

## Is Brodsky a Poet for *Our Time*?

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### Abstract

In the late 1980s, when Valentina Polukhina published the first monograph about Joseph Brodsky, she called it *A Poet for Our Time*. Now, over 30 years later, Brodsky remains one of the most contested cultural personalities. He is regarded by many as a canonized poet, the last Russian classic, a charismatic philosopher and a cult figure. The ideologues of *Russkii mir* have laid claim on Brodsky on account of his ostensible imperialist sensibilities. Others, for the same reason, either demonize the poet or feel the need to justify him. While some contemporary Russian writers attempt to deflate his status, among informal Russian audiences Brodsky has become a popular brand. Brodsky liked to say that the poet is but a tool of language – once written, texts assume an existence of their own, independent of their authors' will, design and perhaps even understanding. Focusing on a range of his works (poems, essays, plays, interviews, publicistic pieces) this chapter considers the relevance of his legacy for our troubled time, when the geopolitical and existential situation forces us to revisit basic notions about human nature, the trappings of the mind, Artificial Intelligence, totalitarianism, freedom, and the phenomenon of cancel culture. This examination is not limited to the reception of Brodsky in the 21st century. Rather it aims to identify recurrent elements of his discourse, ideas, insights and speech patterns that can inform a deeper understanding or at least a more complex articulation of today's reality.

### Keywords

Brodsky's posthumous reputation – Brodsky's legacy – cultural contexts for understanding Brodsky's contemporary reception

In 1989, when Valentina Polukhina published the first monograph about Joseph Brodsky, she called it *A Poet for Our Time*. Now, over 30 years later, Brodsky remains one of the most contested cultural figures. He is regarded by many as a canonized poet, the last Russian classic, a charismatic philosopher, and a cult figure. Brodsky's imperialist sensibilities have become a trendy topic

in and beyond academic circles. The ideologues of *Russkii mir* have ‘appropriated’ his poem *On the Independence of Ukraine* (*На независимость Украины*) and other controversial texts that appear to assert Russian cultural superiority. Brodsky’s lines are now frequently quoted by Kremlin propagandists. Others turn to the same texts either to condemn Brodsky or to justify him. Participants in high-brow YouTube programs debate in earnest whether Brodsky would have supported the military invasion in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> While certain contemporary Russian writers attempt to deflate Brodsky’s status (a phenomenon defined by Polukhina as a ‘Brodsky complex’ in the context of her polemic with Dmitrii Bykov),<sup>2</sup> ‘Brodsky’ has become a real brand among informal Russian audiences. His memorial wall in the courtyard of the Akhmatova museum is a popular place for young Petersburgers to smoke a joint or drink a beer while glancing at the display of long-forgotten Soviet paraphernalia (dish-drying rack, round-dial telephone, etc.) interspersed with scraps of paper featuring Brodsky’s verse. The museum ‘In a Room and a Half’ has become a premier destination for many Russian visitors to Petersburg. The museum shop sells round pins with aphoristic Brodsky quotations. When mobilization was declared in September 2022, one such pin suddenly became a hugely popular gift for younger men. The pin reads, ‘Don’t leave your room, / Don’t make this mistake’ (‘Не выходи из комнаты, / не совершай ошибки’), urging them to stay put, as free circulation in the city may result in their being drafted into the army and dispatched to the Ukrainian front. A couple of years earlier, the same lines were quoted in connection to the Covid lockdown. Brodsky has

1 Ostorozhno: Sobchak. Brodskii – ne imperets?

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koJgmizJtBI> [accessed 25 March 2023]).

2 Valentina Polukhina, ‘I ia ne prevrashchus’ v sud’iu’, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, p. 278 (774), 11 December 2018. More recently, Bykov published an article in which he argues that Brodsky is a ‘poet of resentment’ who used poetry as a tool of self-assertion and revenge (‘Iosif Brodskii’, *Diletant*, May 2022: <https://diletant.media/articles/45252580/>, accessed 10 September 2022). See also Alexander Goldstein’s sarcastic characterization of Brodsky: ‘But what else can you expect from an author who is a real Midas in his essays: whatever he touches, everything turns into banality. He does not have a single unpredetermined association, they are all banalized from the start, so that the First Rome is invariably compared with the Second, and the Second with the Third, Byzantium drags along behind the paraphernalia of the Ottoman Empire, which cannot exist even for a minute without the Soviet Empire; it turns out that the East, no matter how we idealize it, cannot be accorded even the semblance of a democratic tradition – the provincial backyards of thought and style’: ‘Тетис, или средиземная почта’ (‘Tetis, or the Mediterranean Post’), in Aleksandr Goldshtein, *Rasstavanie s Nartsissom* (*Parting from Narcissus*), *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, Moscow, 1997, p. 298.

become an omnipresent point of reference – to use Apollon Grigorev's proverbial words about Pushkin, he has become 'our everything'.<sup>3</sup>

Brodsky liked to say that the poet was but a tool of language. Once written, texts assume an existence of their own, independent of their authors' will, design and perhaps even understanding. Focusing on a range of his works (poems, essays, plays, interviews, letters to the editor), this chapter will consider the relevance of his legacy for *our* troubled time. This examination will not be limited to the reception of Brodsky in the twenty-first century. It will rather identify elements of his discourse that appear to have found renewed resonance today, when the geopolitical and existential situation forces us to revisit some basic notions about human nature, reality, the trappings of the mind, freedom, cancel culture, and verbal manipulation. As is the case with all great books and authors, Brodsky's corpus is so diverse and full of paradoxes, that anyone can tease out of it an isolated thought, statement or image that would support almost any view. I am aware that I risk falling into the same trap of subjective reading. I will therefore limit myself to identifying only those motifs, intuitions, and verbal patterns that Brodsky consistently revisited over the years in different genres. Ultimately, my investigation will seek to determine what part of his legacy remains relevant, informing a deeper understanding or at least a more complex articulation of today's reality.

### 1 *The Marbles (Мрамор): High-Tech Totalitarianism*

One of the key markers of our time is disturbing ontological instability. The accelerated technological development and computerization in all spheres of life has suddenly transformed our familiar solid world into fluid, transparent and progressively more virtual. In the era of fake news, post-truth, computer-generated images, and programmes like ChatGPT, it becomes ever harder to verify any factual information, to distinguish between what is true and what is simulated. As remote as these concerns might have seemed in the early 1980s, Brodsky anticipated this evolutionary curve in *The Marbles* (1982), a play that obliterates not only the distinction between prison and freedom,<sup>4</sup> but also between reality and its surrogate. Brodsky offers his readers a glimpse of

3 For a discussion of Grigor'ev's remark, see Joe Andrew, 'Introduction: Pushkin's Secret' in Joe Andrew and Robert Reid, eds, *Two Hundred Years of Pushkin. Volume 1: 'Pushkin's Secret': Russian Writers Reread and Rewrite Pushkin*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2003, pp. 1–13, especially p. 12, note 16.

4 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001, p. 301.

future dystopia by conflating the boundaries between the tangible world and its mediatized simulation.

