

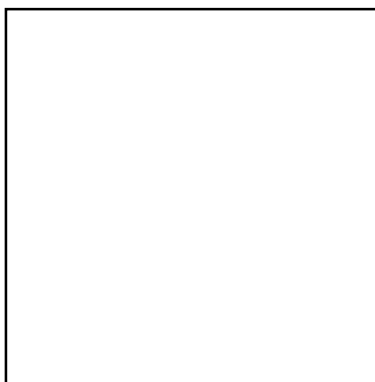
# PLEASING THE SHADOWS

## BRODSKY'S DEBTS TO PUSHKIN AND DANTE

di Valentina Polukhina

... И новый Дант склоняется к листу  
и на пустое место ставит слово.

Joseph Brodsky<sup>1</sup>



I feel privileged to be talking about three poets whose importance for world culture it is impossible to exaggerate. I also feel guilty, not being able to pay them their due. The material I have collected is enough for a whole book, and some of similarities can be represented here only schematically. In so short a paper it is difficult to avoid simplification. I am not a Dante or Pushkin scholar and 'out of respect to the audience and to Dante himself', as T.S. Eliot once said, 'I shall refrain from quoting him in Italian'.<sup>2</sup>

Brodsky drew inspiration from Pushkin and Dante at different time and in different degrees. It is tempting to consider these three poets at a high level of generality or to point to some biographical similarities: all three were born in May, Brodsky and Pushkin died in January, all three were exiled (Dante and Brodsky died in exile), separated from their family and loved ones, knew the power of love and believed in the power of the poetic word. But it is much more rewarding to examine their writings. I shall begin with Brodsky's debt to Pushkin since the similarities between them are the most striking. I shall refer to Dante when it is relevant but concentrate on his influence on Brodsky's poetics in the second part of my talk.

Pushkin had a far larger influence, intellectually and poetically, on Brodsky than has generally been recognised.<sup>3</sup> Although Brodsky wrote little about Pushkin and had a declared preference for Baratynsky he knew his Pushkin by heart: 'The Bronze Horseman' I knew and, I believe, still know to this day by heart'.<sup>4</sup> Pushkin is present

in Brodsky's poetry in the form of well-known quotations, numerous borrowings, reminiscences, allusions, echoes.

The coupling of their two names began as a jest, widely circulated in Leningrad, when someone dubbed the eighteen-year-old Brodsky 'the Jewish Pushkin'. The first time that the two names were seriously linked was in Anatolii Naiman's preface to *Halt in Wilderness* sometime between 1964-68.<sup>5</sup> After Naiman other Russian poets, Gorbanevskaja, Gordin, Krivulin and Loseff, found both superficial and more fundamental parallels between the lives and works of the two poets.<sup>6</sup> However, the not infrequent comparison between Pushkin and Brodsky were limited, as a rule, to biographical details: their falling out with their respective regimes, their being shadowed by the Tsarist Okhranka and the Soviet KGB, their exile, the censoring of their work, etc. It is very tempting to compare the fate, personal and poetic, of the two poets, but, as Lev Loseff has noted: 'there are at times parallels in the biographies of the two poets [which] only serve to underline that in Brodsky's case he had to deal with a nightmarish or grotesque variant of Pushkin's situation... Pushkin wasn't sent into exile as a convict under armed guard, having gone through the mill of prison cells and mental hospital wards'.<sup>7</sup>

In identifying the similarities and dissimilarities between two poets separated by 150 years, we must take into account the larger picture, to convey the full scale of their contribution to Russian poetry, the Russian poetic language, Russian intellectual life, and so on. Like his predecessor, Brodsky was engaged in giving the Russian language of his time a perfect poetic form. Both poets were able to immerse themselves in the truly vernacular idiom. Perfecting form, experimenting with diverse poetic genres, they surrendered to the language, their commitment to it being absolute. Brodsky subscribed to Pushkin's sense of harmony. He, too, has created a new kind of harmony, unthinkable or apparently unachievable before him. Finally, they both possessed a worldview that was both Russian and European. Indeed, they are perhaps Russia's only true Europeans. Hence, their common complaint - *Бывало, что ни напишу, / Все для иных не Русью пахнет* (For some, nothing that I write, is Russian enough, To Delvig, 1921). It is hard not to think of Brodsky's situation in Russia when one read these lines of Pushkin. Brodsky has been repeatedly accused of having lost his Russianness, in spite of the fact that he made a point of insisting on it and hoped that a widening is taking place, not a narrowing'.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to Pushkin I will deal with a particular aspect of the poetics of these poets. I shall attempt to identify certain features of self-portraiture common to both. Brodsky's tendency to belittle himself in the scheme of things, to see the worst in himself, echoes Pushkin's practice in some of his own self-portraits. For Pushkin, too, self-depiction is often ironic, anti-romantic, far from flattering and transcending the conventional bounds of the poetic. The external details of their self-description are

banal and disparaging. Both cultivated self-denigration and self-abnegation. This may have something to do with their obsession with death. However, they appear as figures of intellectual sobriety with a sense of perspective. They both took Dante as a model of poet as exile and wanderer.

