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## JOSEPH BRODSKY'S IMPERIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

There is no complete language, no language which can express all our ideas and all our sensations; their shades are too numerous, too imperceptible. Nobody can make known the precise degree of sensation he experiences... all languages are, like us, imperfect... everything has become metaphor<sup>1</sup>.

*Voltaire*

...it's not that the language happens to be his [a poet] instrument, but that he is language's means toward the continuation of its existence. Language, however, even if one imagines it as a certain animate creature (which would only be just), is not capable of ethical choice<sup>2</sup>.

*Joseph Brodsky*

[Thinking about empires], where literature replaced life, where literature was the only form worthy of human life, we may conclude: literature is never innocent, even if it wants to be innocent (especially when it wants to be innocent)<sup>3</sup>.

*Oksana Zabuzhko*

After attending a party featuring a champagne fountain and other ostentatious trappings<sup>4</sup>, the 1987 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature Joseph Brodsky, a famous Russian, and later American poet, ruminated about the unpredictability of life: "A different continent, a different life... How did we drift here? How did we manage to find

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, New York, n.d., p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> J. Brodsky, *Nobel Lecture*, trans. by B. Rubin, 8 December 1987, available at [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1987/brodsky-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1987/brodsky-lecture.html).

<sup>3</sup> O. Zabuzhko, *Proshchannia z imperieiu: kil'ka shtrykhiv do odnoho portretu*, [in:] *Khroniky vid Fortinbrasa: Vybrana eseistyka*, Kyiv 2006, p. 306.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Liberman (1912-1999), Russian-American publisher, painter, photographer, sculptor and the editor of *Vogue Magazine*, hosted the party.

ourselves here?”<sup>5</sup>. A member of an intellectually driven circle of poets in Soviet Leningrad, and later, part of the American intellectual elite, Brodsky was amazed at the transformations that had occurred in his life. Brodsky possessed a set of features that were suspicious to the Soviet regime: he was unemployed, or rather self-employed, a concept foreign to the Soviet authorities; and he communicated with foreigners who visited the Soviet Union and with suspicious “elements” of the Leningrad intelligentsia. For these reasons, he was exiled and eventually banned from the country.

Yet the subject of this essay is not Brodsky’s dissidence in the Soviet Union, especially since no one identified him as a Soviet dissident. He was not a member of any underground organization that opposed the Soviet regime, and he did not distribute *samizdat* in the USSR, although his poems were published in *Sintaksis*, the first *samizdat* poetry journal circulating in Moscow and Leningrad<sup>6</sup>. In fact, Brodsky himself has insisted that he was not a dissident<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, he has repeatedly stated that he was apolitical and his creativity was not informed by political history<sup>8</sup>. This essay challenges this self-identification and attempts to understand Brodsky’s imperial attitudes. More specifically, this text analyzes Brodsky’s position toward Ukraine and its independence in 1991, an exercise that might help us understand the definition of “empire” in Brodsky’s world and, more broadly, the meaning of “empire” for its artists. This project was provoked by an explicit text about Ukraine that Brodsky wrote after the Soviet Union disintegrated, a process in which Ukraine played a significant role<sup>9</sup>. He entitled this poem “To Ukraine’s Independence” (*Na nezavisimost’ Ukrainy*)<sup>10</sup>. Brodsky’s assertive and quite aggressive imperialistic tone employed in this poem stunned many. As it routinely occurs with creative writing, but especially with Brodsky’s poetry, this poem informs its readers more about the author himself, rather than about the subject of his writings<sup>11</sup>.

This essay explores the poet’s motives for appointing himself guardian of the Union’s integrity, and attempts to unearth biographical details about Brodsky that could explain his reaction to the collapse of the Soviet civilization, a reaction seemingly uncharacteristic of him. Brodsky’s proposition about the future of Ukraine severed from Russia is rather gloomy: in his view, Ukraine’s independence was lethal to its people and culture. By uttering this view, albeit in poetic form, Brodsky expanded

<sup>5</sup> L. Shtern, *Brodskii: Osia, Iosif, Joseph*, Moskva 2001, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii: Opyt literaturnoi biografii*, Moskva 2006, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets*, New Haven-London 2009, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> On the role of Ukraine in the demise of the Soviet Union, see S. Plokhyy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*, New York 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Brodsky’s students could learn more about Brodsky as a poet and a human being from his lectures about other poets, in the absolute and deliberate absence of the poet’s references to his own poetry. See V. Polukhina, *Michiganskii universitet: 1980*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: Trudy i dni*, eds. L. Losev and P. Vail’, Moskva 1998, p. 60.

his literary expertise by adding an overt political and ideological dimension to his work. Some observers have suggested that extreme, often polar, reactions to Brodsky were typical: he was obsessively admired or viciously criticized for everything he did, wrote or said<sup>12</sup>. However, in 1992 most were flabbergasted at Brodsky's ideological "evolution," when they heard or read his poem "To Ukraine's Independence".

The term ideological "evolution" is not applicable in Brodsky's case. In fact, his philosophy or worldview was rather stiff and inflexible<sup>13</sup>. He was very much a product of Russian literature and its two-century imperial literary tradition, and less influenced by the Soviet system which he largely despised and ignored. This tradition helped shape Brodsky's subconscious mental map of Russia and its language, the geographical borders of which were rather rigid.

### Mutual idiosyncrasies: Brodsky and the Soviet regime

"The parasite" Brodsky was arrested by the Leningrad authorities on 13 February 1964. The transcripts of two show trials of Brodsky that took place in Leningrad on 18 February and 13 March 1964 were originally published in the weekly magazine *Ogonyok* in December, 1988. Because of Frida Abramovna Vigdorova's civic gallantry and unprecedented courage during the trials, the transcripts survived. A well-known journalist, writer, and teacher, Vigdorova took notes in the courtroom despite the judge's prohibition against doing so<sup>14</sup>.

Several years before these trials, Nikita Khrushchev had unmasked the cult of personality and officially liberated the minds of the Soviet people at the Twentieth Party Congress of 1956. During the short period of the Thaw, new themes and ideas emerged among promising young Russian poets and writers. They were inspired by liberal political changes, managed to publish their innovative works and advanced themselves further both intellectually and professionally. Russian literature experienced an awakening. However, the regime very quickly became intolerant of dissident literature and any other progressive form of art. The state aggressively intruded into the creative process, and by 1958 the official Soviet ideology had created an unbearable atmosphere for the creative intelligentsia. Once again, writers were forced to adjust themselves and return to the routine, praising the achievements of the socialist society. Some resisted the regime actively. Many resorted to an "internal immigration". In other words, they isolated themselves from the insanity of the bureaucratic system and the police state by writing what they felt like writing, without any hope of being published. Brodsky was among those who chose this sort of internal freedom. To some degree, Brodsky created "his own exile, both linguistic and expe-

<sup>12</sup> E. Brudne-Wigley, *Drevniaia stikhiia pesni. Muzhestvo pevtsa i proroka v pafose I. A. Brodskogo*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: tvorchestvo, lichnost', sud'ba*, Sankt-Peterburg 1998, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Brodsky himself believed that language is more capable of mutations and transformations than people. See the text of his 8 December 1987 Nobel Lecture.

<sup>14</sup> F. Vigdorova, *The Trial of Joseph Brodsky*, translated from the Russian by M.R. Katz, "New England Review", p. 183-207, available at [www.nereview.com/files/2014/01/NER-Vigdorova.pdf](http://www.nereview.com/files/2014/01/NER-Vigdorova.pdf).

riential”<sup>15</sup>. Reading and writing became his priorities, an intellectual engagement which superseded politics. From the Soviet government’s perspective, such arrogant and socially passive behavior should have been punished ferociously. The local Leningrad activists and the KGB routinely intimidated Brodsky, and finally in February 1964 he was arrested.

The transcripts of the two show trials illustrate the conflict between intellect and talent on one hand, and bureaucracy and mediocrity on the other. The task of the system was to destroy a marvelously independent mind, or at the very least to bring the poet into conformity. The leading figures of the trial, most of the witnesses, many of the people in the courtroom, and Yakov Lerner who launched the attack on Brodsky in the local newspaper, *The Evening Leningrad* (*Vechernii Leningrad*) were rehearsed and orchestrated by the secret police. Brodsky’s internal opposition to the regime, his “self-induced isolationism”<sup>16</sup>, general aloofness and metaphysical perception of life were characteristics of an “idle and good-for-nothing” individual who could not contribute to a new Communist society. Naturally, he was not a member of the Union of Writers, and, therefore, could not rely on its protection. In fact, this institution played a negative role in Brodsky’s life: its administration supported the prosecutor’s decision to initiate a civil suit against Brodsky; the activists at the Union of Writers also asked the prosecutor to launch a criminal case against Brodsky and his friends, if possible<sup>17</sup>. Lerner and “official” writers succeeded. Brodsky was put on trial – the state expected his complete moral and intellectual surrender, and subordination.

