

Title: Prosody & Politics, or the Poet's Take on Russian-Polish Love-Hate Relationship: Joseph Brodsky on Free Verse in Translations of Zbigniew Herbert
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Abstract:

Joseph Brodsky's quixotic opposition to free verse is well known. Brodsky rejected the idea that disintegration of poetic form is an indispensable prerequisite of modernism: "...a regular meter and exact rhymes shaping an uncomfortable thought are far more functional than any form of free verse." When it came to Russian-English poetry translation, Brodsky insisted that the form of a poem shaped in meter and rhyme in the original must be preserved at all cost across translation, whereas in the US the free verse had become the main instrument of poetry translation into English already by 1970s.

However, in his 1993 introduction to Italian translations of poetry by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert Brodsky suggested that Polish poets were perhaps the only ones, who had a valid excuse to write in verse libre. The reason, he argued, was that the strict meters reminded Polish poets of the poetics of their Russian invaders, which gave them a justification to depart from it. This statement represents a remarkable twist in Brodsky's thought, for he had otherwise always asserted poetry's independence from the so-called forces of history. In fact, he had continually opposed the idea of subordinating art to history and in the disputes between politics and aesthetics Brodsky would typically give aesthetics the upper hand.

My paper will probe Brodsky's pronouncements on prosody and politics by analyzing his own translation of one of Herbert's poems into English. As poetry in free verse is allegedly easier to translate than formal poetry, my paper will compare Brodsky's translating strategies in his translation of Herbert into English with those he applied to formal Russian-English poetry translation.