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How Iosif Brodskij Definitely Became Joseph Brodsky: a Lifelong Influence of English

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Iosif Brodskij's¹ relationship with English had started long before his emigration to the United States in 1972, after the expulsion from the Soviet Union with a charge of social parasitism. An attraction for his second language that can be traced back to his youth in Leningrad, when he, as all the young people of his generation, searched for new models of individualism, watching the «trophy films» the regime had allowed, and avidly reading Western literature, mostly in the books that foreign students brought illegally to the URSS. In winter 1964, during his first exile in Norenskaya, Brodsky recounted having had an 'epiphany' reading a poem by Wystan Auden: he thought he had found the deep bond between language, individual consciousness and poetry. The famous English poet was thus to become the addressee of Brodsky's work, his «invisible reader», as explained in the autobiographical essay *To Please a Shadow*. When he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987, there was still a linguistic divide in his work: poetry in Russian and prose in English. In 1991, the nomination as Poet Laureate of the United States marked a turning point in Brodsky's work – unquestionably a way to avoid the endless corrections he made to the translations of his own poems, but not only. This paper aims to outline the steps that led one of the most representative Russian poets to leave his mother tongue and fully adopt English, both for prose and poetry, to stand to us as a new author, «Joseph Brodsky».

¹ 'Iosif Brodskij' is the transliteration of Brodsky's Russian name in Western characters; after becoming an American citizen in 1977, he adopted the English version «Joseph Brodsky». From this point on, I will refer to him as Joseph Brodsky.

1. THE BEGINNING OF A LOVE STORY

«I have a love affair with the English language», Joseph Brodsky used to say when interviewed about his attitude towards his second language. This sometime-troubled relationship had started long before his arrival to the United States in 1972.²

Brodsky traced back his fascination for English to his early years in Soviet Leningrad, although his first encounter with the language, at school, was not encouraging. Brodsky studied English from the fifth grade through the eight, but as George Kline³ (Brodsky 1973: 14) observes, «[...] with meagre results. The language was taught in a formal and theoretical way – like Latin or Sanskrit – by incompetent teachers using inadequate texts».

An only child of a Jewish family – his father was a photographer in the Soviet Navy and his mother an interpreter – Brodsky left school at the age of fifteen, his family suffering marginalization due to its Jewish status. After trying unsuccessfully to enter the Soviet Navy, Brodsky held a variety of jobs, self-teaching in the meantime Polish and English, and beginning to work as a translator from both languages. At that time, Brodsky wrote his first poems in Russian.

In many interviews and essays, Brodsky (1995: 6-7) narrates his first chances to meet the «real» English language, as when he used to listen to the American tunes on the radio his father had brought home: «When I was twelve, my father suddenly produced to my great delight a shortwave radio set [...]. To this

² Brodsky was forced to leave the Soviet Union after many attempts to discredit him and his work, which was defined as «pornographic and anti-Sovietic». In order to earn a living while writing poetry, he held many jobs; he was then charged of social parasitism and sent to a mental hospital. After a 'mock' trial in 1964, he was confined to the Far North, before being ordered to leave the USSR, in 1972.

³ George Kline was one of Brodsky's first translators: his is the translation and the edition of the collection in English *Selected Poems*, published in New York in 1973.

brown, shining-like-an-old-shoe Phillips set, I owe my first bits of English and an introduction to the Jazz Pantheon». We know that Brodsky, a music lover, would have praised American jazz music all his life.

Additional chances to meet English, and the Anglophone culture, were offered by the Hollywood films taken by the Soviet troops during the occupation of Germany as «spoils of war». ⁴ The few that had passed the severe censorship of the regime ⁵ were almost all subtitled – or badly dubbed – in Russian, nonetheless, to Brodsky and his generation they offered an insight into Western reality, suggesting the possibility of another life, far from the constraints of the Soviet society. As Brodsky (1995: 8) recalls:

They held us in greater sway and thrall than all the subsequent output of the neorealists or the nouvelle vague. The *Tarzan* series alone, I daresay, did more for the de-Stalinization than all Khrushchev's speeches at the 20th party congress and after.

