

Introduction

On Poetry, Life, Method, and Sundry Affairs

After all, what goes into writing a book—be it a novel, a philosophical treatise, a collection of poems, a biography, or a thriller—is, ultimately, a man's only life: good or bad but always finite.

*In any given book, the foreword is the first and the last thing; it serves either as an explanation or as a justification and a defense against criticism. . . .*¹

For several years now, I have been engaged—as a reader, critic, and teacher—with the lives and works of three outstanding poets: Holocaust survivor and arguably the “greatest French poet of the German language” Paul Celan (1920–1970); Dresden native and one of the most significant living German poets Durs Grünbein (1962–); and Leningrad native, U.S. poet laureate, and Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996).² Above and beyond each poet's literary-historical significance, biographical factors, and personal taste, and beyond the inevitable *je ne sais quoi* behind any reader's or critic's penchant for a particular poet, writer, artist, group of artists, or period, my initial interest in this particular group of authors was triggered by the fact that all three consider themselves heirs to the legacy of Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), the Russian-Jewish poet and cofounder of the Acmeist movement in Russian poetry who, owing to his tragic fate at the hands of the Stalinist regime as a more or less direct corollary of his supreme artistry, has come to epitomize the precariousness, necessity, integrity, and moral force of po-

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etry in the face of sociopolitical adversity. What especially intrigued me about this literary constellation was not so much its genealogical dimension *per se*—after all, as Seamus Heaney reminds us, there is hardly anything extraordinary about poets turning to the “great masters of the past” to follow their “artistic inclinations” and “imaginative needs”—but rather its significance within a literary-historical trajectory that culminates in Grünbein’s extensive reception of and response to both Celan’s and Brodsky’s readings of Mandelstam.³ (Of the three poets, I should note, only one, Grünbein, has seriously engaged with the other two; at best, Brodsky and Celan took marginal note of each other.)

The more time I spent in the company of Mandelstam and his self-proclaimed poetic descendants, however, and the longer I studied the ways in which they received and interpreted Mandelstam’s legendary poetic “letter in a bottle” addressed to a “more or less distant, unknown interlocutor,” whose “embrace” and “love” the poet longed for (thus Mandelstam’s erotic depiction of poetry as transhistorical dialogue), the clearer it became to me that much more is at stake in examining Celan’s, Grünbein’s, and Brodsky’s recourse to “Russia’s greatest [modern] poet” than understanding one strong poet’s impact on and survival in the works of a handful of self-appointed poetic successors.⁴ I gradually realized that the significance of the ways in which the three poets can be said to have appropriated and creatively put to use in their own lives and works Mandelstam’s *polyphonic organicism* and *ethical realism*—that is, his conception of poetry as a living organism born of and participating in the ever-unfolding polylogue of the voices “of all ages” and as an ethical-existential force bespeaking the poet’s love and concern for the world and “human society”—by far exceeds the purview of literary genealogy and history, crucially bearing on the much more fundamental question of the very workings of poetry (and literature in general) as an articulation of *life*, and hence as an ethical practice.⁵

Thus, what had begun as a comparative study in literary genealogy and history soon gave way to a more conceptually oriented inquiry into the *poetological* significance of Celan’s, Grünbein’s, and Brodsky’s respective poetic practices, which programmatically blur the line between life and art.⁶ Furthermore, in the course of my concomitant engagement with the three poets in light of their genealogical affinities, I couldn’t help at least strongly intuiting, if not clearly discerning at first, that from a poetological viewpoint as well they were best studied in conjunction; that is, although each of them individually may certainly have something to teach us about the workings of poetry, it is their cumulative, combined artistic effort that holds the most interesting theoretical lessons on the internal and external life of poetry as a form of utterance constitutively bound up with life.

As I was trying to come up with an adequate response to what I experienced as the three poets' demand to be read side by side—in other words, as I was trying to determine how their poetic projects could be made to fit together conceptually—the following overarching argument gradually developed that allows each poet's theoretical significance to come to the fore with particular clarity while emphasizing the embeddedness of their poetic projects within a framework of mutual imbrication and complementarity: by looking at how Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky go about their craft individually, we can learn a great deal about the anatomy and physiology of the poetic text, as well as about how it symbiotically relates to the extrapoetic—to its material, biographical, and sociohistorical conditions. Moreover, by approaching their poetics as mutually complementary (in a sense yet to be elaborated), we are afforded an unprecedented *comprehensive* view of how poetry works. I should stress that although my overarching argument may have developed empirically on the basis of and certainly draws on the three poets' genealogical and historical (if limited) ties, it does not conceptually presuppose or depend on those ties. Adopting a *catalytic* interpretive method that valorizes aesthetic reception over production, I juxtapose Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky in light of their yet-to-be-disclosed mutual *poetological* complementarity.⁷

Given its inductive, twofold thrust—that is, its concern with the lives and works of a particular set of authors *and*, through them, with general questions of poetics—my argument necessitates the concurrent pursuit of three interlocking goals: to offer inventive readings of Celan's, Grünbein's, and Brodsky's lives and works; to probe, through these readings, in an innovative mode the relationship between literature and life and, specifically, the ways in which this relationship gets staged and articulated in poetry; and finally, to point, on the basis of the three poets' translations of life into poetry (and vice versa), to creative new ways of conceiving of the workings of poetry as an ethical practice.

