Renegade Thread: Joseph Brodsky in Defense of Dissidents

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By Clayton Stallbaumer

Everything in life intertwines, . . . everything is, in a sense, but a pattern in a carpet. Trodden underfoot.¹

This generalized commentary on the interplay and irreverence of the human condition was made by one who faced and ultimately endured the harshness of such an existence. Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) emerged during the dissident movement of the Brezhnev era as a renegade thread of, but rapidly fraying from, the social fabric of the day. The tapestry woven by Communist statesmen had become increasingly threadbare, a result of their own abuses of a flawed system. These abuses and the foundations of the system itself were the targets of Brodsky's criticisms. Yet, if one is to believe the Marxist assertion that “circumstances condition consciousness,” then Brodsky’s denunciations of the state, despite their intent to distance, are undeniably entrenched in the system that engendered them.

To combat the evils created by such a system, Brodsky envisions “literature in general, and poetry in particular, as a mode of endurance, a way of facing, and perhaps surviving, the ghastliness of both public and private life.”² Perpetuating language, to Brodsky, is a means of overcoming the atrocities of state-dictated existence, a way of recapturing the individuality lost to a dehumanizing regime. Indeed, Brodsky holds dear the assertion that language and literature are more permanent than any political system could ever aspire to be. This fundamental belief shaped the volume of his work.

The dissident movement arose during the mid-1960s and lasted roughly twenty years. In that time, Russian and non-Russian intellectuals pleaded the cause of human rights, creative and civil alike, to an unlistening but not unreactive Soviet system. Rooted in frustration with alternating government repression and toleration, the movement was a response to the reversal of the initial thaw that followed de-Stalinization. Rising levels of sophistication and expectations coupled with increased contact with Western ideas intensified the climate of dissent, as did Brezhnev’s 1968 armed intervention in Czechoslovakia. The trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel in late 1965
marked the beginnings of the long, bitter struggle between the government and its most astute critics. It must be understood, however, that initially most dissidents still believed in socialism and “made their case on moral and cultural, not political grounds, . . . [seeking] to reform the regime, not to overthrow it.”3 Thus, despite the objecting nature of their accounts, these dissidents remained inextricably linked to the source of their disenchantment, fraying only slightly from the social fabric crafted by their oppressors. These loomsmen countered the dissidents’ campaign for human rights with a harsh program of harassment, a policy Brodsky would become aware of all too soon.

Brodsky’s first actual encounter with the dissident movement was his 1964 arrest and trial for “social parasitism,” a conviction that landed him in internal exile near Arkangelsk. However, Brodsky’s history of dissent was much more deeply-rooted. His “first attempt at estrangement” was to ignore the ubiquitous images of the Soviet founder: “There was baby Lenin, looking like a cherub in his blond curls. Then Lenin in his twenties and thirties, bald and uptight, with that meaningless expression on his face which could be mistaken for anything, preferably a sense of purpose.”

“This face,” he continues, “in some way haunts every Russian and suggests some sort of standard for human appearance because it is utterly lacking in character.”4 Brodsky’s notion of the “rule of nobodies” is just one of many criticisms of the system’s dehumanizing and deceptive tactics: “To be governed by nobodies . . . is a far more ubiquitous form of tyranny, since nobodies look like everybody.”5 Such denunciations of political structure are not limited to Soviet Russia, yet they are derived from Brodsky’s experience with that system, forever tying him to the object of his reproach.

The main contention of Brodsky’s indictments is that any system serves to trivialize the importance of the individual, operating on the “anti-individualistic notion that human life is essentially nothing, i.e., the absence of the idea that human life is sacred, if only because each life is unique.”6 In his estimation, adherence to a particular doctrine, especially socialism or communism, further distorts the singularity and uniqueness of an entity: “The truth is that every ‘ism’ operates on a mass scale that mocks national identity.”7 If a nation could not be true to itself, how could one expect it to be loyal to its constituents? The fundamental flaw of any system that values philosophy over pragmatism is that in its efforts to attain a general idealized identity, such a regime suppresses the identities of its components, creating a constituency of faceless, acquiescent subordinates. The result of this is a “further departure from the spirit of
individualism toward the stampede of the masses,” in which “the idea of one’s existential uniqueness gets replaced by that of one’s anonymity.”

