Martinus Nijhoff & Joseph Brodsky

'Harbingers of the Future'

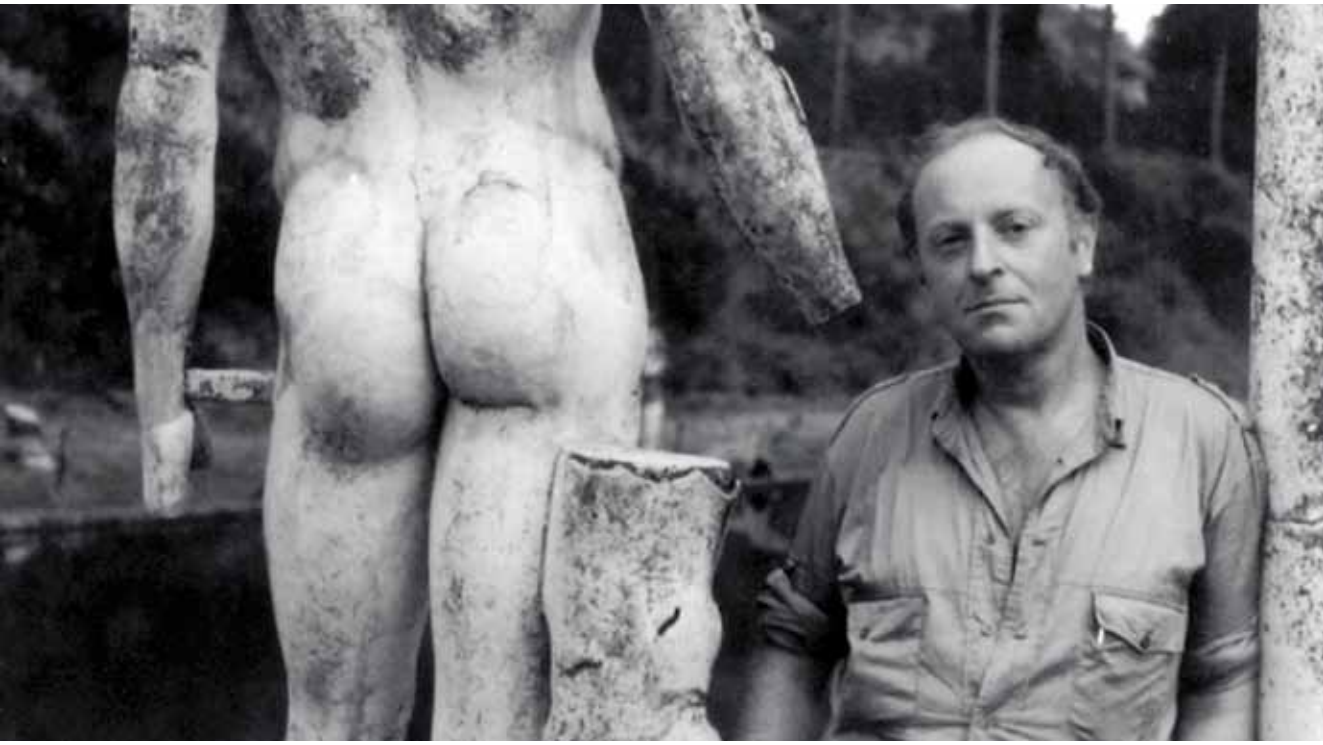
Living too brief an hour
for fear or trembling,
you spin, motelike, ascending
above this bed of flowers,
beyond the prison space
where past and future
combine to break, or batter,
our lives, and thus
when your path leads you far
to open meadows,
your pulsing wings bring shadows
and shapes to air.

From The Butterfly, X, Joseph Brodsky

In the poem *The Clouds* by Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) the narrator recalls lying as a child with his mother in the grass: 'And mother asked me what I saw up there. / And I cried: Scandinavia, and: swans, / A lady, and: a shepherd with his sheep –'.

With a turn of phrase characteristic of Nijhoff he continues: 'The wonders were made word and drifted on'. To Nijhoff the greatest wonder is not the things the child sees in the clouds, but the fact that these figurations of the mind's eye (perceived by the child as supreme reality) can become word. He sees becoming word and becoming flesh as part of the same sacred plan. Language grants objects a second life, and it is the poet above all who enables and safeguards this rebirth.

Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), once called 'a calm contemporary of Nijhoff' by critic Guus Middag, also repeatedly alludes to rebirth. Brodsky cherished the notion of returning as an object, once you had been dead long enough. Thus in his poem *August* he states, not without humour: 'Having made a career out of the crossroads, now the knight / finds himself a traffic signal' (translated by Andrew Reynolds). In the same vein he writes to his daughter: 'On the whole, bear in mind that I'll be around. Or rather, / that an inanimate object might be your



Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996)

father, / especially if the objects are older than you, or larger.' For Brodsky even a stoplight or an armchair might be part of an animate universe, and on a metal hanger in his junk room hangs 'a white, pure-cotton angel'. Within the ideological shackles of the Soviet Union these were extremely questionable ideas.

European culture

Joseph Brodsky, who later won the Nobel Prize, spent much of his writing life in exile. He grew up in Jewish circles in Saint Petersburg, which, though renamed Leningrad under Stalin's harsh regime, 'provided conspicuous visual propaganda for a past which had been officially renounced and for the values of European culture,' as writer and Slavicist Kees Verheul so aptly put it. (Brodsky became acquainted with Nijhoff's work through Verheul, and it made a great impression on him.) No wonder Brodsky's later descriptions of Rome, Florence and Venice always hinted at the contours of his original Western-oriented birthplace.

From Homer to Dante, from the Scriptures to John Donne, from T.S. Eliot to W.H. Auden and from Nijhoff to Achmatova, Brodsky felt bonded with European

culture to the very fibres of his being. This must have required considerable effort, as almost all these names fell outside the official canon. In his *Letter to Horace*, Brodsky later said, with his characteristic irony: 'Nothing breeds snobbery better than tyranny.'

During Brodsky's sham trial in 1964 (an admirer kept notes from the court session and secretly distributed them afterwards), he was required to justify the fact 'that in failing to take up paid work he had lived at the expense of society.' The dialogue proceeded as follows:

> ***Judge:*** *What is your profession?*
> ***Brodsky:*** *Poet. Poet and translator.*
> ***Judge:*** *Who said you were a poet?*
> *Who assigned you that rank?*
> ***Brodsky:*** *No one. Who assigned me to*
> *the human race?*
> ***Judge:*** *And did you study for this?*
> ***Brodsky:*** *For what?*
> ***Judge:*** *To become a poet? Did you try to attend a school where they train poets...*
> *where they teach...?*
> ***Brodsky:*** *I don't think it comes from education.*
> ***Judge:*** *From what then?*
> ***Brodsky:*** *I think it's... from God...*

In order to cure himself of this gift, Brodsky was forced to carry out heavy labour 'in a remote place'. Banished to a kolkhoz near Arkhangelsk, he continued with his poetry in greatly changed circumstances. On his fortieth birthday he wrote: 'I have waded the steppes that saw yelling Huns in saddles, / worn the clothes nowadays back in fashion in every quarter, / planted rye, tarred the roofs of pigsties and stables, / guzzled everything save dry water. / (...) Granted my lungs all sounds except the howl; / (...) Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, / only gratitude will be gushing from it.' (*May 24, 1980*, translated by the author).

Tyranny is no match for human truth. Brodsky was granted early release, partly thanks to protests from abroad. He eventually received permission to leave the country, and was strenuously advised to make prompt use of it. In 1972 he emigrated to the United States, leaving behind his son, his parents and his girlfriend (to whom he would continue to dedicate poems for many years).

Ideological bankruptcy

It says a good deal for Brodsky that he never boasted of his spectacular life events, but of course these experiences shaped him. Even a poem in which Odysseus addresses his son Telemachus gains new significance from an awareness of the meaning of separation in the poet's life: '(...) away from me / you are quite safe from all Oedipal passions, / and your dreams, my Telemachus, are blameless.' (*Odysseus to Telemachus*, translated by George L. Kline.) Ithaca and Saint Petersburg become interchangeable, as a volcanic eruption

Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953)

over Pompei foreshadows twentieth century violence. Similar connotations surface in Brodsky's biblical scenes, such as Nunc dimittis (Simeon's song of praise to the Messiah) and *Flight to Egypt*. Reading Brodsky always involves tracing multiple layers of meaning.