More than entertaining stories, those films, with their «liberating effect», sounded as a hymn to individualism, much sought-after by Brodsky and his generation (Brodsky 1995: 9): «There was, of course, something more crucial to these trophy movies; it was their 'one-against-all spirit', totally alien to the communal, collective-oriented sensibility of the society we grew up in».

⁴ Elena Razgolova (2014: 164) writes: «From 1947 until the mid-1950s, Soviet moviegoers for the first time encountered dozens of German, Austrian, Italian, American, and French films that were stolen from the so-called trophy fund during the occupation of Germany. These films, which were meant to provide funding for the then-moribund Soviet film industry, were dubbed (most German films were) or subtitled (most American films were) and shown without credits; initially, each copy began with the title 'trophy films' but later even that title was omitted because many of the films shown were made by the Soviet Union's allies in the war».

⁵ «A special Politburo resolution called for 'necessary editorial corrections' to be made in each film and anti-American introductory texts and commentaries were added» (Volkov 2008: 176).

In the young Brodsky, nevertheless, love for literature was soon to prevail, as Elena Razgolova observes (2014: 164):

Poet Joseph Brodsky remembered that his initial excitement over seeing Western lifestyles in trophy films abated after a few years, and he turned to the journal *Inostrannaya literatura* for more exalted literary examples of Western Individualism, an alternative to the Soviet collectivist ideology he found unpalatable.

Brodsky offers a clear analysis of his passion for literature – and Anglophone literature in particular – during his youth, in the brilliant prose of his autobiographical essay «Less than one» (1986: 28). By reading it, we have a glance at the ways of life of the young cultured people of the sixties in the Soviet Union.

We were avid readers and we fell into a dependence on what we read. Books, perhaps because of their formal element of finality, held us in absolute power. Dickens was more real than Stalin or Beria. More than anything else, novels would affect our modes of behavior and conversations, and 90 percent of our conversations were about novels. It tended to become a vicious circle, but we didn't want to break it. In its ethics, this generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that. A relationship could have been broken for good over a preference for Hemingway over Faulkner; the hierarchy in that pantheon was our real Central Committee.

In winter 1964, with a first charge of social parasitism, Brodsky was sentenced five years of forced labor – later reduced to eighteen months – and sent to the small village of Norenskaya, in the Arctic region of Arkhangelsk. Brodsky narrates his life in the Far North in the essay *To Please a Shadow*: he chopped wood, carried manure and wrote on the typewriter he had brought with him. Surprisingly for us, Brodsky defined those eighteen months, the «happiest time of my life». He had rented a small cottage without heating and plumbing, but having a pri-

vate space was considered «an unthinkable luxury» (Gessen 2011) in Soviet Union, at the time. Brodsky used to spend long nights with his English-Russian dictionary, trying to decipher his anthology of English and American poetry. Kline (Brodsky 1973: 14) explains Brodsky's curious *modus operandi*: «His technique was simple: he made literal translations of the first and last stanzas and then tried to 'imagine', what, poetically speaking, should come in between!».

In Norenskaya, Brodsky (1986: 361) recounts of having had an «epiphany», a moment of sudden revelation, that would have influenced the development of all his art: «(B)y pure chance the book fell open to Auden's 'In Memory of William Butler Yeats'». ⁶ Brodsky thought he had found what he was looking for: «The plain words of the English poet confirmed his belief in the dominance of language over individual consciousness and collective existence» (Loseff 2011: 100-111). We remind that, when Auden died in September 1973, Brodsky wrote his «Elegy to W. H. Auden», ⁷ which further testifies his deep bond with the English poet: «Poetry without you equals only us. / The words are retreating to the stage / of lexicons, of the muse. / The sky looks like an empty page / which you did not use».

As per Brodsky's own assertion, his subsequent decision to write in English was taken to «find [himself] in closer proximity to the man whom [he] considered the greatest mind of the twentieth century: Wystan Hugh Auden» (1986: 357). Natasha Kovachevic (2008: 58) adds a further meaning to this literary choice, asserting that «Brodsky not only perfects his writing in English with the shadow of Auden reading over his shoulder,

⁶ These lines by Auden struck Brodsky: «Time that is intolerant, / Of the brave and innocent / And indifferent in a week to a beautiful physique, / Worships language and forgives, / Every one by whom it lives; / Pardons cowardice, conceit, / Lays its honours at their feet».

