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Joseph Brodsky's "Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot"

By JOSEPH BRODSKY

Translated from the Russian and with an Introduction

By GEORGE L. KLINE

When T. S. Eliot died in London on January 4, 1965, Brodsky was still in exile in the remote Arkhangelsk region of northern Russia. The news did not reach him until a week later. But within twenty-four hours after learning of Eliot's death, Brodsky had completed a three-part poem entitled, "Verses on the Death of T. S. Eliot." Unlike most of Brodsky's poems, which are dated only by year, this one is dated precisely: "January 12, 1965."

Brodsky's poem is modelled on W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats, (d. Jan. 1939)." The sequence of metrical patterns and rhyme-schemes follows Auden's closely, except that Part I of Auden's poem is in free verse, whereas Brodsky's poem is rhymed throughout. Part I of Auden's poem begins:

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost deserted,¹

Part III begins:

Earth, receive an honoured guest;
William Yeats is laid to rest:
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.²

Brodsky's Part III follows this metrical and rhyme-scheme exactly (as does the translation, although Parts I and II of the translation are in blank verse, with only occasional rhymes or slant-rhymes). But Brodsky is concerned exclusively with the fate of Eliot as man and poet, and with the career of his poetry, whereas Auden is concerned not only with Yeats, but also with the fate of Europe, and the world, on the eve of the Second World War.

The English translation of Brodsky's poem is published here for the first time.³

G. L. K.

¹W. H. Auden, *Another Time*, New York, Random House, 1940, p. 93.

²*Ibid.*, p. 94.

³The Russian text, under the changed title, "In Memory of T. S. Eliot," and with the substitution of *okna* ("windows") for *styokla* ("windowpanes") in line 4, was published in *Den' poezii*, Leningrad, 1967, pp. 133-135.

I

He died at start of year, in January.
 His front door flinched in frost by the streetlamp.
 There was no time for nature to display
 the splendors of her choreography.
 Black windowpanes shrank mutely in the snow.
 The cold's town-crier stood beneath the light.
 At crossings puddles stiffened into ice.
 He latched his door on the thin chain of years.

The Muses' Holy Family will not brand
 his gift of days a bankrupt. Poetry
 is orphaned, yet it breeds within the glass
 of lonely days, each echoing each, that swim
 to distance. It will splash against the eye,
 sink into lymph, like some Aeolian nymph,
 a narcissistic friend. But in the rhyme
 of years the voice of poetry stands plain.

With neither grimace nor maliciousness
 death chooses from its bulging catalogue
 the poet, not his words, however strong,
 but just — unfailingly — the poet's self.
 It has no use for thickets or for fields
 or seas in their high, bright magnificence.
 Death is a prodigal, it piles
 a horde of hearts upon a wisp of time.

Used Christmas trees had flared in vacant lots,
 and broken baubles had been broomed away.
 Winged angels nested warmly on their shelves.
 A Catholic, he lived till Christmas Day.
 But, as the sea, whose tide has climbed and roared,

slamming the seawall, draws its timely waves
down and away, so he, in haste, withdrew
from his own high and solemn victory.

It was not God, but only time, mere time
that called him. The young tribe of giant waves
will bear the burden of his flight until
it strikes the far edge of its flowering fringe,
to bid a slow farewell, breaking against
the limit of the earth. Exuberant
in strength, it laughs, a January gulf
in that dry land of days where we remain.

II

Where are you, Magi, you who read men's eyes?
Come now and hold his halo high for him.
Two mournful figures gaze upon the ground.
They sing. How very similar their songs!
Are they then maidens? One cannot be sure:
pain and not passion has defined their sex.
One seems an Adam, turning half away,
but, judging by his flow of hair, an Eve . . .

America, where he was born and raised,
and England, where he died — they both incline
their drowsy faces as they stand, dejectedly,
on either side of his enormous grave.
And ships of cloud swim slowly heavenward.

But each grave is the limit of the earth.

III

Apollo, fling your garland down,
 Let it be the poet's crown,
 sign of immortality,
 all there is where mortals be.

Forests here will not forget
 voice of lyre and rush of feet.
 Only what remains alive
 will deserve their memories.

Hill and dale will not forget.
 Aeolus will know him yet.
 Blades of grass his memory hold,
 just as Horace had foretold.

Thomas Stearns, don't dread the sheep,
 or the reaper's deadly sweep.
 If you're not recalled by stone,
 puffball drift will make you known.

Thus it is that love takes flight.
 Once for all. Into the night.
 Cutting through all words and cries,
 seen no more, and yet alive.

You have gone where others are.
 We, in envy of your star,
 call that vast and hidden room,
 thoughtlessly, "the realm of gloom."

Wood and field will not forget.
 All that lives will know him yet —
 as the body keeps alive
 lost caress of lips and eyes.

January 12, 1965