If it is not to remain merely formal, this threefold goal that stakes out the parameters of my interpretive endeavor necessitates in turn a number of steps aimed at infusing my argument with concrete historical, thematic, and conceptual content. Thus such abstract and general notions as *life*, *lives and works*, and *the workings of poetry*, which are central to my argument, must be specified and concretized in order to be tackled meaningfully in the first place. After all, if we want to talk about life and literature, we can do so only on the basis of concrete manifestations of both, as well as in specific thematic and conceptual respects. In my approach to Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky I consequently focus on a handful of concrete, contextually significant real-life *events*, as well as on a limited number of texts and poetic encounters *in light of these events*. More specifically, I attend

to how Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky poetically respond to and metabolize these events so that their particular modes of translating life into poetry cannot fail to acquire unprecedented poetological and ethical force. In order to be able to argue the latter persuasively, I in turn map the thus disclosed interface between literature and life onto a stratigraphically specified conceptual grid developed in response to Celan's, Grünbein's, and Brodsky's poetics and devised signally and comprehensively to capture and do justice, at a theoretical level, to what may well be considered the fundamental, mutually imbricated building blocks of the life of poetry: the constitution of poetic signification, the subsequent emergence of poetic subjectivity on the basis of poetic signification, and finally, the assumption of poetic and (by extension) ethical agency on the part of the thus-created poetic subject.⁸ In particular, this conceptual grid, which allows me to bring into sharp relief what I consider to be especially innovative about the three poets' poetics, is informed by Celan's emphasis on the poetic process as the condition of subjectivity and agency, by Grünbein's focus on and emphatic staging of subjectivity as a poetic invention, and finally by Brodsky's postulate that "aesthetics is the mother of ethics."⁹

Before turning to the events in question and apprising the reader of the specifics of my take on Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky against the foil of these events, a few explanatory remarks regarding my overall treatment of the life-literature nexus are in order. Heeding my three poets' emphasis on the irreducible entwinement of poetry and life (without in any way implying that "art can be explained by life"), and relying on the notion of literature in general as a form of utterance (and hence as essentially saturated with the contexts of its articulation), I am concerned with life only to the extent that it has become a determinant *literary fact*.¹⁰ What do I mean by this?

Following the Russian formalists, who distinguished between the literary order, or *series*, and other, extraliterary *historical series* (such as biography, history, politics, and so on), while acknowledging the indelible, if complex, link between literature and "extraliterary orders," I mean by *literary fact* anything at all insofar as it has become an element of the literary series, or literature, *tout court*.¹¹ "Although it is getting ever more difficult to define literature," Jurij Tynjanov notes, "anyone . . . will be able to point out a literary fact. He will be able to say that this or that does not belong to literature but, rather, to the poet's everyday or personal life, while this or that, conversely, is an emphatically literary fact."¹² Tynjanov's fellow formalist Boris Tomaševskij offers a helpful explanation of the difference between a literary and an extraliterary fact: It is not an author's biography *per se*—his or her "curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life"—that makes for a literary fact, but rather the author's "legendary" or "literary" biography, his

“biographical legend,” that is, his *life and times* insofar as they have become a “living and necessary commentary to his works . . . a legendary concomitant to his poetry.”¹³ Thus, a few illuminating instances of life-turned-literary-fact are Gustave Flaubert’s trial in February 1857 for publishing the presumably immoral *Madame Bovary*, the scandal surrounding the publication of Nabokov’s *Lolita* in 1955, and the 1928 publication and subsequent reception of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* (1928), including the 1960 obscenity trial of Penguin Books for printing an unabridged version of the work—all of which would count, in Tomaševskij’s view, as literary facts. After all, all of these real-life events have been absorbed into the lives of the books that occasioned them; or to put it differently, neither *Madame Bovary* nor *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* nor *Lolita* would be what they are without the scandals surrounding their publication, and the consternation and indignation they triggered (and continue to trigger) among readers.¹⁴ The inclusion of “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”—the essay on the novel’s genesis and aesthetic rationale that Nabokov wrote in response to charges of pornography shortly after the novel’s publication—in all subsequent editions of the novel is a particularly good example of the enmeshment of the extraliterary with the literary.

