

THE LANGUAGE ZONE: JOSEPH BRODSKY AND THE MAKING OF A  
BILINGUAL POET

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation unites several aspects of Joseph Brodsky's writing under the arc of his development as a bilingual and transnational writer. I make the case that Brodsky's poetic sensibility was originally transnational, i.e. exhibited an affinity with both foreign and domestic poetic traditions in pursuit of its own original poetics. I establish the trope of a speaker alone in a room as a leading poetic concept of Brodsky's neo-Metaphysical style. The poems that are centered on this trope do not refer explicitly to the poetry of the British Baroque through intertextual references or imitation, which attests to the ability of Brodsky's transnationally oriented poetry to process foreign traditions with subtlety and to incorporate key elements of it fully within his own idiom. I follow the new generation of researchers (Ishov, Berlina) in their attempt to "put Brodsky on the map of American studies" by paying close attention to Brodsky's self-translation strategies and the reasons behind the negative reception of Brodsky's English-language poetry during the time of its publication. Drawing on Jan Hokenson and Marcella Munson's concept of the bilingual text, I discover in the "English Brodsky" the tendencies characteristic of most Modernist bilingual writing. My comparative analysis of the archival materials pertaining to the translation of the poem "Dekabr' vo Florentsii" ("December in Florence") shows that Brodsky's solutions as a self-translator aim at preserving the conceptual and stylistic

unity of his bilingual oeuvre. I further read Brodsky's English prose as an attempt to rehabilitate and explain his poetic credos: the insistence on formal versification, the importance of the continuity of the poetic tradition, and estrangement as the main function of the poetic utterance. I show that Brodsky's English writing on Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva is self-revealing as it discloses the poet's own motivations for writing prose. Analyzing Brodsky's autobiographical essays "Less than One" and "In a Room and a Half," I return to the trope of a room and read his prose as a form of translation commentary that provides his new audience with a rich cultural context that is essential for a full understanding of his bilingual project.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In 2016 I took a hiatus from my studies and returned to St. Petersburg, a place that Joseph Brodsky called his *rodnoi gorod* (native city) in his interviews. In preparation for writing this dissertation, I besieged The National Library of Russia, but the items that interested me the most in its Brodsky archive were marked by the sinister letter З [ze] which meant *закрытый доступ* (closed access). The letter was buzzing at me inhospitably; turning it into an О for *открытый доступ* (open access) promised to take months; it didn't happen that year and hasn't happened to this day. In 2017 I found out about the Brodsky Museum Foundation and their plans to open his "room and a half" to the public. This small but ambitious project boasted collaboration with the Anna Akhmatova Museum at the Fountain House and with none other than Valentina Polukhina, the poet's famous biographer currently residing in England. I imagined researchers working with Polukhina archives and guests walking around the rooms of the famous Muruzi house<sup>1</sup> in awe. I wrote to them offering my assistance in translation and

---

<sup>1</sup> Located at the address 24 Liteiny Prospekt, the so-called *Dom Muruzi* (Muruzi House) is a landmark of Saint Petersburg. Although its architecture "in Moorish style" is remarkable, the building is famous for its association with the literary world. Lev Losev in his book *Joseph Brodsky. A Literary Life* (2011) describes it as follows:

This building on the corner of Panteleimon [today Pestel' street] and Liteiny, where Brodsky lived two-thirds of his Russian life, at various times also housed such literary figures as Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Pushkin, the eldest son of the poet, the novelist Nikolay Leskov (1879), and, finally, between 1899 and 1913, Zinaida Gippius, Dmitriy Merezhkovsky, and D.V. Filosofov, perhaps the most famous literary family of Russia's "Silver Age." The Merezhkovskys' flat served as a meeting place for a religious-philosophical society often attended by Aleksandr Blok and Andrey Bely. In 1919, in another flat, Korney Chukovsky ran a literary studio attached to the World Literature publishing house; among its lecturers were Nikolay Gumilyov and Evgeniy Zamyatin, and among its attendees were the Acmeist poets and a group of prose writers who called themselves Serapion Brethren. By 1920, Chukovsky's studio had been replaced by a club called Poet's House, first headed by Blok, then later by Gumilyov. Gumilyov's famous Poet's Workshop also met here. (4)

research, hopeful that the walls of this virtual museum (since the museum had not been opened yet) will be more welcoming than the somber and solemn red-carpeted halls of the National Library. Soon I received an enthusiastic reply which was followed by an invitation to come and help – the windows at the legendary apartment badly needed washing. This was my contribution to what was to become the new Mecca for Russian poetry enthusiasts: watching layers of brownish-grey dust and residue from the Petersburg streets dripping down the windowpanes I tried to look at the view with Brodsky's eyes. As the outlines of Pestel' Street emerged on the damp glass, lines kept resurfacing in my memory:

Сегодня ночью я смотрю в окно

и думаю о том, куда зашли мы?

Tonight I am looking out the window

and thinking, where is it that we've wandered?

\*\*\*

Я сижу у окна. Я помыл посуду.

Я был счастлив здесь, и уже не буду.

I am sitting by the window. I have washed the dishes.

I was happy here, but won't be any more...

Some of them I knew by heart, some I glimpsed earlier on the walls of the apartment, which were covered by fresh white wallpaper with Brodsky's poetry inked all over as a design solution for one of the early exhibitions of this museum in progress. Indeed, the apartment was in a somewhat sad state and the exhibition was supposed to be inspiring. There were other harbingers of museum activity there. A golden head with

Brodsky's profile on a granite pedestal – a copy of the sculpture by Vladimir Sverdlov – was cruelly locked inside a little cold gallery overlooking Transfiguration Square and seemed to be casting lonesome glances through its hazy windows towards the Cathedral. Another statue of Brodsky humbly stood in the corner: its eyes behind the wire glasses without lenses expressed disdain at being occasionally mistaken for a rack for scarves and purses. The light of the winter sun reflected from the grey Petersburg sky fell on the old parquet making it look like flotsam swaying on swamp waters. There were no archives to work with or artefacts to examine. The place felt empty but strangely alive, as if just unearthed from under a layer of ashes left by an ancient volcano eruption, as in the plot of another Brodsky poem (the sonnet "*My snova prozhivaiem u zaliva...*" or "Once again we are living by the bay ..." from 1962). It was not yet a museum dedicated to a Great Russian poet but a site of excavation initiated by a group of enthusiasts from all walks of life. It was raw and exciting.

In winter of 2017 I was asked to assist at the concert in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of Brodsky's Nobel Prize award that took place at the Hermitage Theater. The event was a grandiose one and I could only admire the effort and achievement of the Foundation team. The ceremony looked like a high point in the process that started back in 1999 when Mikhail Milchik and Yakov Gordin established the Foundation on paper and the rooms in the communal apartment at Muruzi house still belonged to their last residential owners. However, when I walked through the Hermitage halls with their Imperial paraphernalia and operatic lighting, a sense of uneasiness grew in me. The golden head by Sverdlov was now standing in the middle of the exhibition hall shining in unison with the gilded stucco; a string orchestra in tails was playing classical music on

the stage, underneath a giant screen with a photograph of Brodsky projected on it. In this black and white shot, he was smiling and holding up his Nobel Prize medal; wearing a tuxedo, he looked like a member of the orchestra that celebrated him. Speeches were made, famous actors recited Brodsky's poetry and bards sang his poems set to music. As I watched them on the theater stage, under this festive photograph, as if crowned with the gilded double-headed eagle on the coat of arms that decorated the theater curtain, I was reliving a recurrent scene of my childhood – the annual Lyceum Day (or Pushkin Day) concerts my secondary school organized in October. On this day, girls and boys wearing light white blouses and black skirts and pants (which brought most of us to the brink of pneumonia after hours in the freezing cold backstage of our local concert hall) solemnly recited Pushkin's textbook poems against the background of his famous profile, as if inked with a quill by one of his Lyceum friends. Every year we were reminded of "our everything," "the Sun of Russian poetry" and the creator of the Russian language and by the eleventh grade we were decidedly sick of the Great Poet of Russia. Years later, things like Marina Tsvetaeva's "My Pushkin" and Daniil Kharms' anecdotes healed me from this complicated love-hate relationship with the Russian classic.

Perhaps, this was the source of my uneasiness. The celebrations seemed to be turning Brodsky into a new Pushkin, a new national poet, and, while the intention was to give his name and his poetry a new life at home, it seemed to have a limiting effect instead. Although the event commemorated the act of international recognition, it was monumentalizing Brodsky as the last "Great Poet of Russia," claiming his poetry as Russia's *natsional'noe dostoiianie* (national treasure), once renounced, but recently reappraised and wanted. This first impression took clearer shape later that year, when I



heard Ellendea Proffer Teasley give an interview as she promoted her new book *Brodsky Among Us* (the Russian version titled “Бродский среди нас,” 2017) at a Petersburg bookstore *Podpisnyie izdania*. When she was asked whether it was hard to write a book about Brodsky, her long-time friend and a protégé of Ardis Publishers, she replied, to the astonishment of the audience, that the book was born of anger. She explains:

Я просто разозлилась, когда я увидела, что творится здесь. Что человек, который для меня очень живой, очень присутствует (то есть я слышу его голос до сих пор, это абсолютно не какой-то гений на пьедестале). Сроят из него какой-то не просто памятник, а государственный памятник. Но уже вы уничтожали блистательного поэта Маяковского таким образом. Не надо, не надо. Так я разозлилась и начала писать.

I simply got mad when I saw what was going on here. That a person who was still very alive for me, very present (meaning I still hear his voice, he is absolutely not some genius on a pedestal). He is being turned into not just a monument, but a state monument. But you already destroyed the brilliant poet Mayakovsky this way. Don't, don't. So, I got mad and started writing. (*Podpisnyie* 32:18 – 32:50, my translation)

Her remark made me realize what I felt earlier: indeed, canonization and institutionalization comes at a cost. The example of Mayakovsky was telling in this context. Once proclaimed “*burevestnik Revolutsii*” (the stormbringer of the Revolution) and the first poet of the proletariat, he was buried as a great Modernist poet and a trans-medial artist. Although the idea of a Brodsky museum came from the grassroots and started without any academic or governmental support, it became more of an official

statement as it grew in scale. In her book, Proffer Teasley speaks of a kind of reduction and petrification that comes with this kind of national recognition:

I liked the Nabokov Museum and the Akhmatova Museum; I was glad there were such things in memory of these great writers. So why was I so upset at the idea of a Brodsky Museum? Later it came to me that you can resume grieving and not know it until something shocks you into awareness. [...] I don't want there to be a museum for Joseph, I don't want to see him on a stamp, or his name on the side of a plane – these things mean he is dead, dead, dead, dead, and no one was ever more alive.

I protest: a magnetic and difficult man of flesh is in the process of being devoured by a monument, considering just how human Joseph was. (135)

Earlier in the book she tries to imagine Brodsky's own reaction to a contest of busts or sculptures of him or to the speeches at receptions and gatherings that portrayed him as a martyr: "Mr. *Mauvais Ton* would have laughed – and then have cried. [...] He would have found this unbearable." (129 - 130). Like every memoir about Brodsky, Proffer Teasley's book interweaves questions of politics and poetics, exile and translation. Although at the forefront of it is her personal experience of Brodsky's canonization in Russia which she sees as a betrayal of the true nature of a dear friend and a poet she and her husband "discovered" for the world, what lurks behind it is a critical problem directly affecting the scholarly approach to Brodsky's oeuvre and the theoretical concepts it involves. Indeed, as Brodsky himself resisted any kinds of reductive labels during his lifetime, the complexity and interliminal nature of his bilingual writing resists definitions that emerge from nationalist approaches to literature.

In my research I follow the approach of Hokenson and Munson who, in their monograph *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Self-Translation* (2014), seek to bring this complexity and interliminality in focus, appealing to the ancient tradition of literary bilingualism and self-translation that flourished in antiquity, the Middle Ages and, again, during the period of colonial expansion. They note that this tradition was marginalized during the time of the consolidation of nation states and draw attention to the effect it had on modern criticism and scholarship:

Monolingual literary critics extol the writers' texts in one language while neglecting their work in the other, even as theorists in linguistics and translation studies tend to ignore self-translations altogether, in their consensual focus on cultural and linguistic difference. (2)

Brodsky's case is interesting in this regard. While his English-language poetry is of little interest for his Russian audience, his successful career in the United States and his status as a Nobel Prize laureate are often mentioned with pride and, in fact, as an argument for the continuing process of monumentalizing him as a foundational figure of the Russian – often as opposed to the Soviet – literary tradition. As Hokenson and Munson notice, however, it is the effort to guard “the linguistic purity of the foundational figures” of the European canon (they bring up the examples of Chaucer and Dante), that lead to the exclusion of their translations or bilingual writing and, as a result, to the neglect of this form of writing as a whole (1). Following Berman, Pym, Venuti and others, they trace the history of such attitudes back to the German Romantics' notion of a writer as loyal to (and the product of) the genius of his native language, which contains in itself the essence (*Wesen*) of its people (*Volk*), or nation. This had put the bilingual writer

into a precarious position. For example, Hokenson and Munson refer to Schleiermacher's famous opus on translation which, despite calling for a change towards foreignization in translation, "pronounced a bilingual writer a pure impossibility" as well as "a citizen of no language or perhaps a traitor to two" (3). It is the echo of this period, and this text in particular, that still resounds in the Anglo-American criticism of Brodsky's self-translation of the 1980s, as the words "perverse" and "unnatural" litter the texts of the reviews and betray their authors' firm and outdated belief that one can translate only into one's first and native language. Interestingly, these purist attitudes to language still affect the Western scholarship on Brodsky, while the Russians seem to have largely forgotten the first impression of something "foreign," "contrived" and "strangely English" Brodsky's innovative poetry had on its early readers, his contemporaries. Less than two decades ago, on the pages of *Novyi Mir* (New World) Solzhenitsyn criticized Brodsky for his "alienation from the Russian literary tradition" and reproached him for not tapping into "deep-seated abilities of the Russian language" and its "enormous organic layer" and for the lack of contact with the "vast Russian soil" (my translation). Today, Brodsky is extolled as the successor and the custodian of the Silver Age tradition of Russian poetry and his verse is credited with overcoming the Soviet Newspeak (*Novoyaz*) and producing a new blend of Russian poetic language. Western Slavists sing the second part to this narrative which, although honorable, is bound to "eras[e] the intercultural origin of the literary innovation" which Brodsky, as a bilingual writer, brought into both Russian and Anglo-American poetics. Even those researchers, whose works are most insightful and appreciative of Brodsky's linguistic and poetic hybridizations, focus on his significance for Russian literature and in their conclusions

tend to shelve him neatly between Tsvetaeva and Sedakova rather than between Auden and Walcott.

To start with, David Bethea's seminal study *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* written during the poet's lifetime (1994) lays the groundwork for a comprehensive approach to his writing but does not go far beyond the canon of his Russian poetry. Discussing the engagement of Brodsky's poetics with the Russian, Classical European, and Anglo-American traditions, Bethea coins the term "triangular vision" which defines its complex and multilayered structure of influence and intertextuality across genres (elegy, sonnet, essay) and themes (religion, metaphysics, desire). As he examines the "palimpsest" of the poetic strands from Brodsky to John Donne, Dante, W. H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot, Bethea argues compellingly that Brodsky's grafting of the Anglophone onto Russian poetics rescued him from the problem of "belatedness" and the Bloomian anxiety of influence. However, as he concludes with a chapter on translation and bilingualism, Bethea is critical of Brodsky's attempt at linguistic transition, contrasting it, as many before him had, with Nabokov's success. Bethea connects it to the specificity of poetic versus prose translation and Brodsky's fixation on the prosody, which he "*as a major practicing poet*" felt acutely and could not let go of (230, italics is original). He finds that the "rhythmic signatures" of the Russian Brodsky are lost, the "unmistakably Brodskian [...] subtleties of tone" are flattened in the English of the self-translations and post-emigration poetry (231 - 234). His conclusions, however, lie not in the sphere of translation methods, but in that of language proficiency. He suggests that the rhymes do not work because Brodsky "hears Russian endings and Russian syntactical units" when he pronounces his English lines; the "perfect pitch" of Brodsky's ironical buffoonery is

off balance because “his linguistic roots are in another language” (233-234). All in all, while culturally proficient, Brodsky simply “does not feel English the way Auden did” (234). The devil is in the detail, and in the end notes to the chapter we see him quoting D.M. Thomas: “One can translate only into one’s mother tongue – at least this is true for poetry, because there is something primordial in poetry which cannot be captured in any other way” ([original in French] *Actes* 162, qtd. in Bethea 296). Thus, Bethea’s reliance on the premise of the untranslatability of poetry seems to be in the way of acknowledging Brodsky’s “total bilingualism” (231). Bethea speaks of Brodsky as *a* translator rather than a self-translator or a bilingual writer in the sense Hokenson and Munson define it. At some point in his introduction Bethea comes close to it and intuits Brodsky’s belonging to the company of transnational or bilingual authors – Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Czeslaw Milosz, but stops short of developing this comparison in his discussion of Brodsky’s bilingualism (13).

The revision of the phenomenon of bilingualism and self-translation brought about mostly by postcolonial trends in literary studies made the field ripe for revising this view of Brodsky’s text. For example, Jahan Ramazani in his book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) presents the concept of transnational Modernism and the exceptional capacity of poetry above all genres/literary media to exist within this category. He believes that certain qualities of poetry, often precisely those which were previously considered to be obstacles for its transnational and transcultural travel, in fact have enormous potential for transgressing national boundaries. Among those he names poetry’s “elasticity,” i.e. its ability to “stretch” over time and space and to assume various ethnic and national poetic forms and genres – such as the epic, *ghazal*, stanza, elegy, etc.–

and to circulate in songs and translations and become adapted and transformed *transnationally* (13-14). Another quality is the ability of poetry to compress layers of cultural information in language forms that it deals with and, thus, to make it transportable into a different culture and language. Ramazani connects this quality with the intensity of poetry's dependence on language itself (19). "Mongrelization" is one of the key concepts of Jahan Ramazani in *A Transnational Poetics*. In it, the origin, or as Ramazani describes it the degree of "mongrel" in one's origin, plays a role in his/her power to expose the influence of globalization on his/her primary cultural tradition or traditions. As Ramazani provides several case studies of poetic creation between traditions and languages usually in a colonial context (Claude McKay, Derek Walcott), some of the tendencies he distinguishes apply to the writing of the Russian-born poet and some do not. The peculiarity of Brodsky's case is in the inverted order of its linguistic aspect. Instead of bringing the "Russian element" into the Anglo-American tradition, he selects and appropriates the characteristics of the Anglophone poetic tradition, particularly as it is crafted in Modernist poetry, and applies it to the "problematic" areas of Russian. Hokenson and Munson do not exclude poetry from their project and make a compelling case for the "twinned" poetic texts "written with one hand" of a bilingual. They focus on the texts' embedded-ness in their respective languages as a factor enriching, rather than complicating or undermining their interpretation. Unfortunately, both Ramazani's and Hokenson and Munson's work mention Joseph Brodsky only in passing, as one in the long lists of "other" transnational or bilingual writers of the twentieth century, since their analysis is limited by periodization and stops at Modernism.

It appears that while Nabokov's case has long made it to the studies of bilingualism, Brodsky is still firmly in the domain of the Slavic Departments.

As a new generation of Russian-English bilinguals comes to conduct research at American and European Slavic and Comparative Literature Departments, the interest in Brodsky as a bilingual, rather than as a Great Russian poet comes to the fore. As a result, the criteria of a successful poetic self-translation are questioned and Brodsky's project of rendering the "signatures" of his Russian poetics into English has received a more sympathetic reaction. Recent scholarship shows more interest in the reception of Brodsky's writing and more engagement with the archival research. In this regard I want to distinguish two works that inspired and provided the foundation for my research. Zakhar Ishov's dissertation "'Post-horse of Civilisation: Joseph Brodsky translating Joseph Brodsky. Towards a New Theory of Russian-English Poetry Translation'" (2008) concludes that the 'un-English' qualities of Brodsky's self-translations were "on the surface" and became "the easiest target" for his critics (226); he complicates the issue by plunging into the theoretical depths of the difference between Russian and English prosody and versification, building on Zhirmunsky's meter-rhyme theory. Alexandra Berlina in her work "Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation" (2014) aims "to put Brodsky on the map of American studies" and in her introduction updates the list of the anthologies of American poetry that keep, as they had been, ignoring his English verse (3). She notes that "the quantitative imbalance" between Brodsky's languages – there are, of course, far more poems in Russian than in English – should not be reflected in the scholarship, which she strives to fix by drawing attention to the twenty-six self-translations in relation to their Russian versions. Berlina offers no new



theoretical framework for Brodsky's bilingualism and she is explicit about that; her hands-on approach to Brodsky's texts strives to even out another imbalance – the predominance of theory over practice in translation studies (5).

My dissertation sets out to combine Bethea's comprehensive approach to Brodsky's oeuvre with close attention to the reception and the genesis of his Anglophone writing that the more recent studies reflect. In doing so, I explore three stages of Brodsky's formation as a bilingual and a transnational poet. Chapter II demonstrates the ability of Brodsky's poetry to "hybridize" poetic traditions in Ramazani's sense not only across time, but also across linguistic and cultural borders. Brodsky's engagement with the Anglophone tradition started early on, in his pre-emigration years, originating in his infatuation with the British Baroque, a style/movement which stands apart in its own native tradition and which he explored through translation and imitation. The influence of John Donne and other Metaphysical poets on Brodsky had been frequently commented upon by the poet himself, his contemporaries and fellow-poets, and discussed both in Russian and American scholarship. The latter, however, while speaking of Brodsky appropriating Donne's conceit and "strong line," focused mostly on poems that display intertextual relations and experimentation rather than mastery and original treatment of these elements. For example, David Bethea, meticulously analyzing the origins and various circumstances of "the Donne-Brodsky dialogue," focuses, predictably, on "The Great Elegy to John Donne" (or the "Large Elegy" as he calls it, 1963) and several other early poems he sees as "'infected' by the Donne subtext" (109), including Brodsky's translation of Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Morning." The texts borrow Donne's themes and imagery – the union of souls and the compass, for example – and are rather

what could be called in Russian “*variatsii na temu*” (inspired/indebted improvisations). While these early poems deserve attention as an important step in Brodsky’s appropriation of the Metaphysical corpus, Brodsky’s title as “the only Russian poet who can be called truly ‘metaphysical’ in the Donnean sense” can hardly be limited to the rather explicit dialogic relations like the ones they demonstrate (Bethea 83). In Chapter II I investigate the implications of the term Metaphysical in this title and its reception/interpretation in Western and Russian scholarship on Brodsky. In particular, I strive to move away from the view of Brodsky’s Russian corpus as a consistent poetic rendering of philosophical postulates by Kierkegaard as Shestov, as it is presented in David MacFadyen’s book *Joseph Brodsky and the Baroque* (1998). Instead, I envision it as a Post-Modernist reworking of Baroque elements into a kind of neo-Metaphysical style, not unlike that performed by American Modernists, Brodsky’s predecessors. Following the example of Igor Shaitanov and his reading of Brodsky’s lesser known poem “*Gorenie*” (“Burning”) as quintessentially Metaphysical, I focus on three poems that are united by Brodsky’s signature trope of a speaker alone in a room – “Don’t Leave the Room,” “To L.V. Lifshits” (or “I Kept Saying...”) and “Noon in a Room.” This strikingly potent trope approximates a Metaphysical conceit while betraying no intertextual trace of Donne. I analyze these unambiguously modern poems about voluntary isolation or involuntary exile as Metaphysical poems, described by Helen Gardner as ones written “on occasion,” sprouting from a casual situation that is transformed into a metaphysical dilemma, and using the conceit as an instrument of an argument the poem constructs. The trope of a room as a microcosm in the background of a lyrical hero contemplating cosmic and human dimensions – Time, Space, Infinity, Will,

Death, Memory, etc. – further takes root in Brodsky’s unique “neo-Metaphysical” style and resurfaces in his later poetry and English prose. Thus, Chapter II demonstrates the ability of Brodsky’s poetics to absorb and process the foreign soil to an unpredictable end, without yet crossing linguistic borders. The next logical step is to repeat the feat in a second language, except in this case “the foreign soil” is his own mature Russian poetics.

In Chapter III I revisit the reception and status of Brodsky’s self-translation project drawing on recent theoretical developments in the field of literary self-translation and bilingualism. Taking a closer look at the negative reviews Brodsky’s self-translation received at the time of their publication, I attempt to solve the puzzle that disturbed his Russian-speaking contemporaries. How could a brilliant translator into Russian, an heir to the long and venerable tradition of poet-translators which included such names as Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Kornei Chukovsky, Mikhail Lozinsky, Arsenii Tarkovsky, and others fail at poetic translation into his second language, “despite his astonishing prowess as English essayist” (Bethea 233). To understand the degree to which it was unfathomable to his Russian audience, some context is in order. Indeed, young Brodsky quickly became part of the thriving Soviet industry of literary translation that gave sanctuary to many literary pariahs before him. Its ambitious projects, such as for example the *Biblioteka Vsemirnoi Literatury* (“Library of the World Literature”) series, conceived by Maxim Gorky in 1919 and amounting to two hundred volumes by the 1960s, upheld high standards of literary translation and had to employ the best literary talents of its time, even if it meant temporarily overlooking their political reliability. Sometimes the translations would not be credited to their authors, like Brodsky’s translation of Umberto Saba in the Soviet publication entitled “*Kniga pesen*” (“The Book

of Songs”). Sometimes, on the contrary, translation would serve as a means to smuggle in original work or criticism on an author, rescuing the writer from oblivion, like it was with “*Golosa poetov*” (“Voices of Poets”), a collection of Anna Akhmatova’s translations from Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, and Serbian published in 1965. As was the custom, poet-translators worked from a *podstrochnik* (rough trot, interlinear crib) prepared by experts in a particular language; Brodsky translated an array of authors this way (Pablo Armando Fernandez, Umberto Saba, Thomas Venclova, Cyprian Norwid, Konstanty Gałczyński, and others), his proficiency in the source languages ranging from zero to intermediate. Thus, in this system linguistic proficiency was much less of an issue than the ability to grasp and recreate the nuances of an author’s poetics and style. Brodsky’s mastery of this aspect of literary translation was lauded by such authorities of the craft as Natalia Grudinina, Efim Etkind, Vladimir Admoni, and others. In fact, the testimonies that they provided as witnesses of the defense at the court hearing for Brodsky’s parasitism case in 1964 highlighted Brodsky’s extraordinary ability to “sense the tune of the [source] language” and his “wide, diverse, and thorough [...] knowledge of American, English, and Polish literature,” essential for the high quality poetic translations he produced (Vigdorova). Finally, Dmitry Sergeyevich Likhachev, a prominent academician and a leading editor of the “*Literaturnyie Pamiatniki*” (“Literary Monuments”) series, went to great lengths to commission Brodsky to select and translate the specimens of Metaphysical poetry to be published in the collection “*Poeziia angliiskogo barokko*” (“Poetry of the English Baroque”). This amount of trust towards a twenty-five-year-old poet, who had just returned from internal exile, should alone attest to his skills as a translator of poetic texts. How come, then, that his efforts as a self-translator, i.e. a

translator of his own poetic texts, were not equally appreciated by his contemporaries? The archival research shows that Brodsky did not have a shortage of helping hands after emigration; friends, native speakers of English, provided him with interlinear cribs or translation drafts that he treated as such, and fellow-poets and editors proofread his versions (Rulyova). Are Brodsky collaborators then to be equally blamed for the “faults” the critics find in Brodsky’s English poetry or are they to be exempt on the grounds of being overruled by the author? In the case of the latter, what were the author’s reasons or intentions in overruling these experts? Following Berlina and Ishov, in an attempt to answer these questions, I turn to archival research and analyze the translation drafts of Brodsky’s self-translations focusing on a much discussed poem “December in Florence” (“*Dekabr’ vo Florentsii*” 1976), published in 1980. Drawing on Hokenson and Munson’s approach to the bilingual text, I focus on the continuities, not differences, between the Russian and the English version, contrasting the latter against the translation drafts by other authors. In accordance with Hokenson and Munson’s understanding of the bilingual text as complicating and subverting the traditional concepts of an original and a (faithful) translation, I treat them as two versions of the same “twinned” text, written “with one hand.” Thereby, I show that the translative solutions Brodsky comes up with and chooses over those provided by other translators are aimed at transplanting the “signatures,” as David Bethea calls them, of his Russian style into English. In other words, I argue that they are a means to create a recognizable and consistent style in English rather than mistakes and blunders born of an accent and a lack of understanding of English idiom. In this chapter I often refer to the critique of Brodsky’s translation method offered by Daniel Weissbort in his memoir *From Russian with Love. Joseph Brodsky in English* (2004). I

focus on this over other critical accounts because it not only summarizes the biases about translation and accent common at the time but also shows the premonitions of the contemporary attitude towards the role of a translator and the purpose of a translated text. For example, discussing the relation between Brodsky's self-translations and English "bad" poetry, Weissbort suggests an unlikely comparison between the English Brodsky and D.H. Lawrence's transient poetry of "the immediate present:"

The pansies [referring to D.H. Lawrence's collection *Pansies*, 1929] have done their *job*, to use one of Joseph's favourite words.

And Joseph's English verse, too, has a job to do. It is of-the-moment alive; in its work with language, it is as much improvised as planned or foreordained. It seems to me that in his English verse, possibly more than in Russian, he is thinking on his feet (pun intended but appropriate). And he takes chances; he stumbles, even falls, but gets up again, keeps going. In typical free-verse fashion, Joseph treats the language as though it was something plastic. (125)

In other words, he imagines Brodsky's English verse as poetry "in the making:" not definitive, but consistent in its design and progression, not perfect – but precise. This corresponds to the contemporary understanding of literary translation as an ongoing, open-ended process, in which no version is the last and the definitive one. I would add that Brodsky was also a bilingual poet in the making, acquiring his cultural (poetic, stylistic) expertise and linguistic proficiency in English while growing as a poet in both Russian and English simultaneously. Remarkably, Weissbort does sense an aftertaste of Modernist tendencies in this ongoing project of Brodsky's, with the creation of idiolect

singled out among the typical traits of Modernist bilingual writing by Hokenson and Munson.

While Joseph was, for polemical purposes, a traditionalist, devoted for instance to classical prosody, he was also an experimenter; at least, one recognizes in his work the experimentation of the earlier part of the century. In his translations or his collaboration with translators, he tried to formulate a kind of *inter-language*.

(Weissbort 126, italics are mine)

This freedom of experimentation within the nominal rigidity of the classical structure was perceived and performed by another bilingual poet, Derek Walcott, whose translation of Brodsky's "*Pis'ma dinstatii Min*" (in translation "Letters from the Ming Dynasty") I analyze as a counterargument to the impossibility of poetic translation and Brodsky's "impossible" demands.

The theme of bilingual writing in the making continues in Chapter IV in which I observe the "expansion" of Brodsky's poetics into English prose, namely into the genre of the essay. Here, I suggest looking at Brodsky's essays as a form of translation into the "language," or discourse, of his audience. I use the term "translation" here both figuratively and literally, as I focus my analysis on Brodsky's first collection of essays *Less than One* published in 1986. The previous chapters establish the importance of literary tradition for Brodsky; they also show that the reception of Brodsky's English verse was affected by the reaction of the English-speaking audience to his treatment of the dogmas of the Anglo-American poetic tradition, e.g. his rejection of free verse, his insistence on "mimetic translation," his play with themes and diction deemed archaic, etc. So, in a quite Brodskian manner, instead of adjusting to the new environment, he adjusts

the environment to his creative process. In other words, I propose to see Brodsky's English prose as an exercise in nurturing and training an audience that would be able to appreciate his poetry coming from a tradition other than its own. Following the examples of Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva in his literary criticism essays, Brodsky "explains" his own poetics vicariously through the analysis of Dante, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Cavafy, Walcott and others from his poetic pantheon. Through this process, that is not unlike "localization" he brings his poetry closer to the reader, thereby performing the figurative "translation" of his poetic self. However, in his memoirist essays that frame the collection, we can detect tropes, imagery, metaphors, and whole lines from the Russian Brodsky literally translated into the prose of his English essays. To showcase this kind of translation, I return to the trope of a room and trace its genesis in his autobiographical prose. Comparing it to Brodsky's poem "Noon in a Room" discussed in Chapter II, I continue to unravel the trope's potential as a Metaphysical conceit and discover its intertextual connections with Mandelstam's famous prose work *The Noise of Time* (1925). Looking at the reception of this volume, I conclude that, although most critics still introduced Brodsky as a "great Russian poet," the charges of lack of language proficiency have been dropped and the interest in his poetry, and in Russian poetry in general, has increased. Daniel Weissbort says that Brodsky chose to be "his own flack-catcher" (125); indeed, instead of arguing with his opponents on OpEd pages, he did it in the volumes of his poetic prose.

This study is an attempt to trace the emergence of a bilingual poet in his struggle to make room for himself and his poetry in the interliminal space between traditions, genres, languages, and literary cultures. Hokenson and Manson invoke Anthony Pym's



notion of sociolinguistic “interculture” and propose to see a bilingual author as existing in a “hypothetical zone between languages” (4). In Brodsky’s case this zone is as hypothetical as it can be, since his poetics always emerges at the intersections that have not been established before – between Russian Silver Age<sup>2</sup> and Soviet poetry of the war generation, between British Metaphysical poetry and Russian classicism, between Modernism and Post-Modernism, between free and formal verse, etc. It is perhaps in the search for such a zone that would be free of polarities but also would be flexible enough to include them that he created his theology of Language. From the famous “epiphany in Norenskaya”<sup>3</sup> to the metaphor of one’s language as a

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<sup>2</sup> “*Serebrianyi Vek*” (Silver Age) as opposed to “*Zolotoi Vek*” (Golden Age) of Russian poetry. Boris Gasparov in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (2011) gives the following brief description of the poetry of the Silver Age:

The moniker ‘Silver Age’ refers to the epoch of early and high modernism in Russian culture, which began around the mid-1890s and was put to a rather abrupt end by the October 1917 Revolution. [...] In less than a quarter of a century, Russia produced a remarkable constellation of poets, quite a few of whom (Alexander Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Osip Mandelshtam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky) stood at the world-wide cutting edge of the poetic culture of their time. The very feeling of the era seemed to be saturated with poetry: even those authors whose main talent and achievements lay in the domain of prose – such as Andrei Bely, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Fedor Sologub, and Ivan Bunin – made significant contributions to the poetic landscape of the time as well. (1-20)

<sup>3</sup> Brodsky’s fascination with the idea of Language as a divine entity with an agency of its own and poetry as the goal of human activity came into being during his internal exile in the Northern region of Arkhangelsk, in the village of Norenskaya. Lev Losev calls it “epiphany at Norenskaya” and analyzes it as a result of Brodsky’s intensive study of Anglophone poetry. Not surprisingly, the revelation came from the lines by a poet who became Brodsky’s greatest poetic and personal inspiration. Brodsky describes this moment in his essay on W.H. Auden “To Please a Shadow” (1983):

[B]y pure chance the book fell open to Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” [...] They, those eight lines in tetrameter that made this third of the poem sound like a cross between a Salvation Army hymn, a funeral dirge, and a nursery rhyme, went like this:

Time that is intolerant  
Of the brave and innocent  
And indifferent in a week  
To a beautiful physique,  
Worships language and forgives  
Every one by whom it lives;  
Pardons cowardice, conceit,  
Lays its honours at their feet.

capsule in outer space, Brodsky develops the idea of Language as a safe space in which creativity flourishes, experimentation is embraced, and exile is irrelevant. Brodsky researchers have noted the echo of Walter Benjamin's concept of pure language in Brodsky's ideas of Language as a medium of Time and poetry as its distilled essence. Whether or not Brodsky was familiar with Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, his bilingual writing in the form of self-translation does appear to happen in the zone where distinctions between particular languages are blurred and it is only the language of poetry that matters.

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I remember sitting there in the small wooden shack, peering through the square porthole-size window at the wet, muddy, dirt road with a few stray chickens on it, half believing what I'd just read, half wondering whether my grasp of English wasn't playing tricks on me. (*Less than One* 361-363)

**CHAPTER II**  
**THE METAPHYSICAL ROOM: BRODSKY AND THE POETICS OF THE**  
**BRITISH BAROQUE**

And now good morrow to our waking soules,  
Which watch not one another out of feare;  
For love, all love of other sights controules,  
And makes one little roome, an every where.

(John Donne, *The Good-Morrow*)

And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,  
We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;

(John Donne, *The Canonization*)

**The Term “Metaphysical:” How Metaphysical is Brodsky’s Poetry?**

It has become customary to use the term “metaphysical” when speaking about Brodsky. Yet, it is difficult to determine, when, under what circumstances, and perhaps more importantly, for what reasons, Joseph Brodsky was first called “the premier Russian poet metaphysic.” The term “metaphysical” attached itself to Brodsky’s poetry well before any of it was published and before any known reviews of his poetry appeared in press. The Brodskiana, consisting of innumerable interviews, memoirs, and articles, habitually flashed the term “metaphysical” to replace, summarize, or accompany adjectives such as “strange,” “obscure,” “unpredictable,” “different,” “difficult,” “pretentious,” and even “foreign.” Like Donne in his time, Brodsky was “the first poet in the world in some things,” in the words of Ben Jonson about the latter.

“Metaphysical” is an odd term due to both its novelty and its connection to the ancient philosophical tradition. Brodsky’s first audience, the Soviet intelligentsia of the

Thaw period, intuitively perceived the term as an exoticism coined to define the undefinable effect of an innovative poetry. Adam Michnik's retrospectively documented impressions are common among the readers of Brodsky's generation:

What appealed to me in Brodsky's poetry? First of all, his excellent Russian, second, his metaphysics, the metaphysics of freedom and of human fate. He was absolutely different from the other contemporary poets I read.<sup>4</sup> (Polukhina 217)

Brodsky's early fame was built on his reputation as a translator from English and other languages and his interest in the British Baroque was well known. As the robust underground Leningrad book trade filled private libraries with pre-Revolutionary editions and smuggled foreign publications, the term might have stuck by association with his professional engagement.

Like solving a mathematical equation with two unknowns, it is challenging to define the term "metaphysical" as it used to describe Brodsky's oeuvre. A maze of definitions spans the ambiguous, seventeenth century usage of the term "metaphysical" to describe the poetry of Donne's school and the generalized understanding of this term among Brodsky's Russian and English-speaking audiences.

Brodsky's Russian readership, more versed in matters of poetry than Western philosophy, used "metaphysical" interchangeably with philosophical when speaking of something "greater than the human," able to operate with the absolute categories such as Time, Space, Spirit, and Infinity, and revealing "another plane of being" in the familiar reality. Here, "metaphysical" is used similarly to Symbolist or Surrealist, perhaps as their modern reinvention (Ivask 167-168). Russian scholarship, initially preoccupied with

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<sup>4</sup> All translations of citations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

biographical interpretations of Brodsky's poetry, used "metaphysical" to mark the influence of foreign literary traditions. Scholars have focused on the formal attributes and evident intertextual borrowings of Brodsky's poetry, and Brodsky's early poem, "Bolshaia èlegiia Dzhonu Donnu" ("The Great Elegy to John Donne," 1963), which is regarded as "the Metaphysical poem," has been the main focus of research on Brodsky's poetic connections to the British Metaphysics. On the contrary, Western Slavists interpreted Brodsky's poetics in terms of existential philosophy, tracing it back to the changing definitions of "metaphysics" from Aristotle to Descartes, through Hegel and Kant, and, finally, to Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

David MacFadyen's book, *Joseph Brodsky and the Baroque* (1998), is an example of this type of philosophically inspired research. Counterintuitively to its title, rather than making a connection to seventeenth-century British poetry, MacFadyen's monograph focuses on reading Brodsky's poetics through the tenets of Kierkegaard's and Shestov's theories regarding faith, free will, and the existential fear of choice. Including both poetry and prose, the detailed close readings of selected works support a neat and well-argued division of Brodsky's oeuvre into the three stages of the Kierkegaardian triad and its eternal repetition.

According to this division, Brodsky's pre-emigration poetry belongs to the lowly, aesthetic stage of the triad. Concerned with "problems of human transience and cyclical history," this stage includes his poems from 1957 to early 1960 and his early long poem "Shestvie" ("Procession," 1961). According to MacFadyen, poems of this period exemplify Kierkegaard's idea that "the very necessity of biological cycles contradicts freedom of existence, which is based upon choice" (30). In these poems, the speaker

observes the changing seasons and the decay of biological forms; he is preoccupied with the inevitability of death and oblivion, with the circulation (of blood and of ideas), and with the recurring past. “Procession” is the apex of this stage. It stands out as a highly intertextual, humorous, and ironic poem that explores the absurd extremes of banality. Irony and humor are the precursors of the second, ethical stage in MacFadyen’s classification: “Whereas irony is born of fear of accepting responsibility for the importance of one’s words, humor admits the limits of rational possibility” (25). In “Procession,” literary and historic characters like Don Quixote, Prince Myshkin, and Hamlet are faced with an ethical dilemma they fail to solve, end up stuck, and unable to transgress the ethical stage similarly to Kierkegaard’s “knights of faith.”

According to MacFadyen, a leap of faith mediates Brodsky’s 1962 poem “*Isaak i Avraam*” (“Isaac and Abraham”) and marks the beginning of the ethical stage in the development of Brodsky’s poetics: “Faith is a common topic in this period, but is overwhelmed by an increasing sense of fear and trembling, before the adoption of the truly religious, Baroque stage in 1972” (38). In the ethical stage, Brodsky’s poems reflect elements of Kierkegaard’s philosophy and personal *telos*, such as the realization of limitless choice, the double movement or repetition, and the teleological suspension of the ethical. The stage ends with the impossibility of rational faith in the long dramatic poem *Gorbunov i Gorchakov* (Gorbunov and Gorchakov, 1968).

MacFadyen argues that the final, “religious stage” of the triad is experienced by Brodsky after emigration and reflected in his “truly Baroque” poetry after 1972. His resignation to irrational faith in the absolute God, where God is replaced by Language in Brodsky’s personal teleology, is prompted by exile and Brodsky’s severed ties with the

familiar. Rather than Donne, MacFadyen sees Richard Crashaw as the Baroque parallel: “Constant exile gradually lessened the importance of specific places, and Crashaw was soon left with nothing in his life ‘save resignation to God’” (100). Here, MacFadyen stops using the term “Metaphysical” and draws a sharp division between Donne and the truly Baroque sensibilities of Crashaw or between the psychic and pneumatic worldviews, which he sees as the two major contesting forces of seventeenth-century aesthetics. Due to the crisis of faith and the achievements of the “new science,” Baroque art reflected the surrender to the irrational and moved closer to the psychic worldview, which emphasized the unity of body and soul, material and spiritual, finite and infinite expressed in Cartesian dualism. In MacFadyen’s understanding of the term, Brodsky, in his Metaphysical, pre-Baroque stage, is still thinking – and writing – in pneumatic terms in opposition to the material and divine: it “reveals spirit as spirit in a spoken, literally logical and dynamic relationship with the concrete world.” This dilemma can be solved only by renouncing the former in favor of the latter and by the power of spoken word, an oath of commitment to the Deity. “Crashawvian” (in MacFadyen’s term) poems such as “*Sretenie*” (“Nunc Dimittis,” 1972), “*Osennii krik iastreba*” (“The Hawk’s Cry in Autumn,” 1975), and “*Kolybel’naia treskovogo mysa*” (“Lullaby of Cape Code,” 1975), evidence the fear and trembling brought on by the leap into the psychic sensibility. In MacFadyen’s schema, Brodsky commits the leap of faith and surrenders to the absolute and irrational power of Language – his Deity. While exiled in America, the poet renounced the rational and surrendered tradition and exclusive commitment to his native language thus belonging to it on a higher plane. The silent year of 1979, in which he wrote no poems, marks his post-Baroque stage.

