

Some characters escape the war but return, finding that they can no longer live in their homelands. The prizewinning story, Amir Kamber's "Amir Kamber: Organ and Piano Tuner," is in artistic terms not notably superior to many of the other stories, but it does combine nostalgia for the world of the narrator's grandfather, a dislocation of language and identity, the brutal facts of deportation, and the anguish of a writer who must try to find himself in "a quality search engine. / I type myself. / And enter."

Not all the stories in the collection are this bleak or self-reflective, but as a whole they give a strong impression of the mood of a generation who survived the recent Balkan wars and who are now trying to make psychological and artistic space in which to live. Unfortunately, *Inso(mno)lent P(rose)* will probably not reach the audience it deserves. Even the Omnibus Web site ([www.omnibus.ba](http://www.omnibus.ba)), does not list the anthology. An American or English press should welcome the opportunity to distribute this very impressive collection of stories by new voices.

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## Russian

■ **Joseph Brodsky. *Conversations*.** Cynthia L. Haven, ed. Jackson. University Press of Mississippi. 2002 (released 2003). xxii + 191 pages. \$46 (\$18 paper). ISBN 1-57806-527-5 (528-3 paper)

TO WRITE BRILLIANTLY IN TWO LANGUAGES and to achieve fame and glory in both, such was the achievement of Joseph Brodsky. A Russian native who started writing poetry in Russian, won a Nobel, and was poet laureate of the United States, he taught world literature in English to American university students. He was a literary bridge like no other, protected in the USSR by the great Anna Akhmatova and by W. H. Auden in the Anglo-Saxon world. He believed in the beauty and power of poetry, in the end promoting an organization that distributed poetry free as a service to creativity and the reading public.

Like so many of his modern brethren, he wrote poetry (in English, and even more so in Russian) that is subtle and difficult, and he was as opinionated as he was creative. This collection of "conversations," superbly edited and brilliantly introduced by Cynthia L. Haven, is an inexhaustible trove of ideas and views. It covers his life here and elsewhere and his creations, but its main focus, as one would expect, is on literature. "What interested me most, and still does, is the process of writing itself," he says to Michael Scammell in 1972: in this he never wavered, as shown in this series of conversations stretching from 1970, when he was still in the USSR and gave an "audience" in English to a very bright young American university student, to shortly before his death in 1996 from the heart problem that plagued him during his entire U.S. existence.

Brodsky's opinions on life, literature, and politics (he denied being interested but did not hesitate to opine) are often controversial, often supercilious, and never without bite. He can state that no one can write poetry without reading and absorbing the *Gilgamesh* (is he kidding?) and often gives the impression that he considers Americans less thinking and less intellectual. And he is unendingly gloomy: "I think the world is capable of only one thing basically—proliferating its evils," he says to Sven Birkerts in the book's longest conversation, the de rigueur *Paris Review* inter-

view. Though he denies being religious, he admits to spiritual content in his verse.

Brodsky returns again and again, along with his interviewers, to Auden, whom he almost worshipped, though—to me, at any rate—the muscularity and energy of Auden is quite different from the more meditative tone of Brodsky. He loves music and dance and travel (he had a veritable love affair with Venice, to which he dedicated an interesting English-language meditative essay). Yet among performers, he admits to having only one close friend, Baryshnikov, with whom, as the editor points out, he shared a consuming passion for women.

It is, of course, Brodsky's literary views that readers will seek in these pages, and they will find them everywhere. The editor has provided an index, which allows you to find any writer about whom he expressed an opinion. His biases are well known to his readers, but might bear some reexamination: the greatest poet in Russian of the twentieth century, Marina Tsvetaeva; the greatest poet in English of the twentieth century, probably Auden, but also possibly Frost (see his comment to Missy Daniel: "Frost is the greatest poet America produced in this century"). He refers with some dislike to both Pound and Eliot and is profoundly enamored of Roman writers, especially Ovid (he likes his melancholia).

Form and structure are to Brodsky the *sine qua non* of any poetry, and he found that too many of his students in the United States had no sense of pattern. So he would require his advanced university students to learn one poem a week by heart: the oral tradition had disappeared here, and this was the way of bringing it back.

Still, I cannot, putting this book down, avoid the feeling that I am being assaulted by an aggressive opinion-maker who cannot wait to tell me how wrong I am. For Brodsky—this, too, is not news to anyone who knows him—was truly arrogant, even defiant, daring the listener to disagree with him. Was it his failing health, his brutalizing past, or his psychological makeup that made him so negative and pessimistic? Read *Conversations* and make up your own mind.

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■ **Emil Draitser. *Kto ty takoi: Odessa, 1945–1953*.** Baltimore, Maryland. Seagull. 2003. 243 pages. ISBN 0-9714963-4-X

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK *Kto ty takoi* (Who are you?), Russian-American writer Emil Draitser imaginatively re-creates the world of childhood in a particular setting and time. Its hero, who is also the narrator, is an intelligent Jewish boy with an inquisitive mind. Early in life he begins to feel that he is somehow different, that he is unlike the others around him. He also wants to know why others see him in that light. Relief from these questions comes to him not in Russia but in America, although the inner search for identity continues even in the new country. The greater part of the novel concerns the life of this boy in the Soviet city of Odessa during the post-World War II period. The events, such as Stalin's orders and finally his death, leave a distinct mark on the narrator's psyche.

One of Draitser's earlier books was titled *Poterjannyj mal'chik* (The lost boy). The work before us could be called "The Boy Has Been Found," because in it—judging by the richness of the minute observations, psychological insights, and vivid descriptions—the