From the very beginning of the trial, the judge Savel’eva was rather hostile to the defendant Brodsky. Her manner of leading the hearing was unsophisticated and crude. Savel’eva wandered in circles, repeatedly asking Brodsky about his lack of employment. She attempted to discipline the poet, and largely dismissed his answers that essentially reflected one simple idea: he worked, writing poems and translating foreign poetry.

Judge: What do you do for a living?

Brodsky: I write poetry. I translate. I suppose...

J: Never mind what you “suppose.” Stand up properly. Don’t lean against the wall. Look at the court. Answer the court properly. (To me [Vigdorova]) Stop taking notes immediately! Or else – I’ll have you thrown out of the courtroom. (To Brodsky) Do you have a regular job?

B: I thought this was a regular job.

J: Answer correctly!

B: I was writing poems. I thought they’d be published. I suppose...

J: We’re not interested in what you “suppose.” Tell us why you weren’t working?

B: I did work. I wrote poetry... I had contracts with a publisher<sup>18</sup>.

To Savel’eva’s questions about who recognized him as a poet, who put him in the ranks of poets, and what education he received to be a poet, Brodsky replied that he

<sup>15</sup> D.M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, Princeton, NJ 1994, p. 252.

<sup>16</sup> D. MacFadyen, *Joseph Brodsky and the Soviet Muse*, Montreal et al. 2000, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> F. Vigdorova, *The Trial of Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 184.

did not think that one became a poet through education. He added: "I think that... (perplexed) it comes from God..."<sup>19</sup>.

Twenty years later, Brodsky explained that his generation "was among the most bookish in the history of Russia... It started as an ordinary accumulation of knowledge but soon became our most important occupation, to which everything could be sacrificed. Books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded as either nonsense or nuisance"<sup>20</sup>. Precisely for these views, the KGB scripted the plot of the short trial where Brodsky would be sentenced to a number of years of exile and forced labor in Siberia. Predictably, despite the defense's efforts to prove that all accusations of parasitism were not true, Brodsky was assigned for psychiatric evaluation (very typical practices for this time period) and scheduled for a second trial that occurred in March, 1964.

The transcripts of the second trial are also instructive. They reveal evidence of a fabricated case to accuse Brodsky of anti-Soviet activities and parasitism. The document suggests that Brodsky was not "informed of the charges against him either prior to the first trial," or during the second trial. Only after the court recess, was he informed about what he was accused of. Moreover, it turned out that the anti-Soviet poems allegedly written by Brodsky were not even his. Furthermore, all witnesses who were invited by the prosecution began their testimonies with the same phrase: "I do not know Brodsky personally, but...". The system of intimidation or blackmailing, employed by the KGB, worked very persuasively on those who were "invited" to testify in court. Basing their judgments on Lerner's libelous article "A Near-Literary Drone", the witnesses called Brodsky a parasite and an anti-Soviet poet. The transcripts reveal that among the prosecution's witnesses not one could be considered an expert in literature. Among them were Denisov (a worker), Nikolaev (a pensioner), Logunov (an administrator), and Romashova (a party functionary). All of them consistently labeled Brodsky's poetry as "awful" and "shameful", and his life style as "militantly parasitical".

In contrast to the prosecution's orchestrated activity, the defense presented the most respected people in literature, all of whom knew Brodsky personally and were familiar with his brilliant translations of Polish, Yugoslavian, Cuban and American poetry. The transcripts introduce the testimony of such famous scholars and writers as Efim Etkind, Natalia Grudinina and Vladimir Admoni. They confirmed the defense claims about Brodsky's contracts with different publishing houses to publish his translations. They evaluated his poetry very highly, and predicted a great future for him as a poet. Moreover, as professionals, they emphasized Brodsky's incredible productivity, and characterized him as a hard worker. For example, the transcript included the testimony of Grudinina who stated:

As a professional poet and scholar of literature by training, I can affirm that Brodsky's translations were done on a high professional level. He possesses a specific talent, not often encountered, for translating poems artistically. He presented me with his work consisting of 368 lines of verse, in addition to which I read 120 lines of his translated poems published in various Moscow editions. I know from my own personal experi-

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> J. Brodsky, *Less Than One*, New York 1986, p. 28.

ence as a literary translator that such a volume of work demands no less than a year and a half of concentrated effort by an author, not to mention the difficulty of getting the works published and consulting with specialists. The total time required for such activities, as is well known, is impossible to calculate...<sup>21</sup>

Etkind testified:

I realized that I was dealing with an exceptionally gifted man – and what’s no less important, he had perseverance and a capacity for hard work. His translations, which I had the chance to read subsequently, strengthened the opinion of him that I’d formed... I have had many conversations with Brodsky and have been surprised by his knowledge of American, English, and Polish literature... One can translate poems for several years and not earn a single ruble. Such work demands unselfish love for poetry and for the work itself. The study of languages, the history and culture of working people – all that is not accomplished swiftly. Everything I know about Brodsky’s work convinces me that a great future awaits him as a poet-translator<sup>22</sup>.

Nevertheless, the opinions of literary experts could not and did not change the pre-determined verdict of the trial.

Not surprisingly, the “ordinary” spectators in the courtroom were not quite ordinary. Interviewed many years after the trial by Solomon Volkov, Brodsky stated that from the very beginning he understood who was in the courtroom. He suggested that half of the courtroom contained KGB and police agents.<sup>23</sup> They were recruited and specially trained to intimidate Brodsky and to create an illusion that the overwhelming majority of the Soviet people held the belief that he had an anti-Soviet mindset and maintained the lifestyle of a dissident poet. The transcripts abound with the remarks of people in the courtroom during the hearings. For example, when Brodsky answered the judge’s question about how he benefited the country (“I wrote poems. That’s my work. I’m convinced... I believe that what I’ve written will be of use to people not only now, but also to future generations”<sup>24</sup>), a voice from the crowd said: “Imagine that!” Other statements speak for themselves: “Writers! They should get rid of them all!” or “Intellectuals! They’re millstones around our necks!”<sup>25</sup> A carefully instructed public applauded when the witness Nikolaev asked the court to treat Brodsky “without mercy”<sup>26</sup>.

The Soviet intelligentsia’s expectations for freedom were naïve and premature. Brodsky was one of the few who did not expect anything of the kind from the totalitarian regime. He knew that the grasp of tyranny was firm and unyielding. Brodsky wrote:

...we are dealing not with the tyranny of an individual but with the tyranny of a party that simply has put the production of tyrants on an industrial footing... a tyranny does just that: structures your life for you. It does this as meticulously as possible, certainly

<sup>21</sup> F. Vigdorova, *The Trial of Joseph Brodsky*..., p. 191.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> S. Volkov, *Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim*, Moskva 1998, p. 75-76.

<sup>24</sup> F. Vigdorova, *The Trial of Joseph Brodsky*..., p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 197.

far better than a democracy does... This is what the party-run state, with its security service, mental institutions, police, and citizens' sense of loyalty, is for<sup>27</sup>.

In crisis situations, Brodsky often quoted Robert Frost – “the best way out is always through”<sup>28</sup>. The best way out for Brodsky in the Soviet Union became his estrangement from the system, reading and writing, an individualistic principle incompatible with communal socialist values. Another Russian writer Sergei Dovlatov has accurately grasped Brodsky's model of behavior: “He lived not in a proletarian state, but in a monastery of his own spirit. He did not struggle with the regime. He simply did not notice it. He was not really aware of its existence”<sup>29</sup>.

Brodsky was an individualist, an impossible and punishable status in the USSR. He was charged with “social parasitism” and was sentenced to five years in exile in Norenskaia, a small village in the Arkhangelsk Province. In June 1972, Brodsky was banished from the Soviet Union. Anna Akhmatova famously declared: “What a biography they are making for our red [ryzhyi]!”<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, the trial and the subsequent exile made Brodsky famous in the West where he was kindly embraced, and his poetic bilingual efforts were encouraged. “The parasite” and “disobedient child” of the Soviet system fashioned a distinguished literary and scholarly career in the United States and became a Nobel Prize Laureate in literature in 1987. Paradoxically, the Soviet system, trying to exterminate everything that was not “red”, created a very broad palette of colors among Soviet intellectuals, where Brodsky's color became the brightest.