Despite MacFadyen's exhaustive scope – including British Baroque poetry, existential philosophy, and Brodsky's poetics – reviews limit themselves to recommending it as “a treasure trove of useful information” rather than a successful monograph (Terras 188). One reviewer fairly notes that, “Brodsky's Russian connections are not dealt with sufficiently” as the argument focuses on the theoretical framework of existentialism. Contrary to his own claim that “the Existentialism of these two men [Kierkegaard and Shestov] acts as a complement to the influence of the Metaphysical poets,” MacFadyen's book presents Brodsky's affinity with the Donnean tradition as complementary to his existentialist readings of Kierkegaard and Shestov. In other words, MacFadyen's argument demonstrates the viability of the concept of “triangular vision” suggested by David M. Bethea in his book *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (1994). Bethea identified Brodsky's “master trope” as the tendency to model a foreign tradition or a distant period (e.g. Dante) with another, more recent and native tradition (e.g. Mandelstam) to create a third kind of poetry that pays homage to both while remaining distinctly original. Although one side of Bethea's triangle is always based in the Russian tradition, MacFadyen connects existentialism to both Brodsky and the British Baroque without a clear argument about the poetic relationship between the two.

Identifying the gap in the research, MacFadyen emphasizes that “[...] no study has been undertaken of how the two philosophers both instigate and clarify Brodsky's teleological progress, nor of how the poet radically re-fashions some of their basic tenets in a manner which is integral to the development of a Baroque aesthetics” (24). Meanwhile, MacFadyen's study, while rich with insights into Brodsky's teleological progress, is not as convincing in his exploration of the latter task. Indeed, what were these



basic tenets and how were they re-fashioned? How does Brodsky's treatment of the tenets of existentialism contribute to the development of a Baroque aesthetics? These questions would lead us astray from the primary enquiry of the present study – the blending of foreign and native traditions in Brodsky's transnational poetics, which do not result from the merging of cultural and linguistic trends in a border territory. In other words, Brodsky's knowledge of and engagement with existentialist philosophy only points to a vicarious connection with the Metaphysicals, since the progression of the Kierkegaardian triad can be applied to the philosophy of Donne's writing only retrospectively. Rather than the hermeneutics inherent in the abundant definitions of Metaphysics as a philosophical category, I focus on the "Metaphysical" as a literary style, drawing predominantly on Helen Gardner and Igor Shaitanov, who represent the Western and the Russian views on this literary movement.

Helen Gardner's famous Introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets* (1957) outlines the major characteristics of the Metaphysical style. She emphasizes that the term Metaphysical appeared as a temporary "witty sally," due to a lack of a better term to define the innovation of this poetry. Gardner points out the term's original use was degrading, or at least critical, and suggests that it was coined by opponents to Metaphysical poetry and arose from confusion regarding these poets' poetic innovations. This confusion emerged when all known forms and movements were exhausted, and new ones had not yet been defined. Although a great need for them was floating in the air, these new forms were shelved on the stalls of tradition:

What came to be called by its denigrators the "strong-lined" style had its origins in this general desire at the close of Elizabeth's reign for concise expression,

achieved by an elliptical syntax, and accompanied by a staccato rhythm in prose and a certain deliberate roughness in versification of poetry. Along with this went admiration for difficulty in thought. (Gardner xx-xxi)

Interestingly, the same confusion was typical for Brodsky's more thoughtful critics, who seemed to have stumbled upon this term as a more or less fitting marker. In comparison to the Elizabethan understanding of poetry as pleasure-giving entertainment, the criticism with which the Metaphysicals were met is comparable to that which Brodsky's poetry endured during his lifetime. It often stemmed from a comparison with the Apollonian clarity of the Pushkinian tradition or with the law-abiding accessibility of Soviet *shestidesiatniki*, or sixties poets. For example, in comparison with the rather straightforward imagery and open personal rhetoric of Evgenii Evtushenko's verse, the reserved tone and coded (or cryptic) metaphorical structure of Brodsky's poetry was seen as "mere itch of wit" in the commentary on the Metaphysicals. Thus, applied to Brodsky, the term is often reminiscent of its Baroque usage as a "disapprobation." However, among Brodsky's admirers, this term was timely and reflected the need for a new kind of poetry, which echoed the sixteenth century's "cry for 'More matter, and less words'" as a reaction against the superfluous, even hypocritical, translucency of Socialist Realist poetry.

Similar to Britain's late-sixteenth-century demand for concise, densely packed poetry, Russian underground literary circles appreciated difficulty in poetry (*Difficilia quae pulchra* is the principle that Bacon applied to Tacitus) and perceived intellectual poetry as "something to be 'chewed and digested,' which will not give up its secrets on a first reading" (Gardner xx). The unfortunate conditions of Brodsky's limited audience

and the underground status of his poetry bear another similarity with the Metaphysicals. Helen Gardner notes that their demands upon the reader were not the result of negligence but rather of intimacy and confidence, or the sense of shared background and common views. Hence the contemptuous remark from Drayton, who called them “Chamber poets” due to the fact that their poetry was rarely published; rather, it was disseminated in manuscripts and copied by friends and admirers – a Soviet literary underground practice perfected in the form of *samizdat*. Brodsky’s first domestic collection, *The Maramzin’s Volumes*,<sup>5</sup> is an exemplary specimen of this practice. Different pieces of the *Volumes* were handwritten or re-typed by Brodsky’s readers, most of whom were his close friends and acquaintances. Evaluations of Brodsky’s early poetry by his contemporaries echo Gardner’s description of the challenges of writing for a familiar audience. While Brodsky’s critics often faulted his verse for elitism and exclusivity, or what Gardner would describe as “the smell of coterie” that accompanied Metaphysical poetry, his admirers praised it for a freedom and independence of thought and expression (Volkov, Polukhina) akin to “the ease and artistic sincerity” that, according to Gardner, “comes from being able to take for granted the understanding of the audience for whom one writes” (xxi). Although the premise differs, the effect is strikingly similar and maintained by Brodsky in his English verse of the post-emigration period.

Apart from the much-discussed difficulty of “strong-lined” poetry, Gardner’s detailed and insightful observations in the context of a philological, rather than hermeneutic, approach help us trace the development of Brodsky’s Metaphysical style. In

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<sup>5</sup> *Sobranie Maramzina* is a specimen of *samizdat* (clandestine self-publishing) of the 1970s. In 1971-1974 a writer and an engineer Vladimir Maramzin, together with an author Mikhail Kheifets and a translator and a literary critic Efim Etkind, created 5 volumes of type-writer copy of Joseph Brodsky’s writing to be spread out among his readers.

It became a reason for Maramzin’s arrest and extradition in 1974.

this sense, Gardner's idea of a metaphysical poem as a "line of argument" that the reader is "held to" and of a metaphysical conceit as its instrument is quite revealing (xxi-xxiii). The epigrammatic concentration, the economy of language, and verse forms that "artfully enforc[e] the sense" are all in service of arguing an idea to urge the reader to "pay attention and read on," and read again but with the same dynamic pace (xxii). Here, the apostrophic character of a Metaphysical poem is implied and contained in the original nature of conceits that expanded "to 'prove' [an unlikely] likeness;" this is opposed to extended metaphors that explored auspicious similarities. Emphasizing the idiosyncrasy of the Metaphysical conceit, Gardner distinguishes it from the Elizabethan ornamental conceit that still resembles an extended metaphor; the argument of a poem drives a truly Metaphysical conceit:

In a metaphysical poem the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade. The poem has something to say which the conceit explicates or something to urge which the conceit helps to forward. It can only do this if it is used with an appearance of logical rigour, the analogy being shown to hold by a process not unlike

Euclid's superimposition of triangles. (xxvi)

Apart from the superimposition of distant ideas, Gardner distinguishes another important superimposition or bridging as a marker of a Metaphysical poem, or the "dramatic" dimension of Baroque poetry, inherited from the late-sixteenth century "flowering of the drama" (xxvii). This dramatic dimension occurs when the Metaphysicals conjoin the lofty and the casual, the spiritual and the fleshly, and it is most prominent in their sonnets and love lyrics.

Igor Shaitanov, referring to Gardner's insights as "Sunday school truths" of today's scholarship on the British Baroque, focuses on the argumentative conceit and the merging of the lofty and the quotidian when speaking of Brodsky's poetry as Metaphysical. In his influential article "*Uravnenie s dvumia neizvestnymi. Poëty-metafiziki Dzhon Donn i Iosif Brodskii*" ("The Equation with Two Unknowns: The Metaphysical Poets John Donne and Joseph Brodsky," 1998), Shaitanov provides a close reading of Brodsky's "*Gorenie*" ("Burning," 1981) as a quintessential "Donnean" poem. Brodsky compares the flame in a stove with a dancing silhouette of a woman and transforms the heightened lyricism of a love poem into a cosmic-scale meditation of a man who is watching "the whole Universe go up in smoke inside his hearth". According to the Shaitanov, such "self-reflecting passion," which culminates in the "sacred parody" of a sensual dance and religious-sacrifice-gone-wrong, makes the poem sound "blasphemous" to a reader trained in the classical Russian tradition. While such imagery would be organic in the British Baroque, it is offensive for the Russian reader unaccustomed to the religious eroticism present in the Catholic faith. However, Shaitanov points out that in reinventing the Baroque's psalm-like love sonnet, Brodsky follows the forgotten tradition of Russian Classicism, in which "sensuality acquired the status of cultural value" through "elevation by means of alluding to mythology, either from classical antiquity or Christianity." Thus, Brodsky's engagement with a foreign tradition once again enables him to bridge the gap between Russian classics and low or obscene erotic poetry never intended for public (e.g. Pushkin's "Barkov's Shadow").

In his analysis of "Burning," Shaitanov stumbles upon a feature of the Metaphysical poetics that Gardner also signposts:

Argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem. Its quintessence and soul is *the vivid imagining of a moment of experience or of a situation out of which the need to argue, or persuade, or define arises.* (Gardner xxvi, italics are mine)

In a typically metaphysical fashion, Shaitanov sees the situation from which “Burning” is spoken – a man watching a fire and meditating over a lost love – as *obydenna* (quotidian, trivial, banal), noting “in comparison with [the speaker’s] sophisticated thought, this metaphysical wit is able to connect ideas and concepts incompatible in their nature and value and, therefore, to cover colossal distances of meaning.”

Both Gardner and Shaitanov emphasize the immediacy, or the “here and now” sensation that renders the poetic utterance dramatic. Gardner, speaking of Donne’s Satire III “Of Religion” and of elegies such as, “To His Mistress Going To Bed,” suggests that their expressive power lies in the “desire to make poems out of particular moments” or out of the situations that “set the scene” for this or that observation or “chance remark” (xxvii, xxix). While otherwise abstract, with this approach a historical event, an affair of public interest, or simply an illumination on the nature of things acquires “verve,” and a reader’s imagination is more predisposed to accept the “incongruity of comparisons” described. As Gardner illustrates, speaking of Donne’s “Good Friday”:

We may not accept that [it] was actually “made as I was riding westward that day,” as a heading in some manuscript tells us, but we *must accept as we read the poem* that he is riding westward and thinking as he rides. (xxvii, italics are mine)

A similar dramatism and sense of immediacy also characterizes Brodsky’s style; it arises from the connection between a poem’s meditation and its “setting.” Whether it is

witnessing a church being demolished by a bulldozer, as in “*Ostanovka v pustyne*” (“A Halt in the Desert,” 1966), or talking to a statue in the Luxemburg Garden where one “wandered into after a restaurant,” as in “*Dvadtsat' sonetov k Marii Stiuart*” (“Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots,” 1974), or watching a hawk through binoculars on the last day of autumn in “*Osennii krik iastreba*” (“The Hawk’s Cry in Autumn,” 1975), the setting itself becomes an allegorical representation or an extended conceit that reflects the dilemma unfolding in the poem. Underscored by the inclusion of slang and colloquialisms, an ordinary, cliché situation familiar to the speaker’s contemporary nevertheless brings about the unusual, often anachronistic *siuzhet* upon which the speaker meditates. Here, Gardner’s description of Metaphysical poetry perfectly describe the effect of Brodsky’s meditative poems: “A reader may at times exclaim ‘Who would ever think such a thought in such a situation?’ He will not exclaim ‘Who can imagine himself in such a situation?’” (xxix) For instance, there was nothing more banal for a Leningrader of the 1960s than watching a historical building (fig. 1) being crushed to make room for another Soviet structure of grey concrete and glass named to celebrate the Revolution (fig. 2).



Fig. 1. *Tserkov' Sviatogo Velikomuchenika Dimitriia Solunskogo* (The Church of Saint and Great Martyr Dimitry Solunsky, a “Greek Church”). It was erected 1861-1865 and demolished in 1962, as it was deemed a building “of low artistic value.” The demolition is described in Brodsky’s poem “*Ostanovka v pustyne*” (“A Halt in the Desert,” 1966)



Fig. 2 *Bol'shoi kontsertnyi zal Oktiabr'skii* (The October Big Concert Hall (BKZ)). The Concert Hall was erected in place of the “Greek Church” in the Greek Square. It opened in October 1967, inaugurating the fifty-year-anniversary of the October Revolution.

The routine demolition process, leisurely related with “a flavor of spontaneous thought,” using Gardner’s words, in the poem’s opening, moves away from banality as the speaker begins mediating on the “proportions of ugliness” that affect humans much more than “ugly proportions.” The poem projects this scene onto a contemplation of the historical process, of displacement, and of topographical memory, and it slowly arrives at a series of truly philosophical questions:

Сегодня ночью я смотрю в  
окно и думаю о том, куда  
зашли мы?  
И от чего мы больше  
далеки: от православья  
или эллинизма?  
К чему близки мы? Что там, впереди?  
Не ждет ли нас теперь другая эра?  
И если так, то в чем наш общий долг?



И что должны мы принести ей в жертву?

Tonight I am looking out the  
window and thinking, where is it  
that we wandered?

And what are we more distant from:  
from Orthodox Christianity or from Hellenism?

Perhaps, a new era is waiting for us now?

If so, then what is our common duty?

And what are we to sacrifice to it?<sup>6</sup>

To echo Gardner, who would think such thoughts in such a situation? I argue that this ability to extrapolate from the casual and banal to “beyond the human” is what Brodsky’s contemporaries meant when they first applied the term “metaphysical” to his verse. In “A Halt in the Desert,” the allegorical situation has not yet formed the metaphysical, or, according to Gardner, argumentative conceit; the speaker addresses his reader with a generative question rather than a thesis. The situation is too rich in imagery and meanings and too multilayered to weave into one argument. In other words, the specific nature of this occasion is not universal enough to form a metaphysical *siuzhet* that could travel from poem to poem. However, such a *siuzhet* or trope exists. I argue that the trope of a speaker in a room allows Brodsky to fully realize the potential of metaphysical rhetoric and argumentative conceit, and this is the heart of his unique Metaphysical style.

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<sup>6</sup> All translations of Brodsky’s poems are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

## The Topos of a Room: The Metaphysical Conceit Reinvented

This project traces the influence of the British Baroque and its Anglo-American Modernist reinventions on the development of Brodsky's "metaphysical" style and the Russian tradition. Going beyond an exploration of intertexts, I will delve into Brodsky's signature imagery as a new type of Metaphysical poetry that extends the possibilities of the conceit into Brodsky's poetic philosophy. While it may not be directly present in the supra-text of his oeuvre, it is identifiable in subtle projections.

For Brodsky, one such original invention, which I define as the extension of the Baroque conceit, is the image of a room. The room becomes a common trope, or even *topos*, of his most *umozritel'nye* or subjective, cerebral, and contemplative poems early in his poetic career. This trope enters Brodsky's prose after his exile from the Soviet Union in works such as "Less Than One" (1976) and "In a Room and a Half" (1985). In my analysis, I focus on three poems from the later Soviet period: two pre-emigration poems and one published in the first years of immigration. These poems, written in the early 1970s post-Thaw period, feature a lyrical persona speaking from and into a confining but familiar, secure room: "*Ne vykhodi iz komnaty*" ("Don't Leave the Room," 1970), "*L. V. Lifshitsu*" or "*Ia vseгда tverdil, chto sud'ba – igra...*" ("To L.V. Lifshitz" or "I Kept Saying That Fate Is a Game...", 1971), and "*Polden' v komnate*" ("Noon in a Room," 1974 – 1975). Here, the room is a place of withdrawal from the current (predominately political) time, from the limitations of material existence, from the realm of the public. It is an escape into the realm of the private, intimate, and intellectual, and it is the only place where independent and unimpeded or uncensored thinking and creation is possible. In Brodsky's poetics "a room" becomes a site where one practices *vnutrenniaia*

*émigratsiia* (internal emigration)<sup>7</sup> and metaphysical meditation. I argue that in these “room poems,” Brodsky’s connection to the British Baroque is prominently blended with the native tradition and reinvented into an idiosyncratic, Metaphysical style.

Brodsky’s room is a site of solitary confinement; thus, it is a site of reflection and self-reflection. The solitude it affords is sought after, craved for, and almost impossible to attain. It is a luxury and a privilege in a society where the ideological “eye” permeates the private sphere, where seclusion is unthinkable, and where mass culture is valued above the individual. The confinement is limiting, but it also protects one’s privacy, which is liberating. Unlike Hegel’s, but rather closer to Heidegger’s, *Dasein*, it is a place “vne” – outside of time and space, which makes it meta-physical. However, for Brodsky’s lyrical persona, it is the only place worth staying. A treasure trove of aphorisms for generations including millennials, “Don’t Leave the Room” can be read as a manifesto for voluntary,

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<sup>7</sup> “Internal emigration” or “internal exile” is a strategy of voluntary isolation and deliberate disengagement with the surrounding social and political reality. It is thought to have been first used by the French writer Delphine de Girardin in 1939 when she referred to the lifestyle of young aristocrats during the time of the July Monarchy as

“*émigration intérieure*” (Girardin 249). Later, in the disputes between Thomas Mann and Frank Thiess, the phrase “*innere Emigranten*” (“inner emigrants”) described people who lived and worked in Germany under the Nazi regime but did not share or approve of its ideology (Watanabe-O’Kelly 443). In the Soviet context the term was used to shame the adherents of the “old regime” who did not want to participate in the creation of the new socialist aesthetics, Anna Akhmatova being a prime example of such public shaming. Later, the term was reclaimed by the “internal emigrants” themselves to indicate their conscious non-participation and ability to create an alternative “inner life” and contesting value systems they adhered to while staying in the Soviet Union without any possibility of actual emigration (Ivanova). Sergei Khoruzhii in his article “*Blesk i nishcheta vnutrennei émigratsii*” (“The Splendors and Miseries of Internal Emigration,” 2002) compares such existence to evolution on an isolated little island and underlines the importance of belonging to “World Culture,” which was typical of this community and also characteristic of Brodsky’s worldview:

Some islands came together under the sign of religious beliefs, others were formed in accordance with the political views and the degree of resentment against the regime, finally, some others emerged for the sake of culture: the inhabitants of the latter saw in their separation from the Soviet sea not only disassociation from the totalitarian inhumanity, but also the opposition of world culture to aggressive, moronic ignorance.

This definition sets it apart from mere escapism or *dissidentstvo*, the latter meaning non-violent resistance by legal means rather than complete disengagement.

solitary confinement as the only viable alternative to forced engagement with the immediate environment.

“Don’t Leave the Room...”

The poem consists of six stanzas written in six-ictus *dol'niks*. Each stanza, except for the last one, begins with “Don’t leave the room!” followed by reasons for remaining in the room, or the unattractive alternatives to it, as well as wild recommendations on what exactly to do about it. The key pronouncement is a plea because everything in the poem points to the impossibility and catastrophe of leaving. The powerful first stanza sets the tone by labeling leaving “a mistake” with the assurance that behind the door “everything is pointless;” it ends with an aggressive exclamation in the last stanza, “Don’t be a fool!... Don’t leave the room!”

Не выходи из комнаты, не совершай ошибку.

Зачем тебе Солнце, если ты куришь Шипку?

За дверью бессмысленно все, особенно – возглас счастья.

Только в уборную – и сразу же возвращайся.

Don’t leave the room, don’t make a mistake.

Why do you need *Solntse* if you smoke *Shipka*?

Behind the door everything is senseless, especially a cry of happiness.

Only go to the bathroom and immediately return.

Gradually, from stanza to stanza, the anaphoric plea grows from a clause to a full sentence and eventually to an exclamation in stanza five.

Не выходи из комнаты. О, пускай только комната  
догадывается, как ты выглядишь. И вообще инкогнито  
эрго сум, как заметила форме в сердцах субстанция.  
Не выходи из комнаты! На улице, чай, не Франция.

Don't leave the room. Oh, let only the room guess  
what you look like. Anyway, incognito ergo sum,  
as substance remarked to form in a fit of anger.

Don't leave the room! It is not France outside, after all.

Why is it so pointless or dangerous to leave the room? A reference to France alerts a Russian reader to a political interpretation. Of course, it might be simply an indication of pointlessness rather than danger, considering that France in the Russian imagination always was the ultimate sightseeing destination; this idea is captured in the popular motto: "To see Paris and to die!" The line might simply be emphasizing the previous point that there is nothing to see and nothing new to experience there, which is outside the room. However, within the context of the stanza, it implies the possibility of persecution: "*Na ulitse, chai, ne Frantsiia*" (It is not France outside, after all!) alludes to another familiar colloquial phrase "*Na ulitse, chai, ne mai mesiats!*" (It is not May outside, after all!), which is usually said to someone who opens a door or window during the cold season and creates, or lets in, a draft. Thus, it awakens one to the chilling reality of the natural or political climate outside. The country, "not France," is well known by everyone, and the realization is created by the first call of a familiar warning. Here, France represents the European states of the "enemy regime," which guarantee human

rights and freedom of speech. This choice was possibly affected by Brodsky's release from his sentence in Norenskaya due to the Jean-Paul Sartre's letter to Anastas Mikoyan, as well as by the protest movement of the 1960s. Echoing Descartes's famous phrase, "incognito ergo sum," Brodsky's line designates the room as the sole confidante for one's appearance: "*i puskai tol'ko komnata dogadyvaetsia, kak ty vygliadish*" (and let only the room guess what you look like). The initial plea turns into a signal for going into hiding: "It is not France out there, so you should keep a low profile." Existence is contingent upon staying unidentified, unrecognized, and invisible; for Brodsky, existence is "incognito," and this formulation anticipates the exilic persona of an "absolute no one, a man in a raincoat" found in Brodsky's later verse, "*Laguna*" ("Lagoon," 1973).

Stanzas one, three, and four speak of a danger that also threatens the character similarly to the danger of facing political reality. It is a danger of pointless effort, of vain production or exchange, and of the existential futility of any action. Why change one brand of cheap Bulgarian cigarettes for another – "*Zachem tebe Solntse, esli ty kurish' Shipku?*" – if both are equally mundane, harmful, and satisfying. The phrase sounds like a mocking, sophisticated rendition of the popular saying "*meniat' shilo na mylo*" (trade this for that). It suggests the folkloric argument against exchange for the sake of exchange and the profoundly Russian understanding that no change actually brings about anything qualitatively new. It is simply not worth the effort. In the third stanza, the idea is developed further as the wall and chair are proclaimed to be the only objects worthy of attention.

Не выходи из комнаты; считай, что тебя продуло.

Что интересней на свете стены и стула?  
Зачем выходить оттуда, куда вернешься  
вечером таким же, каким ты был, тем более  
-- изувеченным?

Don't leave the room; consider yourself sick with a cold.  
What in the world is more interesting than a wall and a  
chair? Why to go out of the place which you will return to  
in the evening the same as you were, moreover – maimed?

As the potential exchange with the world can bring negative outcomes, the speaker's focus turns inward more. The stanza ends by stating that the only change possible is distortion. To come back to the point of departure as the same, damaged person is not only stagnation but backwards movement. To leave the room (“*izuvechennyĭ*,” maimed) is associated with mechanical damaging force in “A Halt in the Desert,” 1966. In this light, contemplating a chair by the wall seems to be a viable alternative. The mathematics of loss and gain are continued in the next stanza, which warns against excessive (literary) production:

О, не выходи из комнаты. Танцуй, поймав, боссанову  
в пальто на голое тело, в туфлях на босу ногу.  
В прихожей пахнет капустой и мазью лыжной.  
Ты написал много букв; еще одна будет лишней.

Oh, don't leave the room. Dance, having caught the tune of the bossa nova  
wearing a coat over your naked body, shoes on your bare feet.

In the hall it smells like cabbage and ski wax.

You wrote many letters; one more will be unnecessary.

The smell of cabbage and ski wax is reminiscent of Osip Mandelstam's description of a Jewish home in Petersburg in *Shum vremeni* (*The Noise of the Time*, 1925); it speaks of the inevitable stability of *byt* (daily routine, mundane existence). No number of letters is going to change this constant existential reality, which nearly blends with the space and becomes it. Perhaps, it is the smell in the hall that "makes up space" and "ends with a meter" (stanza II). In the end, it is a measurement of the energy used, so why spend it on one more "excessive letter." The meter also indicates a taxi meter, which presupposes measuring and reckoning with the distance passed. Hence the plea: "Don't call the motor/ Go out to face the meter/ Write another letter." Instead, the poem prompts one to enjoy the freedom of solitude and paints an iconic image of jazz era movies – one dancing alone in the room.

Bossa nova, as in Brodsky's poem about bidding farewell to youth, "From Outskirts to the Center" (1962), bossa nova should be danced in the manner of a town fool – wearing a coat on a bare body and shoes on bare feet. It is also the attire of someone who hastily threw their clothes on and left the room in a panic, only to suddenly change their mind and stay to enjoy the moment. It is an outburst of absurd impulse in life and a protest against necessity, which only the room can be trusted to witness. Smoking *Shipka*, contemplating a chair, or dancing bossa nova are all sacred rituals of solitude destined to outweigh the futility of the outside. They are not to be interrupted by



any intrusion from out there, even by a dear woman (*milka*) who seems to threaten with pronouncements – “*rot razevaia*” (raising a howl) – which, along with letters, are banned from the room. Thus, the room is not simply a setting but a space that embodies commitment to disengagement from the world; it affords self-preservation, contemplation, and the freedom to be absurd. It is the ultimate private oasis in the desert of an oppressive public space. Although usually not listed among Brodsky’s Metaphysical specimens, this poem stands out among his pre-emigration writing as it builds the trope of a room out of scattered elements that form Brodsky’s oeuvre, which allows it to be characterized it as “metaphysical” in both the Russian and Western senses.

The last stanza contains many such elements, which include a preoccupation with thingness, much discussed in analyses of Brodsky’s recognized “first” Metaphysical poem “The Great Elegy for John Donne” (Bethea, McFadyen), time as a metaphysical category traditionally referred to as Chronos, and self-portrayal as invisible substance. Substance appears a stanza earlier; it is arguing with form and making the angry remark “*incognito ergo sum.*” In this context, this is a warning against taking any kind of shape. “*Sleisia litsom s oboiami*” (Blend your face with the wallpaper) is an imperative for remaining shapeless, transparent, and lost in the motley, worn-out wallpaper, which is the most ignored constituent of any room. It is a call for entropy that grants invisibility and an ultimate blending with the substance of the room, which concentrates the private and the individual; it is a kind of entropy of the self.

Не будь дураком! Будь тем, чем другие не были.

Не выходи из комнаты! То есть дай волю мебели,

слейся лицом с обоями. Запрись и забаррикадируйся

шкафом от хроноса, космоса, эроса, расы, вируса.

Don't be a fool! Be what others have not been.

Don't leave the room! That is, give free rein to the furniture,

blend your face with the wallpaper. Lock yourself in and barricade yourself

behind the wardrobe from Chronos, cosmos, Eros, race, and the virus.

To be “what others have not been” or to “blend [one’s] face with the wallpaper” requires a degree of entropy that is hard to reach. One must lose attention in order to then bodiless-ly focus it on the “characters” of the room – the walls, the chair, the wardrobe. Not only should the outside be abandoned, but it should also be locked out and barricaded. The enjambment in these lines makes a heavy and mundane figure of the wardrobe; it becomes the last threshold between one’s self and the world threatening to invade the limited space of the private room. Each element of the outside world refers to their casual manifestations mentioned earlier in the poem. Chronos hides in a ticking meter in the “Kafkaesque cosmos” (“Less than One”) of a hall, while Eros, in the shape of another girlfriend (*milka*), knocks on the door alive and loud. Although encounters with them cannot be fully avoided, they have to be minimized: “*Tol'ko v ubornuiu — i srazu zhe vozvrashchaïsia*” (Only go to the bathroom and immediately return).

Bodily needs make these encounters inevitable, and Brodsky’s later poetry is often scornful of these bodily needs. The wardrobe that guards the room’s solitude from the public space and the three dimensions of human existence originate in Brodsky’s biography. The wardrobe can be connected to the one in Brodsky’s nostalgic, English-language essay “In a Room and a Half” (1985). In this essay, he writes that in their

Leningrad *kommunalka*, he used an old wardrobe to create a barricade between his half-room and the living room that his parents used as their bedroom. For the budding Russian poet in his late twenties, this move, which would have been a standard gesture of rebellion for a Western teenager, is a desperate search for privacy. In this regard, this poem already exhibits all the defining traits of the Metaphysical style proposed by Helen Gardner: the symbolic dualism of the conceit that conjoins the quotidian and the lofty, the tendency of a poem to spring up from a common occasion, and the argumentative function of a conceit.

“To L.V. Lifshitz” or “I Kept Saying that Fate Is a Game...”

While the wardrobe barricade and locked door are signs of deliberate isolation, and perhaps of extreme estrangement, one element in Brodsky’s metaphysical room, a site for poetic production, still indicates the speaker’s interest in exterior space. In Brodsky’s oeuvre, several poems feature the poetic persona sitting by a window. In this default position, thought is born, and emotions are reflected upon post-factum. A window is not quite a door. Instead, it offers a place for observation, it frames reality, and it can be a more direct conduit to outside reality, which is made accessible without having to walk through the corridor, stairs, and doors and without unnecessary interaction with the familiar (familiar faces included). Epitomized in the transparency and fragility of glass, the window offers almost unmediated access to reality. In each of the first four stanzas of “*Ia vseгда tverdil...*” (“I Kept Saying...”), the speaker reiterates and reflects on earlier pronouncements. In each stanza, the statement “I am sitting by the window” is repeated as a coda followed by a description of the view, of a random detail in the room, or of the

emotional state accompanying it. Every time, this can be read as the result of a pronouncement in the preceding quatrain. For example, the first two stanzas articulate nostalgia for the daring convictions of youth.

Я всегда твердил, что судьба - игра.

Что зачем нам рыба, раз есть икра.

Что готический стиль победит, как школа,  
как способность торчать, избежав укола.

Я сижу у окна. За окном осина.

Я любил немногих. Однако - сильно.

Я считал, что лес - только часть полена.

Что зачем вся дева, раз есть колено.

Что, устав от поднятой веком пыли,  
русский глаз отдохнет на эстонском шпиле.

Я сижу у окна. Я помыл посуду.

Я был счастлив здесь, и уже не буду.

I kept saying that fate is a game.

That why does one need fish, if one has caviar.

That the Gothic style will win as a school,  
as the ability to stay high, without a prick.

I am sitting by the window. Outside there is an aspen.

I loved few people. But I loved them much.

I thought that the forest is only a part of a log.

That why does one need a whole maiden, if there is a knee.

That, tired from the dust raised by the era,

the Russian eye will rest on an Estonian spear.

I am sitting by the window. I have washed the dishes.

I was happy here but won't be any more.

The fatalistic phrase “*sud'ba — igra*” (life is a game) is ironically rhymed with “*ikra*” (caviar), which creates a utilitarian metonymy privileging the most useful part to the whole (a concentrate). In the coda, the past tense verbs *liubil*, *byl*, and *schastliv* are contrasted with preferring caviar to the whole fish, a knee to a whole girl, a wood block to the forest, and with the banality and futility of the present existence (*ia pomyl posudu, za oknom osina*). Clean dishes are a sign of closure and represent completion in a trivial gesture of single-person household. The aspen is traditionally associated with death and cleansing in Russian literature (for example, in Brodsky's “Lagoon” the aspen is “crying over” “a man in a coat”); it is an indication of the end and perhaps of the violent and premature death that waits outside. The intense past emotions, which are impossible in the future (“*liubil sil'no*” (loved much), “*uzhe ne budu*” (will no more)) emphasize this sense of closure. These reflections haunt the one sitting by the window.

In stanza three, the concentration of the “metaphysical” elements increases, revealing parallels with “Don't Leave the Room.”

Я писал, что в лампочке - ужас пола.

Что любовь, как акт, лишена глагола.

Что не знал Эвклид, что, сходя на конус,

вещь обретает не ноль, но Хронос.

Я сижу у окна. Вспоминаю юность.

Улыбнусь порою, порой отплюнусь.

I wrote, that in a lightbulb there is the horror of the floor.

That love, as an act, does not have a verb.

That Euclid did not know that, reduced to a cone,

a thing acquires not zero but Chronos.

I am sitting by the window. I am remembering my youth.

At times I smile, at times I spit.

The stanza starts with anaphoric variation “I wrote.” Here, unlike other stanzas, it is a written statement rather than a pronouncement or a conviction, which suggests a reference to one’s youthful poetry. “I Kept Saying...” combines the echoes of youthful love lyrics with metaphysical concerns and a tone of retrospective disappointment. Chronos (or Time), looming behind the door barricaded by the wardrobe in the previous poem, now appears at the end of a cone. Deflating the laws of geometry (and physics), time extends existence and starts exactly at the point where material substance ends. This extension of material form through time and dimension is a metaphysical imagining that ancient thinkers such as Euclid (who Brodsky who Brodsky probably confused with Archimedes, the author of a circle in a cone figure) would hardly endorse. Indeed, according to Archimedes (not Euclid), a cone is significant because it is a three-dimensional figure that contains in itself both a circle (or sphere) and a triangle. The former is a traditional symbol of infinity, and the latter is an embodiment of regularity in proportion and finiteness. For the poem’s speaker, the order might be reversed. Since the

sphere does not have an end, a sharp point of completion, it never approximates the infinity of nothingness, whereas a cone expresses the movement from material groundedness towards complete material emptiness, where eternal time, or Chronos, begins. Thus, for Brodsky's speaker, a cone has more potential and movement than a round, monotonous sphere.

This obsession with dynamic cones also echoes lines from the previous two stanzas, which prophesize Russia's future fascination with Estonian church spires and the triumph of Gothic architecture. The cone-like spires of Catholic churches offer an opposition to Russian Orthodox sphere-like domes. They express swift upward dynamics and the ability to *torchat'* (stick out) without being punished – *izbezhav ukola* (having avoided a prick). Brodsky frequently plays with the double meaning of otherwise trivial words, and this line, with its use of *torchat'*, (slang for being high on drugs), suggests the feeling of being “high” without drugs. Instead, it alludes to the intoxicating effects of being abroad as Estonia and the other Baltic republics were popular sites of escape for the Soviet intelligentsia and the closest Russian equivalent to the West. This intoxication is mostly aesthetic. It permits the “eye to rest,” but the source of the fatigue is history, stagnation, and the “dust raised by the age.” The speaker's “Russian eye” is tired of peeking through the dusty, hazy ether of the current century and longs for the clear, dashing lines that seem to define the neighboring West. However, there is no indication that Gothic spires are visible through the window or that they are a part of the outside reality. While the imagination roams from one subject to another, the coda is devoted to the reminiscences of youth, which evoke a smile, frown, or even spitting.

The space in the room is marked by the opposition of a lightbulb and the floor, where one reflects the “horror” of the other. In one interpretation, this opposition emerges from the fear of the lowly and banal in the face of loftiness and enlightenment. Perhaps, it is the fear of seeing one’s distorted reflection as the flat surface and direct lines of the floor that bend and curve in the spherical mirror of a lightbulb. However, this line is followed by one referring to love as an “act without a verb,” and the double meaning of the word *pol* (both floor and sex or gender) suggests an allusion to making love in the dark and the fear that the electric light could reveal the physicality of a youthful sexual encounter. However, when looking for a metaphysical interpretation in the style of Donne and Marvell, I suggest we picture the floor and the lightbulb as the base and vertex of a cone hidden in the cube of the room. Here, a lightbulb is the end point of a cone; it is the point where the horrifying future of the floor’s disappearing, circular base transforms into time. In the room, a person sitting on a chair, the “centaur looking back” found throughout Brodsky’s other poems, constitutes a cone of its own. The sphere encircles the four chair legs. It narrows upward to the shoulders, narrows further to the head, and culminates in the final point at the lightbulb, which is the ultimate site of both entropy and enlightenment. Thus, the third stanza paints a metaphysical universe isolated in a symbolic room or a “mind palace” of a poetic consciousness interacting with space and time through language.

While the third stanza underlines the themes of futility and loneliness in its vegetative metaphors, the last two stanzas bring the reader back into historical reality.

Моя песня была лишена мотива,



но зато ее хором не спеть. Не диво,  
что в награду мне за такие речи  
своих ног никто не кладет на плечи.

Я сижу у окна в темноте; как скорый,  
море гремит за волнистой шторой.

My song was deprived of a tune,  
but at least it cannot be sung in chorus.  
No wonder, no one rewards me for such speeches  
by laying their legs on my shoulders.

I am sitting in the darkness; like an express train,  
the sea is roaring behind the waving curtain.

The speaker recalls past pronouncements *ia tverdil, ia schital, ia pisal, ia skazal* (I repeated, I considered, I wrote, I said) that turned out to be “songs” without a tune and “speeches” without rewards. The song has no tune and “cannot be sung in a choir;” it is too rough, complicated, and unusual to become a hit of the crowd. Singing in unison is an attribute of conformist existence; it is directly associated with the popular Soviet phrase *shagat' stroem* (to march in one column) and signals active participation in and contribution to public life and social goals. In the coda to the fourth stanza, society is the company of one’s own shadow as in Russian *obshchestvo* means both company and society. The speaker is one’s own company now; they are split into self and shadow, which becomes an interlocutor.

Я сижу у окна, обхватив колени,

в обществе собственной грузной тени.

I am sitting by the window, having embraced my knees,

in the company of my own heavy shadow.

Here, embracing one's own legs foreshadows bitterly accepting ("*ne divo*") one's forced celibacy in the next stanza. The speeches ("*rechi*") will not make one popular with the opposite sex or lead to the "award" of a lover's legs on one's shoulders.

However, the last stanza reveals that rewards are no longer the speaker's concern. It is not worthwhile to contribute to and engage with historical reality as it has already been deemed *vtorosortnaia* (second-rate). The second-rate epoch is so suffocating that producing ideas (one's youthful songs and speeches) born of this experience may already be grounds for pride.

Гражданин второсортной эпохи, гордо

признаю я товаром второго сорта

свои лучшие мысли и дням грядущим

я дарю их как опыт борьбы с удушьем.

Я сижу в темноте. И она не хуже

в комнате, чем темнота снаружи.

A citizen of the second-rate epoch, proudly

I admit as second-rate goods

my best thoughts, and to the impending days

I give them as the experience of battling the suffocation.

I am sitting in the darkness. And it is not worse

in the room than in the darkness outside.

Suffocation does not result from the claustrophobic space of the room; it occurs only at the point of contact with the outside reality or the historical epoch. Instead, the emphatic “*gordo*” (proudly) is syncopated through the first enjambment. It refers to accepting and even celebrating that one’s finest ideas will fail to be in demand or have currency in the marketplace, which is regulated by that epoch’s material, and moral, planned economy. Indeed, the ideas are not “second-rate” in and of themselves; rather, they are “damaged goods” in the eyes of the mass consumer. This evokes comparisons with the undoubtedly “first-rate product” produced for Soviet readership by the Moscow *shestidesiatniki*, which included such icons of mass-consumed, stadium-gathering poetry as Anna Akhmadullina, Evtushenko, and Robert Rozhdestvensky. It is a badge of honor that the speaker’s finest ideas are not included. To be rated below, or rather outside of, circulation is a mark of maturing and accepting one’s true value. This reflects the transition from regret for the absence of popularity (the lonely company of one’s shadow and the absence of legs on one’s shoulders) to the pride in being an outcast.

However, this pride also recalls that of Aleksandr Pushkin’s “*Exegi monumentum*” (1836), in that it dares to prophesize long life and future study to thoughts and ideas sung in a song without a tune. Here, the gesture of giving, “*ia dariu*” (I give) is one of generosity and grace; however, it also removes the finest ideas from the market system as gifts are to be kept and appreciated rather than sold or exchanged. This refusal to be judged within the popular value system is akin to the song’s inability to be sung by a choir or the determination to stay in one’s room barricaded by a wardrobe from one’s own time.

The optics are of great importance for Brodsky's metaphysical space, and here, the last two stanzas reveal a new detail about the room as the constant refrain of "I am sitting by the window" is replaced by the phrase "I am sitting in the darkness." As it turns out, the vertex of the cone-like, metaphysical room universe, or the bulb, was not lit after all. Perhaps "the horror of the floor" is in the floor's complete dependence on the lightbulb for existence. In the darkness, the floor is undiscernible to a human eye; thus, it hardly exists. In the last stanza, the enjambment stresses location "in the room" (*ν komnate*), and the emphasis draws attention to the room's darkness in opposition to the outside. Not only is the darkness "not worse" (*ne khuzhe*), but thanks to this exclamation, it is more important and final than the darkness outside. In the rhyme, *Komnata* (room) and *temnota* (darkness) come together and coincide in the universe of the room. The room's darkness, or the darkness within, is still emphatically different than the darkness behind the window. While "to be in the dark" is traditionally interpreted as being lost, disoriented, and nearly paralyzed, it is also associated with being forgotten or even hidden. I suggest that the darkness outside the window is of the first kind, while the one inside is of the second. While voluntary isolation in one's metaphysical room does not provide answers, the poem suggests that neither does the outside reality. In contrast to the darkness outside, the darkness inside hides and protects the speaker and his surroundings; it can also be controlled in that it is governed by the light bulb.