The play pictures a futuristic, sterile, high-tech empire that sends space-ships to distant planets and exercises total surveillance over its citizens through omnipresent screens. Every social, political and existential aspect of life is rationalized, calculated and controlled. The two protagonists, the 'stoic' Tullius and the 'barbarian' Publius, held in a high-tech 700-metre-tall prison tower, are dehumanized not through physical violence and deprivation, but in a more sophisticated manner: the torture of a gnawing suspicion that everything they see is mediated. They take their daily walk without leaving their relatively comfortable cell as the image of a beautiful park is projected on its walls. At some point, Publius begins to suspect that what he sees out of the window (a majestic panorama of the futuristic imperial Rome) may also be just a screen, a fabricated image recorded or broadcast live. This impression is reinforced when Tullius, after a brief escape, returns to the cell soaked from the rain, while Publius sees bright sunshine when he looks down at the city. Ultimately, he begins to doubt his own and Tullius' existence. When Tullius disappears, Publius ponders whether his cellmate was just a stereoscopic projection and not a real person, or whether he himself had been 'broadcasted' to Tullius:

**Publius:** Tullius! ... Wait ... Maybe they are just putting this on ... On tape, of course ... Stereoscopic, three-dimensional ... was in the papers: just invented. That's why he doesn't reply. Naturally. Because – on tape ... Or-or-or else it's *me* they are showing to *him*! Live, of course. That's why he doesn't reply ... Or-or-or else this ... is a superimposition ... Double exposure! Mixing the tapes! Or – tapes with live! Which is, after all, what life is all about! Reality, that is ... Or else – it is the tape being played to 'live.' Which is the definition of reality. Its full formula.<sup>5</sup>

Publius is somewhat reassured that he is not a computer programme but a human being made of flesh when he sees his own blood seeping from a small wound, and this is why he does not want to stop the bleeding.

The two interlocutors in this updated Socratic dialogue are quite equal, as pointed out by Petr Vail and Alexander Genis, as if Brodsky sets out to test

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5 Joseph Brodsky, *Marbles. Play in three acts*. Translated by Alan Myers with the author, The Noonday Press, New York, 1989, p. 63.

different and autonomous positions in the context of the ‘impending totalitarian utopia’.<sup>6</sup> Tullius and Publius present arguments that move from opposite presumptions to meet halfway. It takes two minds to develop a coherent conception, as in this debate about the natural and artificial:

**Tullius:** The natural comes to an end naturally ... That is, it becomes artificial.

**Publius:** Maybe the artificial if it keeps being artificial long enough becomes natural.<sup>7</sup>

Brodsky’s intuition in this instance suggested something that lately came to constitute a point of intense scientific and philosophical debate: Artificial Intelligence, singularity, the ability of artificially generated neural networks to approximate natural evolution in the process of learning, leading to the redundancy of Homo Sapiens, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Yana Meerzon has noted that in Brodsky’s imagined empire not only punishment but also justice is executed by computers.<sup>9</sup> Following in the steps of Zamiatin and Orwell, Brodsky shows that high technology and the management of humanity by algorithms facilitate the creation of a perfect totalitarian state. In *The Marbles*, the computerized empire is indeed super-powerful, it stretches *ad infinitum* horizontally and vertically, rendering senseless any attempt to run away from it. Tullius returns to the prison cell and chooses to go into deep sleep blending with Time, and this is the only feasible escape a stoic can contemplate.

## 2 Brodsky’s Post-anthropocentric Thinking

The current academic reflection on the place of the human within the universal continuum of biological species and non-organic intelligence entails a fundamental revision of the anthropocentric mentality. Western experts in

6 Petr Vail, Aleksandr Genis, ‘Ot mira – k Rimu’ (<https://art.sovfarfor.com/literatura/ot-mira-k-rimu> [accessed 27 March 2023]).

7 Brodsky, *Marbles*, pp. 73–4.

8 The warnings of this sort have been frequently expressed, including in Yuval Noah Harari’s books (*Sapiens*, *Homo Deus*, *21 Questions for the 21st Century*), in frequent public lectures of neuroscientists Konstantin Anokhin, Tatiana Chernigovskaia and others.

9 Yana Meerzon, ‘The Ideal City: Heterotopia or Panopticon? On Joseph Brodsky’s Play *Marbles* and Its Fictional Spaces’, *Modern Drama*, 50:2, Summer 2007, p. 189 (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/219161/pdf> [accessed 22 May 2023]).

posthuman studies are at pains to unseat the Anthropos from its position as the 'crown of creation' and to dislocate Leonardo's Vitruvian man as the model of the world.<sup>10</sup>

In one of his earlier poems, *Butterfly* (*Бабочка*, 1972), Brodsky interrogates the superior status of the human being as a chosen beneficiary of Creation in impressively direct terms:

не высказать ясней,  
что в самом деле  
мир создан был без цели,  
а если с ней,  
то цель – не мы.<sup>11</sup>

(it is impossible to say with more clarity / that really / the world was created without purpose, / and if there was one / we were not it.)

Man is side-lined because the world appears to have a different scale not commensurate with human dimensions or our ability to see, hear, grasp, and appreciate the complexity of the universe. More specifically, the poem *Butterfly* addresses the inadequacy of the human perception of time and space. After all, the sophisticated design on the butterfly's wings is 'wasted' only on humans, who are unable to see its intricacy with the naked eye. The lyric persona regrets that the beautiful butterfly disappears too soon to 'lure' someone's 'pupil'. But why is our human life the measure of time? How do we know that a butterfly's life is too short *for the butterfly*? Why should our inability to see the level of detail in the wing's 'landscape' (without a magnifying glass at least) or the inability of our ear to hear the butterfly's voice suggest that the insect's life is somehow meaningless, or that it is mute? It would be so only if we accept that man is the measure of all things, a position reiterated by Polukhina in connection to this very poem: 'This bold statement that the purpose of God's creation is not ourselves is even more startling than the metaphor we are a

10 See: Francesca Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations', *Existenz*, 8, 2013; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013.

11 Iosif Brodskii, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, Azbuka, St Petersburg, 2021, p. 224. Subsequent Russian-language quotations of Brodsky's poetry and prose are from this edition unless otherwise indicated; future page numbers will follow the quotation in the main text. Brodsky picks up this motif in a different context in a later poem: 'мир отнюдь / создан не ради нас' (the world / is created not at all for our sake: *Тритон* [*Triton*], 1994).

thing. This train of thought is quite hard to accept. We take it for granted that we are God's children and that the world was perhaps created specially for us'.<sup>12</sup>

While this has been a familiar anthropocentric premise of Western humanist philosophy for several centuries starting in the Renaissance, 'man as the measure of all things' is by no means a universally accepted concept. To give just one example, Hindu chronology admits the fundamental relativity of time scales, the human one being just one limited and imperfect way of processing time. Thus, the Kali-yuga, the 'unlucky' dark age we are living in now presumably began over 5,000 years ago, and is expected to last for 36,000 human years, which corresponds only to 100 'divine years', as Georg Feuerstein explains in his book *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*.<sup>13</sup> He delves further into the Hindu concept of time to demonstrate what a humble creature the ostensible 'crown of creation' indeed is:

His [God Brahma's] life-span extends over a 'century', that is, a period of 31,040,000,000,000 human years. At the demise of the Creator, the whole manifest universe dissolves. After an immeasurable period, the process is reversed, and the whole cycle of space-time existence starts again. A truly awesome vision that leaves no doubt that the human race is utterly insignificant, to say nothing of the individual.<sup>14</sup>

David Bethea sets the poem *Butterfly*, which he calls one of Brodsky's 'greatest metaphysical creations',<sup>15</sup> against Nabokov's butterfly *topos* (acknowledging all along that Brodsky may not have consciously intended any such dialogue). For Bethea, Brodsky's philosophical position is informed by the sensibilities of a later era (compared to Nabokov's), 'one marked by increasing scepticism about transcendental signifiers'.<sup>16</sup> Brodsky questions the Creator's design (how can something so beautiful die so quickly?), which 'Nabokov, through his marriage of science and art, is able to affirm'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, 'Brodsky's focus is on the *death of beauty ... while Nabokov's is on the beauty that overcomes death*'.<sup>18</sup>

12 Valentina Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky. A Poet for Our Time*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 189.

13 Georg Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Shambala, Boston, 2003, p. 178.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

15 David Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 241.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

18 *Ibid.*

At least during the earlier period, in *The Gift*, Nabokov allowed his favourite characters to hear butterflies' voices and even suggested that the divinely-inspired deceptive artistic design on their wings may have been created precisely *for* human eyes:

He told me about the odors of butterflies – musk and vanilla; about the voices of butterflies; about the piercing sound of a Malayan hawkmoth, an improvement on the mouselike squeak of our Death's Head moth; about the small resonant tympanum of certain tiger moths; about the cunning butterfly in the Brazilian forest which imitates the whirl of a local bird. He told me about the incredible artistic wit of mimetic disguise, which was not explainable by the struggle for existence ... and seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eye of man.<sup>19</sup>

Nabokov returns to this idea much later, in *Speak, Memory*, again citing the superfluous 'exuberance' and 'luxury' of the butterfly design, far exceeding any natural utilitarian purpose, hence a sign of the higher Creator:

The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. ... When a certain moth resembles a certain wasp in shape and color, it also walks and moves its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. 'Natural selection' in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behaviour, nor could one appeal on the theory of 'the struggle for life' when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.<sup>20</sup>

According to Bethea, 'whereas Nabokov is able to make his leap of faith through the science of entomology and through his own mystical belief, Brodsky, who acknowledges that some signature, some order from above, seems to

19 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift. A Novel*, Michael Scammell, trans., Putnam, New York, 1963, p. 122.

20 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, Toronto, 1999, pp. 94–5.

be present in this creature, cannot connect that knowledge to himself, his mortality, and his understanding of time'.<sup>21</sup> It is tempting to consider why Brodsky's poetic persona cannot make this connection. Is it because this is beyond the capacity of the human mind or the range of human sensory perception? To put it bluntly, man was not designed to be the chief spectator or interpreter of the universe, and therefore simply is not equipped with the kind of optic necessary for the appreciation and full understanding of all its infinite nuances. Which brings us back to Brodsky's key intuition articulated in this poem: we are not the purpose of creation (or, even more disturbingly, there is no purpose of creation at all).

The next stage in the progressively more sceptical exploration of this motif is represented in the verse of Mikhail Gendelev, one of the best poets of the turn of the twenty-first century although practically unknown beyond the Rusophone audience. Gendelev lived in Israel since 1977, and this is where he was shaped as a poet. The genetic link to the Russian tradition (often displayed irreverently) and the initial colouring owed to the Leningrad underground is complemented and eventually superseded in his verse by a carefully crafted poetic identity as an Israeli. Gendelev's Israeli profile is built to a great extent on his military experience in the 1982 Lebanon war. In some way, he felt a competitive pressure vis-à-vis Brodsky, which did not quite amount to the 'Brodsky complex', but found occasional expression in ironic remarks about his renowned compatriot and fellow Leningrader. More importantly, Gendelev's poetry develops a number of Brodsky's core themes but in a different register and with an even greater sense of metaphysical isolation. One such theme – a sceptical approach to anthropocentrism – finds in Gendelev a specifically Jewish framing.

Contemplating the endless cycle of wars and terror waged against his country since the founding of the modern State of Israel, Gendelev turns to the destiny of the Jewish people, once chosen but now abandoned by an indifferent God. In this context, he rearticulates Brodsky's motif of an external gaze directed at man who thereby turns into a mere object, a thing. In Brodsky, different entities may have eyes and look at man: 'И зреньем наделяет тут судьба / Все то, что недоступно глазу' (And destiny here endows with vision / All that is out of sight: *Einem alten Architekten in Rom*, p. 300). In Gendelev, man is an object of divine observation. Far from being at the centre of creation, man is a simple pawn, a marionette in the gigantic divine spectacle beyond his understanding and control. Man is not in the position of the spectator placed

21 Bethea, p. 246.

at an aesthetic distance from the show, he is part of the performance itself and so unable to grasp the beauty and logic of the unfolding spectacle. Unaware of the meaning of his minor part in the universal drama, man suffers and dies, and his pain may contribute to the aesthetic pleasure of the Creator / master puppeteer. Gendelev expressed this idea most clearly in a prose piece in which he described his impressions as a witness and near casualty of an explosion:

In the fall of 1982 I saw how, less than a kilometre away from a hill which I had climbed out of curiosity, one end of an armoured regiment ... stumbled under the fire of its own artillery. Instantly deafened and getting a forceful rubbery shove from the shock wave (for some reason you feel it most on your face) I did not lie down instantly like my experienced comrades ... I was so stunned that I remained standing in the suddenly-formed black curlicue air, dancing atop the earthquake. I simply had no time to get scared during all four rounds of fire, and my legs trembled separately from the activity of my higher nervous system. And not because of the *spectacle*. A spectacle of *rare beauty*, I must admit. The sound was so thoroughly suppressed that I could not hear how blood throbbed in my ears – the silence was absolute, and as a result the colours and curves of what I was seeing through my unmoving eyes exceeded normal vision, just like an open window is superior to glasses made of plywood. *Someone invisible (and perceptible), the sky reaching only to his waist, stomped on suburban villas as (probably) did I on top of the hill, and under his hills little houses like puffy mushrooms let out clouds of smoke and dust without a crunch.* ... Amazingly dense clouds of smoke rose up on stems ... while green and yellow lights and, particularly, unbelievably deep-red lights of sharp blasts – so intense it was as if ... the sun's light had been turned off (emphasis mine – M.R.).<sup>22</sup>

Gendelev concludes this poetic passage in a characteristic way: 'The fact of the presence of beauty in a dehumanized world, the presence of harmony in a world not intended for spectators, if it does not provide the fifth proof of God's existence, it at least undermines my entirely understandable anthropocentrism'.

