

Esthetics Is the Mother of Ethics

Grzegorz Musial and Tomislav Longinović / 1989

From *Periplus: Poetry in Translation*, edited by Daniel Weissbort and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Oxford University Press, 1993), 37–50. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India. The interview took place in 1989, when Brodsky visited the University of Iowa to give a reading of his poetry.

Grzegorz Musial: This is the magazine I'm working for, *Res Publica*, a monthly formerly published underground, but openly since 1986. It is the leading magazine for the younger generation of the independent Polish intelligentsia. Every issue is devoted to a special problem. This is the Prague Spring issue, this is the Viennese issue. Vienna is the symbol of the end of Europe, fin-de-siècle decadence. The question is whether we are faced with a new decadence of culture at the end of this century. So the question of spirituality arises, moral values. Of course there is no need for me to repeat something you know very well, but I would just like to emphasize that in the non-violent Polish revolution, the question of spirituality was a crucial one, because the Cross was placed in the middle of this revolution as a symbol of the readiness to forgive, the readiness to bear witness to the times, to suffer, to make sacrifices. So that is why I would like to ask the great poet about. . . .

Brodsky: Quit the epithet, O.K.?

Musial: O.K.

Brodsky: So, what is your question, simply . . .

Musial: What is your attitude to religion? The same question you were asked a half-hour ago at the question and answer session at the University, and which you refused to answer. You even added: "This is one of those questions one is not supposed to ask, or to answer."

Brodsky: I, I don't think, well, for one thing, in my view, religion is a highly ecclesiastical persuasion, so to speak, is a highly personal, not only personal, an intimate matter, well, and you don't talk about your intimate concerns in public. That's to begin with. Secondly, to talk about them in public very often amounts to proselytizing, and one very easily slips into that mode, which may be good for society, but for the individual is almost invariably bad, even if you bring to the audience what you consider the ultimate

truth, even if you are convinced that it will be better for them. I don't believe that one should proselytize. One should simply leave these things for people to decide on their own. Faith is a matter of arrival, well, people arrive to faith, they don't receive faith, in my view. Life generates that in them, and nothing can substitute for the efforts of life. It's actually the job that is best left, and best executed, obviously, by time. In part my reserve here is also the product of living in a country, which embraces or is embraced by several creeds. It's not a homogeneous country like Poland, and to, say, carry a cross in America, it may produce rather unpleasant echoes, say, in the mind of some, Ku Klux Klan. Secondly, some people who are of different religious persuasions may feel somewhat offended. This place is very much like Alexandria in the second or third century B.C., a marketplace of religions. Well, in a sense, it is all very well for the Poles to be Catholics or new Catholics. But in so far as you are within the confines of your community, it's fine. The moment you spill over the borders you find all sorts of things, and a great number of conflicts, very bloody conflicts, in the human history, precisely were religious wars, so one should bear that in mind. Now, we can return obviously to the question of religion, but before I forget your initial point about the decadence of culture. Culture decays only for an individual. Talking about the decadence of culture is to promote a solipsistic view of reality. It's like ethics dying for a lecher. If you are a lecher, ethics is dead. If you are not and you are living next door to a lecher, your ethics are in full bloom. So I think it's a little bit premature and melodramatic to talk about the decadence of culture and, especially, the new decadence, et cetera. And I'd be terribly careful with all this. Indeed, what's happening in the culture is rather peculiar, well, culture is not an exception from other aspects of existence, though we all become now—it's my firm view—the victims of a new demographic situation in the world. There is a huge increase of people. There is an old educational structure, however, surviving intact. That is, the old educational structures in society haven't adapted themselves as yet to the new demographic realities. And for that reason, a great number of new arrivals are facing very old tenets. Speaking of culture, for instance, in the last, let's say, twenty or thirty years, in literature, very little qualitatively new has happened. However, the population of the globe has doubled in the last twenty years, so the net result of it is that the new arrivals, the new generations, are dealing, or are exposed to at best, material which is dated from their point of view. That is, the new generations don't seem to have produced something qualitatively new. So, therefore, the new generations are living off the old ties, the old cultural ties. Unquestion-