### “Noon in a Room”

Written after emigration, “*Polden' v komnate*” (“Noon in a Room”) abounds in images that later become a signature of Brodsky’s poetry. It is also the longest of the three poems discussed here and consists of thirteen sections with three stanzas each in the *dol'nik* meter. This poem is more complex in its multilayered imagery, which I will interpret in terms of the Metaphysical conceit. As the title suggests, it explicitly addresses the interrelation of space and time, which the previous poems touched upon. Here, the room is more abstract and detached from the immediate reality of the speaker and from the biographical reality of the author. For example, while the wardrobe in the previous poem gestured toward the biographical fact of Brodsky’s own half of a room, in “Noon in a Room” nothing points toward the specificity of a room from where the word is actually spoken. In fact, alluding to the opposition between home and emigration, scholars suggest that there are two different rooms described. Maija Könönen, in her book *Four Ways of Writing the City: St. Petersburg-Leningrad as a Metaphor in the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky* (2003), finds recognizable attributes of St Petersburg/Leningrad and suggests, there is evidence for a retrospective account of the room as one’s lost home (“nest”). In contrast, I focus on the blurring of these attributes to show how the poem moves to universalize any descriptions. This universalizing gesture causes the room itself, and the pronouncements performed in it, to transcend the biographical, the personal, and the profane into a timeless and spaceless dimension outside of history and geography. It makes possible the speaker’s fascination with metaphysical subjects: sound and light (or the speed of sound versus the speed of light), words and digits, things and bodies (or thingness versus life), and time and tense (or concrete time in chronological

development) as opposed to eternity (or timelessness, Time in its absolute sense). The speaker is occupied by the transition between these sets of binary oppositions, and the poem describes them as gradually transforming Brodsky's habitual concepts into their supra-conceptual counterparts. In other words, the room in a Leningrad *kommunalka* becomes an eternal and universal room, the imagined shelter of meditation, and a universe in miniature. With its classical architecture and location on a big river by a sea, the city of Leningrad becomes every city covered with either snow or the ashes of ancient volcanic eruptions. The sights and the speaker's words reflect the common and universal human ability to see and to speak about what is seen. The transition from the concrete to the universal indicates the vertical dynamics that David Bethea, David McFadyen, Anton Azarenkov, and others have noted in the semantical structure of Brodsky's long poems.

The first three stanzas of the poem present this metaphysical ascendance in miniature. At first glance, it seems that they refer to a habitual siesta: time for a break in one's room on a sunny day, when time stops, when action and engagement comes to a halt, when energy is low and consciousness wanders between dream and wakefulness.

I

Полдень в комнате. Тот покой,  
когда наяву, как во сне,  
пошевелив рукой,  
не изменить ничего.

Свет проникает в окно, слепя.

Солнце, войдя в зенит,

луч кладя на паркет, себя

I

Noon in a room. That stillness,  
When waking is like in a dream,  
the movement of the hand  
won't change anything.

The light enters the window, blinding.

The sun, upon reaching its zenith,

lays its ray down on the parquet, turning

этим деревенит.

itself into wood.

Пыль, осевшая в порах скул.

Dust, deposited in the pores of the jawlines.

Калорифер картав.

The heater is burring.

Тело, застыв, продлевает стул.

The body, petrified, extends into the chair.

Выглядит, как кентавр

Looks like a centaur

II

II

вспять оглянувшийся: тень, затмив

looking back: the shadow, having hidden

профиль, чье ремесло –

its profile, whose craft

затвердевать, уточняет миф,

is to petrify, clarifies the myth,

повторяя число

repeating the number

членов. Их переход от слов

of limbs. Their passing from words

к цифрам не удивит.

to numbers won't cause surprise.

Глаз переводит, моргнув, число в

The eye, having winked, transforms the number

несовершенный вид.

into the imperfective aspect.

Воздух, в котором ни встать, ни сесть,

Air, in which one can neither stand up, nor sit down,

ни, тем более, лечь,

least of all lie down,

воспринимает «четыре», «шесть»,

comprehends “four,” “six,”

«восемь» лучше, чем речь.

“eight” better than speech.

What can be more human and familiar than this state of half existence, when the air is dense like ether and the sunlight physically acquires the qualities of the objects it illuminates? The image of dust falling into the pores of one's jawline enhances this slow-motion effect. The description is specific and palpable, which makes it easy to imagine that the dust falls slowly enough for the destination to be observed, or even perceived, by

the speaker. The sound of a burry heater implies coziness, but the word *kalorifer*, which is epoch and place specific, still ties the room to the Leningrad of Brodsky's memoirist writing. However, we also witness the merging of the human body with the chair in a unity of form and a shape reminiscent of a mythological centaur, which renders the body ahistorical. This section, the least metaphysical or mythical one of all, suddenly ends with the word *kentavr* (centaur). Here, the room's concrete reality meets the speaker's mythologizing, transformational imagination, which directs the room's transformations. In fact, everything in this long poem is already present in this first section. Here, in the room, we notice the liminal status of existence between dream and reality and the static nature of space and time ("nothing can be changed by a hand's motion"). Entities transform into each other; the sun is transformed into the wood of the floor, and a human figure is transformed into a chair. Metamorphoses characterized by *zastyvanie*, petrifying or freezing, are thematized later in the freezing of a bridge over the river and the freezing of a man into a monument to himself. Remarkably, although the word "centaur" concludes the first stanza, is not the end of the sentence. The sentence spills over into the next stanza and section, which is devoted to the idea of transformation in form and in myth and depicts the transformation of both the human and chair limbs into numbers or digits. This stanza also cascades into the next stanza with the emphatic *chlenov* (of members/limbs) and *ikh perekhod* (of limbs. /Their passage...) that follow the caesura and practically form a full sentence. Thus, the very structure, with its meaningful enjambments and one stanza amalgamating into another, exemplifies the process of *perekhod* or the transition from one state into another. This process is detailed in section two.



In the beginning, it appears that the speaker is watching a shadow pantomime unfolding on the sunlit floor mentioned earlier. In the sharp shadows, the silhouettes of a human and a piece of furniture merge into the mythical figure of a centaur. According to the speaker, the shadow's "*remeslo*" (craft or art) will be petrified by the stability and immobility of the noon hour. However, we expect shadows to combine the incompatible and generate the unthinkable with moving, mystical shapes that beg for fortune-telling. By interpreting these strange shapes, we predict the future. However, for the speaker, the frozen, sharp shapes born of the midday sun serve the same purpose (this becomes obvious in the last three sections treating the city of the future), for he is taking a peek into the future of things and their metaphysical configurations. The immobile, stagnant air produces the impression of a room filled with glass, which shares the quality of transparency; one can "neither stand up, nor sit down, /let alone lay down ("*ni vstat', ni sest', / ni, tem bolee, lech*")", and verbs of motions do not exist as they are banned from the midday siesta. In the anonymous shadow of the centaur after metamorphosis, there is no place for descriptive language and even nouns are unreliable. In this surreal space, words have no function and give way to numbers. Further encoding the furniture centaur into existence and memory, the shadow counts its limbs and preserves it for the future. The sequence of even numbers – four, six, eight – is more functional than speech as this universe values stability and the possibility of repetition. Four legs stay four with every blink of an eye, and the speaker equates this repetition with imperfect verbs. Unlike words that "shake the air" (*sotriasat' vozdukh*) – a Russian phrase that implies pronouncements without result that waste the time spent talking – numbers bring about change, confusion, and emotional drama. However, they have no concrete meaning.

Numbers, in other words, become the constant that this shaken world needs. The opening stanza of section three illustrates the shuddering effect the simplest words can produce.

Three laconic sentences intimate biographical tragedy and the impossibility of homecoming.

III

Я родился в большой стране,

в устье реки. Зимой

она всегда замерзала. Мне

не вернуться домой.

Мысль о пространстве рождает "ах",

оперу, взгляд в лорнет.

В цифрах есть нечто, чего в словах,

даже крикнув их, нет.

Птица щебечет, из-за рубежа

вернувшись в свое гнездо.

Муха бьется в стекле, жужжа

как "восемьдесят". Или -- "сто".

III

I was born in a big country,

at the mouth of a river. In winter

it would always freeze. I

cannot return home.

A thought of space produces an "ah,"

an opera, a glance through a lorgnette.

In numbers there is something that words,

even if one shouts them, don't have.

A bird chirps, having returned

from abroad to its nest.

A fly is beating against the windowpane, buzzing

like "eighty." Or "a hundred."

Revealing the "I" of the speaker for the first time, the lyrical persona, previously preoccupied with coding surroundings into words or numbers, finds himself projecting his meditations onto his own fate. This striking first "I" produces a confessional effect; it is acutely intimate and personal. However, on afterthought, the stripped-down sentences sound increasingly anonymous. Is it universal, even banal, to be born as one of many in a big country? Describing one's place of birth as a city on the mouth of a river does not

add much, though it does imply an inclination towards leaving and merging with the outside world by way of the ocean. The imperfect verb *zamerzala* (would freeze) refers to the regularity of the seasons as does the image of a bird chirping upon returning to its nest. However, the speaker is not part of this regularity and not part of the normal life cycle of his homeland, for unlike the bird, he will not return home to his nest at the mouth of the river. The cold is transformed into a perpetual winter, which immobilizes the speaker in time and space and away from the place of his birth.

Indeed, the river mouth flowing across a big country is perceived from a distant perspective. It is impossible to describe the vastness of this expanse (*prostranstvo*) in words; the attempt results in mere exclamation (“Ah!”) and an emotional, operatic drama where one excitedly pulls out a lorgnette to distinguish the particularities of a large-scale and distant act. However, the distance is measured in numbers impervious to the relativism of emotions, which still possess the power to impress and to convey meaning. This is the “something” (*nechto*) that words do not possess even if they are “shouted out.” Indeed, the ability of numbers to illustrate, with unrelenting precision, the facts of our existence is a familiar, even if still surprising, property. Russians habitually express the grief and devastation of WWII in the ever-growing number of lost lives; 27,000,000 sounds infinitely more convincing than the words “many,” “much,” or “a lot” no matter how loud and how often they are pronounced. Does this celebration of numbers mark the failure of language to denote the incomprehensible? If so, does it only refer to the incomprehensible moments and the distortion of perceived reality? The chirping of a bird that returns home to nest in accordance with the changing of the seasons is akin to speech that describes everything familiar, regular, comprehensible. Does this suggest that, like

the unnatural struggle of a fly against a transparent but impenetrable glass, facing the incomprehensible requires one to resort to figures? In the persistent and monotonous clash with the distorted reality of a windowpane, or with the reality of a different (higher?) order, the buzzing of the fly becomes a mathematical code for an impasse.

The onomatopoeic, long, and alliterative *vosemdesyat* (eighty) comes to a full stop in an abrupt and dull thud of *sto*. *Sto* or “stop” without the “p” exists in a symbolic parallel with “*tsifry ne umira*” (“numbers don’t die”) in section XVIII. As the desperate droning of the fly is suddenly interrupted by one last hit against the windowsill, the sticky silence of a hot summer day is restored. A biographical reading suggests that words are the luxury of those who freely navigate the normal world, and in light of the perceived failure of language, the one voluntarily confined to the room must create the higher order description of incomprehensible reality.

The next four sections split the personal and metaphysical themes. The philosophical meditation of the laws of physics are interrupted and associated with retrospective contemplations. Sections IV and VI both start with the phrase “there was” (*tam byl*) or “there were” (*tam byli*), and the speaker creates a distant mirage of his home city and its reality. The alternating sections V and VII both begin with “air” (*vosdukh*) and its physical qualities, which the speaker presents in numbers as a sort of mathematical analogy. In her analysis of the poem, Maija Könönen argues that the city is described using easily recognizable attributes of Leningrad-St Petersburg: a flat landscape, the “precision of prospects,” the Admiralty spire disguised as a “needle anesthetizing the clouds,” rows of columns lost in snowdrifts, inflamed dawns, and, of course, a bridge over a frozen river. Indeed, many of these elements are key components

of Petersburg poetics from Pushkin to the Silver Age and part of Brodsky's imagery. Although initially imagined as Leningrad-Petersburg, a concrete site of exilic nostalgia, I argue that these descriptions follow the vertical ascendance characteristic of Brodsky's imagery to develop into a conceit and abstraction. In fact, in the second stanza of section VIII, the speaker invokes an ancient city devastated by a volcanic eruption, which is a signature image that can be traced back to his early *sonnet* (*My snova prozhivaem u zaliva...*) ("A Sonnet," 1962) and which resurfaces in his later "*Dekabr' vo Florentsii*" ("December in Florence," 1976). The reference to Herculaneum, located in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius and destroyed by the famous eruption of 79 AD, places the city of "Noon in a Room" among other ghost cities on the edge of an empire. In poems such as "*Pis'ma rimskomu drugu*" ("Letters to the Roman Friend," 1972), Brodsky creates continuity across epochs from the ancient Roman empire to the modern empires of the Soviet Union and the United States. This trope of a once great but now forgotten city epitomizes a site of rest and oblivion.

IV

Там был город, где, благодаря  
 точности перспектив,  
 было вдогонку бросаться зря,  
 что-либо упустив.

Мост над замерзшей рекой в уме  
 сталью своих хрящей  
 мысли рождал о другой зиме --  
 то есть, зиме вещей

IV

There was a city, where, thanks to  
 its accurate perspective,  
 it was useless to rush after something,  
 having missed it.

The bridge over the frozen river would  
 with the steel of its cartilage  
 bring thoughts of another winter --  
 that is, the winter of things

где не встретить следов; рельеф      where one won't see traces; the terrain  
выглядит, как стекло.                      looks like glass.  
Только маятник, замерев,                Only the pendulum, petrified,  
источает тепло.                                exudes warmth.

VI

Там были также ряды колонн,  
забредшие в те снега,  
как захваченные в полон,  
раздетые донага.  
В полдень, гордясь остротой угла,  
как возвращенный луч,  
обезболивала игла  
содержимое туч.  
Слово, сказанное наугад,  
велух, даже слово лжи,  
воспламеняло мозг, как закат  
верхние этажи.

VI

There were also rows of columns,  
that had wandered into those snows,  
as if taken captive,  
stripped naked.  
At noon, proud of its sharp angle,  
as if a ray returned,  
the needle anesthetized  
the content of the storm clouds.  
A word, spoken at random  
aloud, even the word of a lie  
would inflame the brain, like sunset  
the top floors.

In the speaker's retrospective daydreaming, the city is abandoned and populated by things rather than people. In the absence of people, the frozen river and the snow coating the Dorian columns is a temporal and historical, rather than geographical, reference. Indeed, with its stagnation and silence, the passage evokes futuristic portrayals of a nuclear winter or "*zima veshchei*" (the winter of things). Imagined as the destructive nadir of human history, the nuclear winter is a point of

no return frozen in time. The stopped or petrified pendulum still emanates energy generated by its recent motion; it is the only source of warmth in this frozen realm. However, words have an inflammable quality that is threatening to this ultimate winter; their effect does not depend on their quality or meaning, whether random or simply false. Pronounced aloud, words have an explosive effect, which is underscored by a powerful image, frequently found in the Petersburg text, of the top-floor windows painted scarlet red by the sunset.

Why is the word, the verbal form of thinking and comprehension, so adamantly resisted in “Noon in a Room”? In the room, throughout the speaker’s meditations on the physical qualities of objects and on the ghost city’s landscape, there is a sense of competition between the word and this universe’s main elements – light and sound. In a scheme reminiscent of Cartesian dualism, words are troubling, even threatening, as they tie light and sound to materiality through the speaker’s body. Like the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Brodsky considers the division between the self and the world and between the immateriality of thought and the palpable word that expresses it. In the act of speaking, the word emerges from the corporeality of the body, yet it shapes the ideal world and the subjectivity of the speaker striving for pure cognition. The odd sections of the poem develop this dilemma, while the alternating even sections retrospectively describe the ghost city.

Sections V and VII begin with the word air (*vosdukh*). In section II, dense and immobilizing air fills a comatose state during a midday siesta. Now, as the first element of the physical world, it is discussed on a higher plane. The anaphoric alternation between “*Vosdukh...*” and “*Tam byl(i)...*” (There.../Air.../There.../Air...) as well as the

etymological and onomatopoeic implications of the word *vozdukh* (related to *dukh* [spirit] and *dykhanie* [breath]) suggest the act of taking a breath before relating a memory. It is so difficult to put this memory into words that it is breathtaking in the literal sense of this epithet.

V

Воздух, бесцветный и проч., зато  
необходимый для  
существования, есть ничто,  
эквивалент нуля.

Странно отсчитывать от него  
мебель, рога лося,  
себя; задумываться, "ого"  
в итоге произнося.

Взятая в цифрах, вещь может дать  
тамерланову тьму,  
род астрономии. Что подстать  
воздуху самому.

V

Air, colorless etc., though  
essential for  
existence, is nothing,  
the equivalent to zero.

It is strange to count from it  
furniture, moose antlers,  
oneself; to wonder, pronouncing  
“whoa” in the end.

Taken in numbers, a thing can give  
Tamerlane’s legion,  
a kind of astronomy. Which befits  
air itself.



## VII

Воздух, в сущности, есть плато,

пат, вечный шах, тщета,

ничья, классическое ничто,

гегелевская мечта.

Что исторгает из глаз ручьи.

Полдень. Со стороны

мозг неподвижной пластинки, чьи

бороздки засорены.

Полдень; жевательный аппарат

пробует завести,

кашлянув, плоский пи-эр-квадрат –

музыку на кости.

## VII

Air is, essentially, a plateau,

a stalemate, an eternal check, futility,

a draw, classic nought,

a Hegelian dream.

That which extorts streams from the eyes.

Noon. From a distance

The brain looks more immobile than a record,

whose grooves are cluttered.

Noon; a masticatory apparatus

is trying to rev up,

having given a cough, the flat  $\pi^2$  is

music recorded on bones.

The air sections undermine the preceding city sections and impart a different dynamic. In section IV, the city is described as horizontal and flat in the clear perspective of its avenues, the frozen bridge without a footprint, and the glass-like landscape. This suggests that the city is filled with air that travels freely along and over its inviting surfaces. In section V, the air is “colorless, etc.” and its nullifying qualities, such as its lack of color, smell, substance, and weight are emphasized; however, it is not simply absent but nullified - ground zero. Here, air is a point of departure from which one “counts” the vertical dynamic of the progressive metamorphoses of matter into objects, animals (“moose antlers”), and, finally, the human (“self”). The scale of the metaphysical gap between air and human subjectivity is incomprehensible and generates “a type of

astronomy” that gives meaning to the compound potential of air in the context of life in the universe as well as the life of an individual as a concrete variant in a point of space and time. This evokes the primordial evolution of species, when air, or oxygen homeostasis, was crucial for the development of complex biological forms. Brodsky’s speaker contemplates this evolution in its metaphysical dimension, which results in the failure of language as only the exclamation “*ogo*” emerges. Numerical signification first rescues the speaker as a vague *t’ma* (darkness, immense quantity). In Ancient Rus’, *t’ma* referred to an army of over a thousand warriors, and for a medieval warlord, this was a number close enough to infinity; it could envelop their prospects for victory in darkness. The term *astronomicheskoe chislo* (astronomical number), a set phrase in Soviet vocabulary infiltrated with terminology from physics and engineering, looms behind the comparison of numeric representation with “a kind of astronomy.” Soviet triumphs in the space race of the 1960s (from the launching of *sputnik* to Yuri Gagarin’s journey into space and tour around the world), astrophysics, and space engineering were breakthroughs in the evolution of astronomy comparable to Kepler’s, who, not coincidentally, was a contemporary of John Donne. Air, which makes up the Earth’s atmosphere, is home to the habitual and the last plateau of the comprehensible, while Euclidian geometry and Newtonian mechanics are the last frontier before the incomprehensibility of astronomical numbers and Einstein’s relativity. In the alternating odd and even sections, the city’s horizontal vistas pale in comparison to the cosmic distances between air and the world of things and humans. Illuminated by midday sunlight, the view outside is undermined by the mind of solitary thinker confined to his room and the contemplation of metaphysical categories.

This effect is even more pronounced in the contrasting imagery of sections VI and VII. The vertical imagery of section VI, the columns, the spear piercing the clouds, and the top floors of the buildings aflame with the sunset or an unwary word, contrasts with the first stanza of section VII, which undercuts this motion with a succession of synonyms equating flatness with both an impasse and pure nothingness (nonentity). The alliteration of the synonyms – *plato, pat, shakh, tshcheta, nich'ia, nichto, mehta* – reproduces the sound of a needle scratching against the surface of an old record and animates the image of the last stanza. Here, the air embodies a non-result and the undisturbed status quo, which is exemplified in a draw (*nich'ia*). This is not a defeat or an end; instead, it is a result that nullifies the game and invalidates all efforts (*tshcheta*). The epithets “eternal” and “classic” emphasize the stability of equilibrium, and the advancement of synonyms from the particular to the abstract culminates in a Hegelian dream, which is the ultimate synthetic unity of the empirical and the ideal. This discovery paralyzes the brain and reduces its complexity to the formula for a circle’s surface ( $\pi r^2$ ) and to the stubborn disk of a record it resembles. As if forgetting all articulation, the mouth, reduced to its original function of a masticatory system, struggles to “retrieve” (*izvlech'*) sensible sounds. The word is not possible without understanding, but the truth about the air’s metaphysical nature is beyond understanding. The speech function is rendered inadequate, and the speaker is stupefied.

After its prominent introduction at the beginning of the poem’s first stanza, the word *polden'* (noon) appears again in section VII. It appears twice, and similarly to section I, it is located in a nominative sentence, which has now lost its location *v komante*. Both times *polden'* appears as an anticlimactic full stop as if explaining the

vision presented before and simultaneously providing the setting for the following stanza. Indeed, only in the midday stillness can daydreams and thoughts wander as far as comprehending the metaphysical implications of air while experiencing an almost physical sensation of the thought process.

Section VIII brings the meditation back to the room with the mention of the dominant ceiling over the landscape – the *eralash* or mishmash of people and their belongings cluttered in the small, improvised, apartment “rooms” somewhere in the ghost city. The eye strives to escape the chaotic rooms and ascends to the pure, uncluttered, and homogenous ceiling. As the eye follows the falling dust, reflected and preserved in the amalgam of the mirrors, the speaker witnesses the movement down the vertical plane between the floor and the ceiling. The comparison between the room dust and the ashes of Herculaneum inscribes a Leningrad *kommunalka* into the genealogy of lost civilizations and gives closure to the theme of the city.

The poem becomes entangled in the hierarchy of light and sound. In the room, the speaker engages with the gaze and the echo in an attempt to solve the main question regarding the viability of poetic pronouncement. Mirror reflections embody stability in the poem’s universe. Light, and its reflection, makes objects visible; it “describes” them to the human imagination and preserves them in memory. Though time takes its toll on objects, as they decay and even become fossilized (*okamenev, obvetshav, obnishchav*), they are still recognizable to the human eye (section IX). However, the speaker of “Noon in a Room” is longing for an echo or for a reflection in sound. Mirror reflections are deemed inferior to an echo, and the speaker conceives of himself in terms of sound rather than light (section X).

## IX

Звук уступает свету не в  
 скорости, но в вещах,  
 внятных даже окаменев,  
 обветшав, обнищав.

Оба преломлены, искажены,  
 сокращены: сперва –  
 до потемок, до тишины;  
 превращены в слова.

Можно вспомнить закат в окне,  
 либо – мольбу, отказ.

Оба счастливы только вне  
 тела. Вдали от нас.

## X

Я был скорее звуком, чем --  
 стыдно сказать -- лучом  
 в царстве, где торжествует чернь,  
 прикидываясь грачом  
 в воздухе. Я ночевал в ушных  
 раковинах: ласкал  
 впадины, как иной жених --  
 выпуклости; пускал  
 петуха. Но, устремляясь ввысь,  
 звук скидывает балласт:

## IX

Sound is inferior to light not in  
 speed, but in objects  
 that are clear, even having become petrified,  
 dilapidated, impoverished.

Both are refracted, distorted,  
 diminished: first  
 down to obscurity, to silence;  
 turned into words.

One can remember a sunset in the window,  
 or a plea, a rejection.

Both are happy only outside  
 the body. Far from us.

## X

I was a sound, rather than --  
 embarrassing to say -- a ray  
 in a kingdom, where the mob celebrates,  
 pretending to be a rook  
 in the air. I spent nights in  
 auricles: caressed  
 cavities, like some groom  
 reliefs; let out  
 a crow But, as it aims skyward,  
 sound drops the dead weight:

сколько в зеркало не смотришь,  
оно эха не даст.

no matter how long you look in the mirror,  
it won't give out an echo.

Both light and sound are susceptible to the distortions of human perception and can be reduced to their nullified state (darkness for light and silence for sound) before they undergo the ultimate human-induced transformation into discourse. Sound, as the material of speech, seems more closely related to discourse. Neither a painter nor a sculptor, the painter, a poet, thinker, and writer, chooses the path of sound. To paraphrase the title of N.A. Dobroliubov's famous article of 1860, "*Luch sveta v temnom tsarstve*" ("A Ray of Light in the Realm of Darkness"), one who relies on sound, or language, will never become the beacon light of his dark realm. In other words, it will not have changed the material world. Relying on optics, its true qualities are blurry; it takes the *chern'* (mob or darkness) to recognize an innocent bird in the air. In contrast, sound is called "sincere" and associated with "momentum of thought" (section XVI). As a vehicle of verbal expression, sound creates, rather than reflects, the forms of the physical world and serves as the means for human transcendence from the material to the metaphysical.

Sound and light are connected to the key metaphysical category of Time in the physical vessel of the speaker – the body. As in most of Brodsky's poetry, the relationship with the body is complicated. The speaker is estranged from his own body and bitter about being unable to control the natural, physical aging process. He is trapped or transported, sexually attracted or frustrated; he must oblige bodily functions and look a certain way. The speaker resists the thingness of the body, which is revealed in his interaction with objects in the room as the body can be reflected in the mirror like a thing

or be invisible (non-existent) in the darkness. Section XI continues this theme where the speaker renounces the use of his voice. Here, the body is helpless against the external forces of the city. Due to the city's cold temperatures, it is "forced to wear a coat" and faces oblivion in the city's inhabitants or those who used to love him but forgot what his body looked like. In fact, this process is one of monumentalization, as the speaker turns into one of the city's antique statues, which represent its obsolete citizens left on the eaves of multitudinous palaces and staring into the empty skies. Instead of creating memory, this process nullifies and appropriates it while transforming a living person into a thing or an object that is "marble. i.e. without lungs, without / a name, facial features" (*mramornym. T. e. bez legkikh, bez / imeni, chert litsa*). This petrification is distinguished by the loss of identity; one loses not only his facial features and name but also his lungs. The speaker feels that, once he is no longer able to produce sound or speak, he ceases to exist and becomes one of the anachronistic statues in the lost city of the universal past.

Again, breathing and speaking are connected in the metonymic association of lungs with the living, breathing body. At first, identification with sound appears liberating, but it only proves successful in his interaction with other people, or on an amorous front rather than a poetic one. Transitioning to higher planes (*ustremliias' vrys'*) requires one to get rid of the physical ballast. Inevitably, both light and sound must leave the body to perform their mission. While outside the body, both are described as "happy" and divorced from "us;" they are unburdened by connotations created in the human mind and thus restored to their absolute form. When bound to meaning production, both are compromised. In this section's last stanza, the sunset reflected in the window parallels the sound of a plea or rejection. This brings us back to the "random

word” that “inflamed the mind” (“*slovo, skazannoe naugad [...] vosplamenialo mozg*”) in section VI and creates a powerful, poetical scene of a moment remembered – a memory. This memory is conflicted, tormented, and bound to the life of one person, whose physical existence is rooted in a particular point in space and time. Thus, it cannot be “happy” when embodied in the absolute, as this is a state accessible only to the categories of light and sound in the metaphysical world.

This unhappy conclusion causes the speaker to meditate on his physical body and its preservation in an alternative system of signification – the numerical one. These last sections are increasingly concerned with the future, and they are uncannily prophetic when exploring digital coding as a metaphysical continuation of the human condition. In section XII, the speaker acknowledges that every living being (“*dvunogoe – vprochem liubaia tvar*”) has the potential to be described, and thus preserved, in a matrix of numbers and letters, which allows the reading of faces like an “ABC book, checkered numbers” (“*bukvar', kletochnuiy tsifir*”). This urge to be coded for preservation conflicts with the living body’s vivacity and the mind’s sensing of its presence. The last stanza evidences a protest against this new monumentalization and claims that it is extraneous to the living being’s experience and value in the present. Three sentences in the last stanza end with exclamation marks and insist that the living body, positioned *en face* rather than in profile like the statue in section XI, has value in the amount of its experiences. The preference for darkness and nakedness, which increases this value (“*[...] Osobenno -- v neglighe, / i lampa ne vkli uchena.*”), may suggest either reproductive potential or a merging with the surrounding physical environment through tactile sensations. In other words, petrification is opposed to living in the moment.



While section XII ends with the image of an unlit lamp, metonymically the darkness in a room, section XIII begins with the promise that the numbers (digits) are tasked with dissipating this darkness. Literally stopping short, numbers are immortal and close on the heels of verbal signification as indicated by the omission of the last syllable in the line: (“In the future, numbers will dissipate darkness. / Numbers don’t d.” (“*V budushchem tsifry rasseiut mrak. / Tsifry ne umira*”). As telephone numbers represent different people in our memory, various combinations of figures stand for personae, or perhaps, for everything living and temporary in the physical world. The connection to writing – a system humanity has used for this purpose throughout the centuries – is still there.

<p>Сонм их, вечным пером привит к речи, расширит рот, удлинит собой алфавит; либо наоборот.</p>	<p>A horde of numbers, grafted by the eternal pen to speech, will widen the mouth, lengthen the alphabet; or the other way around.</p>
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These lines describe a digital universe that preserves and duplicates organic life in a code of words and numbers. Known as cybernetics in Brodsky’s time, we see this today in virtual reality and computer programming. Following the tradition of Metaphysical poetry, Brodsky’s verse inscribes contemporaneous “new science” on the speaker’s thought process in a room.

The future’s ability to know and conserve the past is emphasized throughout, and the future, as a mirror reflection and an amalgam of the past, is the poem’s central conceit. This amalgam both forms the reflective side of a mirror and blends the past, present, and future as an alchemic alloy. “Land claimed by a dream” is a reflection divided from its real counterpart by the blue line of the horizon – it is ground zero.

“Sated” by its reflection in the water, in a feat of Narcissism, the city paradoxically sees not itself but its own “inimitable” beauty. The appearance of this future universe is important as it brings us back to the unreliable nature of optical perception. Indeed, could inanimate stone, things, and air, or objects, landscapes and backgrounds, “reproduce” any differently than by being reflected on illuminated surfaces? The reproduction of an inanimate world depends on human perception, imagination, and memory. Meanwhile, due to their physical presence in a particular time and place, a human is always inscribed in historical time. In section XV, the dust, generated by the process of living and inhabiting the city’s rooms, is preserved in the amalgam of the mirrors and deemed “the essence” of the future. As in Brodsky’s earlier poem, “*Naturmort*” (“Still Life,” 1971), it is the flesh of time: “*Ibo pyl’ — èto plot’ vremeni; plot’ i krov*” (For dust is the flesh of time; its flesh and blood). The mirror reflections ensure that the life cycles will repeat, and the ideal reflection of a real world is what the coded, digitized future will “look like.” The one standing by the window in a room will still observe the dropping thermometer in winter and the buzzing bee trapped by a windowpane in summer. Future city squares will still perplex both eye and ear with unimaginably long perspectives mirrored in resonant echoes that “surpass the sound hundred-fold.” In other words, as prophesized by the onlooker, the historical events and gatherings in these squares will echo into posterity. This theme, of the past amalgamating into the future, peaks in the bold exclamation “We will not die!” and resists defining the end as the death of the perishable body. Death is impossible until a mischievous child of a future generation scratches off the amalgam. Thus, generational continuity does not require children or physical procreation: “the white meat, the flesh” unable to match the “acceleration of thought.” Instead, it occurs

through this amalgam of times concentrated in the thoughtful gaze of an onlooker. “A gaze” can travel “further than the body.” Like a star, it extends into the universe, surpasses earthly dimensions, and returns to human consciousness with the information that was revealed to it. Its main function is not to radiate light, but to consume darkness, which is, perhaps, the same darkness that engulfed both the inside and the outside of the room in “*Ya vseгда tverdil...*” (“I Kept Saying that Fate is a Game”). Thus, rather than a source of light hidden in the mind of an enlightened onlooker, the gaze is an instrument for processing the darkness and making sense of it.

In this complex poetic construction, the philosophical categories of Time and Space suddenly enter the scientific discourse of physics and astronomy, where they are weighed against the categories of light and sound. At this intersection of science and philosophy, the speaker wrestles with the futility and the meaning of a poetic pronouncement. While, as a whole, the poem speaks of stagnation, of the collapse of times and verbal tenses into one other, of the impossibility of change, and of an impasse where both sound and light have failed and numbers threaten to replace words, the very existence of the poem serves as a counterargument. For this poem to exist, light allowed the observation of the room’s physical reality and sound allowed the speaker to pronounce thoughts on the past, present, and future of the site. As a result, words were composed and formed the cultural amalgam that will reflect them back at future generations. And while Brodsky, paraphrasing the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, calls the star of a poetic gaze “unwanted by everyone,” the hope for continuity persists in the rebellious “*No*” (but) that breaks up the last section. Following this “*No*,” the

meaning-making work of the star-gaze serves as an antithesis to future descendants' alleged indifference.

## CHAPTER III

### BRODSKY'S SELF-TRANSLATIONS AS BILINGUAL TEXT

#### **A Miracle or a Disaster: The “Dreyfus Affair” of English Brodsky**

As Chapter II demonstrates, poetic translation and the preference for Anglophone verse had been a significant part of Brodsky's creative process long before emigration; they are the distinctive traits of his poetics that were manifested early in his career as a professional translator. To overlook it and to see self-translation and original writing in English merely as a necessity, a means of adaptation to the new language and cultural environment would result in a reductive approach to the analysis of it. That is not to say that such necessity did not exist at all; without translations into English Brodsky's writing would have been limited to the readership of Russian émigré circles, representing a withering branch of his native tradition. This might have impeded his creative development, as happened to so many Russian talents, Brodsky's fellow countryman, including his contemporaries Sergey Dovlatov and Vasily Aksyonov, for example. International interest in his legal case created a demand for the translations of the pariah poet's verse. (It might be argued that the interest was generated by anticipation of a kind of anti-Soviet “literary bomb,” and in this sense it was bound to disappoint, as Brodsky's poetry turned out to be largely apolitical.) While Brodsky's grasp of English was not yet strong, he embraced translations of his poetry by George L. Kline (“the American George Kline, Professor of Philosophy at Bryn Mawr,” Weissbort 14) and Carl Proffer (“who met him in Austria, Professor of Russian at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor,” Weissbort 10), which were rather “workman-like” with “the poetic voice somewhat missing” (Proffer Teasley). Later, prominent poets such as Richard Wilbur, John Updike,

and Derek Walcott among others undertook poetic translations into English, which received favorable reviews. However, even if Brodsky's own proficiency in English might have been a hindrance in the first years (or, according to some, months) of immigration, soon it ceased to be one. Brodsky "improved his English at fantastic speed" (Proffer-Teasley) and soon expressed sensitivity to certain "losses" in Kline's and other's translations. Incidentally (or, perhaps, expectedly) the greatest loss of all, in his opinion, was omission of rhyme and meter. Thus, similarly to Nabokov a few decades earlier, Brodsky decides that to perform a task properly is to perform it yourself. The result "produced the kind of acrimony last seen during the Dreyfus case" or, in the literary world, during the Nabokov-Wilson translation war of the 1960s on the pages of *The New York Review* (Proffer Teasley 74). The experts and critics of Brodsky's time knit their brows at "the generally 'unEnglish' quality of Brodsky's performance" (Reid 17) on the pages of the prominent publishing venues, parsing grammatical mistakes and lexical incongruities procured from the lines of his self-translations and English verse. It is notable that, unlike Nabokov's, Brodsky's English writing is reproached mostly for the level of proficiency that was found unacceptable, rather than his method of translation or any disadvantages the translated texts might exhibit in comparison to the originals. In most of the negative reviews the questions, so pertinent to any discussion of translation, of freedom and fidelity, loss and gain, connotations and nuances of figurative meaning are absent. It is mostly the questions of fluidity, flow, compatibility, relation to contemporary preference in form (free verse) and the rules of the target language tradition that occupy the reviewers. In other words, the main objection that the adversaries of Brodsky's English poetry promote is that his "English poems do not *sound*

right at all” (Bayley 4). Characteristically, the focus on the technicalities of the written English in the form of “small matters that may not fit neatly under the headings of the grammar-book” figure in these reviews with the constant references to the sound of Brodsky’s English verse (Reid 17). Apparently, to a reader with an ear for the English idiom, the poems sound simply wrong. While some critics advise that “an ear” is “the first thing he needs to acquire, if he is to make progress” (Reid), others imply that nothing good ever did or will come of such an endeavor (Davie 14). Indeed, Brodsky spoke English with a distinguishable Russian accent, which is perceptible in so many of the audio and video recordings of his interviews and which his bilingual readers recognized as “Russian English” (Weissbort 237). However, the response by the Russian émigrés and English-speaking scholars of Russian literature, who could have become Brodsky’s primary advocates, became somewhat irrelevant in the discussions, amounting only to apologetic references to his Russian poetry. Ellendea Proffer Teasley, who, with her husband Carl Proffer, jumpstarted Brodsky’s publishing career at their small but influential press Ardis Publishers, remembers the criticism that erupted behind the scenes:

Friends of mine – American poets or Russian scholars – would call me up and sadistically read the latest Brodsky translation (or English original), and I got very tired of defensively saying that he was a great poet in Russian. (75)

A closer look at the most disparaging of the reviews reveals a strange connection between the intolerance towards Brodsky’s English with a foreign accent and his status as an immigrant and, consequently, the discussion of his “rights” towards the English language. In his notorious piece titled “Great American Disaster” (1988) Christopher

Reid hopes he is not too late to offer “a skeptical enquiry into [the] foundations” of Brodsky’s underserved “status as a literary idol” and a “great American poet” (the latter title particularly pains the critic who considers it, at the very least, prematurely awarded). Reid reprimands Brodsky not only for his “gros[s] solepcisms” and “[e]lementary errors, of the kind that the long-suffering Mr Parkhill spent hours trying to correct in Hyman Kaplan and his classmates,” but also for his “intellectual impatience” with which he surrenders “the privileges” that an émigré writer enjoys as long as he stays within his own domain:

[T]he terms are clear. Hitherto, through no fault of his own, the poet has seemed to occupy a position of statelessness somewhere between Russian and English, in the neutral zone called Translationese; and while the stateless person is always vulnerable and never to be envied, the stateless poem enjoys privileges peculiar to the culture of our time, especially when it is attached to an interesting personal history. Of late, however, with his growing self-assurance, Brodsky has dared to dispense with these privileges, and in the course of the past decade has been writing poems in English that demand to be judged purely on their own merits.

(17)

What draws attention to this passage is a strange conflation or interchangeability between state and language, person and poem. The poet, who apparently is an entity combining the latter two, is stateless in his position not between two countries, but between two languages. Note, that when Reid’s review was published, Brodsky had held American citizenship for eleven years and had famously defined himself as “Jewish, a Russian poet, an English essayist – and, of course, an American citizen” in an interview



on the acceptance of the Nobel Prize a year before. It is, therefore, at least puzzling that the Hong-Kong-born British author calls the poet “stateless,” unless he means that a person’s legal citizenship does not rescue a poet and, by extension, his poems from the linguistic and cultural limbo of exile. Why then are the poems only “stateless” when they are written in English? Is it because linguistic citizenship is denied to the poet despite his American passport? Are the privileges “peculiar to the culture of our times” to be read as privileges to be published as long as it is within the borders of one’s true linguistic citizenship? The critic appeals to “terms” that “are clear” to the literary community, and it is these terms that let him speak of what Brodsky should and should not have dared to do with his poetry. In this sense Reid’s opinions sound like distant reverberations of such early outbursts as, for example, Denise Levertov’s open letter in *The American Poetry Review* of 1973, published only a year after Brodsky’s immigration. Divided by numbers, the aspects she claims unrelated are unified by the acute feeling of inappropriateness of Brodsky’s presence both in America and on the pages of a journal about American poetry:

- 1) Brodsky's choosing to come to this country, rather than any other, is a political act however much he may claim to be an apolitical person. It is an act of tacit approval of a country that is committing gross atrocities in Asia. I can understand Brodsky's leaving Russia, indeed it seems he was *persona non grata* there – but if he did not want to go to Israel there were other parts of the world in which he could have settled (though he would not have received, in, say, Norway or New Zealand, the fine house and the adulation he receives in

the USA; it is true – an adulation due far more to the spurious glamour of his defection than to a knowledge of his work)...

- 3) A literary objection: what is APR doing, allowing Brodsky – quite apart from any political considerations, simply as someone obviously ill-equipped to comprehend poetry written in English – to pontificate about Richard Wilbur (or any other American poet)? Wilbur has written poems of great beauty which I cherish. While he himself may, and probably does, utterly disagree with me about Brodsky, I nevertheless find Brodsky's ignorant praise of him insulting to Wilbur. (Levertov 54)

The idea that Brodsky wore out his welcome and is to be “allowed” or “made allowances” to, i.e. regulated and kept at bay, is in various degrees present in most of the critique regarding his use of language, poetic or otherwise. The imagery Reid employs in his eloquent panning of an article foils his concern with Brodsky’s foreignness. The metaphors he devises are striking in their perhaps unintended but no less evident relevance to the circumstances of Brodsky’s expulsion from the Soviet Union:

It [impatience] accounts, too, presumably, for the hastily-packed look his unaided translations have, their contents stuffed any-old-how into once square-cornered, but now travel-worn, English verse forms – and never mind if a cuff here or a hem there still protrudes after the author has brought his backside down on the lid and pressed the locks home. (18)

For those who are aware of Brodsky’s biography, this metaphor cannot but evoke the famous 1972 photograph of the poet sitting on top of his old leather suitcase at Pulkovo Airport before leaving his country forever. The legendary suitcase was rumored

to hold a symbolic luggage consisting of a typewriter, two bottles of vodka, and a collection of poems by John Donne and is today displayed in the Anna Akhmatova Museum in Saint Petersburg. Neither then, nor later Brodsky had time to properly pack; unlike the contents of his Leningrad bag, his poetic baggage was too large to fit into half a life left to live and write in a foreign country and in a foreign language. With his heart condition, he had very little time, and he knew it.

Zakhar Ishov in his study of the critical reception of Brodsky's collections ranging from *A Part of Speech* (1980) to *To Urania* (1988) notes the formation of two "camps" divided by nationality, and, in part, by generation. The criticism mostly emanated from British reviewers and poets of the preceding Pleiad, while among the defenders were many American poets and Brodsky's peers (*Post-horse* 15-20). According to Proffer Teasley's memoir, it is for their sake that Brodsky endeavored the whole project of self-translation: "Joseph very much wanted the other major poets – his only peers – to be able to see what his poetry was really like, and he worked very hard to show them [...]" (75). Indeed, Brodsky's English verse was held in high regard by such prominent figures in the American poetry establishment of the time as Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Peter Viereck, Mark Strand, and, as the exceptions among the voices from the Isles, by Stephen Spender and Seamus Heaney. Their support, however, was more often communicated privately, in personal correspondence and talks, rather than in the public sphere. When publications appeared, they sounded somewhat apologetic and defensive. Note, that even when a researcher looks for the reasons behind their favorable attitude, he succumbs to this rhetoric and speaks of "making allowances" for an ally in craft and in method, rather than of genuine appreciation of a poetic achievement:

Many of these reviewers [...] were poets themselves, most of whom shared with Brodsky an aesthetic affinity in their preference for the formal devices in poetry. A great number of them were either Brodsky's associates or direct translators of his poems in English. As such they were cognizant of the complexities of poetry translation and more predisposed to make greater allowances for Brodsky's translating methods. (Ishov, *Post-horse* 19)

I would point out, however, that the most appreciative of Brodsky's English project were not simply those who were directly involved in it, as this explanation might suggest, but the ones who shared another important quality with him – the sensibility of a bi- or multi-lingual writer. The voices that could be most often heard praising rather than parsing the “foreignness” of his verse were voices with accents, such as Michael Hofmann's or Derek Walcott's. As much as critics with a purist attitude to language would wish Brodsky's lines to be neatly packed into a Samsonite-trendy, brand new, one-hundred-percent-homemade translations or, better yet, stamped for a long travel back home, into his native idiom and away from both English ears and tongues, he and his rhymes were here to stay. After all, Hyman Kaplan never learned to play by the rules.