With these considerations in mind, I now turn to a preliminary discussion of the cluster of real-life events that have provided this book’s historical-biographical skeleton, as well as of the three poets’ responses to and poetic transpositions of these events. The events in question are the so-called Goll affair, in the course of which Celan was wrongfully accused of plagiarizing the work of poet Yvan Goll and which overshadowed his life from the early 1950s until his suicide in 1970; the banishment of Stoic philosopher and statesman Lucius Annaeus Seneca to the Mediterranean island of Corsica in 41 B.C.E. on the charge of adultery with Emperor Claudius’ niece, Julia Livilla—an event that has become central to Grünbein’s self-fashioning as a contemporary poet; and finally, what I would like to call comprehensively the “Brodsky affair,” which set the tone for virtually all of Brodsky’s oeuvre and which comprises the poet’s trial and conviction on the trumped-up charge of social parasitism in 1964 and subsequent expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1972, as well as his momentous liaison with and betrayal by Marianna Basmanova. I should note right away that the ostensible interpretive imbalance created by my decision to home in on three events that are not biographically homologous—two of the events did actually happen to two of the poet’s involved and one did not (Seneca’s exile obviously did not happen to Grünbein)—has no essential bearing on my overall concern with the interface between literature and life: The fact that what I would like to dub the “Livilla affair” did not directly happen to Grünbein neither diminishes its status as a real-life, his-

torical event nor means that it cannot, like any event, become and be treated as significant in any number of contexts other than the context of its initial occurrence. In other words, the fact that, unlike the Goll and Brodsky affairs, which did transpire in Celan's and Brodsky's lives, the Livilla affair did not transpire in Grünbein's life is contingent from a literary-factual viewpoint. What is important is that, as I show, Grünbein *treats it* as central to his life and poetics.¹⁵

What do the three poets do, poetically, in response to these events, the significance of which in and for their lives and works can, as I illustrate, hardly be overestimated? How do they respond to and translate these affairs so that their responses can be said to cast the question of poetry as an ethical practice in a novel light?

Clearly it would be facile to assume that any serious, existentially motivated response to any given situation or event could ever be reduced or boiled down to a single, essential aspect or feature; any attempt at such a reduction would presuppose willfully disregarding the inherent complexity and multifacetedness (semantic, pragmatic, intentional) of human action. This means that the three poets' respective dealings with the above-mentioned affairs cannot possibly be reduced to a single feature. This being said, however, it is not only possible but plausible—if not to say ineluctable, given the inevitably perspectival nature of human cognition—to consider any given phenomenon, including responses to situations or events, in light of what to the observer appears to be its contextually most remarkable or dominant trait, its overall thrust, so to speak.¹⁶ Consequently, it is in light of what emerges as the contextually dominant, most remarkable feature shared by all three poets' responses to the events in question that I wish to interpret them. Whatever else the three poets may be said to have done poetically in response to the Goll, Livilla, and Brodsky affairs, respectively, all three have translated these events, as I document in great detail, into *affairs of poetry*—into *poetic affairs* (in an amatory, erotic sense, above all); all three, in other words, can be said to respond most memorably to these events by displacing their “affair-quality” (that is, their sociopolitically extraordinary, transgressive, and scandalous character) onto the level of poetry and reenacting it in emphatically erotic terms. In so doing they not only succeed in putting, as I explain, existentially and ethically significant and unexpected spins on the three affairs, but they also adumbrate and stage (in tacit homage to Mandelstam's erotic poetics) an unprecedented conception of *poetry as love affair*—that is, a conception of poetry as not primarily linguistic (hinging on the interplay of the six basic functions of language, with the poetic function dominating the others) but as what I would like to call *affairistic*—as predicated on the ethical-existential and erotic categories of love, fidelity, and betrayal.¹⁷

This is of course not to suggest that the verbal aspect of poetry is downplayed by the three poets, but rather that it is recognized and staged as embedded and already unfolding within an affairistic framework. In and through their *affairistic* appropriations, displacements, and rewritings of the three events, Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky succeed, I argue, in sounding, in an innovative key, the workings of poetry, approached through the threefold question of the constitution of poetic signification (Celan), the subsequent emergence of poetic subjectivity (Grünbein), and finally the assumption of poetic and (by extension) ethical agency on the part of the thus-created poetic subject (Brodsky).

