

## AD LITTERAM

### In the Presence of Two (Future) Nobel Laureates

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*This essay presents the author's encounters with Joseph Brodsky on two occasions: in the fall of 1972 at Berkeley and subsequently at Harvard University. The earlier encounter occurred shortly after Brodsky's arrival in the United States and provides a personal observation of the poet at a critical point in his biography. This episode also involved Czeslaw Milosz, who was at that time a professor in the Department of Slavic Languages at the University of California.*

During the early stages of my work as a Slavist, I noticed that some of my colleagues were adept at meeting important figures in Russian culture, noted writers and scholars. I did not particularly envy them for this skill, for I found such encounters remote and of little relevance to my own search for a path into Russian culture. But fate takes its own path.

From late August 1971 until June 1972 I participated as a graduate student from the University of California, Berkeley in the US-USSR exchange of scholars, administered by the International Research and Exchanges Board. During this period I was affiliated with Leningrad State University for dissertation research on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer Vasily Sleptsov. Much of my research took place at the Institute of Russian Literature (*Pushkinskii Dom*). The year was remarkable for me in many ways, but that is another story.

However, those of us in the small group of American graduate students, as well as our friends in the British group, were well aware of the tense situation surrounding the some of Russia's greatest literary talents. None of them seemed closer to us than Joseph Brodsky. Various rumours — some of them highly improbable — about his emigration were finally put to rest as we were making our preparations to leave Leningrad. On June 4, 1972 Brodsky was summarily expelled from the Soviet Union and put on a plane to Vienna. A month later he arrived in the United States to take a teaching position at the University of Michigan.

I was very far from these events. As noted above, my dissertation dealt with Vasily Sleptsov, one of the «*shestidesiatniki*», or radical writers of the 1860s. One could hardly imagine a topic more remote from contemporary poetry. All the greater was my surprise, therefore, when in early December 1972 (December 7, to be precise) one of my professors in the Slavic Department approached me at the departmental office in Dwinelle Hall with a sudden request to show Joseph Brodsky the local exotica on Telegraph Avenue, adjacent to the university campus. I was told that Brodsky had just flown in for a meeting with his close friend Czeslaw Milosz. Professor Milosz was at the moment giving a seminar on Polish literature, and would I please keep compa-

ny with the Russian poet for the next couple of hours — perhaps show him some of the Berkeley «scene». Thus, the master poet and I set off through Sather Gate and across Sproul Plaza toward Telegraph Avenue.

As I knew from personal observations, Berkeley was well known in Leningrad and Moscow for its vociferous opposition to the war in Vietnam. However, as we strolled past the exotica of Berkeley culture, I had the distinct impression that Brodsky — like many Russian intellectuals — was less than taken with the radical protest movement, and he had a sardonic view of manifestations of the «hippie» lifestyle — manifestations that were themselves intensely commercialized by this time.

Although noticeably fatigued from the flight, Brodsky was cordial and patient in our conversation. I spoke briefly of my dissertation research on the work of Sleptsov and mentioned Korney Chukovsky's long-standing support of that «unjustly forgotten» writer. This was not a topic for sustained discussion between us.

Common ground appeared, however, in our perceptions of the architecture and design of St. Petersburg/Leningrad. Although I did not yet have a single publication on Russian literature or architecture, my descriptions of walking throughout the historic city with camera in hand elicited a sympathetic, knowing response. The architecture of St. Petersburg and its relation to literature (Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Blok, Akhmatova) formed a unifying theme for both of us.

Later in the afternoon, around 3:00 pm, I brought Brodsky back to the Slavic Department seminar room in Dwinelle Hall. There we met Martin Malia, distinguished professor of history and author of a highly regarded book on Alexander Herzen (Malia, 1961). As a specialist in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian social history, Malia was a member of my dissertation committee. Malia had immense regard for Brodsky, both as a poet and as an unwavering example of individualism in the face of repression.

At the appointed time of 4:00, I accompanied Joseph Brodsky to the office of Czeslaw Milosz. I made a brief knock, and Milosz opened the door with a broad smile. The two poets warmly greeted each other, and my presence was no longer needed. Later that evening I was part of a group that attended a reading of Brodsky's poetry, following which we gathered at the house of Simon Karlinsky, professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

Karlinsky was a brilliant interpreter of both Russian and Polish culture, and he knew much of Brodsky's poetry by heart. His seminars were characterized by a deep knowledge and understanding, which he enthusiastically conveyed to us, his students. In his seminar on Russian poetry I was particularly impressed by his interpretation of religious elements in Brodsky's poetry. I might add that Karlinsky was the primary adviser during my work on the dissertation.