ably, that creates either thirst or neglect on the part of the general population. In the West it's always a matter of distribution, because there is a great deal of wonderful words, even produced fairly recently, but they're not distributed. It's a capitalist country and you go by profits, and the man who tries to make a profit, as a rule, has a very limited version of what the market is like. He goes for certainties, not for the possibilities, and that's what limits him. Well, he simply does not assess the importance of these losses, and so on and so forth, and presumably very often he cannot. In the East . . . in the East, also for a variety of reasons, it has been regarded as prudent and useful to assert old values, which is quite all right, of course, and very often it serves as a kind of good for the intellectual, or cultural glue for the society, except that I don't think that this glue is terribly solid. I would think that the trouble—and now we're getting back to religion—the trouble with religion and with that sort of new Catholicism of yours is to remember where it was in the non-violence in Poland, et cetera, et cetera. The problem with those things—how shall I put it? is that in the final analysis they are ethical issues, and ethics, by itself, can't keep society together. You need something else, and I think ethics can be easily faked. There is nothing easier than to fake high principles. I think in order to make society indeed survivable, you ought to give society esthetics, because esthetics can't be assimilated. That is, a man has to become an esthetical being first. Esthetics, you see, in my view is the mother of ethics. And good though the Church may be about ethical matters, it can't produce art. To say the least, the treatment by art of ecclesiastical matters is very frequently far more interesting than the treatment of ecclesiastical issues by the Church itself. For instance, the version of afterlife given by Dante in his *Commedia Divina* is far more interesting than what you can find even in the New Testament, not to mention St. Augustine, not to mention other Fathers.

Musial: I think the definition of the standards which the Church is trying to activate in Poland now relates rather to the question of morality than . . .

Brodsky: Well, what you in the end have is somebody stressing morality, and what is the basis for that morality? Well, the basis for that is obviously the notion of God. And we've been living in a world which has been very busy negating the existence of any supreme being. Therefore, the people have to take morality or ethical principles on faith, which is fine and dandy, but it can be easily challenged. As I said, I think that esthetics is the mother of ethics, and the ethical principles emerge from the esthetics, and esthetics is tangible, it is more palpable, in a sense, than the subject of your faith.

Musial: I guess that you refer more to the moral teaching of the ancient, pre-Christian philosophers like Marcus Aurelius, for example, and to others like . . .

Brodsky: Let's not name names. What I'm trying to say is this, the human being makes his or her choice first on an esthetical rather than on an ethical basis. Take a child, take a baby, a one-year old who doesn't speak, whose experience of the world is zero. Well, mother holds up baby in her arms, the parents are having a party, and the baby smiles at somebody and cries at another. Well, in other words, he likes this person and doesn't like that person. That is, the child exercises an esthetical choice. Or his judgement is an esthetical judgement, see, but that is, esthetics do precede ethics, that's what I'm trying to say. And I think esthetics is a more sound basis to build a society, or civil society, upon, because in the end, you have to, when it comes to the moral choices—if it's based on the Church, on the faith, on the religion—then you in the end have to legislate, whereas esthetics make you a decent human being without legislation.

Musial: Where do you place the metaphysical experience then, the spiritual experience of a single person, the knowledge which goes with that kind of experience?

Brodsky: Well, I place it above the Church. The Church, or religion, is one of the many manifestations of the metaphysical potential of human beings. The reason I do this, and I have to get a little bit personal here . . . Well, I don't want to take too much of your time or of your page, but what happened to me was that my life went round such a course that I've read the Bhagavad-Gītā, the *Mahābhārata*, the Upanishads, became acquainted with them before I got acquainted with the Old and New Testaments, and it's simply because the Bible wasn't available in Russia for my generation. I came to read the Bible only at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three. So, I read those things and they provided me with terrific metaphysical horizons, indeed, horizons. With Hinduism, let's say, to put it sort of vaguely, you get indeed a sense of tremendous spiritual Himalayas, one reach after another, et cetera, et cetera. Still it was clear to me that it wasn't my cup of tea. That is, simply, well, how shall I put it, biologically not mine, because though I could practice, and loved to practice, self-negation—not self-detachment, even, but self-negation—I practiced that for purely defensive reasons, because when you're grabbed by the police, et cetera, and beaten up—well, I think that's an extraordinary hell—they can't really get you, because you think you are

not your body. Still, in the end, I felt it wasn't mine, and when I read the Old and New Testaments, and I read them one after another, well, I don't separate them the way it's done, for instance, in this country and the way it's presumably done in Poland too . . .