### **Writing from the Midzone: Continuity versus Dissimilarity in the Approach to (Self-)Translation**

Brodsky died of a heart attack in 1996, just a few years too early to see a turn in the reception of his self-translations. Daniel Weissbort, a poet and a translator who collaborated with Brodsky on the collection *A Part of Speech*, in his rather tormented memoir written over a year that followed the passing of his dear friend and colleague,

reflects on his own objections to Brodsky's self-translation project. He ends up asking the questions that occupy the minds of translation theorists today and demonstrate the complex issues and the challenge of the bilingual text as a translative phenomenon:

Are the two texts both original creations? Is either text complete? Is self-translation a separate genre? Can either version belong within a single language or literary tradition? How can two linguistic versions of a text be commensurable?

(2)

The same year, Mark Strand in a tribute to Brodsky at Columbia University is recorded advocating for the poet's self-translation method and the end result:

I want to say another thing about Joseph in translation. We usually say someone is translated into English, or someone into Russian, and it's very unfair, because someone is really translated into the idiom of the translator. So there's something too general about saying Brodsky into English. The fact is that Brodsky translated Brodsky into Brodsky, Russian Brodsky into English Brodsky. He knew what he was doing. (Sontag et al. 180)

These intuitions about the special nature of self-translations coming from people with first-hand experience in translation and literary production soon acquired theoretical outlines. In the same decade Anthony Pym publishes his groundbreaking theory that proposes a focus on translators and the contexts they work in that he conceptualizes as overlaps of cultures. Translators and translated texts then become "intercultures" that combine rather than transform, mold rather than connect the opposites. Today these ideas have gone a long way. Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson in their book *The*

*Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* (2014) apply the notions of interculture and overlap to their theory of the bilingual text. They point out:

Just as no one would think of calling the leading twentieth-century translators “monocultural” (William Weaver, Ralph Mannheim, Richard Howard, David Magarshack, Donald Keene, Gayatri Spivak are at the least sociolinguistic intercultural), so bilingual writers cannot be reduced to a single cultural identity but thrive in the middle region of overlaps. Writing from the midzone, the bilingual self-translator does not just bridge the gaps between cultures but combines them as a single subject living bilingually, and writes both languages with one hand. (165)

They draw attention to the fact that self-translations and twinned texts by bilingual authors have been neglected both in translation theory and literary theory, despite the fact that most of the theorists, especially in the twentieth century that brought about mass migration of learned minds, were themselves bilingual. Moreover, they were often producing work in a language other than the language of the country they lived in. Hokenson and Munson attempt to rescue self-translators and bilingual authors from the status of flukes and their doubled texts from being perceived as “perverse” or neglected as “idiosyncratic anomalies.” On the contrary, they argue that such authors are writers *par excellence*; their research demonstrates that bilingual textuality was present in literary canons since Greco-Roman antiquity through the European Middle Ages and, after the period of Romanticism with its ideas of national literatures tied to monolingualism, came back in Modernist writing. Their cases of bi- and multi-lingual production span centuries – from Nicole Oresme to John Donne and to Ungaretti, Nabokov and Beckett among

others. Their observations and discoveries, if known to Brodsky's critics at the time of the debates around his self-translations, could have corrected many of the assumptions that were in the way of appreciation of his work on its own merits.

First of all, I would like to draw attention to their use of the term *translatio* and the transformation of its contexts over centuries formed by competing languages and their cultures, the main example of which, of course, is the constantly shifting dynamics between Latin and the vernaculars. Drawing on Karlheinz Stierle's model of vertical and horizontal *translatio* – a Roman term that used to denote “both translation between languages and displacement in space” - they show, throughout the book, how the bilingual authors often find themselves working with or between the two axes. Since political power and “knowledge in language” traditionally found seat in a *lingua franca* of any given period (the ones Hokenson and Munson distinguish are “Latin and French and now English” for the Western canons), its imposition onto and/or trickling down into the vernaculars and dialects was of a vertical character. Stierle demonstrates how in “postmedieval culture” this axis is disturbed and gradually bent in the direction of horizontal, i.e. equal relations between the *lingua franca* and the emergent linguistic and cultural essences that suddenly powerfully manifest themselves in writing (or, particularly, in literary creation). As Stierle speaks of the role of such writers as Chretien de Troies and Marie de France followed by Dante, Petrarch, and Montaigne, Hokesnon and Munson emphasize the fact that all of them were bi- and multi-lingual, as was then customary. While, according to Stierle, it is the Renaissance that sees the formation of “the level zone” which is described as “the experience of simultaneous and equivalent pluralities of discourses, and all they comport,” Hokenson and Munson point out that in

bilinguals this simultaneity had existed all along, or, in other words, bilingual writers always exist in this “level zone.” Therefore, they conclude that “the bilingual text thrives on the horizontal.” (6-7)

Brodsky’s case both illuminates and complicates this picture. The poet’s project is to perform horizontal *translatio* between Russian and English – languages, literary traditions, cultures – which are not, in his mind, bound by any relationship of subordination, whereas he falls into the vertical discourse of English being the *lingua franca* for all immigrants in America. Brodsky’s project resists this discourse not only because it is somewhat irrelevant to his status as an immigrant, but also because it comes from a context in which one of the languages – Russian – is itself a *lingua franca* in its area and era (meaning especially the late Soviet period with its centralized translation industry). Brodsky embarks on the journey of self-translation fairly early; he translates “December in Florence” in 1980, only eight years after his expulsion from the Soviet Union, and publishes *To Urania*, a collection with an overwhelming number of self-translations, another eight years later, in 1988. Such rapid development in less than two decades for someone whose language proficiency at the start was embryonic could only be explained by a much earlier impulse that it gained momentum from. This impulse was Brodsky’s interest in Anglophone poetry and the affinity with the British tradition he had intuited and started exploring well before he came in direct contact with it through immigration, as I describe in Chapter II. Given the isolation of the Soviet Union from Western influences and the cultural expansion the rest of the world experienced at the time, it is hardly the current status of English that propelled this interest. As always with Brodsky, the considerations are rather aesthetic and closely tied to the creative challenge



he was faced with in Russian poetics. He is firmly situated in the centrality of the Russian poetic tradition, in fact, perhaps, more so than other Soviet poets, his contemporaries, as his is the poetry of salient continuity with classical and Modernist Russian traditions. It could also be argued that he was contributing to this centrality by translating from Lithuanian, Polish, Georgian, and other languages of the Eastern Block into Russian for publication in Soviet anthologies, although his active promotion of the same poets, such as Tomas Venclova for example, among his American audience and in English attests to his participation in destabilizing this vertical relationship. When I use the term *translatio* in relation to Brodsky's project I do mean to imply both the linguistic and the spatial dimensions of it. For Brodsky, who feels acutely that Russian poetics is under- or perhaps mis-represented in English, translation is not simply the linguistic transformation of *traductio*, but the spatial and temporal transplantation of *translatio*, as a means of establishing lineage, transmitting values and communicating idiosyncrasies of form and style. Not unlike the *translatio imperii* or *translatio studii* Hokenson and Munson refer to as, respectively, "temporal power descending in time" and "the transplantation of the study of ancient wisdom from Greece to Rome and then Paris" (6-7), for Brodsky, translation of Russian poetry (not only his own) is a step towards passing over the Russian tradition in its entirety to this younger, newer culture of American letters marked by the dominance of the English language. His metaphors reflect this attitude. If for Nabokov, a polyglot since childhood and a Cambridge-educated cosmopolite, *Lolita* is "a love affair with the English language" which implies seduction and play (Nabokov 314), for Brodsky writing in English is a journey into the cosmos. His definition of exile as "being hurtled into outer space in a capsule" of "your language" is often quoted to

emphasize the sorrow of an exiled writer losing touch with the ground of his/her native idiom. I, however, want to pay attention to the paragraph, often neglected, following and elaborating on the metaphor; I believe it suggests the expansive, almost contagious qualities of a journey into another language and of becoming a bilingual writer:

For one in our profession, the condition we call exile is, first of all, a linguistic event: an exiled writer is thrust, or retreats, into his mother tongue. From being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule. What started as a private intimate affair with the language, in exile becomes fate—even before it becomes an obsession or a duty. A living language by definition has a centrifugal propensity and propulsion; it tries to cover as much around as possible—and as much ground as possible. Hence the population explosion and hence your autonomous passage outward, into of the domain the telescope or a prayer. (*On Grief and Reason* 32-33)

Note the transition from “intimate affair” to “an obsession or a duty” towards a language. It is as if the acute personal interest grows into a mission that calls for populating the English poetic language with the intonations of Russian accentual verse, its lyric pathos and archetypal themes that were, in their own turn, molded with the “foreign” sensibilities of his British influences. Perhaps, it is this expansive intention that Brodsky’s English-speaking contemporaries sensed in his self-translations and perceived as a threat. Daniel Weissbort on the early pages of his memoir expresses the concern of many when he complains of Brodsky's impossible standards that, in his opinion, made Brodsky reject translations by the English-speaking authors:

The trouble with Brodsky was that he simply wouldn't understand that he was asking the impossible, for the Russian text to be *imported* into English wholesale, English having to be Russianized to accommodate it. It followed that English then ceased to be English. That it was to be avoided at all costs seems obvious. (31, italics by the author)

Weissbort is and is not right at the same time here. Although, as I mentioned before, the impulse to *import* is indeed present in Brodsky's approach and is in accordance with his mission, the reasons are hardly only the linguistic ones, as suggested by "Russianize." The contemporary theory of the bilingual text approaches this molding, which is an inevitable trait of translation per se but is especially manifested in bilingual writing, through such concepts as idiolect and style:

Translingual stylistic analysis, rather than examining the texts from within each language and its linguistic or cultural requirements, can conjoin them as functions of one stylistic idiolect, or literary stylistic works by one hand, effecting commensurate dialogic relations to their audiences. (Hokenson & Munson 182)

Speaking of the resurgence of the tradition of bilingual writing in Modernism, Hokenson and Munson note the formation of an idiolect and the concentration on style as a general tendency in all the authors they examine. For example, studying Nabokov's text they point out:

Though it was recognized that Nabokov shared comic grotesquery and thematic daring with Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and others, and used Russian with the finesse of Pushkin, some émigré critics considered his prose "foreign" and "un-Russian", just as some American critics later found his English contrived. [...] The bilingual

writer is strange, both a foreigner and a local, an interculture, using two languages rather bizarrely to say the same thing differently. [...] Among leading bilingual writers, the unique nature of the “foreign” as singular idiolect in both Proust’s and Nabokov’s sense varies in each case, of course, yet, it is consistent across the writer’s languages. (183)

Nabokov’s famous stylistic mastery only demonstrates a consistent pattern:

The material surface of the text is clearly a function of language as a linguistic medium, as for any writer. But the bilingual text exhibits the distinct distillation of style in the translative process, independent of any specific language, least of all Russian. (183)

Let us now remember the responses of Brodsky’s Russian audience, discussed in the previous chapter, who found his Metaphysical verse sounding “foreign” and unusually “British.” The word “idiolect” comes up a lot in both Russian and Anglo-American criticism of Brodsky’s poetry in the respective languages. Weissbort quotes Lachlan Mackinnon’s description of Brodsky’s efforts as “creating a new idiolect, precisely the half-English of a deracinated man” with the result of it “while sometimes disconcerting, usually self-consistent and achieved.” (qtd. Weissbort 31). With much pondering, Weissbort accepts this view of the idiolect that he argues was “neither half, nor quarter, but simply itself” (31-32). He is also ready to reconsider his attitude in view of latest developments in the understanding of style and language standards. For example, regarding Brodsky’s bold mixing of registers he appeals to analogies:

William Morris’s archaicizing translations of Icelandic poetry, or Browning’s Agamemnon, for instance, seemed “unreadable” not so long ago but are now

being reconsidered. I know that opponents will maintain that a Morris or Browning start from a secure basis in English, whereas a Brodsky really does not, but the English language now is more open to “foreignizations” of one sort or another. Brodsky cannot so easily be dismissed as a foreigner. (51)

Likewise, immediately after recounting his objections to Brodsky’s English that “ceases to be English,” he exclaims: “Now I am not so sure! What did I understand by “English”? Was I so certain about my own English?” (31) Weissbort’s reconsiderations, which are echoed in many of Brodsky’s obituaries and interviews devoted to his work postmortem, foreshadow not only Lawrence Venuti’s theory of the translator’s invisibility, but also the contemporary theory of accents.

Apart from linguistic considerations, the criticism of Brodsky’s self-translations often emanates from comparison with the Russian versions of the same texts. Translators that he worked with and whose versions were discarded or severely altered upon publication, often noted that Brodsky exercised an unlimited authorial license to make changes a professional translator couldn’t afford, bound by the notion of fidelity to the original. Those who could read and appreciate the Russian versions and the feat it requires to translate them, instead of rooting for Brodsky’s ingenuity in translation of his own poetry, often criticized him for that. In essence, Brodsky was reproached for not being faithful enough to his own texts. Hokenson and Munson observe that such attitudes towards bilingual writing had always existed and were often at the core of the critics’ and contemporaries’ desire to exclude one of the sides of bilingual production from a writer’s oeuvre; the existence of two differing versions made it too hard to perform any conclusive study or to fit them into a canon. They conclude that such an approach is

problematic because it focuses on the difference and overlooks the very essence of the bilingual text – the dialogue that is happening between the two versions across languages and cultures, the dialogue of the author with the self:

To date most critics ably describe the dissimilarities between the two versions of a bilingual text, and they end up with an accurate list of details without (as most admit) really illuminating the phenomenon of duality. (4)

Hokenson and Munson argue that such a focus severely limits our understanding of the bilingual authors, who often are representatives of their literary epochs; in their research they polemicize with readings performed in this vein and strive to shift the focus “from dissimilarity into the richer realm of continuities.” They prompt the critics of bilingual writing “to start from a point closer to the common core of the bilingual text, that is, within the textual intersections and overlaps of versions,” to take up a new “critical locus of overlap and similarity, as opposed to dissimilarity,” following, again, Anthony Pym’s notion of the interculture. (4)

This focus on dissimilarity between a translation and an original, even in a bilingual text, often comes from the impulse to compare that the study of translation seems to presume. Hence are the claims that translation should be recognized as one of the major methods of Comparative Literature as a discipline and used “as a fulcrum” of literary study (Apter 243). However, in practical implementation as a method, it often leads to incorporation of the age-old biases of translation as a process. Even the recent studies on Brodsky’s self-translation, although generally favorably disposed towards Brodsky’s solutions as a translator and inclined to debate the critical attitudes of the 1980s, still approach them from the end of comparing for difference, or at least claim to

be doing so. For example, the recent study *Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation* (2015) by Alexandra Berlina provides exhaustive and detailed comparative readings of over thirty of Brodsky's self-translations and corresponding originals with the goal of "putting Brodsky on the map of American Studies." In her last chapter, Berlina questions the status of *original* and *translation* as a secondary creation in bilingual writing and describes her method as follows: "My own approach has been to search the two texts for differences and attempt to explain their causes and effects" (Berlina 3). However, as she parses poem by poem, contrary to the stated goal, similarities in the poet's approach to both versions come into focus. The "differences" the scholar analyzes display the continuity of style in its tendency to "foreignize" texts in both languages, bending the respective traditions and having an effect of estrangement on the reader.

Berlina often discovers that the original sentiment of the Russian poem is intensified in a self-translation, despite or, sometimes, due to the shift of semantic accents. For example, following the change of the mood and the rhyme scheme in self-translations of Brodsky's "poems à clef" ("The Polar Explorer" of 1980 and "Minefield Revisited" of 1988), she finds that they result in "the Russian version offer[ing] "English" understatement, while the English one provid[ing] "Russian" emotional intensity" (73). In "Polar Explorer" the absence of the possessive pronouns and the placing of the word "gangrene" – the protagonist's deadly diagnosis – in the final position makes the tone of the poem more somber, while alleviating its autobiographical connotations present in the Russian version (73). In "To a Friend: In Memoriam" (1985) the sexual innuendoes become much more explicit than in the Russian version ("*Na smert' druga*," 1973) where only readers privy to a very particular layer of slang could

perceive them (108 - 109). In what Berlina calls “a delicate balance” of Brodsky’s Nativity poetry, “*Kolybel’naya*” (1992) with its stress on the emptiness of the desert and the suffering of the mother saving her holy son, transforms into “Lullaby” (1993) in which the omnipresence of the sands and the solemn mission of the mother receives more attention. The shift is accomplished through the word choice and the placing of key words in the rhyming position (66). The formal qualities are, likewise, persistent across languages. Brodsky’s penchant for using function words and parenthetical phrases in the stressed rhyming position – a traditional choice in British, but not Russian poetry – had been described as his signature innovation by Mikhail Kreps in his seminal study on Brodsky’s Russian poetics and continues through his English writing. These continuities, although often unknowingly exposed in the parallel analysis of the versions, are never focused upon as “gains” of Brodsky’s self-translations.

#### Polemics with Weissbort’s Approach to Brodsky’s Self-Translation

It appears that one of the major aspects that Brodsky’s translators into English take issue with is his free handling of the authorial license that he, as they perceive, used (or abused?) to create a “definitive” translation of his own texts (Weissbort 186). The translation “liberties” that Brodsky undertook were out of reach for the translators who were native speakers of English, because they held fidelity to the original in high regard and understood it traditionally, as translating “for sense” by means of equivalents available in the target language. Weissbort is frustrated with the frequent instances in Brodsky’s translations, in which, in his opinion, “the sense” of the Russian original, as well as the meaning of the English idiom(s) (as both a language and particular idiomatic



expressions) are misused for the sake of preserving the formal qualities of the poem: e.g. rhyme scheme, the length of lines, the rhythm of the strophes, the placement of enjambments, etc. He ascribes many instances that he considers blunders to Brodsky's lack of acute understanding of his second language. For example, throughout the book he returns to the questionable use of the idiomatic "nitty-gritty" in Brodsky's self-translation of "May 24, 1980" in the following lines:

From the height of a glacier I beheld half the world, the earthly  
width. Twice have drowned, *thrice let the knives rake my nitty-gritty.*

Quit the country that bore and nursed me.

Those who forgot me would make a city. (italics are mine)

The literal translation of the second line is a more direct and laconic "*trizhdy tonul, dvazhdy byval rasporot*" (thrice drowned, twice was unpicked/unstitched).

Weissbort finds this choice unmotivated, as it, in his opinion, not only fails to fit the context and the tone of the poem, but also distorts the meaning of the idiom itself. He believes that the sole purpose of such word choice was to provide a rhyme with "city" in the following b line (in abab pattern). On several occasions, he brings it up as a prime example of Brodsky's contrived rhymes that were "sounding rather *ad hoc*, or lexical (i.e. lifted out of the dictionary)" and evidence of the insecure grasp of English idiom (155-156).

Still, occasionally things surely seem to have got out of hand. [...] "Nitty-gritty" rhymes with "city" in the succinct, if somewhat unidiomatic Brodsky rendering: "those who forgot me would make a city." But even with knives *raking* it, "nitty-gritty" is hardly acceptable as a stand-in for heart, the problem being compounded

by the possessive pronoun “my.” [...] On the other hand, one might argue that his euphemistic periphrase is matched by Brodsky's awkwardly elaborate metaphor. Perhaps he also felt that the English reader was likely to need more clues than the Russian. (51)

What follows from this passage is that Weissbort, consumed by the genre in which he is writing (memoir) and by the content of the poem that suggests following autobiographical milestones, is unable to separate the author from the lyrical hero. He believes that Brodsky is referring to the open-heart surgery he underwent in 1979, cardiac insufficiency having been the curse of his life and believed to be the underlying condition of the death motif of his verse. He assumes that Brodsky's translation choice is an attempt to play with the figurative meaning of “nitty-gritty” as “the heart of a matter” to alert the English audience to his health problems which were a common knowledge among his Russian readership. Similarly, he interprets drowning (“twice drowned”) as a metaphor for experiencing anesthesia – “going under” – or the effect of sedatives that might have been used on the poet during the three weeks of forensic psychiatric examination in the course of the trial in 1964. Indeed, the poem does seem to allude to the other highlights of the poet's biography: his travels during geological expeditions (“from the top of a glacier, I surveyed half the world”), the arrest (“I have braved [...] steel cages”), the agricultural labor during the internal exile (“sowed rye, tarred barn roofs”), the exile abroad (“Quit the country that bore and nursed me”), and the Nobel award ceremonies (“dined in coat-tails [...] on truffles”) – even if the succession of events is not chronologically consistent. After all, it is an anniversary poem featuring a speaker taking stock of the long forty years on Earth. However, what Weissbort seems to

overlook is that both poems – in Russian and in English – are more than personal accounts of a (biographical) event but, simply by virtue of being poems (as opposed to a diary entry, for example), exist primarily as answers to a particular creative challenge. Here I want to remember Mikhail Kreps' idea of poetic (literary) innovation which he defines as a “quality leap” that not only processes the achievements of the preceding tradition in overcoming it, but also makes the new-found device an organic part of one's sustained poetic context (14-15, 31). Speaking of Brodsky's Russian poetry, Kreps identifies the use of unconventional rhymes (often by means of mixing registers or distorting/paraphrasing popular sayings or idioms) as one of such sustained and justified devices of Brodsky's poetics. What makes it different from a fluke or sheer experimentation à la early Briusov and the Futurists, is that it is “cemented by its poetic context,” i.e. and is not detached from the content and the creative goal of the poem, but is effective in bringing it out (Kreps 8). For Brodsky, the challenge is often to grow a metaphysical dilemma out of an ordinary, familiar situation by using the vocabulary that usually pertains to it and playing on the contrasts between the former (the metaphysical theme) and the latter (the familiar vocabulary). It is also one of the criteria of a metaphysical poem, outlined by Helen Gardner in her *Introduction*, that Brodsky appropriated as one of the major principles of his poetics (Chapter II). The opening lines of the Russian poem leave no doubt about the situation in question: starting with “*Ia vkhodil vmesto dikogo zveria v kletku, vyzhigal svoi srok i klikukhu gvozdem v barake*” (I entered, instead of a wild beast, a cage,/burned my nickname and term with a nail in a barrack, lit. trans.), it is a prison tale. Prison jargon frames the recounting of life's highs and lows; the contrast between them makes the coat-tails parties and casino nights by the

sea sound like chance miracles that happened to an adventurous homeboy. In his *Leftover Comments...* on the poem, Weissbort mentions that this side of the poem reminds some of its readers (undoubtedly familiar with the Soviet popular culture of the time) of the popular song about a captain, a kind of Baron Munchausen character, who “travelled to many countries, about fifteen times drowned, was about to die among the sharks, but did not even bat an eyelid” (*Raz pyatnadtsat’ on tonul / Pogibal sredi akul / I ni razy dazhe glazom ne morgnul*) (233).

This song is however just a few steps away from the popular genre of a rogue song (*blatnaia pesnia*), a kind of criminal hagiography, the constant attributes of which are *kletka* for a cell, *klikukha* for a criminal nickname (not just any nickname), and the omnipresence of the convoy’s eye (“the sentry’s third eye” in Brodsky's self-translation); the plot usually consists of the recounting of a grand life *na vole* (on the loose) intermittent with complaints about the *toska* (longing) and the hardships of prison camp living. Brodsky’s poem, while undoubtedly referring to his own lived experience of incarceration, universalizes it in the witty parody of the genre. Weissbort was right in calling it a “mock-heroic” poem; the element of parody, especially when its subject is a genre that takes itself so seriously, contributes to the slightly self-deprecating, ironical attitude of the poem. As Kreps notes, whenever Brodsky takes a familiar trope for a departure point, the readers expectations are always thwarted to avoid banality and repetition. Here, as well, the “song” ends not with the usual condemnation of the enemy (the judge, the guards, the wife that stopped waiting, or the fate itself), but with the “defiant turn” - a declaration of gratitude (“Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, / only gratitude will be gushing from it”) (Weissbort 52).

A closer look at Brodsky's translation solutions shows that to preserve these stylistics was a priority. Certain associations with camp lore are lost even through literal translations and require compensation elsewhere. For example, translating "voronenyi" as "burnished" in "voronenyi zrachok konvoia" (the sentry's burnished eye), while perhaps suggesting association with a metallic, cold stare (as in "steel cold winter"), Weissbort in his "not quite *ad-verbatim*" variant loses the sound association with "voronok" as a symbol of the practice of sudden arrests during the Great Terror, and, on a folkloric level, an association with "voron" (raven) as a harbinger of death (48). Indeed, the car model GAZ M1, usually black, would come at night or early morning for those who had been informed on, to conduct search and arrest; a mere sight of the car parked outside a building meant that one's neighbor was to fall prey to the system – be executed or sent to camps. The nation's imagination soon connected it to the folklore song "*Chernyi voron, ia ne tvoi*" about a worrier dying in the field of battle but putting up the last fight to deny the hovering black raven the chance to see him as carrion. The other nickname of the car was *Marusia* in association with letter M in its model specification; this name is featured in Anna Akhmatova's "Requiem" (1938-40) that was distributed through Samizdat in 1960s, Brodsky's formative years as a poet.

*Zvezdy, smerti stoiali nad nami,*

*I bezvinnaia korchilas' Rus'*

*Pod krovavymi sapogami*

*I pod shinami chernykh marus'.*

The stars of death stood above us

And innocent Russia writhed

Under bloody boots

And under the tires of the Black Marias. (qtd. in Bailey 326)

Brodsky's translation, by replacing "burnished" with "sentry's third eye," suggests the omnipresence of the threat, which is in accord with its ability to penetrate not only the life of the nation, but a person's subconscious – his or her "wet and foul dreams." Similarly, in the second line of the poem he replaces the specifics of Soviet imprisonment with details that should remind an English-speaking reader of incarceration; instead of burning one's term and nickname with a nail in a barrack, the speaker carves it "on banks and rafters." While barracks are strongly associated with labor camps and prisons in Russia, banks in combination with cages will bear the image of a prison cell for an American reader. Thus, the expansion from one to two words here is not merely a sign of padding and wordiness, but rather a translative strategy of localization. Kreps writes of paraphrase as a device of semantic compression that is one of Brodsky's innovation in Russian poetry (61). This, almost skaldic, metaphorical circumlocution is not typical for Russian classical poetry except for a limited set of phrases borrowed from folklore. Brodsky, meanwhile, develops a whole dictionary of original and recognizable imagery described in this way: e.g. "a stale box for assorted lives" for a hotel, "the moisture of the eye" for a tear, etc. It seems that the same device is attempted through the translation solutions that Weissbort discusses as unmotivated in "May 24, 1980".

As for the stumbling block of Weissbort's analysis – the use of "nitty-gritty" for a heart – it is likewise quite possible to suggest that the translator's choice had intentions other than rhyme-making. While "*byval rasporot*" indeed can refer to Brodsky's heart

surgeries, the mentioning of knives in the translation makes one think of stabbing, which is the most common type of murder in prison as well as in criminal lore. The abundance of jargon terms for blades as well as for the act itself is a proof of that. The combination with the violent “raked” and the literal meaning of “*rasporot*” as “unpicked” or “ripped open” suggests if not disemboweling, then something less constructive than a medical operation. The figurative meaning of “nitty-gritty” adds a layer to the prison experience, which not only threatens with physical harm, but often “rakes” in one’s psyche and value system – the existential nitty-gritty.

As Weissbort himself notes, Brodsky is attentive to the sound effects of his rhymes (131). The use of reduplicated phrases, alliterative and rhyming idioms with a comical effect of pronunciation, is characteristic of street talk (as well as argo) in both Russian and English; they are also a constant in criminal songs, indicating, rather than naming sketchy activities, e.g. “hooking up” as the untranslatable “*shyrli-myrl*”, “*shury-mury*,” etc. The street talk in Brodsky’s poetry often coincides with motifs of foreign music (“*zarubezhnaia muzyka*”), keeping and selling of which used to be a crime in the Soviet Union. So, this choice in translation might have been the echo of the smuggled (or recorded from The Voice of America) records of the 1960s, with Shirley Ellis’ “The Nitty Gritty” being the catchiest hit of 1963, the year when Brodsky’s persecution had started (MacFadyen, *The Soviet Muse* 19). As the Anti-Cosmopolitanism Campaign (*Bor’ba s kosmopolitizmom*) was gathering steam during the 1940s, many of the popular music genres from abroad were forced into the underground where they were picked up, among other things, by criminal lore. For example, the most popular criminal tune of the time, “*Murka*,” was performed with a tango rhythm. So, the anniversary manifesto of May 24,

1980 echoes Brodsky's early Russian poem "*Ot okrainy k tsentru*" ("From the Outskirts to the Center", 1962) with its "*dzhas predmestii*" (the jazz of the suburbs) that accompanies a walk in Soviet suburbia (*Malaia Okhta*) – a literal and a symbolic crossing of the bridge into maturity (Turoma 37). Similarly, researchers associate the lines "*Tantsui, poimav, bossanovu / v pal'to na goloe telo, v tufliakh na bosu nogu*" (Dance, having caught bossa nova / wearing a coat over your naked body, shoes on your bare feet) from "Don't leave the Room" (1970) with the popular hit of 1964 by Astrud Gilberto and Stan Getz "The Girl from Ipanema" which is known to have played on the radio at the time (Dolinin et al.).

These associations with the inner freedom of underground culture – be it criminal folklore or popular tunes played at bohemian *kapustniki* (informal parties with live music) – is a part of the emerging style of Soviet postmodernism, in which versatile intertexts and play on the stale discourses catalyze stylistic innovations, more obvious in prose by such authors as Abram Terz (Andrei Siniavskii), Venedikt Yerofeev, and Andrei Bitov, etc. Weissbort notices the ironic play on the clichés of Soviet propaganda in his discussion of the translation of the last lines of the poem:

What should I say about life? That it's long and abhors transience.

*Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me vomit.*

Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,

Only gratitude will be *gushing* from it.

The literal translation offered by Weissbort himself goes as follows:

*Chto skazat' mne o zhizni? Chto okazalas' dlinnoi.*

What should I say about life? That it turned out to be long.



*Tol'ko s gorem ya chustvuyu solidarnost'.*

It is only with sorrow (grief) that I feel solidarity.

*No poka mne rot ne zabili glinoi,*

But until my mouth is crammed with clay (rather “until they cram clay down my mouth”)

*Iz nego razdavatsa budet lish blagodarnost'.*

Only gratitude will resound (ring out) from it.

Here, like in the line with “nitty-gritty,” Brodsky takes liberty with the use of an idiom to a somewhat hyperbolic effect. In Russian the play on the “the cliched political dictum” is supposed to “ech[o] the fatuous term *solidarnost'* (solidarity), a constant of Party jargon of the time, to rhyme it unexpectedly with *blagodarnost'* (gratitude)” (52). Since solidarity does not have the same ring for the Anglophone audience, Brodsky instead impinges upon what Weissbort calls “a rather too well-known political saw: You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs” (49). While it completely changes the literal meaning of the stanza, it nevertheless preserves the sentiment: the speaker's solidarity lies with the individual experience rather than with anyone preaching suffering for the sake of greater good. While Weissbort feels that “the ironic dignity of the original (“Only with grief do I feel solidarity”) is poorly served” by this free treatment of the idiom (52), I argue that it is in fact organic within the general tone of the self-translation and is more “faithful” to the “sense” of the original than, for example, Weissbort's own variant:

What can I say about life? That day follows day.

It's only grief I'm inclined to cosset.

But until my mouth has been stopped with clay,  
Gratitude's all that will issue from it. (85)

The author of these lines himself acknowledges the omission of the sentiment described above: “And to “cosset” grief is by no means synonymous with feeling sympathy for grief, let alone solidarity with it” (85). The idea of rejection of the party line is not there. The contrast of the idea of gratitude against all odds is also, subsequently, let go, which loosens the tension within the poem as a whole. As for the rhymes, while the elegant combination of masculine and full rhyme “day / clay” is probably pleasing to the proper English ear, the very slant and far-fetched “cosset / from it” simply doesn’t hold the competition with Brodsky’s “Gilbertish” as Weissbort calls it “vomit / from it” (52). In fact, the introduction of the omelette idiom in the self-translation as if continues the theme of food and appetite, initiated with the contrast between “din[ing] on truffles” and the “stale and warty” bread of exile. While the real-life food that accompanies the turns of the protagonist’s fate is consumed with enthusiasm, the discourse that society is trying to feed him is not so easily digested. Both “vomit” and “gushing” suggest an involuntary reaction, the latter highlighting the uncontrollable force of creativity (since gratitude here is expressed in a poem) which, perhaps, is somehow connected with the feeling of disgust towards the established discourse.

Weissbort is bothered by the semantic turn or increase of intensity Brodsky’s self-translation demonstrated against the original Russian poem: he notes in regard to the last stanza that “the original is more subtle and direct” or “more restrained” (50). He, of course, connects it with Brodsky’s desire to create a mimetic translation, adjusting the properties of the English language itself: “Compensating for the irregularity of the iambic

meter in English, Brodsky has produced a less plain, less immediate text” (70). Hokenson and Munson, however, show that such a semantic or tone difference in “twinned texts” is a tendency that they would like to call a norm within the framework of the bilingual text theory. In their introduction, by way of example, they speak of the dual discourse in a short text by a sixteenth-century French poet Etienne Dolet. They demonstrate the shift of tone, mostly through word choice, that happens in the two versions of his *Genethliacum* (1539), “celebrating the birth of his son, in Latin and in French.” They acknowledge that “Dolet’s French text is gentle and orthodox,” while “his Latin incisive and heretical” (7). They suggest, however, that the author is led by the properties of his respective languages and the cultural baggage and connotations they contain. It is evident even in the use of such cognates as Latin *natura* and French *la nature*:

The vertical and the horizontal axes are clear: it is in Latin that the sheer power and wisdom of nature overwhelms the new father, who can invoke for his son the still living descendance of Roman values, while in the horizontal world of Christian vernacular French the more nurturing mother figure of nature, while equally powerful, sheds her imperial aspect to serve as feminine protectrice for the child. (7)

However, Hokenson and Munson encourage us to pay more attention to the common core of this dual text that shows itself in “the inter-echoing strains of paternal wonder, pride, and no little fear for his son” both versions display, even though the accents are slightly shifted (7). They encourage, through the focus on the overlaps between the two texts, to develop a kind of “stereoscopic vision” that enriches any interpretation of a bilingual text. Brodsky’s self-translations, although a somewhat special case, might also benefit from

this kind of reading. It is true that many of the texts he performed self-translations of did not necessarily arise from intercultural conditions, i.e. he wrote the Russian versions while being in Soviet Russia and before becoming bilingual, in Hokenson and Munson's definition. I argue, however, that it is through the process of self-translation that they entered the intercultural conditions their author found himself in, which prompted him to reconceptualize and essentially re-write his texts as parts of a continuous translangual whole of his oeuvre.

#### From *Dekabr'* to December: Continuity in Brodsky's First Self-Translation

"December in Florence" is the first among Brodsky's self-translations and also his first Italian poem where the theme of exile is established through the trope of poetic lineage in world, not only in Russian, poetry – through the parallels between Dante's and Brodsky's own stories of exile from their respective native cities and languages, which for both poets meant more than the states that expelled them. Following Hokenson and Munson's model of studying self-translation with an eye for continuity and similarity the twinned texts exhibit, I would like to analyze the drafts of this poem's various translations performed by English-speaking poets and translators against the draft that gives an idea of the genesis of Brodsky's self-translation: the documents are part of the Joseph Brodsky Papers archive in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection at Yale University. In my opinion the comparison of translations by other authors with the self-translation highlights the semantic and formal continuities between the Russian and the English versions of Brodsky's text and proves Hokenson and Munson's hypothesis of the "twinned text."

As Alexandra Berlina mentions in the introduction to her analysis of “*Dekabr' vo Florentsii*” (1976) versus “December in Florence,” several talented professionals tried their pens at the poem’s translation (in 1979), the results being dismissed by the author, who published the final version in *The New York Review of Books* in May of 1980 with a note “translated by the author.” Among the copies a researcher can examine are the following: a clean draft which is a result of collaboration on a poetic translation by Maurice English and George L. Kline (one of Brodsky’s early and stable translators), a draft by Robert Lowell, several drafts by Alan Myers gradually incorporating corrections by Barry Rubin, whose interlinear translation with copious notes is also included. Berlina mentions that the poem was first commissioned to Daniel Weissbort, but his version is not among the drafts, unless one can prove his authorship of the draft marked “by unidentified translator” (Appendix A). I, however, find reasons to believe that this draft is an early draft of Brodsky’s self-translation. First of all, the corrections visible as marks in red pen draw attention to grammatical incongruities that are typical mistakes Russian-speakers make in English: the replacement of indefinite articles by definite ones and vice versa, crossing out articles before abstract nouns, changing past perfect tense into past simple and vice versa, and, at times, changing the present participle ending into the past participle’s one, etc. It is hard to imagine Daniel Weissbort, British-raised and -educated, a native speaker of English and an acclaimed poet making these kinds of grammatical mistakes in his draft. Secondly, this translation takes quite a number of “liberties” in seemingly departing from the original, while, in fact, only playing with variants that could bring out its common core, i.e. displaying continuity with it, as I will later demonstrate. Finally, almost all the rhymes in the final, published self-translation

coincide with those in the draft “by unidentified translator” and differ from those offered by translations by other authors. Although Brodsky often published collaborative translations and, as the story with Weissbort shows, used the translations by others as a point of departure, he does publish this translation with the mark “translated by the author” without any reference to others’ attempts. It is hard to imagine that he would do so, having borrowed so much from another’s version. Rhymes were indeed particularly important for him and he often took pride in coming up with successful rhymes, as he did in “December in Florence” (Berlina 17). Based on this evidence and for the purpose of the present analysis I will treat the draft described above as an early version of Brodsky’s self-translation which served as the basis for the published version in English. This draft, with numerous telling marks and corrections, lies next to the copies of *The New York Review* pages displaying the same version of the poem with occasional alterations. I argue that the choices Brodsky makes, following through with certain translative solutions over other, quite successful ones, demonstrates his vision of the English version of *Dekabr'* as a part of his transnational oeuvre, unified by characteristic traits of his poetics.

First, I would like to address the semantic aspect and show how Brodsky’s self-translation pursues continuity in this sense, contrary to the arguments of his critics who were baffled by semantic dissimilarities between his Russian and English versions, which they take for infidelity as a result of his handling of authorial license. The Russian poem is remarkable for handling the tension between the familiar and the anonymous: while alluding to some very recognizable literary biographies that are highly symbolic of the theme of exile, it also maintains the emphasis on the anonymous figure of the speaker (or,

rather, in the context of Brodsky's Italian poems – the viewer) and the anonymity of his relationships with the foreign city. Brodsky's translative choices speak of his striving to preserve this anonymity which seems to be kept out of sight by other authors in their translations. (Appendix B)

In the first stanza, the second-person narration by means of the Russian informal address “*ty*” (you) and the second-person singular endings of verbs is an unusual choice in the Russian poem. It makes the poem simultaneously apostrophic in its address to Dante (some argue, also to Ovid and Osip Mandelstam) and intimate as the reader shares the focal point of the speaker and joins in his experience. The lines “*no / ty ne verneshsia siuda...*” (but /you won't return here), “*v izvestnom vozraste prosto otvodish' vzor ot / cheloveka*” (at a certain age you just turn you gaze away / from human[s]) and “*tvoi podiezd ...namekaiet...na prichinu izgnania*” (your entryway hints at the reason for exile) set up the combined point of view belonging simultaneously to the reader, the speaker and the addressee, which is possible through enhanced anonymity. Thus, other actors that appear in the poem are perceived as extensions of this combined point of view. For example, the “eye” or “gaze” or “pupil” that so often provide the optical point of view in Brodsky's Italian poems allow the reader to take in the views of Florence while referring to Brodsky's speaker capturing the kind of *tableaux Florentines* (à la Baudelaire) with his implied allusions to what Dante's vision of his native city would be if he were to witness it across time. So, in the opening lines of stanzas II and IV of “*Dekabr*” the implied modifier of the “eye” is “*tvoi*” (yours, your eye): “*glaz, migaya, ... zaglatyvaiet...fonari*” (*the eye, blinking, ...swallows...the streetlamps*) and “*v pyl'noi kofeine glaz v polumrake kepki / privykaiet k nimfam plafona*” (in the dusty café the eye in the twilight of a cap /

gets used to the nymphs of a plafond). Similarly, the details that are related in the grammatically impersonal or ambiguous way also assume this triple identification. For example, in the line “*Tam est’ mesta, gde pripadal ustami / tozhe k ustam, I perom k listam*” (There are places there where pressed with lips / on also lips, and with pen on paper) the past tense of “*pripadal*” (literally “fell down on”) can refer with equal probability to “*on*” (he, the third person singular, masculine), “*ya*” (I, masculine), or “*ty*” (you, masculine); that is, the recollection of a first kiss and a first writing experience may refer either to Dante, or to Brodsky’s autobiographical speaker, or to the universal experience of one returning to one’s native city.