Time and again he exhibits that sense of history Eliot once claimed was necessary for anyone with poetic ambitions beyond the age of twenty-five. Brodsky's great themes – loneliness, loyalty, betrayal, friendship, exile and fear of chaos – rise above his personal lot and play out against a broader backdrop of cultural decline, placing him in line with the historical avant-garde, as represented by Eliot, Auden and Nijhoff. Nijhoff writes of the crisis of the Interbellum: 'it is an awakening to our ideological bankruptcy. The economic crisis will of course be transient in nature (...). The psychological aspect of the crisis, however, the ideological bankruptcy, is permanent. Never again will faith, beauty or nature offer sanctuary (...). Humanity as a whole no longer recognises any guiding value in these concepts and will not reconsider its position."

Contrary to later postmodernists, Eliot and his followers do not let it rest here. In the same piece Nijhoff states (his futuristic vision agreeing precisely

with that of Brodsky): 'The human soul must adapt to that which human skill apparently innocently created. Art can play an important role in the adaptation process. Poetry must be a harbinger of the future. It must conceive the future as already existing and stake a claim for the human soul.' According to Brodsky too, the poet has an obligation to offer a final glimmer of hope along the road of poetic form.

'A great writer,' he says in the collection of essays *Less than one*, 'is one (...) who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow.' It was with good reason that he named his first poetry collection (which first appeared after his emigration to America) *A Stop in the Desert* (1972).

In *The Butterfly* Brodsky offers just such an opening, as the solo flight of a butterfly, which falls dead into his hand, is stripped of any hint of the pride of Icarus. Brodsky implies that life and death form two physical states of the same existence, in an almost Platonic pattern. It is thanks to the butterfly, loaded as it is with poetic notions, that the colourless air takes form. What form? Perhaps like the clouds it will be Scandinavia and ducks, or 'Perhaps a landscape smokes / among your ashes, / and with thick reading glasses / I'll scan its slopes - / its beaches, dancers, nymphs.' (*The Butterfly, V*)

Driven onward jubilant

Elsewhere in Brodsky's work the butterfly is accompanied by a hawk:

Wind from the northwestern quarter is lifting him high above
the dove-gray, crimson, umber, brown
Connecticut Valley. Far beneath,
chickens daintily pause and move
unseen in the yard of the tumbledown
farmstead, chipmunks blend with the heath.

(The Hawk's Cry in Autumn, translated by Alan Myers with the author)

In the background do we not hear Nijhoff's foolish bees, carried in on the snow motif? In Nijhoff's poem the bees are tempted by the scent of higher honey, which brings them, 'driven onward (...) jubilant, on adventure' to set course for the ice cold azure:

we climbed aloft and vanished,
disbanded, disembodied,
we climbed aloft and vanished
away like things asparkle.

This brings us to what may be the most beautiful verse in Dutch poetry:

It's snowing, we are dying,
fluttering worldwards, homewards;
It's snowing, we are dying,
snowing between the beehives.

Brodsky takes a sharper tone as he describes the hawk rising: 'Still higher! Into some blasted ionosphere! / That astronomically objective hell // of birds that lacks oxygen, and where the milling stars / play millet served from a plate or a crescent.' Finally there is an auditory shock:

And at this point he screams. From the hooklike beak
there tears free of him and flies ad luminem
the sound Erinyes make to rend
souls (...)

(...)

(...) A piercing, high-pitched squeal,
more nightmarish than the D-sharp grinding
of the diamond cutting glass,
slashes the whole sky across.

(...)

We, standing where we are, exclaim
"There!" and see far above the tear
that is a hawk, and hear the sound that lingers
in wavelets, a spider skein

swelling notes in ripples across the blue vault of space
whose lack of echo spells, especially in October,
an apotheosis of pure sound.

Like the bees in search of 'the elusive symbol', the hawk is an alter ego of the poet, who exhibits a Mallarméan preference for 'the zenith', 'the dark-blue high of azure'. This is the deeper parallel between Nijhoff and Brodsky, as the poet rises in flight he must confront Nothingness. The butterfly formed 'a frail and shifting buffer, / dividing it from me'. After the fall from uninhabitable Nothingness, a transformation takes place. The bees are 'disbanded, disembodied' and fall in a new form, as snowflakes. In the case of the hawk, we hear 'something ring (...) like some family crockery being broken, / slowly falling aswirl, // yet its shards, as they reach our palms, don't hurt / but melt when handled.'

Bees become snowflakes and falling feathers resemble the 'curls, eyelets, strings' of Cyrillic script: 'blurred / commas, ellipses, spirals, linking / heads of barley'. They too end up where they belong, on earth.