Musial: No, not any more, it disrupts the unity . . .

Brodsky: So, one thing I immediately sensed, that while the Old Testament is more congenial to me, partly because I'm a Jew—but it's not because I'm a Jew, it's simply a frame of mind, certain experiences—still I remembered the metaphysical horizons offered to me by Hinduism, and I realized that, metaphysically speaking, the Old Testament, not to mention the New Testament, is inferior to the metaphysical possibilities offered to you by Hinduism. This is why I always find myself in a difficult situation when somebody starts to talk about this or that particular church, because I think human metaphysical potential very seldom—well, that's my conviction—very seldom is fully exercised by this or that particular creed.

Musial: On a certain level of religious experience one comes to a similar pattern of moral values. When you go through the deep experience of Catholicism, for example, you go through the same steps of metaphysical experience, exactly seven steps—a seven-step mountain Thomas Merton called it—as you do in Buddhism, right . . .

Tomislav Longinović: Eight in Buddhism.

Musial: Eight in Buddhism.

Brodsky: Good to see you gentlemen counting. But I'm more interested, well, how shall I put it, in matters of principle here. I spoke not so long ago about that to Milosz, and in literature you very often, a writer very often finds himself in sort of a double bind. That is, partly as a writer, as an active writer—well, writing, editing, correcting, correlating the things that he's saying to more or less the reality of society, et cetera, or trying to influence the society—he finds himself squarely in the Western tradition, in the tradition of the control of the will, in fact, a personal lyricism, imposing that upon the society or altering the society, whereas at the same time, simply by virtue of his occupation, he finds himself very much in the Eastern bind as well, in the self-negating position. So, one way or another, a writer is a cross between those two, and in fact, the value of literature, the value of poetry in particular, for a reader, for a general population, is precisely this, precisely that breach or that fusion of the self-negation and will. That's why literature is so, in a

sense, attractive to us, or poetry in particular. So, I'm not interested in the seven types or eight types of ambiguity, because there are more than that.

Musial: André Malraux said that the twenty-first century will be either spiritual or it will not be at all.

Brodsky: It may be . . . Well, Malraux said so many things. The French are very fond of making up reasons, ever since La Rochefoucauld, and presumably before, I don't know. Milosz thinks that we are entering, the world is entering an entirely nihilistic stage. I am not so sure of that, although on the face of it, reality doesn't conform to any ethical standards, as we see it. It's getting rather paganistic. I think what may emerge—and this is one of my greatest apprehensions—what may emerge is a tremendous religious strife, not exactly religious, between the Moslem world and the world that is vaguely Christian. The latter won't be able to defend itself, the former will be terribly assertive. It's simply for the numerical reasons, for pure demographic reasons, that I perceive the possibility for such a strife. I am not a sage, I am not a prophet, I can't presume to say what the twenty-first century is going to be like. To say the least, I am not even interested in what the twenty-first century is going to be like. Well, I am not going to be there, for one thing, so why should I bother . . . And it was easier for Malraux, it was clear that he wouldn't be there, so it was easy to fantasize . . . The foreseeable future, that is, foreseeable by me, which again can be terribly erroneous, is precisely the conflict of the spirit of tolerance with the spirit of intolerance, and there are all sorts of attempts to resolve that conflict now. The pragmatists try to suggest that there is some equivalence between these principles. I don't believe that for a minute. I think that the Moslem notion of universal order should be squashed and put out of existence. We are, after all, six centuries older than the Moslems spiritually. So, I think we have a right to say what's right and what's wrong.