Just like Nabokov's and Brodsky's butterfly observers, Gendelev unexpectedly obtained insight into beauty, harmony, and sophistication of a higher

22 Mikhail Gendelev, 'Srezannye polovye organy rastenii' in *Okna*, Tel-Aviv, 1996, pp. 25–31. <http://gendelev.org/proza/gendelev-gendelev/30-zapiski-iz-mansardy/481-srezannye-polovye-organy-rastenij.html>.

order, not specifically intended for human eyes and independent of the human (anthropocentric) conceptual and ethical repertoire. On some super-human level, the pain and bloodshed of a military campaign is not assessed in terms of suffering or evil but as an aesthetically pleasing *mise-en-scène*. Likewise, the extreme beauty and detail of a butterfly design is not 'wasted' even if it is lost on a human observer.

While Nabokov only hints at this, Brodsky and Gendelev meditate on the de-centred position of man in the universe. In his poems, Gendelev pushes this idea much further, depicting a God who is tired of gazing down at earth:

Господь наш не смотрит на землю  
 не  
 интересно Ему  
 как  
 корчится медленно зелень  
 в бесцветном на солнце дыму  
 и танки неторопливо  
 спускаются в тяге тупой  
 в спокойном размеренном ритме молитвы  
 к заливу  
 как на  
 водопой

(Our God does not look at Earth / He is not interested in seeing / how / the greenery slowly writhes / in the colourless sunlit smoke / and tanks unhurried / descend in dull traction / in the calm measured rhythm of a prayer / to the gulf / as if / to drink.)

## II

наш Господи-Боже наверно  
 он  
 слепо-и-глупо  
 немой  
 десант одуванчик по ветру  
 влечется на небо домой  
 влечется влечется от даже  
 земли  
 от сводящих с ума

земли нашей лунной батальных пейзажей  
особенно если с холма

(Our Lord-God must / be / blind and stupid / and dumb / the parachute unit a dandelion / pulled by the wind / homeward to the sky / pulled and pulled / away even from / the earth / from maddening / lunar battle landscapes of our earth / especially if seen from a hill. *September 1982* [*Сентябрь восемьдесят второго года*])<sup>23</sup>

'Our military God has had enough playing us' ('наш военный Бог наигрался в нас'), writes Gendelev in *The Ceremonial March* (*Церемониальный марш*, 1997). He contextualizes this *topos* of abandonment by God in the distinctly Jewish theological thinking about God's covenant with his chosen people. When the covenant is broken all kinds of disasters ensue. But as opposed to ancient prophets who called on the people to mend their ways in order to return God's mercy, Gendelev turns his accusations against God. The breaking of the ancient covenant entails apocalyptic consequences for the Jews, but their God also risks being wiped out, because the observer disappears along with the observed: 'с объектом наблюдения исчезает / и наблюдатель во-все' ('Along with the object of observation / the observer also disappears': *The first Epistle to the Jews* [*Первое послание к евреям*, 2004]).<sup>24</sup>

In his book *Language is God: Notes on Joseph Brodsky* (*Язык есть Бог: Заметки об Иосифе Бродском*), Bengt Iangfeldt writes that Brodsky was attracted to the idea of the 'strict and absent God – Deus absconditus'.<sup>25</sup> The thought that God is 'arbitrary' and ultimately indifferent to the fate of man does not cause Brodsky's indignation or revolt: as opposed to Gendelev he does not accuse God of defaulting on his promise of eternal covenant. On the contrary, this state of affairs fills him with a sense of profound metaphysical significance. An indifferent and distant God for Brodsky is the God of the Old Testament that contains, as he explains, more metaphysical depth than Christianity with its humanized deity who operates by human ethical categories. He restated this position in several interviews:

I prefer the Old Testament because the spirit of that book is very high and very ... less forgiving. I like the Old Testament ... because of the idea

23 [http://www.gendelev.org/stihi/knigi-stikhov/23-v-sadakh-allakha.html#a\\_7](http://www.gendelev.org/stihi/knigi-stikhov/23-v-sadakh-allakha.html#a_7) (accessed 16 April 2023).

24 [http://rulibs.com/ru\\_zar/poetry/gendelev/o/j1.html](http://rulibs.com/ru_zar/poetry/gendelev/o/j1.html) (accessed 16 April 2023).

25 Bengt Iangfeldt, *Iazyk est' Bog: Zametki ob Iosife Brodskom*, Astrel', Moscow, 2012, p. 156.

of justice – not concrete justice but divine justice – and because it insists on personal responsibility. It almost rejects those excuses which the New Testament gives to people.<sup>26</sup>

Christ is not enough, Freud is not enough, Marx is not enough, nor is existentialism or Buddha. All of these are only means of justifying the holocaust, not of averting it. To avert it, mankind has nothing except the Ten Commandments, like it or not.<sup>27</sup>

I certainly prefer the Old Testament to the New Testament. In other words, the metaphysical horizon, or metaphysical intensity of the Old Testament is, in my view, far higher than the metaphysics of the New Testament. The idea is grander, the idea of a supreme being who does not operate by ethical, i.e. human, categories but relies on his own will, which is underpinned by whim, i.e. ‘God is arbitrary’.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that the Pentateuch (referred to by Brodsky as the Old Testament) was for him only a philosophical text. He was not familiar with the Jewish tradition, Talmudic commentaries, or living religious practice, which embrace the idea of a compassionate God who may avert an evil decree if man truly repents: this understanding is manifested, for example, in the 13 attributes of God’s mercy, central to the *Selichot* prayers of Rosh ha-Shana, and in many other parts of the Jewish liturgy.

No matter how reductive and superficial Brodsky’s understanding of Judaism was, his comments complicate the prevailing belief in his affinity for Christianity. Calling Brodsky a ‘poet for our time’, Polukhina defined that time as a post-Christian era. Brodsky, in her view, formulated ‘Christian ideas in the modern Russian language which had forgotten how they sound or how they are written’.<sup>29</sup> I would dare say, however, that Christianity appears to have been for Brodsky a form of cultural affiliation: he saw it as a foundation of Western (and Russian) civilization, with which he deeply identified, and as a form of resistance to the regime, practised by the Soviet intelligentsia, Jews in particular.<sup>30</sup> Later, Brodsky spoke forcefully against the impending threat to

26 Quoted in Anne-Marie Brumm, ‘The Muse in Exile: Conversations with the Russian Poet, Joseph Brodsky’, *Mosaic*, Vol. 8, no. 1, Fall 1974, pp. 229–46 (239).

