Contradictions and Paradoxes: Apoliticism and the Myth of Joseph Brodsky

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Apoliticism and the Myth of Joseph Brodsky

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Note on Transliteration and Abbreviations

The transliteration of Russian in this thesis conforms to the Library of Congress system (without diacrytical marks), although personal names that have acquired more familiar English equivalents are rendered in their better known form. For example, 'Mandel'shtam' is written as 'Mandelstam', and 'Zholkovskii' as 'Zholkovsky' etc. Titles of poems and collections of poetry are transliterated both in the body of the thesis and the bibliography, as are titles of any newspapers and journals. All quotations of poetry are given in the original Russian. The titles of Brodsky's poetic collections are abbreviated for ease of referencing:

Konets prekrasnoi epokhi — KPO
Ostanovka v pustyne — OVP
Chast' rechi — ChR
Uraniia — U
Peizazh s navodneniem — PSN.

Introduction

A Note: Development and Approach

The idea for this thesis took root as I registered the general perception of Brodsky as an apolitical poet. As I became increasingly familiar with his poetry, prose writings, and interviews, it became clear that this perception of the poet projected both by critics and by Brodsky himself is problematic and ultimately difficult to justify. Exploring the conflict between this understanding and elements of Brodsky's thinking and work established a foundation for this thesis, the ultimate aim being to advance an argument to contradict this perception of Brodsky as an apolitical poet. As this exploration developed, it became clear to me that the topic of Brodsky's relationship to politics is inextricably bound to other crucial issues, most particularly Brodsky's place in the politically-driven tradition of the poet in Russia and subsequent questions of biography and self-creation. The importance of this theme was confirmed when it became apparent that the notion of Brodsky's apoliticism works as part of an intricate myth on the same level as the self-projections of other canonical Russian poets.

This thesis therefore falls naturally into two discrete parts. The first and second chapters explore the workings of Brodsky's myth and its relationship to notions of biography, as well as Romanticism and ultimately also to the political tradition of myth creation. This approach is driven by an emphasis upon the importance of context and consequently large sections of the first chapter in particular constitute an overview of Brodsky's biography and the tradition from which he emerged. General trends in Brodsky criticism are also analysed, as are the elements of his self-projection both within and without his poetry. The second approach of the thesis, as set out in the third and fourth chapters, points out areas within Brodsky's poetry that can clearly be linked to politics, providing evidence to contradict the simplistic perception of Brodsky's poetry as exclusively apolitical. As a result, the general exploration and analysis of the first two chapters is given over to precise, analytical reading of a number of poems in order to rebut further the myth of apoliticism which seems now to define Brodsky. The majority of these close

readings are entirely original, reflecting the absence of scholarship dealing with the issues raised by this thesis, an absence which itself justifies the exploration of such issues.

Introduction

> 'I suppose it was just that my life somehow acquired an external political dimension' — Joseph Brodsky (Haven 2002: 8)

This quotation comes from an interview Joseph Brodsky gave to Michael Scammell in the magazine for the organisation 'Index on Censorship' shortly after his enforced exile to the West in 1972. He had been asked 'Why do you think they sent you to prison?', and 'Why do you think that you were released so quickly?'. Scammell was questioning Brodsky about his biography and the circumstances surrounding his trial and exile, attempting to expose the dynamic between Brodsky, his poetry, and the Soviet authorities. The quotation shows that Brodsky recognises this. Moreover, his response is typical of many of his statements regarding similar questions: he displays an apparently casual disinterest that suggests a disingenuousness towards these issues. In other words, Brodsky is so constantly and insistently dismissive of political issues that he seems unconvincing. Brodsky often asserted that a poet's true preoccupation is not political but is the language in which he works. Of poetry and politics he said scathingly that '[they] do have something in common — the letter p and the letter o' (Loseff 1990: 34). This is accompanied by his frequently repeated aphorism that 'a writer's biography is in his twists of language' (2011a: 3)**.** Minor variations upon this wording are found throughout Brodsky's writings: for example, in his essay 'The Sound of the Tide', he writes 'A poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes, and metaphors' (2011a: 164). The logic of these statements regarding politics and biography is immediately clear: the validation of his apolitical stance demands that Brodsky decontextualise his works and deny the relevance of the biographical facts of his life to his poetry.

This approach is seen in Brodsky's other responses to Scammell's questions where, for

example, Brodsky maintains that he considers Scammell's enquiries to be underpinned by 'a typically western approach to the problem: every event has to have a cause and every phenomenon has to have something standing behind it. It is very complex'. He concludes that,

> A man who sets out to create his own independent world within himself is bound sooner or later to become a foreign body in society, and then he becomes subject to all the physical laws of pressure, compression and extrusion. (Haven 2002: 8)

What Brodsky does not acknowledge is that in certain societies to create an 'independent world' can itself be interpreted as a political act whereas in others this is emphatically not so. Illustratively, the landscape of Brodsky's poetic world developed in its later years away from Soviet Russia to present a still more alienated reality than throughout its early stages, yet it would be inadequate to equate the persecution Brodsky experienced in the USSR with any 'pressure, compression and extrusion' to which he may have been subject in the West. It was writing 'independent' poetry in the Soviet communist context that placed him at odds with the society in which he lived. That Brodsky should fail to identify this and instead react with flippancy to enquiries about his imprisonment, preferring to raise questions of 'cause' and 'effect', suggests some disinclination to recognise or confront this fact. Rather, Brodsky insists on projecting an image of himself as an apolitical poet upon whose life and works politics has been gratuitously imposed.

However, whilst claiming that external political considerations are attached, unwanted, to his life, and that this life has little to do with his poetry, Brodsky simultaneously raises the idea of a consideration of his biography in line with traditional ways of thinking that are intimately tied to political circumstances. Whilst discussing nineteenth century poetry and 'the French as certified immoralists' in his essay 'Altra Ego', Brodsky writes:

> On the whole, underneath this bad-mouthing of poets lies the instinctive desire of every social order — be it a democracy, autocracy, theocracy, ideocracy, or bureaucracy — to compromise or belittle the authority of poetry, which, apart

> from rivalling that of the state, hoists a question mark over the individual himself, over his achievements and mental security, over his very significance. (2011b: 69)

Although the purpose of 'Altra Ego' is to offer an overview of poetry and its reception, this passage shows Brodsky inserting into the discourse ideas regarding the poet as an individual personality. Moreover, by focussing on the persecution ('bad-mouthing') of poets in this way, Brodsky demonstrates his engagement with a characteristically Russian cultural conception of the poet as 'a martyr […] a Christ-like figure, who takes upon himself the sufferings of the people' (Boym 1991: 120). This conception was canonised by Mikhail Lermontov in his poem 'Smert' poeta' (1837), and later developed in works such as 'Na dne preispodnei' (1922) by Maksimilian Voloshin. Crucially, it is a conception that 'thrives on political oppression': the poet's mythology can only exist in a context defined by state-inflicted suffering. Moreover, it is inherently tied to Romanticism and the Romantic concern regarding the unity of the poet's life and art (Boym 1991: 120). Brodsky demonstrates his engagement with this tradition and its political implications by emphasising the 'authority of poetry', which he places in direct competition with that of the state. Such views are found throughout his interviews and essays. In one exchange with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky asserts that 'People read the poet and […] when what the poet has done is accepted, the people speak the language of the poet and not of the state' (1998: 98). Here Brodsky focusses specifically upon the opposition between poet and state. To a similar end, he frequently uses terminology such as 'tyranny', 'society' and 'demagogue', undoubtedly displaying a political cadence within his thought.[1]

W.H. Auden noted that Brodsky's poetry is 'perhaps defiantly' apolitical (Todd, Hayward 1993: 959), a comment which draws attention to this innate paradox in Brodsky's stance. Michael Murphy observes these difficulties, noting that Brodsky's enthusiastic acceptance in the West can be seen as 'based in part at least on political rather than artistic considerations' (2004: 97). Yet even after moving from a country which demanded his poetry be ideological and which rejected neutrality, to a context

[1]See Brodsky's essay 'On Tyranny' as an example of this (2011a: 113-122).

where such poetry is vested with political dissent, Brodsky maintained that poetry transcends such concerns, stating that '[a] poet has only one obligation to society: to write well' (Volkov 1998: 98). This view is reflected in the supposed 'anti-heroic' posture that Brodsky adopts both in public and in his works — a stance that Brodsky claims 'was the *idée fixe* of our generation' (2011a: 367), and which Sanna Turoma characterises as 'the construction of a self-deprecating poetic identity' (2010: 43). Crucially, this posture is constructed in reaction to what Valentina Polukhina identifies as the 'time-worn Romantic images of the poet' (2003: 159), themselves fundamental to the Russian cultural conception of the poet. Brodsky's apparent rejection of these images is represented in the second stanza of his poem 'Venetsianskie strofy (1)' (1982):

> О, девятнадцатый век! Тоска по востоку! Поза
> изгнанника на скале! И, как лейкоцит в крови,
> луна в твореньях певцов, сгоравших от туберкулеза,
> писавших, что — от любви. (*U*: 105)

Here Brodsky satirises the Romantic 'pose' ('поза'), mentioning tuberculosis as a barbed reference to Keats and highlighting Romantic clichés precisely in order to undermine them ('Тоска по востоку! Поза/ изгнанника на скале!'). An integral part of Brodsky's 'anti-heroic stance' is, therefore, the irony with which Brodsky treats Romanticism and, accordingly, the Russian cultural conception of the poet and the associated creation of poetic myths. This is seen in an anecdote regarding Brodsky's reaction to being awarded the Nobel prize. Apparently Brodsky joked that this was 'a big step for me, a small one for mankind' (Klines 1987: *nytimes.com*). Brodsky's poems are often similarly bathetic, seeming to deflate the heightened romantic link between life and works in an explicitly ironic manner.

Yet this stance suggests that Brodsky uses the traditional Romantic understanding of the poet-prophet as a position to react against, itself implying an engagement with this tradition. In other words, Brodsky is forced to confront his poetic heritage, if only to shape his own position in contrast. David Rigsbee realises this when he observes that 'Brodsky was quick to minimise the impression of symmetry between his life and works

on the grounds of our making a biographical fallacy, meanwhile alluding to this very symmetry, albeit in satirical terms' (1999: 5). In using an anti-heroic stance in order to draw critical attention away from the biographical and, ultimately, political element of his work to the 'twists of language', Brodsky refuses to be a martyr (or 'dissident') first and a poet second (Bethea 1994: 17). Arguably such self-effacement — similar in certain ways to Akhmatova's own (yet in her case not self-effacing) principles of 'solitary detachment, stoic independence, [and] restraint' (Painter 2006: 199) — is but another casting of self-sacrifice, creating an alternative impression of martyrdom and heroism. As a result, Brodsky can be seen to have created a biographical and poetic myth of his own, that of 'Brodsky: the self-effacing, apolitical poet'. The subtlety of this self-projection lies in the way that he appears to direct attention away from himself and his biography, succeeding in constructing a myth whilst simultaneously appearing to reject such myths and their related ideals.

Unsurprisingly, critics have struggled to deal with such contradictions, which combine around biography and politics, and in this respect chime with the traditional Russian view of the poet as a prophet. Polukhina, by far the most prolific Brodsky specialist, is indicative of this issue.[2] This is illustrated in the introduction to her monograph on Brodsky, where she writes:

> [Brodsky's] poetic world reveals a paradoxical type of poet: he is simultaneously solitary and social. Finding himself in conflict with a society which rejected and exiled him, he has retained a deep and treasured link with this society. The theme of Russia nurtures his poetry no less than world culture does. This outcast and exile is as much immersed in the fate of his people as he is in the fate of civilisation as a whole. (Polukhina 1989: xi)

While Polukhina identifies that Brodsky is 'a paradoxical type of poet', she also

[2] Polukhina's publications on Brodsky include the monograph *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time* (1989), and two volumes of *Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries* (1992) (2008). She has also edited a number of volumes, including *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics* (1990), and *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem* (1999), both collaborations with Lev Loseff. She has written many articles published in numerous edited volumes.

reinforces his own statements uncritically. The phrase 'finding himself in conflict with a society which rejected and exiled him' displays the extent to which she echoes Brodsky's assertion that his life 'somehow acquired an external political dimension'. The willfulness of writing individual, lyric poetry in a Soviet context is not broached, and although Brodsky must have been aware that writing apparently apolitical poetry in this context would have a political dimension, he is presented as an unconsciously 'foreign body' pitted against the zealous agency of his society. Polukhina also couches her assessment of Brodsky in uncritical Romantic terms: 'immersed in the fate of his people', he is framed as the typical poet-prophet. Similarly, martyrdom is hinted at in his characterisation as an 'outcast and exile'. Polukhina's uncritical reiteration of Brodsky's stance, as well as her failure to set his poetry in context, transforms his statements into monoliths, contributing to other perceptions of Brodsky that serve to perpetuate and magnify his myth.

For example, in his study of Brodsky's poetry and exile David Bethea states that 'Christian sacrifice […] stands at the centre of Brodsky's poetic worldview' (1994: 9). This quotation is revealing, for although Bethea couches this idea in the primarily apolitical discourse of religious sacrifice, it is impossible not to read this theme through a biographical prism. Attempting to delineate something as complex as a 'poetic worldview', to some extent Bethea exhibits a critical sleight-of-hand. By making Brodsky a martyr poetically, Bethea elides the relative commonplace of exile with an exalted position as sacrificial victim. Arguably, such a view prioritises one element of Brodsky's biography, promoting it to the level of myth, without fully contextualising such claims within the facts of his life.

In a similar way, much critical work touches upon these elements of Brodsky's oeuvre only to retract such notions afterwards. In an interview with William Wadsworth — a former Brodsky student and the executive director of The Academy of American Poets from 1989 to 2001 — Polukhina raises the issue of biography:

Polukhina: Joseph was very much against biography as such; he would insist that

> a poet's biography is in his vowels and consonants. Isn't there some contradiction here?
> **Wadsworth**: Contradiction is the essence of poetry. Yeats said that it is out of the 'quarrel with ourselves' that we make poetry […] Poets deal in paradoxes, and this was Joseph's paradox […] (Polukhina 2008: 467)

Wadsworth's response is telling: whilst acknowledging the existence of a fundamental contradiction in Brodsky's stance, he refuses to be drawn into an exploration of Brodsky's position. Instead he brushes off the issue as simply another characteristic of poets and poetry. Volkov captures this problem in his description of Brodsky. He portrays him as being 'in constant Socratic dialogue with himself, endlessly questioning, expanding, and shifting his mental position […] a poet in all his contradictions, full of immense vitality and intellectual curiosity' (1998: xii — xiii). Here Volkov alludes to both sides of the issues, which have affected Brodsky's critical reception. On the one hand, he accurately represents the contradictions and difficulties, which are a key part of Brodsky's output, in his poetry, essays, and conversational discussions about his work. On the other, he expresses these difficulties through the metaphor of 'Socratic dialogue', calling what he has just said into question. Plato's Socratic dialogues exhibit an intellectual mismatch between the individuals, which undermines any sense of true debate, whereas Socrates himself uses conversation to bring more equal individuals towards his own viewpoint. Volkov's book of dialogues between himself and Brodsky, as well as the many exchanges carried out between interviewers and the poet, occasionally display similarly unequal interlocutors. Often approached with deference, Brodsky can frequently be seen to dominate the conversations, an effect which Volkov refers to in his reminiscences:

> More than a few times I heard Russian acquaintances of Brodsky address him as *nachal'nik*, or 'the boss,' and Brodsky seemed to accept and even enjoy it. Once the writer Sergei Dovlatov […] inquired in all seriousness as to whether I'd ever had a nosebleed after a long tête-à-tête with Brodsky. After hearing my answer in the affirmative, he gave a sigh of relief. 'Thank God. I thought I was the only one who was such a weakling.' (1998: 10)

This forcefulness in Brodsky's stance can be interpreted as part of a charismatic performance tying in with certain strategies of self-fashioning. These include his self-effacing, stoic pose which both deflects and attracts attention, and the strategies of aphorism and absolutism — the two most obvious devices at work in his statements such as 'a writer's biography is in his twists of language'. Such strategies intensify the forcefulness of self-projection hinted at by Volkov, perhaps contributing to the way in which many critics are unable to move beyond his statements regarding biography and politics to an awareness of the contradictions between such statements, or certainly a willingness to explore them. A reflection of this situation lies in the fact that there still exists no official scholarly biography of Brodsky, but only one 'literary biography' by Lev Loseff (2011), and two memoirs — one by Brodsky's friend, Liudmila Shtern (2004), and the other by his translator, Daniel Weissbort (2004). This issue is treated in greater depth in the first chapter; for now it is sufficient to point out that the failure to engage with these contradictions has meant that the issues of Brodsky's biography and its relationship to the Russian cultural tradition, and his consequent myth of apoliticism, while being perennial elements within Brodsky criticism, have not been satisfactorily resolved. Bethea articulates this problem, asking: 'What comes first, Joseph Brodsky the man […] or the poems themselves? It is a choice that lies at the centre of his biographical legend of his 'creative path'' (1994: 8). Rigsbee similarly notes that '[…] the very notion of a poet's embodying something of his or her poetry seems to lie at the source of much discussion and contention — at least opinion — vis-a-vis [Brodsky's] work' (Rigsbee 1999: 1). The lack of resolution — and indeed engagement — regarding this issue has resulted in the perpetuation of Brodsky's own self-projection as a poet to whom politics is irrelevant.

This thesis aims to dispel this perception of Brodsky as an apolitical poet politicised only by the ideologically driven Soviet authorities on the one hand and, on the other, the eagerness of Western audiences to interpret him as a dissident. As outlined above, this issue is so bound up in questions of biography and the subsequent problems of self-projection and myth that it is impossible to address the subject without first exploring Brodsky's self-presentation and the way this relates to the Russian cultural tradition of

the poet-prophet. These issues form a major focus of this thesis and are dealt with in the first and second chapters. The first chapter places Brodsky in context. It opens with an exploration of the pertinent details of Brodsky's biography — a necessity when no critical biography exists — before continuing to provide a sketch of Brodsky's poetic inheritance. This lays the ground for an exploration of his myth and biographical legend, identifying its central features and looking at how it is constructed, and by whom. This is approached firstly by considering Brodsky's public self-presentation, and secondly by considering his presentation within criticism.

The second chapter argues that Brodsky's lyric persona contributes to Brodsky's self-projection and must be considered in parallel with his self-presentation in public. It draws heavily on the themes and issues of the first chapter by exploring the techniques of self-projection in Brodsky's poetry. As such, it traces the relationship between self-effacement and self-promotion in his works, showing that Brodsky responds to the Russian cultural myth of the poet in his poetry as well as in public. Ultimately, the first and second chapters set out an argument for reconsidering Brodsky's relationship with politics based upon such self-presentation and myth-creation, both of which insert him into a Russian tradition that is heavily defined by its relationship to political and civic matters.

The third chapter considers Brodsky's poetry in light of his poetic project regarding the raising of individual consciousness in both the poet and the reader. It argues that Viktor Shklovsky's theory of estrangement provides a useful means of reading the theme of alienation in Brodsky's works, demonstrating that alienation can be understood as a device by which Brodsky presents reality anew to ultimately instill in the individual a resistance to 'tyrannical' automatisation. The chapter begins by outlining the importance of alienation to Brodsky's works. It then considers the evolving alienation between Brodsky's lyric persona and his poetic lover figure, tracing its relationship to autonomy through four key works. It then analyses the motif of birds and its relevance to the connection between alienation and autonomy. This chapter demonstrates that alienation is key to Brodsky's poetic project, which he expresses in political terms. It also responds

to the eagerness of critics to tie alienation to a romanticization of the exilic position, showing that it must be considered a theme in its own right.

The final chapter ends by addressing the most central complexities of Brodsky's assertion that politics is irrelevant to his work. It demonstrates that Brodsky produced a body of poetry that deals primarily with political themes. Founded upon a close reading of selected poems, this chapter identifies themes that are implicitly or explicitly political and explores their implications. The poems are grouped thematically in order to display the broad range of their political content. The first section deals with Brodsky's depiction of society in the USSR, the second covers the portrayal of the state, and the third focusses on characterisations of tyranny and autocracy.

Chapter One — Brodsky and Biography: The Creation of a Myth

Brodsky's Biography: A Summary

Born in 1940 to a Jewish family in Leningrad, Brodsky was raised in modest circumstances: his family 'simply tried to make the best of everything' (2011a: 449). He lived with his parents in the single room of a communal flat, an experience to which Brodsky's attraction to the principles of privacy and isolation is often attributed. Bethea points out that,

> […] every Soviet *intelligent* knows [that] the 'life of the mind' becomes more of a sine qua non when basic physical privacy is hard to come by. It is the last place the state can look when one is forced on a daily basis to share toilets and kitchens with neighbours. (1994: 20)

Although Bethea's quotation is perhaps a little simplistic in that it presents a convenient cause and effect relationship between excessively communal living and a need for privacy, it does offer a glancing insight into the psychology of isolation in the context of an all-seeing regime. To some extent this might explain Brodsky's position, which is characterised by a desire for privacy underpinning his refusal to discuss or offer biographical details.

Brodsky left school at the age of fifteen, a decision he was to later consider his first act of free will (Polukhina 1989: 6). In place of formal teaching he embarked upon a voracious scheme of self-education and early poetic experimentation. In the title of his chapter on this topic, Lev Loseff calls this Brodsky's 'real education' (2011: 17). Loseff asserts that Brodsky's knowledge of geography and history was more the result of his own reading than his school assignments (2011: 18), and he outlines the way Brodsky familiarised himself with Polish so that he could read not simply the Polish poets that he admired, but also the majority of Western literature that could only be accessed in Russia through Polish translations. Apparently Brodsky remarked that he 'probably read half of modern Western literature in Polish translation' (2011: 34-5). Brodsky

subsequently spent several years moving through a variety of jobs and occupations, including labouring as a milling machine operator, working in the morgue of the infamous Kresty prison, and joining several Soviet geological expeditions to remote areas of the USSR (Volkov 1998: xiii). Such changes were critical to how he was to be perceived by the authorities, who were to condemn his supposed lack of a steady vocation.

Brodsky's literary interests quickly led him to become an active and influential member of Leningrad's network of young intellectuals and writers, and it was through such literary acquaintances that Brodsky first met Anna Akhmatova (Shtern 2004: 52). Brodsky's own assessment of the meeting was to profess to have been entirely unaware of the significance of this event: '[…] I don't remember those first few meetings very clearly. Somehow I just didn't realise whom I was dealing with' (Volkov 1998: 208). Although Brodsky was open about his initial lack of engagement with Akhmatova's poetry (Loseff 2011: 57), he credited their friendship with an enormous influence on his personal life and broader cultural education. In one set of dialogues with Volkov, Brodsky claims that 'Nothing like it ever happened to me before or, I think, after […] Stages of development do not repeat themselves' (1998: 207). As Irina Grudzinska Gross points out, Akhmatova was an embodiment of memory, opening for Brodsky and his friends the pre-revolutionary Russian literary tradition that by then had few remaining witnesses (2009: 116). It was at this time that Brodsky met the artist Marina Basmanova, with whom he had a long-lasting and tempestuous relationship. Loseff claims that Basmanova made an impression upon everyone that she met; Lidiya Chukovskaya recorded that even Akhmatova lauded her beauty as being '[like] clear cold water' (Loseff 2011: 61). Although the couple never married, they had a son together. Basmanova is the dedicatee and implied addressee of many of Brodsky's poems, and in 1983 he published an entire retrospective collection of his love poetry dedicated to her, *Novye stansy k Avguste.*

Still living with his parents, Brodsky earned occasional money by translating and carrying out odd jobs. It was at this point that he began to experience skirmishes with the 'over-zealous' Soviet authorities (Volkov 1998: 3). Following a denunciation in the

paper *Vechernii Leningrad* in November 1963, in which Brodsky was variously described as a 'loner…[writing poetry] full of pessimism, a mixture of decadence, modernism, and simple gibberish' (Reeder 1994: 438), and 'a dissolute and cynical parasite' (Burford 1974: 466), Brodsky was arrested several times. He was also confined for two periods in mental asylums in December 1963 and from February to March 1964, the experiences of which he 'described […] all in verse' in the poem 'Gorbunov i Gorchakov' (1968) (Volkov 1998: 67). The culmination of these events was the infamous 'Brodsky Trial' in 1964,[3] in which Brodsky was charged with 'social parasitism' (*тунеядство*). Brodsky did not belong to the Union of Writers and, as Bethea further elaborates:

> When Brodsky was tried for 'social parasitism' […] it was because, as the so-called crime suggested, he lived outside, or 'on', the host. He had held many odd jobs and, though they rewarded him poorly, he gave the impression of hopping from one host's back to the other, of doing as he pleased; he was not, in a word, a solid citizen of Soviet letters (1994: 37).

Brodsky's refusal to be either an authorised writer or a non-writing citizen brought about his internal exile to the northern region of Arkhangelsk, where he was sentenced to five years of hard labour (Burford 1974: 470).

Brodsky's trial plays an important role in the history of Russian literature and culture. As Roberta Reeder points out in her note to the article 'The Crimes of Joseph Brodsky', the trial represented a retreat from Khrushchev's reforms that many had believed meant a genuine easing of State repression in the arts (Reeder, Etkind, Gubanov 1999: 95). The growing atmosphere of creative optimism was stifled and 'fear returned, haunting figures like Brodsky, who was committed to creating his works in a personal way rather than taking orders from the regime' (Reeder 1999: 95). Volkov refers to the process of the trial as 'kafkaesque', describing it as an 'absurd drama at the intersection of genius and idiocy' (1998: 3-4). The notorious dialogue between Brodsky and the judge was recorded illicitly by Frida Vigdorova, who made her notes available both in the USSR and abroad (Reeder 1994: 441). According to Volkov, it became one of the most

[3] Although there were technically two trials (Reeder 1994: 441-3), for the purpose of this thesis they are treated as the same event.

frequently quoted court exchanges in the history of twentieth century culture, and turned Brodsky into an artistic cause célèbre (1998: 4). A revealing and often-quoted extract from Vigdorova's notes displays the confrontation between Brodsky and the judge:

> **Судья**: Ваш трудовой стаж?
> **Бродский**: Примерно…
> **Судья**: Нас не интересует 'примерно'!
> **Бродский**: Пять лет.
> **Судья**: Где вы работали?
> **Бродский**: На заводе. В геологических партиях…
> **Судья**: Сколько вы работали на заводе?
> **Бродский**: Год.
> **Судья**: Кем?
> **Бродский**: Фрезеровщиком.
> **Судья**: А вообще какая ваша специальность?
> **Бродский**: Поэт. Поэт-переводчик.
> **Судья**: А кто это признал, что вы поэт? Кто причислил вас к поэтам?
> **Бродский**: Никто. *(Без вызова)*. А кто причислил меня к роду человеческому?
> **Судья**: А вы учились этому?
> **Бродский**: Чему?
> **Судья**: Чтобы быть поэтом? Не пытались кончить Вуз, где готовят…где учат…
> **Бродский**: Я не думал, что это дается образованием.
> **Судья**: А чем же?
> **Бродский**: Я думаю, это…*(растерянно)*…от Бога…
> **Судья**: У вас есть ходатайства к суду?
> **Бродский**: Я хотел бы знать, за что меня арестовали.
> **Судья**: Это вопрос, а не ходатайство.
> **Бродский**: Тогда у меня ходатайства нет.
> ('Sud nad Iosifom Brodskim': *Polit.ru*)

At the centre of this confrontation is the judge's questioning of Brodsky's self-professed title of poet. Sitting as the representative of the legal, and therefore societal, structure, the judge asks 'А кто это признал, что вы поэт? Кто причислил вас к поэтам?' This question, rooted in the evaluation of literary worth by social criteria, is met with individualism: 'Никто. *(Без вызова)*. А кто причислил меня к роду человеческому?'

As Murphy highlights, 'implicit in the judge's question was the fact that if Brodsky did not hold the appropriate post within the Soviet literary establishment then he had no right to call himself a writer. Explicit in Brodsky's response was a direct challenge to the authority of the State' (2004: xiv). Whilst the extent to which Brodsky's 'challenge to the authority of the State' can be described as 'explicit' can be debated, undoubtedly in the Soviet context Brodsky's insistence on his right to personal expression was plainly a political act. Wadsworth expresses this clearly, noting that '[Brodsky's] insistence to the Soviet judge that poetry had nothing to do with politics or social responsibility was in itself a political act with social consequences' (Polukhina 2008: 467).

As a result, particularly in the West, Brodsky subsequently came to symbolise the struggle for artistic freedom in an oppressive state. This is highlighted by the interview — referred to in the introduction — that was conducted by Michael Scammell for *Index on Censorship* magazine (Haven 2002: 7-12). An international organisation that 'promotes and defends the right to freedom of expression', *Index on Censorship* describes itself as 'the inspiration of the poet Stephen Spender […] founded in 1972 to publish the untold stories of dissidents behind the Iron Curtain' ('About Index': *indexoncensorship.org*). That Brodsky should be singled out as a pertinent interviewee for the magazine is revealing, and displays the extent to which he was viewed in the West as the victim of political persecution by the authorities of the Soviet Union. Similarly, that Brodsky should agree to such an interview whilst continuing to assert that his life 'somehow acquired an external political dimension' (2002: 8) highlights the irony of Brodsky's paradoxical position regarding politics. The political resonance of this struggle for artistic freedom in an oppressive state is impossible to ignore, and it forms the central element of Brodsky's variant of the traditional myth of the Russian poet. As Akhmatova apparently commented on the consequences of the state's attentions in the Soviet Union: 'What a biography they're fashioning for our red-haired friend! It's as if he'd hired them to do it on purpose' (Polukhina 2010: 119). In this way, Akhmatova is aware of the power of such actions and how they relate to preexisting cultural assumptions about the role of the poet, in particular with regards to the state. Importantly, she is also recognising the potential of the biographical fact of Brodsky's trial and exile for the fashioning of a narrative and literary persona, and a biographical

legend.

Following a protest by prominent Soviet and international figures, Brodsky's sentence was commuted in 1965, approximately eighteen months after he was sent into exile. The poet often referred to his experience of internal exile as one of the more content periods of his life (Burford 1974: 470). He wrote continually and further familiarised himself with the metaphysical Anglophone poetic tradition. Loseff recalls that Brodsky had already read a large amount of Anglo-American poetry in translation, but he states that it was not until his time in Norenskaya that he 'really began to study it' (2011: 101). According to Loseff, Brodsky owned a passable English-Russian dictionary and a small collection of books, including Oscar Williams' *New Pocket Anthology of English Verse*. At night, in his hut on the edge of a village on the banks of a stream, 'there was nothing to distract him; he ploughed through his dictionary for exact equivalents; he spent hours slowly making his way through English texts' (2011: 101). For his part, Brodsky stated of his daily life in internal exile that,

> I loved it [farm work] because it was pure Robert Frost or our poet Klyuev: the North, the cold, the village, the earth. This abstract rural landscape. More abstract than anything I've ever seen. (Volkov 1998: 76)

This comment is significant: Brodsky sees his experience in literary terms, reaching for poetry, and in the case of Frost the life, of figures whom he respects. In describing a landscape in which he lived for a year and a half as 'abstract', Brodsky shows a degree of the distancing and alienation which is an important theme within his poetry. That the description of the north relates to part of Brodsky's life which he viewed with pride is also significant. Murphy draws attention to this, showing how Brodsky's sentiments in his quotation are reflected in his poem 'Ia vkhodil vmesto dikogo zveria v kletku […]' (1980). Murphy shows that this poem depicts the 'Russian model of the internal émigré, the alienated individual ostracised even while living within his own country'. He adds that, 'this is the tradition to which Brodsky, at the beginning of his writing life at least, belonged' (2004: viii). Murphy's observation is revealing insofar as it touches upon the Russian Romantic model that defines Brodsky's attitude and work, even while Brodsky satirises this model elsewhere. This dilemma is explored fully later in the thesis.