One might suggest that the history of Brodsky's harassment by the Soviet authorities and his problems with the law should have generated the poet's long-standing alienation from everything Soviet or Russian except the language and culture, especially from the Russian authoritarian and imperial traditions and institutions. Had Brodsky's adjustment to Western culture failed, this might have further exacerbated his feelings of frustration with the Soviet regime that deprived him of his Motherland. This, however, was not the case.

Brodsky became uniquely successful in the West, and his success may be attributed to many factors. One of them was his amazing ability to adjust to circumstances. His exile and conflict with the Soviet authorities played a significant role in his desire to escape from mono-linguistic creativity<sup>31</sup>. In the United States he began to write his prose and his poems in English. On many occasions, Brodsky stated that the features of the Russian language opposed the political regime in the Soviet Union, creating a dissonance unbearable to the poet's ear. The language of the Soviets

<sup>27</sup> J. Brodsky, *Less Than One...*, p. 120, 121.

<sup>28</sup> R. Frost, *A Servant to Servants*, [in:] *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. E.C. Lathem, New York 1975, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> S. Dovlatov, *Remeslo: Sobranie prozy v triokh tomakh*, Vol. 2, Sankt-Peterburg 1995, p. 23. Also quoted in A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton-Oxford 2006, p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> Brodsky had reddish hair.

<sup>31</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 223.

created a fictitious world, enslaving the nation, according to Brodsky<sup>32</sup>. He insisted on the metaphysical nature of the language, and any of the Russian language's connections or associations with the Soviets appeared to be nonsensical and irritating to Brodsky. He gravitated toward the English language, ethically, aesthetically and ideologically, a language that, in Brodsky's view, was (more than Russian) in harmony with the "national culture" of the United States<sup>33</sup>. Yet, as Shamil Khairov has argued, Brodsky expressed opinions that often contradicted one another: "depending on his needs, Brodsky could either associate a language with a given political system or, on the contrary, detach the former from the latter"<sup>34</sup>.

Nonetheless, he always positioned himself as a Russian poet, quite proudly announcing this at any opportunity. His pride of being Russian was genuine and enigmatic. His poetic gift and Russianness combined with his eloquence in English and his status as the Nobel Prize Laureate became a combination that made him unique in the West, and this uniqueness amplified his feeling of pride.

### Cultural imperialism

The discourse about the history of the birth of a Soviet writer, and the role of literature and artists in empires is well-known and too extensive to be fully explicated here<sup>35</sup>. But two works are especially relevant here. Ewa M. Thompson has examined the phenomena of Russian imperialism, colonialism and nationalism, and how they are embedded in Russian cultural discourse and literature. She has explored how the Russian, and later Soviet, Empire created its image in literary texts, and has argued that Russian literature traditionally enforced the narrative of Russian presence in the conquered territories, eradicating regional history and culture or allocating them to subordinate status in the empire<sup>36</sup>. In turn, this phenomenon produced colonial consciousness among many Russian writers. In a similar vein, Myroslav Shkandrij has explored how stereotypes which cast Ukraine and Ukrainian culture as inferior to Russia and Russian culture were shaped by nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals,

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Brodsky's essay "Catastrophes in the Air" in *Less Than One*.

<sup>33</sup> S. Khairov, *Writers' Linguistic Observations and Creating Myths about Languages: Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky in Search of the 'Slavonic Genius of Language'*, "The Modern Language Review" 109, no. 3 (2014), p. 732; D.M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation...*, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> S. Khairov, *Writers' Linguistic Observations...*, p. 731. See also p. 736.

<sup>35</sup> Among others, see: B. Groys, *Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by Ch. Rougle, Princeton 1992; M. Epstein, *Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art*, [in:] *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. M. Balina, N. Condee, and E. Dobrenko, Evanston 2000, p. 3-29; E. Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories*, Evanston 2005; A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever...*; K. Clark, E. Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*, New Haven-London 2007; V. Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Cambridge 2009.

<sup>36</sup> E.M. Thompson, *Trubadury imperii: Rosiis'ka literatura i colonialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. by M. Korchyns'ka, Kyiv 2008, p. 19.

and how both Russian and Ukrainian writers exploited identity politics after 1991<sup>37</sup>. How does Brodsky fit into this system of logic and the canon of Russian imperial thought?

Many scholars have mentioned Brodsky's cosmopolitanism and even internationalism<sup>38</sup>. They deny the poet's imperialism and Russian chauvinism, given his suffering under the Soviet empire<sup>39</sup>. Some have emphasized that he was a person of Empire, yet an exiled one, and his reaction to the "vyshivanizatsiia" is quite natural<sup>40</sup>. Other commentators believe that the space and place in which Brodsky was born and raised (Leningrad, an imperial city, and its grandiose architecture) played an important role in the formation of his imperial thinking<sup>41</sup>. Tomas Venclova has emphasized that Brodsky was a poet of the city, the city that shaped Pushkin's poetry<sup>42</sup>. This geographical place and its intellectual space were saturated with imperial traditions reflected in the gray waters of the Neva River, a landscape cherished by Brodsky. He seems to have perceived Russian culture and its greatness precisely through the prism of these traditions and space<sup>43</sup>.

By 1988, Brodsky's views about the Russian and Soviet empires and the role of artists in them were more or less transparent for those who were interested in the culture and history of Eastern and Central Europe. In his multiple interviews, essays and meetings at various American universities, Brodsky identified the Soviet Union as a police state, yet argued that literature and culture transcended geographical borders and political systems<sup>44</sup>. At the 1988 international literary conference in Lisbon, during debates with Czesław Miłosz, Brodsky agreed with the oppressive imperial nature of the Soviet Union, rejecting, however, the notion of "Central Europe" and Russian culture being a part of the European cultural mosaic<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, Brodsky

<sup>37</sup> M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, Montreal-Kingston 2001.

<sup>38</sup> S. Khairov, *Writers' Linguistic Observations...*, p. 746; Shamil Khairov's presentation *Under the Sway of Languages: The Linguistic Reflections of Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky* at the CRCEES IV Annual Research Forum at the University Glasgow, 12 May 2011.

<sup>39</sup> V. Gogolitsyn, *Pozdnii Brodskii – imperialist?*, *Stikhi. ru*, 26 November 2013, available at [www.stihi.ru/diary/gog2330386/2013-11-26](http://www.stihi.ru/diary/gog2330386/2013-11-26).

<sup>40</sup> D. Lekukh, *A vot Brodskogo my vam ne otdadim. K iubileiu poeta*, "Kul'tpul't" 25 May 2015, available at [www.kultpult.ru/A-vot-Brodskogo-my-vam-ne-otdadim-K-yubileyu-poeta-230](http://www.kultpult.ru/A-vot-Brodskogo-my-vam-ne-otdadim-K-yubileyu-poeta-230). *Vyshivanizatsiia* is a derogatory term for Ukraine's strivings for cultural distinctiveness and independence.

<sup>41</sup> V. Makhno, *Venetsianskii lev: Ob Iosife Brodskom*, "Zvezda", September 2013, available at [zvezdaspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=2159](http://zvezdaspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=2159). See also L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 23. On the architectural grandeur of Saint Petersburg and its image as an "aspiring master of the world," see A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge 2011, p. 100-101.

<sup>42</sup> T. Venclova, *Foreword*, [in:] I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. xii.

<sup>43</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 130-31.

<sup>44</sup> J. Brodsky, *Why Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky*, "The New York Times Book Review", 17 January 1985. See also I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> Czesław Miłosz wrote in his "diary" *A Year of the Hunter* about Brodsky's and other Russian writers' positions: "They don't comprehend the degree to which their thinking is imperialistic..." Quoted in I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 132. See also Brod-

suggested that nothing would change in “Central Europe” unless the Russians “liberate themselves” first. Irena Grudzinska Gross has defined this attitude as “paternalistic”, if not imperialistic<sup>46</sup>. Brodsky insisted that it was a mistake to accuse the Russians of imperialism or colonialism, and emphasized that the West was as guilty as the East in creating the oppressive communist system<sup>47</sup>. What is fascinating here is that, routinely claiming to be extremely individualistic, Brodsky spoke on behalf of the entire Russian nation. This was not simply an emotional response to Milan Kundera’s works and to the representatives of “small peoples” who fought for their identity and their right to be heard and to survive culturally<sup>48</sup>; this was an intellectual position that found its reflection in Brodsky’s subsequent speeches and writings, culminating in his poem “To Ukraine’s independence”.

