stress. Or it panics and wonders if it is being taken for a ride when it had expected a rhythm. At other times, however, it yields with that unbounded assent that only the most triumphant art can conjure and allow.