Making matters worse, such a wandering system often presides over its dehumanized and demoralized constituency with a heavy hand, dictating, as Brodsky suggests, every aspect of their existence: “And tyranny does just that: structures your life for you.” Making the people to a predetermined existence, robbing them of the right to self-determination, is the state’s effort at maintaining its legitimacy, a legitimacy that demands an unquestioning acceptance of the state as the sole arbiter of truth. The constituency of such a state is reduced to a utility for silencing the state’s fears or satisfying its hates. Ultimately, the repressed lose their claim to individuality, the state being the executioner of their collective soul. Indeed, as Brodsky contends, “no country has mastered the art of destroying its subjects’ souls as well as Russia.” Differing from other monarchies that rest”on the traditional feudal principle of willing submission or resignation, . . . act[s] of will, as much as casting a ballot is,” the main premise of the Soviet system and its leaders, beginning with Lenin, is the “manipulation of will itself.” This manipulation of will was not limited to the subjects of the regime; the system sought to influence time itself.

Brodsky’s other substantial objection is the manner in which political systems seek to subvert the hierarchy of permanence. He believes that any social organization is merely temporary, by definition “a form of the past tense that aspires to impose itself upon the present (and often the future as well).” The credos, impositions, and fundamentals of a system are incidental; what endures is language.

Literature allows for the preservation of one’s privacy, a means of maintaining individuality in the face of a dehumanizing regime: “One of literature’s merits is precisely that it helps a person to make the time of his existence more specific, to distinguish himself from the crowd of his predecessors as well as his like numbers, to avoid tautology, that is, the fate otherwise known by the honorific term ‘victim of history.’ Recognizing the potential threat to its assumed monopoly on truth, the state tightened the reins on literature during the Brezhnev era. Brodsky comments on this, distinguishing between censorships, when he writes that “burning books is just a gesture; not publishing them is a falsification of time. But then again, that is precisely the goal of the system: to issue its own version of the future.” Issuing a beneficial interpretation of a future with the state as its focus was essential to continuation of a regime nevertheless destined, like all forms of social organization, to a finite conclusion.
Suppression of literature was just one of many modicums, apparent and inherent alike, employed by the Soviet state to maintain its temporal hold on the fate of the public and preserve the domination of its self-manufactured truth. The dissidents “never were published in Soviet Russia and they never will be published there, for they came closest to doing to the system what it had done to its subjects,” namely trivializing their worth by reducing their existence to a type of uniform rigidity. Bearing this in mind, the notion of censorship is all the more gravely significant when viewed in context with the foundations of the state: “Of more far-reaching and disastrous consequence, however, was the state-sponsored emergence of a social order whose depiction or even criticism automatically reduces literature to the level of social anthropology.” Thus, language under such a system, the “property or prerogative of a minority,” is dangerously and unhealthily compromised by the risk of being reduced from an eternal, autonomous compendium of the human condition to a delineated analogue of human history as interpreted by the state.

To perpetuate its position at the helm of society, the state also bombarded the public with a deluge of dubious propaganda, promoting its good intentions while masking its true ambitions. The overriding aim of this self-effacing slew was to declare the infallibility of the system, the party, and their heads, and to inspire (one could even say demand) allegiance to the regime. Brodsky caustically and sardonically alludes to this when he writes that “all was in vain: the system, from its top to its bottom, never made a single mistake. As systems go, it can be proud of itself. But then inhumanity is always easier to structure than anything else.” This propaganda also served the state’s ulterior motive of skewing time such that it could proffer a future made in its own light, blurring history to its advantage. The vozhd was often oblivious to this practice, intrinsic and essential to the regime: “A man in his position doesn’t distinguish between the present, history, and eternity, fused into one by the state propaganda for both his and the population’s convenience.” The Soviet leaders were thus more accepting rather than arranging of the propaganda efforts.

The state also employed less overt means to glorify itself and to shroud its shortcomings. These endeavors were as deeply-rooted as the system’s foundations yet superficial as the phrasing used to describe them. In creating and bolstering the new system and party structures, the founders were careful not to stray too far from the previous arrangement, in principle if not in practice, as Brodsky suggests: “In order to conceal its purely demographic origins, a party usually develops its own ideology
and mythology. In general, a new reality is always created in the image of an old one, aping the existing structures. Such a technique, while obscuring the lack of imagination, adds a certain air of authenticity to the entire enterprise.”20 This air of authenticity was augmented by politically-contrived language, “terminology that obscures the reality of human evil, terminology, I should add, invented by evil to obscure its own reality.”21 Yet the greatest achievement (or worst atrocity) of the system was the imbibed sense of guilt or betrayal felt by the constituency, a sort of deserved punishment for not attaining the ideal (but unreachable) level of devotion to the state: “Besides, don’t we all harbor a certain measure of guilt? . . . So whenever the arm of the state reaches us, we regard it vaguely as our comeuppance, as a touch of the blunt but nevertheless expected tool of Providence.”22 Staying or fraying, the system forwarded this feeling of fault, its means to a necessitated end: “That is the ultimate triumph of the system: whether you beat it or join it, you feel equally guilty.”23

In response to his indictments of the system, Brodsky proposes that literature and language could be used to address these problems, to perpetuate civilization despite its social organizations. Such a utilization of language is indeed essential: “Because civilizations are finite, in the life of each there comes a moment when centers cease to hold. What keeps them at such times from disintegration is not legions but language.”