Following the commuting of his sentence, Brodsky returned to Leningrad where he remained for the next seven years. He rejoined the same cultural circles that he had left the year before and continued to write poetry, 'refusing to participate in the established and politically controlled literary world' (Volkov 1998: 6). Bethea characterises the situation of Brodsky and his friends as 'young people being forced to seek value outside the prevailing discourse and power structures of the state' (1994: 28). Brodsky's decision not to collaborate with the KGB — an option which was open to him and which would have given him the opportunity to publish his first volume of poetry — is characterised by Volkov as 'simple inasmuch as it was morally unambiguous' (1998: 6). By providing the logic for an early decision in such unwavering and consistent terms, Brodsky demonstrated the moral and creative integrity that can be seen to contribute to his personal myth. Such action at the time was extremely single-minded, and he refused to publish works in popular magazines because he wished not to compromise the choice of poems for inclusion (Volkov 1998: 6). As a result, all of Brodsky's work — with the exception of seven poems (Polukhina 1989: 286) — was published abroad or circulated in Russia in *samizdat*: *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* was published in Washington in 1965, and *Ostanovka v pustyne* in New York in 1970.

The second significant public event in the trajectory of both Brodsky's career and biography occurred in May 1972 when Brodsky was approached by the Soviet authorities and informed of his imminent exile. It was made clear to him that he was to be forcibly removed from the country within ten days (Polukhina 1989: 29). Brodsky was flown to Austria, where the next stage of his life was marked by a meeting with W. H. Auden, a figure Brodsky admired greatly (his essay 'To Please A Shadow' concludes with the famous lines: 'The chair being too low, two dishevelled volumes of the OED were put under [Auden] […] I thought then that I was seeing the only man who had the right to use those volumes as his seat' (2011a: 383)). However, conforming to Brodsky's principle that 'a writer's biography consists in his twists of language', he persistently refused to dramatise the event of his expulsion from the USSR. This is demonstrated in two separate interviews quoted by Polukhina. In the first, Brodsky describes his situation in terms of 'absurdity', 'weirdness', and 'ridiculousness' rather than tragedy, and in the second he emphasises the banality of the events, stating that 'I don't really think that my

experiences are so unique' (1989: 31).

As has already been pointed out, Brodsky's reception in the West was 'enthusiastic' and based in part at least on political rather than artistic considerations (Murphy 2004: 97). His treatment by the Soviet authorities served to entrench the West's romanticised view of Brodsky as a political dissident and 'illustrious outsider', already widespread due to his perceived 'long-suffering past' (Bethea 1994: 6). As Grudzinska Gross observes,

> The fact that Brodsky came from Russia guaranteed more interest in his person. Also, times had changed; in the twenty years that separated the two acts of emigration the USSR had lost a lot of its attractiveness: only a few Western communist parties continued to express confidence in the future of its political system. (2009: 69) [4]

Grudzinksa Gross touches upon Western attitudes towards communism and the USSR, making a link between a growth of cynicism and hostility towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the West's resulting eagerness to accept and laud exiles and emigrants. E. J. Czerwinski notes the effect this had on Russian writers, stating in 1988 that 'If a text is in Russian, the probability of translation and publication is greatly enhanced. Otherwise, an Armenian novel remains an Armenian novel' (1988: 211). This general attitude can be seen to influence the perception of Brodsky as an 'illustrious outsider', an image that Brodsky downplays thereafter through his continual attempts to direct focus away from extra-literary events and his biography and back to his poetry. Grudzinska Gross continues to chronicle the events surrounding Brodsky's reception:

> Thanks to Auden, Brodsky soon travelled to London, where they stayed together at Stephen Spender's. The reason for that trip — an international poetry festival — became the Western 'debut' of Brodsky, the first of many such festivals he […] frequented. During the festival Robert Lowell, who befriended Brodsky, read English language versions of the Russian poet's poems. Brodsky also met Seamus Heaney and John Ashbery […] And so, two weeks after arriving in the West, Brodsky found himself at the very centre of the establishment of poets. (2009: 70)

[4] Grudzinska Gross is referring to the emigration of the Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz.

That Grudzinska Gross chooses to use the word ‘debut’ is revealing. By couching these events in terms of a public performance, she draws the link between Brodsky’s biography and biographical legend, highlighting the way that these events worked to shape his reputation as a poet. Moreover, Grudzinska Gross shows how Brodsky’s literary connections served to project him fully into the Western cultural milieu. Brodsky does credit Auden with having a great impact upon his own personal poetic ideas and philosophies (Volkov 1998: 129), but Auden also helped to further Brodsky’s reputation as a ‘serious’ poet in the West. As Susan Sontag notes, ‘I think to have Auden's benediction had already set him on an incredibly exalted plane’ (Polukhina 2008: 328). Thus, through the connections of the older poet Brodsky was swiftly initiated into American intellectual circles. He also secured a prestigious job at the University of Michigan through his friend, Carl Proffer (Loseff 2011: 175).

Brodsky was quickly made a visiting professor at other major universities, including Columbia University and the University of Cambridge, although he returned to the University of Michigan in 1974 where he remained until 1980. General regard for his intellectual capacity grew rapidly, and just as he had been active in the cultural circles of Leningrad, so he became integral to the Anglophone intellectual community. Sontag illustrates this, recalling that Brodsky once laughingly commented, ‘Sometimes I find it so odd to realise that I can write anything I want and it will be published’ (Polukhina 2008: 327) — a comment that reflects both the eagerness with which Brodsky was accepted in the West, as well as the permissive Western attitude to literature in contrast to the Soviet Union. Brodsky remained close to eminent Russian émigrés such as the fellow writers, translators, and scholars Gennady Smakov, Lev Loseff, and Sergei Dovlatov (Shtern 2004: 266). He also became a friend of significant Western poets and academic figures such as Sontag and Heaney, as well as the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. Apparently viewed with both admiration and jealousy by other Russian cultural figures (Shtern 2004: 331), Brodsky became an essential point of contact for Russians wishing to integrate themselves into American cultural life (Shtern 2004: 301). Though this was a role that he largely rejected and claimed to despise (he said that in America he

'sometimes had to deal with people [he] wouldn't even speak to at home' (Volkov 1998: 157)), he did play a central part in the defection in 1979 of the celebrated Russian ballet star, Alexander Godunov (Volkov 1998: 170-7).

The event of Brodsky's exile from the USSR may well be vested with undue critical significance. At least two works focus on exile in relation to Brodsky — Bethea's *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (1994), and Murphy's *Poetry in Exile: A Study of the Poetry of W.H. Auden, Joseph Brodsky & George Szirtes* (2004) —, and various other studies also exist, among them the well-known article by George L. Kline, 'Variations on the Theme of Exile', in *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics* (1990). This would imply that exile should occupy a position of absolute importance in the perception of Brodsky, an idea explored in the third chapter where the notion of exile can be seen to subsume the theme of alienation in Brodsky's poetry. Yet the fact of Brodsky's exile, while providing the inspiration for a number of his poems, does not seem to effect a clear change or break in Brodsky's output. Rather, his poetry can be seen to follow a natural course of development while retaining such essential 'Brodskian' qualities as an extensive and surprising range of vocabulary, often attributed to Brodsky's wide range of experiences in the USSR. As Volkov summarises, '[Brodsky's] unusual trajectory had landed him in the factory and the morgue, on geological expeditions, and in prisons and squalid back-water villages, and had placed him in contact with criminals, paupers, street-hustlers, mental patients, and peasants' (1998: xiii). Murphy characterises the general evolution of Brodsky's poetry by describing his early works as 'deal[ing] with the traditional matter of lyric poetry: love, loss, and — most powerfully of all — the young poet's sense of having been called to a vocation' (2004: 86), before pointing out in his summary of Brodsky's later works that they '[question] what it is like to live in a condition of metaphysical and historical loss' (1999: 7). Although never devoid of philosophical implications in the early period, Brodsky's poetry does develop in metaphysical scope. This accords with a generally acknowledged waning of the expression of emotion in Brodsky's poetry, replaced by a growing tendency towards philosophical themes and the forensic pursuit of the phenomena of language and poetry within his poems themselves. David MacFadyen characterises this, claiming that 'the

social writer becomes private and the objective is replaced by the subjective' (2000: 30). Tomas Venclova succinctly summarises Brodsky's poetic development in concluding that 'the further he progressed […] the more he aimed at vast, large-scale constructions, convoluted syntax, vertiginous inversions and enjambements, complex, even shocking metaphors and, above all, at a strictly logical development of the theme' (*units.muohio.edu*).[5]

In 1977 two collections of Brodsky's poetry were published: *Konets prekrasnoi epokhi: Stikhotvoreniia 1964-1971,* and *Chast' rechi: Stikhotvoreniia 1972-1976*. By the end of the 1970s Brodsky began to receive a number of prestigious awards and accolades, notably an honorary degree at Yale University in 1978, and membership of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1979. In 1981, Brodsky was a recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's award for his works of 'genius' ('Joseph Brodsky — Biographical': *nobelprize.org*). Given that Brodsky's poetry was accessible to the majority of his anglophone readers only through translation, these awards suggest the extent to which he had become a widely respected and influential cultural figure. Moreover, the formal recognition resulting from such prizes established Brodsky's canonisation. By placing him on a par with significant Anglophone writers, these awards institutionalised Brodsky's work, rendering him an honoured Western poet just as much as he had been a marginalised Soviet one, despite the linguistic link to Russia. At this point Brodsky was suffering particularly frail health, undergoing open-heart surgery and two bypass operations. In 1980 he moved to an apartment in New York's Greenwich Village, a home that became renowned for its literary atmosphere and the conversations that occurred there. Heaney reminisces about Brodsky's apartment, writing that,

> When I briefly visited his apartment in New York some years ago I felt I had entered some kitchen of the mind where operations had been temporarily suspended: Russian encyclopaedias, piled books, encroaching paper, all disposed without any of that designerish calculation that can subtly call into question the whole raison d'être of a work space. Indeed I felt I had passed a test when he later

[5] A date for this article could not be located.

> gazed on the disarray of my own attic in Dublin and pronounced with a pleasurable Slavic lengthening of the third word, 'It's all right.' (1987: *nytimes.com*)

Brodsky's next collection of poetry, *Novye stansy k Avguste: Stikhi k M.B., 1962-1982,* which was published in 1983, was an assortment of his love poems that had already been published elsewhere. *Uraniia: Novaia kniga stikhov*, another collection of old and new poetry, was published in 1984, and in 1986 he received the National Book Critics Award for his book of essays in English, *Less Than One*, as well as an honorary doctorate of literature from the University of Oxford. As with his previous awards, these acts of canonisation helped to secure Brodsky's position within the ranks of established writers in the West, helping to anoint him the 'living classic' that Viktor Krivulin describes in Polukhina's article 'The Myth of the Poet and the Poet of the Myth (Polukhina 1994: 141).

The pinnacle of this decade for Brodsky was the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987. According to the academy, the award was made 'for an all-embracing authorship, imbued with clarity of thought and poetic intensity' ('The Nobel Prize in Literature 1987': *nobelprize.org*). Efim Etkind observes that the rationale was that Brodsky's poetry was seen as 'distinguished by an unusual intensity of spiritual and intellectual life, broad general cultural horizons, and a brilliance of artistic form' (Reeder, Etkind, Gubanov 1999: 98). This characterization is in stark contrast to the way in which Brodsky downplayed the personal significance of the award:

> So being grateful to you for your decision to award me the Nobel Prize for literature, I am essentially grateful for your imparting to my work an aspect of permanence, like that of a glacier's debris, let's say, in the vast landscape of literature. (2011b: 51-2)

Of course, this focus on his work and the terms in which it is made provides an interesting insight into Brodsky's biography. If his poetry is the debris of the glacier, Brodsky becomes the glacier itself. Though this accentuates the theme of impermanence that he expresses earlier in the speech (2011b: 41), the melting away of the glacier

contrasts with the valleys it carves. These scars on the 'vast landscape of literature', and the relocated geological material contained within them, are by implication the consequence of Brodsky's life, amounting again to a declaration of self-assertion in this self-effacing speech.

The complexities of Brodsky's self-projection in the Nobel speech are in contrast to his role as conceptualised by the Soviet authorities. The KGB expressed anger at the prize, calling it a 'political provocation on the part of the reactionary circles in the West' (Murphy 2004: 98), a statement that revealed the essentially unchanged position of the Soviet authorities towards Brodsky since his exile. Despite Brodsky's absence from the USSR for nearly twenty years, those in power still viewed him as a symbol of political and ideological opposition. To some extent this reflected certain views which questioned the motives behind the award. Czerwinski expresses this, suggesting that Eastern European writers were were only noticed and singled out for literary prizes if they had been exiled, thereby highlighting the preference in the West for figures that could be understood in terms of political dissent. He quotes one Polish critic who apparently asked 'Does this mean that a writer from these bloc countries has to leave his homeland in order to be considered for the Nobel Prize?' (1988: 213). For his part, Brodsky consistently referred to the political history of Russia in his Nobel lecture, unfavourably comparing the nature of the state with that of language and art:

> Language and, presumably, literature are things that are more ancient and inevitable, more durable than any form of social organization. The revulsion, irony, or indifference often expressed by literature toward the state is essentially the reaction of the permanent — better yet, the infinite — against the temporary, against the finite. (2011b: 41).

By placing poetry above the concerns of politics, this quotation helps to explain Brodsky's attitude to biography — namely, that poetry is infinite whereas human life is temporary and therefore insignificant by comparison. He also demonstrates his belief that literature is essentially connected to the individual rather than to society or, perhaps more accurately, as tangentially connected to the individual, as the debris to the glacier,

but never to the state. Uttered by an émigré from a regime which both politicises literature and subordinates the individual to the collective, this quotation offers another explanation for the KGB's continued antipathy towards Brodsky.

After the Nobel Prize, Brodsky's career was marked by a small number of collections and accolades. *So Forth*, a collection of poems in English, was published in 1996, the year of his death. It brings together a range of his poetry written mainly between 1987 and 1995. The last years of Brodsky's life can be seen as a period of great personal significance. In the early 1990s Brodsky's estranged son visited him from Russia (Shtern 2004: 122), and soon after the poet married Maria Sozzani, a young student from the Sorbonne, with whom he subsequently had a daughter named 'Anna', after Anna Akhmatova (Grudzinska Gross 2009: 115). Brodsky was made Poet Laureate of the United States, a position that was to be the final major award of his career. He died of a heart-attack in the January of 1996, never having returned to the USSR or seen his parents since his departure in 1972.

By returning to Brodsky's work in the light of his biography, it is possible to begin to recontextualise some of his statements and ideas, providing a challenge to the selective readings of those critics who have chosen to use elements of his biography either to create a monolith or to adapt them to fit a cultural pattern. Equally important for subsequent analysis is an awareness of Brodsky's complex relationship with the traditions of Russian poetry, in particular the Romantic tradition. As a result, the discussion now moves to an exploration of Brodsky's position in relation to the Russian myth of the poet, followed by an overview of the significant elements of this tradition.

Romantic Forbears: The Poetic Contexts for Brodsky's Work

> 'I have no hesitation whatsoever in stating that Czeslaw Milosz is one of the greatest poets of our time, perhaps the greatest' (Brodsky 1978: 364)

This assessment of Milosz's poetry is indicative of how Brodsky relates to other poets. Particularly it points to how this relationship can be fitted within a traditional Romantic

appreciation of Eastern European poetry. The superlative judgement of the statement reveals an absolutism, which is a staple of Brodsky's analyses of other poets. Of W. H. Auden, Brodsky claims that he considered him 'the greatest mind of the twentieth century', and in the conclusion to his essay, 'To Please a Shadow', he states that the poet's intelligence, in his view, 'has no equal' (2011a: 357). Similarly, Brodsky says that Marina Tsvetaeva has 'the most tragic voice of all Russian poetry', adding 'I think nobody wrote better, in Russian, anyway' (Haven 2002: 86). Osip Mandelstam is 'Russia's greatest poet in this century' (2011a: 145), and when asked about Derek Walcott, Brodsky describes him as 'the grandest thing around' (Haven 2002: 85), concluding in his essay that 'both thematically and stylistically Derek Walcott's poetry is the case of the highest and most logical evolvement of the species' (2011a: 174). Brodsky makes comments in a similar vein about T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Boris Slutsky, and Thomas Hardy.

Highlighting this tendency to use superlatives does not call into question the place of these figures in the canon of contemporary poets; rather, the issue is the way in which Brodsky frames this. His presentation of these poets indicates an awareness and sense of a contemporary canon, and even a mentality that focusses on such canonisation. Zholkovsky recognises this tendency in Akhmatova also, mentioning 'her prescriptive cultural rankings (of books, artists, cities, pastimes)' and her 'obsession with superlatives' (2000: *bcf.usc.edu*). Such an attitude — absolute, hyperbolic, reverential — is congruent with a wider cultural practice across Russia and Eastern Europe in which writers are treated with excessive reverence. Andrew Wachtel characterises the whole of Eastern Europe as 'that part of the world where serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvalued' (2006: 12). Similarly, Catriona Kelly states that reverence for writers was a form of 'secular religion' (2001: 42). Yet Brodsky's relation to this cultural phenomenon is highly problematic, given the connection that it makes between poets' lives and their works, and how each of these relate to the state. In Russia this starts with, or is at least crystallised by, Aleksandr Pushkin (Kelly 2001: 6). The Pushkin cult in Russia cannot separate the works of the author from his life or his supposed political dissent; Stephanie Sandler talks of 'the process by which Pushkin's

life and death became a series of textual figures, that is, the ways in which biographical facts become the stuff of books' (2004a: 39). This is the tradition to which Brodsky problematically relates himself through his discussion of significant writers.

In fact, these links to Romanticism can be seen not only through this cultural connection, but also more explicitly through analyses of poets themselves. In discussing Milosz, Brodsky veers into explicitly Romantic assessments, despite his frequent dismissal and deflation of Romantic poetry:

> […] we find ourselves confronting a severe and relentless mind of such intensity that the only parallel one is able to think of is that of the biblical characters — most likely Job […] Milosz's poetry releases the reader from many psychological and purely linguistic traps, for it answers not just the question 'how to live' but 'for the sake of what to live'. (1978: 364)

Here Brodsky shows not only the reverence which is a staple of Russian assessments of great writers, but by placing this lyric perspective on the level of the Bible, Brodsky implies a transcendental element to Milosz's poetry which is connected to prevailing, and Romantically rooted, cultural attitudes to poetry. Eliding secular culture and religion to provide the most literal example of Kelly's definition of Russian reverence, Brodsky also obliquely alludes to Milosz's biography. At the time that this speech was given, Milosz was translating the Book of Job from Hebrew to Polish. By choosing Job as his likeness for the lyric voice within the poetry, Brodsky closes the distance between the transcendentally poetic, which can answer both 'how to live' and 'for the sake of what to live', and the individual who is working on a translation. According to Brodsky, Milosz's choosing to translate the words of Job invests his work with a Biblical power, and so here Brodsky can be seen to create his own version of the Romantic type of the poet-prophet. In fact, Milosz works over the same ground, writing in his translator's preface that 'Poring over the Book of Job, I couldn't help but see the faces of those who entreated heaven in vain, the colours of the earth, nature's incomprehensible beauty with which my imagination still cannot make peace, just as it cannot make peace with Job's lament within myself' (Cavanagh 2009: 274). Eliding the work of comprehending and

translating with Job's 'lament within myself', Milosz makes the same connection as Brodsky between poetic subject, lyric persona, and biographical individual.

The complexity of Brodsky's relationship to Romanticism, far greater than his dismissal of it in poems such as 'Venetsianskie strofy (1)' would suggest, requires investigation. Though he openly denied the link between his own life, 'tailor made for the prophet model' (Cavanagh 2009: 174), and his work, it is clear that his poetic attitudes, which include a quasi-religious approach towards the poet and poetry, references to the poet's authority, and a tendency to draw parallels between art and life, are deeply rooted in a critical culture fostered by Romanticism. As such, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of this culture in order to explore Brodsky's position and his own self-stylisation with greater insight, examining first theories of Romanticism in general, and then the archetypal cases of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Akhmatova in particular.

Romantic thinking can be seen to lie behind the expression of Brodsky's appreciation of his poetic antecedents and contemporaries. M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* illuminates the origins of the art/life crossover, showing how the biographical use of literature can be traced to the neoclassical 'interest in mankind' and to the rhetorical conceit that 'style is an image of mind' (Abrams 1980: 226). In his comments on Milosz and Job, Brodsky parallels exactly this idea, investing Milosz with some of the power of Job through his lyric voice. For Boym, the typically Romantic attitude of a connection between style and mind means that an author's stylistic choices slowly become equated with their personality, and the relationship between author and work therefore becomes the critic's main concern (1991: 4). Whilst Brodsky spends much time insisting on the irrelevance of biography to his own work, his stylistic appreciation of Milosz draws on biographical detail in a way that is fundamentally drawn from Romanticism.

This use of biography within Romantic criticism is inherently linked to a belief in the notion of genius, an attitude which accords both with Brodsky's claims about the superlative quality of the poets he talks about, and his covert use of biographical detail in the case of Milosz. Boym highlights the fact that, for Schleiermacher, genius is a

spirit that turns upon itself to find 'the divine source of all plastic arts and poetry' (1991: 4). This accords with Abrams' main contention that the major change in criticism under Romanticism related to the issue of the artist's innate authority: where once an artist acted as a mirror to the exterior world, he or she was now seen as a figure who could illuminate this world for the benefit of others (1980). To use the metaphor coined by Abrams, the process of Romanticism saw the artist become a 'lamp' rather than a 'mirror'. Whilst Greenblatt (1980) sees elements of personal 'self-fashioning' occurring within Renaissance writing, the power of art and its connection to the life of the individual was thoroughly explored in Romanticism across Europe and Russia. As the artist's personality and his art became blurred (Boym describes these dual aspects as 'correlated variables' (1991: 4)), elements of life and work were codified into a limited set of stock characters, which were then used to override the nuances across those same works and lives. From the demonic Byronesque type, drawn from Byron's poetry, to the melancholic 'sensitive man' of Werther's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Boym states that even now these types are often used to override the complexities of an individual's life (1991: 4). This point is made by Zholkovsky about Akhmatova, observing that such 'scripts' make the poet 'larger — but also leaner — than life' (1996: 141)**.**

The problem of dealing with authors in this way is encapsulated by Boym, who characterises the traditional, Romanticized image of the poet as a prophet and a martyr:

> The poet has to love tragically and sentimentally, like Werther, and die tragically and heroically like Shelley, Byron, Lermontov, or Pushkin. He can be a solitary figure, like Vigny or Keats, but he is preferably a public persona, a distinguished politician and revolutionary, like Hugo or the Russian poets. (Boym 1991: 4)

Byron died of a fever and excessive blood-letting, and Shelley drowned having never learned to swim. Boym accurately penetrates the issue of a Romantic appropriation of the poet's life, demonstrating that it is unable to function whilst allowing the facts to speak for themselves. Rather, the work of the individual, and selected elements of their life (Byron's being in Missolonghi to fight for Greek independence and Shelley's

writing of politicised poetry in self-exile, for example) are taken to create a Romantic biography. In fact, the images laid out here by Boym are all predicated upon the fundamental image of a poet who is a prophet and martyr figure. As Cavanagh points out, the model for all such Romantic visionaries is Christ, whose body unites 'all categories in identity':

> Christ is both the one God and the one Man, the Lamb of God, the tree of life, or vine of which we are the branches, the stone which the builders rejected, and the rebuilt temple which is identical with his risen body'. (2009: 93)

This connection is invariably linked to the myth of 'the visionary poet as both herald and inaugurator of a new and supremely better world', which in itself leads to the Romantic dream of rebirth brought about by the poet, in which 'a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home' (2009: 93). It is partly this tradition that inspires Russian culture — both writers and society at large — to understand its writers as 'secular saints' (Bethea 2012: 171), thereby inserting them into a tradition of martyrology. As Bethea points out, the Russian writer became a lightning rod (or 'scourge') in a society that was anything but 'civil', and also in a faceless, sprawling bureaucratic state (first tsarist, then Soviet) that had little respect for individual rights and the rule of law. The poet and literary critic, Vladislav Khodasevich, characterises this as a fatal contract, or 'bloody repast' (*кровавая пища*) into which Russian society and its writers entered. The poet-martyr was persecuted like Christ due to his service to a higher ideal (in this case, Russian culture and the Russian poetic word), while society played the role of Pontius Pilate. As Bethea concludes, by persecuting the sainted figure of the poet, Russian culture was fulfilling a larger dispensation: offering the Christ-like figure the chance to redeem society through his suffering (2012: 175-6).

In this way the nexus of absolute statements about poets, an assessment of their works in transcendent or even religious terms, and a selective reading of their lives, can be seen as fundamentally Romantic critical tendencies. Through this means, the poet is turned into a 'spectacular figure', his own 'romantic hero', whose art and life interact, elements of

each influencing the other (Boym 1991: 4). Such a tendency is conspicuous in Brodsky's statements about Milosz and others, and thus legitimately calls into question his own disavowal of the importance of his biography, and his dismissal of the Romantic stance as highlighted in the poem 'Venetsianskie strofy (I)'.

It was the figure of Pushkin that saw the translation of these complex ideas into a specifically Russian understanding, resulting in the genesis of the distinctive cultural myth of the poet. As Harrington attests,

> It is Pushkin's biographical legend, which revolves around the poet's struggle with authority and state power, that provides the main blueprint for the myth of the poet in Russia — what Victor Erlich calls the 'myth of the artist as a tragic hero' — and Russian poetry throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries repeatedly articulates and perpetuates the image of the Russian poet as a tragic, Christ-like figure, with remarkably little variation. (2011: 458-9)

The combination of Pushkin's poetic talent — widely held to be genius (Sandler refers to the way in which Russians consider him 'an integrity-filled man of genius' (2004a: 12)) — his self-stylisation in his verse and his biography, as well as the eagerness of others to interpret him in a Romantic mode, was instrumental to the fashioning of this myth. The lyric persona of his work often reflects his biographical self: broadly, a 'genius' oppressed by a regime and society that does not understand or accept either his freedom of spirit or the truth of his perceptions. This image acquired clear political overtones at the time through Pushkin's ambiguous links to the Decembrists, his periods of exile and his writing of political verse. Yet it was Pushkin's death that now provides the clearest example of the way biography affects myth and vice versa. Cavanagh refers to Pushkin having 'the misfortune to die in a singularly un-bardlike duel provoked by his foolish wife's high society flirtations' (2009: 271). Yet from this his self-designated successor, Lermontov, composed the poem 'Smert' poeta', a work that came to define the interpretation of Pushkin's death for generations of Russians to come (Powelstock 2005: 23). Indeed, 'Smert' poeta' taught its readers to regard this event as the ultimate expression of Pushkin's opposition to petty and small-minded forces within society and

the state, thereby 'initiating the politics of Pushkin as a state martyr' (Sandler 2004b: 204). This is seen in the poem's fifth stanza:

И прежний сняв венок — они венец терновый,
Увитый лаврами, надели на него:
Но иглы тайные сурово
Язвили славное чело;
Отравлены его последние мгновенья
Коварным шопотом насмешливых невежд,
И умер он — с напрасной жаждой мщенья,
С досадой тайною обманутых надежд.
Замолкли звуки чудных песен,
Не раздаваться им опять:
Приют певца угрюм и тесен,
И на устах его печать. (Lermontov 2013: 95-6)

In the final stanza Lermontov refers to the executioners of Freedom, Genius, and Glory ('Вы, жадною толпой стоящие у трона,/ Свободы, Гения и Славы палачи!'), and in this stanza Lermontov highlights their hypocrisy as they replace the poet's laurels with a crown of thorns. As Cavanagh points out, this lyric not only reached a wide, receptive audience; it also helped secure Lermontov's reputation as a worthy heir to the martyrological tradition that he himself had helped to identify — or even initiate (2009: 271). David Powelstock goes further, detecting a subtle undermining of Pushkin within the poem — even while Lermontov presents him as Christ-like — in order to enhance Lermontov's own reputation: 'In death the Poet relinquished his control over his own image to the other, but at the same time death was necessary in order to frame the Poet's life as a text and prove his immortality in the eyes of the other' (2005: 23). Lermontov both effects this immortality through his own poetry, and borrows from it in order to secure his own reputation. Crucially, through this poem Lermontov also provided future readers with a template for interpreting the circumstances of his own death four years later and, by extension, the untimely deaths of many of Russia's poets thereafter (Cavanagh 2009: 271).

Pushkin's absolute canonisation, taken up by Lermontov but inspired by the poet's own

actions, led to the establishment of a Pushkin cult within Russia with longterm consequences for attitudes to poetry. Illustrating this, Kelly quotes Vissarion Belinsky who in 1838 declared 'Every educated Russian must have a complete Pushkin, otherwise he has no right to be considered either educated or Russian' (2001: 39). The conception of Pushkin as a national hero and repository of the country's unique identity was entrenched further by others, ultimately being exploited by the Soviet authorities in the twentieth century who co-opted Pushkin's myth in order to enforce a new correlation of artistic merit and political progressiveness, based upon an increasing emphasis on prescribed cultural values (Kelly 2001: 44). The magnification of Pushkin's myth reveals the nature of the self-fulfilling prophecy that can occur when a poet styles himself in a particular fashion: the writer creates an image, the reading public accepts and encourages it, the writer's image inflates.[6] Yet, as Roman Jakobson highlights in his essay 'The Generation that Squandered its Poets', it is worth remembering the real-life circumstances of many of Russia's poets who — consciously or unconsciously — perpetuated the image of martyrdom as a result of the simple fact that writing remained an art requiring an element of self-sacrifice (1967).

Anna Akhmatova and the Creation of Biographical Myth

A further development in the relationship between life and art in Russia was effected by the Symbolists, who developed the neo-Romantic concept of 'life-creation' (*жизнетворчество*) (Harrington 2011: 458). As Irina Paperno elucidates, following Romanticism the Symbolists aspired to merge art and life into a unity, whereby art was declared to be a force capable of the 'creation of life', while 'life' was viewed as a creative act. As a result, 'art' and 'life' became one — for the artist, no separation existed between personal life and artistic activity (1994: 1). Boym explains this synthesis as 'an imposition of an ideal or idealized grid upon everyday behaviour in an attempt to achieve a perfect aesthetic organisation of life' (1991: 5), an argument that goes back to Yuri Lotman's article 'The Decembrist in Daily Life' (1985). The consequence of this

[6] Such a myth can still take on unintended features, however, one of which is to eclipse the work of the writer. This is a consequence that Brodsky's self-effacing statements suggest he is wary of occurring in his own case, even if this wariness is undercut by an element of disingenuousness.