27 Joseph Brodsky, ‘Beyond Consolation’, *The New York Review of Books*, 7 February 1974, p. 13.

28 Langfel’dt, p. 331.

29 Polukhina, p. 34.

30 In an interview, Brodsky explains this infatuation with Christianity among Soviet-Jewish intellectuals by the influence of Pasternak’s poetry: ‘After his “poems from the novel” lots of Russian intellectuals, especially Jewish boys, got very inspired by the ideas of the New

the Christian civilization from Islam, but again he articulated his position in cultural terms – it was done in connection with the 1989 campaign in defence of Salman Rushdie against the fatwa. But as a spiritual system, Christianity did not contain, for Brodsky, true ‘metaphysical’ insights, or a viable moral code: Christian principles of ritualistic forgiveness, absolving one’s sins and relieving personal responsibility, were for him hard to accept.<sup>31</sup>

### 3 ‘Man Is Dangerous’: Brodsky’s Negative Anthropology

Brodsky’s emphasis on personal responsibility, which he traced to Judaism, was a key component of his moral philosophy and a constant element of his thinking about the relations between an individual and a state. He was ahead of his time in assessing the role played by ordinary people in the atrocities perpetrated by the Communist regime. In the late Soviet period, the prevailing discourse squarely put the blame for the horrible past on the ‘system’, portraying Soviet subjects as passive victims of abstract notions and institutions: Stalinism, Communism, the ‘great terror’, the KGB etc. Sergei Dovlatov of course famously questioned who had then written four million denunciations if only Stalin was to blame, but his voice fell on deaf ears at the time. The absence of self-reflection, characteristic of post-Soviet society, went in parallel with another delusionary narrative that pronounced the Soviet period an anomaly, a contingent and unique detour from some presumably ‘true’ path of Russian history. The disastrous consequences of this absence of sustained critical self-examination in the late Soviet period are clear today, with Russia living through a grotesque historical ‘tautology’ (to use Brodsky’s favourite word), haunted by its totalitarian past and archaic mentality.

Brodsky did not harbour any illusions of this sort. It is well known that he himself never encouraged conversations about his own ‘victimhood’ and thought that the position of victim engendered irresponsibility. He claimed that the Soviet political system provided the population with the ‘psychological comfort of the victim’: ‘What does a victim do? He throws up his hands

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Testament. In some way it was a form of resisting the system, on the other hand it was related to a truly remarkable cultural legacy.’ (Quoted in Langfel’dt, p. 331).

31 It should be noted that Brodsky also suggested that, if anything, he was a Calvinist, ‘because according to Calvinist doctrine man answers to himself for everything’. For discussion of this see Victor Terras, review of *Nativity Poems* in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 3–4, Summer–Autumn, 2002, p. 146. According to Terras, Brodsky made this remark in an interview with Peter Vail.

and gives up. The victim does nothing, it's the others who are guilty. This is just an exploitation of our deep-seated impulse of irresponsibility'.<sup>32</sup> It is in this light that we should read his proposed dichotomy between a 'freed man' and a 'free man' ('A free man, when he fails, blames nobody').<sup>33</sup> His polemic with Vaclav Havel was a further development of Brodsky's ethics of responsibility. In particular, Brodsky objected to the point made in Havel's speech about the threat of post-Communism. In his *Letter to the President*, Brodsky suggested that the use of various 'isms', including post-Communism helps 'the democratic world to externalize evil' because 'one who fights or resists evil almost automatically perceives oneself as good and skips self-analysis'. This logic, continues Brodsky, permits the characterization of Communism and other catastrophes of the twentieth century as an 'error', 'as a horrendous political aberration, perhaps imposed upon human beings from an anonymous elsewhere'. He redefines the evil of 'communism' as 'a breakdown of humanity', not a political but a 'human problem, a problem of our species, and thus of a lingering nature', and as 'an extraordinary anthropological backslide'.<sup>34</sup> As in many other respects, Brodsky's thinking about humanity resonates with W.H. Auden's ostensible ethical argument: in his analysis of the poem *September 1, 1939*, Brodsky focuses on Auden's suggestion 'we all are capable of becoming Hitlers'.<sup>35</sup>

Brodsky's insights into man's negative potential underlie his statements against humanist philosophy ('I don't consider myself a humanist')<sup>36</sup> and here again, he finds a parallel in W.H. Auden's anti-Enlightenment stance. At least, this is how Brodsky chooses to interpret Auden's line from *September 1, 1939*: 'The enlightenment driven away'. According to Brodsky, Auden implies Enlightenment here with a capital 'E' and sees in it the origins of the catastrophe of Nazism and World War II. Brodsky goes on to explain that it is Rousseau with his idea of the 'noble savage' who is 'almost solely responsible

32 See Langfel'dt, p. 317.

33 Joseph Brodsky, 'The Condition We Call Exile', *The New York Review*, 21 January 1988. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/01/21/the-condition-we-call-exile/> (accessed 14 May 2023).

34 Joseph Brodsky, *Letter to the President*, *The New York Review of Books*, 17 February 1994. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1994/02/17/the-post-communist-nightmare-an-exchange/> (accessed 14 May 2023).

35 Joseph Brodsky, 'On "September 1, 1939" by W.H. Auden' in Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1986, pp. 304–56 (323). Brodsky discusses this in similar terms in his conversation with Solomon Volkov; see his *Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim*, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, Moscow, 2000, p. 146.

36 Langfel'dt, p. 309.

for the concept of an ideal “ruler”, i.e., in this instance Herr Hitler’. He does elaborate on this extravagant idea, reading it into Auden’s poem:

a ‘noble savage’ ruined by imperfect institutions. Hence, obviously, the necessity of improving those institutions, hence, then, the concept of the Ideal State. And hence an array of social utopias, bloodshed in order to bring them about, and their logical conclusion, a *Polizeistaat*. ... the idea was shallow, if only because it flattered man. Flattery, as you know, doesn’t take you too far. At best, it simply shifts the emphasis – i.e., guilt – by telling man that he is inherently good and that it’s the institutions which are bad. That is, if things are rotten, it’s not your fault but someone else’s.<sup>37</sup>

From the above analysis of Auden’s poetic response to Germany’s invasion of Poland we learn more about Brodsky’s own views. His critical attitude to the thought of the Enlightenment – the epitome of humanist, ‘flattering’ articulations of the human being – clearly informed his reassessment of canonical Russian literature. Taking Solzhenitsyn’s portrayal of the GULAG as an example, Brodsky defines mainstream Russian literature as ‘comforting’ (‘утешительная’) – literature that does not want to confront reality as it is. Solzhenitsyn, in his view, never permitted himself to state the uncomfortable truth: that millions of people are needed to kill millions of others, and it is not just a political system that gives power to one group over another – such a system is the product of human hands. Hence Brodsky’s recipe both for writers and politicians to write texts and to build society on the premise that man is evil and dangerous.<sup>38</sup>

Why did humanity reveal its evil with such intensity in the twentieth century? For Brodsky, it happened because masses came to the forefront of history. Overpopulation, mass society, the loss of the sense of individual uniqueness, and marginalization of culture based on individualism have already demonstrated their destructive potential in the course of the twentieth century but threaten the future even more: ‘the catastrophe that occurred in our part of the world is the first cry of mass society: a cry as it were from the world’s future.’<sup>39</sup>

37 ‘On “September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden’ in Brodsky, *Less Than One*, pp. 333–4.

38 See *Letter to the President* and Iangfel’dt, p. 308.

39 *Letter to the President*.