It is not so much similarity in the circumstances of their lives, as in personality type and quality of talent, that explain the way they approached self-portraiture.<sup>9</sup> Pride and a passionate striving to be the first in everything co-exist with a genuine humility. Dante also proudly calls himself a genius ('*omai la navicella del mio ingegno*', *Purgatorio*, I:2),<sup>10</sup> and Oderisi of Gubbio has assured him that he will surpass his famous contemporaries, Guido Gvinnelli and Guido Cavalcanti: '*e forse e nato / chi l'uno e l'altro caccera del nido*' (maybe, one / Is born already for their niche of fame, *Purgatorio*, XI:98-99). But he immediately countered with 'O empty glory of all human powers!' (*Purgatorio*, XI:91).<sup>11</sup> Dante is aware of his own pride as a poet and he is pleased that the five greatest poets – Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Virgil – accept him as the sixth among them.

Pushkin's "гордый мой рассудок" (my proud reason, Pushkin, III:178) is echoed by Brodsky's advice to himself: "Смотри без суеты / вперед. Назад / без ужаса смотри. / Будь прям и горд, / раздроблен изнутри, / наощупь тверд" (Look without vanity / before, behind / without horror, look. / Be upright and proud / broken from within / firm to the touch, II:193). But Pushkin also writes about softness of voice and poverty of talent: "Конечно, беден гений мой" (Of course, my gift [genius] is poor, *To My Aristarkh*, 1815); "Мой голос тих" (My voice is soft, *Sleep*, 1816). Dante, too, in Mandelstam's words, suffers either from 'miraculous bouts of self-esteem' or 'feeling of utter worthlessness'<sup>12</sup>: "И часто речь моя несовершенна" (Many times my words come short of the fact, *Inferno*, IV:147).<sup>13</sup> In many of Brodsky's autobiographical poems we find a similar but much more obvious self-deprecatory tone: "Я, певец дребедени, / лишних мыслей, ломаных линий" (I am a singer of nonsense, / superfluous thoughts, and broken lines, III:44).

All three knew that their unique style, formidable energy and incisive vision were signs of greatness. But what is also characteristic of all three poets is their profound desire to retain humility: "И дух смирения, терпения, любви / и целомудрия мне в сердце оживи" (And the spirit of humility, of patience, of love / and of chastity revive in my heart, Pushkin, III:421). Brodsky, "приемыш гордый" (proud adopted child, III:25), as he called himself, at the end of his life, repeating Pushkin's words 'If God should send me readers...', said that everyone should be apprenticed to such authorial humility.<sup>14</sup> And that despite the fact that both of them were convinced that they "плетут рифмы" (wove rhymes, Pushkin, I:18, 26) or "сочиняют стишки" (compose verselets), as Brodsky loved to say, more skilfully than any of their

contemporaries. Of Pushkin's pre-eminence everyone has had his fill. Brodsky's contemporaries testify to his: 'He was the first and paved the way for all the rest to follow', says writer and historian Mikhail Kheifits in his preface to the samizdat collection of Brodsky's poetry that earned him five years, 1974-80, in prison camp. In his opinion Brodsky uncovered the truth which challenged the catastrophic state of consciousness of an entire generation.<sup>15</sup>

A few words need to be said at this point about the nature of our two poets' cultural endeavour. In Loseff's opinion, both Pushkin and Brodsky, 'united and brought to perfection all the fundamental trends in literature in their own and in the preceding generation (in Pushkin's case it was Russian neoclassicism and the early Romantic "school of harmonic exactitude"; in Brodsky's it was Russian modernism from symbolism to Lugovskoi and Slutskii). Both enriched our spiritual world, "translating into Russian", organically transfusing the Russian mentality, with forms of artistic perception, the Russian language with forms of expression alien to it (Pushkin – the Gallic, Brodsky – Anglo-Saxon and Celtic, both of them, the Latin of the classics)<sup>16</sup> Dante in his *Divina Commedia* gathered all the learning of the Middle Ages. It should be noted that neither Dante nor Brodsky were sufficiently educated, although both acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge at a later stage.