'idealized grid' was that the artist's life was treated as a text, constructed and 'read' by a method similar to that used in art (Paperno 1994: 2). This approach accords with the views of Akhmatova, an immediate heir to this neo-Romantic concept (Harrington 2011: 458), who 'read literary texts as autobiographical, highly sophisticated, stylized gossip, a kind of veil thrown over a writer's self challenging other writers to unmask it' (Reeve 1993: 155). Equally, much evidence suggests that Akhmatova treated her own life as a text that could be shaped and adapted at will, simulating the self-conscious relationship to biography initiated in Russia by Pushkin and Lermontov. Kelly asserts that Akhmatova 'ghosted' her own biography (Kelly 1994: 219), editing her schoolmate Valentina Srezevskaia's memoirs about her and then instructing Srezevskaia to rewrite them in her own hand (Zholkovsky 1996: 136). Zholkovsky further highlights the strategies Akhmatova used to fashion her own identity, drawing upon her self-portrayal as an aristocrat, prophet, and heroic opponent of the Soviet regime:

> If there exists such a thing as a self-made aristocrat, Akhmatova was one. She invented her name (whose dubious Genghiside aura was compensated for by its Slavo-Turkic-Finno-Ugric ring, so demographically correct in the Russian Empire); created appropriate personalities for herself; cultivated monarchist childhood memories […] and imagined herself alongside revered statues and in memorable venues; dwelt in palaces […] whose modest accommodations were outweighed by the glamour they gave her datelines […] (1994: 137)

These deliberately fashioned elements of Akhmatova's identity were expanded upon elsewhere. Zholkovsky mentions 'Akhmatova's own carefully remembered and retold examples of her prophesying' (1994: 137), and Harrington avers that 'In conversation with others she repeated particular anecdotes that she wished to be remembered and covertly imposed her own viewpoint on them' (2011: 457). Similarly, Akhmatova employed a confessional tone and extensive use of autobiographical referents in her poetry, encouraging readers to identify the lyrical persona directly with the poet and further shaping her self-projection both in public and in her verses (Harrington 2011: 457). Kelly states decisively that Akhmatova's image 'was not natural and inevitable; it was the result of a process of self-creation and mythologization' (1994: 210). Due to her self-fashioning in this regard, the mythology which has arisen around Akhmatova

conforms broadly to the traditional pattern outlined by Khodasevich of the poet as a martyred, Christ-like figure — a mythology which stresses her victimhood and 'fortitude in the face of undeniable suffering' (Harrington 2011: 459).

Through Akhmatova, Brodsky came into direct contact with this tradition of life-creation and self-fashioning. His relationship with the poet is characterised as 'dialogic' by Venclova, who continues that,

> [Akhmatova was] a person who shaped to a very large degree, if not completely, [Brodsky's] inner world. Brodsky's existential choices, his notions of values were as if subconsciously dictated by Akhmatova: one can argue that Brodsky internalized Akhmatova, made her a part of himself (he himself probably would have said that he felt himself a part of her). (*units.muohio.edu*)

Although this quotation is inflected with the Romantic reverence and hyperbole that forms a recurrent characteristic of Eastern European poetic criticism, Venclova's observation is striking. It attests to an important degree of influence effected by Akhmatova over Brodsky, who seems to have 'learnt' from the older poet. Venclova goes even further in saying that 'Undoubtedly, Brodsky assimilated Akhmatova's disillusioned, stoic, and scornful attitude […]', thus drawing important parallels between Brodsky's self-projection and that of Akhmatova. Brodsky's crucial pose as a stoic is thereby attributable to Akhmatova's influence. This implies that Brodsky so valued Akhmatova's self-presentation as to absorb her techniques. To some extent this is confirmed by Brodsky, who stressed that it is 'not in the way of verse-making that we learned from her' (Volkov 1998: 240), implying that Akhmatova perhaps taught him the more fundamental elements of being a 'Poet'. This is verified by Loseff, who asserts that 'the lessons Brodsky took from Akhmatova had to do not only with private morality but with the poet's moral calling'. He continues that '[Brodsky] understood that poets who take their calling seriously could not help but be a voice of the people whose language they spoke and wrote' (2011: 60). These views are clearly related to the Russian Romantic understanding of the poet's role in society as an opposing force to the authority of the state. As a consequence, such observations are intimately tied to the

resulting issue of role-playing by fitting oneself or reacting to an ingrained cultural pattern — in this case the Russian tradition of the poet-prophet. Clearly, this can be understood in terms of the fashioning of biography in relation to literature. As such, while their techniques may be different, one can find certain similarities in the way Brodsky and Akhmatova project their self-images..

Understanding Brodsky's Myth: Techniques of Self-Fashioning

A consideration of the major aspects of Brodsky's self-mythology and self-projection as a 'poet' clarifies the links between Brodsky and the Russian poetic tradition of 'poet-prophet' — a tradition itself dependent upon the relationship to the surrounding political reality for meaningful existence (Boym 1991: 120). The following discussion explores the way in which the consequences of Brodsky's distancing from the Russian cultural tradition — achieved primarily through his claims about the irrelevance of biography — can be understood as drawing attention to him as martyr even while his stance purports to direct attention away from this. As a result, the discussion also serves to throw doubt upon the validity of the image of Brodsky that is widely perpetuated.

Ronald Hingley's assessment of Boris Pasternak provides a useful example of the way self-effacement can be used as a technique for self-assertion. Hingley says of Pasternak that,

> [he] repeatedly asserted that he did not want to be the centre of attention […] This policy accords with his belief that a poet's work is all-important, whereas his life and personality matter not a jot. (1983: 3)

Hingley claims that Pasternak's 'specialty' was the 'choreography of self-effacement'. He sees this as Pasternak's way of 'mocking and discrediting' the Soviet system and he illustrates this with an account of Pasternak's performance at the Polytechnic Museum in February 1948. Ignoring the microphone, Pasternak spoke directly to the audience, reciting poetry that had little application to the themes the organisers of the event required, after which he received enormous applause. The effect of this strategy — not

taking up the microphone and seeming to wish to avoid celebrity — was not to achieve self-effacement, but rather to bring him prophetic fame (1983: 155). A similar effect can be seen in Brodsky's Nobel acceptance speech. Here Brodsky's efforts at self-effacement can also be interpreted as a strategy for self-assertion:

> And as far as this room is concerned, I think it was empty just a couple of hours ago, and it will be empty again in a couple of hours hence. Our presence in it, mine especially, is quite incidental from its walls' point of view (2011b: 51).

This essay in self-effacement is produced in a context which confounds the effort, inverting the decontextualised meaning of his words: Brodsky affects to be 'incidental' whilst at the same time accepting the most public and prestigious of literary prizes in front of a hugely influential audience. Such affectation of humility whilst simultaneously drawing attention to himself is particularly communicated in the moment where he singles himself out: 'mine especially'. This contradiction is an inherent and recurring theme in his self-projection. A similar contradiction is achieved in the fact of distancing himself so strongly from a tradition that still defines the cultural conception of the poet: the more Brodsky distances himself, the more he is defined by this tradition through his response.

Self-Effacement and Self-Assertion as the Strategies of Brodsky's Public Image

References to Brodsky's myth and specifically his biographical legend are relatively numerous. Amongst them Grudzinska Gross declares that, 'the biography of Joseph Brodsky began to turn into a legend while he was still alive' (2009: 34). She recounts a conversation with Anatoly Naiman where Naiman is reported to have said of Brodsky's internal exile that 'Iosif then started to turn into Brodsky, into a different persona' (2009: 41). Shtern makes a similar observation, writing that '[Brodsky's] persona has become larger than life. He has been proclaimed a living classic, and as such has taken his place in the history of 20th-century Russian literature' (2004:3). Yet Grudzinska Gross and Shtern offer little more insight into this topic. Krivulin on the other hand provides more detail: 'one always feels that no matter what he is doing, in any situation he is above

personal attitudes, that in any, even the most intimate situations, he acts as a Poet, and that all his actions are facts of his biography' (Polukhina 1994: 143). In a letter to Brodsky reacting to the death of the Russian poet's mother, Heaney displays the common difficulty in distinguishing between Brodsky's stoic pose and the alternative, arguably more human, figure that remained affected by life's difficult events: 'I had never taken into account that your parents were still behind you all that time. Stupidly I had assumed that your spiritual state — Yeats's 'finished man among his enemies' stage — of solitude and beyond-ness was some sort of absolute condition' (Grudzinska Gross 2009: 79). However, despite this implicit acceptance of the existence of a Brodsky myth based upon a particular interpretation of his biography and stoic stance, there is as yet no scholarship on this topic equivalent to Zholkovsky's articles about Akhmatova, or Gregory Freidin's study of Mandelstam's romantic self-fashioning, *Coat of Many Colors* (1987).

As has already been indicated, this lack of scholarship is to some extent unsurprising given the paradox inherent to Brodsky's myth, a narrative constructed largely from self-effacement. This being so, the process of understanding this myth is not the same as deconstructing the myth of Akhmatova, of whom there is copious evidence to suggest that she regarded the poet's life as a text which could be created and read like any other, and who behaved accordingly (Harrington 2011: 456). Primarily, a myth realised through efforts at self-effacement is more complicated to unravel, as the results of the process — self-advertisement and assertion in Brodsky's case — seem counter-intuitive. Moreover, as has already been touched upon, Brodsky's efforts at self-presentation are 'fraught' with contradictions (Loseff 2011: ix). Perhaps the most striking of these is the fact that he wrote two autobiographical essays, 'A Room and a Half' and 'Less Than One', ostensibly undermining his claims regarding the irrelevance of biography and his associated stance of self-effacement. Intriguingly, the same can be said of Pasternak who, while claiming that the poet's life was unimportant, wrote two large autobiographical studies (Hingley 1983: 4).

Brodsky's efforts at self-effacement largely rest upon clear attempts to emphasise the

idea of the insignificance and irrelevance of biography. Such emphasis is achieved through the forceful stance he adopts in his public image throughout his essays and interviews. Rhetoric plays a large part in the projection of this forceful persona: through devices such as aphorism and absolutism, Brodsky lends an authority to his voice that offers gravitas to his self-presentation. Brodsky's essay, 'The Sound of the Tide', quoted earlier, provides a pertinent example:

> A poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes, and metaphors. Attesting to the miracle of existence, the body of one's work is always in a sense a gospel whose lines convert their writer more radically than his public. With poets, the choice of words is invariably more telling than the story line; that's why the best of them dread their biographies being written. (2011a: 164-5)

By presenting his opinion regarding the irrelevance of biography as fact, Brodsky elevates his personal philosophy to the level of general truth. He takes the situation for one poet, himself, and renders it a general truth for all poets. Furthermore this reading is given a religious overtone through the language choice ('gospel'), and literature is seen as completely recreating the life of the individual metaphysically which is, by implication, more important than the facts of their life. From such a position, one would wonder why the poet would dread the writing of their biography, but of course this is not about providing a realistic relation of circumstances. Rather it is about creating such circumstances, as the words themselves suggest. Brodsky aims to here use language to undermine the importance of his biography, but the final sentence betrays the anxiety at the core of this effort.

This 'general truth' style of pronouncement is embedded across the entire range of Brodsky's essays, further reinforcing its sense of fact. Towards the conclusion of his essay on Tsvetaeva, for instance, he asks '[…] what can be more removed from everyday reality than a great poet or great poetry?' (2011a: 202). Of course, he does not envisage receiving a reply: the question is entirely rhetorical. To a similar end, phrases that include puns and striking metaphors or imagery are repeated often, providing memorable aphorisms that seem to simplify and therefore validate his position. Some of

the most often quoted include ‘a poet’s biography is in his twists of language’ (2011a: 3), ‘aesthetics is the mother of ethics’ (2011b: 42), and ‘a poet’s identity should be built more on strophes than catastrophes’ (Haven 2002: 67). These phrases have been repeated so frequently, often in slightly differing forms, that is it difficult to know their true origin. Moreover, through such repetition the phrases adopt the characteristics of a mantra, strengthening Brodsky’s position through their charismatic force. The following quotation by Brodsky regarding the experience of Soviet prisons is another example of this: ‘prison — well, what is it really? A shortage of space compensated for by an excess of time. That’s all.’ (Volkov 1998: 69). This particular quotation is found in startlingly similar form in his essay ‘Less Than One’, where Brodsky writes ‘The formula for prison is a lack of space counterbalanced by a surplus of time’ (2011a: 23), suggesting that this idea forms part of the collection of phrases that amount to mantra through repetition. Also pertinent here is a consideration of Akhmatova, who repeated certain anecdotes that she wanted to be remembered (Zholkovsky 1996: 137), exposing the way in which repetition can be seen to impose opinions and ideas upon others.

Such rhetorical devices are not reserved for conveying Brodsky’s views only in relation to himself. They also form part of the critical vocabulary he uses in his analyses of other poets. Brodsky lends his pronouncements a sense of broad coherence, seeming to reinforce the guiding philosophies that inform his stance of self-effacement. Discussing particular poets in this way allows Brodsky to develop the relative impersonality of his references to ‘a poet’ (as seen in the quotation taken from ‘The Sound of the Tide’) to a more specific form. As a result, the theme of biographical effacement takes on a more precise resonance than broad pronouncements about poetry as a whole. When analysing the tone of the lyric ‘I’ in Tsvetaeva’s poetry, for example, Brodsky adds that ‘Her life experience could do nothing but follow the voice, permanently lagging behind it, for the voice was overtaking events […]’ (2001a: 183). By shifting from the impersonal rhetoric of ‘a poet’s biography’ to ‘her life’, Brodsky increases the scope and effect of his pronouncements, moulding them into a broad presentation of his philosophies that give precedence to literature rather than biography.

Beyond the constructed language of his essays, Brodsky's stance in interviews also serves to emphasise the irrelevance of biography and by extension his own self-effacement. When discussing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, Brodsky allows his derision for the author's engagement in civic matters to elide with his opinions about his writing, of which he is also derogatory. There appears to be an implicit link between Brodsky's distaste for both Solzhenitsyn's work and his humanitarian activities undertaken precisely as a result of his activities as a writer. Characteristically, Brodsky closes the topic by reinforcing his stance on the irrelevance of biography and biographical legend to the artist's work:

> **Q**: What's your opinion of Solzhenitsyn and the legend which has been built around him?
> **A**: […] you shouldn't worry or care about legend, you should read the work. And what kind of legend? He has his biography […] and he has his words […] forget about legends, that is real crap […] about every writer. (Haven 2002: 53)

Brodsky's instructions to the interviewer are uncompromising. Constructing his response with imperatives ('you shouldn't worry', 'you should read', 'forget about legends') Brodsky replies in a way that is emphatic and final. The strength of the language he employs ('that is real crap') is mirrored by the sense of logic Brodsky evokes through the patterning of '[he] has his biography […] and he has his words'. As a result, Brodsky manages to forcefully reiterate his views, giving absolute statements about legends that contribute to his self-effacing self-presentation and encapsulating exactly the contradiction between effacement and affirmation seen elsewhere.

Importantly, Brodsky's general view on the irrelevance of biography is also turned upon himself, providing a very direct form of self-effacement. This is often achieved through Brodsky adopting an air of indifference, projecting an attitude that credits himself and his experiences with little significance. Thus, in his dialogues with Volkov, Brodsky refuses to attach any importance to either the transcript of his notorious trial or the trial itself:

> **Volkov**: I consider this transcript an outstanding document.
> **Brodsky**: Maybe you do, but I don't. To say nothing of the fact that this document has been published a thousand times since then.
> **Volkov**: You're judging all this [the trial] so calmly now, in retrospect. Are you trivializing an important and dramatic event?
> **Brodsky**: No, I'm not making anything up! I'm saying exactly what I really think about this! I thought the same then as well. And I refuse to dramatize all this! […] And believe me, it made absolutely no impression on me whatsoever. Really, none whatsoever! (1998: 70-2)

Yet the almost aggressively dismissive attitude in Brodsky's first response ('Maybe you do, but I don't') is undermined by a sense of protestation. Brodsky refuses to 'dramatise all this', reflecting his apparent dislike of the Romantic tendency to adapt events according to a tragic-heroic code — the tendency that Brodsky rebels against. Yet it seems unlikely that these events made no impression on him whatsoever. In fact, Brodsky is so at pains to dismiss the importance of these events that he employs hyperbole and melodrama: 'a thousand times', 'absolutely no impression on me whatsoever'. The exclamatory character of Brodsky's second response reinforces the sense of exaggeration. It would be simplistic to interpret this as complete insincerity: rather, Brodsky is at such pains to protest against drama that he goes so far as to completely deny these events any importance at all. By pushing his stance to this extent, Brodsky effectively performs an *auto-reductio ad absurdum*, and it becomes impossible to be entirely convinced by a position, which is so extreme. Instead, the reader must interpret his statements as meaning something other than their face value.

This strength of expression is also communicated in other ways, such as the attitude of disengagement that Brodsky adopts in the many interviews where he is questioned on biographical experiences and details. In one particular dialogue, the interviewer begins with a question that combines both biographical details and an oblique reference to a personal myth. The tone of the interview quickly descends and towards its conclusion Brodsky becomes dismissive virtually to the point of rudeness:

> **TGQ**: Joseph, how do you account for the way in which the world has embraced

not only you, but Solzhenitsyn?
JB: Does it embrace me?
TGQ: I think it has. Your name is known.
JB: But I am not my name.

TGQ: Do you know where you will be in ten years? Do you have any goals?
JB: No.
TGQ: Is there anything you want to do with your sensitivity, your message?
JB: No, how could I?
TGQ: What has motivated you to produce what you have written to this date? I don't know that I can take your statement seriously that you have no goals.
JB: You may take it seriously. Masochism. (Haven 2002: 46-7)

This particular exchange is revealing. It displays the deadlock between the poet's ideal self-projection and, as Brodsky views it, a 'typically western' understanding of his position as a poet (Haven 2002: 8). The interviewer wishes to interview her subject in a simple style, but Brodsky will not conform. It seems Brodsky considers the questions to be trite, and he refuses to accept the interviewer's goal-directed, teleological approach – an approach with which he was presumably familiar from his early years. More important, however, is that Brodsky also displays a level of disingenuousness in his replies. Reacting to the interviewer's remark that he has been described as 'the greatest living poet', Brodsky declares that 'It's merely a fun and tasteless statement. It's impossible to say anything like that during the time the person you are talking about is living. I don't care that much about posterity' (Haven 2002: 46). This statement highlights the contradiction between Brodsky's self-projection as a biographically effaced poetic figure and the actions that undermine such effacement: not only does Brodsky regularly discuss other artists in such hyperbolic terms, he also acts in a way that implies a great regard for posterity and a willingness to be canonised, such as the acceptance of the Nobel Prize and several honorary doctorates, or taking the position of American Poet Laureate. Moreover, Brodsky's attempts at self-effacement in this regard achieve a posterity of their own, significantly defining his image and contributing to a lasting myth.

A similar paradox is found in the way Brodsky presents his role as a poet. Brodsky's

ideas on this topic are subject to many minor variations, yet the principal concept is founded upon the notion of a poet's duty, the main element of which is the intellectual emancipation of his reader by reinforcing or initiating a realisation of the reader's individual self-consciousness. This is predicated upon the principle that the poet is an authority figure as a result of his relationship to language. Brodsky is overt in his belief of the superiority of poets: in his essay 'Altra Ego', he refers to non-poets as 'less articulate fellows', for example (2011b: 72)**.** Such statements can be interpreted as attempts by Brodsky to assert his presence as a 'Poet'. However, the contradiction between Brodsky's statements of self-effacement and his self-asserting actions arises once more. Namely, it is difficult for Brodsky to elevate his standing as a poet without also elevating his biography and endorsing the notion of myth that he dismisses summarily elsewhere. The contradiction inherent to his Nobel Prize acceptance speech — in which Brodsky claims insignificance whilst accepting a prestigious literary prize in front of an international audience — illuminates this tension.

The essence of this tension is the way in which such self-effacement becomes self-promotion, obliquely drawing attention to the elements of biography that Brodsky supposedly dismisses. Considering the facts of Brodsky's life for instance, his apparent rejection of dramatisation might be interpreted as a projection of stoicism and humility. In fact, Brodsky is admiring of these traits although, interestingly, never overtly in relation to himself. Reading between the lines of the following quotation, for example, Brodsky is referring to 'stoicism' as much as 'endurance'. Humility is conveyed by the characteristically self-effacing and self-deprecating remark at the close:

> **Brumm**: Could you describe your philosophy of life?
> **Brodsky**: It's not a philosophy of life. This is just a number of devices. If to call it [sic] a philosophy, I would call it a philosophy of endurance — of the possibility of endurance. It's very simple. When you have some bad situation, there are two ways to deal with it — just to give up or to try to stand it. Well, in some sense, I prefer to stand it as far as I can. So this is my philosophy — that's all, nothing special. (Haven 2002: 17)

Stoicism and humility are clearly virtuous traits. Moreover, they find themselves one

step away from restraint and nobility of spirit. Such traits hold evocative connotations and are linked to Russian Romantic interpretations of the ideal poet who must suffer virtuously for the greater good. In fact, Brodsky follows the model of the Russian literary intelligentsia articulated by Paperno, who states that it manifests 'an unswerving and uncritical allegiance to values associated with the nineteenth-century intelligentsia tradition'. These include:

> [...] alienation from the establishment, rejection of accepted living forms; valorization of poverty, suffering, and self-denial; reliance on the written word for self-expression and self-preservation; staunch belief in literature as a source of moral authority; and an overwhelming sense of the historical significance of one's personal life (Paperno 2009: 60).

Whilst this cannot be said to be a perfect description of Brodsky's position, the similarities suggest his connection to this tradition in a way that is not clear from his own statements about the source of his literary aesthetic or personal philosophy. Venclova contends that such tendency to restraint and stoicism in Brodsky is inherited directly from Akhmatova (*units.muohio.edu*), and it is possible to see how Akhmatova herself is another proponent of elements of the tradition articulated by Paperno. Clearly this upholds the argument that, contrary to the belief that Brodsky is a writer without a biography, he is in fact an inheritor to a tradition in which constructing one's biography and biographical identity is key, and is connected to a sense of the historical import of one's life. This accords with an anecdote related by Grudzinska Gross that, on Brodsky's sudden exile and arrival in America, he received a letter from Milosz offering him some words of comfort and advice by suggesting that work is the sole method of survival. Grudzinksa Gross writes:

> Only at the end of the letter does he respond to the main message of Milosz's letter: 'As for the first part of your letter, my own comes out so short because of what you wrote in yours.' This sentence has three crossed-out fragments, as if written with a lot of effort. It seems to be saying: I understand and I am already working; let's not talk about emigration and suffering. The letter ends: 'Thank you. Yours, Iosif Brodsky.' (2009: 5)

Brodsky upholds his self-effacing identity in the face of severe trial, reinforcing his principal of not drawing attention to himself. The implicit outcome of the anecdote is yet another suggestion of Brodsky's stoicism, humility, and restraint. Without ignoring the genuine suffering of Brodsky's situation, this can be seen as an act of self-effacement that translates into an assertion of identity — in this case, one that is based upon the template provided by Akhmatova, who combined classical stoicism with the Romantic sense of the poet as genius and opponent of tyranny. By uncovering the ideological links between the two poets, it is possible to see how, through his connection with Akhmatova, Brodsky conforms to the self-identity of the Russian intelligentsia for whom literature is a quasi-religion.

Yet Brodsky's strategies go further. Cynthia Haven notes that, according to Shtern, Brodsky asked friends not to help researchers (2006: 161). Haven herself verifies this, stating that Brodsky was controlling with other peoples' memories and that friends were afraid to write about him, just as critics were afraid to disparage. She notes that Brodsky's influence was often intimidating and quotes Shtern's anecdote concerning Brodsky's 'casual slam' of the popular Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov, which destroyed the author's chances with Brodsky's premier publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (Haven 2006: 161) (Shtern 2004: 305-6). Haven also states that she was dissuaded from finding dates for a simple chronology as part of the front-matter for *Joseph Brodsky: Conversations*:

> I […] was told that Brodsky wouldn't have wanted these 'personal' details known — years after his death in 1996. Mind, we're not talking about prying loose bedroom secrets, we're talking the basic biographical dates that can be found in any *Who's Who* for any Nobel laureate, part of the burden attendant upon being an eminent person. (2006: 161)

Thus Brodsky can be seen to manipulate his self-presentation even after death, retaining control of his biographical details and ensuring the perpetuation of the notion that they are both private and irrelevant. This legacy of biographical effacement has been

overturned somewhat by Shtern and Weissbort, both of whom have written memoirs about their experiences and history with Brodsky. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, there still exists no researched, scholarly biography of Brodsky. Others who have published works founded upon first hand accounts and biographical testimony feel the need to justify their preference for avoiding straying into the realms of actual biography. Loseff states that he is hindered by the obligation to protect the privacy of those who were intimately related to the poet at different periods in his life (2011: xi), while Polukhina and Grudzinska Gross are more explicit by stating their wish to address Brodsky's biography in line with his own principles. Polukhina states that, 'Bearing in mind Brodsky's declaration that 'a poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his metres, rhymes, and metaphors', the emphasis has been placed upon the problems of Brodsky's poetics and not upon the peripeteia of his biography' (1989: x), and Grudzinska Gross comments:

> The book's center is the poetic work of Brodsky and Milosz — their poems, their thinking about the nature of poetry, and the changes in their poetic languages […] Brodsky was convinced that the real biography of a poet is in that poet's works, and that his poetic choices better reflect a life than awards, passports, health problems, or love affairs. So I treat their poetry as a record of their convictions and lives. (2009: xvi-xvii)

This is directly reminiscent of Zholkovsky's assessment of Reeder's biography on Akhmatova, that 'Reeder's love of Akhmatova turns her into the latter's pawn, a disciple dutifully taking down a holy writ posthumously dictated — authorized, as it were, by the Akhmatova estate' (1996: 137). Like Akhmatova, Brodsky dictates his self-identity and others both submit to and reinforce it. Such control is achieved both tacitly, through the perpetual reinforcement of his philosophies regarding poetry, and explicitly, constituting direct requests and implicit threats. As a result, Brodsky not only conforms to the Russian mythologising tradition through his martyr-like self-portrayal; he also conforms due to his active and clear attempts to control representations and disseminate his own self-image.

Brodsky in Criticism: The Poet as a Cultural Icon

Much of the secondary literature on Brodsky contributes significantly to the perception of him as a humble, self-effacing character, who eschews attention, rejects his romantic literary heritage in Russia and ultimately avoids engagement with the political issues that others are so keen to attach to him. He is taken seriously, compared to other canonical figures and regarded with reverence, particularly with regards to his status as a 'Poet' and a shaper of language. Such attitudes to a large extent reflect and magnify Brodsky's own projection of himself in public and within his poetry. Intriguingly, such criticism is eclectic, encompassing almost as many attitudes in the West as it does in Russia, where the Romantic notion of the poet and poetry holds more cultural sway and historically the poet has possessed greater cultural capital. However, despite the fact that both strands of criticism contribute to this phenomenon, there tends to exist a split between the two. On the whole, Russian comment and criticism can often veer to the point of exaggerated reverence, or a seeming hero worship, reflecting Wachtel's observation about the 'overvaluation' of literature. Western criticism, on the other hand, tends to be less hyperbolic (although it does emphasise politics). Perhaps this difference can be attributed to the divergent attitudes towards the 'poetic word', which in Russia and Eastern Europe already carries its own mythology, while in the West the notion of the poet as a quasi-divine figure feels somewhat outdated. Despite this, there exists a Western tendency to dwell on the suffering of Russian writers and to emphasise their martyrdoms accordingly. For example, Robert McFadden's obituary of Brodsky in the New York Times is entitled, 'Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55'. Brodsky's exile is emphasised from the outset, and this is followed by the first line which reads, 'Joseph Brodsky, the persecuted Russian poet […]' (1996: *nytimes.com*). It seems that the drama of Brodsky's biography is used as much to hook the readers as it is accurately to inform his obituary.

Polukhina's interview with the poet Bella Akhmadulina is a particularly good example of the way in which Romantic hyperbole, underpinned by an overvaluation of literature that Wachtel sees as typical of Eastern Europe, augments and mythologises the image of

the poet. Akhmadulina refers to Brodsky as 'perfection' and a 'miracle', saying that,

> What […] we have in Brodsky [is] one whose greatest feature is his innate ability to take on board the culture of the whole world […] His correspondence is to the whole universe, to its cultural treasures, classical, Biblical and more contemporary […] He is the only person, who I know, absorbs into everything that is the best. The poverty of life is not evident in his work. (Akhmadulina 1990: 197)

The implication that Brodsky is a version of a divine poetic figure is clear, as is the implication of his genius. Such inflated, romanticizing statements reflect a broader tendency towards hyperbole in discussions of Brodsky. In the transcript of a conversation between Samuil Lur'e and Tat'iana Vol'tskaia, the subject of Brodsky's death is used to open the dialogue and Vol'tskaya remarks that, 'we are completely orphaned' (2001: 18), depicting Brodsky as a spiritual leader. Indeed, Lur'e elaborates that '[Brodsky] was precisely what in the nineteenth century was called a 'master of men's minds'' (2001:19).

Such aggrandisement of Brodsky's image does not stand in contrast with the element of his self-portrait that is self-effacing, rather it reflects his own poetic ideals, as well as the foundation to his self-projection that relies on its Romantic heritage. This is illustrated by the way that statements about Brodsky directly mirror the way in which Brodsky discusses other poets. Aleksandr Kushner states, for example, that Brodsky is 'the world's last Romantic poet' (Polukhina 2010: 128) and Natalya Gorbanevskaya adds that he is 'the best Russian poet in general, after Akhmatova and Mandelstam' (Polukhina 2010: 92-3). As a result, it is logical that comments such as the much-repeated quotation by Yevgeny Kiselyov should exist: whilst hosting the weekly news program 'Itogi', Kiselyov stated to Russian television viewers that '[Brodsky] was the only Russian poet who enjoyed the right to be called 'great' in his lifetime' (MacFadden 1996: *nytimes.com*). Of course, it is ironic that such views within Russia should lag behind the supposedly less deifying West, where Brodsky had already been considered a major cultural figure for some time. Similarly, Yakov Gordin reflects upon the pervasiveness of such hero-worship by depicting the wider effect of Brodsky's

mythology in Russia, expressing this as a 'mythologised yearning' to see him return: 'Of course, [Brodsky's return] would be a sort of symbolic act. And there are constant rumours…there's already quite a folklore…And so Leningrad and Moscow live on these myths of Brodsky's return [sic]' (Polukhina 2010: 45). Gordin thus draws attention to the inter-dependent relationship between Brodsky's self-portrait and the portrait offered by others to the poet's cultural phenomenon. In echoing Brodsky's statements about himself whilst simultaneously attaching to his image the expectations of the Russian romantic tradition, a perception of the poet reverberates, magnifying itself to become a mythology that can only regenerate and expand.