Let us trace how Brodsky treats the element of this triple anonymity in his self-translation versus the translations by other authors. In the first stanza of his self-translation he puts the first “you” right after the caesura and before the parenthetical “however” which distinguishes “you” in its almost antagonizing relationships with the city in a moment in time. The reader is forced to pause on “you” and contemplate what it entails and who it represents. In the last line of the stanza, however, Brodsky enhances the anonymity by switching to “one” in the lines, “at a certain age / one simply raises his collar to disengage / himself from the humans and dulls his gaze.” Notably, all other translations, except for Robert Lowell’s, keep the “you” narration while concretizing it through other means. Thus, both English and Kline’s and Alan Myers’ translations imply that the protagonist’s misanthropy is particular to the city and directed to its dwellers: “shutting *its* people from your gaze” (English and Kline) and “here, in the city, beautiful, no doubt... you don’t look out / for people” (Myers). Myers’s translation goes as far as turning the second-person point of view into an imperative – a command or a plea to



“raise the collar, shut them out.” In Brodsky’s English version however, the impersonal nature implied in the Russian version becomes salient: the protagonist, whose age-related tendency is supposedly shared with the reader in the impersonal “one,” wishes “to disengage” from all people, or rather from humans as a species. His gaze “dulls” at encountering their quadruped silhouettes on the streets that seduce the eye with the aged beauty of its architecture, which is coherent with the context of other stanzas that speak of the eye “gulping” the light of streetlamps and tearing up at the sight of domes. The peak of the anonymity is, of course, a “*telo v plashche*” (a body in a raincoat) that appears in stanza V and continues as Brodsky’s signature trope of an incognito traveler, “the absolute no one, a man in a raincoat” that features in his earlier Russian poetry, including a close relative of “*Dekabr*” – a 1972 Venetian poem “*Laguna*” (“Lagoon”). Still the more or less concrete “body” of the Russian version undergoes a number of metamorphoses towards greater amorphousness. In the final self-translation, Brodsky chooses to keep “a shape” used in English and Kline’s translation, instead of a more palpable “*telo*” (body) of the Russian version. In it, “*telo*” suddenly comes to imply the multitudes of those who pilgrim to the great poet’s apartment as it turns into the plural form of the second-person pronoun “you” in “*v prihozhei vas obstupaiut dve staryie tsifry 8*” (in the hallway you are surrounded by two old figures 8). Traces of that are evident in the unidentified translation, as it employs one of Rubin’s variants “a bulk in a raincoat” instead of “a body” and refers to it as “whoever waits” in line 7. In contrast, translations by other authors often choose to narrow down the implication of “*telo*.” Robert Lowell’s translation unexpectedly concretizes it into “a boy,” which kills the reference to Dante’s moment of revelation “in the middle of life’s journey” and thirty-five as the age of

maturity – Brodsky is thirty-six when the poem is written (Bethea 66). English and Kline refer to their, at first highly amorphous “shape” as “he” in their last lines, bringing it back to the conventional third-person narration.

This establishment of the element of anonymity in the first stanzas is significant for the coda of the stanza IX that provides an unconventional view of the aftermath of exile – a glimpse into the life of the city left behind, caught by an exiled poet sanctuaried by the place a fellow man of letters is banned from. Both the image of the city and of the speaker reach the highest degree of abstraction here. The former now belong to the ahistorical and geographically indistinct multitude of cities that their poets left behind, the latter represents all those exiled. The entry to such cities is denied through its subjectless second-person and past tense constructions, to all those involved throughout the poem – to the exiles of the past, the pilgrims of the present, and to the reader, i.e. to the him, me, and you of this text. Here, like in the first stanza, the translation faces the problem of rendering Russian “*cheloveka*” that is faceless in its absence of an article and gender and its ability to combine the meaning of both a human as a representative of a species, a person, and an impersonal reference (as in “people”). Most translators opt for the combination of “one” in “there are cities where one cannot return” of the first line and “a man/a person” in variations of “the crowd... speaks in the language of a man who has departed” in the last line. The impersonal “one” somewhat dilutes the concretization of “the man/person” the English sentence has to employ, as the subject is followed by a description (modifier) “who has left”. However, in the Russian version, the structure of the first line is nominative, implying “the cities” as a subject. Myers’ translation comes closest to it with its “Cities there are to which there’s no returning.” Indeed, the Russian

version does put the emphasis on the cities, as if making them the agents of exile, their nature itself – the cause of banishment, obscuring any possible political reasons hinted at in stanza II (lines about living by a volcano). Brodsky’s self-translation rejects Myers’ “faithful” version of this line and opts for the same combination of “one” and “a man” – with one important change: “returning” is replaced by seeing in his “there are cities one won’t see again. The sun/...” While still implying the impossibility of return, it performs two additional functions: the level (not the sounds) of the alliteration of Russian version is matched in the repetitive alternation of *s* and *n* and the visual or the optical character of “returning” is highlighted here. “One,” be it the exiled self or his disciple, can return to the city to see but traces of it. The theme of blurred vision and optical illusion merges here with the idea of irreversible time. The tear that is suggested in the numerous descriptions of the “moist eye,” “drowning/sinking pupil” or “blurred lenses” is a tear of nostalgia masked as a secretion caused by the blinding sun reflected in the mirror surfaces of the city. It is only the language of the crowd and the sacred toponymics (the names of rivers, streets, statues and numbers of addresses) that serve to orient the spectator in this mirage of a city and anchor him in the history he seeks to revisit.

The poem’s triple vision possible through the anonymity of the speaker and the city is what is prioritized in Brodsky’s self-translation, which is very purposeful in its handling of the balance of foreignization and domestication. We can see that in the self-translation draft Brodsky often rejects solutions of other authors that involve adding more “local color” to the poem’s setting. For example, English and Kline in their stanza V turn Russian “*prosim, prosim*” (come in, come in) into Italian “*prego, prego*” unrhymed in its *terzina* (which indicates that rhyme was not the catalyst here), while Brodsky replaces it

with the brief and straightforward “Wait!” Alan Myers, in contrast, does seem to be urged by rhyme demands when he inserts an Italian word in his finale in “there crowds speak, *presto*, / in the language of a man gone long ago.” Robert Lowell goes further inserting a highly specific term “*pietra serena*” – a type of grey stone typical for the architecture of Renaissance Florence, also known as Macigno stone – to rhyme with “*verbena*” and “Ravenna.” While Brodsky, in both his Russian and English versions does use quite a number of Florentine toponyms and proper names – Arno, Ravenna, Cellini’s bust, Brunelleschi’s egg, Lorenzo’s tomb are mentioned in both – he does not employ any further foreignization. To use words of the Italian language, even for the sake of rhyme, would be to indicate that “the language of a man who has departed thence” was Italian, which works for Dante, but does not for Mandelstam, Brodsky, and the reader, thus, eliminating the play with anonymity and the triple identification at the core of the poem. Brodsky, however, does “domesticate” his English version more than the other translators dare to do, restrained by its Italian flavor. In this first self-translation Brodsky already mixes in some Americanisms that make his strict lines (in terms of meter and rhyme) sound unexpectedly colloquial, a characteristic duly noted by his critics from the British Isles. For example, in stanza I he prefers short, monosyllabic words in “Doors bang, beasts hit the slabs” to the initial “Beasts emerge on the pavement as doors bang” of the draft and rhymes “a bit” with “it.” In the colloquially American “ever” and “real” added in the lines “There are places where lips touched lips for the first time ever / and pen pressed paper with real fervor” (stanza IX) give them more than an extra number of syllables and a rhyme; they imbue them with the rhythm and sound of street speech, a

quality of the Russian version Barry Rubin repeatedly refers to in his notes on its meter, rhyme-scheme and diction (see fig. 3).

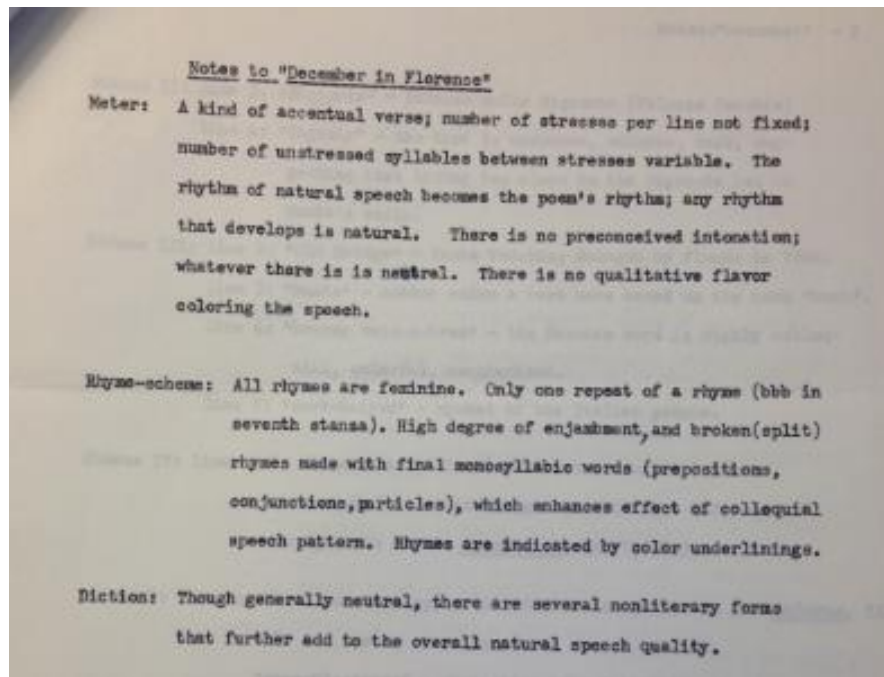


Fig. 3. English translation by Barry Rubin, a draft, GEN MS 613, box 56, folder 1075.

This tendency for domestication did not subside with the development of Brodsky's English writing. So, Alexandra Berlina in her study of the self-translations of the Nativity poems, notes that in the later poem "Lullaby" (1993), the English version of "*Kolybel'naya*" (1992), Maria, addressing her holy son, is "transform[ed] into a twentieth-century American woman" in his rendering of the archaic colloquial Russian "*znat*" into "I guess" and "I figure" in English. In this poem set in a biblical desert Brodsky measures distance in miles: "one can tell for miles the mountain by a cross." Berlina notes, however, that the Russian version performs a similar domestication without being a translation from any other language: in it "demotic language and the use of the measure unit "*versta*" (*verst*) make her [Maria] sound like a Russian peasant." Similarly, in "December in Florence" Signoria "looms" just "yards off" the exiled poet's

home, whereas in the Russian version the distance is measured in minutes (Berlina 20). However the familiar phrasing itself – “*tvoi pod'ezd v dvuh minutah ot*” (your entryway two minutes from) – brings the Russian reader back to a Leningrad neighborhood, which for those familiar of the author’s biography, reminds of the proximity of the Muruzi house (Brotsky’s home) to the KGB seat at Liteinyi Prospekt 4. Berlina concludes about the “twinned text” of the Nativity poem, “Both vernaculars prove to be too closely associated with certain spaces different from the poem’s setting – namely, the desert [the Negev]” (62). Both in Russian and in English the ability of the reader to identify with the archetypal plot at the core of a poem is not a problem, but rather a purpose for Brotsky. While both versions of ‘December’ are clearly Italian-inspired, they allow for both its Russian and American readers to reminisce about the cities they left never to return.

Finally, the aspect which makes the affinity of the self-translation with the Russian version stand out against the translations by other authors is, predictably, the rhyme scheme. In this regard an analysis of the “December in Florence” drafts can be illuminating as it, on the one hand, confirms Brotsky’s attachment to mimetic translation, and, on the other hand, demonstrates the rhyme’s rootedness in the poem’s inherent semantic design and its continuity with the rest of his bilingual oeuvre. In other words, it shows that Brotsky’s poems rhyme not only for the rhyme’s sake or out of habit. Recent attention to the poem (Ishov, Berlina, Turoma) consistently shows that both the poem’s intertextuality and its structure are meant to develop it as a tribute to Dante as a symbol of eternal exile. The peculiar mathematics of the poem is in dialogue with Dante’s designs. Nine stanzas with nine lines in each allude to the nine circles of Hell described in *Inferno*. Brotsky’s *terzinas* mimic and simultaneously subvert Dante’s Italian rhymes

in the *Commedia* (Bethea 65). He goes as far as imitating Dante's feminine rhymes in Italian by putting the toponyms of Florence in rhyming positions. For example, regarding the rhyme "Arno-poparno" in the first lines of the poem, Ishov notes: "Dante himself had, in fact, put "Arno" in the rhyming position several times in *Inferno* and one time each in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*" (11). Semantically, the tribute is in the underlying theme of the poem is the nostalgia of the city for its exiled poet, experienced and lamented by a stranger. Kreps in his analysis of "*Shipovnik v aprele*" (1970) shows that this kind of reversal that overthrows a traditional *siuzhet* is characteristic of Brodsky's poetry (22). The irony towards the city's past grandeur perceived by several scholars – including Kreps, who goes as far as to suggest that the city is portrayed as a strange and ugly vision inhabited by infernal creatures – stems, perhaps, from the bitterness of the speaker who cannot see the poet in its streets anymore. While the figure of Dante is replaced by the monuments to more recent idols (like their names replaced his in the poem), one feeble reincarnation of him survives. Ishov in his detailed study of the Dantesque intertext of the poem, seconds Bethea (65) stating that stanza VI portrays the triumph of poetic inspiration over life circumstance, as the goldfinch "razlivaietsia" (pours out in song) in his "wire Ravenna" of a bird cage. Ishov grounds his interpretation in Brodsky's own comparison of bards (or poets) and birds:

In his essays on Frost and Hardy Brodsky suggests that in poetry birds and poets should often to be equated: "a bird, as you know, is very often a bard, since technically speaking, both sing. ... we should bear in mind that [the] poet may be delegating certain aspects of his psyche to the bird." In *December in Florence* Brodsky takes this metaphor to its logical conclusion, equating the exiled Dante

with the bird in the cage of Ravenna. [...] The poet may not return to the city from where he had been exiled, but the people who remain there will speak in his language. Therein lies the poet's ultimate triumph. ("Joseph Brodsky's 'December in Florence'" 16-17)

I would, however, suggest that instead of a triumph the stanza completes the idea of Florence as bleak without its singer and its visitor longing for the resurrection of the city's and the poet's fabled past. Just as nymphs and cupids exist only as faint patterns on the ceiling and elements of stucco in a dusty café, the *terza rima* of the city's famed singer is replaced with "*kolentsa*" (somersaults or tricks) of a "decrepit" bird. In fact, the context of the stanza indicates that the goldfinch is "decrepit" precisely because it is "feeling the lack of terza-rima." The self-translation is a bit more optimistic enabling the feathery singer to "mak[e] up for the sour terza-rima crop" with his "sharp cadenza." While the streets of the city are filled with modern noises of barking speakers and screeching brakes (stanza VIII) and Dante's museum apartment is plunged in the "frightening voiceless-ness" of its dark, deteriorating staircase, the song of the goldfinch is, while not enough, still a live sound and reminds one of the poet's energetic meters. In the Russian version no compensation seems to be taking place. The bird's enthusiasm in the last lines of the stanza could be compared to the fervor of the city's best poet, but the quality of his singing is not a good match. It is up to the speaker – the poet-traveler – to make up for his absence. Brodsky's poems often subvert their explicit "message" by their very existence, as we saw in "Noon in a Room," when the poet speaking of the futility of the word for the preservation of memory presents a verbal feat that performs exactly that. Likewise, "*Dekabr*" while lamenting the absence of the poet and his word, is a formal



and intertextual *tour de force* proving that his word is not only still alive in the continuity of culture but is possible in other vernaculars.

Clearly, this important aspect could not be ignored in the English version, otherwise the whole project of homage to the Florentine master would be compromised. The drafts preserved in the Beinecke collection demonstrate that preserving the structure of the poem was set as a priority early on. The detailed meter and rhyme scheme drawn on lined notebook sheets was found in one folder with Barry Rubin's interlinear translation, which perhaps was meant to accompany it for the benefit of the future translators (Rubin). The chart of rhymes across the drafts shows that commissioned translators make more sacrifices for the sake of the rhymes – a fault usually ascribed to Brodsky's self-translations (Appendix C). Here, the self-translation, while taking risks to achieve a lot in terms of rhyme, demonstrates greater intra-textual and intertextual unity – i.e. continuity within itself and with the Russian version.

Opponents of Brodsky's self-translation often complain about his penchant for using feminine rhymes that in English are “associated with light or humorous verse” and “had to be used sparingly or with caution” (Weissbort 70). Those familiar with Russian versification supposed that Brodsky simply transposed his rhyming habits from Russian into English. In Russian, feminine rhymes are abundant due to grammatical endings of this synthetic language and the existence of a great number of polysyllabic nouns with their first or second syllable stressed. Although they can be trite, feminine polysyllabic rhymes in Russian sound neutral and do not add any connotation of irony or ridicule to the tone, which they apparently inevitably brought about in Brodsky's English-language

readers to the point of comparisons with “macaronic” rhymes by Ogden Nash or Gilbert (Weissbort 132, 141-142, 157).

Brodsky’s self-translation of “*Dekabr*” in which all the Russian rhymes are feminine, reveals that he is aware of the ill-advised overflow of feminine rhymes in English and, perhaps, thanks to the guidance by Barry Rubin, he chooses mostly masculine, predominately slant rhymes for his English verse to achieve a neutral, speech-like diction. Indeed, out of nine stanzas four boast all masculine rhymes (with a couple arguable points), in four of them only one of three *terzinas* has feminine rhymes, and only in one stanza the rhymes are mostly feminine. Thus, most of the eighty-one lines of the English version end in monosyllabic consonantal or assonantal masculine rhymes that the critics of the time stated to be the preferred, or in Weissbort’s terms “unintrusive” way to rhyme, if one has to rhyme at all. In fact, a closer look at the exception to this rule makes it clear that the use of feminine rhymes is predicated on the necessity to put Italian proper names in strong position (*cadenza-palazzo-Lorenzo* and *veinous-verbena-Ravenna* in stanza VI), or to rhyme with a diphthong in a word (*fear-gears-spheres* in stanza VII), whose semantics is significant, i.e. requires it to be in a strong position again.

Among them, however, there are no banal, simple or, as Weissbort calls some of Brodsky’s early English attempts, “naively consecutive, elementary” rhymes (152). There is also no sign of grammatical endings in the rhyming position. In fact, it is Myers’ slender version that reaches a consistency within *terzinas* often by resorting to those: “checking-backing” (stanza III), “grappling-trapping” “better-letter-litter” (stanza IV), “rotting-faltering-flaunting” (stanza V), and “returning-yearning-earning” (stanza IX). These appear neither in the draft nor in the final version of the self-translation. Brodsky

also does not go out on a limb to reproduce the “feats” he accomplished in Russian in terms of congenial rhyming of Florentine toponymics. For example, Arno, Signoria and Cellini, for the lack of sensible and creative rhymes, are moved mid-line, while in some of the translations by other authors they are left at the end of the line without any attempt at a rhyme. Brodsky often also neglects the “simple” or “elegant” solutions of his predecessors in translation in favor of riskier rhymes. For example, in the opening stanza all versions go for rhyming “steam” that the Florence’s doors breath with the “stream” of Arno – quite a logical solution, considering that it preserves the semantic pairing of steam and Arno the Russian version so brilliantly puts forth. Brodsky, however, is not satisfied with this easy rhyme and tries to come up with something more original. His early draft (by “unidentified translator”) rhymes “won’t,” “amount” and “ant:” the first pair is suggested nowhere in the drafts by the native speakers of English, while the appearance of an ant in the last line of the *terzina* stretches the image of beastly figures. It later metamorphoses into the consonantal “won’t-kind-bend” that asserts and lightens the rhythm, adding a desired colloquial flavor to the diction.

To summarize, it seems that the translations by other authors, while procuring some elegant and creative solutions, do seem to struggle with the requirement of the strict rhyme, and end up sacrificing the poem’s internal unity and, at times, resorting to unoriginal rhyming pairs. Rhymes do or do not happen in Robert Lowell’s translation that also treats the number of lines quite freely, with eight of them in the fourth, and ten in the fifth stanza. English and Kline start by using *terza rima* instead of *terzinas*, maintaining the formal reference to Dante, which however is not sustained throughout the poem. As it fails to be consistent, it turns into a “haphazard scheme” which, Berlina notes, “takes

away too much from what constitutes the essence of “*Dekabr*” (23). Only Myers’ translation exhibits a conscious and often successful attempt to reproduce the aaabbbccc rhyme-scheme of the original but has more feminine and grammatical endings than the self-translation, which makes it less equivalent to the degree of formal innovation in the Russian version.

The creation of a different rhyme scheme is not the only thing that positions the self-translation as an independent, new text, rather than a result of collaboration with the commissioned translators; likewise, the inconsistency of the other translations’ rhyme schemes does not seem to be the only reason Brodsky attempted his own version. He uses the achievements of the other translators surprisingly seldom, if at all. For example, instead of borrowing what were brilliant translative solutions to the challenges posed by the lines whose meaning is tightly bound to the Russian language (to the visual effects of the Russian alphabet or the auditory peculiarities of Russian pronunciation), he invents his own. Stanza VIII is especially illustrative in this regard. In the following lines of Barry Rubin’s interlinear translation, most of the translators incorporated the letter X due to its graphic resemblance to both the Russian Ж /je/ and to a figure of a human waving their hands up and down:

The policeman at the intersection  
waves his arms like the letter Ж – neither downward nor  
upward. Loudspeakers bark about costliness/high costs.

O, the inevitability of “Ы” in the spelling of “жизни” (Rubin MSS)

While Brodsky also uses the letter X in the corresponding lines of his self-translation, he alters the original image and those surrounding it to enhance the visual and

sound effects of the Russian version. In it, the two last lines are symbolically connected, since Ж is the initial letter in the word жизнь (*zhizn'* or life). Thus, the ambiguous motions of the policeman at an intersection are representative of the uncertainty of human existence, of its constant fluctuation between life and death, or “living and leaving,” as Brodsky puts it in the published version of the self-translation. The life/death dichotomy is implied in the first two lines of the stanza as well, when the reference to the “egg” of the Cupola di Brunelleschi is unexpectedly tied with a risk of being “bespittled/pecked to death.” Although English and Kline’s translation offers a clever “sp/battered to death,” Brodsky chooses to simply omit this witty variation à la chance typo and replace it with the emblem of deadly threat in his “Intersections scare your skull / like crossed bones.” This image, absent in the Russian version, ties the stanza together, as the “X” of the last lines echoes both crossroads and crossed bones and “skull” mirrors the egg and the nest in a kaleidoscope of life and death (Berlina 39). The image of a figure with waving arms is replaced by a gesture of a raised hand – a stop sign in universal body language. The line then acquires both a literal and figurative meaning, as the reader is prompted to suspect that it is the intersections of these two polar states of our being that really “scare [one’s] skull,” temporarily materialized in the busy crossroads of a foreign city. In the Russian version this duality is commented on in the last line that plays with the Russian word *zhizn'* and the contradiction between its sound and spelling. Berlina explains: “In Russian, “*zhizn'*” (life) is indeed pronounced as if it featured “ы” (/y/); however, one of the very first orthographical rules learned by every schoolchild is that this word is written with “и” (/i/) instead. Hence the image suggests a mistake” (41). She also mentions several interpretations by other scholars that connect the letter to suffering, disgust and

separation. I can only add that, despite the long history of resentment by Russian poets towards this unfortunate vowel (Berlina 21), it is prominent in both “*byt*” (to be) and “*mysh*” (mouse), the latter identified as an image associated with running out of time in Brodsky’s poetics (Kreps 253). However multilayered the contexts of this line may be in Russian, all native Anglophone translators have captured the meaning in its reliance on the irony of spelling:

How urgent the need for an “I” in the words “to live” and “to die”! (English and Kline)

How easily the I in life (can) rhyme(s) with the I in to die. (Lowell)

Oh, the inexorable ‘y’ that living’s spelling lacks! (Myers)

Brodsky, however, goes through the variations of all of them before coming up with his own, which he keeps in the published translation:

O, the ubiquitous ‘I’ in both to live and to die. (Unidentified translator)

Oh, the inexorable “Y” that living’s spelling lacks! (Brodsky, self-translation draft)

Oh, the obstinate leaving that “living” masks!” (the published self-translation)

The final, published version reveals several things about Brodsky’s priorities in self-translation. Sound play is undoubtedly important. To start with, the bold changes in imagery in both lines (the second and the last) allow him to come up with more original rhymes (see Appendix C). Moreover, the difference in sound between the longer flatter [i:] and shorter, more open [i] is close (as close as it gets in two different languages) to the difference between the Russian и (/i/) and ы (/y/). The fact that he undertook this feat of phonetic translation/mimicry demonstrates that, despite his own accent and Berlina’s

statement that “with a Russian accent “leaving” and living are indeed indistinguishable,” Brodsky did understand the difference in the pronunciation of English long and short vowels (41). It debunks Berlina’s earlier explanation of the rhyme “indeed – bit – it” (stanza I) as caused by the faults of Brodsky’s Russianized pronunciation in which “/i:/ and /i/ are experienced as one phoneme,” and proves that Brodsky indeed had “an ear for the English language,” even if he spoke and recited his verses with an accent. This correlation in sound play to the point of using almost exact same sounds enables the self-translator to pack more complex meaning into the line. “Leaving” means departure that can be read as both separation and death. While Bethea and Akhapkin read separation in the nuances of the letters’ graphics in typing, Berlina is skeptical of it. I suggest a different source for this association. As I noted earlier, Brodsky’s poems are often in dialogue with each other. So, the moaning “ы” from “*Dekabr*” seems to echo the line from a poem written in the same year, “*Niotkuda s ljuboviu*” (“From Nowhere with Love”).

*Ia vzbivaiu podushku mychashchim "ty"*

*za moriami, kotorym kontsa i kraia,*

*v temnote vsem telom tvoi cherty,*

*kak bezumnoe zerkalo povtorisia.*

I pummel the pillow, mumbling “you”,

across the seas which have no bounds or limits,

in the dark, my whole body repeating anew,

your features, as in some crazy mirror. (Brodsky and Weissbort)

“The bellowing ‘you’” of the final lines (literally, *mychashchim* implies the sound that cows make), a moan of separation and longing, is perceptible in the wail resounding from “*zhizn*” in the eighth stanza of “*Dekabr*’.” The preceding stanza VII is connecting death, love and parting: the speaker is disillusioned and sees love as a dividing rather than unifying force. While “*Niotkuda*” is speaking about the distance between the continents, in “*Dekabr*’,” in a Donnean manner, the parting is felt on a cosmic scale: “If love were to shift the gears / of the Southern Stars, they’d move to hostile spheres.” Thus, the solutions of the self-translation not only achieve onomatopoeia, but also reinforce a self-intertext, which the translations by other authors, although brilliant, do not prioritize.

While these comparisons are not aimed at establishing the superiority of the self-translation over the other versions, they do demonstrate that labelling a Brodsky English text “translationese” was often no more justified than if the same term was applied to any other translation by an English speaker, who was a professional translator. The poem, read as a part of the bilingual text, shows that, contrary to statements of Weissbort’s torn criticism or Reid’s deficiency report, Brodsky understood the differences between the English and the Russian traditions of versification, was aware of the implications and effects of certain poetic forms, and used them deliberately. It shows that he was, in fact, flexible with the translation and compensated for the rigidity of the formal design by other means. Early on his path of bilingual writing, he demonstrated mastery of English poetic tradition and incredible sensibility to its sound and symbolism.



Birds of a Feather: Derek Walcott's Translation as an Example of an Approach by a  
Multilingual Poet

Derek Walcott in his review of *To Urania* titled "Magic Industry" (1988) admires precisely the qualities of Brodsky's poetry that others criticize: his risqué English, peculiar sound and intonation, overt homages, and rigid form. He opens his review with a close reading of just two lines which with almost onomatopoeic palpability "magisterially, and in an adopted language, establish torpor" – the key sensation of the stanza. He admires the "simultaneity of assonances" of the lines extracted from the pronunciation of English words, while quickly brushing aside an instance of grammatical incongruity: "The fly, of course, is not "in" August, but August itself." Walcott seems annoyed to have to pay attention to such minor things that distract from the essence of the poetic utterance – the intricate play of meaning and sound. Where other critics hear echoes of nursery rhymes and odious classicism (which he thinks they confuse with antiquity), he listens to "Edmund Spenser's ghost rustling behind pages" and "Keats and Clare" recalled "in their own language." While others cringe at the cumbersome "translationese," he is able to enjoy "the sound of difficulty" that makes Brodsky's English "peculiarly his." Walcott also shares Brodsky's belief in the "sacred, tested shapes" of stanzaic rhyming; he sees Brodsky's weddedness to it as a tribute "to the history of craft" and finds comfort and sense of stability in their solid architecture. In general, Walcott in this essay is almost in a state of awe at the miracle of Brodsky's poetry entering the Anglophone canon; he sees it at least as a happy coincidence that makes things happen that otherwise would never happen in it:

There is no modern English or American poet who will take such risks—being utterly serious with feminine endings, of attempting to reach the sublime and noble without the pseudo-humility of the dying fall, the retractable conceit.

Double rhymes and long lines threaten contemporary poets in English with the bespectacled shade of Ogden Nash, not to mention the garrulous precision of Byron. Wit has therefore gone the way of rhyme.

There is no doubt that Walcott's benevolence towards the Russian poet's English rhymes could be ascribed to their friendship and collaboration: indeed, they were friends and members of the same close literary circle. They gave interviews and performed on panels together, always advocating for formal versification and political disengagement. Walcott performed as Brodsky's translator and reviewer; Brodsky wrote a highly appreciative essay on Walcott's poetry, "The Sound of the Tide" (1983), in which he states, referring perhaps both to Walcott and to himself: "Poet's real biographies are like those of birds, almost identical – their real data are in the way they sound" (Less than One 164). The two poets have in common the reputation as "intruders" into the Anglo-American literary scene and their roles as ambassadors of another culture, or even their position "in between" traditions, languages and cultures. However, what connects the more than all of the above is their readiness to make this position a point of departure and a dominanta of their Anglophone poetry and their extraordinary ability to be organic and comfortable in this "in-between-ness," even when others (their critics and readers) are not. This unlikely level of affinity between the postcolonial poet and dramatist from the Caribbean and the last classical poet of the Soviet underground turned American essayist testifies to the underlying transnational nature of poiesis. Both create under the crossfire

of literary ideologies disturbed by their refusal to choose – an affiliation, a definition, or a conventionally coherent identity. Their work concerns language, influence, genre and form. Walcott refuses to be dictated what language to write in – in Caribbean Creole or “standard” English – to please either the Caribbean critics and the academics of postcolonial studies by reinstating his “roots” or to satisfy the purist Western critics gatekeeping the canon. Instead, he writes in a “creole of creoles,” creating “English-inflected’ creole in some poems [...and] Creole-inflected English in others,” having his characters speak French-lexicon Creole amidst the narration in impeccable English that is “tonally St. Lucian,” and “adapting Rastafarian Jamaican English” in his drama (Terada 83, 92). Brodsky does not intend to stay within the golden cage of his title as a “great Russian poet” of his time, but seeks to expand his poetry into an idiolect that is immediately recognized by his bilingual readers as “Russian English” but is unknown to most Anglo-American critics (Sontag et al. 181), except perhaps for its likeness to Nabokov’s prose with its neologisms and dictionary-dug pearls. Both persist, not intimidated by the initial reaction of their readers who, met with “the poem’s resistance by their linguistic comfort” and respond with “surrendering to the surface of that resistance and rejecting the poem as foreign” (Terada 87). Both claim English as their own, or rather the common, domain of poetry. Walcott, in response to reproaches of Eurocentricity and “collaboration with the tradition of the oppressor,” claims “birthright” to the English language and defends his freedom to excel in it in his own way: “The English language is nobody’s special property. It is the property of imagination... I have never felt inhibited in trying to write as well as the greatest English poets” (qtd. in Baugh 23). Brodsky could put his name to these statements. He is remembered to have seen his

ongoing learning of English as an advantage, not a limitation. So, Mark Strand speaking at a tribute to Brodsky held at Columbia University in 1996 says:

When you grow up in a language you have such conventional notions of it. You always take the plainest, clearest, simplest way. Joseph had any number of alternatives. Because he hadn't grown up in the language, his choice, his range of options, was greater than that of a native speaker, and it created a kind of oddness, brilliant and unforgettable. (Sontag et al. 180)

When I earlier called the affinity between the two poets “unlikely” I meant that poets and their poetry, as immigrant workers and goods, are often expected to group according to their national or cultural affiliation. It is according to this principle interviewers and researchers often pair up Brodsky with Milosz, Venclova, or, again, Nabokov; it is also following this logic that Weissbort in his memoir is seeking to understand Brodsky through Jewishness. Elizabeth Beaujour observes, “in many ways bilingual or polyglot writers have more in common with each other, whatever their national origins, than they do with monolinguals.” She defines the bilingual writer’s sense of free linguistic option as “a comparative three-dimensional insight into language, a type of stereolinguistic optic on communication the monolingual rarely experiences” (qtd. in Hokenson and Munson 15). It is this vision that allowed Walcott and Brodsky to relate and to advocate for each other in questions of language proficiency and style.

Walcott was among a few that supported Brodsky in his insistence on rhymed verse in the dispute around free verse that had been reigning in American poetry since Whitman (although Walcott claimed it began with Navajo poetry). Brodsky called for looking into the meaning of “freedom” implied in the original name of the form. In its

original French, he would argue, *vers libre* meant not so much free, but *liberated* verse. What does free verse liberate a poet from? – was his question. The common answer implied liberation from banality, from following a tradition deemed obsolete (to which, according to Bethea he was immune), which for the nineteenth-century French poetry was classical verse with its constraints unfitting to explore modern sensibilities. In Brodsky's opinion, however, negligence towards tradition, ignorance of the canon, and the "free" verse demonstrated by contemporary American poetry produced more banality than could be tolerated (Jangfeldt 189). He highly appreciated the element of play, the role of pleasure and craftsmanship in poetry, and saw meter and rhyme as the necessary creative strainer that can, by sifting, enhance, not preclude creativity. Indeed, we can refer to the poets of the French avant-garde who practiced techniques of "constrained writing," such as lipograms, acrostics, erasure, etc. Brodsky was determined to prove that English, with its, as many opponents argued, "limited amount of rhymes" and polysyllabic stress, can be as versatile as his native inflective Russian. Perhaps, his fascination and translation work with the British Baroque poetry, with its syncopated rhythm of the "strong line" and its long and "contrived" conceits that, nevertheless, lent themselves to the rigidity of the rhymed verse convinced him of that. Walcott considered the alteration of formal and free verse a normal course of events, the latter – a reaction to the former (Jangfeldt 188). As bi- and multi-lingual writers often do, when he entered American letters, he didn't feel compelled to follow the set up "natural" for it and played by his own rules. Often accused of misusing the idioms and distorting English grammar, creating a forth idiolect out of a mix of standard English, French patois and Caribbean Creole, Walcott was not bothered by the "un-Englishness" of Brodsky's verse and not

intimidated by the demands he posited for his translators. Rather, he saw it as a noble challenge.

Although Walcott was never commissioned to translate a cycle or a collection of Brodsky's (unlike Weissbort, for example), he is the author of some of the most successful translations of Brodsky's verse. The fact that Brodsky rarely "corrected" his translations and published them as "translated by Derek Walcott" instead of as the customary "translated by... with the author" attests to his appreciation of his translative solutions. What is it about Walcott's translations that satisfied the insatiable Russian? I suggest that Walcott was able to grasp the essence of Brodsky's fascination with rhyme. What Brodsky was pursuing was, again, a blend, a hybrid between formal and free verse. In the same interview, he complicates Walcott's idea of the alteration between the two poles of versification:

But it's not a simple return, because it's not just simply a pendulum going back and forth. On the way back, the classical verse has already absorbed several aspects of free verse, and the main aspect of free verse is a rather remarkable aspect. This is part of what accounts for its popularity, in my view. [...] I would avoid parallels with painting—the closest thing that comes to my mind is indeed a performer's solo, a jazz solo, when the man plays a tune and suddenly he breaks out in his own cadence, in his own rendition, and then he returns to the tune. That's what free verse is all about, but in order to break out, in order to produce that solo, you have to know the tune. Regrettably the reality of modern verse, of the practice of verse nowadays, is that people don't know the tune. They simply start with the solo. (189)

The idea of improvisation within a certain “tune,” of following one’s own cadence and then returning, having reinforced the structure by bending it, is embodied in Brodsky’s treatment of rhyme and meter in his Russian verse. He re-energizes the classic form by infusing it with new material (lexicon, semantics, and the mixture of registers) and new sound, while preserving a structure which echoes the voices that speak tradition. In other words, verse that pays homage to tradition – the tune – while breaking away from it is freer than one that denies its existence.

Walcott, as if sensing the direction of Brodsky’s thought, speaks of the essential similarity between free verse and the most tested classic:

The point about formal verse, really, when one tries to teach it, is if you take a passage from Milton, or in the later Shakespeare, and examine the way that the caesuras are shifted in Milton or shifted in Shakespeare, that is the best possible example of free verse. Within the frame and the rigidity of the same pentameter you get astonishing phrases that are the equivalent of algebra or of very avant-garde music. So that the argument doesn’t work. The argument is not about the number of beats to the line; the argument is how skillful is the manipulation of the shifts of stress within the structure. (192)

Although Brodsky does not acknowledge the existence of the same affinity between free verse and the best specimen of classic poetry in Russian – simply for the reason that “free verse never took root there” (192) – it could be argued that his own poetic innovation is to produce this effect of verse measured and rhymed but free. Moreover, since Russian accentual verse is more flexible in terms of intonation and can easier incorporate the “shifts” Walcott is talking about, Brodsky’s formal structure has to

be excessively rigid to contain “the avant-garde music” of his modulations. Zakhar Ishov in his thesis explains the odd tension, which the critics of Brodsky’s self-translations take for flawed intonation born of a Russian accent, by the transplantation of the Russian rhythmical patterns on his English verse. Applying Zhirmunsky’s comparative theory of prosody and versification, he ascribes the Anglophone readers’ perception to the confusion regarding the concepts of “meter” and rhythm.”

With the help of Zhirmunsky’s metre-rhythm distinction, it becomes clear that what Brodsky was often trying to convey in translating his poems was not their metre – as the poet himself maintained in his numerous pronouncements – but their rhythm. This rhythm which Brodsky in fact attempted to preserve is to a great degree equivalent to the rhythm of his original poems, and possesses characteristics typical of Russian verse: it often contains omissions of stress, or ‘Phyrric’ feet. As the result, a conflict with English acoustic habits is unavoidable.

*(Post-horse 54)*

This explanation implies that the tension was unintentional; it also follows from it that Brodsky’s Russian verse was congruent with the rhythm traditional in Russian poetry, and it is only due to mimetic translation, that the tension arose. However, Nila Friedberg in her article “Rule-Makers and Rule-Breakers: Joseph Brodsky and Boris Slutsky as Reformers of Russian Rhythm” (2009) shows that Brodsky’s rhythmic patterns were at times as problematic for the Russian ear in his Russian verse as they were for the English ear in his self-translations. In her analysis of scientific precision and with the help of spectrograms that illustrate the pronunciation of Brodsky’s lines, Friedberg proves that



the poet deliberately used such characteristic features of English prosody as elision and made it his signature innovation in Russian:

Brodsky had chosen to imitate Donne, English versification's most notorious rulebreaker, who, according to Ben Johnson, "for not keeping of accent deserved hanging." [...] However, Brodsky did not borrow Donne's metrical eccentricities, incorporating instead a perfectly regular feature of the English poet's verse – his elision. Brodsky could have noticed the striking regularities in the prosodic shape of Donne's "extra syllable" lines and introduced these regularities into his Russian verse – a testament to his exceptional intuition regarding foreign prosody. (649)

Friedberg goes even further in her analysis and demonstrates that the idiosyncratic patterns of elision Brodsky devised in his Russian verse was in fact "abstract," i.e. not intended to fully manifest in pronunciation, but rather to contribute to the "foreignizing" effect of his style:

Brodsky's elision is purely abstract: the syllable is there, but simply does not count. Moreover, omission in this context is not only avoided in recitation; it is also consciously acknowledged as impossible. A survey conducted among seventeen native speakers of Russian reveals that none of the respondents would ever omit the first post-tonic vowel in [the examples].[...] Proposing such abstract elision may seem odd, given that in colloquial Russian, unstressed vowels, especially those in the first post-tonic position, can be omitted entirely, that is, the Russian language has no shortage of real elisions. [...] Brodsky created an abstract rule in the 1960s, then, precisely in order not to sound colloquial, and to

be distinguished from poets like Voznesenskii, about whose language Brodsky was extremely negative. [...] Though Brodsky employs numerous colloquial expressions in his poetry, his colloquialism is primarily lexical rather than prosodic, and his desire to distinguish verse prosody from everyday speech is further evinced by the peculiar chant-like manner of his recitation. (653-654)

Thus, the tension between various elements of what constructs a verse is how Brodsky's style is built and his unique, immediately recognized intonation is transcribed in writing. It is how he achieved the "incredible acceleration of thought" that only poetry could generate. I suggest that Brodsky's experiments with both Russian and English rhyming were of the same nature. The strict rhymes were an "abstract" rule that followed a concrete pattern of innovation – the rhymes were to be incongruent, often made of functional words, resisting the function of "intellectual montage" they had usually performed on the symbolic plane of poetry. The reader's attention carried into the middle of the line by frequent enjambments and semantic peaks was to perceive rhyme not as the end-goal of a line but as a framing containing multiple tensions that animated the design of each stanza.

It is remarkable that, among Brodsky's translators, Derek Walcott, another bilingual (or rather multilingual) and a poet of the "mongrel muse" (as Ramazani puts it), was able to reproduce these subtleties and, perhaps, come as close to Brodsky's idea of freedom within formal verse as it was possible for anybody but the author himself. I want to look at one poem that demonstrates Walcott's mastery in following these principles. In his translation "Letters from the Ming Dynasty" (1977) Walcott performs a truly Brodskian feat of rhyming, even though the original is less remarkable for this feature of

the author's style. I suggest that the dominant of this translation is the rhythm and the diction, with attention to rhyme as its important instrument. The original's *dol'nik* is highly variable which is achieved not so much through an array of enjambments – there are fewer of them than usual, but through the fluctuation of stress within lines. The Russian rhymes vary from mostly feminine in the first part and mostly masculine in the second, with the rhyme sequence going from quite conventional pairing in the former to an intricate spiral in the latter: I aabbccddeeffa<sup>1</sup>a<sup>1</sup>gg II hhijjkkj llmlnnon.

In Walcott's translation, the rhyme scheme suggests an approximation of the following: I aabbccddeeffgghh; II ijkkklmnmnoopo, treating the second part as one stanza of sixteen lines. It is approximation because some rhymes are rather suggestions than rhymes per se, i.e. "nightningale-nightfall," "joke-Duck," "as-does-zeros." Some others are quite original and brilliant in their exactness and ability to highlight the context, such as "Empress-rice" and "li-hieroglyph." However, Walcott's translation is remarkable rather in terms of inner rhyming and the use of assonances and consonances that are so striking and organic within the poem's diction that they outshine the rhymes of the line ends and make them sound secondary, undeliberated and coincidental. Some of the alliterative solutions and hidden rhymes are highlighted in the poem reproduced below:

"Letters from the Ming Dynasty"

I

Soon it will be thirteen years since the nightingale  
 fluttered out of its cage and vanished. and, at nightfall,  
 the Emperor washes down his medicine with the blood

of another tailor, then, propped on silk pillows, turns on a jeweled bird  
that lulls him with its level, identical song.

It's this sort of anniversary, odd-numbered, wrong,  
that we celebrate these days in our "Land-under-Heaven."

The special mirror that smooths wrinkles even  
costs more every year. Our small garden is **choked** with weeds.  
The sky, too, is *pierced by spires* like pins in the shoulder blades  
of *someone so sick that his back* is all we're allowed to see,  
and whenever I talk about astronomy  
to the Emperor's son, he begins to **joke**...

This letter to you, Beloved, from your Wild Duck  
is brushed onto scented rice paper given me by the Empress.  
Lately there is no rice but the flow of rice paper is endless.