It seems that Brodsky himself realised his leading role in introducing to a Russian audience some notorious icons of world culture. As if fearing that even in his lifetime he would be turned into a monument he cultivated, as a form of self-defence, as has been noted, a deliberately disparaging form of self-portraiture: "я - один из глухих, облысевших, угрюмых посллов / второсортной державы" (I am one of the deaf, bald, gloomy ambassadors / of a second rate power, II:161). "Конюший дряхлого Пегаса" (Ostler to a decrepit Pegasus, *To my Aristarkh*, 1815). Some self-disparaging metaphors of substitution for Brodsky's self are borrowed directly from Pushkin: "Я, пасынок державы дикой / с разбитой мордой" (I am the stepson of a primitive power / with a bruised face, III:25) alludes to Pushkin's line "Старым пасынком судьбины" (Like an old step-child of Fate, *To Natalia*, 1813); "усталый раб - из той породы, / что зрим все чаще" (a weary slave of that breed / that is seen more and more often, III:27) has its source in "Давно, усталый раб, замыслил я побег" (A weary slave, for long I have contemplated my escape, *It's time, my friend, it's time*, 1834).

Dante's portrait is not so much physical as psychological and ethical. He does not, like Pushkin, complain of his monkey-like appearance or, like Brodsky, of his rotten teeth, but he also doesn't flatter himself. In the *Inferno* we find a frank admission of the fear and horror felt by him: "Мне сжавший сердце ужасом и дрожью" (which had pierced my heart with fear, I:15); "И я, с главою, ужасом стесненный" (And I, my head encircled with horror, said, III:31); "Мое чело покрыто смертным

потом, / И я упал, как падает мертвец”<sup>17</sup> (so that for pity I swooned as if in death and dropped like a dead body, V:140-41). Compare with Brodsky: “Боязно! То-то и есть, что боязно” (Fearful! Truly fearful, III:16). Moreover, during the process of ethical formation he accuses himself of vanity, uncertainty and other weaknesses. This tendency towards self-examination in Pushkin and Brodsky has a common origin in Dante.

On the personal level, we note that they are alike in the nature of their talent and in character: both were ‘care-free admirers’ (*Epistle to Prince A.M. Gorchakov*, 1819) of female beauty and possessed overwhelming personal charm and a great talent for friendship. Both were easily wounded and haughty, short-tempered and absurdly generous. ‘The chief thing was that he (Pushkin) lacked what is called tact’, Pushkin recalled.<sup>18</sup> Exactly the same could be said of Brodsky. Both were well aware of the duality of their nature:

Порой ленив, порой упрям,  
 Порой лукав, порою прям,  
 Порой смирен, порой мятежен,  
 Порой печален, молчалив,  
 Порой сердечно говорлив

(At times lazy, at times obstinate, / At times cunning, at times frank, / At times humble, at time mutinous, / At time sorrowful, at times taciturn, / At times cordially effusive, Pushkin, VI:619).

Neither their personal appearance nor their origins, it would seem, satisfied either of our poets. Each lavished a great deal of care on his appearance and worried about his physical shortcomings: “А я, повеса, вечно праздный, / Потомок негров безобразный” (But I, a rake, ever idle, / ugly progeny of negroes, *To Iur’ev*, 1820); “Я не лейб-кучер, не ассессор, / Родов униженный обломок” (I am no liveried coachman, no assessor, / but a humble fragment of [aristocratic] stock, II:875). A synonym of Pushkin’s обломок can be found in the twelfth of the *Roman Eligies*: “Я был в Риме. Был залит светом. Так, / как только может мечтать обломок!” (I was in Rome. I was flooded with light. As / only a fragment can dream of being! III:48). There are even more unflattering remarks to be found in Brodsky’s poems about himself: “Смардно дыша и треща суставами, / пачкаю зеркало” (With foul breath, and joints creaking / I stain mirror, II:290); “в ломаном “р” еврея” (in the guttural Jewish “r”, III:43): “отщепенец, стервец, вне закона” (A renegade, son-of-a-bitch, outlaw, III:8). Such bizarre metaphors are scattered throughout Brodsky’s poems.