Conversely, Brodsky is rarely presented as a genius or charismatic leader in Western critical commentaries, although he still tends to be romanticised. In contrast to the explicit hero worship of Russian writings, Western criticism tends to focus more on the particular aspects of Brodsky's character and poetry projected by Brodsky himself. This is more problematic: a less hyperbolic presentation of the poet can obscure the difference between the adherence to and magnification of the Brodsky myth on the one hand, and the simple reiteration of facts and advancement of interpretation on the other. Of course, such magnification is presented in terms of fact, which can be misleading when combined with an attempt at presenting Brodsky's biography. Cited in Carolyn Riley's sixth volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1976), an article by Roger Garfitt in *London Magazine* in 1974 states:

> What matters, quite as much as the courage of [Brodsky's] resistance to pressure, is the positive nature of his response […] it would have been easy for him to retire into hieratic isolation. Instead, he has forced himself to engage closely with the contemporary situation, and to confront a secular reality which previously, perhaps, he had only partially valued. (1976: *eNotes.com*)

Unsurprisingly, this assessment of Brodsky is couched in abstract generalisations with no examples to support its claims. Without such illustrations, phrases such as 'resistance to pressure', 'retire into hieratic isolation', 'forced himself to engage', and 'confront a secular reality' are simply a hollow reiteration of the virtues of humility and stoicism

that Brodsky himself projects. A similar example of such eager reiteration of Brodsky's self-image is found throughout his *New York Times* obituary, again displaying the different accent of the reverence he received in Russia and the West:

> Joseph Brodsky sustained and exemplified the mysterious power of poetry both in the repressive Soviet culture from which he was exiled and in the permissive American culture to which he came. He was the authentic representative in our time of poetry as the deep moral alternative not just to the cruelty but also to the banality and vulgarity of the Soviet form of totalitarianism. (McFadden 1996: *nytimes.com*)

Again, unhelpful phrases such as 'the mysterious power of poetry', 'authentic representative of our time', and 'deep moral alternative' have little meaning yet convey an excessively reverential attitude. Such uncritical language is peppered throughout Brodsky criticism. Bethea's criticism is rigorous and insightful, yet such vague statements occasionally find their way into his writing. He refers in his introduction, for example, to the 'secret essence of the 'Brodskian' (1994: 9). Perhaps this is simply a rhetorical turn of phrase, but in the context of the hyperbole surrounding Brodsky's image such mystical allusions are unhelpful. However, such veneration is no more or less simplistic than the Russian equivalent: both operate according to different but equally culturally ingrained expectations of what a Russian poet should be.

Yet, as the major and prominent contemporary Brodsky scholar re-quoted in innumerable books and articles, Polukhina can be held particularly responsible for a dissemination and magnification of the poet's myth on his own terms. Primarily this is achieved straightforwardly; Polukhina regularly uses Brodsky's ideas and quotations unquestioningly as support for her own interpretations. In his review of Polukhina's book, *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for our Time*, Mikhail Kreps also identifies this, observing that Polukhina's analyses of Brodsky's poems 'are richly supported by the opinions of Brodsky himself, taken from his essays, interviews, talks, etc., which Polukhina always takes with blind trust' (1991: 359). Such 'blind trust' works as a vehicle for Brodsky's own image, translating his ideas into practice with regards to the

interpretation of his works, biography, and personality. In 'Brodsky's Poetic Self-Portrait', for example, Polukhina confidently states that Brodsky's ethical position 'is that of a stoic' (1992: 130), reading the stoic representation of his poetic persona as a reflection of the dogged forbearance of his real-life character and circumstances.

By taking Brodsky's public statements at face value, as well as treating his lyric persona as a reflection of his public image, Polukhina attempts to make sense of Brodsky's stance in a manner so simple that it only serves to further cloud the issue of Brodsky and his mythology. Particularly, failing to draw a clear distinction between Brodsky's poetic lyric persona and the poet himself shows Polukhina carrying out an extreme form of biographical fallacy. In being unable to identify Brodsky's poetic image as a self-projection or imagined self-in-writing, Polukhina further advances the poet's myth. A particularly relevant example of this problem is manifested by her article, 'The Myth of the Poet and the Poet of the Myth'. Although promisingly titled, the article exposes the confusion at its centre in its opening sentence:

> The myth of the ideal poet is extremely tenacious, and it is poets themselves, it would appear, who create this myth. Brodsky, who inherited the title of First Poet from Akhmatova, lives this myth, having come as close as is possible to it. (1994: 139)

Although Polukhina identifies the problem of poetic mythology and the role poets play in shaping their own myths, she continues to give a confused account of how this relates to Brodsky. What Polukhina means by 'having come as close as is possible to it' is unclear, particularly as she simultaneously states that Brodsky 'lives this myth'. Logically, these two ideas are incompatible, perhaps the result of a reluctance to fully acknowledge Brodsky as the major creator of his own mythology. This reluctance is further demonstrated elsewhere in the article. Firstly, rather than choosing to examine Brodsky's own statements and self-presentation, Polukhina instead compiles a selection of observations by others, showing a disinclination to engage critically with Brodsky's stance. Secondly, Polukhina never defines Brodsky's 'myth' and as a result loses her way, the article becoming a more general musing upon the way he is perceived by others

without addressing why.

Yet Polukhina's perpetuation and embellishing of a Brodsky myth — even if she is unclear what exactly this myth involves — does not merely produce a largely passive reiteration of the poet's own stance. In fact, Polukhina actively aggrandises Brodsky's mythology through hyperbole. Often this is a somewhat paradoxical trend, in that it emphasises Brodsky's self-effacing stance whilst simultaneously exaggerating and advertising it. For example, while reiterating Brodsky's perceived attitude of playing down any hint of heroism within his biography, Polukhina states that '[…] in the post-Stalin period the list of poets who have been drawn into unequal single combat with the state is headed by the name of Brodsky'. She portrays this as a 'direct contact with history at a young age' and continues to include his 'tragic fate' as one of the factors promoting the inception and growth of a Brodsky myth (1994: 142). In doing so, not only does Polukhina portray Brodsky in a stereotypically heroic struggle with the state, but she also pits him against history and talks mysteriously of his biography as though it were pre-determined. Such criticism is not internally consistent: it displays a removed awareness for a Brodsky myth based upon the philosophy of the rejection of such a myth, whilst also creating and strengthening Brodsky's biographical legend to much the same formula as the traditional 'blueprint'. On another equally paradoxical level, Polukhina's portrayal of Brodsky ultimately fails to do Brodsky the honour of reducing reference to his biography, which would seem the appropriate course were she to take him at face value.

Kreps also notes Polukhina's tendency to overstatement, commenting in his review that Polukhina's 'informative' book (*Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for our Time*) is 'marred by an exaggerated estimation of the achievements and services of Brodsky to Russian poetry, as well as by preposterous generalisations, even when the author tries to support her point by some authority' (1991: 359). Kreps extracts his own examples from Polukhina's text, including the quotations, 'Brodsky has done for Russian poetry what Dostoevsky did for Russian prose: he has stripped it of naivete and innocence', and, 'his enormous erudition […] helps him to transfer the Russian language, by means of its very

own resources, to the center of world culture' (1991: 359). The conclusion of Polukhina's book provides a similar example of the way inflated rhetoric and a tendency to draw sweeping generalisations contribute to the construction and consolidation of Brodsky's mythology: 'Word just like the Spirit exists outside Time. That's why 'Time worships Language'. Language Worships God. The poet worships both' (1989: 281). In essence Polukhina is attempting to unravel Brodsky's problematic philosophy and ideology regarding language. However, the manner in which she does so only sensationalises Brodsky's position by placing him on an exalted plane and implying his genius, thereby lending it a Romantic attitude that Polukhina would presumably be the first to deny.

This portrayal of Brodsky is manifested in Polukhina's style of interviewing. In 'Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries' — a major source for much first-hand insight into the poet's life, character, and work — Polukhina's questions display a strong lack of neutrality, often revealing a seeming infatuation with Brodsky. Moreover, Polukhina displays a desire to impress her viewpoint upon others. An exchange with Naiman displays a subtle confrontation between the idealistic views of the poet represented by Polukhina and the more cynical appreciation of a figure who was acquainted with Brodsky before his international reputation had been established:

> **Polukhina**: Please name the poems of Brodsky's you consider to be masterpieces.
> **Naiman**: I don't want to call them masterpieces. (2010: 30)

Although Naiman's attitude towards Brodsky might be coloured by bitterness given that of 'Akhmatova's orphans' Brodsky had the more successful career as a poet, this exchange is characteristic of the way in which Polukhina's imposition of her own interpretation attempts to affect the answers she wishes to elicit. Other examples of such leading questions include, 'In your view what improvements has Brodsky brought about in the Russian language?' (2010: 129), and, 'Tell me, when did you personally begin to see signs of genius in Brodsky?' (2010: 69). A particularly revealing exchange with Gorbanevskaya displays the extent to which Polukhina's adulatory attitude leads her to make assumptions:

> How, in spite of your love for Joseph and his poetry, have you succeeded in remaining independent? Weren't there temptations? Or did you realise that it was not possible to imitate him? Or was there no need? (2010: 96)

Polukhina's inability to see past her own image of Brodsky is unfortunate considering her astute close analysis of his poetry. Her tendency to take Brodsky at his word, endorsing his supposedly stoic and humble self-portrait, whilst simultaneously portraying him with an air of reverence reminiscent of the uncritical biography of Akhmatova by Reeder, reflects the Russian tradition of hyperbolic over-valuation. As such, it is ironic that she should state so confidently with Loseff in the forward to their jointly edited book that 'It is not the task of literary scholars to create the reputation of a living poet' (Loseff, Polukhina 1990: vii).

As such, Brodsky's mythology of self-effacement and stoicism can be understood as a creation resulting from his self-projection in public. It is also the result of the way in which this projection is received and disseminated in Brodsky's criticism. Particular responsibility lies with the differing forms of reverence with which he is treated in Russian and Western criticism, both of which respond to their own preconceptions of what a Russian poet should be. Polukhina is specifically accountable, as her particular interpretation of Brodsky magnifies and even distorts Brodsky's self-image. This self-image and resulting myth can be seen to have strong links to the Russian Romantic tradition both in the strength of the way Brodsky responds to cultural pattern, thereby defining himself by it further, and also in the elements of his self-presentation that resonate with Romanticism in and of themselves. These include the implicit link between Brodsky's presentation of stoicism and the notion of martyrdom. Consequently, Brodsky's self-projection in public already places Brodsky within a tradition of Romantic myth-creation that is defined by its relationship to politics. The following chapter builds upon this understanding, examining Brodsky's self-projection in his poetry and tracing further links between his self-presentation and the Russian cultural myth of the poet.

Chapter Two — Brodsky's Poetic Self-Identity

The image of the self that Brodsky projects throughout his poetry contributes to his public image. This is especially the case at the points where the lyric persona seems to resemble the poet or share features of his biography — in other words, where Brodsky appears to be writing with autobiographical directness. In this way, the poet's works, personality and biography can be seen to combine together creating the figure of 'Brodsky' that resonates in public perception. As with Brodsky's public image, when discussing his self-projection in poetry critics tend to focus on anti-heroic and anti-Romantic features. Adam Weiner, for example, refers to Brodsky's 'anti-Romantic stance' (1994: 36). To a similar end, Liudmila Zubova talks of the Odysseus figure in 'Odissei Telemaku' (1972) as '[excising] any hint of the heroic' (1999: 29). Yet Rein's observation that Brodsky's poetic stance is 'an attempt to get away from the notorious Russian Romantic pose which is so completely at odds with the herd' (Polukhina 2010: 79) raises the issue also found in Brodsky's public statements. In self-consciously attempting to distance himself from the Russian Romantic tradition – the intersection of Romantic literary values and traits and their specific Russian interpretation – Brodsky remains defined by them. Furthermore, the self-restraint, stoicism, and humility projected so forcefully by Brodsky can be seen to carry their own idealist weight by presenting the poet as a figure of forbearance, ultimately conforming to certain elements of the cultural tradition that Brodsky attempts to reject.

The way in which Brodsky cultivates links between his poetic lyric persona and the public persona projected throughout his interviews and essays contributes to the interaction between these two forms of self-projection. As Harrington points out, cross-over between these elements of self-presentation is unsurprising given that they are products of the same consciousness (2011: 466). Yet a clarification of the way in which Brodsky self-consciously encodes biography in poetry is necessary in order to approach the issue of self-projection in his works more clearly. References inviting the reader to interpret Brodsky's poetry biographically include allusions to recognisable events and periods in the poet's life. In the poem 'Odissei Telemaku' (1972), for example, Brodsky

adopts the myth of Odysseus in order to depict the relationship between an imminently absent father and his estranged son. The biographical parallels are obvious, particularly considering the poem's date — the year of Brodsky's exile. A handful of poems are still more explicit, their titles referring to precise dates and events. Examples include '1 ianvaria 1965 goda' (1965), '24 dekabria 1971 goda' (1972), and '1972 god' (1972). Brodsky also heightens biographical parallels by casting his lyric persona as a poet, often treating the process of writing in the first person ('Эти слова мне диктовала […]', line 37 of 'Temza v Chelsi' (1974) (*ChR*: 41)), and reflecting on the act of writing itself. In this way, Brodsky invites the reader to perceive the lyric persona as Brodsky speaking directly, for all that this is never truly the case with a self in writing. As a result, Brodsky self-consciously draws attention to the relationship between the poetic work and the figure positioned both inside and outside of it. Brodsky also dedicates a large number of his poems to friends, many of whom figure implicitly in the body of his poetry as subjects and addressees. Marina Basmanova is the most well known example, but others include Tomas Venclova who, in the poem 'Litovskii noktiurn' (1974), is presented as a 'partner in the [poem's] dialogue' (1999: 122). Piotr Fast calls such efforts at encoding biography in poetry 'pseudo-autobiographism'. Through these efforts, Brodsky creates the impression that his work can be read as a direct representation of himself as an author, whilst also maintaining distance from such an interpretation (1996: 126).

Writing with such autobiographical directness creates problems, however. Certain critics interpret the parallels between Brodsky's lyric persona and his biographical facts as a means for understanding his personality. This reflects Akhmatova's approach to poetry and biography by treating a poet's works as a veil that can be decoded, although Akhmatova's approach is often more sophisticated. Polukhina is an example of the problems created by such parallels. In her article 'Pushkin and Brodsky: The Art of Self-Deprecation', she draws parallels between what she perceives to be the personalities of the two poets, using Pushkin's works to support her deductions. For example, she uses the poem 'Otsy pustynniki i zheny neporochny' (1836) to state: 'What is also characteristic of both poets is their profound desire to retain humility: 'И дух смирения,

терпения, любви/ и целомудрия мне в сердце оживи'. She continues in this vein, later quoting 'Iur'evu' (1821) to add that 'Each lavished a great deal of care on his appearance and worried about his physical shortcomings: 'А я, повеса, вечно праздный, / Потомок негров безобразный' (Polukhina 2003: 157, 159, Pushkin 2014: 598, 248). These types of statement are at odds with the apparent aim of Polukhina's article, which, she writes, attempts to 'identify certain features of self-portraiture common to both poets' (2003: 154). Despite this demonstration of an awareness of self-portraiture and its processes, Polukhina subsequently shows that she is unable to discern the performance of self-presentation undertaken by both Pushkin and, by extension, Brodsky. Polukhina elides their self-projections with what she perceives to be the poets' essential, 'genuine' personalities. Clearly, the question of an essential self is problematic, showing Polukhina's conclusions to be naive at best. Moreover, interpreting Brodsky's works in this way refuses to consider Brodsky's presentation of his lyric persona as another facet in the fashioning of his self-myth.

The remainder of this chapter seeks to examine the ways in which Brodsky's lyric persona feeds into the complex self-myth which has already been explored in the first chapter. The first section explores the way in which the poetic persona's self-deprecation leads to lyrics which thematically deal with ageing, impotence, isolation and banality, and connects the impoverishment of the lyric persona with the self-effacement seen elsewhere. The second section focusses on objectivity and the way in which the distance this creates is connected to both self-effacement and self-assertion, in a familiarly Brodskian manner. The third section examines the way in which Brodsky's poetry increasingly abstracts the lyric persona, resulting in a disembodied 'I' that connects to Brodsky's disavowel of biography. The fourth section highlights the theme of martyrdom in the poem '1972 god' (1972), and the way in which such depictions are coloured by Brodsky's personal relation to the lyrics. In the final section this exploration turns to the use of mythological and historical figures, and the way in which Brodsky's self-identification with such figures contributes to his self-myth. Overall, the chapter reveals some of the ways in which an understanding of Brodsky in relation to his attitude to biography, as well as the Russian poetic tradition, can enrich readings of these verses,

and provide a powerful insight into them. In turn, these verses themselves illuminate certain strategies of Brodsky's myth-creation.

Self-Deprecation: Ageing, Impotence, and Banality

As in Brodsky's public self-presentation, his lyric persona is often constructed to seem self-deprecating rather than self-aggrandising. Most often this is enacted through an actively unflattering self-portrait. This is the chief feature of Brodsky's self-portrayal and it often underpins other forms of self-deprecation, which concern ageing, impotence and banality. The prominence of self-deprecation in Brodsky's poetry has generated much critical attention. Turoma, for example, refers to 'a self-deprecating poetic identity […] which towards the end of the 1960s becomes more and more manifest' (2010: 43) and Polukhina devotes an entire study to this element of Brodsky's self-portrait in her article 'Pushkin and Brodsky: The Art of Self-Deprecation' (2003). Recurring through a number of poems across his career, such images of self-deprecation are an important part of Brodsky's overall poetic identity, and clearly connect to his self-effacement in statements about his own biography by furthering the image of Brodsky as a humble figure who is not self-promoting. The conspicuousness of the strategy of self-deprecation owes much to the strength of the imagery employed by Brodsky, which is often grotesque and therefore draws attention to the negative aspects of his lyric persona.

Of Brodsky's earlier poetry, the first stanza of 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' (1969) is largely representative of the self-deprecation found in his work:

> Потому что искусство поэзии требует слов,
> я — один из глухих, облысевших, угрюмых послов
> второсортной державы, связавшейся с этой, —
> не желая насиловать собственный мозг,
> сам себе подавая одежду, спускаюсь в киоск
> за вечерней газетой. (*KPE*: 58)

The portrait of the figure at the centre of this depiction is decisively unflattering, the

strength of the image heightened by a forceful trio of adjectives in the second line. The projection of this unflattering portrait is broad, encompassing both the abstract aspects of attitude ('угрюмый') as well as concrete physical attributes. Such physical attributes are overtly linked to ageing, a theme which becomes gradually more central to Brodsky's work as the poet himself ages. This is a powerful tool with which Brodsky paints the portrait of his lyric persona. Here he focusses upon the process of becoming bald and deaf which, although clearly implied as undignified, compares relatively neutrally to the stronger imagery found in his later work. Even so, Brodsky deliberately rejects alternative positive clichés that can be associated with age. Fulfilment and wisdom, for example, rarely feature in his works. This poem also depicts banality: the lyric persona simply puts on his coat to get the paper. It therefore brings together many of the themes inherent to Brodsky's unflattering self-portrait. 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' is discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis, where focus is placed on the poem's depiction of the USSR.

The ageing depicted in 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' is seen particularly in '1972 god', where Brodsky uses it to undermine expectations of the poet as a Romantic figure and, particularly, the heroism that this stance implies. This poem displays the tensions in Brodsky's self-portrayal between self-deprecation and its allusion to effacement, and self-affirmation. The first half of the poem is broadly self-deprecating, whereas the second half is more clearly self-affirming. As such, the first section is analysed here, while the second section is explored later in the chapter. Written approximately seven months after the event of his exile from the Soviet Union to the West and containing clear autobiographical referents, this poem plays an important role in the shaping of Brodsky's image both within and without of his poetry. The explicit link to his exile in the title encourages readers and critics to interpret this poem as an example of Brodsky's poetic stance in the face of his biographical circumstances. Almost the entire work is dedicated to a representation of the poem's speaker, and self-deprecation is conveyed through a strong anti-heroic and generally un-Romantic portrayal. The focus on coarse physical traits based upon ageing undermines expectations of social acceptability and counteracts broad Romantic poetic stereotypes. 'Возраст' is first mentioned in line 7,

developing swiftly to a grotesque and impassioned exploration of physical decline:

Птица уже не влетает в форточку.
Девица, как зверь, защищает кофточку.
Подскользнувшись о вишневую косточку,
я не падаю: сила трения
возрастает с паденьем скорости.
Сердце скачет, как белка, в хворосте
ребер. И горло поет о возрасте.
Это — уже старение.

Старение! Здравствуй, мое старение!
Крови медленное струение.
Некогда стройное ног строение
мучает зрение. Я заранее
область своих ощущений пятую,
обувь скидая, спасаю ватою.
Всякий, кто мимо идет с лопатою,
ныне объект внимания.

Правильно! Тело в страстях раскаялось,
Зря оно пело, рыдало, скалилось.
В полости рта не уступит кариес
Греции древней, по меньшей мере.
Смрадно дыша и треща суставами,
пачкаю зеркало. Речь о саване
еще не идет. Но уже те самые,
кто тебя вынесет, входят в двери. (*ChR*: 20)

The emphasis upon premature ageing (Brodsky was only thirty-two when this poem was written) is achieved immediately through the simple use of the word ‘уже’. In this way Brodsky depicts the intrusion of old age into youth, creating a sense of brutality that gathers pace with the harsh imagery of the second and third stanzas. This is supported by a strongly sensory depiction: once well-built legs now offend the sight, the lyric hero’s breath smells, and his joints audibly crack. The emphasis placed upon the mouth is particularly evocative as Brodsky combines the reference to stinking breath with a

metaphor for decaying teeth, intensifying the grotesque self-portrait of his poetic persona. The metonymical image of the mouth sees parallels in a number of other poems. An example is the central image to the poem 'V ozernom kraiu' (1972) which, once again, uses the mouth to provide a grotesque metaphor for general physical decline: 'я, прячущий во рту,/ развалины почище Парфенона'. In '1972 god' (*ChR*: 24). Brodsky expands the imagery to explore a general decline in vitality through the metaphor of slow-flowing blood — a comparison which evokes a reticence that is both physical and spiritual, drawing upon the association between blood and life-force. To a similar end, in the second stanza he employs emphatic and repetitive punning upon the word 'старение'. A swift progression through the word's rhymes and half rhymes — 'струение', 'стройное', 'строение', 'зрение', 'заранее', 'внимания' — constructs an echo of the stanza's first line, reinforcing its already emphatic opening ('Старение! Здравствуй, мое старение!'). Importantly, the theme of ageing is taken to its conceptual extreme by early references to dying. Yet where such references could be interpreted as melodramatically Romantic in the way that they fatalistically prefigure death, Brodsky works to achieve the opposite by offering a depiction that is marked by banality. Simply, anonymous figures pass by holding spades and those who will carry the coffin arrive through a door.

In this poem**,** the theme of ageing is also used to underpin a depiction of cowardice. This is particularly the case in the seventh and eighth stanzas:

> Старение! В теле все больше смертного.
> То есть, не нужного жизни. С медного
> лба исчезает сияние местного
> света. И черный прожектор в полдень
> мне заливает глазные впадины.
> Силы из мышц у меня украдены.
> Но не ищу себе перекладины:
> совестно браться за труд Господень.
>
> Впрочем, дело, должно быть, в трусости.
> В страхе. В технической акта трудности.

Это — влиянье грядущей трупности:
всякий распад начинается с воли,
минимум коей — основа статистики.
Так я учил, сидя в школьном садике.
Ой, отойдите, друзья-касатики!
Дайте выйти во чисто поле! (*ChR*: 21)

The physical incapacity expressed in stanza seven ('Силы из мышц у меня украдены'), for example, is matched by the lyric persona's psychological incapability to commit suicide. Brodsky portrays such incapability as cowardice (*трусость*), making a direct link between physical and emotional weakness. Seen in the context of the trope of suicide in the Russian poetic tradition, Brodsky can be seen to deliberately disassociate himself from the legacy of such poets as Mayakovsky, Esenin, and Tsvetaeva, all of whose suicides contributed to the perceived drama and tragedy of their biographies. By focussing on cowardice and fear, Brodsky leaves no room for the artistic idealisation of his lyric persona's plight, stripping the decision to live of even a sense of admirable stoicism. Simultaneously Brodsky implies inferiority to those poets who, the implication continues, must have more emotional strength. Thus Brodsky can be seen to employ these poets' myths in an attempt to discredit a romanticised version of his own biographical legend. A similar technique can be found in his Nobel lecture. He states that '[…] it is precisely their lives, no matter how bitter or tragic they were, that often move me […] to regret the passage of time', continuing that '[…] if it were not for them […] I would amount to much less' (2011b: 39). Here Brodsky is being self-deprecating, attempting self-effacement by portraying his insignificance in the face of these poets' perceived greatness. Yet he is relying on their own romanticised and heroic biographical legends in order to portray himself in this way, and the contrast does not work unless they are first accepted as poetically and biographically important. Thus Brodsky distances himself from the tradition of martyrdom through suicide whilst also reinforcing this tradition. The emotional cowardice expressed through such initial distancing is tied inextricably with the bodily uselessness that Brodsky depicts in order to construct a portrayal of absolute human weakness ('Старение! В теле все больше смертного./ То есть, не нужного жизни'). The implication of an external factor that

physically steals the strength from the muscles of the lyric persona reinforces this, depicting the speaker as powerless and passive — 'Силы из мышц у меня украдены'.

Powerlessness and passivity relate to the theme of impotence, which is particularly pervasive in Brodsky's earlier poetry. The first line of 'Rech' o prolitom moloke' (1976) — 'Я пришел к Рождеству с пустым карманом' — provides a typical portrait of impotence in Brodsky's work (*KPE*: 6). The lyric persona is powerless — he has nothing to offer. Brodsky heightens this by framing the lyric persona in the approach to Christmas, a time symbolic for its emphasis upon giving. This sense of powerlessness is rendered acutely in the earlier poem 'Liubov'' (1971). As Loseff observes, Brodsky is presenting the memory of a failed union (2011: 63). Within this image, the lyric persona is portrayed as unobtainable, separated from his lover by reality. The image is notable for the passivity displayed by the lyric persona. The pain of separation is symbolised by a fence ('изгородь') which parts the lovers so that they are on opposite sides. However, despite the shared experience of such separation, Brodsky focusses on his persona's 'недосягаемость', using the first person possessive pronoun 'моя':

> […] не вправе
> оставить вас в том царствии теней,
> безмолвных, перед изгородью дней,
> впадающих в зависимость от яви,
> с моей недосягаемостью в ней. (*KPE*: 114)

Throughout the poem the emphasis is laid upon Brodsky's lyric persona in this way. The phantoms of his former lover and child appear to him amid an air of expectancy, implying that they are active in their longing to exist together. Yet the response of Brodsky's lyric persona is inactivity, his only motion appearing in the opening lines when he moves to the window — 'Я дважды пробуждался этой ночью/ и брел к окну' (*KPE*: 113). Considering the title of the poem — 'Liubov'' —, an echo of this inactivity can be sensed in the line '[…] любовь, как акт, лишена глагола' of the poem 'Ia vsegda tverdil, chto sud'ba — igra […]' (1971). The image of fragmented speech also becomes a metaphor for ineffectiveness, which is reinforced by its utterance during

sleep. Brodsky underlines the transience of this image by likening these words to dimming street lamps in the distance. In this way, the ineffectiveness of the lyric persona's words becomes a metaphor for his impotence as a whole:

> и фонари в окне,
> обрывок фразы, сказанной во сне,
> сводя на нет, подобно многоточью
> не приносили утешенья мне. (*KPE*: 113)

A similar portrait of impotence is found in the second stanza of the poem 'Laguna' (1973). Here the powerlessness of the lyric persona is defined partly through its new sense of isolation. Loseff contends that the 'absolute nobody […] a man/body in a raincoat' — a pervasive image in Brodsky's work — first appears in this poem (2011: 108). The poem is set in Venice, where the image of Brodsky's lyric persona adopts new connotations of displacement, translating into a sense of helplessness and lonely nostalgia and once again blurring the lines between his biography and his lyric persona. The image of a bottle of grappa within the figure's pocket offers a tragic realism to the existential image of a 'совершенный никто' with no sense of place:

> И восходит в свой номер на борт по трапу
> постоялец, несущий в кармане граппу,
> совершенный никто, человек в плаще,
> потерявший память, отчизну, сына;
> по горбу его плачет в лесах осина,
> если кто-то плачет о нем вообще. (*ChR*: 35)

The simplicity of the imagery here can be interpreted as another representation of the banality seen in 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi'. In a sense, the 'человек в плаще' (itself evoking parallels with the Russian *malen'kii chelovek*) suggests the anonymity often associated with the mundane. Paradoxically, this is achieved through the detail of Brodsky's reference to the coat which, although specific, speaks of the impersonal, ordinary element that here strips the lyric persona of his individuality. As a result, banality is employed as a subtle foundation to the projection of the poetic persona as a

whole, attempting to work against the high drama of Romantic stereotypes.

This is seen in many other poems. In 'Ia vsegda tverdil, chto sud'ba — igra […]' (1971) (*KPE*: 106-7). Brodsky juxtaposes the philosophical nature of the lyric persona's internal narrative with the banality of his actions, emphasising the persona's lack of traditional heroism. These actions include washing the dishes ('Я помыл посуду', line 11), smiling, and spitting ('Улыбнусь порою, порой отплюнусь', line 18). This banality is emphasised through anaphora. The phrase 'Я сижу' appears at the same point in every stanza, creating a repetitive pattern and accentuating the sense of perpetuated inactivity. Moreover, the use of deliberately short, undeveloped phrases reflects the inactivity of the verb 'сидеть', creating an image of listlessness. Brodsky reinforces this physical listlessness with a metaphor, employing the image of a song without tune to imply lack of direction: 'Моя песня была лишена мотива' (line 25). Bearing in mind that Brodsky often represents poetry and art as a song (G. S. Smith points out that the title of the poem 'Pen'e bez muzyki' (1970) is widely understood to represent poetry as 'singing without the wordless element of melody' (1999b: 23)) this can be interpreted as the inability of his poetic persona to both write and communicate. As a result, although banality can be understood as the primary theme of the poem, the issue of impotence is also present.

