Joseph Brodsky possesses one of the purest speculative minds in the history of Russian poetry. Not unlike Sir Thomas Browne, the medical doctor-cum-mystic whose work is everywhere marked by oxymoron, paradox, and “double vision,” Brodsky might remark that “I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an Oh Altitude”. In this same Religio Medici, written in 1634-35 just a few years after death of John Donne, Browne goes on in a discursive and, one wants to say, typically “Brodskian” vein:

‘Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved aenigma’s and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation and Resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan, and my rebellious reason, with that odde resolution I learned of Tertullian, Certum est quia impossibile est. I desire to exercise my faith in the difficultest point, for to credit ordinary and visible objects is not faith, but persuasion . . . where I cannot satisfy my reason, I love to humour my fancy. . . .1

Brodsky too loves to pose involved enigmas and riddles to his “apprehension,” to exercise his faith in the “difficultest” point, to find out what it means that Certum est quia impossibile est.

This, however, is true a fortiori when the subject is the death of a Christian sceptic and fellow poet, for here the body-soul debate emerges in its most dramatic terms. Donne, we recall, who had “contemplated death for many years,” 2 spent his final days with a drawing of his own enshrouded body, head turned eastward toward Him “Cujus nomen est Oriens.” In the seventeenth century it was not uncustomary for a man to pose for his own funeral portrait, to compose his own epitaph, in short,

---

to make a fitting end. It was not the intention, as Donne's biographer tells us, "to turn away [one's] face from the facts of death" or "to remove from everyday life all constant reminders of its omnipresence."3 To those who witnessed Donne's final appearance in the pulpit at Whitehall (25 February 1631), it was as though he "had preach't his own Funeral Sermon." 4 And here Donne's concern to embrace his own mortality is deeply shared by Brodsky, who is more obsessed with death, his as well as others', than perhaps any other Russian poet with the possible exception of Innokentii Annenskii.5 It should follow, therefore, that the elegy is that form which by definition unleashes in Brodsky the broadest and most "paradoxical" speculation.6 It is, in his hands, a kind of Jewish prayer for the dead, which, as chance would have it, Donne himself once witnessed, probably in a synagogue in Holland with the Drurys in 1612. Brodsky becomes, as it were, the modern "sonne or some other neere in blood or alliance, [who] comes to the Altar, and there saith and doth some thing in the behalfe of his dead father, or grandfather respectively."7 The absolute nature of death, its total silence and liminal status, makes it an ideal occasion for the presence of poetic speech. For Brodsky, the elegiac genre is a gesture of sublime ventriloquy, since the poet, projecting his words onto the one who cannot answer back, must constantly raise his voice (if not emotionally, then speculatively) in order to be heard in the deafening quiet.

This essay is a close reading and contextualization of "Bol'shaia elegia Dzhonu Donnu" (Large Elegy to John Donne, 1963), the second poem in Ostanovka v pustyne (A Halt in the Desert, 1970).8 "Bol'shaia elegia" is, among other things, one of the first major poems of Brodsky's early maturity, and for that reason alone it deserves our care-

---

3. Ibid., p. 527.
4. Ibid., p. 526.
5. Both Annenskii and Brodsky, significantly, share the fate of the serdechnik, in Russian the person with a bad heart.
6. "Elegy ... [is] the most fully developed genre in poetry. ... Every 'on the death of' poem, as a rule, serves not only as a means for an author to express his sentiments occasioned by a loss but also as a pretext for more or less general speculations on the phenomenon of death per se," as Brodsky says in his Tsvetaeva essay. See Joseph Brodsky, Less Than One: Selected Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), p. 195.
8. Joseph Brodsky, Ostanovka v pustyne (New York: Chekhov, 1970). pp. 21-26. Elsewhere I have written about Brodsky's considerable debt to Donne and his modern use of the metaphysical conceit, important topics which space does not permit discussion of in these pages. See the chapter on Donne and Brodsky in my forthcoming book "Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile" (Princeton Univ. Press).