4 'Будущее, увы, уже настало':<sup>40</sup> Humanity's Neolithic Prospects

One of Brodsky's recurrent themes is the impending entropy of the world, the collapse of civilization and retreat into a neolithic stage of development:

размытые очертанья,  
хаос, развалины мира. Но это бы означало  
будущее .... (*Vertumnus*, 525)

(washed-out outlines, / chaos, the world in ruins. Though this would have signalled / the future [*Vertumnus* ].)<sup>41</sup>

Пахнет оледененьем.  
Пахнет, я бы добавил, неолитом и палеолитом.  
В просторечии – будущим. Ибо оледененье  
есть категория будущего, которое есть пора,  
когда больше уже никого не любишь,  
даже себя. (529)

(It smells of an ice age, / it smells, I would add, of neolith and of paleolith;  
/ to use the vernacular, of the future. Since an ice age / is a category of  
the future; which is that time / when finally one loves no one, / even  
oneself.)<sup>42</sup>

... В определенном смысле,  
в будущем нет никого; в определенном смысле,  
в будущем нам никто не дорог.  
Конечно, там всюду маячат морены и сталактиты,  
точно с потекшим контуром лувры и небоскребы.  
Конечно, там кто-то движется: мамонты или жуки-  
мутанты из алюминия, некоторые – на лыжах. (530)

(In a certain sense, / the future's got nobody. In a certain sense, / there is  
nobody in the future that we'd hold dear. / Of course, there are looming  
everywhere moraines and stalactites, / exactly with the flowing contours

40 'The future, alas, has already arrived', a line from Brodsky's poem *Odnazhdy ia tozhe zimoiu priplyl siuda* (*Once I also sailed here in winter*, 519).

41 *Vertumnus*: Joseph Brodsky, *So Forth. Poems*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1996, p. 38.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

of the Louvre and skyscrapers. / Of course, there someone moves: mammoths or beetles – / mutants of aluminum, some – skiing.)<sup>43</sup>

The advance of the planetary 'ice age' parallels the lyric persona's personal freezing (going into dead slumber, shedding the ability to love, transforming into a mollusc). The planet's and man's destiny is in fact a return to the past:

Сильный мороз суть откровенье телу  
о его грядущей температуре

либо – вздох Земли о ее богатом  
галактическом прошлом, о злом морозе.  
(*Fourth Eclogue (Winter)* [*Эклога 4-я (Зимняя)*], 435)

(A bitter, brittle cold represents, as it were, a message to the body / of its final temperature // or – the earth itself, sighing out of habit / for its galactic past, its sub-zero horrors.)<sup>44</sup>

Через тыщу лет из-за штор моллюск  
извлекут с проступившим сквозь бахрому  
оттиском 'доброй ночи' уст,  
не имевших сказать кому.

(In a thousand years from behind the curtain / they will draw out a mollusc / with an imprint showing through the fringe, / 'good night' from the lips / which had no one to say it to.)  
(*This is a series of observations ...* [*Это – ряд наблюдений. В углу – тепло*], 247.)

This vision of the circular movement of cosmic existence towards a starting point is reminiscent of the cycle of creation and destruction described in Indian *vedas* and *Bhagavad gita*, a text that impressed Brodsky with its metaphysical grandeur.<sup>45</sup>

43 Ibid.

44 *Eclogue IV: Winter*, translated by the author: in Joseph Brodsky, *To Urania. Selected Poems 1965–1985*, Penguin Books, 1988, p. 76.

45 See Iangfel'dt, pp. 331–2.

This cosmogony informs Brodsky's reading of political and military conflicts – they are but symptoms of global entropy, of the movement of history in reverse. He expresses this in stark terms in his early verse:

Атака птеродактилей на стадо  
ихтиозавров.  
Вниз на супостата  
пикирует огнедышащий ящер –  
скорей потомок, нежели наш пращур.

Какой-то год от Рождества Христова.  
Проблемы положенья холостого.  
Гостиница.  
И сотрясает люстру  
начало возвращения к моллюску.

(Pterodactyls attack a herd of / ichthyosaurs. / Down on the foe / the fire-breathing pangolin swoops – / More our descendant than ancestor. // Some year after Christ's birth. / Problems of a bachelor existence. / A hotel. / And the chandelier is shaken / by the onset of our reversion to mollusc.)

(*Sea Manoeuvres* [Морские маневры], 1967)

*Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980* (Стихи о зимней кампании 1980-го года, 1982), written in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, develops this idea:

Новое оледененье – оледененье рабства  
наползает на глобус. Его морены  
подминают державы, воспоминанья, блузки.  
Бормоча, выкатывая орбиты,  
мы превращаемся в будущие моллюски,  
бо никто нас не слышит, точно мы трилобиты. (419)

(The Ice Age is coming – slavery's ice age is coming, / oozing over the atlas. Its moraines / force under nations, fond memories, muslin blouses. / Muttering, rolling our eyeballs upward, / we are becoming a new kind

of bivalve, / our voice goes unheard, as though we were trilobites: *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980.*)<sup>46</sup>

We know about Brodsky's strong emotional reaction to the Afghan war from his conversation with Solomon Volkov:

The invasion of Afghanistan, though ... I don't know anything else in the world events that has ever made such an impression on me. And after all, they weren't showing any of the atrocities on television. I just saw tanks driving across a rocky plateau, and I remember I was struck by the thought that this plateau had never before known tanks or tractors or iron wheels of any kind. This was a collision on the level of the elements, iron striking stone. ... In Afghanistan, apart from everything else, there was a violation of the natural order. ... this was an anthropological crime as much as a political one. A tremendous evolutionary transgression. It was like the Iron Age invading the Stone Age.<sup>47</sup> [Or like sudden freezing]<sup>48</sup>

In the poetic text, however, this 'political' and 'anthropological crime' is presented from a much more distant, level-headed and philosophical position. Commentators have pointed out the minimal historic or political detail in this poem. The poetic narrative alternates between descriptions of the physical sensations of Soviet soldiers (and includes some of their vocabulary, like the low-brow pejorative 'Chuchmekistan') and showing the 'Slavic' invaders through the Afghans' eyes as 'human pig meat' ('человеческая свинина'). For the most part, however, the poet locates himself far and above, as if looking at the war spectacle from the depth of the universe (Существой на звездах / жизнь, раздались бы аплудисменты,' 419 ['If the stars had life-forms, / space would erupt with a brisk ovation']),<sup>49</sup> but also from a distant future where humans no longer exist, turned to molluscs. This enormous distance in time and space obscures the specific context of the conflict: who took part in the war and why, which human tribe won or lost is almost irrelevant after the human species has become extinct. In the opening lines, the war

46 Brodsky, *To Urania*, pp. 45–6.

47 Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky. A Poet's Journey through the Twentieth Century*, Marian Schwartz, trans., The Free Press, New York, 1998, pp. 51–2.