Objectivity as Covert Stoicism

One of the principle aspects of Brodsky's poetry often used to justify the view that he is a self-effacing anti-Romantic is the objective and analytical tone that resonates throughout his work. Boym quotes Yury Karabchievsky, who considers Brodsky to be characterised by 'emotional emptiness' (Boym 1991: 185). This objectivity is found particularly in his later poems from approximately 1980 onwards. Yet in the same way that self-effacement can result in a traditional mythologising image, objectivity can be seen to evoke a sense of stoicism. Similar to the way Akhmatova invites readers to read between the lines (Harrington shows how readers of Akhmatova's poetry are 'forced to speculate, to try to reconstruct the situation, to fill in the gaps' (2013: 19)), Brodsky

draws attention to his lyric persona precisely through his analytical and 'unemotional' approach. Venclova observes the similarity between Brodsky and Akhmatova and the way in which an 'interest in the object' combines with a sense of tragedy:

> One can find many things that unite Brodsky and Akhmatova from the point of view of poetic technique, and set them apart from, say, Tsvetaeva: interest in the object, reserved tone combined with a high degree of tragic tension. (*units.muohio.edu*)

The most significant example of this is the poem 'Pamiati otsa: Avstraliia' (1989), commemorating the death of Brodsky's father. In this poem, Brodsky coldly appraises an image of his father that has occurred to him in a dream — 'Ты ожил, приснилось мне, и уехал/ в Австралию' (line 1) (*PSN*: 43). The dream works to draw clear lines of separation between reality and fantasy, depicting the father's death simply in terms of existence and non-existence. This separation is reflected in the image of the father's voice echoing in the poem's imaginary flat: 'Голос с трехкратным эхом/ окликал и жаловался на климат' (lines 2-3) (*PSN*: 43). The echo achieves the same result as the dream, evoking the non-existence of his father by drawing attention to the separation between the physicality of the body and the abstract nature of sound and memory. Banality is also invoked in order to further strip the poem of emotional sensationalism. The father is depicted wandering the imaginary flat, commenting prosaically:

> […] никак не снимут,
> жаль что не в центре, но около океана,
> третий этаж без лифта, зато есть ванна,
> пухнут ноги, а тапочки я оставил (*PSN*: 43)

The objective stance adopted here by the lyric persona is reinforced by the lack of adjectives or descriptive qualities generally, contributing to Brodsky's conceit of these lines as a running commentary by his father. The objectivity of this poem reaches its conceptual climax in the final stanza and line:

> Все-таки это лучше, чем мягкий пепел

крематория в банке, ее залога, —
эти обрывки голоса, монолога
и попытки прикинуться нелюдимом

в первый раз с той поры, как ты обернулся дымом. (*PSN*: 43)

Again, Brodsky presents his father's death in terms of objective fact, referring to the soft dust of his father's body after cremation and the way his smoke rises from the chimney. The starkness of this image suggests a sense of tragedy that can be read between the lines, as the shock of the reality portrayed in this poem heightens the sense of bereavement of Brodsky's lyric persona, paradoxically evoking his stoicism. Without detracting from the genuine tragedy that this poem conveys, the lyric persona's objective stance can therefore be interpreted as a pose that requires its audience to read between the lines in order to access the poem's sense of suffering. Such suffering, despite the obliqueness of its expression, resonates with the cultural expectation of the Russian poet as a figure marked out by his forebearance during tragedy. As such, it quietly echoes the Romantic notion of the poet as a tragic hero and hints at the related ideals of the poet as a Christ-like figure within the Russian poetic tradition. This is the case even as Brodsky purports to construct a lyric persona that is objective, unemotional, and stoic — attributes that, at first glance, seem inconsistent with the poetic self-projections that follow the traditional 'blueprint'.

The connection between objectivity and stoicism is also seen in Brodsky's late poem 'Portret tragedii' (1991). The first three stanzas are particularly pertinent as they depict tragedy — personified as a feminine figure — being rationally and coolly examined by the poem's lyric persona. The poem opens with this image, evoking the way in which a doctor might examine a patient:

Заглянем в лицо трагедии. Увидим ее морщины,
ее горбоносый профиль, подбородок мужчины.
Услышим ее контральто с нотками чертовщины:
хриплая ария следствия громче, чем писк причины.
Здравствуй, трагедия! Давно тебя не видали.

Привет, оборотная сторона медали.
Рассмотрим подробно твои детали. (*PSN*: 165)

This portrayal deliberately subverts the traditional relationship between tragedy and its victim, empowering the poem's lyric persona as a result. By the third stanza the depiction of tragedy evolves to a grotesque portrayal, reminiscent of the techniques used by Brodsky in his earlier poetry and once again stripping the concept of tragedy of its historic romanticism. A sense of unmasking is evoked in the second stanza: 'Добрый вечер, трагедия с героями и богами,/ с плохо прикрытыми занавесом ногами' (lines 12-13) (*PSN*: 165). The reference to theatricality here further diminishes the reputation of tragedy by implying the notion of facade and alluding to reality after unmasking. Brodsky then employs this grotesque portrait to satirise those who enjoy the romanticism of tragedy: 'Рухнем в объятья трагедии с готовностью ловеласа!/ Погрузимся в ее немолодое мясо' (lines 35-6) (*PSN*: 166). The implied cynicism here is made explicit in lines 50-1, 'Кто мы такие, не-статуи, не-полотна,/ чтоб не дать свою жизнь изуродовать бесповоротно?' (*PSN*: 166). In posing this question, Brodsky highlights the self-serving nature of engaging with one's tragic circumstances and the hyperbole in which this results. Brodsky links this comment directly to martyrs: 'Не брезгуй ею, трагедия, жанр итога' (line 54) (*PSN*: 166). This is ironic when interpreted in the context of the final stanza:

Раньше, подруга, ты обладала силой.
Ты приходила в полночь, махала ксивой,
цитировала Расина, была красивой.
Теперь лицо твое — помесь тупика с перспективой.
Так обретает адрес стадо и почву — древо.
Всюду маячит твой абрис — направо или налево.
Валяй, отворяй ворота хлева. (*PSN*: 167)

This expression of stoicism, the depiction of a refusal to be cowed, adheres clearly to notions of poetic heroism. This is particularly the case given the heightened rhetoric employed to convey tragedy's portrait, which is as monstrous as it is diminishing. As a result, Brodsky's expression of objectivity and analysis results in a variation of the

martyred pose that he satirises. As with earlier explorations, Brodsky's explicit rejections mark a more complex engagement with the Romantic tradition, and an understanding of that tradition is essential for comprehending the way in which these lyrics function.

Edging Out the Lyric Persona

Brodsky's poetry is notable for its often abstract and disembodied lyric persona. Loseff observes this, writing that 'for Brodsky, physical absence — nonbeing — is the ideal form of being' (2006: 255). Similarly, Polukhina notes that Brodsky's lyric persona tends to be portrayed through metonymy rather than a full self-portrait (2010: 77). He is often presented as simply a voice; in 'Babochka' (1973), for example, he refers to himself as 'бормочущий комок слов' (lines 33-4) (*ChR*: 29). This can be interpreted as another form of self-effacement, the process of which develops particularly in his later poetry. Whereas earlier works often include imagery conveying a sense of the embodied lyric persona's physical portrait (such as those examined in this chapter's first section), Brodsky's later works largely abandon such images. Instead, they are replaced by a disembodied lyric presence often implied only by the first person perspective of Brodsky's lyric 'I'. Effacement of the physical self is found in poems such as 'Kellomiaki' (1982), 'Novaia zhizn'' (1988), and 'Kappadokiia' (1990-1991) — a poem analysed in the third chapter. Clear tendencies towards self-abnegation can also be seen in certain earlier works, such as the cycle of poems 'Chast' rechi' (1975-6). The title of the cycle already alludes to the erosion of wholeness. Polukhina observes that, 'If a man is no longer a oneness, then indeed 'one is perhaps less than one'' (1989: 39). This identifies the way in which Brodsky's self-effacement in poetry mirrors the concerns of his prose essays which, in turn, draws attention to the parallels between Brodsky's public and lyric personae. The physical negation that Polukhina observes broadly manifests itself in the gradual disintegration of Brodsky's lyric persona to metonymical fragments, which Smith characterises as 'Brodsky's studied self-denigration and calculated self-abnegation, his obsession with *absence*' (1999a: 254).

A distinct example of this process is found in the seventh poem of the 'Chast' rechi' cycle:

> Я родился и вырос в балтийских болотах, подле
> серых цинковых волн, всегда набегавших по две,
> и отсюда — все рифмы, отсюда тот блеклый голос,
> вьющийся между ними, как мокрый волос,
> если вьется вообще. Облокотясь на локоть,
> раковина ушная в них различит не рокот,
> но хлопки полотна, ставень, ладоней, чайник,
> кипящий на керосинке, максимум — крики чаек.
> В этих плоских краях то и хранит от фальши
> сердце, что скрыться негде и видно дальше.
> Это только для звука пространство всегда помеха:
> глаз не посетует на недостаток эха. (*ChR*: 81)

Framed by an expression of self-identity, this poem charts a complex process of effacement. The opening line, for example, provides a concrete sense of self-affirmation. A precise statement of fact, it roots the poem's lyric persona in a distinct sense of place. Already, a link between the lyric persona and the poet is created through this specific evocation of Baltic marshes and grey, zinc waves. This connection is strengthened further in the third line, 'отсюда — все рифмы, отсюда тот блеклый голос'. The reference to 'rhymes' implicates the poet directly and further constructs a poetic identity that is linked to Brodsky's public image. The self-affirmation achieved through the assertion of identity and place in the opening is coupled with a gradual erosion of physical wholeness to fragmented abstraction. For example, the imagery, at first offering a sense of completeness — 'подле/ серых цинковых волн, всегда набегавших по две' — gives way to fragmented, isolated nouns in the sixth, seventh and eighth lines. Similarly, the sense of a complete self found at the poem's outset is swiftly followed by hints at human physicality which, as the poem progresses, become impersonal to the extent that they can no longer be linked to the lyric persona of the poem. 'Блеклый голос', for example, can be interpreted as the voice of the speaker, but the later physical references — 'мокрый волос', 'локоть', 'раковина ушная', and 'ладоней' — become less specifically related to the lyric persona. Towards the conclusion of the poem, the

‘фальши/сердце’ represents nobody in particular. Instead, it constitutes an abstract metaphor for truth and the notion that falseness cannot exist when there is nowhere to hide — ‘В этих плоских краях то и хранит от фальши/ сердце, что скрыться негде и видно дальше’. Such abstraction is developed in the final lines where the concepts of human sight and hearing are compared in order to give a final portrayal of ‘пространство’. This emptiness is the culmination of the poem; coherent self-portrayal and imagery have fragmented and disintegrated to a portrayal of space. This depiction of the transition of the poetic self from ‘something’ to ‘nothing’ is a legitimate form of self-effacement. However, by employing imagery that reflects the circumstances of the poet’s biographical heritage, Brodsky frames such physical effacement with an assertion of identity which, despite the poem’s conclusion, cannot be negated. This finds parallels with the penultimate poem of the cycle, which famously ends ‘От всего человека вам остается часть/ речи. Часть речи вообще. Часть речи’ (*KPE*: 93). Although this is often read as a statement regarding the significance of language, it can also be interpreted as a dual expression of abstract existence in the face of physical effacement.

The form of physical self-effacement found in Brodsky’s later works tends to be more deeply rooted within the structure of the poem. The poem ‘Novaia zhizn’’ (1988), opening with the line ‘Представь, что война окончена, что воцарился мир’ (*PSN*: 10), depicts an ambiguous post-apocalyptic vision, the subdued horror of which becomes clearer as the poem develops. A significant contribution to this sense of horror is made by the lack of physical humanity within the poem. This is best characterised by the image in the final stanza of a train — for which nobody is waiting — arriving on time: ‘В свою очередь, поезд, которого ты не ждешь/ на перроне в плаще, приходит без опозданья’ (lines 67-8) (*PSN*: 12). Brodsky depicts the poem’s world functioning perfectly despite its spiritual emptiness. It is significant that one of the few images of humanity depicts people as they exit a room, focussing on absence rather than presence: ‘Люди выходят из комнат, где стулья как буква ‘б’/ или как мягкий знак спасают от головокруженья’ (lines 9-10) (*PSN*: 10). Yet even here people form a minor part of the image, the greater focus being the appearance and function of furniture. This lack of general physical portrayal also relates in a more specific manner to the poem’s lyric

persona. The poem takes the form of a monologue directed at an anonymous and silent addressee, yet despite this conceptual emphasis on the lyric persona as a speaker figure, the voice remains abstract and is unconnected to any direct physical representation. Although the 'ты' of the poem can be interpreted as an ambiguous representation of the poem's voice — an attempt to evoke in the reader the imaginary experiences conceived by the lyric persona, much the way in which anecdotes are relayed in speech, for example — this removal of straightforward self-representation reinforces the sense of abstraction as physical human images are only directly linked to the addressee. This is depicted in the fourth stanza, where the addressee/lyric persona is depicted rising out of a bath and contemplating the furniture:

> В новой жизни, в гостинице, ты, выходя из ванной,
> кутаясь в простыню, выглядишь как пастух
> четвероногой мебели, железной и деревянной. (*PSN*: 10)

The figure in a raincoat depicted in the image of the train platform plays a significant role in such ambiguous physical self-negation. In a sense, the typical use of this image as a symbol of effacement is irrelevant; the figure is directly physically negated instead ('ты не ждешь'). Yet despite such self-negation, the use of this image can be seen to reinforce Brodsky's poetic identity, albeit as the anonymous persona projected in his earlier works. Once again this reveals the tension between Brodsky's poetic self-affirmation and simultaneous self-effacement.

This tension marries with the poem's enigmatic final lines: 'И если кто-нибудь спросит: 'Кто ты?' ответь: 'Кто я,/ я — никто', как Улисс некогда Полифему' (lines 71-2) (*PSN*: 12). Although Brodsky can be seen to use this quotation from *The Odyssey* in order to reinforce the poem's theme of anonymity and physical non-existence, within its original context this quotation is problematic.[7] The difficulty inherent to the notion of actively stating that one is 'никто' underpins the plot in this section of Odysseus' story: when Odysseus claims that he is 'no-man' in order to avoid

[7] The encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemus — to which Brodsky refers — occurs in Book IX of *The Odyssey.*

being identified by Polyphemus, the Cyclops misunderstands and believes that 'No-man' is his name. Consequently, as Odysseus blinds Polyphemus in order to escape, the giants' cries for help are ignored as his only way of identifying his attacker is to cry that 'No-man' is wounding him (Fagles 1996: 211-229, Fowler 2004: 33). The giant's obtuse logic reveals the falseness of presenting oneself as a 'никто'; Polyphemus knows that the person declaring himself to be 'no man' cannot literally be nobody. This reflects an earlier exchange in the narrative between Alcinous and Odysseus, where Alcinous observes that 'No man is nameless' (Ahl, Roisman 1996: 110). This reflection upon the problems of anonymity echoes the contradictory nature of the way Brodsky effaces himself whilst also drawing attention to his stance — to some extent, Brodsky is aware that he is not a 'никто'. Accordingly, Brodsky takes this quotation from a passage that develops to elicit the opposite outcome to Odysseus' initial claim that he is 'no-man'. As Odysseus sails away having escaped and outwitted the Cyclops, he triumphantly reveals his true identity, an explicitly arrogant act (Fagles 1996: 227). This ambiguous oscillation between the two extremes of Odysseus' self-representation reflects Brodsky's use of this quotation: on the one hand, he states overtly that he is 'никто', reflecting the poem's sense of underlying physical effacement; on the other he directly aligns his poetic voice with a work fundamental to the Western literary canon. As with the Nobel lecture's examination of the greats of Russian literature, Brodsky can be seen to draw a contrast which enforces the position of his forbears, and through this action brings himself closer to them. His act of auto-canonisation is a gesture of self-affirmation.

Martyrdom in '1972 god'

The note of self-affirmation in the closing lines of 'Novaia zhizn'' reflects a broad trend in Brodsky's poetry. As with his public self-projection, such self-affirmation works to undermine his construction of self-effacement by simultaneously mythologising his biography. In contrast to Brodsky's public self-projection however, the mythologisation of his biography within his poetry is often less subtle. There are several moments where he places himself firmly within the same mythologising Russian poetic tradition that his efforts at self-effacement attempt to reject. Broadly this manifests itself as a depiction of

Romantic martyrdom that takes its inspiration from a typical representation of the tragic hero according to the Russian cultural tradition. The second half of '1972 god' is an illustration of this. The shift into the poem's self-affirming final section is initiated by the fatalistic rhetorical question found in the final line of the ninth stanza: 'Что бы такое сказать под занавес?!' (*ChR*: 22). It is significant that Brodsky should have chosen theatrical imagery ('занавес') to frame this question. By portraying his lyric persona as an actor upon a stage (presumably drawing inspiration from Pasternak's 'Gamlet' (1946) and Akhmatova's 'Chitatel'' (1959)), Brodsky reveals the inherently performative element to his self-presentation. The question itself underlines this sense of performance by forwarding the conceit that the poet's lyric persona, and by extension Brodsky himself, must singly and tragically justify himself to an expectant and hostile audience.

Brodsky's self-presentation as the typical Romantic poet-martyr is seen most clearly in the poem's tenth stanza. Despite a critical trend of interpreting Brodsky as a humble and self-effacing poet-figure (John Taylor persists in considering these lines an example of Brodsky's 'characteristic modesty' (2011: 300)), an alternative consideration of Brodsky's self-projection offers a different conclusion:

> Слушай, дружина, враги и братие!
> Все, что творил я, творил не ради я
> славы в эпоху кино и радио,
> но ради речи родной, словесности.
> За каковое реченье-жречество
> (сказано ж доктору: сам пусть лечится)
> чаши лишившись в пиру Отечества,
> нынче стою в незнакомой местности. (*ChR*: 22)

Clearly, the basic element of this stanza is a self-justifying poetic martyrdom that chimes obviously with the Russian Romantic notion of the persecuted poet. This is emphasised through the poem's clear echo of Mandelstam's poem 'Za gremuchuiu doblest'' (1931), which contains the original line 'Я лишился и чаши на пире отцов'. By linking himself with an obvious martyr figure such as Mandelstam (Freidin 1987: 68), as well as a poem which displays an overtly willing form of martyrdom with the lines 'Запихай меня

лучше, как шапку, в рукав/ Жаркой шубы сибирских степей', Brodsky can be seen to strengthen his connection with this tradition. Moreover, Brodsky connects the fact of his suffering with his service to the higher ideal of the Russian language. The connotations of religious martyrdom are clear and, despite his ironic tone, Brodsky can be seen to cast himself in the traditional Christ-like role of the ideological martyr whilst Russian society, represented as the presumed others at the 'feast of his Fatherland' — 'в пиру Отечества' —, is cast as a collective Pontius Pilate pitted against the poet. Such a Christ-like self-portrayal is heightened by the subsequent use of the word 'жречество', meaning 'priesthood'. In this way, Brodsky reinforces the saint-like elements of his lyric persona whilst raising his representation of the idealisation of language to a more serious, religious status. Given this evocation of religion, and Christianity in particular, Brodsky's well-known image of being denied a bowl at the feast of his fatherland can be read as an indirect reference to the circumstances of the Last Supper in which the twelve disciples drank from the same chalice in a common act of communion. The emphasis upon the sacredness of this shared experience serves to highlight Brodsky's contrasting situation as an exile and outsider. This image draws together the general theme of the stanza; that is, the uncompromising tension between the poet and his persecutors. In this way, it is clear that Brodsky depicts himself as the other party to the 'fatal contract', or 'bloody repast' (*кровавая пища*) as defined by Khodasevich — reaffirming the myth of the uncompromising relationship between Russian poets and Russian society, which itself relies upon the traditional literary roles of the societal persecutor and the poetic persecuted (Bethea 1994: 11).

Often, Brodsky intentionally laces such self-affirmation with irony, occasionally employing a farcical tone. Although this gives rise to a complex image of the poet, such self-affirmation still works as an echo of the Russian Romantic model of the ideal poet. This is seen in the final pair of stanzas, where Brodsky intensifies the self-affirmation and martyrdom of the preceding portrait:

> Точно Тезей из пещеры Миноса,
> выйдя на воздух и шкуру вынеся,
> не горизонт вижу я — знак минуса

к прожитой жизни. Острей, чем меч его,
лезвие это, и им отрезана
лучшая часть. Так вино от трезвого
прочь убирают, и соль — от пресного.
Хочется плакать. Но плакать нечего.

Бей в барабан о своем доверии
к ножницам, в коих судьба материи
скрыта. Только размер потери и
делает смертного равным Богу.
(Это суждение стоит галочки
даже в виду обнаженной парочки.)
Бей в барабан, пока держишь палочки,
с тенью своей маршируя в ногу! (*ChR*: 23)

The importance of these lines lies in the combination of elements that contribute to the self-portrait of Brodsky as a martyred hero, albeit an ironic one. The contrast between the apparent self-effacement of the poem's earlier stanzas and the self-affirmation here is seen in the metaphorical casting of Brodsky's lyric persona as the Greek hero Theseus. Theseus is the mythical founder-king of Athens and a figure who battled and overcame his enemies, and thus Brodsky's self-identification with this figure contrasts with the earlier self-image defined by a grotesque depiction of ageing. Brodsky draws parallels with the iconic image of Theseus emerging from the lair triumphant having slain the minotaur. Despite the ironic yet bleak metaphor of the horizon as a minus sign, the connotations of such a triumphant pose echo classical heroism: in the face of danger and for the benefit of the greater good Brodsky's lyric persona has struggled, displayed courage, and ultimately succeeded. The clarity with which this pose is conveyed is therefore unlike the ambiguity of the self-affirmation found in the reference to Odysseus in 'Novaia zhizn'', which is largely implicit. Here, by contrast, the heroic impersonation of the mythological Theseus is more clearly self-affirming, a position which is expanded by further references to heroism and martyrdom. Stoicism, for example, finds itself expressed concisely in the line, 'Хочется плакать. Но плакать нечего.' The simplicity of the construction here offers an emphatic denouement to the vaguer suggestions of stoicism interwoven within the poem, such as the earlier lines,

Данная песня — не вопль отчаянья.
Это — следствие одичания.
Это — точней — первый крик молчания (*ChR*: 23)

By denying that this poem is a depiction of pain and distress, Brodsky's lyric persona adopts a position of stoic defiance, which is conveyed by the line at the conclusion to the stanza: 'Это и к лучшему. Так я думаю' (*ChR*: 23). The irony of such optimistic stoicism lies in the result that it elicits. Rather than conveying a sense of genuine defiance, Brodsky's acceptance of his destiny injects the note of tragic pity that he gives the impression of avoiding. This is the result of the way in which self-portrayals combine within the poem to convey the sense of Brodsky as a poet-martyr. For example, the fatalism inherent to Brodsky's rhetorical question 'Что бы такое сказать под занавес?!' is intensified in the final stanza to paint a portrait of the poet in line with the traditional 'blue-print'. For example, although expressed in an ironic tone, the emotive reference to the drum of fate echoes the traditional Romantic notion of the poet who, understanding the duty to his higher cause, must follow the tragic path laid before him. This is heightened by the way in which Brodsky portrays this idea; the image of marching onward to the drum of fate ('Бей в барабан, пока держишь палочки, с тенью своей маршируя в ногу!') evokes unmistakable military parallels, once again reinforcing the notion of knowingly approaching death for the sake of an ideal. The irony of this portrayal is that Brodsky achieves his self-depiction as a poet-martyr and hero paradoxically: he portrays himself as remaining defiant whilst simultaneously submitting to a sense of fate.

Self-Identification with Mythological and Historical Figures

The way in which Brodsky employs classical references to construct his self-portrait is significant. The self-image constructed from the myth of Theseus in '1972 god' forms part of a wider network of classical allusions that is integral to the construction of Brodsky's poetic lyric persona. 'Odissei Telemaku' (1972) is an example of the way Brodsky uses mythological figures to build upon his own self-projection. Brodsky's

choice of this major classical hero is driven by biographical parallels, and here as elsewhere he is drawn to exiles. The figure of Odysseus arises in several of Brodsky's poems, yet 'Odissei Telemaku' offers a particularly pertinent example of the way Brodsky uses this figure to enact a deflation of his self-portrait whilst simultaneously achieving self-affirmation.

Мой Телемак,
Троянская война
окончена. Кто победил — не помню.
Должно быть, греки: столько мертвецов
вне дома бросить могут только греки…
И все-таки ведущая домой
дорога оказалась слишком длинной,
как будто Посейдон, пока мы там
теряли время, растянул пространство.
Мне неизвестно, где я нахожусь,
что предо мной. Какой-то грязный остров,
кусты, постройки, хрюканье свиней,
заросший сад, какая-то царица,
трава да камни…Милый Телемак,
все острова похожи друг на друга,
когда так долго странствуешь, и мозг
уже сбивается, считая волны,
глаз, засоренный горизонтом, плачет,
и водяное мясо застит слух.
Не помню я, чем кончилась война,
и сколько лет тебе сейчас, не помню.

Расти большой, мой Телемак, расти.
Лишь боги знают, свидимся ли снова.
Ты и сейчас уже не тот младенец,
перед которым я сдержал быков.
Когда б не Паламед, мы жили вместе.
Но может быть и прав он: без меня
ты от страстей Эдиповых избавлен,
и сны твои, мой Телемак, безгрешны. (*Ch*: 19)

As in ‘1972 god’ Brodsky chooses to present his lyric persona as the classical figure Odysseus, while Telemachus can be interpreted as the representation of his son. The adoption of this myth is significant. In *The Odyssey*, Homer generally depicts a fierce Odysseus who, in the twenty years that pass between his departure from Ithaka and his voyage home, never loses his desire to return (Torlone 2003: 99). Often read as a response to *The Iliad* due to the way in which the idea of glory undergoes a transformation from the ideals of military excellence to the more mundane notions of simple human happiness (Torlone 2003: 100), this framework works to continue the construction of Brodsky’s lyric persona as a martyr-hero. In ‘Odissei Telemaku’, Brodsky deliberately diverges from the Homeric myth in an attempt to heighten the plight of his lyric persona. This is seen clearly in the second and third lines when Brodsky’s lyric persona claims that he cannot remember who won the war. Such a lack of awareness immediately depicts the lyric persona as disconnected from the events that surround him. Such disconnection is developed throughout the poem as Brodsky builds an image of the poem’s speaker as lost in both space and time. This is made explicit with the reference to Poseidon, who is presented as having ‘stretched’ space (Torlone 2003: 99). This image is linked directly to the lyric persona’s disorientation as it is used to facilitate the portrayal of Odysseus’s difficulty in returning home:

> И все-таки ведущая домой
> дорога оказалась слишком длинной,
> как будто Посейдон, пока мы там
> теряли время, растянул пространство.

Such disorientation is compounded by the explicit claim that ‘Мне неизвестно, где я нахожусь,/ что предо мной’, which is in turn reflected by the lyric hero’s subsequent reiteration that he no longer remembers when the war ended or, indeed, the age of his son. By contrast, Homer’s Odysseus maintains an acute understanding of the passage of time and its inability to mitigate his longing for home (Torlone 2003: 99). This contrast heightens the sense of the lyric persona’s, and by extension Brodsky’s, permanent exile as implied by the poem.

The use of Homer's template impacts upon Brodsky's presentation of his circumstances. The tragic pose of Brodsky's lyric persona combines with the implied heroism resulting from his self-identification with Odysseus. The consequent image of a Romantic poet-hero is developed in the final stanza. The lyric hero's understandably impassioned plea to his son — 'Расти большой, мой Телемак, расти./ Лишь боги знают, свидимся ли снова' — again introduces a note of fatalism, heightening the sense of tragedy. Martyrdom itself figures explicitly in the final three lines, in which Brodsky employs reference to the Oedipus complex as an expression of the idea that his son will be better off without him. Such self-sacrifice conjures an inescapable image of tragic Romanticism. Zubova claims that the picture Brodsky paints is a deflation of the literary Odysseus figure rather than an aggrandisement of his own, and that Brodsky's conception of the character excises any hint of the heroic: the only aspect that remains is 'the name as a sign of cultural allegiance' (1999: 29). Yet Brodsky's use of Odysseus is more complicated than this; Zara Torlone is right to describe Brodsky's treatment of Homer's template as a 'transformation of the heroic into its opposite' (2003: 103). However, when read through a biographical prism this transformation can also be seen to accentuate the portrayal of martyrdom by reflecting the tragic aspects of Brodsky's life, therefore heightening the sense of self-sacrifice and stoicism. The helplessness of the figure within the poem combined with the reader's understanding of Brodsky's biography furthers the sense of pity. In a sense, Brodsky makes the Odysseus of his poem an anti-heroic martyr, and this depiction — close as it is to Brodsky's own attitude to biography — cannot be ignored. Through the choice of an exiled figure adjusted to display Brodsky's own self-negating approach, it is possible to see how Brodsky co-opts the myth of Odysseus in order to construct his own mythologised self-projection.

In the quotation above, Zubova implies that 'cultural allegiance' is insignificant. Yet cultural allegiance is key to Brodsky's self-portrayal as a poet. Not only does it lend a sense of authority to his lyric persona through its evocation of a literary canon, it also provides a basis for the adoption and development of other subtle methods of self-affirmation within the Romantic poet-martyr framework. As well as the mythological figure of Odysseus, Brodsky cultivates parallels with a number of classical writers, the

most significant of which are Martial, Ovid, Virgil, and Dante. The poem 'Pis'ma rimskomu drugu' (1972) for instance uses references to Martial as its focal point. Martial (ca. 40 - ca. 104) was born in Spain and had a successful literary career in Rome. Subsequently however, he returned 'disillusioned and embittered' to the provincial obscurity of Spain to spend the last dozen years of his life from 98 AD (Loseff, Polukhina: 63). The poem's epigraph is written 'Из Марциала' (*ChR*: 9), making explicit Brodsky's link between his lyric persona and the classical author. This reflects Gerard Genette's observation that 'the epigraph is already [the writer's] consecration. With it, he chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon' (1997: 160), directly pointing out the auto-canonisation that Brodsky achieves through his self-identification with Martial. Brodsky further develops links with Martial by employing borrowed elements, such as the name 'Postumus'. It is unclear whether the poem is an imitation or adaptation of Martial — as Kline points out, Loseff contends the former while Kline supports the latter (Kline 1990: 63). However, this is less important than the principal link with the poet, which echoes Martial's displacement in order to reflect Brodsky's own exile.

As such, the poem itself is an evocation of obscurity and displacement: the epistolary genre that Brodsky employs constructs a sense of distance, as do the questions posed in the third stanza:

> Что в столице? Мягко стелют? Спать не жестко?
> Как там Цезарь? Чем он занят? Все интриги?' (*ChR*: 9)

Moreover, Brodsky's lyric hero states explicitly that he is alone — 'Я сижу в своем саду, горит светильник./ Ни подруги, ни прислуги, ни знакомых' (lines 17-18) (*ChR*: 9). As a result, it is clear that Brodsky marries the image evoked by the poem with the circumstances of Martial's biography and, by extension, his own. This impacts upon Brodsky's self-image — by aligning himself so clearly with a classical poet such as Martial, Brodsky elevates the connotations of his self-presentation through precisely the cultural allegiance of which Zubova is dismissive. Moreover, Brodsky reinforces the literary trope of the poet in exile, once again fulfilling Russian Romantic expectations of

the poet as a persecuted outsider figure. Such cultural allegiance echoes throughout Brodsky's poetry; a number of poems are introduced with epigraphs taken from Ovid, such as 'Polevaia ekloga' (1963) and 'Ex Ponto (Poslednee pis'mo Ovidiia v Rim')' (1965), which takes its influence from Ovid's *Epistulae.* This is particularly significant as Ovid represents the ancient template for the banished poet and can be viewed as another example of Brodsky drawing on the Western cultural tradition of exiles within his own work.

As with the link to Martial, Brodsky's two 'Eclogues', 'Ekloga 4-aia (zimniaia)' (1977) and 'Ekloga 5-aia (letniaia)' (1981) reference Virgil in both their titles and also in the epigraph of the fourth eclogue. In parallel to the ambiguous relationship between 'Pis'ma rimskomu drugu' and the works of Martial, on the surface Brodsky's eclogues bear little relationship to Virgil's own (Scherr 1995: 367). It is the final stanza of the fourth eclogue that clarifies the significance of Virgil to Brodsky's self-portrait:

> […] голос Музы
> звучит как сдержанный, частный голос.
>
> Так родится эклога. Взамен светила
> загорается лампа: кириллица, грешным делом,
> разбредаясь по прописи вкривь ли, вкось ли,
> знает больше, чем та сивилла,
> о грядущем. О том, как чернеть на белом,
> покуда белое есть, и после. (*U*: 126)

Although Brodsky's own eclogues largely constitute a consideration of space and time, this conclusion as a paean to the affirming power of language and poetry shows Brodsky reflecting the progression used by Virgil in his fifth eclogue. Virgil's eclogue, which begins with a reference to a tragic death, ultimately reaches an optimistic conclusion through song (Scherr 1995: 347). Having made clear his evocation of Virgil in the epigraph, by linking the eclogue as a poetic form to his idealisation of language (his higher cause) Brodsky by extension implicates Virgil in the image and construction of his own mythology. Here Brodsky also reaffirms both his and Virgil's status as 'Poets'

by directly referencing the prophetic quality of language and poetry. The notion that language 'знает больше, чем та сивилла,/ о грядущем' is an explicit reference to the poem's epigraph, 'Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;/ magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo'.[8] In this way Brodsky can be seen to appropriate Virgil in order to reaffirm the traditional Russian Romantic link between poetry and prophecy, and poet and prophet.