⁷ The poem was first published in *The New York Review of Books*, on 12 December 1974.

but also pictures himself explaining to that great metropolitan poet that Russia, too, has great literature». Auden was then to become his «invisible reader», and the first mentor of Brodsky's international career. Brodsky's (1986: 357-358) later humbly affirmed, «My desire to write in English [...] was simply a desire to please a shadow. Of course, where he was by then, linguistic barriers hardly mattered, but somehow I thought that he might like it better if I made myself clear to him in English».

The exile in the Russian Far North proved for Brodsky a crucial experience both for his personal and for his artistic education. The time he spent in exile was an extraordinary opportunity to extend his knowledge of English, not only from a linguistic point of view (Loseff 2011: 101): «One side effect of such close reading was a good passive knowledge of English, but at the same time his object was not to learn another language; it was to learn another poetry».

Without denying his links with the Russian literary context – the Russian Acmeism and Symbolism of the so-called 'Silver Age' influenced his work – Brodsky started taking inspiration from authors belonging to the Anglophone literary scene, as Donne, Frost and Auden, thus drawing away from the Socialist Realism Regulations. English became a new weapon, a symbolic power, for Brodsky and other writers of his generation, to escape the unbearable *modus operandi* of the Soviet Society. It «also evolved into a source of inspiration, enriching Brodsky's creative repertoire as a Russian poet» (Stakhnevich 2006: 17).

Returned from the Northern exile, Brodsky continued to read poetry in English through rare anthologies brought to Russia by foreign students, which circulated most illegally. On 5 June 1972, after a final ruling of «social parasitism», Brodsky was banished from his homecountry and forced to leave. His first stop was Austria, where he met his American friend and publisher Carl Proffer, and with whom he went to the small village of Kirchstetten, near Vienna, where Auden used to spend

his summers since 1958. Loseff's (2011: 169) words, recalling Brodsky's first reading of Auden's verses, confirm once again the importance the British poet held for Brodsky: «Here Brodsky caught his first glimpse of the poet whose words about language he had read eight years before in a hut in the Russian north, words that have turned his life upside down».

The same Brodsky later remembered the first meeting with the English poet, and it is amusing to read how he was afraid of his poor spoken English.⁸ A few weeks later, Auden brought Brodsky to London Poetry International Festival, and that event could be considered the starting point of Brodsky's international career. Some of his poems had already been printed in the West, as well as the text of his 1964 trial, divulged by his friend Efim Etkind. Being a *cause célèbre*, and thanks to the intercession of Carl Proffer, Brodsky was offered a position of lecturer at Ann Arbor University, in Michigan. He later received an honorary Doctorate of Letters by Yale, soon becoming an estimated professor and lecturer, who travelled extensively in the United States, South America and Europe.

2. BRODSKY'S TRANSCULTURATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

The geographical shift from one continent to another had a great influence on Brodsky's work since the very beginning of his life in exile, and this influence was certainly productive. In this regard, Sanna Turoma (2010: 12) claims that:

Brodsky's transculturation into the English language and North American academic environment was a transition from a stagnant imperial state, with a monolithic cultural hegemony over its domain,

⁸ « [...] my [Brodsky's] English at the time would have been so inadequate that we could not have any kind of substantive conversation» (Volkov 1998: 138).

into a West where Europe's imperial domination of its former colonies was coming to an end and where the modernist canon, in many ways intertwined with metropolitan Europe's imperialism, had been challenged by a set of polemic aesthetical practices.

The fact of living in an Anglophone country undoubtedly spurred Brodsky to write in English. Much more than a linguistic shift, Brodsky's choice for English is the result of a complex cultural process, which first started as an interest in the foreign language, and later, passing through the painful exilic experience, was transformed into an opportunity that bore abundant fruit to the author's literary activity. Brodsky soon realized that being confined into his mother tongue could have been a limit to his work. Additionally, his decision to improve his English was undoubtedly «a mode of participation in the English-speaking community and «[...] a yearning to claim his own space in the new world» (Stakhnevich 2006: 19).