For Brodsky, the collapse of the USSR became a deep concern, a reality he refused to understand or accept. Among other observers, his closest friend and Russian poet Evgenii Rein has argued that Brodsky was devastated not by the fall of the Soviet Union but rather by the disintegration of Russia. Rein has insisted that Brodsky cared about “our Slavic space”<sup>49</sup>. Ukraine was a part of this space, and thus, a part of Russia. Rein has emphasized that Brodsky loved Crimea, and repeatedly said to him: “Crimea must be Russian”<sup>50</sup>. It seems that for Brodsky two notions, “the disintegration of Russia” and “the disintegration of the empire”, were far from being equivalent. Russia was associated with language and culture; the empire embodied political connotations. Aleksandr Batchan has confirmed that in Brodsky’s world, “empire was a positive phenomenon only in a cultural sense”<sup>51</sup>. Brodsky rejected Soviet practices of violence and cruelty, which he identified as “anthropological genocide” and an “extraordinary anthropological backslide”, which annihilated the intellectual potential of several generations of people<sup>52</sup>. But as mentioned earlier, Brodsky did not consider state violence and communism intrinsically Russian phenomena.

The mental geographies of two great poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky, differed in a significant way. For Miłosz, the Russian and Sovi-

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sky’s explanations of his position in the transcript of the May 1988 international literary conference in Lisbon in I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 134-136.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

<sup>47</sup> O. Hnatiuk, *Proshchannia z imperieiu: Ukrain’s’ki dyskusii pro identychnist’*, Kyiv 2005, p. 266-267.

<sup>48</sup> The term “small peoples” was coined by the Czech writer Milan Kundera to define those ethnic communities that lack a “sense of an eternal past and future”. Concerns about their political and cultural past and present, and the issues of identity are central to their survival. For a discussion about “small peoples”, see U. Abulof, “*Small Peoples*”: *The Existential Uncertainty of Ethno-national Communities*, “*International Studies Quarterly*” 53, no. 1 (2009), p. 227-248.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Evgenii Rein by Leonid Velekhov, “*Radio Svoboda*”, 23 May 2015, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpFjZ\\_sLKSs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpFjZ_sLKSs). Rein is absolutely certain that Brodsky would support Russia’s annexation of Crimea today.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>51</sup> A. Batchan, *Kolumbiiskii universitet, New York: 1982*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: Trudy...*, p. 61. Batchan dated his meeting with Brodsky late December 1995, when their conversation focused on Russia and Chechnia.

<sup>52</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare: An Exchange*, “*The New York Review of Books*”, 17 February 1994, p. 5.

et empires were associated with “violence, poverty, and degradation”<sup>53</sup>, while for Brodsky, the associative links were more positive: the language of Pushkin, imperial architecture, and the “gray waters” of the River Neva (*vodichka Nevy*). Miłosz’s vision was more inclusive than Brodsky’s. Although Miłosz’s attitudes toward Russia were ambivalent, Russia and its culture became a part of not only his biography, but also a part of Europe and his own self-identification. Brodsky kept insisting on the exclusiveness of Russian culture and the Russian language<sup>54</sup>. Despite the privileged position Brodsky allocated to the English language, his deep affinity for Russian and his admiration of the language’s warm-heartedness and its spiritual nature has been revealed through his prose and multiple interviews. He made an explicit connection between the language’s features and the “Russian national character”<sup>55</sup>. Brodsky routinely transcended a purely literary discourse, sliding into a discussion about the mysterious Russian psyche<sup>56</sup>, and the mystical spirit of Russia and its culture, which was a political statement in itself.

Importantly, Brodsky’s statements about his apolitical status provoke doubts because after 1972 he lived in a world which could hardly be identified as isolated. The realities forced him to become political. He wrote political poems and participated in debates about “Central Europe” and other political issues. Brodsky’s generalizations about the Russian psyche, Russian history or Russian people also had a political twist, especially after 1991. They may have currency because of his rich and diverse life experience in the USSR. However, these statements should be filtered through a careful analysis of Brodsky’s very special knowledge he acquired over the course of his interactions with the Russian state and people, an issue which we will revisit shortly.

Ukraine was undoubtedly a part of the Slavic space Brodsky considered “ours”. As a geographical place and as an independent entity, Ukraine had never existed on Brodsky’s mental map. In 1987, at a ceremony dedicated to his Nobel Prize award, Brodsky identified Brody as a part of Russia, a place where his ancestors allegedly resided<sup>57</sup>. The Ukrainian town of Brody remained Russian for him for the rest of his life.

Brodsky refused to acknowledge Ukraine’s uniqueness and to accept its independence. In the spring of 1992, shortly after Ukraine became independent, at a conference at Rutgers University, Brodsky met the Ukrainian poet Oksana Zabuzhko who was introduced to him as a poet from Ukraine. “We met at Harvard last year”, Zabuzhko stated. “I do not remember. Where is Ukraine?” Brodsky asked her with some irony. Pointing at Czesław Miłosz who was sitting on her left, and at Brodsky on her right, Zabuzhko replied: “Can’t you see? It is still there, as always, between Poland and Russia”. Miłosz laughed together with other witnesses of this conversation, which was perceived as a gesture of support by Zabuzhko<sup>58</sup>. It is difficult to say

<sup>53</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 146.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>55</sup> S. Khairov, *Writers' Linguistic Observations...*, p. 733, 736.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 737-738.

<sup>57</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 155.

<sup>58</sup> O. Zabuzhko, *Proshchannia z imperieiu...*, p. 282-283.

whether this was Brodsky's awkward attempt to flirt with a young and pretty woman from Ukraine, or a natural reaction to a representative of a "regional", and thus "lesser" culture. Nevertheless, Brodsky's pretense at geographical ignorance ultimately defines his cultural colonial mentality. Examining Brodsky's analyses of the art of poets such as Derek Walcott, Zabuzhko interpreted Brodsky's stance as his cultural deafness to the voices of "the colonized", voices other than "imperial", a "clinical symptom of imperial world perception"<sup>59</sup>.

Some consider Brodsky's consciousness deeply paradoxical. His commentators have noted that Brodsky routinely denied statements he had made in the past. Albert Leong was confident that Brodsky's "paradoxes and contradictions affirmed the personality of a free individual"<sup>60</sup>. To others, this statement seemed an evanescent supposition. Brodsky's mind was sharp and incredibly organized. He appears to have been extremely consistent, and even rigid, in his convictions. At times his explanations about the issues of empire were incoherent and vague<sup>61</sup> but the essence of his principles and vision remained unchanged. Some of his postulates became recurrent: aesthetics should be considered the mother of ethics<sup>62</sup>; communism is not a geographical phenomenon<sup>63</sup>; Russia should not be blamed for imperialism and the like. Brodsky's case was of course not unprecedented or unique – like many other Russian writers, he inherited the Pan-Slavic and pan-Russian identity through Russian literature that celebrated the idea of expansion and conquests. His case was not unique in either an ethnic or geographical sense. Another Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, the great English writer Joseph Rudyard Kipling was extremely imperialistic<sup>64</sup>: it would be difficult to misread his racially charged portraits of Indians who, in Kipling's view, were unable to survive without the guidance of the British. Yet, as was mentioned earlier, Brodsky's imperialistic stance was of a different nature. It lied in the realm of culture, and included the notion of "lesser" cultures, lesser than Russian.

In this context, the anti-Ukrainian poem, which Brodsky apparently wrote in 1992, should not come as a surprise, although it astounded many by its aggressive tone. On 30 October 1992 in the Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, CA Brodsky read his poem "To Ukraine's Independence"<sup>65</sup>. He addressed the audience with the words: "Now I will read something provocative (*nechto riskovannoe*) for you, but nevertheless I will read it". This meeting was attended by approximately a thousand people. The poem mocked Ukraine's independence<sup>66</sup>.

As several commentators have argued, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragic event for Brodsky, and the secession of Ukraine was especially painful for

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 283-289.

<sup>60</sup> A. Leong, *Literaturnaia kritika Iosifa Brodskogo*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: tvorchestvo...*, p. 237.

<sup>61</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 161.

<sup>62</sup> B. Yangfeldt, *Svobodnyi chelovek ne vinit nikogo*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: tvorchestvo...*, p. 95.

<sup>63</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare...*, p. 1-12.

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, Edward Said's analysis of Kipling's views in his *Kul'tura i imperialism*, trans. by K. Botanova and T. Tsymbal, Kyiv 2007, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> In 1994, Brodsky read this poem in Queens College in New York.

<sup>66</sup> See Appendix A.

him. In a private conversation with a Swede he lamented: "Ukraine is no longer Russia, and Russia is no longer an empire"<sup>67</sup>. Again, the appearance of this theme in Brodsky's poetry is no surprise – this is a result of the trauma of decolonization experienced by many Russian writers. Brodsky, however, went beyond his readers' expectations. Irena Grudzińska Gross, for instance, has characterized the poem as brutal and even violent, and her definition is fairly accurate, given the poem's semantics and ideological overtone<sup>68</sup>. Except for the slang, the poem abounds in metaphorical innovations, but the overproduction of pseudo-aphorisms, pretentious and devilish<sup>69</sup>, makes it sound rather violent. Brodsky forbade its publication precisely for this reason, and so that neither side would use it for propaganda purposes<sup>70</sup>.