Other significant figures that Brodsky identifies with in order to further his poetic self-portrait include Dante in the poems 'Pokhorony Bobo' (1972) and 'Dekabr' vo Florentsii' (1976), Mary Queen of Scots in 'Dvadtsat' sonetov k Marii Stiuart' (1974), and the biblical prophet Simeon in the well-known work 'Sreten'e' (1972). All of these particular characters bear the hallmark of a life defined by exile, martyrdom, or prophecy: Dante died in exile from Florence; Mary Queen of Scots was executed and considered a Catholic martyr; Simeon prophesied the birth of Christ. In associating himself in his poetry with these figures, as well as classical poets and mythological heroes, Brodsky elevates his own lyric persona. Moreover, Brodsky continually draws attention to and programmes particular readings of his biography. As with the other elements of Brodsky's poetic self-identity, these forms of self-presentation can be understood as a strategy for his own aesthetic ends. As such, the sections of this chapter provide a selective anatomy of repeated elements within Brodsky's lyrical work, drawing upon the positions that he adopts in interviews and his prose, as explored in the first chapter. The self-effacement and self-assertion exhibited through objectivity, martyrdom and classical mythology are intimately connected with the way in which Brodsky's self-projection functions, contributing to his own self-myth and always drawing him back to the Romantic tradition that he simultaneously reacts against and is constrained by.

[8] Scherr uses a translation by Putnam: 'Now the last ages of Cumaean song has come/ The great line of the ages is born anew' (1995: 371).

Chapter Three — Alienation and the Raising of Individual Consciousness

Brodsky's identification with canonical figures in order to place himself within a narrative of banishment and exile greatly affects the critical perception of alienation in his poetry. His self-appointment to the pantheon of displaced writers has resulted in critical focus upon the nature and form of exile in his works. Not only does this magnify Brodsky's exilic pose and contribute to his myth, it often results in the theme of alienation being obscured under the overarching umbrella of exile. Polukhina illustrates this at the beginning of her final chapter in the monograph *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time*. Despite the chapter's title — 'The Image of Alienation' — the opening sentence elides alienation into the situation of exile. It reads: 'The image of a man in exile — physical, political, and existential — runs through all of Brodsky's works […]' (1989: 237). The subtle replacement of 'alienation' by 'exile' indicates Polukhina's lack of distinction between these concepts. In treating them as synonyms, Polukhina endorses an approach in which they seem interchangeable.

In *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics* (1990), Kline also fails to make a distinction between alienation and exile. He employs a quotation from Jane Knox in order to set up his exploration of the 'themes of exile' in Brodsky's poetry, endorsing Knox's observation that 'Brodsky's critics have always been struck by the fact that a 'condition of banishment' was a constant trait of his spiritual and cultural make-up […] long before Brodsky left Russia, his reaction to the world around him was one of alienation' (1990: 56). By using this quotation in the introduction to a chapter in which Kline explores the issue of exile, Kline once again conflates the distinct states of exile and alienation by treating alienation as a justification for discerning a sense of 'banishment' in Brodsky's poems. Turoma observes many critics' readiness to frame Brodsky in this way, pointing out that Brodsky's travel poems tend to be interpreted in terms of exile rather than tourism. She quotes Loseff, again through Kline:

> '[…] the role and status of a traveler or tourist is quite different from that of an exile, even though both are 'away from home.' The traveler looks around him with greedy eyes; the exile looks rather within himself at the receding image of his

> homeland,' the traveler sees many countries, the exile sees only one: '*non*-homeland.' Despite Brodsky's planetary displacements since June 1972 — Loseff concludes — he has not travelled but simply *lived in exile*'. (2010: 17)

Loseff's interpretation can be seen to echo Brodsky's own self-identification with cultural figures, interpreting him in terms of the exilic narrative of Ovid, Odysseus, Dante, Pushkin, and the other exilic figures with whom Brodsky identifies himself. Turoma shows that Brodsky also evokes the canon of twentieth-century European displaced writers and literary exiles, citing his letter published in the *New York Times Magazine* in October 1972. Brodsky quotes Thomas Mann, writing that,

> I have come to America and I am going to live here […] To paraphrase a German writer who found himself in a similar situation 35 years ago, 'Die Russische Dichtung ist da wo ich bin'. (2010: 19)

Turoma points out that this stance, fashioned with 'a certain kind of distance, an exiled posture', can be seen as an appropriation of the geographic trope of modernism (2010: 18). Although much of Brodsky's work reflects the biographical imposition of his exile, critical readings that interpret the alienation in Brodsky's poetry only in these terms falsely attach to his work this modernist concern which prioritises the exilic condition. Such readings place Brodsky within a 'high-cultural exilic canon' in which displacement functions as the ideological premise informing art, while art simultaneously informs displacement. Such a position neglects the fact that Brodsky's representation of displacement is as much voluntary as it is coercive. It therefore frames Brodsky's works within a modernist mystification of exile and metaphysical discourse rather than considering his poetry in relation to its time and place (Turoma: 17-26). Accordingly, many critics fail to account for the fact that alienation in Brodsky's early poems was apparent well before he was exiled, and the displacement of his travel poems is the result of a direct choice — Polukhina writes that it is 'remarkable' that the image of exile appeared in his poetry 'long before his exile into the West and even before his northern exile', displaying the lack of logic that results from confusing exile as synonymous with alienation (1989: 247).

When the alienation within Brodsky's poetry is not immediately conflated with exile, Brodsky's connection with the broad tradition of Russian lyric poetry becomes clearer. This in turn confirms the significance of alienation as a theme in its own right, showing it to be a defining feature of lyric poetry rather than an exclusively modernist concern. Cavanagh shows David Bromwich observing that the 'autonomous individual' is crucial to the lyric genre (2009: 15), and the alienated lyric persona in Brodsky's poetry can certainly be seen as a continuation and recasting of this. Similarly, Cavanagh characterises the lyric genre in three ways: it prioritises a single speaking voice that privileges private over public experience; it values individual autonomy over civic responsibility; it considers aesthetic independence to be more important than social engagement (2009: 11). These observations begin to point up the political implications of lyric poetry as a result of its alienated stance. Angus Fletcher begins to explore this, identifying the way that lyric poetry traces the boundary between an inner self and 'the world out there' (2004: 227), seeming to test the divide between inclusion and exclusion (2004: 127). Theodor Adorno elaborates this in his essay 'Lyric Poetry and Society', in which he states that 'lyric poetry [is] something opposed to society, something wholly individual […] It implies a protest against a social situation which individuals experience as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive'. He observes that this individualistic stance is itself 'social in nature' (1991: 38-9). In this way, Adorno identifies the tension essential to the stance of alienation — namely, that withdrawing from society implies confronting social context.

The tension observed here highlights the political ambiguity of lyric poetry. Cavanagh outlines this tension in the Russian context, stating that to embrace collectivity and engagement in the USSR meant to serve the state, while to indulge in the bourgeois luxuries of introversion, contemplation, and disinterestedness was to challenge its dictates (2009: 20). Reginald Gibbon expresses this idea from the poet's point of view. He first suggests that '[poetry's] creation is individual, solitary, and takes place in response to, or despite, every known social and political situation' (1987: 650), reaffirming the paradox that Adorno notes as he continues:

> In much Eastern European poetry, the idea of privacy seems a defiance of state powers of surveillance, an insistence that individual powerlessness imposed by the state will not succeed in eradicating identity […] What is wanted by the poet is a thoroughly private life. This value, expressed in a poem, is political. (1987: 664)

In this way, Gibbon elucidates the peculiarly political nature of lyric poetry in the Soviet context. He links the notions of privacy, individuality, and identity, implying that the ability of lyric poetry to distance itself from its social context allows individuals to remain autonomous, so placing them in opposition to the state. The Polish poet, Stanislaw Baranczak, expresses this in even stronger terms, insisting in an interview that the attempt to save or defend one's own personality and the right to individuality is 'the most subversive public act' a poet can commit (Cavanagh 2009: 22).

Inevitably, when situated in the context of lyric poetry in Russia, the theme of alienation in Brodsky's works takes on political resonance. Yet in Brodsky's verse the relationship between alienation and his myth of apoliticism goes further. Alienation, as the 'central theme of […] the whole of Brodsky's work' (1999a: 253), can be linked to his poetic project to raise individual consciousness in response to 'tyrannical' automatisation. Viktor Shklovsky's formalist theory of estrangement (*остранение*) provides a useful means of reading the relationship between alienation and individual consciousness in Brodsky's poetry, particularly as crucial elements of Shklovsky's argument are directly echoed by Brodsky himself in two quotations. The first is taken from his essay 'On Grief and Reason' and the second from 'To Please a Shadow':

> [Art] fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness — thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous 'I'. (2011b: 40)

> A majority by definition, society thinks of itself as having other options than reading verses, no matter how well written. Its failure to do so results in its sinking to the level of locution at which society falls easy prey to the demagogue of a tyrant. (2011a: 359)

Here Brodsky illustrates his belief that art has the ability actively to condition individual consciousness to a heightened state of self-awareness. This reflects Shklovsky's famous phrase: 'И вот для того, чтобы вернуть ощущение жизни, почувствовать вещи, для того, чтобы делать камень каменным, существует то, что называется искусством' (1929: 13). Alienation in Brodsky's work can therefore be seen as a device of defamiliarisation, a technique of *остранение*: through the removal and separation of its perspective, alienation draws attention to the portrayal of a poem's object as much as the object itself, often depicting scenes anew that might otherwise be familiar. In this way, Brodsky returns 'the sensation of life' to both the reader and himself as a poet, enacting what Shklovsky asserts to be the purpose of art: 'Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание' (1929: 13). Brodsky himself imposes a political reading upon the way defamiliarisation in poetry leads to a heightened self-awareness. He shows that when people fail to read poetry, they fail to achieve the self-consciousness capable of resisting tyranny. Brodsky talks of 'sinking to the level of locution that falls easy prey to the demagogue of a tyrant', once again reflecting Shklovsky's views on habitualisation (*автоматизация*) and the way this undermines self-consciousness. The alienated view of the world presented by Brodsky in his art can therefore be equated with the goal of actively encouraging a questioning, individual consciousness that undermines the habitualisation that is the foundation of tyranny. This, as Smith points out, renders the alienation in Brodsky's work 'a deliberate antipode to the theory and practice of Soviet Socialist Realism' (Smith 1999a: 253).

This chapter therefore explores the theme of alienation in Brodsky's poetry as a means of illustrating its connection with his project of emancipating individual consciousness. The aim here is to question the critical acceptance of Brodsky's work as apolitical. The chapter focusses on two areas. Firstly, it discusses the evolving alienation in the portrayal of lovers by reflecting on four key poems, showing the way in which Brodsky connects alienation and autonomy in his works. The chapter then proceeds to explore the significance of bird imagery to the theme of alienation, discussing the implications of birds as a metaphor for the poetic word and showing how Brodsky undermines habitualisation through his evocation of an alternative alienated perspective. The chapter

focusses on close readings of Brodsky's poetry in order to expose better the theme of alienation within his works and to provide examples in contradiction to Brodsky's myth of apoliticism.

Social Alienation: The Distance Between Lovers

The way in which Brodsky presents his lyric persona in relation to others is a defining feature of his construction of alienation. The representation of human interaction necessarily impacts upon the perception of alienation, and Brodsky depicts this in such a way that the autonomy of his lyric 'I' is heightened, reflecting the significance he places upon individual consciousness. As has already been explored, images of humanity are particularly rare in Brodsky's poetry, a fact which reinforces the social alienation of his poetic world. Nevertheless there are a number of works that place Brodsky's lyric persona within the framework of human interaction, providing a more complex portrayal of alienation. Almost all of such poems can be defined as love poetry, and most of them are centred around the figure of Marina Basmanova, to whom the majority of Brodsky's love poems are dedicated. A large proportion of these lyrics are brought together under the title *Novye stansy k Avguste*, a collection that Brodsky is said to have considered his own 'Divine Comedy'. Of this collection, Loseff quotes Brodsky as saying,

> Unfortunately, I didn't write a 'Divine Comedy'. And apparently I never will. But here I've turned out a book with something like a plot of its own. (Loseff 2011: 62)

Brodsky's comment regarding 'plot' resonates with the development of the portrayal of alienation between the lovers in his poems. Brodsky's early love lyrics tend to convey a contented togetherness, thus the issue of alienation only begins to appear from approximately 1964 onwards, when the alienation between the poetic lovers comes to define and reinforce the alienation — and ultimately autonomy — of the lyric persona. Grudzinska Gross states that 'For Brodsky, as for Pushkin, the woman is an unfaithful lover about whom one can only write in the past tense […] Brodsky is the Abandoned One' (2009: 100). This provides a useful summary of the way in which various

manifestations of distance and absence depict the lyric persona's alienation; in Brodsky's poetry it is the separation of the lovers that brings alienation to the fore.

Although the poem 'Pen'e bez muzyki' (1970) is dedicated to Faith Wigzell rather than Marina Basmanova, it provides an elaborate example of the exploration of alienation in Brodsky's earlier love poetry. In these earlier poems the alienation of the lyric persona is lessened by the partial nature of the lovers' separation: although parted physically they remain spiritually connected. This is conveyed in the first lines of 'Pen'e bez muzyki', in which the image of spiritual connection is expressed through a shared memory, while physical separation is conjured with a reference to foreign lands: 'Когда ты вспомнишь обо мне/ в краю чужом' (*KPE*: 75). This conceit forms the basis of the poem's content and imagery framing these opposing states. The poet asks his lover to draw a triangle on a piece of paper in order to symbolise both their distance and their connections simultaneously: the lovers will be at the triangle's bases, separated by distance and invisible to one another, while at the apex there will be a star that they can both see (Smith 1999b: 20). Brodsky emphasises the lovers' physical distance from the poem's opening, repeating once more the barriers that separate them:

> […] когда ты
>
> за тридевять земель и за
> морями, в форме эпилога
> (хоть повторяю, что слеза,
> за исключением былого,
>
> все уменьшает) обо мне
> вспомянешь все-таки в то Лето
> Господне и вздохнешь — о не
> вздыхай! — обозревая это
>
> количество морей, полей,
> разбросанных меж нами, ты не
> заметишь, что толпу нулей
> возглавила сама.

В гордыне […] (*KPE*: 75)

By invoking the land and seas between them, as well as qualifying these barriers with quantifiers to magnify their effect ('тридевять', 'количество'), Brodsky heightens the separation of the lovers. Similarly, by placing the lovers at odds with nature Brodsky diminishes them, showing them to be helpless in the face of insurmountable circumstances. In this way Brodsky's lyric persona is stripped of his agency, and presented as an individual whose physical alienation from his lover is imposed upon him by external forces. This accords with Grudzinska Gross' observation that Brodsky is 'the Abandoned One', a characterisation that is reinforced when Brodsky opens the second section with a repetition of both the opening line and the physical images of countries and earth.

It is significant that the poem's lyric persona is not physically distant from his lover by choice. The alienation of Brodsky's lyric persona is an externally imposed condition rather than a self-constructed posture. Brodsky therefore demonstrates the autonomy of his lyric persona through the emotional connection with his lover — which *is* a choice — by using geometry to provide a metaphor for the transcendence of physical circumstance. Brodsky therefore begins to establish a link between alienation and autonomy, depicting the relationship between these notions in terms of cause and effect. Autonomy is effected through the way in which the lovers free themselves from physical shackles so that they can meet metaphysically. This is expressed in stanzas 47-8, in which the grief of the lovers is contained by the mathematical logic of the triangle, ultimately allowing their love a stronger and more permanent form than physical reality can offer:

[…] Разлука
есть сумма наших трех углов,
а вызванная ею мука

есть форма тяготенья их
друг к другу; и она намного
сильней подобных форм других.

Уж точно, что сильней земного. (*KPE*: 81)

This containment of grief in the pursuit of logic is reflected in the poem's language. There are very few descriptive adjectives, so that the poem amounts to a representation of authentic reasoning and rationalisation. This is also conveyed by the sentence and phrasing structure. Despite the tightly formed abab rhyme scheme, Brodsky's use of enjambement ensures that phrases are not determined by poetic form. Rather they run contrary to the poem's structure, running clauses across stanza breaks and halting in the middle of lines. This example is taken from stanzas 26-8:

> […] — вот
> оно и воздает сторицей
>
> предательству; возьми перо
> и чистую бумагу — символ
> Пространства — и, представив про-
> Порцию — а нам по силам
>
> представить все пространство: наш
> мир все же ограничен властью
> Творца: […] (*KPE*: 78)

Here Brodsky even breaks up a word, using the prefix 'про' to rhyme with 'перо' whilst the remainder of the word — '[…]-порцию' — runs into the third line of the stanza. Brodsky thus creates the impression of an 'unpremeditated outpouring of thoughts that spills over the formal restraints of the stanza boundaries' (Smith 1999b: 19). What might justly be called a stream of consciousness is reinforced as the poem's voice stops, starts, repeats itself, and hesitates (Smith 1999b: 23). On two occasions it breaks the poem's uniform four-line stanzaic structure, lending a fleeting sense of spontaneity: in both the fifth and fifty-fifth stanzas Brodsky inserts a fifth line ('В гордыне' and 'Когда ты') (*KPE*: 75, 81). This may be a playful poetic joke, yet it contributes to the sense of content and form as occasional opposing forces within the poem. This stream of consciousness reflects the process of reasoning that is fundamental to the poem, reinforcing its argument for the containment of grief through logic and therefore

autonomy through alienation from physical reality. Moreover, as Smith observes, it demonstrates this logic in action: emotion has been restrained or fettered by the mind instead of paralysing it and rendering it inarticulate (1999b: 22). Similarly, in portraying the struggle between content and form Brodsky can be seen to mirror the lyric persona's efforts at transcending from physicality to metaphysicality. This divorce from physical reality is reflected in the poem's lack of concrete information regarding the lovers. Brodsky offers no context for their relationship — for example, geographical information is kept to the broad terms 'земля', 'поле', 'море', and 'страна'. Similarly, the poem's only historical information is but vaguely implied, firstly by the poem's elegiac nature to show that the relationship is over, and secondly by the early line 'толпу нулей/ возглавила сама' (lines 19-20) (*KPE*: 75), specifying that it is Brodsky's lyric persona who was abandoned.

Intriguingly, Brodsky's lyric persona is enacting alienation from physical reality (and demonstrating autonomy) in order to defeat personal alienation from his lover. This defeat is achieved by upholding a metaphysical connection between the lovers which is reinforced by a portrayal of spiritual communion. Although the poem's point of view is governed by the lyric persona, Brodsky reiterates the lovers' pairing in his grammar, often employing the first person plural. This is in contrast to many of his other love poems which tend to widen the gulf between the lovers by using only 'Я' and 'ты'. Here, the number of first person plural conjugations, pronouns, and personal pronouns totals twenty-five over the course of sixty-one stanzas. This is significant in the context of a lyric persona notable for his solitariness. Similarly, the motif of pairs also arises a number of times throughout the poem. For instance, the lovers are united by two dots that symbolise the line between them. They are also represented by a pair of spotlights searching for each other in the night:

> Так двух прожекторов лучи,
> исследуя враждебный хаос,
> находят свою цель в ночи,
> за облаком пересекаясь;

но цель их — не мишень солдат:
она для них — сама услуга,
как зеркало, куда глядят
не смеющие друг на друга

взглянуть; […] (*KPE*: 79)

The harmony of the couple is therefore largely conveyed through the image of their alienation from the rest of the world. Here the ordered pairing of the searchlights is countered by the chaos in which they find themselves. Brodsky further portrays this by reinforcing the opposition between the lovers and external forces:

Вот место нашей встречи. Грот
заоблачный. Беседка в тучах.
Приют гостеприимный. Род
угла; притом, один из лучших

хотя бы уже тем, что нас
никто там не застигнет. (*KPE*: 79-80)

Brodsky heightens the disparity between their paradise in the clouds and the 'враждебный хаос' of the external world. Importantly, the adjectives employed are direct opposites ('враждебный' and 'гостеприимный'). The external forces are personified in the lines 'нас/ никто там не застигнет'. By using the impersonal 'никто' Brodsky gives the impression that the lovers are in opposition to many. Moreover, the verb 'застигнет' reinforces the sense of hostility underpinning the world outside the lovers' metaphysical reality. The lovers' connection within this surrounding alienation is captured at the poem's conclusion. Brodsky opens stanzas 59 and 60 with the line 'Ткни пальцем в темноту', a symbol of the lovers' fragile bond in the face of extreme alienation. This is elucidated as the stanzas develop towards their conclusion:

Ткни пальцем в темноту. Невесть
куда. Куда укажет ноготь.
Не в том суть жизни, что в ней есть,

но в вере в то, что в ней должно быть.

Ткни пальцем в темноту — туда,
где в качестве высокой ноты
должна была бы быть звезда;
и, если ее нет, длинноты,

затасканных сравнений лоск
прости: как запоздалый кочет,
униженный разлукой мозг
возвыситься невольно хочет. (*KPE*: 82)

The pointing of fingers into darkness suggests the existence of something that cannot be seen or felt, in this case the lovers' metaphysical connection. Moreover, the metonymy that contributes to the image's fragmentary sense captures the essence of the poem. By depicting a part of the whole, Brodsky shows how the physical self can be self-consciously transcended in order to exist metaphysically on an independent, alienated plane. The irony of this poem is that such alienation is enacted in order to maintain a connection with the lyric persona's lover. This process is symbolised by the star at the triangle's apex; it is a mirror through which to connect their gaze upon one another — a mirror which, even if it does not exist in reality, can be conjured by the mind. Thus Brodsky provides the final word on the poem's reasoning with the lines 'Не в том суть жизни, что в ней есть,/ но в вере в то, что в ней должно быть'. Fundamentally, the power of the mind can self-consciously overcome physical reality, alienating the persona in order that he may gain autonomy and independence. This directly reflects in his poetry the sentiments that Brodsky expresses in his essays regarding the raising of self-consciousness and the way this affects autonomy, ultimately allowing the individual an independent viewpoint that can overcome external pressures.

The sense of alienation as a shared experience gradually begins to disintegrate in Brodsky's love lyrics. Only four years after 'Pen'e bez muzyki' was written, Brodsky composed the cycle 'Dvadtsat' sonetov k Marii Stiuart' (1974) in which the cold, autonomous voice for which Brodsky is renowned is far more prevalent. Widely quoted,

the sixth sonnet offers a complex insight into the way Brodsky positions his lyric persona in relation to the poem's lover-figure. Moreover, as a parody of Pushkin's seminal lyric 'Ia Vas liubil' (1829), it can be seen to subvert the original; Brodsky appropriates Pushkin's lyric and the long tradition of versifying in its vein whilst simultaneously distancing his own sonnet by presenting Pushkin's work anew. The most obvious signal that Brodsky's lovers are no longer connected by an innate romantic understanding is represented by the figure of the statue. The sonnets are framed by the notional image of Brodsky's lyric persona addressing the statue of Mary Queen of Scots, the poem's figurative lover, in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris. The lyric persona's lover has thus become an object — static and unable to communicate; Brodsky has stripped her of humanity. This is reflected in the poem's language. Whereas 'Pen'e bez muzyki' cultivates a sense of conceptual dialogue through its use of imperatives and references to the lover's agency ('Когда ты вспомнишь обо мне'), the sonnets to Mary Stuart create the sense that the lyric persona is addressing a void:

> Я вас любил. Любовь еще (возможно,
> что просто боль) сверлит мои мозги,
> Все разлетелось к черту, на куски.
> Я застрелиться пробовал, но сложно
> с оружием. И далее, виски:
> в который вдарить? Портила не дрожь, но
> задумчивость. Черт! все не по-людски!
> Я Вас любил так сильно, безнадежно,
> как дай Вам бог другими — но не даст!
> Он, будучи на многое горазд,
> не сотворит — по Парменид — дважды
> сей жар в груди, ширококостный хруст,
> чтоб пломбы в пасти плавились от жажды
> коснуться — 'бюст' зачеркиваю — уст! (*ChR*: 47)

The lack of interaction between the lyric persona and the lover is conveyed through the poem's syntax. The lover is never granted autonomy by becoming the subject of a phrase, she is only ever objectified ('Я вас любил' and 'дай Вам бог другими'). The poem's point of view is therefore transmitted solely through the gaze of the lyric persona

as there is no reference to the lover as an individual consciousness. This necessarily alienates the lyric persona, entrenching the poem's voice in a world in which communication is one-directional.

Alienation from the lyric persona's lover is reflected by Brodsky's ironic distancing from love. This outlook is introduced at the sonnet's opening in which Brodsky writes 'Любовь еще (возможно,/ что просто боль) […]'. Here Brodsky undermines the romanticism of love, diminishing its significance by comparing it to the physical reality of pain, and qualifying such pain with 'просто'. Romanticism is further undermined by grotesque imagery in the poem's final lines, marking a move away from a sentimental portrayal of love and human relationships. Desire, for example, is symbolised by the melting of fillings in the lyric persona's jaw. In fact, the entire sonnet can be viewed as a parody of the poetic treatment of love, and Brodsky appropriates the Pushkin classic precisely to this end: the noble love of Pushkin's lyric is subverted by Brodsky. Zholkovsky points out that in Pushkin's 'Ia Vas liubil' the unhappy love of the lyric persona is mediated by God: the speaker loses his beloved but finds himself on the good side of the divine forces and thus reconciled with life (1994: 125). The element of the divine is conveyed in Pushkin's poem through a complete lack of physical references, as though Pushkin's lyric persona exists in a world of feeling and spirituality. Brodsky undermines this through his grotesque, physical imagery, as well as his reference to suicide. By portraying his lyric persona as unable to shoot himself, Brodsky conveys the sense that he is fully shackled by the physical world. Ironically, he is partly prevented by 'задумчивость', showing that the metaphysical reality of consciousness is here defeating physicality. In contrast to Pushkin, therefore, Brodsky's lyric persona is a base figure entrapped within a corporeal existence. His lack of affinity with the divine is expressed in direct opposition to Pushkin's own: whereas the God of Pushkin's lyric grants him a version of peace, Brodsky's lyric persona knows that he will never again experience the 'жар в груди, ширококостный хруст' instilled in him by this particular lover.

The ironic final note of Brodsky's lyric crystallises this subversion of Pushkin's own

work as Brodsky ridicules the poetic sentimentalisation of desire: ‘от жажды/коснуться — ‘бюст’ зачеркиваю — уст!’. Here Brodsky depicts his lyric persona as a poet who censors the reality of his desire in order to sound poetically acceptable. In this context, the replacement of ‘lips’ feels deliberately trite and false. The self-consciousness conveyed by the verb ‘зачеркиваю’ sums up the metaliterary nature of Brodsky’s lyric, depicting the poet’s ultimate concern with Pushkin’s original. As a result, the undermining of love by Brodsky can be seen to relate more to the topic of poetry than his lover (Zholkovsky 1994: 144). The link between alienation and autonomy is therefore reinforced — the lover is pushed to the periphery and alienated; language and poetry become the self-conscious focus of an autonomous lyric persona.

The shift of focus from love towards language reflects the receding presence of the two lovers in Brodsky’s poems from the late 1970s onwards. Moreover, physical displacement comes to define the relationship, heightening the sense of longing and further reinforcing the alienation that already exists. The first lyric of the cycle ‘Chast’ rechi’ demonstrates this: the lines ‘я взбиваю подушку мычащим ‘ты’/за морями’ (lines 13-14) appear towards the end of the poem after the lyric persona has opened with a statement of displacement — ‘Ниоткуда с любовью, надцатого мартобря’ (*ChR*: 75). Despite this, Brodsky’s poem ‘Ia byl tol’ko tem, chego […]’ (1981) offers a rare example of the resurgence of the love theme and the central concern of the relationship between two lovers, developing the connection between alienation and autonomy. Interestingly, the English translation is titled ‘Seven Strophes’ (Brodsky 2001: 286-7). In bypassing the theme of love and focussing upon form and genre in the title, the translation could be seen to reenact the self-conscious alienation found in ‘Dvadtsat’ sonetov k Marii Stiuart’. Yet the theme of language and poetry does not surface in this work; rather, Brodsky constructs an emotionally engaged portrayal of the relationship by means of an affecting nostalgic tone, which ultimately influences the representation of alienation and autonomy in this poem, again linking to Brodsky’s political project regarding the emancipation of self-consciousness. Boym outlines nostalgia in the following way:

> Nostalgia (from *nostos* — return home, and *algia* — longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship […] Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed towards the future. (2001: xiii-xiv)

By linking nostalgia to displacement, Boym identifies the external cause and effect relationship that exists between nostalgia and a change in time or place. This distinguishes nostalgia from alienation, as the latter is primarily derived from an internal state for which a discernible 'cause' is not strictly necessary. Yet nostalgia implies alienation, as its inherent 'sentiment of loss' suggests a sense of both removal and distance. This hints at the way in which nostalgia can be used to construct an image of alienation.

Applied to 'Ia byl tol'ko tem, chego […]', the 'longing for a home that no longer exists' takes the form of the nostalgic love for an alienated lover. Brodsky's lyric persona mourns a connection between the lovers that now no longer exists, just as in Brodsky's earlier poetry, and 'Pen'e bez muzyki' in particular.. The portrayal of this connection within an elegiac framework heightens the state of the lyric persona's alienation in the present — unhappy, he nostalgically mourns for what existed in the past. Brodsky employs fragmentary imagery in order to mimic the nature of memory and therefore alienate the lovers within their past. These fragmentary images from the lovers' past are suspended in space, both intensifying the imagery and heightening the lovers' alienation from physical reality. The fragmentary nature of the imagery is largely achieved through metonymy, which is shown particularly in the first four stanzas of the poem:

> Я был только тем, чего
> ты касалась ладонью,
> над чем в глухую, воронью
> ночь склоняла чело.
>
> Я был лишь тем, что ты
> там, снизу, различала:
> смутный облик сначала,

много позже - черты.

Это ты, горяча,
ошую, одесную
раковину ушную
мне творила, шепча.

Это ты, теребя
штору, в сырую полость
рта вложила мне голос,
окликавший тебя. (*U*: 152)

Here Brodsky uses Pushkin's 'Пророк' (1826) as a subtext through which to hint at the nature of the lyric persona's self-sacrificial love. The fragmentary allusions to physical presence are conveyed by the touch of a hand, the suggestion of a whisper, and the figure at a curtain. The second stanza reinforces the sense that these isolated images are suspended in space: the face is at first vague, its features only gradually becoming clear. Thus as the image asserts itself it expands, encroaching upon the space that surrounds it. This relationship between the poem's lyric persona and the evocation of space is crucial to the alienation at the heart of the poem. The sensory metonymy of the lyric persona's recollections is ethereal; cut off from physical reality and suspended in space and time, Brodsky's lyric persona lives in its memory. The nostalgia of the poem's voice directly contributes to this sensory, abstract existence, evoking a love that no longer exists. This is depicted clearly in the poem's final three stanzas:

Я был попросту слеп.
Ты, возникая, прячась,
даровала мне зрячесть.
Так оставляют след.