I did not attempt to contact Brodsky beyond our meeting at Berkeley. I felt that such an attempt would be an imposition, and that there would be little reason to respond. During the 1970s I was preoccupied with developing my own vision of Russian culture, a process that would lead me to photography and to architecture. My early work in St. Petersburg was a critical part of that development.

Our paths were to cross again, however, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1975 Brodsky was a faculty member at the Five Colleges consortium in Massachusetts, and during the same period (from September 1974) I was assistant professor of Russian literature in the Department of Slavic Languages at Harvard University.

Particularly memorable for me was one of Brodsky's visits to Harvard for a poetry reading — apparently on January 20, 1980. It was an inspiring evening, as the power of Brodsky's delivery reached an incandescent level. Many of the poems came from the collection *Ostanovka v pustyne*, as well as *Chasti rechi*. One of Brodsky's primary translators (Derek Walcott, I believe) was on stage to read an English translation after each of the poems.

Brodsky's voice has been frequently recorded, but the impact of this evening could not be conveyed by mechanical means. Perhaps Harvard had a special significance for Brodsky, although he was sceptical of mantles of «prestige». Whatever the reasons (the chemistry of such performances is elusive), the event was electrifying. At the end of one poem Brodsky's voice rang out with the words from Horace: «Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori» — words well known from Wilfred Owen's poem «Dulce et decorum est».

In their proclamation of the individual's sacrifice for the interests of the nation — a noble sentiment in Horace, but ironic in Owen's poem — the words had special poignancy as a comment on Brodsky's fate. The dramatic silence following these words was broken by a ringing «bravo» from a voice that I immediately recognized as Kirill Uspenskii. Uspenskii was closely associated with the Russian dissident circles, and we frequently met at Harvard's Russian Research Center, where he was working on his dictionary of underworld language (*blatnoi, lagernyi iazyk*).

Afterwards, Brodsky and I met at a party at the apartment of my neighbor Daniel Aaron, a distinguished scholar of American literature. He and I had adjacent apartments for professors at the top of one of the modern towers at Harvard's Leverett House. (Harvard refers to its imposing residences for students and tutors as «houses» — something similar to the «college» at Oxford and Cambridge). Aaron and I had many long conversations on Russian culture and history. Russia fascinated him for many reasons, not the least being his study of American leftist writers during the interwar period (see: Aaron, 1961; later republished in 1974).

Brodsky's presence at the party was probably connected with Aaron's son Jonathan, a well regarded poet who was at that time affiliated with Yale University. Brodsky and I exchanged greetings, briefly reminisced about our earlier meeting and discussed the Harvard experience. Later that evening he left with Jonathan Aaron, I believe for an event with other poets.

The encounters that I have just described are small episodes whose significance lies only in the personalities involved. There were no profound discussions and no transformative events. And yet, in such encounters there are always possibilities and resonances that neither side fully understands at the moment. Indeed, the resonance only increases with time.

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*Submission date: 28.08.2014.*

ВСТРЕЧИ С ДВУМЯ (БУДУЩИМИ)  
НОБЕЛЕВСКИМИ ЛАУРЕАТАМИ  
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Автор рассказывает о двух встречах с Иосифом Бродским осенью 1972 г. в Беркли и Гарвардском университете. Первая из них произошла вскоре после переезда Бродского в США. В эссе отражены личные впечатления от встречи с поэтом в ключевой момент его биографии. Другим участником этого эпизода был Чеслав Милош, в то время — профессор кафедры славистики Калифорнийского университета.

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*Дата поступления: 28.08.2014 г.*

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Более подробную библиографию проф. У. Брумфилда см. в статье: Захаров Н. В. Брумфилд Уильям Крафт // Знание. Понимание. Умение. 2014. № 3. С. 398–402. URL: [http://www.zpu-journal.ru/zpu/contents/2014/3/Zakharov\\_Brumfield-William-Craft/](http://www.zpu-journal.ru/zpu/contents/2014/3/Zakharov_Brumfield-William-Craft/)