Brodsky's transculturation manifested itself in the new literary form he soon engaged with – prose writing – and the means through which he expressed it – the English language. The genre he chose was the essay, which Theodore Ziolkovski (1996: 295) defined the European intellectuals' «genre par excellence» and «the common ground on which, at century's end, the projects of three prominent European writers – a novelist, a poet [Brodsky], and a scholar-critic – converge».⁹

Brodsky wrote his first essays in Russian, but soon switched to English, thus becoming a «regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*» (Polukhina 1997: 239).¹⁰

⁹ Ziolkovski is referring to Kundera, Brodsky, and Eco, and their choice was made because «[...] only the essay can accommodate the furiously shifting kaleidoscope of modern life» (1996: 304).

¹⁰ Loseff (2011: 222): «Brodsky often remarked that his initial decision to write exclusively in English for American journals was a purely practical one, there would be no need to spend time and effort on translation».

In an interview given to Sven Birkerts in 1982, Brodsky confirms this newly discovered enthusiasm for prose writing: «I love it, in English. To me it's a challenge. [...] If asked to write prose in Russian, I wouldn't be so keen. But in English it's a tremendous satisfaction».

Brodsky notoriously paid great attention to the accuracy of his English lexicon, which in the years became richer and richer, drawing from both the elevated and the colloquial registers. With his peculiar use of syntax, Brodsky was able to express witty statements, many of which have become quoted aphorisms. Volkov defines Brodsky's English prose style «highly idiosyncratic, effective and memorable, of which he was rather proud» (1998: xii). Volkov adds a major consideration that makes us reflect about the transformation the author's creativity was undergoing: «Ironically, Brodsky was less confident – or maybe more demanding and self-critical – of his prose skills in Russian» (1998: xii).

Brodsky's production in English is massive and consists of two large collections of essays, *Less than One* (1986), the short, but intense, essay on Venice *Watermark* (1992), and *On Grief and Reason* (1995). Brodsky wrote in total more than one hundred prose pieces between reviews, lectures, introductions and critical pieces, contributions to conferences, letters. In his writings, Brodsky touched many topics: his «privileged position» of intellectual coming from an Eastern country allowed him to have a detached point of view on European and American social and cultural realities, which he expressed through a dense and powerful prose.

Writing critically in English on literature, culture, history and politics helped Brodsky ground himself in the English speaking discourse. It allowed him to share with his English-speaking audience a qualitatively new outlook on important topics that connected two cultural traditions. Through such discourse in English Brodsky applied agency to claim a legitimate membership in his new community of English-speaking literary scholars (Stakhnevich 2006: 21).

If we remember that in his famous letter written to Brezhnev the day of his departure from the Soviet Union, Brodsky had stated, «I belong to the Russian culture. I feel part of it, its component, and no change of place can influence the final consequence of this. A language is a much more ancient and inevitable thing than a state. I belong to the Russian language» (McKelvey 1987), we cannot avoid noticing a discrepancy in the development of his latest work. We know that in the years that followed his emigration to the United States, Brodsky kept a firm distinction in his work: poetry in Russian and prose in English. This is confirmed, for instance, in a letter to *The New York Times Magazine*, written in October 1972, a few months after his arrival in America, in which he affirms again his belonging to his mother tongue:

In order to write well in a language you have to hear it – in taverns, buses and groceries stores. I have not yet invented a way to fight it. But I hope that a man's language travels with him. And I hope that I will take the Russian language wherever I go.

In this statement, Brodsky declared, anyway, the importance of the context in which the language is spoken, and the necessity for an author to draw from it; a belief that will guide him in writing his poetry in English, as shown further in this paper.

For nearly two decades, Brodsky can be defined a bilingual writer. Before briefly analyzing Brodsky's bilingualism and the final development of his work – which brought him to a full adoption of English – it is worth spending a few words on the importance he assigned to language, in specific in relation with exile.