## II

"A thousand-li-long road starts with the first step," as  
the proverb goes. Pity the road home does  
not depend on that same step. It exceeds ten times  
a thousand li, especially counting from zeros.  
One thousand li, two thousand li—  
a *thousand* means "*Thou shalt* not ever see  
thy native place." And the meaninglessness, *like a plague*,  
*leaps* from words onto numbers, onto zeros especially.  
Wind blows us westward like the yellow tares

from a dried pod, there where the Wall towers.  
Against it man's figure is ugly and stiff as a frightening hieroglyph,  
as any illegible scripture at which one stares.  
this pull in one direction only has made  
me something elongated, like a horse's **head**,  
and all the body should do is **spent** by its shadow  
rustling across the *wild barley's withered blade*.<sup>8</sup> (Brodsky, *Collected Poems*  
143-144)

These sound and form effects govern the rhythm of the poem, creating implied or “abstract” caesurae and guiding the reader’s breath and accents. For example, the perceptible internal rhyme between “choked” in line 10 and “joke” three lines lower has an effect of double projection. Namely, the strong position of the latter enhances the memory of the syncopated accent on the former resolved in the flatter “with weeds,” while the lingering effect of it echoes in the emptiness created by the ellipses after “joke.” The delicious alliteration of “*like a plague / leaps*” seals the enjambment and takes the edge off the unrhymed ending in the kklk quatrain. Carefully constructed, the rhyming seems effortless and secondary to the imagery, typically Brodskian, of the longing at the sundown of an Empire, produced in a sense “out of air,” that is out of palpability of its imagined pronunciation.

This translation, one wants to say, is what Brodsky would write like, if he spoke English. However, taking into consideration the recent scholarship on bilingual writing, I want to correct myself and add, “if he spoke only English.” Indeed, the tensions that Walcott so masterfully reproduces in this poem were possible only at the confluence of

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<sup>8</sup> Italics and marks in bold are mine.

two (or several) languages and poetics and only as a result of its interaction. While for a bilingual reader, a speaker of both Russian and English, Brodsky's own translations are equal or even preferable for the "stereoscopic vision" they engender, for the Anglophone reader translations such as the one just analyzed can serve as a glimpse into the unfamiliar. It is true that the idea is not new and that it has been established that literature thrives on translations that expand and diversify the welcoming tradition and language. Nevertheless, it could be argued that translations like the one analyzed above are possible particularly as a lesson learned from self-translations, both on part of the translator and the author of the original. It is the appreciation of self-translation as a genre and the acknowledgment of a bilingual writer's style as a deliberation in solving a creative challenge, as natural to its environment as any other writing, rather than an accident of accent, that makes it possible for the reader to experience literature as transnational.

## CHAPTER IV

### EXPANSION OF ISOLATION: BRODSKY'S TRANSLATION BETWEEN GENRES

#### **Translating Culture**

While an ability to write artistic prose has long been a sign of versatile genius in a poet such as Alexander Pushkin, whose *Povesti Belkina* (*Belkin Tales*, 1830) and novels such as *Kapitanskaia dochka* (*The Captain's Daughter*, 1836) and *Dubrovskii* (*Dubrovsky*, 1833) quickly entered, if not started, the canon of Russian fiction, Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1955) only proved the popular axiom that a poet can, if they will it, produce prose matching their poetry. However, cases of the reverse, prose writers who take up poetry, are virtually impossible (being rare or non-existent, as Nabokov's notorious attempts and lamentations prove). To examine Brodsky's transition from poetry to artistic prose within the Russian tradition, one would seem to have little material to draw upon, since the only piece of prose fitting this context would be his play *Mramor* (*Marble*, 1984). However, Brodsky's English-language essays deserve to be considered part of this genre switch. They present new angles, absent from the Pushkin-Pasternak line mentioned above, that allow us to examine this phenomenon not only in terms of a shift in genre, but also in terms of translation, while connecting it back to Brodsky's bilingualism and the "metaphysics of language" that distinguishes his transnational poetics.

First, the prose Brodsky transitions into is, throughout his essays and interviews, is positioned as a special and separate kind of prose – essayistic writing produced by a poet who is first and foremost a poet, and only then – a writer. In this sense Brodsky is an heir to a different line of prose-writing poets – that of Osip Mandelstam and Marina

Tsvetaeva. Secondly, in walking along the avenue they opened for Russian letters, Brodsky, in essence, treads on a foreign soil, as he writes his prose exclusively in his second language, English. As with his poetry, which blends domestic and foreign traditions and ventures towards a new audience through self-translation, his prose enacts not only a linguistic, but also a cultural shift, approaching the English-speaking readership in a form that is, at once, familiar to them but rooted in the impressionistic prose of the Russian modernist poets.

In fact, the switch to prose, counterintuitively, appears to have rehabilitated Brodsky as a poet and a translator. Indeed, in his review of Brodsky's first collection of essays, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (1986), in *The New York Times*, David M. Bethea, with the rigor of a Slavist, emphasizes to the reader of the collection that they are "in the presence of one of the major Russian poets of this century" (38). This fact is repeated in response after response, account after account of Brodsky's prose, while the various peculiarities of the prose written by a poetry-bound/inspired mind are foregrounded. David Bethea, in his insightful account imbued with the depth of a Russian literature expert's understanding, comes closest to revealing the secret behind the phenomenon of Brodsky's genre switch, when he notices certain parallels between the author and the objects of study of his critical essays. Bethea points out that Brodsky's essay on Marina Tsvetaeva, "A Poet and Prose" (1979), is "self-revealing," i.e. that Brodsky is imitating and even impersonating his object of study, for, like any artist keen on belonging to a tradition, he thinks himself through his literary icon or teachers:

[...] in writing about Rilke [in her poem "New Year's Greetings," the subject of



Brodsky's essay], Tsvetayeva was, as always, writing about herself, just as in writing about Tsvetayeva Mr. Brodsky is writing about himself. (3)

Is Bethea right when he concludes that what made Brodsky commit “the descent into humble prose” was the ongoing search for the “continuation of poetry by other means” and the desire to approach a new reader through a more familiar form (38)? And should we, indeed, look for the answers to these questions in Brodsky's literary criticism?

As the title of his essay suggests, with its generalizing about “a poet,” Brodsky is not only speaking about Tsvetaeva in particular but attempting to outline the poet's “methodology” behind embracing a new medium. One of his major arguments here is that a poet uses prose simply as a means of “extending” their poetry (181). Despite the common belief that, by and large, poets' life circumstances forced them to substitute unpopular poetry (which in Brodsky's own words “pays a lot worse, and more slowly,” 176-177) with prose, Brodsky is himself categorically and philosophically opposed to the metaphor of substitution. Continuation and expansion are the images that he employs over and over in his essay on Tsvetaeva to account for this transition from poetry to prose:

To paraphrase Clausewitz, prose for Tsvetaeva was nothing but “continuation of poetry by other means” (which, in fact, is what prose historically is). Everywhere – in her diary entries, essays on literature, fictionalized reminiscences – that is just what we encounter: the resetting of the methodology of poetic thinking into a prose text, the growth of poetry into prose (178)

For example, he notes that Tsvetaeva's famous folkloric intonations come through in her prose, when she “unconsciously transfers to it the dynamic of poetic language –

essentially the dynamic of song” (180). It is expressed in her syntax that is still guided by “specifically poetic technology: sound association, root rhyme, semantic enjambment, etc.” (179). Tsvetaeva’s essays (and plays) even preserve the signature trait of her poetic syntax – the dash, which, although, Brodsky warns, might add to an impression of “telegraphic style,” is in fact a sign of “the poet’s instinctive laconism,” reached by the “remarkable linguistic expressiveness” her prose inherits from poetry. What holds such a text together is “the energy of the monologue” and “an obsession with intonation.” He compares this overwhelming role of intonation to a voice that, when read aloud, mesmerizes the reader with its unique “timber,” and, by its intensity alone, does away with all the requirements of the genre (181). Thus, such prose unfailingly displays the dominating presence of a poet’s own rhetorical habits and character.

Brodsky’s English prose displays similar tendencies. The meditative and argumentative character of his metaphysical verse that earned him so much criticism appears to have travelled into his prose. The intonation of a reserved, but tragic perception (*tragizm*) and estranged lyricism comes out in the “dry-eyed pathos” of the autobiographical writing (Bethea). Jarring combinations of elevated vocabulary and low registers of slang and obscenity, which is at the core of his innovation in Russian poetry, make their way into the English essays, and are not always to the satisfaction of the reviewers. For example, John Updike is perplexed by Brodsky’s disregard for a “certain decorum” that written English requires (e.g. using “scumbag” in the middle of the sentence about Ezra Pound), but he is hardly aware of the much stronger language that permeates his most famous poetic lines (examples). Similarly, Gary Saul Morson derides

Brodsky's inflated (in his opinion) rhetoric and excessive use of figures of speech, without mentioning the latter to be the trademark of Brodsky recitative-like Russian verse (his last collection of verse was, after all, called *So Forth*). In part, he is right comparing Brodsky's prose to a poor imitation of Dostoyevsky's self-conscious, run-on prose, with an abundance of subordinate clauses, metalanguage, and syncopated rhythm.

However, the impulse behind it might have been not so much to impress, but to digress. It seems to be a common trait among poets who cannot help digressing in their essays. In "A Poet and Prose," Brodsky writes about Tsvetaeva's tendency to abuse the freedom of flowing thought

that prose tolerates, unconfined by the limitations of formal poetry:

Any uttered word requires some sort of continuation. [...] Such is the logic of speech, and such is the basis of Tsvetaeva's poetics. She never has enough space: either in poem or in prose. Even her most scholarly-sounding essays are always like elbows protruding from a small room. (187)

Likewise, Brodsky, overwhelmed by this new-found freedom, can be seen to be "follow[ing] the cadences of a subordinate clause to whatever conclusion might emerge" (Morson 301). However, just like Tsvetaeva, who, according to Brodsky, overflows in both poetry and prose, he, too, is only exercising his old pen on a different scale. Like the cityscape of St Petersburg, which is an unruly site of European architectural genius where perfectly calibrated proportion and harmony has gone wild on an unprecedented scale, Brodsky's prose chokes on the density and the range of his thought unbridled by rhyme and rhythm. Indeed, his poetry often exhibits the "logic of speech," when metalanguage "interrupts" lines in the midst of their lyrical

peak, as, for example, in “*Niotkuda s ljuboviu*” (“From Nowhere with Love” 1976).

Ниоткуда с любовью, надцатого мартабря,  
дорогой, уважаемый, милая, но не важно  
даже кто, ибо черт лица, говоря  
откровенно, не вспомнить уже, не ваш, но  
и ничей верный друг вас приветствует содного  
из пяти континентов, держащегося на ковбоях.  
Я любил тебя больше, чем ангелов и самого,  
и поэтому дальше теперь от тебя, чем от них обоих.  
Далеко, поздно ночью, в долине, на самом дне,  
в городке, занесенном снегом по ручку двери,  
извиваясь ночью на простыне,  
*как не сказано ниже, по крайней мере,*  
я взбиваю подушку мычащим «ты»,  
за горами, которым конца и края,  
в темноте всем телом твои черты  
как безумное зеркало повторяя.

From nowhere with love, Marchember the enth,  
my dear respected darling, but it doesn't  
matter who, since to be frank, the features aren't  
distinct anymore, neither your nor anyone

else's everloving friend, salutations from one  
(on the backs of cowboys) of the five  
continents,  
I loved you more than himself or his angels,  
and so now am further from you than  
from both of them,  
late at night, in the sleeping valley, deep,  
in a small town up to its doorknobs in snow,  
writing on top of the sheets,  
which, to say the least, isn't stated below,  
I pummel the pillow, mumbling "you",  
across the seas which have no bounds or limits,  
in the dark, my whole body repeating anew  
your features, as in some crazy mirror. (Brodsky and Weissbort)

The notorious parenthetical clause – “*kak ne skazano nizhe, po krainei mere*” (as is not stated below, at least) – still puzzles readers as to its meaning and purpose in the short poem. While in online forums Brodsky’s fans attempt to read it literally – as a metalinguistic disclaimer to the second part of the poem – or idiomatically – as a reference to the floor which is below (*nizhe*) the bed and, thus, would signal complete moral breakdown on the part of the speaker – most scholars simply ignore its meaning, paying attention to it only in the context of the poem’s complex syntactical structure. Indeed, the poem is characteristic of Brodsky’s style, consisting of only two compound sentences, in which a message (an address in the first part of the poem and the body of a

“letter” in the second) is constantly interrupted by subordinate clauses, held together by syntactical parallelisms, internal rhymes, and alliteration. The parenthetical negation – “as is not stated below, at least” – is so out of context that it is not clear which of the previous or following statements it refers to. If it indeed was apologetic about the emotional intensity of the previous lines (in which the speaker is “at the very bottom” of a small town, “wringing on the sheets” at night), the part that follows would then release the tension through, for example, an ironic remark – an instrument Brodsky frequently uses to depreciate the pathos of his love lyrics. Instead, the lines that follow exhibit an even greater inner turmoil, as the hero’s voice and body strain in a desperate attempt to replicate (read “resurrect”) his loved one. Despite popular readings in the online public sphere, the line does not serve to separate the first, ironic part of the poem from its affecting second part. In fact, it arrives three lines after such a break and precisely before the emotional peak. Perhaps, the purpose of its placement and its inconsistent meaning is to cause the reader – both the one who we can imagine reciting the poem and the one who reads it to oneself – to halt and take a breath before plunging into the unusual lyrical height (or depth) of the poem. That is, the purpose is not to direct or signpost, but to suspend, to digress, or gesture towards digressing. It is almost as if the poet while experiencing and making the reader (us) experience the “acceleration of thought” spiraling in a short poem, wants us to “take a breather” only to resume the momentum and crash into the punchline (“*vsem telom tvoi cherty [...] povtoriaia*”) fully conscious.

Similarly, in prose Brodsky often uses figures of speech, of which he has a set of favorites, in order “to take a breath” or to establish a certain rhythm in a long composite sentence, rather than to signpost any logical connections. For example, in an excerpt from

a commencement address to the 1984 graduates of Williams College he unconventionally opens with a warning and, as if interrupting the shock that must have been caused by the contrast of the context and the statement, allows the audience to recover during the short pause of “to say the least” before elaborating on it:

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 1984:

No matter how daring or cautious you may choose to be, in the course of your life you are bound to come into direct physical contact with what’s known as Evil. I mean here not a property of the gothic novel but, *to say the least*, a palpable social reality that you in no way can control. (385)

From the very start, the message disrupts the audience’s expectations: instead of celebrating the instrument of agency (higher education) the graduates have received, it declares their helplessness in the world they are about to enter. The promise of “direct physical contact” turns a warning into a threat. A reference to a literary cliché (a gothic novel kind of Evil) briefly releases the tension before revealing what is, for an American graduate of the time, a definition of doom. In it, every phrase elaborates on and enhances the points of the first sentence: “physical contact” turns into “palpable reality,” “no matter how daring and cautious [...] you are bound to” transforms into “you in no way can control.” The innocent “to say the least” is hardly here to imply any kind of worse outcome (the worst is already laid out), but it does increase suspense and offers a pause before the punchline. It is also not hard to imagine the speaker “taking a breath” before gaining control over his, his voice quivering, perhaps, as he relates his personal experience coated in abstract concepts. Indeed, this passage is a variation of a mediation on the nature of evil and the ability of a language to encompass it, which precedes the

highly lyrical coda of Brodsky's autobiographical essay "Less than One". The metalanguage of understatement ("at least," "merely," "after all") is frequent throughout the section which, just like "The Commencement Address" warns us again about an Evil so plain that it is hardly recognizable, concluding in identical mockery: "You never see it crossing your threshold announcing itself: "Hi, I'm Evil!" (*Less* 31; *Address* 384). This parallel is evidence not only of the recycling of a text, but also of the molding of ideas that happens in prose – a medium that allows ideas to develop through expansion rather than through condensation as in poetry. And if Tsvetaeva was a poet whose elbows were always protruding from the rooms of her prose essays, Brodsky seems to have discovered in the genre the principle of an enfilade, in which a writer can step out of a room or "a room and a half," as he entitles one of his essays in *Less Than One*, and transfer its idea to another space (an address, a critical essay), and then to another, and to endow it with a different interior, a new lighting, a new scale.

### **Translating the Self**

Another "self-revealing" conclusion that Brodsky makes about Tsvetaeva's prose is that it was an attempt to approach the reader from another end. His discussion of Tsvetaeva's conversion to essayistic prose, applied to the author himself, do seem to ring true. For a poet, who considers art an endeavor that "always has something elitist in it," this passage exhibits an unusual concern with the reader and communication with them:

"Reading," says Tsvetaeva, "is complicity in the creative process." This most certainly is the statement of a poet; Leo Tolstoy would not have said such a thing.

In this statement a sensitive, or at least a reasonable alert ear can distinguish a



note of despair, greatly muffled by authorial (and feminine at that) pride, coming especially from a poet sorely fatigued by the ever-widening rift – growing with each additional line – between author and the audience. And in the poet’s turning to prose, that a priori ‘normal’ form of communication with a reader, there is always a touch of slackening tempo, shifting gear, trying to make oneself clear, to explain things. For without complicity in the creative process there is no comprehension: what is comprehension, if not complicity? As Whitman said: “Great poetry is possible only if there are great readers.” In turning to prose, and dismantling every other word of it into component parts, Tsvetaeva shows her reader what a word, a thought, a phrase consists of; she tries, often against her own will, to draw the reader closer to her, to make him equally great. (179)

For Tsvetaeva, whose radical thematic and stylistic innovations in poetry that made her “really stand[s] all alone in Russian literature, very, very much off by herself” (191), prose was a means to “explain herself” to her readership of Russian émigrés residing in Paris and clinging to the Symbolist stylistics that became classic. By offering her readings of great predecessors and contemporaries, Tsvetaeva entered into a dialogue with these figures, creating an apologia of innovation in poetry and building her own literary identity.

Brodsky calls prose by a poet the best “laboratory [...] for analyzing the psychology of poetic creation” that can show “all stages of the process [of creating poetry] at extremely close range, verging on the starkness of caricature” (179). While the Tsvetaeva’s text, “*Poet o kritike*” (“Poet on Criticism”), he is quoting is from 1926, the

essay was written in 1979, a year after Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* was published; thus, Brodsky himself might have been familiar with Reader-Response theory and have felt the aesthetics of reception floating in the air of American academia, in which he was a resident. Following his tendency in his English writing to touch upon both traditions – the Anglophone and the Russian – he quotes Whitman to back up his idea of the importance of the reader's complicity in comprehension. As he often does, Brodsky seems to ascribe the discovery of the role of the reader to poets, to their unflinching poetic intuition and the distinguished dependency of a poetic text on the reader's adequacy. This condition is crucial especially when the poet communicates with an audience from a different cultural and linguistic background as was the case for Tsvetayeva, when she started writing prose.

For Brodsky, essayistic prose could become the scaffolding that the new reader required to become familiar with the poet's diction, literary tradition, semantic fields, and cultural background. Unable to expect the same level of complicity that his poetry enjoyed with the Russian reader and with Russian readers possessing the "double vision" of the Russian émigré, Brodsky had to "explain himself" in prose. That included providing commentary on his poetry that had appeared in translation. It has been noted repeatedly that Brodsky's signature imagery travels from his Russian verse to the prose of his essays written in English. For example, Sanna Turoma in her book, *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia* (2010), analyzes Brodsky's Venetian text—a text that includes his Russian poems on Venice and Italy, their self-translations into English, and his famous essay *Watermark* (1992), written in English on a commission from the city. Analyzing the carefully constructed intertext of *Watermark*, in which references to the

works of Western canon are intricately interwoven with reincarnations of his own poetry, she sees in the extended Venetian essay Brodsky's attempt to establish himself in a new literary context through a process not unlike that of translation:

Transitional realities are always translational phenomena, as such critics of postcolonial postmodernity as Homi Bhabha remind us, and Brodsky, too, performed his transculturation by way of translation. The Russian language poems [of the Venetian text] record his gradual transition from the marginal position of a Russian-language poet into his desired center of English-language literary community, a process recalled in *Watermark*, where the transition is translated into a singular text-event, now in his adopted English. This transnational performance takes place in *Watermark* on many levels. Brodsky *literally translates* poetic images from his earlier Russian poems into his English-language prose; the most fascinating instances are those where he reworks these images into a new cultural context of subtexts and allusions interwoven with autobiographical fragments of people and events, real and imaginary. Meanwhile, he also reuses and often expands on the autobiographical materials introduced in the Russian poems [...]. (163)

For example, Turoma reads the opening passages of the essay as “an elaborate commentary on the first two stanzas of “Laguna” (“Lagoon”), a poem written in Russian as early as 1973, a year after his emigration. She focuses on the image of a tear and two different cultural contexts in which the author incorporates this image in two different texts, while maintaining some of its semantics in ways that becomes essential in his own idiosyncratic “mythology of metaphysics” (173). In “Lagoon,” the “moist eye,” called

forth by the ancient beauty of the city, is indelibly associated with the Russian subtexts of the poem, alluding to Anna Akhmatova's Venetian and Petersburg texts; it suggests a tear of admiration and nostalgia. In *Watermark* (1992) the tear is still present as the sign of an encounter with sublime beauty and as a symbol of Time, but it is now placed in a context easily recognizable to a Western reader, Turoma argues, by its sheer proximity to a passage on Ezra Pound, thus, alluding to Pound's "thing of tears" in "Night Litany." Similarly, a marble statue, a seminal image in Brodsky's Russian poetry on Petersburg and Roman (Imperial) motifs, which in such poems as "Torso," "Roman Elegies," "The Bust of Tiberius" and even in "Sonnets to Mary of Scotts" serves as "an impetus of metaphysical explorations," also figures prominently in the essay. While, according to Turoma, in "Venetian Stanzas" Brodsky capitalizes on the sculptural myth of the Petersburg text as described by Roman Jakobson and recognizable in the contrast of the mobility of the human world and the "stasis" of its mimetic architectural environment, in *Watermark* the reference to Nereus and the Nereids and the picture of the underwater world as an "marble aquarium" "instantly evoke" Pound's "white forest of marble." An almost literal translation of some imagery taken from the Russian version of "San Pietro" (a poem written around 10 years prior to the essay) is used to describe Venice's famous *nebbia* while connecting it not to the foggy landscapes of the author's native city, as the poem does, but to the intimate memory of Auden and his poem "The Fall of Rome" (1947). It is also possible that such a "translation" worked in the reverse direction as well: Turoma notes, for example, that a discussion of the concept of beauty in a certain passage of the essay practically "consists of a prose translation of "*Doklad dlia simpoziuma*" (A Lecture for a Symposium"), a poem in Russian that was written almost simultaneously

with *Watermark* (173). Thus, poetry could, in fact, also serve as a commentary or “extension” of the essays.

The parallels between Russian poetry and English prose can be seen on two levels at least: the surface level of borrowing images, tropes, and motives – the level that is to a certain degree intertextual-- and a deeper, structural level that reproduces principles of poetic organization and develops Brodsky’s metaphysical sensibility in prose.

The similarities between, for example, the long poem “Noon in a Room,” analyzed in detail in Chapter II, and the essay “In a Room and a Half” are numerous and haven’t been studied, neither extensively, nor, one can argue, at all. The essay that was written in English in 1985 and translated into Russian in 1995 by Dmitry Chekalov as “*Poltory komnaty*” became the most famous piece of Brodsky’s prose at home and abroad and contains a treasure trove of biographical and philological information that sheds light on Brodsky’s entire oeuvre.

On the level of “borrowing” imagery from poetry written in Russian, some images reappear almost unaltered, but grounded in the situation of a “real life experience” (Morson 301) which often implies but plays down their metaphysical element. One such motif is the obsession with the inanimate “life” of objects and their ability to symbolically represent human life, sometimes almost to the point of replacing it. The most obvious example is the enumeration of the objects in the chests of drawers of “a room and a half,” in which one cannot fail to recognize the echo of the gallery of objects that, one by one and all together, “fell asleep” (*usnuli*) in over forty poetic lines of “The Great Elegy to John Donne” to underscore the impossible phenomenon of his passing:

Those ten-foot-high, two-story chests [...] housed nearly everything our family had amassed in the course of its existence. [...] My father's various cameras, developing and printing paraphernalia, prints themselves, dishes, china, linen, tablecloths, shoe boxes with his shoes now too small for him yet too large for me, tools, batteries, his old Navy tunics, binoculars, family albums, yellowed illustrated supplements, my mother's hats and scarves, some silver Solingen razor blades, defunct flashlights, his military decorations, her motley kimonos, their mutual correspondence, lorgnettes, fans, other memorabilia – all was stored in the cavernous depths of these chests, yielding, when you'd open one of their doors, a bouquet of mothballs, old leather, and dust. [...] With hindsight, the content of these chests could be compared to our joined, collective subconscious... (*Less than One* 459)

Джон Донн уснул, уснуло все вокруг.

Уснули стены, пол, постель, картины, уснули  
стол, ковры, засовы, крюк, весь гардероб, буфет,  
свеча, гардины. Уснуло все. Бутыль, стакан,  
тазы, хлеб, хлебный нож, фарфор, хрусталь,  
посуда, ночник, белье, шкафы, стекло, часы,  
ступеньки лестниц, двери. Ночь повсюду.  
Повсюду ночь: в углах, в глазах, в белье,  
среди бумаг, в столе, в готовой речи,

в ее словах, в дровах, в щипцах, в угле  
остывшего камина, в каждой вещи.  
В камзоле, башмаках, в чулках, в тенях,  
за зеркалом, в кровати, в спинке стула,  
опять в тазу, в распятыях, в простынях,  
в метле у входа, в туфлях. Все уснуло.  
Уснуло все. Окно. И снег в окне.  
Соседней крыши белый скат. Как скатерть  
ее конек. И весь квартал во сне,  
разрезанный оконной рамой насмерть.  
Уснули арки, стены, окна, все.  
Булыжники, торцы, решетки, клумбы.  
Не вспыхнет свет, не скрипнет колесо...  
Ограды, украшенья, цепи, тумбы.  
Уснули двери, кольца, ручки, крюк,  
замки, засовы, их ключи, запоры.  
Нигде не слышен шепот, шорох, стук.  
Лишь снег скрипит. Все спит.  
Рассвет не скоро. Уснули тюрьмы, замки. Спят весы  
среди рыбной лавки. Спят свиные туши.  
Дома, задворки. Спят цепные псы.  
В подвалах кошки спят, торчат их уши.  
Спят мыши, люди. Лондон крепко спит.

Спит парусник в порту. Вода со снегом

под кузовом его во сне сипит,

сливаясь вдалеке с уснувшим небом.

Джон Донн уснул...

John Donne has sunk in sleep. . . All things beside  
are sleeping too: walls, bed, and floor-all sleep.

The table, pictures, carpets, hooks and bolts,  
clothes-closets, cupboards, candles, curtains-all  
now sleep: the washbowl, bottle, tumbler, bread,  
breadknife and china, crystal, pots and pans,  
fresh linen, nightlamp, chests of drawers, a clock,  
a mirror, stairway, doors. Night everywhere,  
night in all things: in corners, in men's eyes,  
in linen, in the papers on a desk,  
in the wormed words of stale and sterile speech,  
in logs and fire-tongs, in the blackened coals  
of a dead fireplace-in each thing.

In undershirts, boots, stockings, shadows, shades,  
behind the mirror, on the backs of chairs,  
in bed and washbowl, on the crucifix,  
in linen, in the broom beside the door,  
in slippers. All these things have sunk in sleep.



Yes, all things sleep. The window. Snow beyond.  
A roof-slope, whiter than a tablecloth,  
the roof's high ridge. A neighborhood in snow,  
carved to the quick by this sharp windowframe.  
Arches and walls and windows-all asleep.  
Wood paving-blocks, stone cobbles, gardens, grills.  
No light will flare, no turning wheel will creak. . .  
Chains, walled enclosures, ornaments, and curbs.  
Doors with their rings, knobs, hooks are all asleep-  
their locks and bars, their bolts and cunning keys.  
One hears no whisper, rustle, thump, or thud.  
Only the snow creaks. All men sleep. Dawn comes  
not soon. All jails and locks have lapsed in sleep.  
The iron weights in the fish-shop are asleep.  
The carcasses of pigs sleep too. Backyards  
and houses. Watch-dogs in their chains lie cold.  
In cellars sleeping cats hold up their ears.  
Mice sleep, and men. And London soundly sleeps.  
A schooner nods at anchor. The salt sea  
talks in its sleep with snows beneath her hull,  
and melts into the distant sleeping sky.  
John Donne has sunk in sleep... (Brodsky and Kline, in Maxton 63)

This trajectory from “everything” (*usnulo vsë*) to every separate thing, from the general to the particular is reminiscent of running one’s fingers through and turning over someone’s abandoned belongings in an attempt to imagine or remember the person. What this attention zooms in on is not the object, but rather what or who it represents. In both cases the objects are the extensions of a past era and of a person who is gone, but the assemblage of objects is what enables us to temporarily reconstruct them.

Some objects’ nostalgic subtext is less evident in the poetry but is revealed in the prose of the essay which explicitly reveals their connection to childhood memories. For instance, the image of yellow lanterns lighting up a dark street was generated, as the reader of the essay discovers, by a memory of taking in the sight of the father’s Navy uniform – an early ritual of filial love (again, very relatable to any child of the war generation):

In no way could it [the school uniform] match my father’s pitch-black overcoat with two rows of yellow buttons that suggested an avenue at night. And when he’d unbutton it, underneath you’d see the dark-blue tunic with yet another file of the same buttons: a dimly lit street in evening. “A street within an avenue” – this is how I thought of my father, looking askance at him as we walked home from the museum. (*Less than One* 468)

Here, indeed the prose works as a “laboratory of poetic creation,” to employ a formulation from “The Poet and Prose,” allowing a retrospective glimpse into the formation of one of Brodsky’s favorite similes. Different variations on this simile occur in a range of poems from early experiments to signature pieces. For example, a

pre-emigration Petersburg cycle, “*S fevralia po april*” (“From February to April,” 1969-1970), seems to contain the kernel of the structure and imagery of “Lagoon:”

*Река – как блузка,  
на фонари растегнутая. Садик  
дворцовый пуст. Над статуями кровель  
курится люстра  
луны, в чьем свете император-всадник  
свой высеребрил изморозью профиль. (Stikhotvoreniia 229)*

*The river is like a blouse,  
unbuttoned along the [line of] streetlamps. The palace  
garden is empty. Above the statues of the roofs  
a chandelier of the moon  
is steaming, in its light a/the horse-riding emperor  
silvered his profile with frost mist.<sup>9</sup>*

The same image, repeated almost verbatim, appears in “Lullaby of Cape Cod” (1975); it develops and refines many of the motifs that were key in “Noon in a Room” – petrification, memory and oblivion, and the projection of time (as a location in personal and cultural history) on space (as a geographic location and a physical dimension), of meaning – on numbers. This poem, written three years after the poet’s emigration, marked the beginning of the

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<sup>9</sup> My translation and emphasis.

“American period” in Brodsky’s poetry in Russian and, for many of his readers back home, became a sign of the resurgence of his poetic powers.

Выползая из недр океана, краб на пустынном пляже  
зарывается в мокрый песок с кольцами мыльной пряхи,  
дабы остынуть, и засыпает. Часы на кирпичной башне  
лязгают ножницами. Пот катится по лицу.  
*Фонари в конце улицы, точно пуговицы у  
растегнутой на груди рубашки.*  
Духота. [...] (*Stikhotvoreniia* 328)

Crawling to a vacant beach from the vast wet  
of ocean, a crab digs into sand laced with sea lather  
and sleeps. A giant clock on a brick tower  
rattles its scissors. The face is drenched with sweat.  
*The streetlamps glisten in the stifling weather,  
formally spaced,  
like white shirt buttons open to the waist.*  
It’s stifling. [...] <sup>10</sup>

In both poems, the image is associated with darkness, blurred vision, and the metamorphoses of the surroundings; the sensation of being alienated from the familiar context is, however, combined with heightened awareness of the location’s significance

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<sup>10</sup> Translated by Antony Hecht, the emphasis is mine. (*Collected Poems* 116)

for one's life and for the moment in history. As always with Brodsky, the simultaneous presence and absence of a concrete location is not a contradiction, but rather an invitation to exercise one's imagination beyond material borders. The essay section in question is in fact devoted to the contradictory nature of the author's attitude to the uniform – the main (and often the only) attire every citizen of the post-war Soviet Union had – its ability to situate a person in a certain context (school, army, state organizations and services, etc.) while concealing (or obliterating) their deeper, personal backgrounds and aspirations. Despite its elevated symbolism (Brodsky associated the Navy with the Russian Empire and, thus, saw it as something opposed to Soviet conformism), even as a child, he was able to sense the double bottom of this, otherwise enticing and smart cover; his father's versatile knowledge and inclinations made it split at the seams:

This six-foot-tall navy commander knew quite a lot about civilian life, and gradually I began to view his uniform as a disguise; more precisely, the idea about the distinction of form and content began to take root in my schoolboy mind. His uniform had to do with the effect no less than the present content of the facades he was pointing at. In my schoolboy's mind this disparity would refract, of course, into an invitation to lie (not that I needed one); deep down though, I think this taught me the principle of maintaining appearances, no matter what is going on inside. (467)

Thus, both in the twilight of a Leningrad frosty evening (“From February to April”) and in the suffocating heat of the night “at the Eastern end of the Empire” (“Lullaby of Cape Cod”), the protagonist is peering through darkness and trying to make out the deeper tissue of life behind familiar or expected facades. Both poems are written

“at the crossroads” in a literal and figurative sense; both express a quiet wonder at being alive: “*i schastliv ty, I ni smotria ni na / chto, zhiv eshcho. [...]*” (и счастлив ты, и, не смотря ни на что, жив еще), he concludes in the first one, while, in the second, mentioning halfway through the first stanza – “*Stranno dumat', cto vyzhil, not eto sluchilos. [...]*” (Странно думать, что выжил, но это случилось.). The dedication of “Lullaby” to A.B., i.e. to Brodsky’s estranged son (Andrei Basmanov), suggests that the speaker’s glance is turned “back” to Leningrad, from the shore of his new homeland, but still at the edge of it – at the extreme point that allows for the most, physically reachable, proximity to the home he left behind. Only the stoic pose of a traveler-explorer in an unknown land (analogous to the safe image of the Russian Navy officer) and the “uniform” of a “poem on the occasion” of the two-hundredth anniversary of the United States\* can help contain the pathos of the situation – of “what’s going on inside.”

However, just a year later, in Italy, which became his new cultural and poetic homeland, Brodsky writes one of his most poignant poems on exile “*Dekakbr' vo Florentsii*” (“December in Florence”), in which he sings of a city “to which one can never return” and in which “the crowd [...] speaks the language of a man, who departed.” It is a poem written from the other side of a crossroad (after exile), when the sense of wonder (at survival, at the change of one’s context) is dulled and nostalgia is bursts through.

Perhaps, this is why the streetlamp trope metamorphoses further, the buttons turning into anti-memory pills: “*Glaz, migaia, zaglatyvaiet, pogruzhaias v syryie / sumerki, kak tabletki ot pamiati, fonari [...]*” (Глаз, мигая, заглатывает, погружаясь в сырые / сумерки, как таблетки от памяти, фонари...). Perhaps, this is the effect of the Florence’s architecture, It is too reminiscent of the father and son’s routine walks through

the streets of Leningrad – of the father’s voice relating the history of the buildings and their inhabitants, and of the yellow glow of his uniform buttons in the dark. Brodsky’s autobiographical writing “unlocks,” as it were, the context of the signature imagery of his poetry. Not unlike a good translation, the prose can stand on its own, but, combined with the instances of its “original” in poems, it produces the effect of double vision, in which both serve as a commentary on each other.

Besides parallels on the level of imagery (intertext), the autobiographical prose “extends” poetic conceptions on a deeper, structural level. Such is the relation between the poem “Noon in a Room” (analyzed in Chapter II) and the essay “In a Room and a Half” that concludes the collection *Less than One*. The parallels between the essay and the poem begin with the meaningful assonance of their titles. Both are speaking of entities that are divided at midpoint and are about halves. In fact, the Russian word *polden'* (noon) contains the same root *pol* (half) as the word *poltory* (one and a half) and literally means “half a day.” Both titles speak of the room as the location or indication of this division (into halves). Equidistant from the edges of fullness, both noon and half a room are as if exhibiting a line to cross, highlighting a border between two polarities. They speak of symmetry and gesture towards arithmetical operations of division and subtraction that are frequent metaphors in Brodsky’s poetry. To a certain extent they reflect the themes that are explored both in this quintessentially Brodskian poem of reserve and metaphysical inquiry and in his most lyrical and unambiguous essay, with its autobiographical dedication to his parents and the poignant expression of personal loss.

As demonstrated in my analysis of the long poem in Chapter II, its structure presents an oscillation between the autobiographical and nostalgic references and

metaphysical meditations – the two parts, often divided by the mention of *polden'* (noon), slowly gravitate towards each other collapsing (into each other) in the last stanzas discussing the purpose of writing (a poetic pronouncement). While personal memory blurs into abstract visions (a room with mirrors and tall windows, a wintry city at the mouth of a river on the edge of an Empire) and words fail to express the complexity of associations, numbers come to the rescue, offering stability and precision. Read against the poem, the essay, it could be argued, exhibits a similar structure.

The essay opens by reminiscing on a casual detail of familial life: the author finds himself carrying a habit of his Leningrad life into his new American reality and well beyond its practical implementation. He remembers the polished parquet floors of the old *kommunalka* and his mother's desperate attempts to protect them from wear and tear. She would resort to superstition and promise "death in the family" to make the men wear shoes or slippers at all times. Although he suspects there is a prosaic flip side to this mysterious ritual (i.e. a way to counteract the smell of men's feet in this "pre-deodorant era"), the wood of the floors is forever bound to bring up the thought of death, its incomprehensible ways and inevitable nature. This "parquet's affinity with wood, earth, etc." presents a striking parallel with the opening stanza of the poem in which the speaker observes the merging of the parquet floor wood and the midday sun (447):

Солнце, войдя в зенит,  
луч кладя на паркет, себя  
этим деревенит. (I)

The sun, upon reaching its zenith,  
lays its ray down on the parquet, turning



itself into wood.

Metonymy is the main mechanism of memory retrieval in this section of the essay: the members of one's family are connected through the touch of their feet on the parquet floor, whose origin in wood and trees connects it to the soil that underlies all the routes of the city, uninterrupted by its frequent bodies of water. Objects and locations are seen as extensions of human lives and as participating in the process of preservation. Indeed, the main theme of the essay is summed up in the last sentence of the section: "I guess, I want to keep things the way they were in our family, now that I'm what's left of it" (448). The parquet floor is the central image of the poem "Noon in a Room": the sun functions by way of metonymy, turning objects and humans into the petrified shadow silhouettes. A flashback of a familiar casual situation – sitting still on a chair in a sunlit room at a midday siesta to the tune of a space heater – is striving to isolate this moment out of historical time and to preserve it in personal memory. Just like in the poem, the next chapter of the essay resorts to figures (numbers): they clarify, but also immortalize the remembered reality in a universal abstraction. "There were three of us in that room and a half of ours: my father, my mother, and I" (448). This number is described as lucky: "All three of us survived the war (and I say "all three" because I, too, was born before it, in 1940); my parents, however, survived the thirties also" (449). It is a big number for the family that survived the War, and almost an unimaginable one for a Jewish family. Suddenly, the prevalence of the number of people over the number of rooms appears as fortunate, reflecting the abundance (of relatives, of life) rather than lack (of rooms). Other figures are introduced to give a clarifying context to this conclusion: 1930 is a number that does not require a footnote in a Russian memoir; serving as a sort

of euphemism for the Stalinist Terror with its pronounced antisemitic slant, it is able to convey layers of condensed meaning that escape any verbal signification (any political term, description, storytelling, etc.), or, to quote from the poem “clarifies the myth by repeating the number.”

This tendency is repeated throughout the essay echoing the structure of the poem: a motif of personal memory is followed by some version of digital coding. Further, for instance, the second section’s long and detailed description of his parents’ daily routine, the *byt* of caring for possessions and of performing chores, concludes with an image eerily reminiscent of the poem’s centaur image: “This way, seated in a chair in the empty room and a half, a neighbor found my father dead a year ago.” (450) In the poem, the figure of the centaur is composed of a human body petrified on a chair, thus, introducing the theme of petrification and monumentalization as resistance to human mortality. In the following section of the essay, section 3, the author is trying to make sense of this personal loss by recounting his father’s existence in numbers: He had outlived his wife by thirteen months. Out of seventy-eight years of her life and eighty of his, I’ve spent only thirty-two years with them. I know almost nothing about how they met, about their courtship; I don’t even know the way they lived the last eleven or twelve years of their lives, the years without me. (450)

This mathematics of presence in each other’s lives (closeness, intimacy, propinquity, coexistence...), the addition and subtraction of lifetimes, suppresses the tragedy and nostalgia of the retrospection and sublimates it into a meditation on the art of dying that we “learn from our parents” and on the role of hereditary in what constructs our essence.

The numerical encoding happens throughout the essay. In section 4 the author uses a succession of numbers to locate the apartment in the legendary Muruzi House before he launches into its history: “Our room and a half was part of a huge enfilade, one-third of a block in length, on the northern side of a six-story building that faced the street and a square at the same time. [...] Erected in 1903, the year of my father’s birth, it was the architectural sensation of St. Petersburg of that period” (451-452). He proceeds to relate to the Western reader the economy of space prescribed by Soviet architecture that was guided by the ideological doctrines of communal living: “In the U.S.S.R., the living quarter's minimum per person is 9 square meters. We should have considered ourselves lucky, because due to the oddity of our portion of the enfilade, the three of us wound up with a total of 40 meters” (452). A few pages down, he recalls the composition (floor plan, constitution, make up, structure) of the *kommunalka* in terms of the number of the dwellers and their rooms:

Apart from an excess of thirteen square meters, we were terribly lucky because the communal apartment we had moved into was small. That is the part of the enfilade that constituted it contained six rooms partitioned in such a way that they gave home to only four families. Including ourselves, only eleven people lived there. As communal apartments go, the dwellers can easily amount to a hundred. The average, though, is somewhere between twenty-five and fifty. Ours was almost tiny. (454)

Section 8 starts with the measurements of the rooms themselves:

Our ceiling was some fourteen, if not more, feet high, adorned with the same Moorishstyle plaster ornamentation, which, combined with cracks and stains from

occasionally bursting pipes upstairs, turned into a highly detailed map of some nonexistent superpower or archipelago. There were three very tall arched windows... (457)

Tracing his lineage through literary topography, Brodsky tries to inscribe his address into the literary history of St Petersburg (the Russian cradle of secular literature) by connecting it to Pushkin's genealogy through the underlying proximity of numbers or literary arithmancy:

Pushkin once lived on that part of the street... His was Number 11, I think; ours was Number 27... Yet, since our building was at the street's intersection with the fabled Liteiny Prospect, our postal address read: Liteiny Pr. # 24, Apt. 28. [...] I am mentioning it here not because it has any specific significance but because my pen, presumably, will never write this address again. (458)

Later, in section 41, the telephone number is casually brought up only to reveal that it is now erased from memory:

A mark of [memory's] deficiency is that it retains odd items. Like our first, then fivedigit number that we had after the war. It was 265-39, and I suppose I still remember it because the phone was installed when I was memorizing the multiplication system in school. It is of no use to me now: in the same way as our last number, in our room and a half, is of no use anymore. I don't remember it, the last one, although for the past twelve years I called it almost every week. (495)

Consistent within his metaphysical worldview, Brodsky insists on the sentimental and symbolic, rather than the practical meaning of numbers.