Musial: I'd like to come back to the idea of my last question—I don't want to take too much of your time. On a more personal level, while listening yesterday to your poetry reading, I was very moved by the way you read. I felt it was more like a moan, more like a cry . . .

Brodsky: It wasn't a moan, it wasn't a cry, it simply has to do with the prosodic nature of the Russian language.

Musial: Which I understand, but with the exception of what you do with your reading.

Brodsky: Well, maybe . . .

Musial: Rhythmically, it's very . . .

Brodsky: But it has to do with the meters presented, with the prosodic aspects of the poem, of this or that particular poem. But all literature that we have in Christendom—and Russian literature belongs in Christendom squarely, poetry especially—is a spinoff of the liturgical services, of the liturgical practices, of the hymns, if you will. So, there is this tremendous carryover of those, and poetry is an art of assertion, it's not an art of self-effacement. And the difference, of course, between the English delivery, delivery of that stuff in English, and the delivery of that stuff in Russian is simply a cultural difference now, because it's considered *mauvais-ton* in the English tradition to be assertive. It all kind of started about a century ago and so forth. *Bon-ton* means to be self-effacing. But I think it's a little bit ridiculous, because poetry is not an art of self-effacement. If you want to be self-effacing, you can take the next logical step and completely shut up.

Musial: I see.

Longinović: I think one question which is connected to Russian religious philosophers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century—Shestov, Solovyov, Berdyaev, who thought that we were in a way entering the new Middle Ages with the Age of Communism—do you see any connection with the apparent dissolution of monolithic communism?

Brodsky: Well, you see . . . how funny . . . in a sense, they were right, because—well, Shestov never said anything of the sort, it was Berdyaev's idea—in a sense they were right, merely because looking into the future they couldn't see anything but darkness. But like all those prophecies, especially Berdyaev's prophecies, well, it's basically easy to make a prophecy because we have so few options in general. Now it's seventy years later and I don't think it's going to be the Middle Ages. I don't want to sound overly optimistic, but communism, well, it's curtains for communism, for any sort of ideological society, in my view, at least in Eastern Europe. In the Orient, perhaps, and in Latin American countries, for perhaps the next thirty or forty years, and perhaps in the Far East, there is some possibility of some ideological society. But for the Europeans, it's over, so I think the societies now are going to evolve along a more pragmatic line, which is also nothing to cheer about. But one thing about a pragmatic principle is that it considers all the options and, therefore, it doesn't rule out the religious or metaphysical option, or won't legislate against those options. In that respect, we should not

forget about one thing. We shouldn't say that the religious man is better than an atheist, though perhaps in our hearts and in our minds he is, and it's a more interesting, infinitely more interesting existence. But I think the root of all evil is when one person says, "I'm better than the other."

Musial: You mentioned the importance of Milosz in your life, the influence he had on you. Could you say something more about this? I guess it's a kind of spiritual experience of the sort we were talking about before.

Brodsky: Milosz is simply, well, a tremendous presence. I am fortunate to know him personally. First of all, I've translated some of his poems. Secondly, he helped me enormously. He wrote me one letter, a very short letter exactly at the moment of my arrival in the United States, which indeed took instant care of a great many insecurities that I harbored at that time. He said in that letter, among other things—he was talking about translation, *et cetera*, *et cetera*—he said I understand that now you are worried about being capable of continuing to write in a foreign country, *et cetera*. He said, if you stop, if you fail, there's nothing wrong about that. I've seen that happening to people. It's perfectly human, *et cetera*. Well, it's perfectly normal for a human being to be able only to write within his own walls, or in his context. However, he said, should that happen, it will show your real value, that you are good on the domestic. There's nothing wrong with that. But when you read that sort of thing—no! And for that reason, I'm awfully grateful to him. But aside from that, I am envious, well, I have a terrible envy of him having lived such a long life. I wish I were there in the twenties and the thirties. I wish I had the same experiences. But ultimately I simply admire his mind. It's a Manichean bent. We make war about this and that, but there is nothing better than an argument with Milosz, it enriches you enormously. It's not only cultural differences or cultural material, baggage that he carries, it's the methodology of his mind, the entire predictability of it. It's great to talk with him about esthetical matters, about, for instance, matters of absurdity, of the absurd in literature, better than to talk about ethics, which is a much more stale discourse in the end.