What triggered Brodsky's hostility toward Ukrainians and his mental attachment to the Soviet Union after residing for almost two decades in a cultural environment so different from that of the Soviet Union? At a very early age, he learned that any sort of attachment, intellectual, cultural or emotional, might be dangerous and fraught with tragedy, loss and pain. Moreover, fixed notions or immobility, intellectual or physical, seemed distasteful and even dangerous for Brodsky. Thus, the notion of fully belonging to one place or "to any realm" was foreign to him<sup>71</sup>. He had a marvelous ability to "move on" in his relations with women and with states. Lev Losev is correct arguing that Brodsky's perception of the empire was broader than political. In immigration, Russia as a cultural and geographical notion was pushed to the background: he fell in love with two other "empires" – Sweden and Italy, which suggests that the esthetic and cultural notions of empire were rather fluid for Brodsky. However, old affinities were periodically triggered by current events or by memories, whether they were about Marina Basmanova (his first serious relationship) or Russia, dominating his intellectual space and attention for quite some time.

Similarly, the events of 1991 activated Brodsky's imperial consciousness, where Ukraine and Russia were a single *cultural* empire, an inseparable entity which was destined to be united. Decolonization triggered Brodsky's imperial recidivism. As a result, the anti-Ukrainian poem emerged, a somnambular identification brought to light. This was consistent with his tendency to return to the same themes in his poetry, such as imperial images, immortal and monumental<sup>72</sup>. Moreover, these images were harmonious and beautiful and, thus, were "separated from abuse and death"<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> See Il'ia Belov's documentary *Brodsky ne poet* (2015), available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAhyBeWN4OY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAhyBeWN4OY).

<sup>68</sup> See I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 159-160.

<sup>69</sup> Sergei Gandlevskii characterized Brodsky's poetry as one that abounds with pseudo-aphorisms, a result of Brodsky's gravitation toward "classical absolutism". See S. Gandlevskii, *Olimpijskaia igra*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: tvorcestvo...*, p. 118.

<sup>70</sup> See Il'ia Belov's documentary *Brodsky ne poet* (2015)... Tomas Venclova also advised Brodsky not to publish this poem. See I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 160.

<sup>71</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 165.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165-166, 168-169.

<sup>73</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 23.

Nothing could replace them in Brodsky's imagination, and in using them as his interpretive lens for viewing Ukraine, his conception of Ukraine as an "exotic peasant paradise," and a place with a peculiar culture seems rather predictable<sup>74</sup>. Reinforced by the Russian literary tradition, the image of Ukraine was quite stable for Brodsky. The void and emptiness were to be there, if Ukraine was not Russian. Losev has confirmed that during the last 25 years of his life, Brodsky's worldview had not changed in a principal manner, while his poetic language became "more precise, richer and nuanced"<sup>75</sup>.

This point of view was shared by many, and hence those who knew Brodsky's poetry very well denied his authorship until the video where Brodsky himself was reading his poem "To Ukraine's Independence" found its way to Boris Vladimirkii's Facebook and later Youtube pages<sup>76</sup>. The poem was published in its original form in 2008 by Natalia Gorbanevskaia with Valentina Polukhina's comments<sup>77</sup>. Losev has stated that Brodsky's circle, people who communicated with him in the United States on a regular basis, were surprised at the level of Brodsky's frustration when Ukraine separated itself from Russia. Despite Brodsky's impulses of disgust to everything Soviet, he rejected the idea of Ukraine's independence. Like many of his compatriots, the Union was indivisible in Brodsky's world<sup>78</sup>. The tragedy of its disintegration seemed incomprehensible and unfair to him. Brodsky was sad and in tears:

Как-нибудь перебьемся. А что до слезы из глаза,  
Нет на нее указа ждать до другого раза.

His sadness, however, does not exhaust the whole spectrum of emotions that could be traced in this poem. Brodsky was furious, and his deliberate attempt to reduce Ukrainians to an uncultured and crude people was achieved through the use of stereotypical Ukrainian identifiers, such as *varenyk*, *zhupan*, *bashtan*, *kavun*, alternating with a slang usually employed in labor camps. This combination was apparently designed to marginalize Ukraine's desire for independence<sup>79</sup>. No doubt there was a clear effort to insult. There might be a pure Freudian slip here, an essential element to this tragedy: for Brodsky Ukraine's "deviation" and "transgression" embodied a personal cataclysm associated with losing a lover and a friend<sup>80</sup>. The abandoned (*broshennyi*)

<sup>74</sup> M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine...*, p. 251.

<sup>75</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 149.

<sup>76</sup> Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vVscdlm0w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vVscdlm0w).

<sup>77</sup> According to Gorbanevskaia, Brodsky read this poem for the first time on 28 February 1994 at Queens College in New York, where he was taped. The poem was decoded, with errors, and distributed through *samizdat*. With the same errors, it was published in the Kyiv newspaper "Stolitsa", no. 13 (1996). Gorbanevskaia claimed that she had received this text from Joseph himself, although one word had been replaced, apparently by Brodsky. See Natalia Gorbanevskaia, available at [ng68.livejournal.com/123368.html](http://ng68.livejournal.com/123368.html); see also L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 263-266.

<sup>78</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 263.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>80</sup> His unfortunate and torturous love affair with Marina Basmanova has been told by many, including Brodsky himself.

status is much more painful than the “abandoning” one. Walking out of a relationship is easy. Being given up is often fraught with crisis.

Beyond the imaginings and tastes shaped by the canon of Russian imperial thought in Brodsky, the very logic, style and tone of the poem brought him to the inevitable conclusion about the superiority of Russian culture: Pushkin's poetry was pristine, eternal and a manifestation of “high” culture, while Shevchenko's poetry was deceptive, insincere and represented a middlebrow culture. “Only when you die... will you wheeze lines from Aleksandr [Pushkin], and not the lies of Taras [Shevchenko]”, Brodsky wrote<sup>81</sup>. According to Brodsky's philosophy, language is “not capable of ethical choice”<sup>82</sup>, however the poet is. Retaining an elegance of verse, Brodsky substituted intellectualism and morality with vocal and poetical sophistication. He appears to be at odds with democratic liberal traditions, lacking a moral orientation and focus: he denigrated those who, like him in the past, strove for independence and freedom from Soviet legacies. By creating a propaganda leaflet, he ultimately supported Soviet legacies and those who advocated keeping Ukraine in Russia's economic, political and intellectual orbit.

Yet, the situation seems to be more tragic than that. Losev has written about Brodsky's lack of formal education but has argued that he had a profound linguistic and historical knowledge obtained through self-education<sup>83</sup>. Losev's admiration of Brodsky extends to claims that the poet, as a young man, mastered English and Polish to perfection<sup>84</sup>, a statement refuted by Brodsky himself. He was embarrassed by his English skills while communicating with W.H. Auden at an early stage of his immigration. Similarly, Losev's claim that Brodsky mastered history appears to be quite a stretch. His poem “To Ukraine's Independence” reveals little, if any, knowledge about Russia's and Ukraine's historical encounters, let alone Ukraine's history and culture. Brodsky seems to be unaware of Ukraine's cultural disruption in the thirties when Stalin's genocide exterminated the majority of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and a good portion of the Ukrainian peasantry, losses unmatched on the state level. In Brodsky's world, the Union no longer needed Ukraine's bread that once saved it:

Не поминайте лихом! Вашего неба, хлеба  
нам – подавись мы жмыхом и потолком – не треба.

Furthermore, Brodsky appears to be oblivious to the fact that the history of Soviet terror in Ukraine has a distinct feature, terror that was associated with the Communists' perception of Ukraine as a place of resistance, a place of pride and dignity, a place of Ukrainian nationalism. There cannot be a common denominator between human losses and casualties in Russia and Ukraine over the decades of Soviet rule,

<sup>81</sup> The translation of Brodsky's lines into English is borrowed from M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine...*, p. 251.

<sup>82</sup> See the text of Brodsky's 8 December 1987 Nobel Lecture.

<sup>83</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 29.

<sup>84</sup> See: *ibidem*, p. 30.

as there was neither a common “noose” nor a common “choice” for the Ukrainians and the Russians Brodsky referred to:

Как в петлю лезть, так сообща, сук выбирая в чаше,  
а курицу из борща грызть в одиночку слаще?