The short essay *The Condition We Call Exile* reports a speech Brodsky gave at a conference held in Vienna in 1987, and it is considered the sum of Brodsky's idea of exile. The booklet that extensively illustrates the author's thought on this topic collects many statements, which have become famous

aphorisms, amongst which we find: «[...] to be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man hurtled into outer space in a capsule [more like a dog, of course, than a man, because they will never retrieve you]. And your capsule is your language», and further «For one in our profession the condition we call exile is first of all, a linguistic event: he is thrust, he retreats into his mother tongue. From being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule» (1995: 108).

For Brodsky, language equals inspiration, in an «anti-Freudian» way, as analyzed by John Maxwell Coezee, Brodsky's close friend and Nobel Prize fellow, in his essay *Speaking for language* (1996).

In 1987, Brodsky received the Nobel Prize for literature. After fifteen years in the United States, in an interview with Solomon Volkov, he pronounced the famous words «I'm a Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist – and of course, an American citizen». With this statement, Brodsky reiterates his being a Russian poet, combined with his new condition of essayist, and a recently acquired status of American citizen.¹¹

3. BRODSKY'S OFFICIAL PRAISE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND AMERICAN POETRY

On 10 May 1991, Brodsky received the highest literary acknowledgement of the United States: he was nominated «Fifth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress». He was the first non-American born writer to receive the prestigious award.

His speech *An Immodest Proposal*, given on that occasion, (1991: 33) offered him the opportunity to praise once again American poetry and the English language:

¹¹ Brodsky obtained the American citizenship in 1977.

American poetry is this country's greatest patrimony. It takes a stranger to see some things clearly. This is one of them, and I am that stranger. The quantity of verse that has been penned on these shores in the last century and a half dwarfs the similar enterprise of any literature, and for that matter, both our jazz and our cinema, rightly adored throughout the world.

On several occasions, Brodsky had declared his appreciation for English. Here, he states «No other language accumulates so much of this [beauty,] as does English. To be born into it or to arrive in it is the best boon that can befall a man» (Brodsky 1991: 34). During that lecture, Brodsky also presented his «Immodest Proposal»: his plan to bring literature – namely poetry – to the American masses. His project is well summarized by Seamus Heaney's words (1996):

Why not print poetry in millions of copies, he asked, since a poem 'offers you a sample of complete . . . human intelligence at work' and since that same poem also tells its readers, 'Be like me'? Moreover, because poetry employs memory, 'it is of use for the future, not to mention the present.' It can also do something for ignorance and is 'the only insurance available against the vulgarity of the human heart. Therefore, it should be available to everyone in this country and at a low cost.'

Brodsky's proposal resulted in the birth of the *American Poetry and Literacy Project*, which, with the help of the young university student Andrew Carroll, between 1992 and 2002 – also after Brodsky's sudden death in New York on 28 January 1996 – distributed one million of free volumes of poetry in schools, hospitals, factories, prisons, airports; on planes, trains, new cars; and so on and so forth. In the intentions of the promoter, there should have been books – the «classics» of American poetry – in all the places where people had to wait long hours, «to kill time before time kills them» (Elam Roth 1997).

Brodsky's extraordinary project may be seen as the demonstration of his bond with the cultural reality of the United

States, as a well as his way of rewarding his host country, which, from the day of his exile, has granted him freedom and support.

To conclude this chapter with a note of Brodsky's famous humor, the Australian writer Les Murrey, interviewed by Valentina Polukhina (2008: 485), offers us a further recollection of Brodsky's predilection for English and English poetry:

[...] I recall his regret that the British missed their chance to colonize Russia in 1918, and that his writing in English could be seen as an attempt to repair this mistake. Of course English for him was not so much associated with colonization as with civilization; he was talking about the English of George Herbert, Marvell, Donne, and Shakespeare.

4. BRODSKY'S POEMS IN ENGLISH

The two linguistic planes Brodsky kept in his writing, for most of his life, clearly show his acquired identity of bilingual emigré.