“The job of holding,” he continues, “at such times is done by men from the provinces, from the outskirts. Contrary to popular belief, the outskirts are not where the world ends; they are precisely where it unravels.”24 Such a breaking point was rapidly realizing itself at the apex of the dissident movement. Brodsky and other renegade threads like him, unraveling from the social weaving of which they were still undeniably a part, placed their confidence and hopes in the inevitability of language and the resilience of human nature, believing that “an individual’s aesthetics never completely surrenders to either personal or national tragedy, no more than it surrenders to either version of happiness.”25 Language is essential to this endurance for it spawns identity, “foster[ing] in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness, thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous ‘I.’”26 This was the dissidents’ credo, the basis of their resistance, their strength and their spoils.

Before his forced exile in 1972, Brodsky and his poems objected not so much to ideology as to the sheer rigid uniformity of a state-mandated existence. This
apolitical trait, nevertheless perceived as subversive on a subconscious level, is apparent in a verse from 1966, “A Halt in the Desert,” where Brodsky comments on the drabness of the Soviet system while metaphorically addressing the issue of dissension through the lyric tale of a razed church: “Moreover, the power shovel may have thought / the wall a dead and soulless thing and thus, / to a degree, like its own self. And in / the universe of dead and soulless things / resistance is regarded as bad form.”

This resistance, as Brodsky justifies in his Nobel lecture “Uncommon Visage,” is the rightful design of literature, a tool for the expression of language’s sovereignty and inevitability. Yet he warns of the potential for failure, due not to the state’s impositions but rather to the perceived might or plight of the system, an endeavor marked by its own mortality:

The revulsion, irony, or indifference often expressed by literature toward the state is essentially the reaction of the permanent—better yet, the infinite—against the temporary, against the finite. To say the least, as long as the state permits itself to interfere with the affairs of literature, literature has the right to interfere with the affairs of the state . . . and a man who works in grammar is the last one who can afford to forget this. The real danger for a writer is not so much the possibility (and often the certainty) of persecution on the part of the state as it is the possibility of finding oneself mesmerized by the state’s features, which, whether monstrous or undergoing changes for the better, are always temporary.

Before this resistance can be realized, however, one must become aware of the state’s repressive nature, a daunting task considering the pervading control the system exercised. However, there existed an unwitting flaw: the imposed conformity of the regime engendered a pervasive boredom, designed, in part, to numb the populace. Yet, confronted with this empty space, they were instead stirred to restlessness and introspection. “Boredom,” as Brodsky describes it, “is an invasion of time into your set of values. It puts your existence into perspective, the net result of which is precision and humility.” The space, filled with earnest and exacting contemplation of one’s true existence, ceases to be empty. The emergent comparison of one’s actual reality to the truth handed down by the state inspires social consciousness: “Recognition, after all, is an identification of the reality within with the reality without: as admission of the latter into the former.” This awareness, coupled with an allegiance and faith in language, empowers an individual to dissent.
While Brodsky does not diminish the role of passive resistance, he believes that a dissident should, if under the guise of passivity, be, at the very least, a mental aggressor, “rendering evil absurd through dwarfing its demands with the volume of [his] compliance, which devalues the harm.” The eventual and inevitable goal of such an approach is the weakening of the state’s confidence in itself, its ideology, and its ability to effectively preside over its constituency. Thus, the individual’s failure to acquiesce—or acquiescence to the point of oppositional excess—leads the regime to question its own precepts, to doubt its own authority and legitimacy. This is precisely the course Brodsky endorses, stressing individualism, when he claims “what one — and I emphasize this ‘one’ — can do, and therefore should do, is rob the aforementioned collective psyche of its ownership of that unholy relic, rob it of the comfort it thinks it enjoys.”