Moreover, Brodsky was certain that without Russia and Russian culture Ukraine would perish, becoming a desolate place, physically, culturally and intellectually:

С Богом, орлы, казаки, гетманы, вертухай!  
Только когда придет и вам помирать, бугай,  
будете вы хрипеть, царапая край матраса,  
строчки из Александра, а не брехню Тараса.

Some traits of Brodsky’s personality might be blamed for these cavalier attitudes. As Tomas Venclova has noted, Brodsky was arrogant, and his “nervous irritation” might have played a role in verbal inaccuracies or exaggerations<sup>85</sup>.

### **Brodsky’s aesthetic and ethical choice**

In light of Brodsky’s anti-Ukrainian poem, it seems appropriate to discuss briefly to what degree Brodsky internalized his poetry, and whether his “lyrical character” was synonymous with Brodsky himself. Valentina Polukhina has argued that “the poet’s principal auto-characteristics are placed at the intersections on several levels associated with aesthetics, poetry, themes and concepts”<sup>86</sup>. For the most part and to a significant degree, like Sartre, Brodsky perceived himself from hundreds of people’s positions – people were mirrors from which Brodsky drew knowledge about himself. Yet, the concept of Time seems to be a dominating framework for him, a framework that allowed accuracy and precision in Brodsky’s self-identification and self-understanding. This self-identification was often unflattering and ugly, almost “clinical” like aging and death<sup>87</sup>, but for the sake of poetry it should be exposed, neutrally and objectively. Time defined Brodsky’s intellectual and poetic landscape, where his “lyrical character” exhibited his fragmented and contradictory personality, often being dismissed and dethroned in a poem<sup>88</sup>. His constant search for external tools and estrangement from self-observation helped him penetrate the spiritual and moral depth of his “lyrical character”, measures often undertaken for the sake of language and aesthetics. These techniques had their own limitations, when the ethics and morality

<sup>85</sup> T. Venclova, *Foreword*..., p. x.

<sup>86</sup> V. Polukhina, *Poeticheskii avtoportret Brodskogo*, [in:] *Iosif Brodskii: tvorchestvo*..., p. 145.

<sup>87</sup> On a “more clinical notion of yourself,” see Brodsky’s 1980 interview in Richard Eder, *Joseph Brodsky in US: Poet and Language in Exile*, “The New Times”, 25 March 1980, p. 2. Quoted also in V. Polukhina, *Poeticheskii avtoportret*..., p. 150.

<sup>88</sup> V. Polukhina, *Poeticheskii avtoportret*..., p. 147-148.

suffered, yielding to the aesthetics, and ultimately making Brodsky's final goal obscure and unattainable.

Truly, aesthetics, language and words were paramount for Brodsky. Walt Whitman once stated that "all words are spiritual"<sup>89</sup>. Brodsky echoed Whitman, arguing that the Word could be spiritualized and materialized<sup>90</sup>. The Word is powerful, and can be destructive and anti-aesthetical. In a sense, Brodsky often desired this destruction, using the all-sweeping power of words, either for self-destruction or for the annihilation of his opponent or opponents. This seems to be the case with the poem "To Ukraine's Independence".

Interestingly, in his response to Václav Havel, in which Brodsky challenged Havel's concept of "the post-communist nightmare", he proclaimed that as a writer, he "weighs words more carefully... than elsewhere before committing them to paper"<sup>91</sup>. This statement might obscure attempts to understand Brodsky being completely oblivious to the fact that many of his oral and written statements in prose or in poetic form sounded exceptionally offensive and disrespectful to many people, East Europeans, people from the West, Ukrainians, women and men. Ironically, in the film-interview *Walks with Brodsky* (1993), directed by Elena Iakovich and Aleksei Shyshov in Venice, Brodsky ruminated about the legacies of totalitarianism. Among other things, he emphasized people's disrespect to one another which was overarching<sup>92</sup>.

Once again, the language of the poem articulates the disaster and metaphysical impasse of Ukraine's independence: the "lesser" culture and the literature of Shevchenko would become extinct if separated from Russia. Clearly, Shevchenko was a "lesser" poet for Brodsky than Pushkin. Tragically, Brodsky did not live long enough to see the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-2014, where protesters were dying for freedom and independence with Taras Shevchenko's poetry on their lips. He did not have an opportunity to learn about the Holodomor, where Shevchenko's poetry played a tremendous role in people's survival.

Brodsky, however, went beyond cultural concerns linked to Ukraine's independence. In a verbally abusive and humiliating manner, Brodsky assumed the future defenselessness of the Ukrainians against the Germans and Poles, a possibility intertwined in his anathema as a vivid scene of the rape of the Ukrainians by the Germans and Poles, who in turn were defined by stereotypical derogatory terms (*Gansy; liakhi*). Of course, in this context, the Ukrainians could be identified only as *pogantsy, khokhly*, and *kavuny*. Offensive name-calling sounds very contemporary. This slang, beyond traditional *khokhly*, alludes to new definitions that emerged in the Russian public discourse and social media in 2013-2014: *ukropy, zhidobanderovtsy*,

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Power of Words*, [in:] *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, New York 1956, p. 24.

<sup>90</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this notion, see V. Polukhina, *Poeticheskii avtoportret...*, p. 150.

<sup>91</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare...*, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> See the fragment from Elena Iakovich and Aleksei Shyshov's film-interview *Walks with Brodsky* (1993), 3 June 2015, available at [www.mk.ru/culture/2015/06/03/okhraniteli-napisali-donos-namertvogo-brodskogo.html](http://www.mk.ru/culture/2015/06/03/okhraniteli-napisali-donos-namertvogo-brodskogo.html).

*petliurovtsy* and the like. Some have posited that imperialism is not only domination but also loyalty to a special ideology of expansion<sup>93</sup>. In Brodsky's case, there was also a linguistic expansion. He extended his verse to the space of vulgarity, having created a dense alloy of words charged with animosity and designed to insult. His aspirations, albeit metaphorical, also had a signature of vulgarity asymptomatic of a cerebral poet: he wished to "spit in the Dnieper river" as a farewell gesture.

Brodsky believed that "there is no other antidote to the vulgarity of the human heart than doubt and good taste"<sup>94</sup>. In the process of writing this poem Brodsky failed to administer this antidote to himself, falling into the abyss of impropriety and bad taste. In her memoirs about Brodsky, Liudmila Shtern has noted that "our poet has never been shy about using strong expressions"<sup>95</sup>. His "lyrical character" seemed to become corpulent and vivid, and gained the features of the real Brodsky.

Curiously, similar to Charles W. Eliot who dreamed of creating a collection of books, a "five-foot shelf of books" that would promote a "liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading it", Brodsky embarked on a project to educate American citizens in poetry by placing poetic lines in the subway and volumes of poetry in hotel rooms, beside the Bible<sup>96</sup>. He partially realized his dream while tenured at the Library of Congress as a poet-laureate (1991-1992). Both initiatives were conceived to stimulate the "liberal frame of mind"<sup>97</sup>. Yet, they, as any other dreams and suggestions about how to improve the world, had their obvious limitations. The moralistic and individualistic stance is transparent in both Eliot's and Brodsky's ideas. Like Eliot, Brodsky also created "a list of great books" and encouraged his students to read them, ultimately shaping a specific epistemological foundation for them. An expert in literature, Brodsky attempted to culturally educate his students by memorizing and reciting poems, and his mission was noble – students were to know who Homer, Goethe, Tsvetaeva and Pasternak were. However, the list (and its variations) Brodsky compiled certainly illuminates his own limitations and lack of knowledge of the history and literature of "little nations", including those of Ukrainians.

This example does not challenge the notion of Brodsky's intelligence. No doubt, Brodsky was an insatiable reader. His reading list has been broadly discussed by many observers: indeed it was extensive. He read dictionaries and encyclopedias, and had an excellent memory. He could declaim verses by heart for hours. He obtained knowledge by "osmosis", Brodsky joked<sup>98</sup>. However, he could not read Ukrainian, and his knowledge of Ukrainian history and culture was incidental. His reading

<sup>93</sup> E. Said, *Kul'tura i imperIALIZM...*, p. 267.

<sup>94</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare...*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> L. Shtern, *Brodskii: Osia, Iosif...*, p. 192.