48 Quoted in Volkov, pp. 55–6. The last quoted sentence is featured only in the Russian version of Brodsky's interview.

49 Brodsky, *To Urania*, p. 45.

is shown as a battle between the Iron and the Stone age, essentially between non-organic materials: iron (the bullet) and stone ('камни лежат как второе войско' [Stones lie flat like a second army]).<sup>50</sup> Humans are reduced to fragmented flesh – muscles, torso, neck – serving as mere targets for a capricious bullet:

Скорость пули при низкой температуре  
сильно зависит от свойств мишени,  
от стремления согреться в мускулатуре  
торса, в сложных переплетеньях шеи. (417)

(A bullet's velocity in low temperatures / greatly depends on its target's virtues, / on its urge to warm up in the plaited muscles / of the torso, in the neck's webbed sinews.)<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, it is not clear whose blood is spilled in the wake of an explosion – blood is just another organic element acting out its biological routine:

Брезгающая воронкой  
как сбежавшая пенка, кровь, не успев впитаться  
в грунт, покрывается твердой пленкой. (417)

(Outside the crater, / the blood, like boiled milk, powerless to seep into / the ground, is seized by a film's hard ripples.)<sup>52</sup>

The Afghan war is then an episode in the inevitable process of global entropy and not a specific geopolitical event: the 'freeze of slavery' is gradually crawling across the entire planet. Hence the seeming indifference to the outcome of the war: no war can be won, and every war, lost or victorious, just brings the world closer to its end by reducing humanity.<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately, any war is senseless, a 'tautology' – killing man who is doomed to die anyway ('Убийство – наивная форма смерти, / тавтология, ария по-пулая,' 419 [Murder's a blatant way of dying, / a tautology, the art form of

50 Ibid., p. 44.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 See also 'Троянская война окончена / кто победил, не помню' ('The Trojan War is over now; I don't recall who won it': *Odysseus to Telemachus*). In this poem, the Trojan war figures as just an archetype for all subsequent wars, and its concrete outcome appears irrelevant.

parrots]).<sup>54</sup> At the same time war is an inherent element of earthly existence since aggression is rooted in human nature. The key theme of this poem then is to define one's individual response to global catastrophe: 'Натяни одеяло, вырой в трухе матраса / Ямку, заляг и слушай "уу" сирены,' 419 [Pull up the blanket, dig a hole in the palliase. / Flop down and give ear to the oo of the siren<sup>55</sup>]). This apparent inaction reveals profound scepticism about the future and the stoic acceptance of the inevitable. The philosophical subtext of the poem justifies the epigraph from Lermontov's visionary poem *Dream* (*Сон*). Accurately describing the poet's own future death in the Caucasus, Lermontov's verses intimate clairvoyance, telepathic connections between kindred spirits, and the inevitability of fate.

And yet, in a world headed for self-cancellation something may endure a bit longer. In *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980*, a white shroud of snow covering the planet is spotted with black letters ('Если что-то чернеет, то только буквы,' 420 [If anything blackens, it's just the letters]).<sup>56</sup> A similar ending completes *Fourth Eclogue* (*Winter*). Composed before the Afghan war, this poem can be read as a parallel text to *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980*: the former presents a grand tableau of the Ice Age in cosmic (galactic) dimensions, and the latter zooms in on a specific case – the Afghan war – that accelerates the process already set in motion. Nonetheless, there is a vague hope that the written word can remain beyond the end of a cosmic cycle, predicted by the Cumaean Sybil:<sup>57</sup>

... кириллица, грешным делом,  
Разбредаясь по прописи кривь ли, вкось ли,  
Знает больше, чем та сивилла,  
О грядущем. О том, как чернеть на белом,  
Покуда белое есть, и после. (439–40)

(Cyrillic, while running witless / On the pad as though to escape the captor, / Knows more of the future than the famous sibyl: / Of how to darken against the whiteness, / As long as the whiteness lasts. And after.)<sup>58</sup>

54 Brodsky, *To Urania*, p. 45.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 46.

57 Brodsky includes the appropriate lines from Virgil's prophetic *Eclogue 4* about the Sybil as an epigraph: 'Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitu ordo.' (*Eclogue IV: Winter*, p. 76).

58 Ibid., p. 81.

## 5 Brodsky's Philosophy of Language

In Brodsky's logocentric universe, the poetic word is the only antidote to death and entropy. Moreover, literary practice is the ultimate goal of human evolution, the *raison d'être* of our species. He stated this explicitly on a number of occasions, most importantly in the Nobel lecture: 'If what distinguishes us from other members of the animal kingdom is speech, then literature – and poetry in particular, being the highest form of locution – is, to put it bluntly, the goal of our species.'<sup>59</sup> He also articulates a thought that has become one of the most popular Brodsky's memes: language is not a tool of the poet, but quite the opposite – the poet is a tool of language. If we unpack this paradoxical statement, we arrive at the very heart of Brodsky's philosophy of language that originated when the poet was exiled to Norenskaia. Reading a volume of W.H. Auden's verse that his friends sent him, he was particularly struck by the following line from the poem *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*: 'Time / Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives'. This was a real epiphany for Brodsky: if time worships language, he figured, then language is older than time. Thus, language became his deity.

As strange as it may seem, for Brodsky poetry was also a meaningful social activity. He understood this obligation not in the canonical Russian sense of the writer's engagement with topical issues ('поэт в России больше, чем поэт' ['a poet in Russia is more than a poet'])<sup>60</sup> but in a completely different way: the poet fulfils his duty not when writing *about* something important for society but when writing *well*. As he says in the essay 'To Please a Shadow':

If a poet has any obligation toward society, it is to write well. ... Society, on the other hand, has no obligation towards the poet. A majority by definition, society thinks of itself as having other options than reading verses, no matter how well written. Its failure to do so results in its sinking to that level of locution at which society falls prey to a demagogue or a tyrant.<sup>61</sup>

In his speech 'The Condition We Call Exile' (1988), he elaborates on his theory, calling literature 'the only form of moral insurance a society has', not least

59 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1987/brodsky/lecture/> (accessed 16 April 2023).

60 A line from Evgenii Evtushenko's poem *Prayer before a Poem* (*Молитва перед поэмой*, 1964), which became proverbial in Russian culture.

61 Joseph Brodsky, 'To Please a Shadow', in Brodsky, *Less Than One*, pp. 357–83 (359).

because literature deals in human diversity and teaches human subtlety, thus providing the best argument against ‘any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution’.<sup>62</sup>

This idiosyncratic cult of the literary word has come under attack today, when the proverbial logocentrism of Russian culture appears to be a thing of the past. A common theme in the current discourse of Russian intellectuals is the impotence of culture to serve as an antidote to hatred and violence. To many, Brodsky’s views have been proven wrong by brutal reality.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Russian culture is perceived today not just as inconsequential but as down-right imperialist, aggressive, and toxic. The Western ‘cancel Russian culture’ movement, unprecedented in its scale, is founded on the erroneous assumption that it is Russian culture (rather than the lack thereof) that has invaded the Ukrainian soil and airspace. Brodsky himself is routinely seen as a naïve dreamer at best and a representative of Russian imperialism at worst. In this climate, it would be timely to re-examine whether such an important part of Brodsky’s legacy has indeed lost its relevance.

Today, most manipulation, from propaganda to advertisement, has a linguistic foundation – we are endlessly bombarded by verbal messages, urging us urgently to buy, to support, to condemn, etc. Such messages have a single straightforward meaning, and their mass consumer is discouraged from dwelling on the ambivalences of the proposed situation or looking for alternative solutions. A person who is not used to reading and interpreting complex texts will more often take a propagandistic or commercial message at face value. As the experience of the last years has shown, the sheer frequency of transmission of any message through different forms of media is in direct proportion to its successful assimilation by the target audience.