While grounding my critical reflections and observations in detailed, contextually motivated interpretations of Celan's, Grünbein's, and Brodsky's overall poetic projects, I disclose and document their specifically affairistic thrust on the basis of their respective dialogues with three choice interlocutors: Celan's with Shakespeare, Grünbein's with Seneca, and Brodsky's with Lord Byron. I focus first on Celan's translations of Shakespeare's sonnets, which develop and instantiate, I argue, an erotic conception of poetic translation and hence of poetic signification *tout court* (insofar as translation is the basic mode of signification), thereby enabling Celan to countervail and parry (if not, in the long run, to withstand) poetically the Goll affair's pernicious impact in the shelter of the loving embrace of Shakespeare's poems—in the "truth" of what I reveal as the two poets' love affair.¹⁸ I then proceed to a detailed discussion of Grünbein's idiosyncratic engagement with the question of poetic subjectivity, giving special attention to what I disclose as his poetologically momentous liaison with Seneca—most vividly staged in his "Seneca Studies." I conclude with a sustained exploration of the ethical dimension of Brodsky's poetics; in particular, I zero in on Brodsky's dialogue with Lord Byron as it most extensively and memorably unfolds in the collection *New Stanzas to Augusta*, which I construe as Brodsky's attempt to countervail political disempowerment and personal betrayal by poetically and, as I argue, ethically recouping agency in the arms of his beloved "English Muse."

By assigning my discussion of the questions of poetic signification, poetic subjectivity, and poetic and ethical agency to three different chapters devoted to distinct poetic conversations (Chapters Two through Four), I am not in any way suggesting, and thereby retracting my initial emphasis on their mutual imbrication, that these constitutive aspects of the literary could ever be encountered in isolation in the real lives of concrete poetic texts. Every poem, every literary text, constitutively performs all three aspects (to a greater or lesser degree of visibility) that can be separated and situated along a linear, discursive axis for heuristic purposes only. In other words, because in the actual life of poetry all three aspects are by defini-

tion intertwined, my sequential treatment of each of them must be recognized as a hermeneutic necessity resulting from the linear nature of discursive reasoning rather than being an attempt at a just portrayal of poetic reality. Concomitantly, the particular order of my engagement with Celan, Grünbein, and Brodsky must be viewed as a function of the stratigraphic logic underlying what I have advanced as the mutual imbrication of the questions of poetic signification, subjectivity, and agency—to wit, signification as the condition of subjectivity, which in turn becomes agency. Each poet, respectively, I suggest, stages exemplarily one of the three constitutive aspects of the poetic here discussed; and although all three aspects are by definition operative in the works of all three poets, the works of each are not equally suited as model instantiations of all three aspects.

Thus, although Celan certainly attends to, as I show, the questions of poetic subjectivity (what he refers to as “the naming and addressing I”) and agency (most explicitly in his notion of poetry as “counter-word”), his main contextual contribution to our thinking about and understanding of the workings of poetry consists, I suggest, *not* primarily in the “answers” he provides to these questions (approached in the well-worn dialogic terms supplied by Herder, Buber, and Mandelstam, among others), but in what I reveal as their reliance on, and hence subordination to, the more fundamental question of poetic signification as the condition of subjectivity and agency.¹⁹ The singularly innovative thrust of Celan’s engagement with the question of poetic signification in turn consists, I argue, in his affairistic practice of poetic translation, which sublates both the Romantic commonplace, according to which “all poetry is translation,” and the semiotic commonplace, according to which “the meaning of any . . . sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign.”²⁰ In Grünbein’s texts, conversely, it is the question of the emergence of poetic subjectivity that moves to the forefront of poetic attention and to which the sibling questions of poetic meaning and agency can be said to be subordinated. The novelty of Grünbein’s take on the question of subjectivity consists, I argue, in casting it in affairistic (as opposed to, for instance, epistemological or cognitive) terms: The subject reveals itself as the fruit of the poet’s love affair with a literary interlocutor. Finally, Brodsky puts explicit emphasis on the question of the interface between poetry and ethics, thereby relegating the questions of poetic signification and subjectivity to second and third place (in no particular order), without in any way obliterating them. Echoing Celan’s and Grünbein’s affairistic presentations of the constitution of poetic signification and subjectivity, respectively, Brodsky in turn casts the poetic subject’s accession to agency in affairistic terms. To enable the reader to follow my argument closely in its full historical, thematic, and conceptual scope, in the first chapter I provide

comprehensive accounts of the three affairs that constitute my argument's historical focus, followed by detailed explanations of its key terms and concepts. On a final preliminary note, I should point out that although Celan's, Grünbein's, and Brodsky's lives and works, including a number of the issues addressed here, have, as I document, received a fair amount of critical attention, neither their specifically affairistic dimension nor their poetological complementarity—that is, the cumulative, combined import of their poetics—have hitherto been probed. It is in attending to the latter two aspects of the three poets' poetic projects, I argue, that their unprecedented significance and innovative force can be most saliently thrown into relief.