Furthermore, writing prose in English, as the same Brodsky recounted, had represented an ultimate form of protest against his homecountry, which, besides having discredited and exiled him, had refused his parents twelve times the authorization to visit him in the United States. As Brodsky wrote in his essay *In a Room and a Half*, which is focused on his early life in Leningrad, and where we find the moving description of his parents, he chose to write in English «to grant them a margin of freedom [...]. To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity» (1986: 460).¹² After the fall of Commu-

¹² Stakhnevich (2006: 21) reports: «Galya Diment wrote, '[...] Brodsky wanted to use his English in order to build a sanctuary for his parents, protecting them from the inhumanity of trivealization and allowing himself to take at least some edge of his pain' (354)».

nism, Brodsky was officially invited to return to Russia, but always refused to.

The reasons underlying Brodsky's writing in English are many, and if his prose, as we have seen, has been written for its majority in English, for what concerns poetry the matter is significantly different.¹³

For the first twenty years in the United States, we know that Brodsky kept Russian as his privileged medium for poetry, with the exceptions of a few poems – considered by the critics as experiments – like the aforementioned *Elegy: For W. H. Auden*, and the later *Elegy: For Robert Lowell*. These poems demonstrate the author's growing confidence with English, as well as the necessity of recounting with new words his new life in America – his «extra reality» (Birkerts 82).

Several translators have turned Brodsky's poetry from Russian into English, and there are double versions of many of his poems. Brodsky was known to make endless corrections to the translations of his verses, feeling never satisfied with the versions they proposed to him – and on which, nevertheless, he was to have the last word. He was deeply committed to the translation of his poetry, as Ann Kiellberg, editor of Brodsky's *Collected Poems in English* (Brodsky 2000: xiv), observes:

Brodsky took an active hand in the translation of his own work into English. He believed strongly that a poem's verse structure should be rendered in translation, and to this he applied the dictates of his own very particular ear. (In Russian he is recognized as one of the most original prosodic stylist of his time.) As he was both author and translator, he was able to reach for solutions that were unavailable to another translator.

As for the content, we may notice that after a few years in

¹³ It is noticeable that in the years, Brodsky's prose and poetry become very close – a similarity that increases with time and which, the last years, make them «virtually indistinguishable» (Polukhina 1997: 224).

the United States, the American landscape slowly starts peeping through Brodsky's verses, and we find places like Cape Cod, New England, New York, California, as well as some elements that are characteristic of the American culture: jazz music, boogie-woogie, Coca-Cola. The author is diving into his new world, of which he begins to appreciate the context and – as he used to affirm – the benefits connected to its democracy. He is nevertheless aware of the inevitable losses, in terms of impairment of his Russian identity, implied in this transformation process, as asserted by John Taylor (2001: 549):

As soon as Brodsky was deported from the Soviet Union, he became cognizant of the linguistic enfeeblement potentially threatening him. In a poem dated the year of his exile, and thus referring to the United States, he declares: 'here I'll live out my days, losing gradually / hair, teeth, consonants, verbs, and suffixes'.

The question arises: how proficient was Brodsky in English? After the first meeting with Auden, Brodsky's English had certainly improved. Loseff in his *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* (2011: 222) records:

After several years in America, Brodsky could speak fluently on any topic in both professional and everyday situations. [...] Nonetheless, he never became completely bilingual: he spoke with a noticeable accent, his usage and diction sometimes seemed slightly off, and his English-speaking friends regularly corrected his use of articles and verb forms in his written pieces.

In this condition, to some extent, of personal and artistic *impasse* – shown by the endless corrections to the translations of his verses – the nomination as Poet Laureate proved a turning point in Brodsky's work. The poems written and published in Brodsky's last years, or posthumously, are in English: the collection *So Forth* (1996), *Discovery* (1999) – a poem for children about the first discoverers of America – and *Nativity Poems* (2002).

In *So Forth*, the poem *To My Daughter* becomes particularly significant since it offers us the clue for the interpretation of Brodsky's last poetry, as well as giving us a glimpse of the author's life. Brodsky wrote it in 1994, and dedicated it to his little daughter Anna, born in 1993 from his marriage with the young Italian-French Maria Sozzani. Along with the image of an ageing father, whose tender look on his daughter brings thoughts of nostalgia for a painful past – and a prophetic imminent loss – we find elements of Brodsky's inventive *prosopopoeia*: «an inanimate object might be your father».