<sup>96</sup> Charles W. Eliot was an American academic and president of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909. He also happened to be a cousin of the Nobel Prize-winning poet T.S. Eliot who was the subject of Brodsky's admiration. On Eliot's ideas about a liberal education, see J.S. Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Chapel Hill-London 1992, p. 27-29.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>98</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 31.

included everything except the Ukrainian classics which became world classics, such as Lesia Ukrainka and Ivan Franko, Taras Shevchenko and Vasyl Stefanyk, yet we know that he read Hryhorii Skovoroda's works<sup>99</sup>. His reading lists and the special knowledge he acquired throughout his life might partially explain his myopic vision about Ukraine, which made the creation of his anti-Ukrainian poem possible. A lack of systematic "disciplined thinking" and logical reasoning in Brodsky (Losev's only criticism) might explain his aggressiveness toward Ukraine, a Soviet republic that suffered significantly in the bacchanalia of Stalin's genocides against national minorities<sup>100</sup>. Associative and irrational thinking ("thinking by analogies"<sup>101</sup>), conditioned by Brodsky's personality and his psychological abilities, can also clarify his disconnected rationalizations.

But let us return to Brodsky's imperial consciousness – was it indeed grounded only in culture or aesthetics? There is an image of Brodsky, sitting at home, wearing a T-shirt with Soviet symbols on it – the infamous hammer and sickle<sup>102</sup>. This photograph was taken in 1993, two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the same time period, disclosing Soviet paraphernalia on a T-shirt in Russia was a rarity – people were still celebrating the fall of the authoritarian Soviet regime<sup>103</sup>. As trivial as it might sound, a T-shirt with the Soviet hammer and sickle symbolizes the ideological position of its owner. Whether this was a political statement for Brodsky or a mere manifestation of spatial nostalgia remains unknown. This choice seems hardly accidental, especially in light of his anti-Ukrainian position. Liudmila Shtern has recalled that Brodsky was extremely fussy when it came to his outfits. He liked to wear blue Oxford shirts<sup>104</sup>, and... apparently T-shirts with Soviet symbols, which, for some unknown reason, did not become idiosyncratic, anti-cultural, and anti-aesthetical for Brodsky, as the "Soviet" language did.

Brodsky's great strengths were always his critical thinking ability and apolitical poetry, yet his creative art to some degree was politicized on both sides, in the Soviet Union and in the West<sup>105</sup>. He was extremely independent and individualistic, paradoxically disapproving Ukrainians' rights for independence and self-identification. The explanation for this inconsistency might be found in Brodsky's own words: he might have still struggled with his Soviet legacies deeply entrenched in him and, being a freed man, was not a free man<sup>106</sup>.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, *ibidem*, p. 30-31, 113; O. Zabuzhko, *Proshchannia z imperieiu...*, p. 276.

<sup>100</sup> For a discussion about the cluster of Stalin's genocides in the Soviet Union, see N.M. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides*, Princeton-Oxford 2010.

<sup>101</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 32.

<sup>102</sup> See the image in Losev's *Iosif Brodskii*. This image is also in Shtern's book.

<sup>103</sup> In an attempt to overcome the Soviet legacies, Ukraine issued a law this year prohibiting public display of Soviet symbols. In contrast, contemporary Russia is a different case. Soviet symbols, including Stalin's images and monuments, have not been condemned, but instead, they are revitalized by the state and gain popularity in Russia.

<sup>104</sup> L. Shtern, *Brodskii: Osia, Iosif...*, p. 74.

<sup>105</sup> B. Yangfeldt, *Svobodnyi chelovek...*, p. 94.

<sup>106</sup> J. Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., New York 1995, p. 34.

Brodsky was exceptionally consistent in his inconsistencies. Yet, he, like Voltaire before him, valued order, rather than chaos, which was evidence of intelligence, as many of his observers have noted<sup>107</sup>. Apparently, his life was always a struggle against chaos and inaccuracies (linguistic, semantic, perceptual) – discrepancies between thought and speech<sup>108</sup>. One might argue that the poem in question is one of the examples of this “risky” (Brodsky’s definition) endeavor and struggle. Some of his poems were a product of aesthetic (linguistic) choice augmented by deep emotional crises; others – a tribute to the classical poetic tradition. In prose, he explained and delivered his ideas in a coherent manner but an inner paradox was always deeply embedded in them. Consequently, his activities, positions and texts were marked by highly-structured organization and self-discipline, yet often they were spontaneous and chaotic.

Brodsky’s reluctance to publish the poem “To Ukraine’s Independence” is not completely clear. Perhaps, his realization that his conscious aesthetic and ethical choice was made at the expense of historical truth and morality was too uncomfortable for him. Or maybe, his interest in pursuing his hostility toward the Ukrainians’ choice was dwarfed by his personal happiness, marriage and love.

## Epilogue

Joseph Brodsky was one of the most gifted Russian poets of the second part of the last century. A self-made man, he should be admired not only as a poet but also as an industrious, diligent and productive intellectual. Yet, a critical distance should be maintained from his magic aura to understand the darkest aspect of his “Russian soul” – his anti-humanistic attitudes towards “others” and “lesser cultures”. As Brodsky himself has stated: “a hero is always best observed from a distance”<sup>109</sup>. No matter how one explains Brodsky’s imperial consciousness, he remains a poet of two of the most powerful empires of the twentieth century, the United States and Russia, although the Americans were much kinder to Brodsky than his countrymen<sup>110</sup>. Having observed both empires and having learned about their cruelties and genocides, he failed to interrogate his own nationalism and solipsism, being mesmerized by the magic and the aesthetics of the Russian language, and the beauty of his own poetic work. Writing the poem “To Ukraine’s independence” was a tipping point in Brodsky’s literary career when his desire to disseminate his hegemonic views took over, allowing a political discussion and politics to crawl into his poetic space, and pressing *brodskovedy* (specialists in Brodsky’s works) to defend his humanity for him after his death.

<sup>107</sup> For a discussion about Man vs. Universe, and order vs. chaos, see Voltaire, *Le Philosophe Ignorant*, ed. J.L. Carr, London 1965, p. 16-17.

<sup>108</sup> For elaborations of this thought, see *ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare...*, p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> O. Zabuzhko, *Proshchannia z imperieiu...*, p. 268. In the United States in 1991 Brodsky became a United States Poet Laureate, and was granted honorary degrees from Yale University and Dartmouth College.

Obviously, for Brodsky the Soviet empire was an abusive and dangerous phenomenon. But a “cultural empire” was something totally different for him: at the very least, it was more legitimate, and this notion sank deeply into Brodsky’s sub-consciousness through literature and his exposure to the totalitarian regime. To a larger degree, Brodsky pursued self-interest, making awkward attempts to protect his “cultural empire”, of which he was a part. He once acknowledged that “self-interest is always exercised at the expense of others, whether it is done by individuals or by nations”<sup>111</sup>. His poem “To Ukraine’s Independence” confirms this point and serves as a justification for his intellectual position about one common Russian space that included Ukraine in general, and his “native” Brody in particular. One of Brodsky’s commentators has exclaimed: “He would be better off if he did not write this poem. This is an embarrassment”. In contrast, Lev Losev believes that one should not seek the political or the ideological in Brodsky’s poetry in general<sup>112</sup> and this poem in particular – it is simply a sign of Brodsky’s bitter loss, a loss of a motherland named Brody that is in Galician Ukraine. “Brodsky creates lyrical texts rather than ideological texts,” he has claimed<sup>113</sup>. It seems, however, problematic to read this text as a purely lyrical one. The term “lyrics” of course might be redefined but what will not fit any new definition is the intention to offend, which is particularly pronounced in this poem. In addition, Brodsky’s lack of moral commitment and intellectual investment in investigating the Ukrainians’ motivations for freedom and dignity cannot be overlooked.

The birth of Brodsky’s anti-Ukrainian poem in 1992 was quite natural if one is willing to trace Brodsky’s formation of imperial consciousness. One must completely surrender his or her critical thinking skills or be blinded by admiration of Brodsky’s poetic gift to ignore the ideological dimension of his poem or his worldview. Lev Losev has claimed that “there [was] no principal difference between Brodsky in his daily life and Brodsky in his poetry”<sup>114</sup>. The poem “To Ukraine’s Independence” highlighted this idea with clarity, representing Brodsky’s paradoxes and multiple identities.

As history has demonstrated, imperialism facilitated a mixture and interdependence of cultures, reinforcing multiple identities<sup>115</sup>. At the same time, the phenomenon fueled ethnocentricity, and national and cultural exceptionalism. In Brodsky, they manifested themselves as cognitive and poetic solipsism, and his inability to surrender hierarchical thinking, when it came to cultures and peoples, other than Russian. Nationalism and the people’s wish to separate from an empire may be criticized on multiple levels but this wish seems to be rather benevolent in contrast to the empire’s abnormal control, brutality and abuse employed for not letting them go<sup>116</sup>. Brodsky

<sup>111</sup> J. Brodsky, *The Post-Communist Nightmare...*, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> L. Losev, *Iosif Brodskii...*, p. 165.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>115</sup> E. Said, *Kul'tura i imperializm...*, p. 467.

