

The Poetry of Decline

STEPHANIE SANDLER

Thinking about the politics of this poem, well-discussed by others in this forum, drew me to compare it directly to Brodsky's "Stikhi o zimnei kampanii 1980-go goda" ("Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980," 1980). It contains many signature themes and rhetorical flourishes from the early 1980s, a tremendously productive time for the poet. The haunting formulation of his 1980 "Ekloga 4-ia (zimniaia)" ("Eclogue IV: Winter"), "Vremia est' kholod" ("Time equals cold"),¹ is transformed in this poem into an equation between northern invaders and the deadly cold they bring to the emotionally warmer people they attack. It is winter during the invasion, and bullets careen through cold air seeking warmth in the musculature of bodies below. The mechanics of war are described with a precision we might think cool: the grotesque metaphor for a tank engaged in mine clearance refuses to sentimentalize incalculable loss.

Механический слон, задирая хобот в ужасе перед черной мышью мины в снегу, изрыгает к горлу подступивший комок	A mechanical elephant, trunk wildly waving at the horrid sight of the small black rodent of a snow-covered mine, spews out throat-clogging lumps ²
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Cynicism and sadness pervade the poem, where the future looks like a new Ice Age and human life is compared to dinosaurs. Scientific innovation is imaged as a dog pointlessly sent off into space, and the shame one ought to feel at letting the earth come to such a pass is not even possible, the red of embarrassment drained from pallid faces. Yet the poem ends hopefully in an enduring image of inscription, like the Cyrillic writing that concludes "Piataia godovshchina (4 iunia 1977)" (translated as "The Fifth Anniversary," 1977) as well as a poem in "Chast' rechi" ("A Part of Speech," 1976).³

"Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980," is, as this paraphrase indicates, enormously rich in imagery and emotion. Brodsky retained one of the images when he recycled a key phrase in "On the Talks in Kabul," perhaps as a mark of his self-consciousness in writing another poem about the Afghanistan war twelve years later. And he repeats it in the same

¹*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*, 8 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1997–), 3:198; Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English* (New York, 2000), 290.

²*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:193; the authorized translation, by Alan Myers, is in Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 254.

³"Piataia godovshchina (4 iunia 1977)," and "Zamorozki na pochve i oblysen'e lesa," in *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:150 and 139. For "The Fifth Anniversary" see Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 244. This poem is especially helpful in this context for its explicit faith in the act of writing; my thanks to Gerald S. Smith for reminding me of its pertinence. The poem I mention from "Chast' rechi" is not included in the English version of "A Part of Speech" that Brodsky produced.

line position, so it involves a rhyme. In the earlier “Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980,” he wrote:

Луна от страха	Afraid of drowning
потонуть в сапоге разутом	in a discarded jackboot, the moon
прячется в тучи, точно в чалму Аллаха.	hides in a cloud as in Allah’s turban. ⁴

The image emphasizes the poem’s account of the fear that grips the Afghan landscape in its reaction to the Soviet assault—it is a fear so intense that even the moon feels vulnerable and wishes to hide. It seeks refuge in the only source of protection that this land knows, the divine protection of God’s blessing. In “On the Talks in Kabul,” the poet’s invocation of the turban’s cover appears in a more fragmentary couple of lines: “Живущие в кишлаках, прячущихся в горах,/ прячущихся в облаках, точно в чалму — Аллах.” Substantively, what is changed in the comparison is that clouds hide not the fearful moon but the mountains, which in turn hide the huts in which the Afghan people live. The same wish to hide in a turban (a covering that marks Islamic men for their humility before God) is behind the metaphor, and we might say that the comparison in its second iteration shows not humility but, again, fear.