Так творятся миры.
Так, сотворив их, часто
оставляют вращаться,
расточая дары.

Так, бросаем то в жар,

то в холод, то в свет, то в темень,
в мирозданьи потерян,
кружится шар. (*U*: 152)

The lyric persona's lover creates a world and then abandons it, leaving it to spin in a lost universe — a metaphor for the abandoned lyric persona. Consequently, Brodsky depicts his lyric persona as trapped in an existence of loss, engulfed by space. The voice is stripped of agency as the lyric persona spins inevitably, hostage to the abstract external forces of heat, cold, light, and darkness. Thus, partly through Brodsky's veneration of his lover throughout the poem, alienation translates to an expression of helplessness — 'Я был только тем/ я был лишь тем'. Helplessness is demonstrated by the way in which Brodsky's lyric persona is barred from physical reality and engagement with life's surroundings. This is heightened by the contrast of the lover who is now her own agent, in contrast to her static portrayal in 'Dvadtsat' sonetov k Marii Stiuart'. Any motion in the poem is enacted by the lover: it is she who 'leaves a mark', forging the world of Brodsky's lyric persona and ultimately abandoning it to an existence of alienation. The metaphysical alienation that Brodsky's lyric persona strives to attain in 'Pen'e bez muzyki' is therefore fully realised, although now not as a result of the persona's own efforts but through inadvertent loss, the grief of which consumes him in exactly the way that the first poem attempts to transcend. The implications are clear: Brodsky's lyric persona does not achieve autonomy because his alienation is partial, governed by an imposed circumstance rather than his own outlook. In such a condition resistance to external forces is therefore impossible, reflecting Brodsky's warnings regarding the danger in failing to achieve a state of removed self-consciousness.

The relationship between alienation and autonomy as expressed by Brodsky in his poetic project is realised most clearly in the poem 'Dorogaia, ia vyshel segodnia iz domu pozdno vecherom […]' (1981), one of Brodsky's last works to be centred upon lovers. This poem depicts the lyric persona's ultimate and now irreversible alienation from his lover. This depiction is achieved through objectivity — the lyric hero is presented assessing and examining the lover through the prism of time:

Четверть века назад ты питала пристрастье к люля и к финикам,
рисовала тушью в блокноте, немножко пела,
развлекалась со мной но потом сошлась с инженером-химиком
и, судя по письмам, чудовищно поглупела. (*PSN*: 44)

This objectivity leads to dispassion: Brodsky excises emotion, imparting memories as though they were a list. To this end the syntax is simple, eschewing overt poeticism in order to convey the frankness that might occur if the lyric persona were simply speaking aloud. Similarly, the listed memories are deliberately prosaic. Dispassion also allows a note of cruelty to appear — '[ты] чудовищно поглупела' (*PSN*: 44). In this way Brodsky demonstrates the lyric persona's indifference and illustrates his lack of nostalgia. As Boym writes, there is now no 'romance with one's own fantasy' (2011: xiii). Rather Brodsky's lyric persona is harsh and matter of fact. This is developed in the following two stanzas:

Теперь тебя видят в церквях в провинции и в метрополии
на панихидах по общим друзьям, идущих теперь сплошною
чередой; и я рад, что на свете есть расстоянья более
немыслимые, чем между тобой и мною.

Не пойми меня дурно. С твоим голосом, телом, именем
ничего уже больше не связано; никто их не уничтожил,
но забыть одну жизнь — человеку нужна, как минимум,
еще одна жизнь. И я эту долю прожил. (*PSN*: 44)

Here emotional reconciliation is portrayed through the imagery of distance — in sharp contrast to 'Pen'e bez muzyki', in which physical separation and a heightened sense of grief are indivisible. Now the separation of the lovers is depicted through removal: the lover is known to the lyric persona through others rather than first hand. Yet this physical distance is less dramatic than that portrayed in earlier poems, for there is a point of contact 'по общим друзьям'. This contrasts starkly with the star of 'Pen'e bez muzyki' that symbolises the achievement of metaphysical freedom from grief. The way this separation is treated undramatically reflects the development of alienation between the lovers. The statement that 'я рад, что на свете есть расстоянья

более/немыслимые, чем между тобой и мною' demonstrates a receding emotional engagement with the lover — the distance between them is no longer exceptional. This is confirmed in the following stanza, in which the lyric persona's emotional alienation is stated explicitly: the features that hold the lover together in the lyric persona's memory — her voice, body, and name — now evoke nothing. It is significant that Brodsky employs the adjective 'связано'; in implying that the lyric persona is no longer reminded of his lover through the notion of 'connection', Brodsky depicts the individual consciousness of his lyric persona as unaffected by the consciousness of another, finally allowing it the autonomy it is denied in 'Ia byl tol'ko tem, chego […]'.

Such autonomy both introduces and concludes the poem. Rather than immediately engaging with the theme of love and the relationship with the lover, Brodsky uses the first stanza simply to portray the lyric persona and his surroundings. Opening with the lines 'Дорогая, я вышел сегодня из дому поздно вечером/ подышать свежим воздухом, веющим с океана' (*PSN*: 44), introduces the lack of concern and engagement that characterises the poem. In this context, referring to the lover as 'дорогая' is laced with irony, paradoxically perpetuating the sense of emotional alienation through use of an adjective that would otherwise connote closeness. This emotional alienation is reflected in the poem's closing line: 'Я курю в темноте и вдыхаю гнилье отлива' (*PSN*: 44). Darkness and space once again communicate the alienation of the lyric persona. Yet here, unlike in 'Ia byl tol'ko tem, chego […]', such alienation equals autonomy. The emphasis upon the subject as a self-conscious individual is conveyed by the agency of the verbs in the first person. Similar to the effect of 'зачеркиваю' in the sonnet explored earlier, Brodsky offers a rare image of a self-conscious lyric persona who shapes his own conditions, even if such conditions are simply smoking in darkness and breathing the scent of seaweed.

Consequently, Brodsky's lyric persona can no longer fully be described as 'the Abandoned One'; his personal autonomy is now realized through the alienation he has effected from his lover. His lyric persona resists the effects of external pressures — such as the grief experienced in 'Pen'e bez muzyki' as a result of the distance from his lover

— through autonomy achieved as a direct consequence of alienation. This process, resulting in the emancipation of Brodsky's lyric persona, reflects the values that Brodsky expresses outside of his poetry. His belief that man should develop a 'sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness' in order to resist the 'demagogue of a tyrant' is echoed in his poetry through the developing autonomy and self-awareness of his lyric persona in relation to the lover figure. As such, the themes of Brodsky's poetry can be seen to reflect his ideals in life – ideals which, as already demonstrated, draw upon and react to Brodsky's political context.

Birds, Freedom, and the Alienated Poetic Word

Just like the evolving relationship between lovers, the image of birds is integral to the expression of Brodsky's poetic project regarding self-consciousness and autonomy. Yet the theme of birds is more clearly linked to the concept of estrangement, showing Brodsky not only representing but realising his project within his poetry. In his essay on Derek Walcott, Brodsky writes that 'the real biographies of poets are like those of birds, almost identical — their data are in the way they sound' (2011a: 164). Brodsky's use of birds as imagery within his poems parallels the thinking within this concept. The comparison between poets and birds implies a similar link between poetry, or the poetic word, and birdsong. This connects birds in Brodsky's poems to the power with which he credits poetry — its ability to '[foster] in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness'. As such, it is fitting that birds are used as a recurrent motif for the presentation of varying forms of alienation, which results in an evocation of individual freedom that Brodsky hopes will engage automatised perception. The final section of 'V Anglii' (1976) draws these themes together, illustrating the connection between poet and bird and providing a starting point from which to interpret the poems in which bird imagery is central:

> Английские каменные деревни.
> Бутылка собора в окне харчевни.
> Коровы, разбредшиеся по полям.
> Памятники королям.

Человек в костюме, побитом молью,
провожает поезд, идущий, как все тут, к морю,
улыбается дочке, уезжающей на Восток.
Раздается свисток.

И бескрайнее небо над черепицей
тем синее, чем громче птицей
оглашаемо. И чем громче поет она,
тем все меньше видна. (*U*: 81)

Here Brodsky eliminates the first person perspective that marks the impressions of England in the preceding sections of the poem and instead uses the bird to present an alien perspective, making the familiar seem unfamiliar. Already this hints at the way the bird's perspective can be linked to Brodsky's project of raising self-consciousness through unfamiliar perspectives so that reality may be appreciated in different lights. Although it is not explicitly stated that the viewpoint is the bird's, it is implied through the expansiveness of perspective: collecting images that cover a wide area in terms of space and scope, Brodsky offers an all-seeing viewpoint that accords with the bird framed against a blue sky in the final stanza. This view also leads to a sense of impersonality in the second stanza as the lyric figure's movements are observed from afar: with no suggestion of his motivation or the context of his actions, he becomes an anonymous figure, perhaps representing the arbitrary movement of humanity juxtaposed to the static permanence of the objects in the first stanza. Brodsky ties these alienated images to his belief in the power of poetry by explicitly linking them to such poetry with the lines 'И чем громче поет она,/ тем все меньше видна'. In this way, Brodsky makes the link between the bird and the poet, echoing his claim that 'the real biographies of poets are like those of birds […] — their data are in the way they sound'. By implying that the bird becomes less visible as his song grows louder, this image can be understood as a metaphor for Brodsky's own self-effacement, tying in with his thoughts regarding the inconsequentiality of the poet and his biography vis-à-vis perceptions of his work (or 'song'). Thus birdsong and bird represent poetry and the poet respectively. Along with the alienated and 'de-automatised' viewpoint, the bird and his

song can be read as a metaphor for the autonomous, individual consciousness achieved through poetry, whilst simultaneously giving rise to such consciousness.

Brodsky's poem 'V okrestnostiakh Aleksandrii' (1982) is a complex example of the relationship between bird imagery and the interrogation of automatised perception. The poem offers a representation of the ancient city of Alexandria, which follows a tradition of using the city as a metaphor for St Petersburg (Loseff notes that Hellenic Alexandria has long figured as a historical analogy for St Petersburg (Loseff 2001: 13-14)). Although Brodsky's representation of St Petersburg as Alexandria is therefore not unusual, the use of this metaphor still offers an alienated representation of the city by presenting the known as an unknown. The city is further alienated throughout the poem, enacting the process that is necessary to defeat habitualisation. This is achieved through the perspective of a detached, wide-ranging eye, which offers an alternative viewpoint of the city. This viewpoint can be linked to a crucial reference to birds that appears fleetingly in the sixth stanza:

> Жертва легких, но друг ресниц,
> воздух прозрачен, зане исколот
> клювами плохо сносящих холод,
> видимых только в профиль птиц. (*U*: 141)

The link between the perspective of the poem and the image of birds is indicated by Brodsky's focus on visibility. Just as the bird becomes 'все меньше видна' in 'V Anglii' as a metaphor for the poet, here the birds are only visible in profile — 'видимых только в профиль птиц'. The similar emphasis on visibility suggests parallels with the image in 'V Anglii', strengthening the notion of the bird as poet and revealing the alienation effected by the poet through an alternative perspective. This is reinforced by Brodsky's translation of this stanza into English. Rather than adopting a literal translation, Brodsky expands his original imagery to include references to language and writing:

> Victim of lungs though friend to words,

> The air is transparent, severely punctured
> by beaks that treat it as pens treat parchment,
> by visible only-in-profile-birds. (2001: 268)[9]

The simile of beaks as pens points to the connection between birds and the processes of poetry. The 'I' of the poem is therefore the alienated perspective of the poet, expressed through the viewpoint of birds. This accords with the alternative birds' eye portrayal of the city — a perspective that is apparent from the poem's first stanza. For example, the 'каменный шприц' representing the spire of a building as it pierces clouds is juxtaposed by the image of a spy rummaging in a rubbish dump (*U*: 141). The convergence of such large-scale imagery with a more specifically detailed image reflects the technique used in 'V Anglii' to evoke a perspective that is broad in both its space and scope. This juxtaposition forms the crux of the city's portrayal: the third and fourth stanzas focus upon the fleeting details of a chandelier's reflections and the tulle curtains at a window ('В сумерках люстра сродни костру,/ пляшут сильфиды, мелькают гузки', and 'В окнах зыблется нежный тюль') (*U*: 141), while the poem subsequently develops to portray first a river and then a sunset. This is mirrored by the poem itself evolving; it opens with a focussed portrayal of Alexandria/St Petersburg from which it ultimately concludes with sweeping references to the desert, pyramids, and the 'горизонтальность […] земля'. The poem ends with a final image of the city from a distance — 'И поезд подкрадывается, как змея,/ к единственному соску столицы' (*U*: 141-2). Just as in 'V Anglii', the effect of the birds' viewpoint is one of alienation through distance. This demonstrates the process of alienation being carried out twice. The bird's perspective already presents the known as an unknown, yet the opportunities of this perspective — namely, the distance that is the result of a bird's eye point of view — alienates the image of the city further. This can be seen in the way the distant perspective offers a differing static portrayal of the city — the train creeps rather than rushes, a reflection of the way in which the perception of movement alters with an increased field of view.

Such stasis creates a sense of removal between the object of the poem — the city — and

[9] This translation by Brodsky first appeared in The New York Review of Books on December 22nd 1983 (Brodsky 2000: 521).

the subject. This technique is mirrored in the poem 'Kappadokiia' (1990-1991) in order to elicit an alternative philosophical reflection upon the implications of history. Brodsky portrays a historic battle between the forces of Roman Emperor Sulla and King Mithridates IV of Pontus, set against the backdrop of Cappadocia, Central Anatolia, circa 89-85 BC. Although the battle is bloody, the perspective through which the drama is portrayed is one of alienation. Again, this is partly achieved through distance, which heightens the sense of stasis as a result, with movements being slowed and the impact of the army diminished against the contrasting permanence of the backdrop of desert, sky, and mountains. A similar effect is achieved in the way Brodsky likens the moving army to a river. Viewed from afar, the army resembles a winding river ('извивающаяся река') whose source tries to keep up with its mouth, which in turn constantly looks back to its source ('чей исток норовит не отставать от устья,/ которое тоже все время оглядывается на исток') (*PSN*: 121). This meandering movement reflects the creeping of the train in 'V okrestnostiakh Aleksandrii', where the perspective of alienation is similarly employed to undermine the impressiveness of movement when experienced in its immediacy. Such alienation from the human drama of the battle echoes throughout the poem; the clashing of armies is portrayed in terms of opposing reflections merging in a common mirror, for example. Stasis, disengagement, and distance unite in the third stanza with the image of an eagle in order to convey the alienation that is crucial to the poem:

> […] Только, поди, орлу,
> парящему в темноте, привыкшей к его крылу,
> ведомо будущее. Глядя вниз с равнодушьем
> птицы — поскольку птица, в отличие от царя,
> от человека вообще, повторима — орел, паря
> в настоящем, невольно парит в грядущем
> и, естественно, в прошлом, в истории: в допоздна
> затянувшемся действии. Ибо она, конечно,
> суть трение временного о нечто
> постоянное […] (*PSN*: 122)

Crucially, the eagle views the events below with apathy ('равнодушие'). The bird's

permanence allows it to view the battle from another perspective: its distance from the human tragedy below allows it to consider the events with indifference. Moreover, its continuity in time reinforces its perception of the soldiers' transience and reflects the poem's message that history diminishes the significance of events as time moves on. This perspective reflects the distance, disengagement, and stasis found throughout the poem, making sense of the ultimately apathetic tone with which the tragedy of battle is portrayed. This reconsideration of a historic event parallels the alternative portrayal of St Petersburg in 'V okrestnostiakh Aleksandrii'. In both poems birds are employed as a tool to reflect anew upon what is already known, offering a fresh and unfamiliar interpretation. This accords with Brodsky's reference to 'видимых только в профиль птиц' where the visibility of birds alters according to the angle at which they are seen. It is this emphasis upon ways of seeing that works as the connection between these poems. As part of Brodsky's poetic project, he presents places, events, and ideas from unexpected angles, here using the motif of birds both as a symbol for individual consciousness and as a catalyst for its awakening.

This works in parallel with Brodsky's representation of social alienation and the way it leads to a realisation of autonomy and self-conscious individuality. As the element that ties these processes together, alienation can therefore be understood as an integral part of Brodsky's aim of instilling resistance in individuals through a realisation of self-consciousness through the power of poetry. The political threads of this project are to be traced in Brodsky's recourse to vocabulary such as 'tyrant' and 'demagogue', demonstrating that it is a misconception to view Brodsky's poetry in isolation from political discourse, and qualifying the screen of apoliticism which has surrounded him.

Chapter Four — Problems of Apoliticism: Political Material in Brodsky's Poetry

> A poet gets into trouble because of his linguistic, and, by implication, his psychological superiority, rather than because of his politics. A song is a form of disobedience, and its sound casts doubt on a lot more than a concrete political system: it questions the entire existential order. And the number of its adversaries grows proportionally. (2011a: 136).

This Romantic assessment of poetry once again depicts poets and their art in terms of genius by remarking upon their 'superiority'. It emphasises the notion of persecution, claiming that poets '[get] into trouble' and highlighting the 'number' of their adversaries. Brodsky also portrays poetry as a vehicle for disobedience in accordance with the Russian Romantic perception of the poet as a martyr-figure who sacrifices himself for the greater good. He also asserts that the poet is not persecuted because of his politics, which he presents as irrelevant in the face of the 'entire existential order'. Thus, while adhering to broadly Romantic principles in his understanding of poets and poetry Brodsky weaves into this narrative a rejection of politics and political issues, giving rise to his myth of apoliticism.

Yet, whilst claiming that political outlook is irrelevant to the persecution of poets, Brodsky's statement that a poem calls into question 'a lot more than the concrete political system' is double-edged. Though Brodsky is claiming the primacy of existential and philosophical concerns within his poetic outlook, political resonances are also contained in such a schematic, albeit with a less important role. The fact that Brodsky did not appear to get into trouble directly for his political beliefs is a long way from any supposition that politics had no role in his getting 'into trouble'. Instead, the 'form of disobedience' contained within his 'song' is exactly the questioning that Brodsky highlights: the presentation of the individual in a context where art was a political commodity.

The extent to which political issues constitute the major theme of a number of Brodsky's

works illustrates the problem that occurs when he diminishes politics in the face of existential concerns. In poems such as 'Glagoly' (1960) — which is explored shortly in this chapter — Brodsky is clearly drawing on the political situation within the Soviet Union for the content of his poetry to the extent that its political subject-matter overshadows any other possible form of 'disobedience'. Here, as in a substantial number of other poems, it is clear that an important aspect is the questioning of the 'concrete political system'. While this may not amount to the fundamental preoccupation of Brodsky's poetry, it demonstrates that political concerns in his poems are often significant and are not always subsumed within philosophical matters as Brodsky claims.

Some critical attention has been paid to elements of politics within Brodsky's verse, although it is frequently torn between highlighting political cadence and maintaining faith to the explicit content of Brodsky's assertions, rather than the political undertow of resistance below the surface of his words. For example, Loseff observes that there are a number of poems for which politics can reasonably be seen to be the primary concern, and he detects Brodsky as developing a unique 'poetico-political philosophy' (1990: 34). Yet Loseff also argues that politics came into Brodsky's work after his aesthetic, existential-philosophic and religious views were already being explored, echoing Brodsky's own assertions about the primacy of existential and philosophical concerns. Despite this, Loseff sees 'the air of political, or rather historical, reality is always present in his work, including even utterly lyrical pieces' (1990: 51). This has been explored in the second and third chapters, where Brodsky's self-presentation and the alienation in his poetry are shown to have specific political resonance: his self-projection places him in a political tradition of self-creating poets, and the theme of alienation links to his political project regarding the raising of self-consciousness. Thus as Loseff points out, political reality is present in such works despite their apparent lack of obvious political content.

Murphy also interrogates Brodsky's claim that philosophical concerns are always primary within poetry, demonstrating that Brodsky draws upon national and

international fears through political allusions (2004: 88). In 'My snova prozhivaem u zaliva' (1962), Murphy sees Brodsky's reference to a 'залив' ('gulf' or 'bay'), as having particular political resonance at a time when both the Gulf of Finland and the Bay of Pigs had brought the public to a perception of fraying peace. Building on his sense of the ambiguity of *залив*, Murphy concludes that the sense of apocalypse that hangs over the love lyric is drawn from specific political conflicts at the time:

> Couched in the terms of a love poem […] 'Once more we're living in the bay' is an acute and unsettling vision of what seemed to many to be impending nuclear war between East and West. (2004: 88)

Murphy has a powerful sense of the political elements within the poem, though he is mistaken to see it as a political poem co-opting the language of love poetry. Rather, it is the political resonances, which are the basic matter from which the love poem is formed, providing the language for Brodsky's expression of attachment immortalised by apocalypse. Nevertheless, Murphy's reading of 'My snova prozhivaem u zaliva' would be significantly less effective without his awareness of the political implications, as it is clear that a significant element of the poem is the way in which it 'casts doubt' on 'a concrete political system'. This calls into question the exclusive primacy Brodsky claims for philosophical and existential concerns over politics.

This chapter demonstrates that, far from politics being a secondary consideration for Brodsky, political and civic content is central to understanding a large number of his verses. For the sake of clarity, the chapter schematises a number of poems into three broad themes. The first comprises poems that have an overt societal focus, depicting people living within the system of the USSR and showing how this is connected to a portrayal of oppression. The second section deals with depictions of the USSR, and the way in which these feed into implicit criticisms of the state. The third section deals with more direct depictions of the Soviet regime, encompassing ideas of autocracy and tyranny. As this system makes clear, the chapter focusses on depictions of the human condition, through to depictions of the country, and then finally to Brodsky's portrayal of the political regime itself. This trajectory through the material seeks to elucidate some

of the ways in which Brodsky uses obviously political material as either the central concern or the inspiration of many of his poems, contradicting his own statements regarding the irrelevance of politics to his work as well as his general myth of apoliticism.

Societal Oppression: Drudgery and Muteness

This section begins with 'Glagoly' (1960), a poem representing life under the Soviet regime and marked by a 'political coloration' as a result of its clear portrayal of oppression (Polukhina 1989: 8). As the title suggests, a significant feature of this poem is Brodsky's portrayal of citizens as verbs, a metaphor which links the linguistic and social concerns at the centre of the poem. This imagery also renders the poem a metaphor for faceless action, as Brodsky depicts oppression through images of citizens who are devoid of individuality and consigned en masse to pointless drudgery:

Меня окружают молчаливые глаголы,
похожие на чужие головы
глаголы,
голодные глаголы, голые глаголы,
главные глаголы, глухие глаголы.

Глаголы без существительных, глаголы — просто.
Глаголы, которые живут в подвалах,
говорят — в подвалах,
рождаются — в подвалах
под несколькими этажами
всеобщего оптимизма.

Каждое утро они идут на работу,
раствор мешают и камни таскают,
но, возводя город, возводят не город,
а собственному одиночеству памятник воздвигают.

И уходя, как уходят в чужую память,
мерно ступая от слова к слову,

всеми своими тремя временами
глаголы однажды восходят на Голгофу.

И небо над ними
как птица над погостом,
и, словно стоя
перед запертой дверью,
некто стучит, забивая гвозди
в прошедшее,
в настоящее,
в будущее
время.

Никто не придет
и никто не снимет.
Стук молотка
вечным ритмом станет.
Земли гипербол лежит под ними,
как небо метафор плывет над нами! (*OVP*: 53-4)

The metaphor of citizens as verbs is emphasised from the poem's first line — in the first two stanzas alone the word 'глаголы' is repeated eight times, constituting approximately a quarter of the words used. This repetition not only reinforces the image itself but also reflects the unvarying nature of the oppressive scene that Brodsky portrays. Throughout the poem repetition and patterning in lexis highlight the monotony that is central to the effects of the verse. The cynical depiction of life under the Soviet regime is achieved through the series of metaphorical images that follow. For example, the citizens' mass consignment to dreary action is communicated in the third stanza through the images of the physical labour of mixing concrete and lugging stones. In fact, the work completed by the verbs is always en masse, the lack of individuation being an important element of the depiction of drudgery. In the first stanza Brodsky employs emphatic alliteration to draw attention to images of the physical and spiritual poverty experienced by the verbs: 'голодные глаголы, голые глаголы,/ главные глаголы, глухие глаголы'. Equally, the hollow nature of the citizens' lives is developed in the second stanza: 'Глаголы без существительных. Глаголы — просто'. Here, the sparse

syntax of the second sentence physically illustrates the image of the first. The effect of state oppression is specifically symbolised by a cellar — 'подвал'. This image succeeds as a strong metaphor for confinement and lack of freedom. It becomes an explicit reference to the Soviet state by subsequent mention of 'optimism' — '[…] в подвалах/ под несколькими этажами/ всеобщего оптимизма' — a recognisably Socialist Realist ideology (Ronald Suny relays the way Andrei Zhdanov opened the First Congress of Soviet Writers by proclaiming that Soviet literature was 'fundamentally optimistic, because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat' (1998: 270)). The tone of Brodsky's reference to optimism is cynical, the irony of the juxtaposition between optimism and dreary confinement impossible to miss. This becomes even clearer when the image of 'optimism' is scrutinised: depicted in 'подвалы под несколькими этажами', Brodsky conveys a sense of being physically stifled and crushed by what should otherwise be regarded as a positive phenomenon, further conveying the notion of oppression.

This ironic puncturing of Soviet ideals continues throughout the poem, deepening the opposition between reality and ideology, as well as between the individual and the state. Where the verbs are initially portrayed as 'молчаливые', it is subsequently made clear that they talk in the cellars ('говорят в подвалах'). Physically confined, the verbs can only express themselves covertly. Connected to this is the depiction of work in the third stanza, which portrays a workforce that labours not in ideological harmony but in lonely solitude — a deliberately scathing assessment of the Marxist ideology of work. Alienation and its societal implications are also brought out by the reference to 'одиночество', which undermines the notion of collectivity and focusses instead on the individual. Alienation is also found in the opening line: 'Меня окружают молчаливые глаголы'. The use of first person here distances the poetic voice from the collective, who are depicted in the third person. This creates an impression of separation, casting the poetic voice as a commentator upon its 'involved' subjects. Interestingly the citizens are portrayed as a collective when opposed to the lyric persona, yet as the first-person resolves into a percipient voice, the citizens' loneliness is then portrayed — an essentially individual state. This shift in the speaking voice and its significance within

the poem displays a concern with the role of the poet as observer that both echoes the Romantic separation between 'poet' and 'crowd' and heightens the emphasis upon individuality — an explicit reaction to the general oppression of the poem.

The political implications of oppression within the poem are framed by the idea of self-questioning. Mute acceptance of the status quo is represented through the metaphor of a closed door upon which nobody knocks, and the impoverished lives of the individuals are explicitly linked to linguistic oppression and stasis through the metaphor of people as verbs. Brodsky's belief that reading poetry raises self-consciousness — thereby permitting individuals to resist 'the level of locution at which society falls easy prey to the demagogue of a tyrant' — allows him to link the silent verbs explicitly with a lack of individual self-questioning. The challenge that such self-questioning would present to the public and civic systems of the Soviet Union is, in its encouragement of psychological freedom in the individual, predicated upon a constant questing self-consciousness. Thus in his depiction of linguistic oppression and mute acceptance Brodsky not only reflects critically on the condictions imposed upon Soviet citizens, he also poses a challenge to citizens to reverse their lack of freedom through self-questioning.

These political resonances contained within the notions of linguistic oppression and stasis are reflected further in Brodsky's poetry. Significantly, linguistic oppression is often represented through the metaphor of fish. This is best seen in the poem of the same year, 'Ryby zimoi' (1960), which provides the template from which Brodsky later develops this metaphor:

Рыбы зимой живут.
Рыбы жуют кислород.
Рыбы зимой плывут,
задевая глазами
лед.
Туда.
    Где глубже.
Где море.

Рыбы.
Рыбы.
Рыбы.
Рыбы плывут зимой.
Рыбы хотят выплыть.
Рыбы плывут без света.
Под солнцем
зимним и зыбким.
Рыбы плывут от смерти
вечным путем
рыбьим.
Рыбы не льют слезы:
упираясь головой
в глыбы,
в холодной воде
мерзнут
холодные глаза
рыбы.
Рыбы
всегда молчаливы,
ибо они —
безмолвны.
Стихи о рыбах,
как рыбы,
встают поперек
горла. (Reavey 1981: 256)

As with ‘Glagoly’, verbal repetition and the depiction of dreary existence is central to this poem, providing a basis from which to explore the theme of societal and linguistic stasis and oppression. Such dreariness is emphasised in the first two lines: ‘Рыбы зимой живут./ Рыбы жуют кислород’. Here the second sentence acts as an ironic qualifier to the first, highlighting the distinction between existing and living as Brodsky sees it, and perhaps alluding to the changes that can be wrought by self-consciousness. The poem’s construction supports the sense of dreariness that underpins its depiction of oppression. Its ‘stepladder’ layout not only visually reinforces the monotonous repetition of the word ‘рыбы’, it also breaks the poem’s natural phrasing, lending the already short phrases a

staccato heaviness. Moreover, such formatting references a layout often used by Mayakovsky (Margo Shohl Rosen refers in her thesis to Mayakovsky's 'signature stepladder line breaks' (2011: 73)). By formally echoing the explicitly political poet in this way, Brodsky draws attention to the political resonances of his own poem. The space in which the fish exist is also exaggeratedly oppressive — dark and cold — similar to the cellars of 'Glagoly'. Such oppression is translated into an image of physical restraint by an outside force when Brodsky depicts the fish as hemmed in by ice. Similarly, the coldness of the poem's setting also prevents self-expression: the fishes' tears simply freeze. Such oppression is expressed clearly in line 13: 'Рыбы хотят выплыть'. This clearly implies that the setting is not of the fishes' own choosing, translating this abstract representation of oppression into a direct statement regarding lack of freedom. The choice of fish as a metaphor is crucial to this statement; Brodsky highlights their muteness, mirroring the impossibility of linguistic freedom of expression in the Soviet Union. This is related directly to the poet in the final lines. In drawing a parallel between a fish's muteness and the incapability of the poet to write, Brodsky implicitly depicts the oppressive society of the USSR and the way this impacts upon individuality and freedom of speech, leading to linguistic stasis: 'Стихи о рыбах,/ как рыбы,/ встают поперек/ горла'. Just as the repression of the verbs in 'Glagoly' means that they can only speak in private spaces, so linguistic stasis in 'Ryby zimoi' connects to political oppression.