<sup>116</sup> In his 1993 study on Ukraine’s dilemmas of independence, Alexander J. Motyl has aptly noted that “the sentiments of the colonizers and the colonized do not have equal moral values”. For a more detailed discussion, see A.J. Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence: Ukraine after Totalitarianism*, New York 1993, p. 100.

supported this abnormality, unequivocally and skillfully. For future generations, his text will remain a text of Russian culture, and part and parcel of an imperialistic affair.

Brodsky valued his language as much as his life. He was fortunate. He was never threatened with the loss of his Russian language as Ukrainians were threatened with the loss of their Ukrainian language. He was never familiar with the definition of forcible russification and what it meant, for instance, for Ukrainians. In order to not feel oppressed linguistically, one has to be raised (not necessarily to be born) within the boundaries of an empire and speak the language considered titular (the main language of the empire). Thus, for Brodsky as an insider, the notion of empire was not associated with “victimhood or resistance”<sup>117</sup>, as it was for Poles, Ukrainians or other national minorities. For him, Ukraine was merely a continuation of Russian space, as his immigration and residence in the United States became just a continuation of the same space, as he suggested on many occasions. He brought “his Russia” with him, enhancing the cultural landscape of the United States through his talent, sorrow and personal sacrifice. He also brought his cultural imperialistic philosophy with him, which may have been amplified by his nostalgic feelings about his past, and the space and place he left behind. As Zabuzhko has aptly noted, “the nature of empire is nomadic”<sup>118</sup>, as well as the culture and philosophy of a colonizer. Brodsky’s sadness provoked by a feeling of loss of the geographical birth place of his ancestors is by no measure apolitical. Thinking about the poet’s geographical movements in general, and about his perceptions of cultural geography in particular, at the very least we should interpret Brodsky’s anti-Ukrainian poem as the idiom of his distinction between “greater” and “lesser” cultures, of his uninformed sorrow, and of his imperfection as a human being.

Writing the “à la Agitprop poem” (using Zabuzhko’s term), he failed at many levels, above all, at a humanitarian level. As one philosopher has suggested, tolerance is “the consequence of humanity”<sup>119</sup>. As practice shows, it may take centuries to remove emotions from people’s minds, when the future generations of Ukrainians are finally able to read and analyze this poem as a historical text, which may help them better understand empires and their poets.

The main argument of Ewa M. Thompson’s work seems especially prescient insofar as it relates to Brodsky’s imperialistic bent. Brodsky was very much a product of Russian literature and its two-century imperial literary tradition, not of the Soviet system per se, which he detested. This tradition help draw Brodsky’s subconscious mental map of Russia and its language, the borders of which were rather rigid. Despite the fact the Soviet realities were unbearable for Brodsky, Russian literature and the Russian literary tradition, which for the most part replaced these realities for him, shaped his unswerving view of the legitimacy and eternity of these borders. Moreover, a “cosmopolite” and an “outlaw” in his own empire, Brodsky invested a great deal of his own efforts and talent in maintaining the imperial Russian literary

<sup>117</sup> I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky...*, p. 156.

<sup>118</sup> O. Zabuzhko, *Proshchannia z imperieiu...*, p. 293.

<sup>119</sup> Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary...*, p. 302.

tradition, an irony grounded in the indestructibility of colonial consciousness and the resilience of early intellectual upbringing.

Yet there is an even greater irony. Despite the fact that Brodsky's anti-Ukrainian poem is ideologically consistent with Russia's current attitudes toward Ukraine, Brodsky's poetry was not recommended for study by high school students in Russia. In their recommendations to the organizers of the All-Russian Olympiad in literature for high school students, the authorities who are responsible for the Russian youth's upbringing noted that some literary texts that reflected pessimism and despair and were offered to the participants of the Olympiad were absolutely unacceptable. Those who "emigrated and abandoned their Motherland" found themselves on this black list. Among them are Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky and others. Once again, a poet of the empire was alienated and forbidden by the new Russian empire<sup>120</sup>.

Brodsky's fixation on space and time, as well as on imperial images, language and its aesthetics which are directly linked to space and time, and his denial of the historical or political *dominanta* in his poetry were two sides of the same coin. History and Politics persistently bleeds through his lyrics, yet admittedly this side of the coin was less interesting for him. He dedicated his life to the examination of the other side of the coin, being fascinated with the language through which he could explain himself. By will and strict discipline, he tried to create a more noble and pure poetry, sanitizing it from politics. Space, as anything else, became an esthetic characteristic for Brodsky, rather than a feature of a political entity or governing<sup>121</sup>. Moreover, any given space was a Russian space, as long as he was there, or he wanted to be there. Sometimes the coin landed on its edge, and we were able to see, what Brodsky tried to conceal even from himself.

## Appendix A

Иосиф Бродский

### На независимость Украины

Дорогой Карл Двенадцатый, сражение под Полтавой,  
слава Богу, проиграно. Как говорил картавый,  
время покажет – кузькину мать, руины,  
кости посмертной радости с привкусом Украины.

То не зелено-квитный, траченный изотопом,  
– жовто-блакитный реет над Конотопом,  
скроенный из холста: знать, припасла Канада –  
даром, что без креста: но хохлам не надо.

<sup>120</sup> M. Lemutkina, "Okhraniteli" napisali donos na mertvogo Brodskogo, "MKRU", 3 June 2015, available at [www.mk.ru/culture/2015/06/03/okhraniteli-napisali-donos-na-mertvogo-brodskogo.html](http://www.mk.ru/culture/2015/06/03/okhraniteli-napisali-donos-na-mertvogo-brodskogo.html).

<sup>121</sup> For a discussion about space, imperialism, modernism, and literary texts, see E. Said, *Kul'tura i imperializm...*, p. 267-272.

Гой ты, рушник-карбованец, семечки в потной жмене!  
 Не нам, кацапам, их обвинять в измене.  
 Сами под образами семьдесят лет в Рязани  
 с залитыми глазами жили, как при Тарзане.

Скажем им, звонкой матерью паузы метя, строго:  
 скатертью вам, хохлы, и рушником дорога.  
 Ступайте от нас в жупане, не говоря в мундире,  
 по адресу на три буквы на все четыре

стороны. Пусть теперь в мазанке хором Гансы  
 с ляхами ставят вас на четыре кости, поганцы.  
 Как в петлю лезть, так сообща, сук выбирая в чаше,  
 а курицу из борща грызть в одиночку слаще?

Прощевайте, хохлы! Пожили вместе, хватит.  
 Плюнуть, что ли, в Днипро: может, он вспять покатит,  
 брезгуя гордо нами, как скорый, битком набитый  
 отвернутыми<sup>122</sup> углами и вековой обидой.

Не поминайте лихом! Вашего неба, хлеба  
 нам – подавись мы жмыхом и потолком – не треба.  
 Нечего портить кровь, рвать на груди одежду.  
 Кончилась, знать, любовь, коли была промежду.

Что ковыряться зря в рваных корнях глаголом!  
 Вас родила земля: грунт, чернозем с подзолом.  
 Полно качать права, шить нам одно, другое.  
 Эта земля не дает вам, кавунам, покоя.

Ой-да левада-степь, краля, баштан, вареник.  
 Больше, поди, теряли: больше людей, чем денег.  
 Как-нибудь перебьемся. А что до слезы из глаза,  
 Нет на нее указа ждать до другого раза.

С Богом, орлы, казаки, гетманы, вертухаи!  
 Только когда придет и вам помирать, бугаи,  
 будете вы хрипеть, царапая край матраса,  
 строчки из Александра, а не брехню Тараса.

<sup>122</sup> In the video, Brodsky reads “кожаными,” instead of “отвёрнутыми”.

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## Summary

**Joseph Brodsky's imperial consciousness**

This article focuses on the formation of an imperial and colonial consciousness in Joseph Brodsky, one of the most outstanding Russian poets. Conceptually, this study should be placed at the intersection of postcolonial studies, social history and cultural history. More specifically, through the lens of Brodsky's individual history and the political and cultural landscape of the last century in Soviet space, it explores his convictions and mental cultural geographies, and offers explanations of Brodsky's attitudes towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian/Soviet empires and his anti-Ukrainian stance. This paper argues that the term ideological "evolution" is not applicable in Brodsky's case, and illustrates that his philosophy or worldview was rather stiff and inflexible. Brodsky was very much a product of Russian literature and its two-century imperial literary tradition, and less influenced by the Soviet system which he largely despised and ignored. This tradition helped shape Brodsky's subconscious mental map of Russia and its language, the geographical borders of which were rather rigid.



**RECENZJE \* OMÓWIENIA**