Brodsky has made the figure more intricate by doubling the act of hiding: clouds now conceal mountains, mountains conceal villages, themselves a place of retreat for warring people. That intense activity of concealment has an equivalent in the guerrilla tactics of the war, and in the strategy of Afghan soldiers who know that the vast but (to them) intimately familiar landscape is their best protection against invaders. It may be that the doubled act of concealment rhetorically encodes the act of repeating lines from 1980 in 1992. Other similarities are pertinent. In both poems, landscape and people are spread out in a reciprocal relationship—in the earlier poem, stones lie flat like a regiment and mountains are still, sharing their motionlessness with the bodies of the dead. Human life resembles the land in its concealing quiet, but its incipient deadness is also compared to edible animal flesh (pork in “Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980,” mutton and horseflesh in “On the Talks in Kabul”). Yet something is disquieting about this comparison between animal and human flesh in “Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980,” *syraia chelovecheskaia svinina* (“human pig meat”), a horribly blasphemous comparison given the Moslem taboo on consuming pork. Still, I believe that “On the Talks in Kabul” is the more disturbed poem, and perhaps for that reason as well the layers of hiding are thickened, but it is more disturbed because it seems almost aware that it can no longer rise to the occasion of this war. The poetry of “Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980” is grandly symmetrical (seven stanzas, twelve lines each, the fourth and middle stanza, from which I quote above, centering the poem’s argument and its imagery), but neither grandeur nor symmetry is possible in 1992, and not just because the negotiations are a less worthy subject.

The later poem, “On the Talks in Kabul,” buckles under the weight of its own psychological complexity. The rhymes, well discussed here by Michael Wachtel and Gerald Smith, add a drumming effect, one that heightens the poem’s intonational urgency. That urgency is

⁴*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:194; Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 255.

political (ambivalently so, Catherine Ciepiela and Katherine O'Connor observe) and also psychic. It bears an undertone of anxiety, an anxiety that concerns poetic identity and continued creativity. Aware of the earlier poem, and perhaps still more aware of the way in which his poetry flourished in the early 1980s, the poet implicitly asks how, fifteen years later, he can write this new poem. From its exclamatory first line, "On the Talks in Kabul" is a speech act, but to whom? I do not hear the poem as a Soviet ambassador speaking to Afghan rebels, to answer one of Gerald Smith's last questions, partly because the Afghan war and its ending seem less important to the poet than his own poetic conundrum. I continue to wonder how the poet imagines himself in the poem, and how he imagines his listeners. On that point, the poem's end is devastating: he, his listeners, and all of what he beholds are reduced to nothing. The void opens out less from an orientaling myth of emptiness than from a poet's fear that he speaks to no one. It is a moment that recurs in the poems of those who most deeply affected Brodsky's poetry, among them Evgenii Baratynskii and Osip Mandel'shtam.⁵ In Brodsky's poems, vision and substance are also negated in poems where poetry itself risks negation: nothing leads to no one, or to someone silenced, which is to say, to a poet who no longer hears his muse.⁶

For Brodsky, the principal acknowledged muse for many years was Marina Basmanova, the M. B. of his *Novye stansy k Avguste* (*New Stanzas to Augusta*) and the mother of his son, Andrei. Andrei came to visit in the United States as an adult in the early 1990s, at about the same time that Brodsky married Maria Sozzani. These events led Brodsky to a more final psychological break with Marina Basmanova than had ever been possible before. That break is vividly felt in a dreadful poem of the time, "Podruga, durneia litsom, poselis' v derevne" (translated as "Elegy," 1992), where the poet gives his former muse the gift of ugliness, and speaks in tones reminiscent of Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" speech.⁷ We have only to compare it to a poem to M. B. written in 1981, "Ia byl tol'ko tem" (translated into English as "Seven Strophes"), where the poet owes a debt to his muse so great as to imagine her as a divinity capable of bringing him to life.⁸ That lovely poem exudes the creative vibrancy that enabled "Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980," whereas much of the work from the 1990s shows a poet feeling strained physically (his heart disease took its toll) and psychologically. Gerald Smith has written eloquently of this aspect of the late work in his reading of Brodsky's last poem, "Avgust" ("August," 1996), where a knight and a tanned youth equally threaten to take away the poet's future. He notes there Brodsky's "studied self-denigration and calculated self-abnegation, his obsession with *absence*."⁹