This motif is found in a number of other poems and always signifies an inability to communicate. It therefore injects a note of political commentary into Brodsky's work, directly undermining the perception of his poetry as apolitical. For example, muteness is drawn upon in the fifth section of 'V Anglii' in which Brodsky likens the silent stone effigies of three knights to fish (*U*: 78-9). Similarly, in 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' Brodsky includes the provocative lines:

> Только рыбы в морях знают цену свободе; но их
> немота вынуждает нас как бы к созданью своих
> этикеток и касс […] (*KPE*: 59)

Brodsky again links muteness and speech with oppression and freedom respectively. Yet here the connection is more complex: although Brodsky casts the fish as free, this can be read as an ironic observation regarding the type of freedom experienced in the USSR — in order to live it is necessary to submit to oppression. This is confirmed in the following lines, in which Brodsky depicts the way that the fishes' linguistic sacrifice inspires others to restrain themselves similarly. The pervasiveness of this attitude within society is referenced in 'Kolybel'naia Treskovogo Mysa' (1975). In lines 16-17 of section IV, Brodsky writes 'затем, что внутри нас рыба/ дремлет' (*ChR*: 100). In the context of the entire poem, which broadly depicts a change of place, and the opening line of section IV, which states that 'Перемена империи связана с гулом слов,/ с выделеньем слюны в результате речи' (*ChR*: 100), this short phrase can be interpreted as an observation that the ability to submit to oppression is not decided by circumstances alone, once again challenging Soviet citizens to realise individual self-consciousness. The pervasiveness of oppression is expanded in the final lines. Brodsky depicts the presence of fish as ominous, and develops the idea of linguistic oppression as a subconscious state by depicting a codfish appearing within a dream:

> […] но глаз
>
> вряд ли проникнет туда, и сам
> закрывается, чтобы увидеть вещи.
> Только так — во сне — и дано глазам
> к вещи привыкнуть. И сны те вещи
> или зловещи — смотря кто спит.
> И дверью треска скрипит. (*ChR*: 108)

Here the fish represents the threat of linguistic oppression — even when dreaming, it is possible to relinquish freedom by curbing self-expression, reflecting the pervasiveness of oppression in the Soviet Union and how this censors its citizens, rendering them mute.

Depictions of the USSR and Implicit Criticism

Although the poems in this category deal with depictions of people in a similar way to those considered in the previous section, the focus is more explicitly upon the state and its implications. The poem 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' (1968) provides particularly direct political references, which are often undercut by a clear sense of criticism. The title itself is provocative, implying decline and watershed. Although the poem encompasses other subjects with political resonance, such as the representation of the lyric persona discussed in the second chapter, certain stanzas portray such irreverence towards a depiction of the state that they demand attention. Derogatory comment toward the Soviet state occurs in the first stanza: 'Я – один из глухих, облысевших, угрюмых послов/ второсортной державы' (*KPE*: 58). Similarly, in the fourth stanza the lyric persona refers ironically to the industrial interests of the state, satirising the tendency towards zealous and unnecessary over-production: 'Даже стулья плетеные держатся здесь/ на болтах и на гайках' (lines 23-4) (*KPE*: 58). The theme of stagnation and inertia is particularly present in 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi', where it is treated directly: 'Этот край недвижим' (line 19) (*KPE*: 58). Brodsky develops this in the final stanza:

> Зоркость этих времен — это зоркость к вещам тупика.
> Не по древу умом растекаться пристало пока,
> но плевком по стене. (*KPE*: 60)

As well as conveying criticism by representing the era of which he writes as an impasse or dead end, Brodsky links this idea to *зоркость*. This results in an allusion to the irony of zealous vigilance combined with stagnation that partly defined the experience of the Soviet Union at the time. The final and perhaps most provocative subject addressed in the poem is the depiction of wanton execution of citizens by the state. This is dealt with in the ninth stanza:

> Что же пишут в газетах в разделе 'Из зала суда'?
> Приговор приведен в исполненье. Взглянувши сюда,
> обыватель узрит сквозь очки в оловянной оправе,

как лежит человек вниз лицом у кирпичной стены;
но не спит. Ибо брезговать кумполом сны
продырявленным вправе. (*KPE*: 59)

The particularly detached tone of this stanza, partly the result of short, pithy phrases, perhaps echoes the moral detachment of the state towards its citizens. The lyric persona distances himself from this position by using the third person ('пишут') to denote others who are implicated in such actions. The theme of execution brings a sinister note to the poem, which is perpetuated in the following sequence of ideas and images. Brodsky introduces the notion of injustice in the poem's final lines which, despite Polukhina's claim that they end 'on a sad lyrical note' (1989: 212), expose the danger inherent in freedom of expression in the Soviet union: 'Неповинной главе всех и дел-то, что ждать топора/ да зеленого лавра' (*KPE*: 60). Moreover, this reference to innocence and the crown of laurels depicts the poet as a martyr, establishing a connection with the traditional Russian myth of the poet-prophet. The lyric persona is therefore pitted in opposition to the Soviet state that he castigates in the poem, heightening the poem's message of poltical criticism.

The portrayal of the poet and his perceived role is also central to the poem 'Piataia godovshchina' (1977). The analysis that follows focusses on stanzas 8-13:

Зимой в пустых садах трубят гипербореи,
и ребер больше там у пыльной батареи
в подъездах, чем у дам. И вообще быстрее

нащупывает их рукой замерзшей странник.
Там, наливая чай, ломают зуб о пряник.
Там мучает охранник во сне штыка трехгранник.

От дождевой струи там плохо спичке серной.
Там говорят 'свои' в дверях с усмешкой скверной.
У рыбной чешуи в воде там цвет консервный.

—

Там при словах 'я за' течет со щек известка.

Там в церкви образа коптит свеча из воска.
Порой дает раза соседним странам войско.

Там пышная сирень бушует в полисаде.
Пивная цельный день лежит в глухой осаде.
Там тот, кто впереди, похож на тех, кто сзади.

Там в воздухе висят обрывки старых арий.
Пшеница перешла, покинув герб, в гербарий.
В лесах полно куниц и прочих ценных тварей. (*U*: 72)

The poem never names the state at its centre, yet the biographical link to the passing of five years since Brodsky's exile makes the USSR the obvious focus of the poem's depiction. The poem serves as a portrayal of the Soviet state as the lyric persona remembers it. Much of the first half of the poem comprises a series of images symbolising remembered aspects of the USSR. Although the individual reminiscences themselves are specific, they provide an insight into the more general workings of the Soviet Union. These images reflect upon the inadequacies of the state, conveyed in a critical attitude undercut with irony. For example, a derogatory barb at figures of authority and their intemperate attitude develops a previously 'ambivalent collocation of various aspects of Russo-Soviet reality' (Polukhina 1989: 224) into an overtly politicised depiction: 'Там мучает охранник во сне штыка трехгранник'. This, in turn, renders lines such as 'Порой дает раза соседним странам войско', and, 'Пивная цельный день лежит в глухой осаде' more politically pertinent, providing a reading and judgement upon the dubious actions and order of the Soviet system that defines the poem. As in 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi', this poem also includes ironic reference to the industrial failures of the state: 'Пшеница перешла, покинув герб, в гербарий'. This idea becomes more barbed in the eighteenth stanza where Brodsky turns an industrial reference into a metaphor for the failings of the state as a whole, expanding his criticism from the specific to the general:

Там украшают флаг, обнявшись, серп и молот.
Но в стенку гвоздь не вбит и огород не полот.
Там, грубо говоря, великий план запорот. (*U*: 73)

By linking industry with the problems of the USSR, Brodsky can be seen to assault one of the most fundamental aspects of Soviet ideology by questioning the worth of industrial output and the dogma that surrounds it. Embedded within his poetry, these exclusively political concerns further undermine Brodsky's claims regarding the irrelevance of politics to poetry's 'song of disobedience'.

Further political concerns are found in the poem 'Poliarnyi issledovatel'' (1978), although in contrast to 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' and 'Piataia godovshchina' its depiction of the state is more covert. The poem is an example of the way in which political concerns can often be seen as central, even in poems that at first seem divorced from such a reading. Overall, it can be read as an allegory for the state and the situation of the USSR in general. This deduction derives from the poem's allusions to Soviet culture. Specifically these include the preoccupation with patriotically driven expeditions and discoveries, while Brodsky also implies an underlying representation of Soviet attitudes and problems, in particular the subsuming of the individual by the state.

The poem's lyric persona — the *issledovatel'* — can be seen to symbolise the nation both in terms of society and state. Depicted alone in a barren polar landscape, he represents the alienation of both the Soviet state in its global context and the individual within the state. Brodsky creates an air of hopelessness through the emphatically concise opening lines: 'Все собаки съедены. В дневнике/ не осталось чистой страницы […]' (*U*: 69). These images are significant; the dogs, the only means the protagonist has of surviving, have been eaten in desperation, perhaps suggestive of the USSR's self-defeating actions against its own citizens. Equally, the image of having no clean page on which to write implies that everything possible has been said or attempted, and represents the opening of a new metaphorical front regarding linguistic oppression. These ideas are made more forceful by the use of simple, emphatic syntax and stark internal rhyme linking the two images together ('съедены'/'страницы') (*U*: 69). The sense of hopelessness is intensified when placed alongside Brodsky's depiction of the disintegration of family. The protagonist sacrifices the photographs of his wife and sister

in a desperate bid to record his scientific observations:

> […] и бисер слов
> покрывает фото супруги, к ее щеке
> мушку даты сомнительной приколов.
> Дальше – снимок сестры. Он не щадит сестру […] (*U*: 69)

The defacement of these photographs can be interpreted as a metaphor for an individual's unwillingness to spare ('щадить') friends, relatives, and self in the pursuit of scientific discovery, articulating a readiness to sacrifice humanity for the sake of ideological goals and once again revealing the political comment at the heart of the poem. This link to ideology is made clear in the penultimate line where the phrasing is reminiscent of the optimistic Soviet propaganda of the period: 'речь идет о достигнутой широте!' (*U*: 69). The juxtaposition of the lyric persona's hopeless and desperate situation is at odds with this positivity, creating a similar tone of bitter irony to that found in the reference to 'всеобщий оптимизм' in 'Glagoly'. This is heightened in the poem's penultimate line when it becomes clear that problems lie not only with factors external to the lyric persona, but with the lyric persona himself: 'И гангрена, черная, взбирается по бедру' (*U*: 69). The image of gangrene can be read not only as a hint at the innate and growing problems of the Soviet state, but also as a specific reference to the intense stagnation being experienced at the time. This metaphor is stripped of tragic romanticism by its simile in the final line, 'как чулок девицы из варьете' (*U*: 69), which serves to sully the image with connotations of cheapness. The contrast with the frozen fish of 'Ryby zimoi' is in the form of the stagnation; while 'Ryby zimoi' depicts a collective oppressed by its surroundings, 'Poliarnyi issledovatel'' portrays an individual corrupted from within and stripped of elements of the self by adherence to ideology. This offers an image succinctly inspired by political concerns, tying in with the rebuttal of Brodsky's myth of apoliticism already advanced by the preceding poems.

'Na smert' Zhukova' (1974) was written earlier than a number of the preceding poems, yet it is useful to consider it last as, at first glance, it seems to undermine the critique of

the state found in the other poems of this category. The tone of bitterness and irony that Brodsky adopts in his depictions of the USSR is absent and is replaced by nostalgia, pride, and patriotism. This could be surprising given that Marshal Zhukov was a Soviet official. Yet this poem is not an arbitrarily uncritical presence in an otherwise consistent body of work. The seeming change of attitude is due to the separation of the ideas of 'homeland' and 'state'. Where Brodsky is critical of the Soviet state he is not critical of his previous generation. Here the subject of the poem, Marshal Zhukov, represents the elements of Russia to which Brodsky feels some sense of loyalty and affiliation. This is most apparent in the final stanza:

> Маршал! поглотит алчная Лета
> эти слова и твои прахоря.
> Все же, прими их — жалкая лепта
> родину спасшему, вслух говоря. (*ChR*: 39)

Brodsky implies Zhukov's role in 'saving' Russia by addressing him directly through an exclamation — 'Маршал!', and asking him to accept his humble tribute. By referring to Russia as 'родина' Brodsky emphasises both their shared heritage and the patriotism elicited by notions of 'motherland'. Thus the separation between state and homeland is entrenched throughout the poem via the juxtaposition of this sense of affiliation with the depiction of 'other'. For example, in the second stanza Zhukov is set apart from his 'foes': 'Воин, пред коим многие пали/ стены, хоть меч был вражьих тупей' (*ChR*: 39). Reminiscent of Stalin's rhetoric of foes and saboteurs, it is to be inferred that Zhukov's foes are political figures, turning such imagery from an endorsement to a critique of the state. The subsequent reference to Zhukov's political situation is also indicative. This is located towards the end of a second stanza which refers to the fact that Zhukov found himself marginalised by figures within the Soviet regime: 'Кончивший дни свои глухо в опале,/ как Велизарий или Помпей' (*ChR*: 39). The significance here lies in the sympathetic way in which Zhukov is presented, implicitly ranged against those who have marginalised him. The inference must be that, as a sympathetic voice, the poem's speaker is also antagonistic towards these same figures, sharpening the poem's critique of the state as a whole.

The reference to Pompeii in Brodsky's assessment of Marshall Zhukov flags up the theme of empire in his poetry. Polukhina asserts that this theme is one of Brodsky's 'principle conceptual metaphors', yet it cannot be 'reduced to a criticism of ideology and politics' (1989: 195-6). However, it is impossible to ignore the pertinence that Brodsky's biography brings to this theme. For example, the first line of 'Post aetatem nostram' (1970) offers a sarcastic sentence about 'the mediocrity of the empire' — 'Империя – страна для дураков' —, continuing to paint a recognisable portrait of the Soviet Union at the time:

> "Империя – страна для дураков."
> Движенье перекрыто по причине
> приезда Императора. Толпа
> теснит легионеров, песни, крики;
> но паланкин закрыт. Объект любви
> не хочет быть объектом любопытства. (*KPE*: 87)

Notwithstanding her claim that the theme of empire cannot be reduced to politics, Polukhina invokes a politician in order to elucidate the resonance of these lines, suggesting that this depiction is reminiscent of Brezhnev's times (1989: 198-9). This can be seen in the way the poem satirises the apathy of the empire. As Polukhina continues, 'a fly crawling across the face of a Greek vagabond who had fallen asleep with his head soaped evokes 'the peltasts of Xenophon in the Armenian snows'', and is a parody of the 'once great campaigns of the once-great Empire' (Polukhina 1989: 199). As with 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi' and 'Piataia godovshchina' in particular, the poem draws attention to other failings of this now decaying empire: poverty, lack of things to do, a huge stadium built by workers who lived for years in the gulag. Polukhina asserts that the deliberate mingling of geographical place-names, as well as Greek and Latin names, and the theme's 'parallels with modernity', all indicate that 'Empire is not a geographical idea behind which some concrete country lurks, a country we could locate on a map, but a concept' (1989: 199). However, as demonstrated in 'Post aetatum nostram', there are sufficient parallels between this theme and Brodsky's Soviet Union

to make a credible case that he draws heavily from the circumstances of the USSR in order to inspire the criticism within the poem. This feature is shared by the other works in this category, all of which present a critical representation of the Soviet state motivated by political issues.

Concerns of Autocracy and Tyranny

Autocracy and tyranny constitute the most specific representations of political concerns in Brodsky's poetry, in that they reflect directly upon features of political regimes rather than the broader notions of state and society. The theme of empire is often linked to a depiction of autocracy and tyranny. This is seen in the poem 'Pis'ma dinastii Min'' (1977), in which the emperor of the Ming dynasty is used in order to portray tyranny:

> Скоро тринадцать лет, как соловей из клетки
> вырвался и улетел. И, на ночь глядя, таблетки
> богдыхан запивает кровью проштрафившегося портного,
> откидывается на подушки и, включив заводного,
> погружается в сон, убаюканный ровной песней.
> Вот такие теперь мы празднуем в Поднебесной
> невеселые, нечетные годовщины.
> Специальное зеркало, разглаживающее морщины,
> каждый год дорожает. Наш маленький сад в упадке.
> Небо тоже исколото шпилями, как лопатки
> и затылок больного (которого только спину
> мы и видим). И я иногда объясняю сыну
> богдыхана природу звезд, а он отпускает шутки.
> Это письмо от твоей, возлюбленный, Дикой Утки
> писано тушью на рисовой тонкой бумаге, что дала мне императрица.
> Почему-то вокруг все больше бумаги, все меньше риса. (*U*: 90-1)

As Polukhina notes, Brodsky's references to tyranny and empire are made without reference to a fully specified circumstance and, as in 'Post aetatum nostram', they must be interpreted in light of their context. However, 'Pis'ma dinastii Min'' is unusual in that it offers an explicit biographical reference — 'Скоро тринадцать лет, как соловей из

клетки/ вырвался и улетел'. The poem was written in 1977 and so these lines can be understood as a reference to Brodsky's initial exile in 1964. By inserting the facts of his biography into the opening of the poem, Brodsky provides a clear case for interpreting the work as a specific reflection upon the regime of the Soviet Union. The main focus of this reflection is a portrayal of inequality and careless brutality. Brodsky heightens the depiction of luxury, exposing the grotesque marriage of comfort and cruelty that is the hallmark of autocracy: the 'богдыхан' simultaneously drinks the blood of his tailor while languishing against a cushion. The arbitrariness of such cruelty is portrayed through the reference to 'проштрафившегося'. In depicting the tailor as merely 'erring', Brodsky satirises the overreaction of the regime to indefinable offences.

Similarly, the stanza's final line serves as a stark reminder of the injustice of luxury: while there is evermore rice paper on which to write, there is less and less rice for people to eat. This is expressed with innocent irony — 'Почему-то' — as though the implication of the lyric persona's observation were not obvious. The lyric persona's position — in opposition to the excess of autocracy yet partially dependent upon it — is made more clear in the general cruelty shown towards the poet figure of the poem. While explaining the nature of the stars to the emperor's son, the poet is goaded following a letter written to the emperor by the poet's lover. The delight the emperor takes in this joke exposes the casual attitude of autocratic regimes to peoples' lives. The allegory that Brodsky uses to underpin this portrayal of despotic injustice is provocative. In drawing parallels between the features of the Soviet regime and those of ancient royalty, Brodsky exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of communism in the USSR. Despite its ideals of equality, the regime's corruption ensures that the Soviet power structure in fact resembles the previous autocracy that it claims to have overthrown. The oppression that exists in parallel with this opulent structure is symbolised by the nightingale that escapes from its cage. Yet Brodsky cannot celebrate this escape, finding no joy in the resulting freedom: 'Вот такие теперь мы празднуем в Поднебесной/ невеселые, нечетные годовщины'. Thus this depiction of Soviet autocracy finds no respite and offers no solutions, possibly a reflection upon the stasis of the regime itself that Brodsky depicts elsewhere.

A notable selection of Brodsky's poems focus specifically on depictions of the 'tyrant', distilling the portrayal of autocracy to its fundamental aspect and further employing political themes as inspiration for poetry. One such poem is 'Odnomu tiranu' (1972), which advances an ominous portrait of the 'тиран':

> Он здесь бывал: еще не в галифе —
> в пальто из драпа; сдержанный, сутулый.
> Арестом завсегдатаев кафе
> покончив позже с мировой культурой,
> он этим как бы отомстил (не им,
> но Времени) за бедность, униженья,
> за скверный кофе, скуку и сраженья
> в двадцать одно, проигранные им.
>
> И Время проглотило эту месть.
> Теперь здесь людно, многие смеются,
> гремят пластинки. Но пред тем, как сесть
> за столик, как-то тянет оглянуться.
> Везде пластмасса, никель — все не то;
> в пирожных привкус бромистого натра.
> Порой, перед закрытьем, из театра
> он здесь бывает, но инкогнито.
>
> Когда он входит, все они встают.
> Одни — по службе, прочие — от счастья.
> Движением ладони от запястья
> он возвращает вечеру уют.
> Он пьет свой кофе — лучший, чем тогда,
> и ест рогалик, примостившись в кресле,
> столь вкусный, что и мертвые 'о да!'
> воскликнули бы, если бы воскресли. (*ChR*: 5)

In contrast to the luxurious image of tyranny in 'Pis'ma dinastii Min'', the portrayal of the tyrant here is subtle. The ostentatiousness that defines the *богдыхан* of the previous poem is lost, and instead the tyrant is portrayed as discreet and 'round-shouldered'. Brodsky illustrates this by drawing attention to the fact that he is not yet 'в галифе' —

he simply wears a coat ‘из драпа’. Yet rather than diminishing the presence of the tyrant, the ordinariness of this portrayal works to increase his sense of power. This is conveyed in the lines ‘Арестом завсегдатаев кафе/покончив позже с мировой культурой’. Here Brodsky highlights the juxtaposition between the insignificant cafe that the tyrant frequents and his ability to put an end to ‘мировая культура’.

This ominous imbalance between normality and power is developed throughout the poem. In the second stanza, the image of the cafe is markedly ordinary: it is full of people who laugh and rattle their records (‘Теперь здесь людно, многие смеются,/ гремят пластинки’). Yet Brodsky signals an undercurrent of menace, developing this image of normality to include unsettling details. For instance, before sitting down the diners glance around them (‘Но пред тем, как сесть/ за столик, как-то тянет оглянуться’). The intangible sense of menace is conveyed through Brodsky’s use of ‘как-то’. In this way, Brodsky hints that something is amiss, implying that there is a reason the diners glance about them while being incapable of explaining why. The sense that this creates is subtly heightened throughout the stanza, as the initial depiction of normality is further undercut with such details: the cakes taste of sodium bromide, and ‘все не то’. This depiction of uneasiness is immediately followed by a depiction of the tyrant — ‘Порой, перед закрытьем, из театра/ он здесь бывает, но инкогнито’. In this way, Brodsky links the menace developed throughout the poem with the poem’s principal figure. Consequently, the actions of the diners become clearer: it is not for no reason that they glance around them, rather it is out of paranoia. Therefore, the poem’s link between normality and power becomes clearer: despite his diminutive portrayal in the first stanza the tyrant’s presence is pervasive, setting others on edge and initiating the menace felt throughout the poem.

This power is fully realised in the poem’s final stanza. Brodsky depicts the way the diner’s stand when the tyrant enters the cafe: ‘Когда он входит, все они встают’. The alliteration between ‘входит’ and ‘встают’ demonstrates the link between these actions, heightening the diners’ instinctive reaction to the tyrant’s entrance. The prosaicness of the phrase also reflects this, offering a sense of logic that shows the relationship between

entering and standing to be entirely accepted. The imbalance of power between the tyrant and the diners is illustrated further; the tyrant gestures and the evening returns to normal. By focussing on the smallness of the gesture — 'Движением ладони от запястья/ он возвращает вечеру уют' — Brodsky heightens the discrepancy between the tyrant's actions and their effect. However, this portrayal of tyranny is not unambiguous. Brodsky is careful to show that reaction to the tyrant is mixed: some diners stand out of duty, but some stand with genuine happiness. In this way Brodsky illustrates the danger of ultimate power. The menace that acts as a warning throughout the poem is realised in this image where people stand joyfully for a tyrant who could presumably destroy them without question. The normality of life is altered to such an extent by tyranny that not only do the diners taste their food differently and glance about in paranoia, they might also love the figure that affects them in this way. This subversion of normality is conveyed in a final ironic comment at the poem's conclusion: the roll the tyrant eats is so good, that even the dead would rise to praise it.

The implicit warnings encompassed in this pair of poems regarding the danger of autocracy and power clearly reflect on Brodsky's context and experience. This can be seen in other poems such as 'Glagoly', 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi', and 'Piataia godovshchina', all of which portray a specifically Soviet reality. Brodsky's focus upon themes such as autocracy, tyranny, oppression, and freedom of speech, as well as his tendency to address such themes in an explicitly critical manner counteracts the notion that political concerns are never paramount in his poetry. As this chapter shows, many of Brodsky's poems are founded upon political subject matter or take inspiration from political issues. This works in parallel with the elements of Brodsky's poetry that, firstly, place him in a politically-driven tradition of myth-creation and, secondly, construct a political project to raise self-consciousness as a resistance to tyranny. Thus the perception that political issues are irrelevant to Brodsky's work is demonstrably untrue, and a reading with no sense of the political issues embedded as a large component of Brodsky's poems therefore substantially diminishes their impact.

Conclusion

Acceptance of Brodsky as a poet whose life 'somehow acquired an external political dimension' is a misconception. This thesis shows that, on close analysis, Brodsky demonstrates a number of significant connections to politics. Most obvious are the political concerns that inspire many of his works, yet he also displays a strong engagement with politics through his project to raise individual self-consciousness, as well as through his place in the Russian Romantic tradition of the poet as a prophet. Importantly, the question of Brodsky's relationship to politics is an issue that opens up many lines of enquiry due to the way it encompasses broad problems such as trends in criticism and engagement with context, as well as more specific issues such as the need for a detailed exploration of Brodsky's statements and works.

At the centre of this enquiry is the investigation into the perception of Brodsky as an apolitical poet, which poses questions as to how and why this has acquired such common currency. As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, to large extent this is a view prompted by the poet himself, who employs various strategies to deflect focus away from his life 'tailor made for the prophet model' (Cavanagh 2009: 174) and, instead, direct attention to his poetry. The most fundamental of these strategies is a poetic stance that denies the relevance of Brodsky's biography to his work — a position related to an apparent rejection of Romanticism and the associated links between art and life. Brodsky's rejection of biographical significance to his poetry results in a form of self-effacement effected through a pose that is designed to be stoic rather than heroic. The self-presentation that this necessitates leads to strategies of self-fashioning, which include a charismatic performance of forceful rhetoric and repetition of aphorisms, and a public persona defined by an apparently severe disinterest in political and social matters. It also leads to a degree of biographical control, whereby Brodsky's exhortations that friends refuse to help researchers perpetuates his pose of self-effacement by impeding the writing and publishing of a useful scholarly biography. Such an apparently deflating self-projection recurs throughout Brodsky's poetry, where he adopts forms of grotesque self-depiction and reduces his lyric persona to a disembodied 'I'.

Understandable though his motives may seem, Brodsky's denial of biography and political issues as well-springs of his poetry merely serves to complicate the reality of their frequent pressure within his work. Brodsky's engagement with politics through poetry is seen clearly in his attempts to instill resistance to 'tyranny' through verse, which he believes can de-automatise the perceptions of both reader and poet to effect autonomy through self-consciousness. Moreover, a significant number of his poems are clearly inspired by overtly political concerns, such as social and linguistic oppression, issues regarding individuality and self-consciousness, cynicism towards political (and specifically Soviet and communist) ideals, and the danger of tyranny and autocracy. Most importantly, however, Brodsky's construction of a self-effacing identity that denies the relevance of politics can be understood as a myth in the tradition of Brodsky's self-fashioning forbears. The interaction between this myth and the Russian tradition of self-creation can be seen in the strength with which Brodsky reacts against the Romantic ideals that inform this tradition. This is most clearly evident in his Nobel speech, where the more Brodsky tries to distance himself from the cultural expectations of what a 'Poet' should be, the more he is defined by such expectations.

Further, certain elements of his self-projection accord with traditional Romantic understandings of the poet and poetry. Much of his self-effacement can be interpreted as a strategy for subtly drawing attention to himself, a fact shown by the fine distinction between stoicism and martyrdom which, in both Brodsky's public and literary personae, is thoroughly blurred. More obviously, Brodsky's critical assessments of other poets, as well as his beliefs regarding the authority of poetry and poets, clearly echo Romantic approaches. His self-identification or cultural allegiance with literary and historical figures, as well as his contradictorily heroic and martyred pose in a number of his poems, also serve to place Brodsky within a tradition of poets influenced by Romantic ideals and images, as well as techniques of self-creation. Thus, despite its foundations in various strategies of self-effacement, both the fact of Brodsky's myth and certain forms of its construction place Brodsky within a tradition of self-fashioning, the inspiration and necessity for which is a relationship with political context as defined by Pushkin's

eternal ideologised poetic struggle with an oppressive state. As Venclova testifies:

> A writer will always use the constants (the myths) that are established in culture: uniqueness comes from the selection — as well as the recombination, transforming and highlighting — of these myths. These creative acts, arising in part from the personal biography of the author, form the unique pattern of his or her art. (Venclova 1994: 10)

In this light, Brodsky can be seen to have appropriated already existing cultural traditions, adapting them to construct a self-presentation that is unique in its subtlety and broadly driven by the personal wish to be defined by his poetry rather than his life.

Such conclusions necessarily reflect upon the field of Brodsky criticism — criticism which has so far failed to distance itself from Brodsky's self-effacing pose in order to question his relationship to politics and the related issues of self-fashioning. As this thesis has shown, a disinclination to engage with the contradictions and paradoxes that define Brodsky's statements on this issue has led to a passive reiteration of his stance. It seems that, as Zholkovsky says of Reeder, Brodsky's critics assume that he is 'by definition right' (1996: 138). Yet Brodsky criticism is not simply passive. Certain elements of scholarship aggrandise Brodsky's own statements, further complicating his myth and distorting perceptions through their internal inconsistency. To some extent, this has been shown to be the result of ingrained traditions and expectations: whereas Russian perceptions tend to display the element of hero-worship that results from a Romantic idealisation of poets and poetry, as well as an 'overvaluation' of literature generally, Western perceptions have responded to the suffering implied by Brodsky's biography, thereby focussing on the virtuous elements of his self-presentation such as stoicism and its implied position of martyrdom and resistance. Just as with Brodsky's own stance, this creates a confusing contradiction. Whilst focussing on Brodsky's stance of self-effacement, it simultaneously mythologises his position. This difficulty is seen most clearly in Polukhina, who encompasses problems related to both Russian and Western positions. Not only does she reiterate Brodsky's own statements, raising them to the level of dogma, but she also attaches Romantic concerns to the perception of him

that she perpetuates. While pointing out the irrelevance of both his biography and political concerns, she focusses on notions of 'fate' and portrays his life as a historic confrontation with political forces. The inconsistency that this illustrates regarding attitudes to Brodsky's stance and biography is further seen in the critical focus on exile, which writes Brodsky into both a Romantic and modernist script while ignoring other concerns and simultaneously refusing to consider the link between biography, context, and poetry. By failing to confront these issues, Brodsky criticism persistently presents an image of the poet that is too simple, yet also unfathomable. Moreover, in refusing to address the issue of politics and self-projection in this way, Brodsky is made to 'become' his statements, and the humanity of his position is overlooked.

The problem of politics to Brodsky's work is therefore an issue that reflects on the most fundamental perceptions of Brodsky as a poet. Investigating this problem goes against the trend of many critical assumptions and results in an approach that refuses to take Brodsky's statements at face value. As a result, it questions the widely-held understanding of Brodsky as a self-effacing poet defined by his anti-Romantic and anti-heroic values, and it argues for a repositioning of the poet into his social, historical and cultural context in order to better comprehend his works, despite his claims for the purity of poetry. Bethea attests that 'there is no 'art' that exists in noble, uncontaminated isolation from the 'life' (2005: 14). In Brodsky's case, the acknowledgement of this fact poses a very direct challenge to his own statements and, consequently, to the broad perception of him within criticism, thus opening the way for further revealing studies. Such studies might include the exploration of his relationship to other Russian poets, questioning the way Brodsky seems to demote in the canon seminal poets such as Pushkin and Blok, whilst simultaneously associating himself with such figures either through intertextual allusions or the strength with which he distances himself. It could also initiate a comprehensive investigation into his constructed self, encompassing the issue of his 'prophetic' style of poetry recitation, which he is said to have inherited from Mandelstam through Akhmatova. The romanticisation of exile by both Brodsky and critics is another subject to be explored due to the way exile has come to define understandings of Brodsky and his poetry in a way that obscures the significance of

alienation to his work. As Sandler points out, 'Some difficult topics are long overdue […] and we do Brodsky no service by keeping to aesthetic matters' (2003: 445). Ultimately, Brodsky is a challenging poet; criticism should rise to meet his challenge.

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