To a Russian reader the passage will inevitably evoke the famous lines from Mandelstam's poem, "*Ya vernulsia v moi gorod, znakomyi do slyoz...*" ("I returned to my city...," 1930), which overtly explores the theme of numbers (of a telephone or an address) as symbolic of people who are lost in Time while the matrix of the place (the matrix of the city's topography and its telephone lines) still contains them:

Петербург, я еще не хочу умирать:  
У тебя телефонов моих номера.  
Петербург, у меня еще есть адреса,  
По которым найду мертвецов голоса.

Petersburg, I've no wish to die just yet:  
give me those phone numbers of mine you've kept.  
Petersburg, I still know each and every address  
that I'll need to track down the voices of the dead.<sup>11</sup>

This reference illuminates the intertext of "Noon in a Room" in which truncated rhymes from Mandelstam's text (*umira/nomera* as opposed to *umirat'/nomera*) are woven into Brodsky's metaphysical meditation on the digital universe:

В будущем цифры рассеют мрак.  
Цифры не умира.  
Только меняют порядок, как  
телефонные номера.

---

<sup>11</sup> Translation by Alistair Noon.

In the future numbers will dissipate the  
darkness.

Numbers do not d.

They only switch places, like [in]  
telephone numbers.

Finally, figures connoting age are appealed to as a means of defining the point of  
no return in the process of losing the sense of one's personal agency while growing up in  
the historical environment of a totalitarian state:

So when and where, I ask myself, does the transition from freedom to slavery  
acquire the status of inevitability? [...] At what age is it most harmless to alter  
one's free state? At the age of twenty? Fifteen? Ten? Five? In the womb? [...]  
But on October 25, 1917, my father was already fourteen, my mother twelve. She  
already knew some French; he, Latin... (483)

However, the chapter circles back to the mundane just as a flash of high lyrical tone  
resolves into a memory of the routine phone conversation about the therapeutic qualities  
of dishwashing, in the casual phone conversation Brodsky reconstructs with his mother:

“What were you doing five minutes ago, before you called?” “Actually, I was  
doing the dishes.” “Oh, that's very good. It's a very good thing to do: the dishes.  
Sometimes it's awfully therapeutic.” (451)

A reader familiar with Brodsky's poetry will glean the reference to the lines from  
one of his early “room poems:”

I am sitting by the window. I have washed the dishes.

I was happy here but will be no more.

The perfective verb *pomyl* (have washed) of the poem contrasts with the past continuous of the prose, as if, when the dishes are done, the natural flow of life is concluded or interrupted. The echo from the poem informs this snippet of a phone conversation in a new way: perhaps, washing dishes is a ritual of transition from everyday existence into introspection (or meditation) and transcendence on a higher plane of being – the metaphysical plane. This is analogous to the shift from writing poetry to writing prose which may be deemed to be as casual and therapeutic as washing the dishes, but, as we now can assume based on the implications of the poem, also carries with it the potential of transcendence.

Besides following the same structure of memories and of numerical alternation, the essay as if dividing the room and a half into symbolic zones, repeats the associative range of the poem. In a manner reminiscent of Mandelstam's autobiographical essays, *Shum vremeni* (*The Noise of Time*, 1925) the essay presents the room as a personal and metaphysical microcosm, in which every piece of furniture, every habitable zone represents a sphere of life and an element in the structure of the Universe. It can be argued that in prose, like in poetry, Brodsky continues and develops the tradition of the Metaphysical poets, the conceit of the room gleaming through the personal and factual account of "In a Room and a Half." Indeed, critic John Freccero claims that the literary innovation of the Metaphysical poets lies not so much in their exploit of "time-worn banalities" (24), but in the fact that their poetry creates a new interpretive reality for the questions of life and resurrection, parting and reunion, absence and presence by establishing "a new *symbolic* cosmology" (author's italics, 25)--a cosmology that offers

new solutions to old questions (25-26). Rosemund Tuve seconds Freccero when she notes the multilayered quality of their imagery and defines Metaphysical conceits as “an image combining a complex number of formal categories, or “places,” in the construction of its meaning.” (qtd. in Bloom 51-52) The dual capability of the Metaphysical conceit would thus be its power to condense many logically consistent meanings within the scope of a single image or word, and conversely, its power to expand the semantic field of an image into a multiple range of possible meanings.

The essay continues the motif the “room poems” by exploring the room conceit: the theme of establishing oneself as an autonomous independent person (or element) through the creation of one’s own place. At a basic level, it starts with one’s own private space, however little may be available. One’s private space, for Brodsky as well as for many others from his generation, had to be constructed, “designed,” and fought for through the erection of physical as well as of metaphysical walls around oneself. Brodsky was luckier than many who had to share one room (a “living room–cum-bedroom,” as Brodsky would put it) with their many relatives having at best a curtain to cover up their nocturnal or toilet nudity. He, at least, had a half a room of his own; his alcove with two tall Moorish arcs separating his space from his parents’ room could be turned into a more-or-less private study by means of partitioning it off with a bookcase or wardrobe (in Russian one and the same word, *shkaf*, is used to refer to either) and a pile of suitcases. “The net effect was that of a barricade; behind it, though the gamin felt safe, and a Marianne could bare more than just her breast.” (476) Since the number of rooms and square meters was strictly supervised by both local authorities (“fairly frequent inspections of our building’s super,” 474) and “good” neighbors (who “save one [...]



didn't inform to the police," 454) and had to remain in its original state, a temporary partition was all one could hope for. "One had to design a palliative, and that was what I was busy at from the age of fifteen on." (475) I find it emblematic that of all "mind-boggling arrangements" – from armoires and curtains, barricades of suitcases and even a project of a twelve-foot-high aquarium with a door – what survived was a *shkaf*, the ultimate barricade between the young poet's privacy and communal hell.

While in the essay "In a Room and a Half" Brodsky refers to a bookcase as a laughable attempt of a teenager to lead an independent life, in one of his room poems the metaphysical layer of this partitioning comes forth: "*Запрись и забаррикадируйся шкафом / от хроноса, космоса, эроса, расы, вируса.*" ("Lock and barricade yourself in with a wardrobe/bookcase / from Chronos, cosmos, eros, race, virus.") The word "to barricade" appears frequently in Brodsky's essay echoing the last lines of "Don't Leave the Room." It might be that this word was simply evoked through association with post-war vocabulary, automatically chosen over the more peaceful "*загородиться*" or "*заслониться*" (to shield or to screen oneself off) for example. However, this word renders acutely the metaphysical situation of the poem, thanks exactly to its military connotations. To barricade oneself is to surround oneself with heavy and bulky items against the attack of a superior number of people or the overwhelmingly ascendant power of an enemy. It is a position of the last stronghold but also the state of being cornered. This word has an echo of a siege – a siege of Leningrad\*--still fresh in the ruinous appearance of the native city. When placed within the same line with concepts such as "Chronos, cosmos, eros, race and virus" it enhances the feeling of being overwhelmed,

cornered by the totality of categories that seem to actively seek entrance into one's life. It conveys the need for stronger, sturdier boundaries, for it will not be enough to simply shut the door in the face of any single one of these concepts, each being too powerful to withstand. A *shkaf* is a barricade and a stronghold and the guarantor of the existence of private space, the "virtually expendable *lebensraum*" for a young poet.

### **Room as a Microcosm in Poetry and Prose**

If we choose to translate *shkaf* as a bookcase, rather than as a wardrobe, the link between Brodsky and the Modernist tradition of prose-writing poets become even more evident. It reinforces a connection with another name from Brodsky's poetic pantheon – Osip Mandelstam. As with Marina Tsvetaeva, the parallels between him and the poets of the previous generation are numerous. In his essay on Mandelstam "The Child of Civilization," Brodsky identifies how his precursor experienced "the official ostracism of the thirties," "growing separation from any form of mass production, especially linguistic and psychological", and a biography riddled by historical turmoil—experiences that eerily anticipate Brodsky's own in a later era (133). Moreover, Brodsky's characterization of Mandelstam's childhood are a paraphrase of his own: "One war is lost, another – a world war – is impending, and you are a little Jewish boy with a heart full of Russian iambic pentameters" (132).

Mandelstam's autobiographical prose *The Noise of Time* contains a chapter straightforwardly called "Knizhnyi Shkap" ("The Bookcase" in the old style), which is devoted to a description of a bookcase in which both his father's and his mother's – Jewish-German and Russian – cultural legacies were mixed together. The motifs of

this essay echo in Brodsky's "In a Room and Half" in its meticulous reconstruction of the interior and the reflective associative analysis of the *shkaf*'s role in the *byt* and cultural structure of the family. Amidst the "Judaic chaos," as Mandelstam terms it, of his father's office with its home-made oak armchair, balalaika with a mitten carved on its bow, and a Turkish ottoman filled with ledgers. A "petite-bourgeois" writing desk – a "small bookcase veiled with green taffeta curtains over the glass doors" – stood as an apotheosis of the mongrel nature of this household. For Mandelstam, it represented a primary and indelible imprint of World Literature:

The bookcase of early childhood is a man's companion for life. The arrangement of its shelves, the choice of books, the colors of the spines are for him the color, height, and arrangement of world literature itself. And as for books which were not included in that first bookcase— they were never to force their way into the universe of world literature. Every book in the first bookcase is, willy-nilly, a classic, and not one of them can ever be expelled. (Mandelstam and Brown 78)

The finality of this first bookcase, this "geological bed" that "had been deposited over decades," for all its heterogeneity, emanates stability and wholesomeness; like a hearth\*, it is primal, central, and sustaining. It is able to contain the "spiritual strain of the whole kin with a graft of alien blood in it" and to arrange literature into a clear hierarchy, with the dust and ruin of Talmud volumes at its foundations, neat rows of German Romantics as if supporting the portico of Russian classics, in which Pushkin in its "cassock of no color at all" and of "almost physical appeal" rivaled with Lermontov's hussar spirit in a cover of military green. Here the forbidden and "heavy" Dostoyevsky was visually identical to the "all open" Turgenev with his "tranquil life" of Baden-Baden

that, one felt, was “nowhere to be found” anymore (Brown 79). In this bookshelf one can detect multiple manifestations of family culture and self as its product: the feeling of national Jewish pride that sounded like a French governess’s exalted panegyric to Napoleon or Hugo out of a young teacher’s mouth, but was to be kept to oneself once out on the streets; the notion of belonging, at least partially, to the “intelligentsia,” a word that was whispered rather than said; the melancholic smoldering of the previous generation on the candlewick of *Nadsonovshchina*. All of these qualities are contained in the little bookcase, as if in a fortress sieged by the “drab surroundings of the mercantile room” of father’s office and its “alien world” infused with the scent of leather, the “smell of the yoke of labor” (Brown 77). (Mandelstam’s father was a leather merchant.) In Mandelstam’s essay the bookcase is both a site of containment and of liberation; its hereditary powers are imposing, while its coincidental arrangement reveals the incongruities between ideals and reality and encourages a search for lofty ideals.

Unlike Mandelstam’s *shkap*, Brodsky’s barricading *shkaf* was not inherited, but rather cultivated and composed, growing along with and out of the independent perspective that the writer developed fairly early. Reconstructing a routine evening in a room and a half, he remembers a reproach of everyday banter:

“Are you reading your Dos Passos again?” [my mother] would remark, setting the table. “Who is going to read Turgenev?” “What do you expect from him?” my father would echo, folding a paper. “Loafer is the word.” (*In a Room* 456)

Elsewhere Brodsky does mention that his mother played a role in initiating his life-long relationship with a library and that the first book of poetry he checked out – *Gulistan* by Saadi – was her recommendation and is evidence of their intellectual affinity.

It is clear from the passage quoted above and from his discussion elsewhere of other parental influences, such as for example his mother's knowledge of German or his father's fascination with everything Chinese, that his literary interests did not take root in his parents' bookcase. Early on Brodsky started forming his own library and soon this independent hearth was fully aglow. The Brodsky papers kept at The National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg include a catalogue of his home, or rather his room's library ("Katalog ego biblioteki"), in which the titles in English completely outnumber those in any other language, including Russian. 185 of 302 items of the catalogue are books in English, predominantly books of selected poetry or poetry anthologies of various American and British authors. Among them there is poetry by John Donne (3 copies of selected poems and two copies of anthologies of Metaphysical poetry), William Blake, H. Melville (2 copies), S.T. Coleridge, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, along with Ezra Pound and Sylvia Plath, as well as W. S. Merwin, James Merrill, Williams Carlos Williams and contemporary authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Richard Wilbur, Ted Hughes, Denise Levertov, Tom Stoppard, etc., not counting works by American and British authors in Russian translations. Of the Russian authors on Brodsky's bookshelf there survived Pushkin, Lermontov, Nikolai Gogol, Vladislav Khodasevich, and Eduard Bagritsky and Boris Pasternak's translation of Hamlet and a few (random) contemporary names such as Daniil Granin and Yan Satunovsky. Surprisingly, Anna Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva are not represented here. Of course, most of the Russian classics could be easily checked out from any library, whereas books in English, especially the editions owned by Brodsky, were as inaccessible as collector's items and, thus, received preference on the limited space of the bookshelves in a room

and a half. However, even considering this circumstance, the literary canon described above is highly unconventional, even for a Soviet writer of the Thaw years. It seems deliberate and consciously curated from material that is quite foreign, in literal and metaphorical sense, from the poet's immediate environment of his pre-emigration years.

The conscious creation of the bookcase as a barricade becomes salient in opposition to the significance of another piece of furniture – a chest of drawers, with its symbolic function as memory storage (see the passage quoted above). Presenting the drawers as a place of storage for the family's "collective subconscious," Brodsky underscores the undeliberate and random quality of the chests' eclectic contents. The objects kept there are, indeed, mostly memorabilia that have no place in the future. Brodsky's father will never wear his Navy uniform anymore, and his mother will hardly have an occasion to use the precious china. They may have been cherished items but were preserved without any purpose or grand design in mind. In a similar manner he characterizes his parents' "very catholic" tastes in literature: "They were just readers – evening readers, to be more precise – and they were always careful to renew their library cards" (488). In contrast, the contents of his bookcase are very deliberate and are oriented toward the future, rather than to the past. The books that stood there by the time the catalogue was recorded were not to be found in any Soviet libraries or bookstores, and to some extent could even cast a shadow on their owner. Every statuette, every photo, every book is a brick in the walls of "the room" in which one can exercise one's intellectual freedom. Unlike his parents, who "took everything as a matter of course: the system, their powerlessness, their poverty, their wayward son" and "simply tried to make the best of everything" (449), Brodsky, since a very young age, is determined to create his own

space, his own community of “dead poets” and map out his own itinerary. Unlike Mandelstam’s inherited bookcase that represented the cultural baggage of his family’s intellectual history, Brodsky’s bookcase is a self-made cradle of idiosyncratic thinking and a shrine to heterodoxy – a barricade against conformity.

This comes forth in Brodsky’s own words when he describes Mandelstam’s idiosyncrasies, attributing the poet’s marginal existence to his resistance to “being topical” and his persistence in finding creative autonomy: “When a man creates a world of his own, he becomes a foreign body against which all laws are aimed: gravity, compression, rejection, annihilation” (134). Interestingly, frustrating the reader’s expectation, Brodsky appears here to refer not to the criminal law by which both were convicted, but to the laws of physics and human interaction, transferring it again into the realm of metaphysics.

Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), in the chapter devoted to Brodsky’s essay, notes how the poet’s metaphysical concerns emerge out of the concrete locale of the “room and a half.” She points out the text’s obsession with time and with objects and their thingness in connection with the practice of estrangement. The objects’ indifference to the outside world and their longer lifetime are contemplated and even envied by the speaker in the room as well. The ability of the inanimate world of things to extend their existence into time and space due to their relative immortality and representative power respectively is something beyond human nature. No wonder why she focuses on the poem “Torso” from *A Part of Speech* – a poem that resembles a baroque allegory of eternity and history – in which she reveals the double trace of both the Baroque and Russian poetic re-inscription of the *Exegii Monumentum* genre (298).

Petrification or thingness of the objects collected in Brodsky's real, physical room is related not only to an extension into time (or memory), but also – into space, through their symbolic or metonymic connection to locations outside the room. Boym notes that the trope of Empire in Brodsky's poetry, which in different contexts can imply the Hellenic, Roman, Ottoman, Byzantine, Soviet, or American empires and “that continuation of space and time that annihilates exile.” Similarly, the city in “Noon in a Room” is a metaphor for any of the world culture's capitals – from Pompeii to Rome to Petersburg to Venice (300). While Boym sees nostalgia as a driving force for this entropy in space and time, I see the trope of a room as its departure point, as a center of the centrifugal force of the writer's imagination. To paraphrase Donne (in “The Good-Morrow”) one little room becomes an everywhere and an isolation within its intimate space brings spiritual awakening.

Like later in *Watermark*, Brodsky skillfully interweaves native Russian and Western intertexts, always leaning towards Modernism. The “room trope” can be found throughout World literature; for example, Baudelaire's *Paysage* comes to mind with its speaker having taken the vantage point *du haut de [sa] mansard* (high up in the mansard) to observe the city; however, the spectatorship that occurs behind the closed shutters signaled by the poet's head gravitating towards the writing desk (“ne fera pas lever mon front de mon pupitre”) is what spurs on the creative process:

*Et quand viendra l'hiver aux neiges monotones,*

*Je fermerai partout portières et volets*

*Pour bâtir dans la nuit mes féeriques palais.*



And when winter comes with its monotonous snow,  
I shall close all the shutters and draw all the drapes  
So I can build at night my fairy palaces.<sup>12</sup>

In the poem's first lines, where *éclogues* rhymes with *les astrologues* the connection of the process of composition with the metaphysical imagination is established. The idea is elegantly framed in the last lines deeming the poet able to generate his own climate within the room ("*...de faire/De mes pensers brûlants une tiède atmosphère.*") to withstand the wintry monotony outside. Pushkin's introduction to *Mednyi vsadnik* (*The Bronze Horseman*, 1833) establishes a similar connection between the surreal landscape of the city veiled by the disorienting phenomenon of white nights and creativity; poetic inspiration emanates from it, expressed as love to the city and its function as a backdrop to the poet in his room:

Люблю... Твоих задумчивых ночей  
Прозрачный сумрак, блеск безлунный,  
*Когда я в комнате моей*  
*Пишу, читаю без лампы,*  
И ясны спящие громады  
Пустынных улиц, и светла  
Адмиралтейская игла,  
И, не пуская тьму ночную  
На золотые небеса,  
Одна заря сменить другую

---

<sup>12</sup> Translation by William Aggeler.

Спешит, дав ночи полчасца.

O how I love ...

Your pensive nights of moonless light

And lambent dusk, when I, contented,

*Sit in my room and read and write*

*Without a lamp*, while in the nearly

Deserted streets huge buildings clearly

Loom up, asleep; and solar fire

Plays on the Admiralty spire;

And Dusk directly (as if plotting

To keep the golden skies alight)

Hands on the torch to Dawn, allotting

A brief half-hour to cheated Night.<sup>13</sup> (Pushkin and Dewey 60)

However, unlike Pushkin, Brodsky famously rejected the French poetic tradition as a lodestar for the Russian poet, being known for saying in an interview: “The French didn’t seem to have anything interesting [...]” (Polukhina 141). Brodsky’s prose takes the somewhat trite image celebrated by Baudelaire and Pushkin and infuses it with a Dostoyevskian motif of soul-searching and transgression epitomized in Raskolnikov’s “*kamorka*” – another literary landmark of Petersburg, for which the city is an oppressive, rather than inspirational background. The room is what the reader immediately encounters on the first pages of *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866) as it becomes inseparable from the protagonist’s psyche:

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<sup>13</sup> My emphasis.

On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge. He had successfully avoided meeting his landlady on the staircase. His garret was under the roof of a high, five-storied house and *was more like a cupboard than a room*. The landlady who provided him with garret, dinners, and attendance, lived on the floor below, and every time he went out he was obliged to pass her kitchen, the door of which invariably stood open. And each time he passed, the young man had a sick, frightened feeling, which made him scowl and feel ashamed [...]. (Garnett 3)

Lines from “Don’t Leave the Room” resound like an echo of this famous opening of Dostoyevsky’s most claustrophobic novel: “Only to the bathroom, and immediately back...” The omnipresent *shkaf*, a generic noun which this time was translated by Garnett as “a cupboard,” implies extreme isolation and, perhaps, petrification, or thingness, of the one enclosed in it.

Raskolnikov, or rather “a young man,” as he is identified in the early pages of the novel, foreshadowing another Petersburg troubled young man, avoids contact with people not because he is “in debt all over,” but rather due to his extreme introspection and “hypochondria” born out of his thought process. Dostoyevsky’s hermit in a room cannot stand any disruptive intrusion from the outside:

He had become so completely absorbed in himself, and isolated from his fellows that he dreaded meeting, not only his landlady, but any one at all. (3)

He had got completely away from everyone, like a tortoise in its shell, and even the sight of the servant girl who had to wait upon him and looked sometimes into

his room made him writhe with nervous irritation. He was in the condition that overtakes some monomaniacs entirely concentrated upon one thing. (34)

Raskolnikov, wincing at the sight of a girl who “would stray into his room with a broom” (an amusing and symbolically potent alliteration of Garnett’s translation), is strangely reminiscent of Brodsky’s protagonist in “Don’t Leave the Room” who calls on the reader to “boot out” anyone (or, particularly *milka* - a female) who comes in “opening [their] yap.” The entropy suggested by the call to “blend one’s face with the wallpaper,” to become incognito, recognized only by the room itself is akin to Raskolnikov’s decrepit look that makes him merge with the shabbiness of his *kamorka* interior:

[...] he waked up bilious, irritable, ill-tempered and looked with hatred at his room. It was a tiny cupboard of a room about six paces in length. It had a poverty-stricken appearance with its dusty yellow paper peeling off the walls, and it was so low-pitched that a man of more than average height was ill at ease in it and felt every moment that he would knock his head against the ceiling. The furniture was in keeping with the room: there were three old chairs, rather rickety; a painted table in the corner on which lay a few manuscripts and book; the dust that lay upon them showed that they had been long untouched. A big clumsy sofa occupied almost the whole of one wall and half the floor space of the room; it was once covered with chintz, but was now in rags and served Raskolnikov as a bed. Often he went to sleep on as he was, without undressing, without sheets, wrapped in his old student overcoat [...]. (34)

The lack of space, where furniture pieces are used not according to their original function is a kind of fictional prolepsis for Brodsky's half a room. The struggle to make it into a full, hermetic shelter is there; however, Brodsky seems more satisfied with his "*Lebensraum*" than Dostoyevsky's protagonist, who looks at his abode "with hatred," similar to that of Baudelaire's disappointing awakening in the prose poem *Double Room*. The passing or see-through (*сквозной*) character of the "rooms" rented by the Petersburg poor, a prime example of which is the Marmeladovs' "room," fulfilled a different function than such rooms did in Brodsky's day. The nineteenth-century subject was crammed in the enfilades out of poverty rather than owing to an ideological premise, as was the case for *kommunalkas*, but such nineteenth-century rooms are nevertheless comparable to the permeable space of Brodsky's half a room:

A very poor-looking room about ten paces long was lighted up by a candle-end; the whole of it was visible from the entrance. [...] It appeared that the family had a [whole] room to themselves, not part of a room, but their room was practically a passage. The door leading to other rooms, or rather cupboards [*kletki* in the original], into which Amalia Lippevechsel's flat was divided, stood half open, and there was shouting uproar and laughter within. (30)

Being a passing room (*prokhdnaia*) between his parents' living room/bedroom and the corridor, and despite a variety of "mediastina" the young man would build, this was hardly a hermetic space. It, however, had the advantage of a separate entrance through, again, a *shkaf* and his father's darkroom – as if it were a tunnel to another, timeless, dimension.

Brodsky's speaker in the room shares with Dostoevsky's an obsession with wallpaper, that indispensable part of Russian and Soviet interior, aimed at making the curvy walls smoother and warmer, and the "grey reality" of existence within the four of them more colorful. Only with Dostoyevsky, the wallpaper is always the first indicator of decay and shabbiness (dirty and faded, peeling off from every wall in the novel), whereas for Brodsky it is simply a background for whatever object in the room is at present the focus of attention – be it a chair or the speaker's own silhouette. In Soviet times wallpaper was the only cheap alternative to remodeling. Layers upon layers of newspapers, affixed to the wall with wheat paste, formed the base for the latest gaudy pattern of wallpaper, which, if inadvertently torn, could reveal a snippet of the news from previous decades or a decree, a pamphlet, or a movie ad. This palimpsest of history and style, just like "the music on the bones" of Soviet self-made records, constructed from x-rays, became a symbol of the epoch, and Brodsky was most probably aware of this paradoxical symbolism. In this case, the line "blend your face with the wallpaper" becomes another call for transcending the category of time, or, perhaps, for joining the league of those buried under the layers of history. Thus, whereas for Dostoyevsky the persistently yellow (a color, traditionally, symbolic of madness in Russian literature) and decrepit wallpaper is only a sign of nervous breakdown that feeds the theories of transgression of the one in the room, for Brodsky it is an aspect of the metaphysical imagination.

Mandelstam's conscious construction of an idiosyncratic cultural identity and Dostoyevsky's extremely introspective and transgressive thought combine in Brodsky's room in a Donnean (or the Metaphysical style's) conjoining of the earthly and the

heavenly, the quotidian and the lofty, which blended in equal parts “makes one little room, an every where.” And if for Donne, the force that is responsible for the transcendence of this union is holy love between two mortals, in Brodsky’s poetics it is the force of estrangement by means of the metaphysical imagination, i.e. irrational, intuitive thinking in terms of, at times, scientific and, at other times, absolute categories of philosophy. Neither in the Russian tradition nor in the British Baroque is the trope of a room a separate or characteristic element of poetics (semiotic unit, perhaps). Brodsky’s poetry and prose distills the traces of this semiotic unit from the two traditions and inaugurates it as a distinct extended conceit of his idiosyncratic Metaphysical style.

Besides employing versatile intertexts from both the Russian and English traditions, there are other signs that Brodsky is targeting an Anglophone, and at times particularly American, audience in his English prose. References to distinctly American realities, such as a basketball net in the opening passage of the first essay of the collection (*Less than One* 3) or to the fact that “Kilroy was here” in connection with the slippery nature of memory, abound. Such examples are reflective of his embrace of a new culture and of his attempt to make the protagonist of the memoirs relatable to the new audience. Much of it – his equivoques to Freud or mediations on the photographic qualities of visual memories – are the seeds that he hopes to throw into the soil fertilized by his predecessor, Vladimir Nabokov.

In connection with the figure of Nabokov and the success of his prose with an American audience, one must ask, whether the switch to prose did the trick for Brodsky. In relationship to the discussion in the previous chapter of the reception of Brodsky’s self-translations, it is reasonable to explore the critics’ response to the prose, as it sheds

light on the role of language proficiency and genre expectation in the formation of Brodsky's figure as transnational writer. While language proficiency and the desire to be recognized by the American audience (and paid by publishers) are most often cited as the possible reasons behind Brodsky's decision to switch to prose, linguistic concerns are significantly less frequently cited in the reviews of his prose collections. In fact, most of them praise his English writing, picking a bone, instead, about the ideas and opinions, rhetoric, tone and, at times, style that is used to express all of it. Quite a number of the reviewers refer to Brodsky's fame as a Russian poet, while mentioning his exilic status and revisiting his biography; the remarks about the former, however, noticeably outweighs the latter in prose reviews, unlike in the majority of literature (prefaces, articles covering the case, biographical notes, introductions, reviews) surrounding his poetry. In general, it seems that the response to the poet's essayistic prose strives to situate this new Brodsky (or, perhaps, true Brodsky?) for the wider American literary milieu and to celebrate the appearance of a new voice among the writers of the period.

Indeed, the long silence that followed the new wave (since the heyday of Nabokov) of "translation wars" and preceded the first prose publications suggested Brodsky's failure in writing poetry in English for some, and brewing rebirth for others. There was a five-year break between his last collection of poems in translation *Verses on the Winter Campaign 1980*, published in 1981, and his first collection of essays *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (1986), many of the essays having appeared before in notable magazines.<sup>14</sup> The publication of *Less than One*, on the eve of his nomination for the

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<sup>14</sup> I mean a break in publications in English. Several works were still published in Russian in this period: *Rimskie elegii*. – New York: Russica, 1982; *Novye stansy k Avguste: stikhi k M.B.*, 1962-1982. – Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1983; *Mramor*. – Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1984; *Uraniia: novaia kniga stikhov*. – Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1984.



Nobel Prize in literature (just before April, 1986, according to the interview with David Montenegro, published in *Partisan Review*, vol 54 (04), 1987), established Brodsky as an essayist. Many critics welcomed his debut in a new genre. For example, in one of the most immediate reviews R.Z. Sheppard of *TIME Magazine* (April 7) calls Brodsky's essays on poets and novelists of the World canon (or his personal canon) "tributaries flowing toward a connecting sea" in which, for example, Auden's poem "September 1, 1939" appears "reimagined rather than reduced by the usual critical method." He suggests that Brodsky's English prose shows to good advantage his "taut" poetry as it "allows [him] to present himself in full figures of speech," while a range of themes "parade an extravagant talent and uncompromising intelligence" (70). John Bayley in his review "Mastering Speech" on the pages of *The New York Review of Books* (June 12) praises Brodsky's literary criticism as "outstanding" and "brilliant," pronouncing his essay on Derek Walcott to be "the most illuminating and understanding appraisal that has been written about the West Indian poet" (although Brodsky explicitly objects to calling Walcott that, instead referring to him as the "world poet" in one of his essays). He describes the effect produced by the poet's autobiographical essays as that "of an intelligence as lyrical and benign as Auden's [own]" and finds them "even more entrancing [...] than Nabokov's *Speak Memory* or Mandelstam's memoir, *The Noise of Time* – a dear compliment considering that Brodsky took Mandelstam's prose as a model. Thus, Bayley, in essence, proclaims that the pupil had surpassed the teacher. Some, like John Gross of *The New York Times* (May 6), speak of Brodsky as a writer already enjoying a "high reputation" that his essays, or rather their "blunt," "bold," and "forceful" tone, had earned him over the years. Although Gross finds some of it "badly

overwritten” and not entirely convincing (“doesn’t entirely carry conviction”) when speaking of the lamentable state of Russian contemporary prose, he admires Brodsky’s “mettle as a critic” and the overall “depth of commitment and imaginative sweep” of the collection (1).

The discussion of Brodsky’s language proficiency subsided significantly in comparison to the response to his poetry self-translation, which testifies either to the improvement that the years of silence brought, or to the success of the strategy of switching mediums – or both.

Indeed, no complaints of “translationese” or a “bad ear” for English can be found in the reviews of *Less than One*. In fact, many critics note as admirable the mastery of English the texts demonstrate. For example, in a short review in *Library Journal* (April 15), Natalie C. Tyler notes that the essays “evinces a supple, witty mastery of the English language” introducing Brodsky as a “sensitive translator” and a “stunning essayist” (82). Just months after Gross’s somewhat biting review in *The New York Times*, the newspaper publishes David Bethea’s enthusiastic response (July) to the collection, in which he celebrates Brodsky as a rare “event” - an ambassador of Russian culture in the West able to address an American audience in an English that is “marvelous in the variety of its stylistic palette” (3). He also insists on the exclusive nature of such a phenomenon of dual linguistic and cultural proficiency:

Mr. Brodsky is the only living Russian poet [...], who is both steeped enough in his own culture and at home enough in his adopted one to present the native to a foreign audience, or the foreign to a native one, in the language of that audience. (3)

In “Mastering Speech” – a title clearly alluding to linguistic proficiency – Bayley speaks of Brodsky as “a writer and a poet in English as well as in Russian,” and he echoes the poet’s own words describing him as “so much a citizen of the world.” It is these words on language as the seat of citizenship that he quotes in the premise of his piece, referring to the essay on Auden, most popular among the reviewers:

To master speech, as Auden and Brodsky have done it, matters far more than any amount earnest protests or right-thinking exhortations. Brodsky refers to Hellenic Greece, and by implication to demotic Cavafy, as an example of how language can triumph when empire fails; and he emphasizes that the vitality of English, extending “from Fresno to Kuala Lumpur, so to speak,” is embodied by Auden’s poem, written at a time when the English polity was in a parlous state. No matter what their local and parochial affiliations, Auden’s readers can be inspired, partly by the poem’s aid, “to become citizens of the Great English Language.”

The first essay collection seems to have convinced the literary community that the language (English) has been mastered and citizenship (in it) fully acquired (pledged), even if the tone is still questionable at times. Notably, the reviews issued after Brodsky was awarded the Noble Prize (December, 1987), tend to elide the language issue entirely, while savoring the details of Brodsky’s critical readings. For example, many felt compelled to counter his pessimistic view of the prospects of contemporary Russian prose, like William Phillips in his piece for *Partisan Review* of Winter 1987, or to defend Tolstoy, Chekhov, and even Dostoyevsky from the essayist’s reproach, as, for example, Gary Saul Morson did in his takedown response in *American Scholar* in Spring 1987. However, none of the offense was on the linguistic front and the advisability of self-

translation was exempt from the discussion. The frequent comparisons reviewers would make to Nabokov is, in fact, an acknowledgment of the success of Brodsky's English prose. Moreover, in a number of accounts of Brodsky's prose that followed *Less than One – Watermark* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992) and *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995) – he is finally granted the title of an American writer. So, John Updike in his essay in *The New Yorker* (1992) writes of Brodsky as one of the few “mandarins” of literature, who are virtually non-existent in the present century in the absence of Jorge Louis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov. He considers him and the Belgian-born writer Marguerite Yourcenar the last of the kind, able “preside above” and “issue bulletins beyond” the immediate literary, academic and public concerns and sensibilities. He admires the passages of *Watermark* written “in the musical fashion of a poem” and in a style “adequate to all but the most intricate word-carving, the working of an image to the utmost” (84). J.M. Coetzee in his review on *Grief and Reason* (1996) writes of the essays originally written in English in *Less than One* as “showing that his command of the language was growing to be near-native.” So impressive is the achievement of the collection, that later publications can hardly surpass it: only “some are [...] on par with the best of the earlier work” (1-2).

In “A Poet and Prose” Brodsky refers to Tsevtava's transition to essays as “an expansion of isolation,” which is illuminated by his understanding that her greatness as a poet was a reason behind her solitary life in the poetic and public arena. However, if we understand isolation in Brodsky's own terms – as an autonomy and independence cultivated within – we might say that his perseverance in translation, between languages,

traditions, and genres secured him the kind of isolation that made him unique and his readers comfortable.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The present research is an attempt to unite several aspects of Brodsky's writing under the arc of his development as a bilingual and transnational writer. In my first main section, Chapter II, I demonstrate that Brodsky's poetic sensibility was originally transnational, i.e. exhibited affinity with both foreign and domestic poetic traditions in pursuit of its own original aesthetics. I establish the trope of a speaker alone in a room or, as I call it throughout the Chapter, a "room trope," as a leading poetic concept of Brodsky's original, neo-Metaphysical style. The poems that are centered on this trope do not refer explicitly to the poetry of the British Baroque through intertextual references or imitation, which attests to the ability of Brodsky's transnationally oriented poetry to process foreign traditions with subtlety and to incorporate the key elements of it fully within his own idiom. Chapter III builds upon the effort of the new generation of Slavists (Ishov, Berlina) to "put Brodsky on the map of American studies" by paying close attention to his self-translation strategies and the reasons behind the negative reception of Brodsky's English poetry during the time of its publication. I believe that the road to American studies lies, for Brodsky's as well as for other Anglophone Russian-born authors, through the emergent fields of the translingual (bilingual) text and transnational poetics. A closer look at the texts of selected reviews of Brodsky's American poetry and Daniel Weissbort's auto-polemical memoir that resembles a collection of critical articles on the nature of poetic translation, exposes a bias against translation by someone who is not a native speaker of the target language and not a "citizen" of its poetic tradition, even if a great admirer of it. The questions of language proficiency, or lack thereof, and its

relation to one's ability to understand the nuances and implications of poetic forms and shifts of a literary tradition, loom large in the discussions of the time. Appealing to Munson and Hokenson's revisions of the concepts of translation through attention to bilingual writing, I find that the tendencies that disturbed English-speaking audiences of the 1970s and 1980s in the "English Brodsky" were characteristic of most Modernist bilingual writing. The creation of an idiolect and perpetuation of a "self-conscious" style marked by ironical play on the ideas of sublime and heightened individualism of expression (which Hokenson and Munson refer to as a privileging of "an art in a second degree" [184]) is what distinguishes both Vladimir Nabokov's Russian and English or Giuseppe Ungaretti's French and Italian texts. Comparing the drafts of Brodsky's self-translations against the unpublished drafts of his English-speaking translators, I show that his solutions as a translator aim at preserving the conceptual and stylistic unity, or continuity in Hokenson and Munson terms, of his bilingual oeuvre. I propose that the negative reception of the English Brodsky did sprout from a certain lack of proficiency and understanding, but not on the part of the poet. In fact, most of Brodsky's English-speaking critics and some of his translators lacked the knowledge of Russian and of Russian poetry and did not quite imagine the degree and complexity of its involvement with the European canon, which was the foundation of Brodsky's poetic sensibility. In Chapter IV I approach Brodsky's English prose as an attempt to rehabilitate and explain his poetic credos, such as an insistence on formal versification, the importance of the continuity of the poetic tradition and estrangement as the main function of poetic utterance. In a self-revealing fashion, Brodsky appeals to Osip Mandelstam's and Marina Tsvetaeva's examples to meditate on the fact that poetic estrangement often leads to the

breach between a poet and the audience of his/her contemporaries, even if they speak the same language. The contrast between the reception of Brodsky's English poetry and his English prose shows that it was the poetic, rather than the linguistic sensibility of his English-speaking audience that he offended with his constant and unabashed rule-breaking. In this chapter I return to the "room trope" and discover Brodsky's autobiographical essays "Less than One" and "In a Room and a Half" as a form of translation commentary that provides his new audience with a rich cultural context that is essential for a full understanding of key imagery in his poetry. It could be said that what Vladimir Nabokov did for Pushkin's "encyclopedia of Russian life" in the literal translation and copious footnotes of his notorious rendition of *Eugene Onegin*, Brodsky did for his own Russian poetry in a rather elegant, and a much more digestible way, having mastered a new genre in the process: the essay.

The discussion of a trope of a room frames my work, as I trace its transformation from the center of a metaphysical cosmology to a microcosm of personal memory. The room, however, can be expanded to even more abstract spheres. I want to refer again to David Bethea, whose insight into Brodsky's poetics is so strong that even passing comments contain clues to complex conceptual issues. Although Bethea does not distinguish the trope of a room as a neo-Metaphysical conceit, he comes close to doing so in his remark on a short poem "*Vse chuzhdo v dome*" ("The tenant finds a new house") from 1962:

Все чуждо в доме новому жильцу.

Поспешный взгляд скользит по всем предметам,

чьи тени так пришельцу не к лицу,



что сами слишком мучаются этим.

Но дом не хочет больше пустовать.

И, как бы за нехваткой той отваги,

замок, не в состояньи узнавать,

один сопротивляется во мраке.

Да, сходства нет меж нынешним и тем,

кто внес сюда шкафы и стол, и думал,

что больше не покинет этих стен;

но должен был уйти, ушел и умер.

Ничем уж их нельзя соединить:

чертой лица, характером, надломом.

Но между ними существует нить,

обычно именуемая домом.

The tenant finds his new house wholly strange.

His quick glance trips on unfamiliar objects

whose shadows fit him so imperfectly

that they themselves are quite distressed about it.

But this house cannot stand its emptiness.

The lock alone – it seems somehow ungallant –

is slow to recognize the tenant's touch

and offers brief resistance in the darkness.

This present tenant is not like the old –

who moved a chest of drawers in, and a table,  
thinking that he would never have to leave;  
and yet he did: his dose of life proved fatal.

There's nothing, it would seem, that makes them one:  
appearance, character, or psychic trauma.

And yet what's usually called "a home"  
is the one thing that these two have in common. (qtd. in Bethea 98-99)

In this short poem Bethea sees a precursor to "The Great Elegy to John Donne," although it does not contain any reference to Brodsky's Baroque hero. He extrapolates on this simple metaphor building on its connection with the genre of elegy, in which Brodsky usually depicts death "as domestic leave-taking," and projects it on Brodsky's place between traditions (98):

Brodsky is already feeling his way toward a pregnant, metaphysical concept of emptiness – that which was once full of life is no more, and what replaces it is qualitatively different than any pristine or virgin emptiness. More abstractly, the tradition Brodsky inherits here in the early sixties is *the emptiness that was once full*: Mandelstam is dead, Akhmatova is in her final years, Petropolis has become Necropolis [...]. The "domestic" (Soviet) can reacquire its authenticity only by inviting in another, "foreign" tenant (John Donne). (99)

Bethea's metaphor is equally effective in illustrating Brodsky's self-translation project. Brodsky enters the home of the Anglo-American tradition at the moment when his idols start departing from it. Robert Frost was gone in 1963, the year Brodsky became the target of persecutions in the USSR as an *upadnicheskyi* (decadent) poet. W. H. Auden

passed away in 1973, only a year after Brodsky's emigration; although the young exile had had a chance to be Auden's protégé for a short while, he later regretted his English was not good enough to truly converse with the man he famously called "the best mind of the twentieth century." Five years later he writes an elegy on the death of Robert Lowell. It appears Brodsky is faced again with populating an empty house, or, perhaps "a room and a half" in it, only this time the "foreign tenant" is his Russian poetry rendered into English by the author himself. Both his English poetry and his literary essays show that it was a particular branch of Anglo-American tradition Brodsky felt affiliated with and sought to fill the void that appeared there with his rhymes and meters. The latter, as discussed in Chapter III, were at the core of the controversy around Brodsky's self-translations which critics and scholars qualified as mimetic, themselves falling prey to the ubiquitous division of form and content. Brodsky in his self-translations strives to bring the two together; he destabilizes the classical stanzaic forms with rhythms resembling the loose *dol'nik* of his Russian verse, which alone can place precise accents on the elusive element of the tragic in this anti-climactic poetry. As the example of "December in Florence" shows, the poetic voices that mentored him (Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Eliot, Frost, Auden, etc.) in Brodsky's eyes belonged to the same European canon and, in their turn, bowed to the same masters of the past (Ovid, Dante). While these voices were silenced by socialist aesthetics at home and rejected by the new generation of poets in his adoptive culture, it was very much at the core of Brodsky's bilingual poetry to create a premise for their echoes, to carry their "aura" through the turbulence of poetic and linguistic transformation his verse experienced. Svetlana Boym refers to the rhymed stanza of Brodsky's verse as a structure that he strived to preserve as

a survival strategy; the continuity with the poetic tradition of the Silver Age was a matter of poetic survival for him in a culture that was dependent on trampling its remains (Boym 293). Strict outlines of this structure were the pillars that carried the weight of tradition but also gave room for experimentation in the empty spaces between the columns. This metaphor seems fitting; after all, *la stanza* does mean “a room” in Italian.