⁵For example, see Evgenii Baratynskii, "Kogda tvoi golos, o poet" (1843) and "Na posev lesa" [1842?], in Baratynskii, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Leningrad, 1989), 200–201, 218 (the latter a favorite poem of Brodsky's); and Osip Mandel'shtam, "Ni o chem ne nuzhno govorit" (1909), "Kontsert na vokzale" (1921), and "Vooruzhennyi zren'em uzkihs os" (1937), in Mandel'shtam, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 92, 163, 269.

⁶"Nazidanie" (1987), mentioned in Gerald Smith's Afterword for its political relevance to "On the Talks in Kabul," also contains a line that is more emphatically negating: "Nikto nikogda nichego ne znaet naverniaka" (*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 4:13–16). For Brodsky's translation as "An Admonition" see Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 356–59. He writes there: "Nobody ever knows anything for a fact" (*ibid.*, 357).

⁷*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 4:123–24; Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 399–400.

⁸"Ia byl tol'ko tem," *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:226; translation, "Seven Strophes," Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 286–87.

⁹G. S. Smith, "Long Growing Dark": Joseph Brodsky's "August," in *Rereading Russian Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Sandler (New Haven, 1999), 254.

One can find similar clues to the poet's psychic and creative state in the early 1990s in many poems of the period, and in earlier poems as well, for it is not as if something suddenly changed in 1990.¹⁰ I would mention one poem for its clear association of bodily presence and health with creative power: a 1992 poem to Mikhail Baryshnikov, a dancer who exemplified inspired artistic performance in Brodsky's poem "Klassicheskii balet est' zamok krasoty" ("The classical ballet, let's say, is beauty's keep," 1976).¹¹ Again, we have the more celebratory intonations of an earlier poem as context for one written in 1992, "Mikhailu Baryshnikovu" ("To Mikhail Baryshnikov"); it suggests that the rituals of virility that once joined the two men are long over. A poem to one of the world's most admired dancers (still performing to great acclaim as the twenty-first century begins) invests Baryshnikov with a marble-like heaviness that Brodsky himself must have felt.¹²

That creative sluggishness, I suggest, weighs down "On the Talks in Kabul." It accounts for its closing lines that mutter about darkness and nothingness, and for its anger. A poem whose title promises thoughts on diplomacy, as Michael Wachtel rightly notes, rides roughshod over both negotiating sides in a manner more aggressive than conciliatory. The poem's bitter rejection of both East and West is a form of self-rejection, the fearful gesture of a poet who worried that the body's decline had inevitable consequences for the spirit, and for the creative psyche. In the end, the vulnerability of Afghan villages under Soviet threat in 1980 is precisely what the poet seems to feel in 1992. One has to wonder whether the poet, so keenly regarding his own decline, can see clearly the horror of lives destroyed by war and violence, in Afghanistan or anywhere else. He wrote in "Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980": "Все неустойчиво (раз — и сдуло):/ семьи, частные мысли, сакли" ("Nothing is stable [one puff and it's over]: families, private thoughts, clay shanties").¹³ The sense that nothing is stable was never so undermining, nor so close to the self, as in Brodsky's last years of writing. In "On the Talks in Kabul," all goes dark.

¹⁰To mention a slightly earlier poem, equally dark: "Tol'ko pepel znaet, chto znachit sgoret' dotla" (1986), in *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:305; translated as "Only ashes know what it means to be burned out," in *Contemporary Russian Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Gerald S. Smith (Bloomington, 1993), 209.

¹¹*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:114; Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 83–84 (in the translation, the date is given as 1975).

¹²*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 4:120–21; there is no English translation to my knowledge.

¹³*Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* 3:194; Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 255.

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