The bees' 'foolishness' should not be confused with pride, nor should the hawk's risky adventure. It is more a case of *mania*, that higher wisdom seen as the duty and driver of poets and seers from Plato on. It is with good reason that the hawk in Homer is the messenger of Apollo, the oracle god and protector of the muses. Bees, too, are connected with poetry in classical literature.

Exile to verse

It is significant that Brodsky and Nijhoff's winged alter egos do not fly upwards entirely of their own free will: bees and hawk are *driven onward* and *propelled* respectively. They are as free or as constrained as Edgar Allen Poe's raven, Baudelaire's albatross, Mallarmé and Yeats's swans or Ida Gerhardt's kingfisher from the cycle 'Exile to verse'. All these forms, in Nijhoff's words, indicate one 'seeking superiority, and condemned to fall short.' The bees, however, have at least sniffed the scent of higher honey and the hawk has brought forth a cry which remains ringing in our ears.

The two poems reveal related notions of poetry: words too must undergo a metamorphosis, should they wish to gain poetic strength. The words must *sing themselves free of their meanings* (as Nijhoff formulated it in 'Dual death'). The snow motif has a purifying effect here, worn-out meanings can be polished up to reveal their original shine. A good example of this is in the final verse of *H Hour*, in which Nijhoff says about the trees (yet to be planted):

How lovely otherwise
when blossoms and leaves arise.
How lovely? Heaven knows how.
But there it ends for now.

According to Nijhoff even a filler can be made to sparkle like a diamond, with the requisite skill, but cold hard skill alone is not enough. There must be poetic conviction at its core. In both Nijhoff and Brodsky's work we encounter the idea, more in keeping with Byzantine than reformational thinking, that every word is divine in origin. The protestant Sola Scriptura seemed to them not so much overly restrictive as outright wrong: if God revealed himself in Word, then all ramifications of that Word must also contain the seed of the divine. Even the cry of a hawk may be a divine echo. It is the task of the poet to tap these sources, to reveal something of their sights and sounds. Disdain for everyday language has no place here - the word lives among us, after all.

Reality religion

For that reason both poets repeatedly make fascinating shifts in register. The sacred and the profane, a scooter, a kettle, a window, are naturally united in their poems. Brodsky applies this principle magnificently in the *Elegy for John Donne*, which lists every conceivable item of furniture:

John Donne fell asleep and all around him slept.
The pictures slept, the wall, the floor, the bedding,
the tables, rugs, the bolts, the latch all slept,
the wardrobe, sideboard, candle, curtains, slept.
All was asleep: the bottle, glass and pans,

the bread, the bread-knife, china, crystal, crocks,
the night-light, linen, windows, cupboards, clocks,
the staircase steps, the doors. Night all-surrounding.

(Elegy for John Donne and other poems, Longman, London, 1967,
translated by Nicholas Bethell)

The image conjured up by these lines is neither the dignified 17th century pastor of St. Paul's Cathedral, nor the metaphysical poet bent over his papers, but rather one who has lived and worked among us. His universe, too, contained teacups. Nijhoff speaks of 'a sort of positive mysticism (...), a reality religion, a sensory embodiment of that which is seen'. It is this spiritual sense which Nijhoff considers essential to the 'esprit moderne'.

Within the European literary family Nijhoff and Brodsky are close relatives. They are part of a tradition as aware of its Greco-Roman as its Judeo-Christian roots. Of course there are national elements to their poetry, ranging from Bommel to one of the many bridges of Saint Petersburg, but their broad perspective prevents this from degenerating into provincialism. In Lullaby of Cape Cod Brodsky states: 'I write from an Empire whose enormous flanks / extend beneath the sea.' (VI, translated by Anthony Hecht). For centuries the same stars have shone out over this infinite empire:

Sleep, sleep, John Donne. Do not torment yourself.
Your gown is rent in holes. It hangs dejected.
Just look at it, and out the clouds will look
that star, that constant guardian of your peace. ■

Translated by Anna Asbany

NOTES

1. From *Collected poems in English (Poems written in English and Poems translated from the original Russian by or with the author, including translations by...)*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2000. The excerpt is part ten of a fourteen part cycle, *The Butterfly*, translated by George L. Kline.
2. Martinus Nijhoff, "On my own work". In: *Collected works 2*, Den Haag / Amsterdam, 1961, p. 1160
3. Personal communication from Nijhoff to Victorine Hefting. In: Nienke Begemann, *Victorine.* Amsterdam, 1990, p. 130
4. Martinus Nijhoff, *Collected works 2*. Den Haag / Amsterdam, 1961, p. 297