But those who have rich reading experience, a trained ear and refined literary taste will be more sensitive, in Brodsky’s opinion, to any verbal manipulative tactics, more capable of discerning the ulterior motive behind the message, and therefore less receptive to ‘repetitions and rhythmic incantations characteristic of any form of politic demagoguery’, as he says in the Nobel speech.

62 Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile,’ loc. cit.

63 Alexander Genis talks about Brodsky’s naïve attitude to literature in several recent interviews (‘Skazhi Gordeevoi’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHdkFQlGsE>) (accessed 16 April 2023) and in his interview on Zhivoi gvozd’ ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\\_WJzny4jW0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_WJzny4jW0)) [accessed on 16 April 2023]). In an interview with Irina Shikhman, Russian actor Anatolii Belyi explains that he lost faith in Brodsky’s words after the start of the Ukrainian war (‘A pogovorit’?: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6znCitCuGA>) [accessed on 26 April 2023]).

Conversely, if society fails to read good poetry, it is more likely to 'fall prey to a demagogue or a tyrant'. This is, in a nutshell, the essence of Brodsky's stance on the mutual obligations between the poet and society. Good poetry, no matter what it takes as its subject matter, condenses meanings and finds shortcuts to philosophical insights, thereby accelerating the thought process and raising the philological culture of the reading audience. It deconstructs binary, black-and-white consciousness, advocates plurality of interpretation and asks open-ended questions, inviting the reader to become a co-creator of the text, rather than a repository of imposed, ready-made bits of (dis)information.

Brodsky who never was a political dissident and did not compose explicitly anti-Soviet verse, found himself nonetheless in a 'linguistic conflict' with the state.<sup>64</sup> His writing was so different from any official idioms that it appeared to undermine the state monopoly on language. This is something that the state simply could not forgive. At the very dawn of the age of totalitarianism, Evgenii Zamiatin showed in the novel *We* a direct link between linguistic sterility and the state's control over its subjects' imagination and free will. George Orwell enhanced this idea in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, incorporating into the novel pseudo-scholarly essays on the purpose and methods of creating 'Newspeak'. Through reducing the number of words and eradicating all 'useless shades of meaning' that can lead to alternative interpretations, primitive Newspeak paves the way to unconsciousness. As one of Orwell's characters says: 'Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.'<sup>65</sup> People who use the language unconsciously never commit 'thought crimes'. 'The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect,' 'Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak,' read the slogans of Oceania. If in *We*, people turn into ideal loyal subjects of the state by undergoing a surgical operation to remove their imagination, in Orwell's Oceania the same result can be achieved by 'operating' on the language itself. Once words and concepts are removed from people's lexicon, they disappear from their memory, blinding them to aspects of reality designated by the cancelled words.

Linguistic control equals political control. This is why dictators of all sorts see subjugation of the language as one of their chief priorities. In his book *The Russian Anti-World (Русский антимир)*, Mikhail Epstein demonstrates a curious consistency: over the course of the last century, whenever a Russian leader wished to solidify and centralize his power, he would initiate a language

64 Polukhina, p. 11.

65 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin Books, London, 2018, p. 61.

reform, as Lenin did in 1921, Stalin in 1951, Khrushchev in the early 1960s, and Putin in August of 2020. Epstein also observes that once the tyrant began to mess with the Russian language, he would soon die or be dismissed from his position.<sup>66</sup> This mystical 'revenge' of the language would make perfect sense in Brodsky's logic: a divine, primordial element, Language is more powerful than any bloody dictator, and the days of those who rise against it are numbered. And, conversely, as Brodsky repeats after Auden, Time 'forgives' poets through or 'by' whom the language lives and flourishes.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, Language pays everyone in kind. It may allow those who engage with it creatively and poetically to ascend to metaphysical heights. But non-creative, deadening and manipulative linguistic practice leads to catastrophe, as Brodsky explains in his analysis of Andrei Platonov. In Brodsky's view, the target of Platonov was not only social evil but the sensibility of the language that has brought that evil about. Every sentence in Platonov drives the Russian language into a semantic, 'totally paralyzing' dead end, demonstrates built-in absurdity, and reveals a self-destructive, eschatological element within the language itself.<sup>68</sup> Platonov, in Brodsky's interpretation, 'speaks of a nation which in a sense has become the victim of its own language ... he tells a story about this very language, which turns out to be capable of generating a fictitious world, and then falls into grammatical dependence on it.'<sup>69</sup>

The current critique addressing Brodsky's presumed idealization of the role of poetry in the life of society would appear misplaced if we follow the evolution of his thought through its various iterations. He insisted that politics and propaganda fill the vacuum left in people's minds by art. Prose that is not art compromises life, offering finalities instead of infinities, comfort instead of challenge, consolation instead of verdict, and instilling blind obedience instead of critical reflection. It plays a reductionist role in the development of the individual and betrays humanity to our metaphysical and social enemies.<sup>70</sup> While language and literature can uplift one spiritually and mentally, this does not happen automatically. Great verbal culture is a *potential* remedy and a matter of individual pursuit. This understanding is extremely relevant today

66 Mikhail Epstein, *Russkii antimir*, Franc Tireur USA, New York, 2022. While this thesis still needs to be tested in Putin's case, Epstein predicts a similar scenario within a few years.

67 For another discussion of the roots of Brodsky's ideas about language, see Thomas J. Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2019, especially the Introduction. It may be argued that Brodsky's philosophy of language is rooted in Russian thought and literary criticism of the 1900s–1920s.

68 See 'Catastrophes in the Air', in Brodsky, *Less Than One*, pp. 283, 287.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

when so many entities attempt to trap and control our minds. High philological culture, as Brodsky suggested all along, is a mechanism of self-defence, enabling us to think our own thoughts and speak the words that are our own.

‘The century will soon end, but sooner it will be me’<sup>71</sup> (‘Век скоро кончится, но раньше кончусь я’) wrote Brodsky in 1989, correctly predicting his physical death. But his writings survived into the new century. Some of Brodsky’s key insights have even become more apparent and meaningful in the situation of contemporary crisis. Tomas Venclova spoke of Brodsky’s poetry as ‘post-catastrophic or post-eschatological – poetry “after the end of the world”’.<sup>72</sup> It is not so much a negation of the largely misinterpreted dictum of Theodor Adorno<sup>73</sup> as an illustration of the type of poetry that still *can* be written when all illusions and hopes are gone – poetry marked by anti-pathos, emotional restraint, stoicism, and understanding that ‘despair is often an adequate answer to the world’s challenge’.<sup>74</sup>

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71 Joseph Brodsky, ‘Fin de siècle,’ in Brodsky, *So Forth. Poems*, p. 53.

72 Tomas Venclova, *Stat’i o Brodskom*, Baltrus, Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2005, p. 167.

73 In his 1949 essay ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ (in *Prisms*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1981) Theodor Adorno mentioned that it was barbaric to write verse after Auschwitz (*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*). This phrase has been repeatedly misquoted in a sense that it is *impossible* to write poetry after Auschwitz.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

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