English has now become the language of his affections, mastered by the author up to the point of expressing his poetic self, although with some limits. William Wadsworth (Polukhina 2008: 470), who was Brodsky's university student and director of the Academy of American Poets, asserts «One of his loveliest poem of all is the poem to his daughter, but, note the ironic last line: 'Hence, these somewhat wooden lines in our common language.'».¹⁴ Wadsworth points out what he defines «Joseph's flip side»: the author's «tendency to self-deprecation», a further trait of Brodsky's character, also stressed by other critics, as we will see in the following chapter.

¹⁴ Here is the text of *To My Daughter*: Give me another life, and I'll be singing / in Café Rafaella. Or simply sitting / there. Or standing there, as furniture in the corner, / in case that life is a bit less generous than the former. / Yet partly because no century from now on will ever manage / without caffeine or jazz, I'll sustain this damage, / and through my cracks and pores, varnish and dust all over, / observe you, in twenty years, in your full flower. / On the whole, bear in mind that I'll be around. Or rather, / that an inanimate object might be your father, / especially if the objects are older than you, or larger. / So keep an eye on them always, for they no doubt will judge you. / Love those things anyway, encounter or no encounter. / Besides, you may still remember a silhouette, a contour, / while I'll lose even that, along with the other luggage. / Hence, these somewhat wooden lines in our common language. (Brodsky 2000: 452).

5. THE CRITICS' OPINION ABOUT BRODSKY'S POETRY IN ENGLISH

It is worth, then, to take briefly into exam some opinions expressed by the critics about Brodsky's poetry in English. Regarding the first, self-translated into English, as well as about the last, the one directly written in English, the critics' views differ, though they essentially share similar positions.

I have chosen some pieces of criticism, which will be presented chronologically – in reverse order – which show some scholars' considerations on Brodsky's poetry. Amongst the most recent, Lev Loseff underlines Brodsky's «detached attitude» – the «self-deprecation» previously mentioned by Wadsworth – not always credible, towards his poems in English (2011: 221):

While his essays by and large received critical praise in the English-speaking world, his poetry met a mixed reaction. His own attitude was complicated as well. On the one hand, he more than once emphasized that the poetry he wrote in English was nothing serious, a sort of verbal game.

Another recent criticism, by Reginald Gibbons (2008: 44), in the *American Poetry Review*, slates Brodsky's poetic efforts in English, with no appeal:

Brodsky's poetry, especially the poems he himself wrote in or translated into English, can seem superficial, meandering, and linguistically very awkward, to native speakers of English; [...] they can seem like poems written in English words by the rules of another language, Russian.

Benjamin Paloff (2001: 103), in the *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: the Twentieth Century*, emphasises the difference between the poems Brodsky translated/wrote himself and the ones translated in English by other translators, which seem to him to be the finest:

From his first introduction to an anglophone public, his poems have been rendered in exquisite English by diligent scholars and accomplished poets, among them George L. Kline, Anthony Hecht, and Richard Wilbur. These poems stand out for their faithful recasting of Brodsky's originals and their creative and insightful solutions to the problems and complexities his work inevitably presents. Translations executed by the poet himself are of uneven quality, and poems first composed in English typically lack the linguistic flair of his Russian. But if he had mixed success as an English poetic stylist, his prose, most of which he wrote in English, is superb.

The imparity in quality between Brodsky's English poetry and prose is – as commonly acknowledged – in favour of this last. In the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the following excerpt of an essay written by the critic John Taylor (2001) is focused on Brodsky's main value as a Russian poet, and well describes the disconcerted reaction of some American audience to his poems in English. Taylor shares Heaney's position, as it is reported further is this paper:

In any event, we must always remember that Brodsky remained a Russian poet (despite his increasing forays into English)... Americans are impressed by the disarming 'surrealism' of Brodsky's startling similes. [I]t cannot be emphasized enough how much he learned from Mandelstam's densely textured, tightly crafted, symbolism, and, more generally, from the aesthetics of the Russian 'Acmeist' movement. Brodsky famously read American slang dictionaries, hunting for eccentric images and possible rhymes. The results are sometimes words, or juxtapositions of words, that test the limits of poetic license. This is the vague criterion that has made some of us wrinkle our brows: when does the foreign poet, writing in English, trespass boundaries of legitimate linguistic inventiveness?