Musial: Have you ever had another deep experience with Polish literature or a Polish writer?

Brodsky: Norwid.

Musial: Norwid, I see. And contemporary writers, Gombrowicz, for example, who's had a tremendous influence on the young Polish intelligentsia . . .

Brodsky: That's understandable, but I think for me, Gombrowicz, much though I like *Ferdydurke*, and what's the other one? I forgot.

Musial: —*Cosmos, Pornographia*.

Brodsky: Much though I like those, I still think Gombrowicz, by the virtue of circumstance—not virtue, by the vice of circumstance—has come to make a big deal out of himself, for himself. That is, he was indeed a literary person, that is, temperamentally, he is quite the opposite, well, of me personally, because I don't write that much. I don't make literature out of everything. I used to, not exactly pride myself on it, but I used to regard myself more as a gentleman who occasionally occupies himself with composing a poem, or writing a piece, whereas Gombrowicz was indeed, well, his life was literature, and also he took himself and the unpleasanties [sic] of his existence a bit too seriously, in my view. But that's my view, that in no sense detracts from Gombrowicz. It's simply my personal view of him. Well, now, for other Polish writers, I think the greatest boost I ever got in my life was from Norwid. I translated Norwid into Russian. Not much, about six or seven lengthy poems, and I don't think there is any greater poem in any language that I know of than "Bema Pamięci Raport Żałobny" [A Mournful Report in General Bem's Memory]. I happen to know that by heart, too, but that's one. It is simply the vector of tragedy in his voice. To me, he is a more important poet than Baudelaire, of the same period, a far greater thing, though I don't really care for his long dramatic poems. But the poems, some of them, are absolutely remarkable, terribly far ahead of his time. I don't place a great deal of value on that sort of thing, but it's stunning to find this sensibility in the nineteenth century. You know, in Rome on the Via Sistina there are two houses, they are door to door, and there are two memorial plaques. On one it says here from such and such—and it's the same years practically, well, with one or two years' difference, they're almost overlapping—here lived Norwid, and the next door, here lived Nikolai Gogol.

Musial: What do you think of Herbert's poetry?

Brodsky: Well, I translated Herbert. I like Zbigniew enormously, and you are tremendously fortunate in Poland to have in one century, or rather in one half-century, poets of this magnitude, Miłosz and Herbert. I would throw in for good measure also Szymborska, and not Szymborska entirely, but she has tremendous poetry, tremendous poems. I wish I were assigned to make a selection of her poems. But speaking of Herbert and Miłosz, I can't really say one is better than the other, et cetera, because at those heights there is no

hierarchy. However, in a sense, because Milosz's operation is huge, you can make the argument that Milosz includes Herbert's idiom, whereas Herbert doesn't include Milosz's. But there is no hierarchy at those heights, it's not even a qualifier here. I would say Milosz is a greater metaphysical event for me than Herbert, although I wouldn't like to live solely with Milosz's poetry and without Herbert's. It in fact makes me appreciate Milosz more and the presence of Milosz makes me appreciate Herbert more. He is in the final analysis, Zbigniew, a great esthetician, a great esthete. He is exactly the man who made his preferences, his choices, on the basis of taste, not on the basis of morality, on this and that. He said something to that effect himself.

Musial: He wrote a poem, the famous one, "The Power of Taste."

Brodsky: Yes, "The Power of Taste." I don't follow Polish poetry right now very closely, and I don't see now . . . Well, I used to, but for the last ten or fifteen years I've been somewhat out of touch . . . I don't really know who in general is what. I don't know who are the followers of Milosz, let's say. But at least I know who is the follower of Herbert. Zagajewski seems to me to represent a development of Herbert's idiom in many ways. He's an absolutely remarkable poet, and the most important discovery for me in Polish poetry for the last ten or fifteen years, and in fact, we're friends with Adam, and it's one of the better friendships that I've had in my life. That's all.

Musial: Thank you.