

October 15, 1987 (vol. 3, no. 4)

Dear Colleague:

The collection of essays by the Russian emigré poet Joseph Brodsky (by the way, he is the son of a geographer) makes me feel that what is remarkable about Russian intellectuals is their boldness--bold to the point of arrogance. They say things that will make most Western men and women of letters cringe. Brodsky says, for instance, that he is repelled by repetition, whether it is of phrases, trees, human relationships, or portraits of Lenin. "Whatever there was in plenitude I immediately regarded as some sort of propaganda." A few trees are fine, but a forest is propaganda. Grass is, inevitably, propaganda. A few friends are fine, but many friends signify a sort of mindless insistence--a compulsion to replicate experience. In contrast with the past, which is defined by a finite set of events, the future radiates an immense monotony: the future, because of its plenitude, is propaganda.

Brodsky dislikes the idea of having a taste shared by others. "However modest the place you happen to occupy, if it has the slightest mark of decency, you can be sure that someday somebody will walk in and claim it for himself or, what is worse, suggest that you share it." When this occurs, Brodsky would walk out rather than fight. "Not at all because I couldn't fight, but rather out of sheer disgust with myself: managing to pick something that attracts others denotes a certain vulgarity in your choice" (Less Than One: Selected Essays, p. 6-7, 13).

Boris Pasternak's novel Dr. Zhivago was banned in the Soviet Union, which is not surprising when you consider its extraordinary articulations of individualism. Pasternak seems to be saying that "if you think that either personal relations or aesthetic creation are all very well in their way, but that just now you haven't time for such frills; that you're too busy waging the class war, or making money, or winning national wars... well so be it. Only at the end of the day you will make the unpleasant discovery that life is not worth living" (John Strachey, The Strangled Cry, pp. 52-53).

At the end of the book, Lara says over Yuri's bier: "The riddle of life, the riddle of death, the beauty of genius, the beauty of loving--that, yes, that we understood. As for such petty trifles as re-shaping the world--these things, no thank you, they are not for us."

I just don't think any esteemed Western writer in our time can make a heroine or hero say that, do you?

Best wishes,