Michael Glover (1996: 119) judges the volume *So Forth* as «more failure than success». On the contrary, the same collection is considered by Christian Graham (1996: 110) «an astonishing collection from a writer able to mix the cerebral and the sensual, the political and the intimate, the elegiac and the

comic. [...] Brodsky's death is a loss to literature; his final collection of poems is the best consolation we could ask for».

The last opinion I report is Seamus Heaney's one (1987), similar to Taylor's one, which highlights Brodsky's excessive audacity in venturing into his second language:

[I]n the case of Mr. Brodsky's poetry, which is written in Russian and which revealed him to great Russian readers as their great contemporary poet, the process of translation is more problematic and resistant [...], he is now the official translator of his own lines. So, in spite of his manifest love for English verse, which amounts almost to a possessiveness, the dynamo of Russian supplies the energy, the metrics of the original will not be gainsaid and the English ear comes up against a phonetic element that is both animated and skewed.

This quick overview of pieces of criticism on Brodsky's poetry in English shows the mixed reactions the critics had towards Brodsky's poems in English. We may well add that Brodsky's poems in Russian bear a perfection of style, as well as a depth of contents, which cannot be found in poems originally written in English, which to many sound as 'naïf'.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to outline the complex and enthralling relationship that has bound one of the most prominent contemporary Russian poet to his acquired language. A fascination for English – and Anglophone literature – that eventually reached the point of absorbing his Russian mother tongue, even for the author's most intimate expression, poetry.

For this last, and in some respects, unforeseen development, many were the reasons, as I have tried to demonstrate. Undoubtedly linked to Brodsky's emigration to an Anglophone country, his choice for English further testifies his cultural crossing, as well as the necessity to find his position in a new lit-

erary context. As Julia Stakhnevich (2006: 11-12) claims in her analysis:

Authors who have learned their second language in adulthood and produce literary works in their adopted language, represent a small but significant group of language learners who have not only successfully crossed invisible sociolinguistic borders but have chosen their second language as a means of creative self expression. [...] For these individuals, language learning is not about memorization or successful imitation. It is rather a complex evolutionary process that impacts their sense of self and their relationship with the world, or, in other words, their identities.

Brodsky's choice to adopt the medium of English for his literary works shows his progressive transculturation, both personal and artistic – from Iosif, Russian poet in exile, into Joseph, the American and fully accomplished writer. Rulyova (2003: 117) asserts that: «[...] while translating *himself* into a newly acquired language, the poet is being transformed by it at the same time. His self is being metamorphosed together with his texts being re-born in a different language, which leads to re-inventing his *self*». It is a never-ending, «non-static, evolutionary, and multidimensional process that provides additional opportunities for creative self-expression [...]» (Stakhnevich 2006: 27), and which undoubtedly enriches the author's repertoire.

His works, the result of his life-long commitment to culture, not only draw on Eastern and Western traditions, but take from past and contemporary world cultures, going beyond nationalities and languages. Brodsky's main commitment in life was literature, of which, on many occasions, he asserted the high value not only for individual formation, but also as a social tool to oppose any kind of totalitarianism. Therefore, his heartfelt appeal to present and future generations sounds as a powerful encouragement to avert the most dangerous disease to humans – the lack of freedom, in all its forms.

In a manner of speaking, we all work for a dictionary. Because literature *is* a dictionary, a compendium of meanings for this or that human lot, for this or that experience. It is a dictionary of the language in which life speaks to man. Its function is to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap, or to help him realize, should he fall into that trap anyway, that he has been hit into a tautology. This way he will be less impressed – and, in a way, more free (Brodsky 1995: 108).

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