Since I first conceived of this project, or rather its variant which transformed quite a lot, as often happens with dissertations, the interest in Brodsky as a bilingual author has increased significantly. Today I have reason to believe that whether Brodsky receives the deeds to his new rooms (posthumously) or remains a temporary lodger, is to be decided in the next few years. I wrote the last chapter of this dissertation in anticipation of two works, one that is forthcoming and another that I was unable to fully access due to the specificities of research during the pandemic. The first is an account of the meticulous archival research by Natalya Rulyova, whose monograph *Joseph Brodsky's Interlinear Translators: Friendly Invisible Collaborators of the Great Poet* is slated to be published in November of 2020. In this book, according to the available abstracts, Rulyova argues that Brodsky's self-translations should be credited to considerably more than just one hand. This in fact would underscore the questions I ask in the Introduction and puts me in the position of an opponent in my discussion of “December in Florence” which, I argue, was an example of Brodsky discarding the translative solutions by other authors. The second book is Adrian Wanner's very recent publication with the telling title *The Bilingual Muse: Self-Translation among Russian Poets* (2020). Wanner, who has focused his research on diasporic writing and émigré literature by Russian Jews, has written extensively on Nabokov's bilingual writing as well. Brodsky and Nabokov serve as

flagships in this new book that leads the English-speaking audience on a journey into translingual writing by Russian-born authors, the list of which includes Brodsky's Modernist muse Marina Tsvetaeva, Wassily Kandinsky in his unexpected employ as a trilingual poet, and such new names as Andrey Gritsman, Katia Kapovich, and Elizaveta Kul'man. Though Brodsky is by no means the sole focus of Wanner's study, his work solidifies Brodsky's position in the new canon of bilingual Russian-American writing and builds towards a theory of translation from Russian. Following the comparative impulse of this new study, the next step would be to take note of Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's remark on the affinity of all bilingual writers regardless of their languages and to place Brodsky among his American bilingual milieu. Given that the attention to bilingual writing as a separate field was championed by postcolonial literary studies and considering the history of Brodsky's collaboration with Derek Walcott, a comparative study of the two poets would be a major contribution to our understanding of self-translation of the period. While I explore the connection between the two transnational poets to some degree in Chapter II, I see it only as the beginning of what could be a comprehensive project requiring the competence of a true comparatist that could resist the rigid nationalization of the poet.

Scholarly attention to Brodsky's indebtedness to translation and to transnationalism is just one way to destabilize the vertical axis of the nationalization of Brodsky as the Great Poet of Russia. There have also been grassroot attempts to wash away the barriers between the poet and his diverse readership that are also worthy of our consideration. After I left St Petersburg, I continued to follow the progress of the Brodsky Museum Foundation: at first my primary source of information was my correspondence

with the team but it was soon replaced by the feed of the museum's Instagram account @brodsky.online and its official website brodskymuseum.com. It was from the online posts and publications that I learned about the purchase of the last privately-owned room in the former communal apartment at Liteinyi 24, which meant that a new *muzei-kvartira* (museum apartment) would be added to the literary map of St Petersburg. The museum opened for free tours in February 2020, a month that, as we all know too well, was not the most auspicious time for new beginnings, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantines that ensued in Russia and elsewhere. As with almost every other public project in the world at that time, museum activity transitioned to the horizontal sphere of interactive online communication. That is when the democratic motto of @brodsky.online, posted back in December of 2017, really became relevant:

«Бродский Онлайн» - это не просто онлайн библиотека произведений Иосифа Александровича Бродского, а интерактивный социальный проект, информационно-аналитический портал о «Ленинградском тунеядце», частью которого может стать каждый. (brodsky.online.)

“Brodsky Online” is not simply a library of the works by Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Brodsky, but an interactive community project, a research and information guide about the “Leningrad parasite,” a project everyone can be a part of.

By mentioning parasitism, the legal charge that made Brodsky world famous in 1964, the authors of this post were reinstating the poet's role in opposition to the state and as the people's hero. During the quarantine period, the Instagram account exploded with live broadcasting of lectures and music concerts from “*poltory komnaty*” (a room

and a half) and launched a number of online flash-mobs encouraging its followers to post poetry-related images from their own media pages. A poetry fan from Novosibirsk created a Telegram chat @BrotskyFM in 2018, followed by a chat-bot @JosephBrotsky\_bot, and soon every person with a smartphone could indeed have a conversation with Brodsky right in their own rooms. Brodsky’s lines spilled into the space of the city as well, when his poem “Don’t Leave the Room” became the unofficial anthem of the pandemic (fig. 4). Graffiti depicting the poet on a middle school’s fence, which was promptly whitewashed by the local *zavkhoz* (supply and maintenance manager), was met with indignation by the citizens of Petersburg and received wide online coverage (fig. 5).



Fig. 4. The graffiti, entitled “Don’t Leave the Room. Don’t Make a Mistake,” by the art group HALVAHFABRIC can be found at the Kozhevnaia metro line on Vasilievsky Island in St Petersburg.



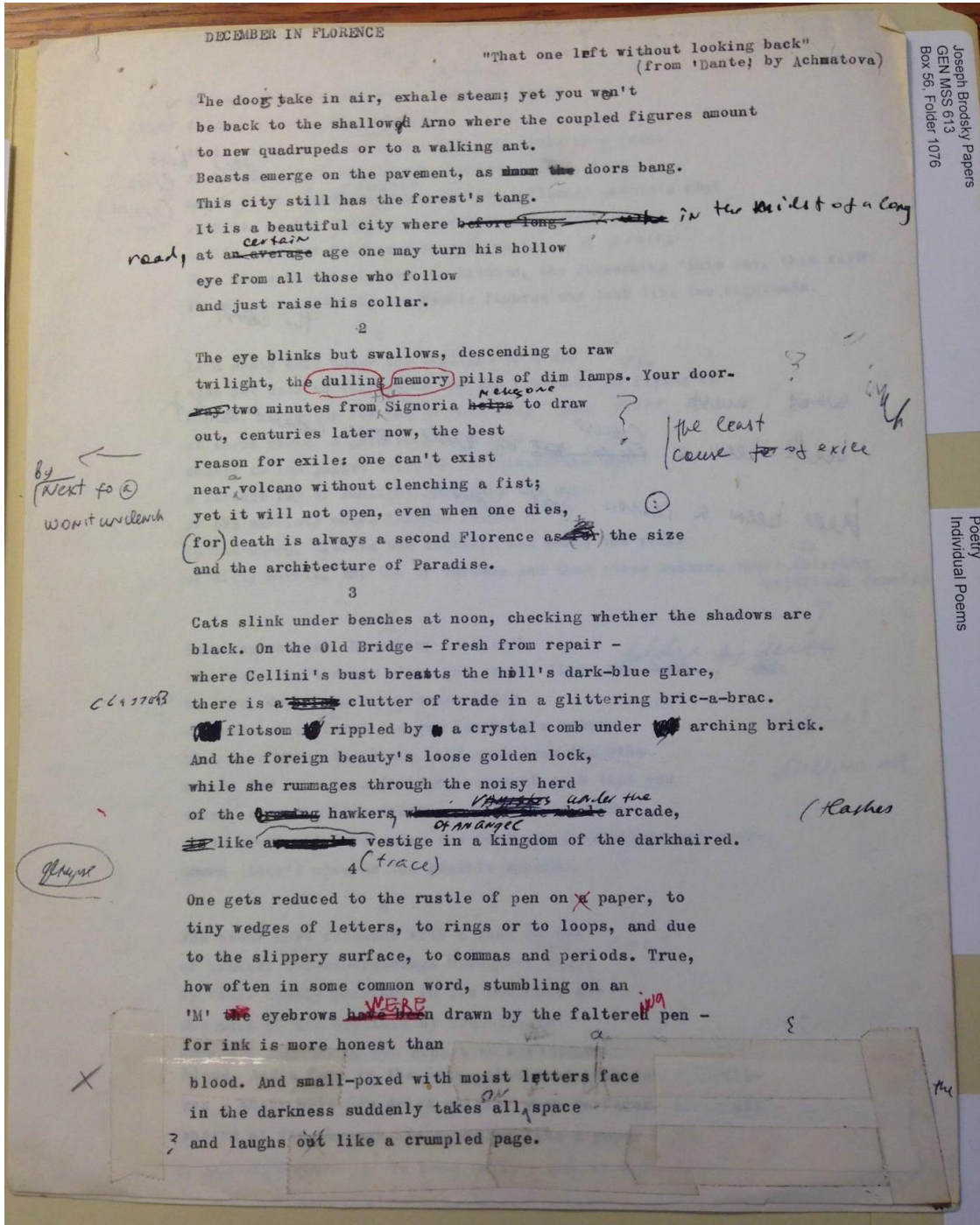
Fig. 5. A worker is whitewashing the graffiti of Brodsky on Pestel' Street in St Petersburg.

As such media-inspired incidents suggest, online Brodsky seems to be anything but a national monument, and, in fact, might be seen as a logical extension of the bilingual Brodsky that has occupied an uncomfortable role in not just the American, but also the Russian canon. A scholarly analysis of Brodsky's recent media presence in Russia in the vein of Digital Humanities, coupled with research into his appearance in numerous interviews and documentaries recorded in America and Europe (mainly Italy) during his life, would be a fitting complement to my analysis of Brodsky's bilingualism and would serve as further testament to his status as a transnational and trans-medial figure.



APPENDIX A

English translation draft of "Dekabr' vo Florentsii" by an unidentified translator, undated. Joseph Brodsky Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale, GEN MSS 613, Box 56 Fld. 1076.



5.

*stalled*

The embankment recalls an enthralled train.  
 Palazzi are visible only from  
 their waist up. A bulk in a raincoat sinks in a frame  
 of the doorway's dank mouth; ascends broken, flat  
 teeth slowly ~~reaching~~ <sup>TEWNOF</sup> for the inflamed palate's ~~flat~~  
 with its number "16". Voiceless bell duly produces but  
 a silence, that frightens whoever waits. *a DEACON*  
 Then comes the smell from the kitchen, the screeching "this way, this way"  
 You are surrounded by two feeble figures who look like two figuree8s.

6

In a dusty cafe under the twilight of a cap *The*  
 eyes get used to the nymphs, to ~~the~~ frescoes, to flying up  
 cupids. Making up for the present crop *BOB TILIN BGRACH ?*  
 of terza rimas, a <sup>decrepit</sup> goldfinch in a cage  
 cheeps in its jagged triplets to animate the age.  
 A strange ray of sunlight splatters the edge  
 of the sacristy where Lorenzo reigns -  
 in his sleep, pierces the shutters and warms the veins  
 of dirty marble, the tub of verberna and that straw Ravenna where <sup>the</sup> chirping  
 goldfinch remains

7

Exhaling couples, breathing in breath  
 the doors in Florence slam. One or two lives ~~thou~~ *holder by death*  
 to live, depending on a chosen faith,  
 one evening in first one you learn it's untrue  
 that love moves the stars (and much less the blue  
 moon); for love is a divider - even of cash that you  
 dream, even the idle thinking of death it tears  
 quite apart. If love ruled the Southern Constellations' gears,  
~~thou~~ they'd move ~~to~~ the hostile spheres.

*(life)*  
*Wishes all*

8

The stone nest resounds with a loud squeal  
 of brakes; ~~the~~ street-crossings beleaguer ~~the~~ *ONE'S* skull  
 by their deadly pecking. In low December sky  
 the mass of the egg laid by Brunellrschi  
 evokes a tear in an eye expert in brilliance  
 of domes. A policeman at the intersection briskly  
 waves ~~his~~ his arms like the letter 'X' - neither up, nor down, nor away.  
 Loudspeakers cry of what's the best buy today.  
 O, the ubiquitous 'I' in both to live and to die!

Joseph Brodsky Papers  
 GEN MSS 613  
 Box 96, Folder 1076

Poetry  
 Individual Poems

APPENDIX B

THE TRANSCRIPTION OF "DECEMBER IN FLORENCE" TRANSLATION DRAFTS

Brodsky, Joseph. "December in Florence." Translation drafts and printed versions, 1980. Joseph Brodsky Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale, GEN MSS 613, Box 56.

<p>Stanza I          "Этот, уходя, не оглянулся..."          Анна Ахматова          Двери вдыхают воздух и выдыхают пар; но          ты не вернешься сюда, где, разбившись попарно,          население гуляет над обмелевшим Арно,          напоминая новых четвероногих. Двери          хлопают, на мостовую выходят звери.          Что-то вправду от леса имеется в атмосфере          этого города. Это -- красивый город,          где в известном возрасте просто отводишь взор от          человека и поднимаешь ворот.</p>		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
<p>"he has left without looking back..." Anna Akhmatova</p> <p>The doors take in air, exhale steam; you, however, won't return to (the) shallowed Arno where, like a new kind of quadruped(s-), idle couples follow the river bend.          Door(s) bang, beast(s) hit the slabs. Indeed, The atmosphere of this city contains a bit of a dark forest. It is a beautiful city where at a certain age one simply raises his collar to disengage himself from the humans and dulls his gaze.</p> <p>In the published version: He has not returned to his old Florence,/Even after having died.</p>	<p>The doors take in air, exhale steam; yet you won't be back to the shallow Arno where the coupled figures amount to new quadrupeds or to a walking ant. Beasts emerge on the pavement as (<i>the</i> crossed) doors bang.          This city still has the forest's tang. It is a beautiful city where before long (crossed, "in the ---st of a long road") at an average (crossed, "certain") age one might turn his hollow eye from all those who follow and just raise his collar.</p>	<p>The doors inhale air and exhale steam; but you will not return here. Breaking into pairs, the crowds go strolling by the Arno's failing stream          like some new breed of quadruped that's strayed, doors slamming behind them, down the pavement.          Truly, there's something of the forest glade, about this handsome city. Yet at a certain age you simply turn up your collar, shutting out its people from your gaze.</p>

– Anna Akhmatova, “Dante”		
Lowell	Myers	Rubin
<p>“That one left without looking back.” (From Anna Akhmatova’s <i>Dante</i>)</p> <p>The doors take in air, exhale steam, yet you won’t come back here, see the populace stream in couples, in twos, in (and) twos, along the shallow Arno – new quadrupeds. The doors slam, wild (crossed out) beast emerge on the pavement from their hollow (old burrough). This city still has the tang of the forest. Truly, it is a beautiful city; one is of age (at a certain age) to (one can) turn from those who follow, and lift (to raise) his collar.</p>	<p>The doorways inhale air and exhale steam, but you won’t be back here, where people teem in pairs close by the shoaling Arno’s stream, like some new kind of beast. The heavy doors slam shut. They pad the pavement on all fours; the air’s alive with forest noise and claws! Here, in the city, beautiful, no doubt, reaching a certain age you don’t look out for people – raise the collar, shut them out.</p>	<p>“That one left without looking back...” Anna Akhmatova</p> <p>[The] doors inhale [the] air and exhale steam(vapour); but you won’t come back here, where paired off in tows the populace strolls above the shoaled/shallow Arno calling to mind new quadrupeds. [The] doors slam. Wild animals come (go) out onto the pavement. There really is something from the forest in the atmosphere of this city. This is a beautiful city, where at a certain age you simply avert your gaze from a person and raise your collar.</p>
<p>Stanza II</p> <p>Глаз, мигая, заглатывает, погружаясь в сырые сумерки, как таблетки от памяти, фонари; и твой подъезд в двух минутах от Синьории намекает глухо, спустя века, на причину изгнания: вблизи вулкана невозможно жить, не показывая кулака; но и нельзя разжать его, умирая, потому что смерть -- это всегда вторая Флоренция с архитектурой Рая.</p>		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
<p>Sunk in raw twilight the pupil blinks, but gulps the memory-numbing pills of the lit street lamps. Yards off from where the Signoria looms, your doorway, centuries later, suggests the best cause for expulsion: one can’t exist</p>	<p>The eye blinks but swallows, descending to raw twilight, the dulling memory pills of dim lamps. Your door(“way” crossed) two mintues from (the) Signoria helps to (makes one) draw out, centuries later now, the best</p>	<p>The eye blinks, straining in the damp dusk. Fearful of going astray, it gobbles up streetlamps, like memory-drugging pills. Your doorway, only to minutes away</p>

by a volcano and show no fist though the fist won't unclench when its maker dies, for death is ( <i>the</i> crossed) a second Florence in terms of size and ("of" crossed) its architecture of Paradise.	reason for exile: one can't exist near (a) volcano without clenching a fist; yet it will not open, even when one dies, (for) death is always a second Florence as for (to) the size and the architecture of paradise.	From the Signoria – centuries later – offers a silent clue to the cause of your exile: near a volcano, one cannot live without shaking a fist at it, nor can you unclench that fist in dying, even, since the death is always another Florence, with the architecture of Heaven.
Lowell	Myers	Rubin
The eye blinks and swallows when it descends to raw twilight – street lights ("dull" crossed) (the) memory like a pill; your doorway two minutes from the Signoria vaguely reviv(-es - ing) ("recalls" crossed), centuries later, the will of the exile. One cannot exist near a volcano without clenching his fist; and it will not open, even when one dies, because death is (always) a second Florence with the architecture of Paradise.	The blinking eye gulps in the pale street(_lamps, pills for oblivion, dissolved in damp dusk, a step from the Signoria you ramp of steps hints mutely, long years later, at exile's raison d'e(ê)tre; volcanic craters are no dwelling place for humble creatures; clenched fists cannot unclasp, though shriven, death represents, as always, for the living, a P(p)aradisaal Florence, build in H(h)eaven.	The eye, blinking, swallows – as it descends into the raw Twilight – [the] street lights, like tablets to reduce memory; and Your doorway two minutes from (the) Signoria hints vaguely, centuries later, at the reason for exile: near a volcano it's impossible to live without showing your fist. But neither is it possible to unclench it, as you lie dying, because death is always a second Florence with the architecture of Paradise.
<p>Stanza III</p> <p>В полдень кошки заглядывают под скамейки, проверяя, черны ли тени. На Старом Мосту -- теперь его починили -- где бюстует на фоне синих холмов Челлини, бойко торгуют всяческой бранзулеткой; волны перебирают ветку, журча, за веткой. И золотые пряди склоняющейся за редкой вещью красавицы, роющейся меж коробок под несытыми взглядами молодых торговков, кажутся следом ангела в державе черноголовых.</p>		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
Cats check at noon under the benches to see ("whether" crossed) if the shadows are black, while the Old Bridge (new after repair),	Cats slink under benches at noon, checking whether the shadows are black. On the Old Bridge – fresh from repair –	Are the shadows black beneath park benches at noon? Cats peer under to see. On the Ponto Vecchio, rebuild again, and

<p>where C(h-)ellini is peering at the hill's blue glare, buzzes with heavy trading in bric-a-brac. Flots(o-)am is combed by the arching brick. And the passing beauty's loose golden lock, as she rummages through the hawkers' herd, flares up suddenly under the arcade, like an angelic vestige in the kingdom of the darkhaired.</p>	<p>where Cellini's bust breasts the hill's dark-blue glare, there is a clatter of trade in a glittering bric-a-brac. (The crossed) flotsom rippled by a crystal comb under (article crossed) arching brick. And the foreign beauty's loose golden lock, while she rummages through the noisy herd of the (word crossed) hawkers, ("vanishes under the" crossed) arcade, ("is" crossed) like ("a----") vestige (of angel) in a kingdom of the darkhaired.</p>	<p>thrusting Cellini's bust against the blue hills yonder, trade in gold trinkets goes on. Fumbling its driftwood, the Arno plashes below. A beautiful woman with golden locks bends to examine the precious cargo spread out on trays, while the shopgirl greedily guesses; what will she buy? In this realm of the raven-haired one glimpses an angel's traces.</p>
<p>Lowell</p>	<p>Myers</p>	<p>Rubin</p>
<p>At noon cats slink under benches proving a shadow is black. On the Old Bridge – they've repaired it now – Cellini's bust breasts the dark blue hills, crystal ripples comb the flotsam of ("still" crossed) slow pools. The brisk trade in catchy bric-a-brac clatters on, and the teased gold hair of the foreign beauty, rummaging through cartons for a priceless specimen, under the tantalized (eye) of the young ("seller" crossed) hawker, is like a vestige of an angel in this kingdom of dark(black)-haired.</p>	<p>At noon cats glance beneath benches, checking the depth of shadows on Ponte Vecchio – now restored – out there are blue hills backing Cellini's bust, bronze gewgaws changing hands. Gurgling waves pick over twigs and sand and gold-curled beautie(s) sweep their anxious hands, seeking rare trinkets, stooping, ravaging boxes beneath the shop girls' ravenous stare, like angles among savages.</p>	<p>At noon cats peek under benches, checking whether black [are] the shadows. On the Old Bridge- they've repaired it now – where Cellini busts/strikes a pose against the dark-blue hills, there's a brisk trade in all sorts of bronzy bric-a-brac, purling waves comb out branch after branch. And the golden strands of the beauty bent over a rare specimen, rummaging among the boxes beneath the unsated looks of the young tradeswomen, seem like a vestige of an angel in the realm of the dark-haired.</p>
<p>Stanza IV Человек превращается в шорох пера на бумаге, в кольцо петли, клинышки букв и, потому что скользко, в запятые и точки. Только подумать, сколько раз, обнаружив "м" в заурядном слове, перо спотыкалось и выводило брови! То есть, чернила честнее крови, и лицо в потемках, словами наружу -- благо так куда быстрее просыхает влага --</p>		

смеется, как скомканная бумага.		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
<p>A man gets reduced to pen's rustle on paper, to wedges, ringlets of letters, and also, due to the slippery surface, to commas and full stops. True, often, in some common word, the unconscious pen strays into drawing, while tackling an "M," some eyebrows (: ) – for ink is more honest than blood. And a face with (crossed word) moist words inside out, with its blinking omission seed, smirks in the dark like a crumpled sheet.</p> <p>In the published version:  "out to dry what has just been said smirks like the crumbled paper absorbed by shade."</p>	<p>One gets reduced to the rustle of pen on (a cr-d) paper, to tiny wedges of letters, to rings or to loops, and due to the slippery surface, to commas and periods. True, how often in some common word, stumbling on and "M" (<i>the cr-d</i>) eyebrows ("have been" cr-d) were drawn by the falter(ed cr-d) (-ing) pen – for ink is more honest than blood. And small-poxed with moist letters face in the darkness suddenly takes all space and laughs out like a crumpled page.</p> <p>The last four lines are written on the paper that is glued over the sheet.</p>	<p>People turn into scratches of pen on paper, into the stitching of letters, their tiny wedges and hooks; and – since it is slippery work – into commas and colons. Only consider how often, meaning to write the letter "M" in some word, the pen will have stumbled and fashioned two eyebrows instead. That is, ink on the page is more honest than blood. And a face in the darkness, its surface splattered with words (they will dry much quicker that way) – laughs like a ball of crumpled paper.</p>
Lowell	Myers	Rubin
<p>One gets reduced to the rustle of a pen on paper – rings, loops, small-wedge-shaped and – because it is slippery – commas and periods. Just think how often stumbling on an "M" in some common word, one has drawn eyebrows, as the pen faltered – in the darkness, the face is plastered with letters – their moisture dries more quickly exposed... alters and sneers like a handful of crumpled paper.</p>	<p>A man becomes a scratch of pen on paper  Loops and curves and downstrokes, grappling  Commas and full stops. Imagine, trapping a letter 'M' in some plain downright line, how often eyebrows leap beneath the pen!  -ink's honester than blood, that means, with men.-  A shadow face fleshed out in words – the better since ink dried more quickly from a letter – laughs, uncurling just like screwed up litter.</p> <p>In a revised draft:  "...Imagine tackling  A letter 'M' in some plain word, think then how often eyebrows form beneath the pen; ink, not blood, proves truer in the end and a face in shadow, masked, decked out in scrawl –</p>	<p>A human being turns into the rustle of a pen on paper, into rings, loops, small wedge-shaped letters, and – because it is slippery – commas and periods. Just think how many times, stumbling upon/discovering an "M" in an ordinary word, [your/the] pen has faltered and traced/delineated brows (that is ink is more honest than blood), and [your/the] face in the darkness, with the words on the outside – since Moisture dries up so much faster that way – has laughed like crumpled paper/a crumple in paper.</p>

	since dampness dries out quickly after all – cackles like paper screwed into a ball.”	
<p>Stanza V</p> <p>Набережные напоминают оцепеневший поезд. Дома стоят на земле, видимы лишь по пояс. Тело в плаще, ныряя в сырую полость рта подворотни, по ломаным, обветшалым плоским зубам поднимается мелким шагом к воспаленному небу с его шершавым неизменным "16"; пугающий безголосьем, звонок порождает в итоге скрипучее "просим, просим": в прихожей вас обступают две старые цифры "8".</p>		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
<p>Quays resemble stalled trains. The damp yellow palazzi are sunk in the earth waist-down. A shape in the overcoat braves a dank mouth of (the cr-d) a gateway, mounts the decrepit, flat, worn-out teeth towards their red, inflamed palate with its sure as fate number "16." (A cr-d) voiceless (instilling fright) ("ful" cr-d) (a) little bell in the end prompts a ("screeching" cr-d) rasping "Wait!" Two old crones let you in, each looks like a figure "8."</p>	<p>The embankment recalls an ("enthralled" cr-d) stalled train. (The) Palazzi are visible only from their waist up. A bulk in a raincoat sinks in a (to the) frame of (the cr-d) (a) doorway's dank mouth; ascends broken, flat teeth ("slowly reaching for" cr-d) the inflamed palate's with its number "16." Voiceless bell duly produces but a silence ("that" cr-d) (which) frightens whoever waits. Then comes the smell from the kitchen, the screeching "this way, this way" You are surrounded by two feeble figures who look like two figures 8s.</p>	<p>The embankments are like a train hurriedly halted. Palazzi stand in the earth, visible down to their waists. A shape in a trenchcoat plunges into the damp, vaulted mouth of the entrance, mounting a flight of stairs like stumps of teeth, then climbs the small steps towards the rough, inflamed palate, straight to the door marked, as always, "16." He waits, unnerved by the doorbell's silence, till a voice rasps "Prego, prego": round him on the landing press two ancient figure 8s.</p>
Lowell	Myers	Rubin
<p>The esplanade reminds one of a stalled train – its firm palazzi only visible from the waist up. A boy in a raincoat comes to a stop, plunges into the dank mouth of a doorway; ascends flat broken teeth to reach an (the) inflamed palate,</p>	<p>Lines of quays (a train caught in a dream), houses seen waist-high, earthbound, firmly clamped. A body in a raincoat braves a damp courtyard like a mouth, mounts broken, rotting molars now ground flat, goes faltering</p>	<p>The esplanades bring to mind a tropid/inert/frozen train. The buildings stand on the ground [and are] visible only from waist up. A body/bulk in a raincoat/ a raincloaked body, plunging into the damp cavity</p>



<p>a thirdfloor apartment, its unchanging number 16. The bell rings, a deathly silence (“as” cr-d) one waits, then someone shrieking, “Please, please come in.” Withered and black, (“you”cr-d) (they) offer welcome in the doorway; their fingers are like figures 8s.</p>	<p>up towards an inflamed palate flaunting its 16 unchanging; up there on the wall, a (silent) bell croaks (turns) out at last its (a rasping) “pleased you called”: two ancient figures 8s (patrol/peer into) the hall.</p>	<p>of the mouth of the entryway, along broken decrepit/dilapidated flat teeth ascends, taking short steps, toward an inflamed palate with its rough/unsmooth invariable “16”; alarming by its speechlessness/muteness/soundlessness, a bell [ringing] produces in the end/ultimately a rasping “Please, please [come in]”; In the vestibule you are surrounded by two old figure 8’s.</p>
<p>Stanza VI</p> <p>В пыльной кофейне глаз в полумраке кепки привыкает к нимфам плафона, к амурам, к лепке; ощущая нехватку в терцинах, в клетке дряхлый щегол выводит свои коленца. Солнечный луч, разбившийся о дворец, о купол собора, в котором лежит Лоренцо, проникает сквозь штору и согревает вены грязного мрамора, кадку с цветком вербены; и щегол разливается в центре проволочной Равенны.</p>		
<p>Self-translation</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>	<p>English and Kline</p>
<p>In a dusty café, in a (the?) shade of (a cr-d) (your?) cap, eyes pick out putty, nymphs, cupids on their way up. In a cage, making up for (a cr-d) the sour crop, a draggled goldfinch juggles his sharp cadenza. A chance ray of sunlight splattering the palazzo and the sacristy where lies Lorenzo pierces (thick) blinds and titillates the veinous filthy marble, tubs of snow-white verbena; and the bird’s ablaze within his wire Ravenna.</p>	<p>In a dusty café under the twilight of a cap eyes get used to the nymphs, to (the cr-d) frescoes,(to cr-d) (the) flying up cupids. making up for the present crop (thin barrow?) of terza rimas, a (decrepit) goldfinch in a cage cheeps in its jagged triplets to animate the age. A strange ray of sunlight splatters the edge of the sacristy where Lorenzo reigns (“in his sleep” cr-d) pierces the shutters and warms the veins of dirty marble, the tub of verbena and that straw Ravenna where (the) chirping goldfinch remains.</p>	<p>In a dusty café, an eye out of cap’s shadow takes in the nymphs on the painted ceiling, the cupids, the stucco molding. A goldfinch out of the tremble of wires he’s caged in feebly runs through the terzinas of his tune. A ray of the sun, breaking against the palace and against the cupola of the sacristy that holds Lorenzo’s tomb, warms, through the shutters, a tub of flowering verbena and the veins of the dirty marble. A goldfinch’s voice flows out from its cage in Ravenna.</p>

<p>Lowell</p> <p>In a dusty coffee house, (“in the twilight” cr-d) (yonder) of one’s cap (in the twilight), one gets used to fresco(e)s, n(y)mphs, and cupid(s); the goldfinch (caged), since terza rima is out of fashion, cheeps its jagged controlled improvisation (-s cr- d). A ray of sunlight splatters the pietra serena at the sacristy where Lorenzo (“abides” cr-d) (sleeps his night), pierces the shutters and warms the veins of dirty marble, the tub of verbena – the goldfinch chirping sweetly though its wire – Ravenna.</p>	<p>Myers</p> <p>A dusty coffee-house, eyes shaded from the blaze (rays) can pick out putti, nymphs on every ledge; bereft of terza rima in his cage, a draggled goldfinch trills his thin cadenza. The sunlight now breaks (breaking) over gable- ends (the palazzo), oh! (crossed) the duomo’s dome where lies old Lorenzo! now pierces drapes (the shutter) and titillates the veinous filthy marble, sprays of white verbena; the bird’s ablaze within his wire Ravenna!</p>	<p>Rubin</p> <p>In a dusty coffee-house [one’s] eye under the partial shade of a cap gets used to nymphs on the ceiling, the cupids, [and] the sculpture; sensing/feeling the lack of terza rima, in a cage [a] decrepit old goldfinch executes its [melodic] figures. A ray of sunlight splattering against the palazzo, against the dome of the cathedral in which Lorenzo lies, penetrates the blind [i.e. shutter] and warms up the veins of dirty marble, [and] the tub of verbena; and the goldfinch sings sweetly/pours forth a song in the middle of his wire Ravenna.</p>
<p>Stanza VII</p> <p>Выдыхая пары, вдыхая воздух, двери хлопают во Флоренции. Одну ли, две ли проживаешь жизни, смотря по вере, вечером в первой осознаешь: неправда, что любовь движет звезды (Луну -- недавно), ибо она делит все вещи на два -- даже деньги во сне. Даже, в часы досуга, мысли о смерти. Если бы звезды Юга двигались ею, то -- в стороны друг от друга.</p>		
<p>Self-translation</p> <p>Taking in air, exhaling steam, the doors slam shut in Florence. One or two lives one yearns for (which depends on the faith of yours), some night in the first one you learn that love doesn’t move the stars (or the moon) enough. For it divides things in two, in half; even cash in your dreams, even idle fears of dying. If love were to shift the gears of the Southern Stars, they’d move (run) to the hostile spheres.</p>	<p>Unidentified</p> <p>Exhaling couples, breathing (taking?) in breath the doors in Florence slam. One or two lives (“thou hath” crossed) (better by math?) To live, depending on a chosen faith, one evening in first one you learn it’s untrue that love moves the stars (and much less the blue moon); for love is a divider – even of cash that you dream, even the idle thinking of death it tears quite apart. If love ruled the Southern Constellations’ gears, they’d move to the hostile spheres.</p>	<p>English and Kline</p> <p>The doors, exhaling steam and breath- ing air, slam shut in Florence. Whether you live one life or two – and that depends on your faith – one fine evening you confront the first. It is not true that love moves the stars (much less the moon) for it divides all things in two, even the money in your dreams. Even the thoughts of death that arise in empty moments. If the southern stars were moved by love, they were moved apart in</p>

		the skies.
Lowell	Myers	Rubin
Exhaling couples, breathing in breath the doors of Florence slam. One or two live(s) you can live, depending on your faith, and in the evening of the first you learn it's untrue that love moves the stars (much less the moon) for love is a divider – even of money in a dream. ("an off hour" crossed) (yet leisure from love) is the leisure of death. If love ruled the Southern Constellations, they'd move with hostile determination.	Exhaling steam, inhaling air, the doors slam shut all over Florence. In the course of one (or) two lives, according to the laws your faith holds, close of day disproves one lie; love can't direct the moon, much less the sky, since it divides all things that multiply (we store by), even money while we sleep (dream of?). Even thoughts of death when we're at ease. If southern stars were moved by love, then they would move apart.	Exhaling vapours/couples, inhaling air, [the] doors slam in Florence. One or two lives you live, depending on your/the faith/belief, [and] in the evening in the first [life] you realize: it's not true that love moves the stars (much less the moon), for it divides all things in two – even money in a dream. even, in leisure hours, thoughts of death. If the stars of the south were moved by it, it would be in opposite directions from each other.
<p>Stanza VIII</p> <p>Каменное гнездо оглашаемо громким визгом тормозов; мостовую пересекаешь с риском быть за{п/к}леваным насмерть. В декабрьском низком небе громада яйца, снесенного Брунеллески, вызывает слезу в зрачке, наторевшем в блеске куполов. Полицейский на перекрестке машет руками, как буква "ж", ни вниз, ни вверх; репродукторы лают о дороговизне. О, неизбежность "ы" в правописаньи "жизни"!</p>		
Self-translation	Unidentified	English and Kline
The stone nest resounds with a piercing squeal of brakes. Intersections scare your skull like (the) crossed bones. In (a?) low December sky the gigantic egg laid there by Brunelleschi jerks the tear from the eye shrewd about blessed domes. A traffic policeman briskly throws his hand in the air like a letter "X." Loudspeakers bark about rising tax. Oh, the inexorable "Y" that living's spelling lacks!	The stone nest resounds with a loud squeal of brakes. (The) street-crossing beleaguer (the cr-d, one's) skull by their deadly pecking. In low December sky the mass of the egg laid by Brunelleschi evokes a tear in an eye expert in brilliance of domes. A policeman at the intersection briskly waves his arms like the letter 'X' – neither up, nor down, nor away. Loudspeakers cry of what's the best buy today. O, the ubiquitous 'I' in both to live and to die.	This stone nest resounds with the ear-splitting screech of brakes. Cross the street and you risk being sp/battered to death. Under the lowering reach of December's sky, the swelling bulk of the egg Brunelleschi laid brings tears to an eye practiced in the glitter of cupolas. The traffic policeman's gestures are splayed: neither straight up nor straight down, the fashion an "X."

<p>In the published variant:  “Oh, the obvious leaving that “living” masks!”  “obstinate” in the collection.</p>		<p>“High prices!” the loudspeakers blare in complaint.  How urgent the need for an “I” in the words “to live” and “to die”!</p>
<p>Lowell</p>	<p>Myers</p>	<p>Rubin</p>
<p>The stone nest resounds with a loud squeal of breaks – crossing a street, you chance being pecked to death. In low December sky, the mass of the egg laid by Brunelleschi evokes: a tear in (to) an eye expert in the brilliance of (the cro-d) dome. The policeman at the intersection waves his arms like the letter X –not up not down. Loudspeakers exhort (“the beggars” cr-d) (the destitution) to buy. How easily the I in life (can) rhyme(s) with the I in to die.</p>	<p>A stone nest, deafened by the piercing hiss of brakes; you cross the pavement at some risk of being pecked to death. December’s greyish sky shows Brunelleschi’s giant egg displayed; a tear comes to the (an) eye, beset by(used to the) blaze of cupolas. A traffic policeman briskly waves not up, not down, but like (miming the) letter X is; loudspeakers bay the news of rising prices, the inevitable accompaniment of crisis.</p> <p>In an earlier variant:  “Oh, the inexorable ‘y’ that living’s spelling lacks!</p>	<p>The stone nest is filled/resounds with a loud squeal of brakes; you cross the street at the risk of being-bespittled/-pecked to death. In the low December sky the mass/bulk of the egg laid by Brunelleschi provokes/evokes a tear in the pupil [of an eye] skilled/expert/trained in the brilliance of domes. The policeman at the intersection waves his arms like the letter Ж – neither downward nor upward. Loudspeakers bark about costliness/high costs. O, the inevitability of “Б” in the spelling of “жизни”.</p>
<p>Stanza IX</p> <p>Есть города, в которые нет возврата.  Солнце бьется в их окна, как в гладкие зеркала. То  есть, в них не проникнешь ни за какое золото.  Там всегда протекает река под шестью мостами.  Там есть места, где припадал устами  тоже к устам и пером к листам. И  там рябит от аркад, колоннад, от чугунных пугал;  там толпа говорит, осаждая трамвайный угол,  на языке человека, который убыл.</p>		
<p>Self-translation</p>	<p>Unidentified</p>	<p>English and Kline</p>
<p>There are cities where one can’t return. The sun splatters their mirror windows. (“But” cr-d) all the same, there is no penetration. One never earns the sum. There are always six bridges (“spanning a local river” cr-d) (spun the low-running) river.</p>	<p>---</p>	<p>There are cities in this world to which one can’t return.  The sun beats on their windows as though on polished mirrors.  And no amount of gold will make their hinged gates turn.</p>

<p>There are places where lips touched lips for the first time ever and pen pressed paper with real fervor. There are arcades, colonnades, iron bogeys that blur your lens. There are streetcars' multitudes, jostling, dense, speak in the tongue of a man who has vanished (departed) whence. Below the glued on paper: there are streetcar's besieging throngs speak the language of a man who lived here once.</p>		<p>Rivers in those cities always flow beneath six bridges. There are places in those cities where lips first pressed on lips and pen on paper. In those cities there's a richness of scarecrows cast in iron, of colonnades, arcades. There the crowds besieging the trolley stops are speaking in the language of a man who's been written off as dead.</p>
<p>Lowell</p>	<p>Myers</p>	<p>Rubin</p>
<p>There are cities to which one cannot return, the sun beats on a window as if it were a mirror – that is, there is no penetration, (“yet money to burn” crossed) There six bridges always arch (the cr-d) a local river, there are places where lip first pressed against a lip, and a pen first marked a piece of scrap – a blur of arcades there, colonnades, scarecrows – there a crowd speaks as it besieges (a cr-d) (the) trolley stop, in the tongue of the person departed. (elsewhere)</p>	<p>Cities there are to which there's no returning. The sun beats on their mirror windows, learning entry here's a privilege worth earning. There six bridges span a running river. There those places where myself a lover pressed lip to lip, likewise pen to paper. Arcades, cast-iron tyrants down below waver in water; there crowds speak, presto, the language of a man gone long ago.</p> <p>In a different draft (perhaps, the final): 3 “that they remain aloof to gold or yearning.” 5 “There lie those places where fond lips touched lover's 6 “lips and pen pressed paper in (early) fever. 8 “there the people in the tramcars' jostling throngs 9 “speak the language of a man who lived here once.”</p>	<p>There are cities to which there is no return. The sun beats against their windows, as if they were smooth mirrors. That is, there is no penetrating them – not for any amount of gold. There a river always flows under six bridges. There are places there where there was occasion to press lips against other lips and pen to [sheets of] paper. And there, there is a blur of arcades, colonnades, iron scarecrows; there the crowd speaks, as it besieges the trolley corner, in the tongue of a person who has departed.</p>

APPENDIX C

RHYME SCHEME

Stanza	Russian <sup>15</sup>	Self-translation	Unidentified translator	English and Kline	Lowell	Myers
I	A A A B B B C C C	won't kind bend indeed a bit it age disengage gaze	won't amount ant bang tang long hollow follow collar	steam pairs stream strayed pavement glade age collar gaze	Steam stream Arno slam hollow forest city follow collar	Steam teem stream doors fours claws no doubt look out them out
II	D D D E E E F F f	gulps streetlamps looms best exist no fist dies size Paradise	raw door draw best exist a fist dies size paradise	astray pills away clues volcano you even Florence Heaven	Raw pill Signoria will exist fist dies Florence Paradise	Lamps damp ramp later craters creatures shriven living H(h)eaven
III	G G G H H H I I I	are repair glare bric-a-brac brick lock herd arcade dark-haired	are repair glare bric-a-brac brick lock herd arcade dark-haired	under trusting yonder Arno locks cargo guesses realm traces	shadow it now hills pools clatters on beauty specimen hawker dark(black)- haired	checking Ponte Vecchio backing hands sand hands ravaging ravenous savages
IV	--	to due true pen an than inside said shade	to due true on pen than face space page	letters work consider word instead blood spattered way paper	Rings slippery stumbling word faltered letters alters paper --	paper grappling trapping line pen men better letter litter

<sup>15</sup> This rhyme scheme, designated by letters, is cited from the folder that contains Barry Rubin's translation draft. Stanzas IV, V and VI rhyme scheme are missing from this sheet.

V	--	Damp waist-down dank flat inflated sure-as-fate fright wait --	Train from frame flat palate's but waits way --	Halted waists vaulted fight steps straight waits prego --	Train waist up stop doorway palate 16 waits come in doorway	dream clamped damp rotting faltering flaunting wall called hall
VI	--	your cap way up crop cadenza palazzo Lorenzo veinous verbena Ravenna	Cap flying up crop cage age edge reigns veins remains	takes in molding caged in tune against tomb verbena marble Ravenna	Cap cupids fashion improvisation pietra serena abides/night veins verbena Ravenna	blaze /rays ledge cage cadenza gable-ends oh/ palazzo Lorenzo veinous verbena Ravenna
VII	S (b) S (b) S (b) T T T U U U	doors yearns yours love enough in half fears gears spheres	breath hath faith untrue blue you tears gears spheres	breath life faith true moon two arise stars skies	Breath two faith untrue moon dream death Constellations Determination	does course laws lie sky by thoughts stars apart
VIII	V V V W W W X X X	squeal skull sky Brunelleschi blessed briskly letter x tax masks	squeal skull sky Brunelleschi brilliance briskly away today to die	screech risk reach layed glitter splayed high complaint to die	squeal chance sky Brunelleschi brilliance intersection down to buy to die	hiss risk greyish displayed blaze waves X is prices crisis
IX	Y Y Y Z Z Z A1 A1 A1	sun same sum river ever fervor lens dense thence	--	return mirrors turn bridges lips richness arcades speaking dead	Return mirror burn river lip scrap scarecrows stop departed	returning learning/yearni ng earning river lover paper/fever below presto/throngs ago/once

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