Such an end, however, is unattainable without the dissident maintaining an affiliation with language that runs deeper than utility. He must recognize and revere the permanence of language, respecting and reveling in its inevitability and endurance. Reaching this level of exaltation, though, is an ongoing and all too often unrealized ideal. Yet, as Brodsky experienced firsthand, “exile brings you overnight where it would normally take a lifetime to go . . . into isolation, into an absolute perspective: into the condition at which all one is left with is oneself and one’s language.” The purity of such an arrangement, in which the exile is thrust into solitude, alone save the most enduring facet of humanity, free to explore and examine its eccentricities and its wiles, is perhaps an indicator of his destiny: “What started as a private, intimate affair with the language in exile becomes fate — even before it becomes an obsession or a duty.” This interpretation highlights one of Brodsky’s most enticing, somewhat contradictory capacities: despite his apparent cynicism, Brodsky was able to extract (or perhaps even create) rewarding attributes from the darkest of situations. Perhaps opportunistic, this nevertheless signifies Brodsky’s will to endure, a will that frightened the state with its persistence and blatant obstinacy. That he, or anyone for that matter, would have the audacity to defy seemingly uncontrollable conditions was unspeakable; to deny their intended effects was unthinkable.

Though the conflict between dissident and regime reached a dubious conclusion, it can be postured, to an extent, that Brodsky and others claimed a repressed triumph over the state, if only because, in their individual anguish, their collective voice was heard. However, this success is not without imperfection: “The moral victory itself
may not be so moral after all, not only because suffering often has a narcissistic aspect to it, but also because it renders the victim superior, that is, better than his enemy . . . [and] we nonetheless know that evil takes root when one man starts to think that he is better than another.”  

It is perhaps due to this intrinsic flaw of the human condition that Brodsky is cynical, at least as far as humankind in general is concerned, as indicated by his response to Matthew Arnold’s assertion that poetry will save the world: “It is probably too late for the world, but for the individual man there always remains a chance.”

Sadly, Brodsky’s redemption never came. Despite his and the state’s attempts to separate, he was never wholly able to escape the regime’s looming shadow. His belief in the endurance of literature, of language, helped to assuage the pangs of separation, yet his allegiance to the Russian language prevented a complete separation from his homeland. David Remnick highlights this distinction when, in describing where Brodsky’s sympathies lie, he writes that “to the Russian language he was loyal, a great lover and craftsman; of Russia he was suspicious to the end.”

Brodsky’s suspicions were not unwarranted, however. The most poignant evidence is the state’s repeated refusals to allow Brodsky’s parents to see their exiled son. The inherent irony of the situation, of the accused living free while the innocent (at least by comparison) lived in subjugation, confounded Brodsky: “The fruit of their love, their poverty, their slavery in which they lived and died — their son walks free. Since he doesn’t bump into them in the crowd, he realizes that he is wrong, that this is not eternity.” Though he was perpetually bound to the object of his reproach by the objects of his adulation, Brodsky was still able to appreciate and venerate the intentions of the upbringing, if not the upbringing itself, that had landed him in such a position: “They tried the best they could — if only to safeguard me against the social reality I was born into — to turn me into the state’s obedient, loyal member.”

“That they didn’t succeed,” he proceeds, “that they had to pay for it with their eyes being closed not by their son but by the anonymous hand of the state, testifies not to their laxness but to the quality of their genes, whose fusion produced a body the system found alien enough to eject.” The pain of separation was very palpable for Joseph Brodsky; indeed, it was what ultimately knotted him to the rapidly fraying social tapestry. His pain persisted as paradox, shaping and being shaped by his existence, conditioning and being conditioned by his consciousness. Brodsky’s basest fear emerged in the form of a solution to this pain. He speculated on an inevitable
return to grace, though on terms not his own — the denial of his pain’s causes: “No matter which way journeys begin, they always end identically: in one’s corner, in one’s own bed falling into which you forget what has already become the past.”40 This was a proposition Joseph Brodsky was unwilling to accept, one which forever labeled him an exile and kept him a lifelong outsider. However, his purpose — perpetuating language — subverted the role of place, making a return irrelevant, if not altogether unnecessary:

Having sampled two oceans as well as continents, I feel that I know what the globe itself must feel: there’s nowhere to go. Elsewhere is nothing more than a far-flung strew of stars, burning away.

Notes


6Brodsky, “Flight from Byzantium,” 422.


9Ibid., 121.


13Ibid., 48.


15Ibid., 283.

16Ibid., 269.


18Brodsky, “In a Room and a Half,” 498.


20Ibid., 116.


22Ibid., 214.


27 Brodsky, Selected Poems, 131-2.


34 Ibid.


38 Brodsky, "Flight from Byzantium," 412.


41 Remnick, 45.