We must admit that Pushkin is much kinder towards himself in his self-portraiture than Brodsky. Some of Pushkin’s self-deprecations (‘my genius is poor’ or ‘my voice is quiet’) could be interpreted as a pose and typical for the romantic tradition (see, for example, Baratynsky’s

'My gift is scant, my voice is not loud' (Мой дар убог и голос мой не громок, 1828). In Brodsky such a persistent tendency in the poet's depiction of his lyrical persona demonstrates his rejection of the timeworn romantic images of the poet: Я эпигон и попугай (I am an epigone and parrot, I:431); Прохожий / с мятым лицом (a passerby with a creased / face, II:320). In Brodsky's interviews we find another explanation for his tendency to self-denigration: '...when you write poetry... you always anticipate that there is some sardonic mind that will laugh at your delights and sorrows. So the idea is to defeat that sardonic mind. Not to give it the opportunity. And the only way is to laugh at yourself. I did that for a while'.<sup>19</sup>

Discussing their insignificance, their ordinariness our poets often use negative constructions: "Я не герой, по лаврам не тоскую... / Я не богач... / Я не злодей" (I am no hero, I do not pine for laurels... / I am no rich man... / I am no villain, *Sleep*, 1816). Pushkin, as a rule, confines himself to enumerative constructions coupled with contrasts: "Не офицер я, не ассессор, / Я по кресту не дворянин, / Не академик, не профессор; / Я просто русский мещанин" (I am not an officer, nor an assessor, / no oath-taking nobleman, / no academic or professor; / I am a simple Russian petty bourgeois, *My Genealogy*, 1830). This particular grammatical device produces the opposite meaning: Pushkin is saying that he is anything but a petty bourgeois. Brodsky, too, uses Pushkin's formula: "Пусть Вам напомним данный томик, / что автор был не жлоб, не гомик, / не трус, не сноб, не либерал, / но - грустных мыслей генерал" (Let this little book remind you, / that the author was no miser, no homo, / no coward, no snob, no liberal, / but a general of mournful thoughts).<sup>20</sup> All these forms of self-denigration can be seen at the same time as a moral denunciation of the self, a desire to become "free, whole and upright", as Virgil said of Dante at the end of their journey that he became: 'libero, drito e sano e tue arbitrio' (*Purgatorio*, XXVII: 140).

Moral self-discovery in the XXth century, obviously, took different forms. Brodsky uses the radical device of the *via negativa*, replacing the lyrical subject, and the contingencies of his existence, with negative pronouns and adverbs: "совершенный никто, человек в плаще" (a complete nobody, a man in a raincoat, II:318); "Никоткуда с любовью" (From nowhere with love, II:397); "Мы с тобой - никто, ничто" (You and I are nobody, nothing, III:84). A vast array of negative pronouns replaces the implied lyrical self: "Что, в сущности, и есть автопортрет. / Шаг в сторону от собственного тела..." (This, in essence, is a self-portrait. / A step to one side, of your own body, III:92). With Brodsky negative tropes of substitution for the self have their origin in the theme of death,<sup>21</sup> a theme far from alien to Pushkin.

Full of *joie-de-vivre*, they both began, very early on, to talk about old age and death; Pushkin began writing about old age when he was sixteen: "Уже я стар" (Already I am old, *To Baroness M.A. Delvig*, 1815), "Печально

старость улетит, / Услышу старости угрозы (Forlornly youth flies off, / I hear the thunderclaps of age, *Elegy*, 1816). And he wrote of death throughout his life: “Один с тоской явлюсь я, гость угрюмый, / Явлюсь на час – и одиноко умру” (Alone with my anguish I will appear, a gloomy guest / I will appear for an hour – and alone will I die, *To Prince A.M. Gorchakov*, 1817); “И смерти мысль мила душе моей” (And the thought of death is sweet to my soul, *Battle is familiar to me*, 1820); “Умолкну скоро я!” (I will soon fall silent! 1821) “Грядущей смерти годовщину / Меж их стараясь угадать” (The coming date of my death / amongst them trying to guess, *Should I wonder...*, 1829). Brodsky began to burble about old age and death while still in his poetic cradle and never abandoned the theme: “Ничего от смерти не убрать. / Отчего так страшно умирать?” (One cannot save anything from death. / Why is it so terrible to die? 1961, I:129); “Старение! Здравствуй, мое старение! / Крови медленное струение” (Ageing! Nail, old age! The slow flow of blood, 1972, II:290-91). Fear of death<sup>22</sup> (Но, не хочу я, други, умирать – [‘But, friends, I do not want to die’, *Elegy*, 1830]; чую дыхание смертной темени / фибрами всеми и жмусь к подстилке [‘I sense the breath of deathly darkness / with every fibre of my being and press myself to the bedding’, Brodsky, II:290]), prompted the belief that their poetry would outlive them. Thus arises a theme common to both – of the memorial to oneself (памятник самому себе, Brodsky, I:424).<sup>23</sup> In this sense death is treated by them as the passage into immortality.

Brodsky consistently adheres to the poetic tradition, that of Pushkin in particular, whereby the poet’s image is codified in monumental form.<sup>24</sup> If, in Pushkin’s case it expresses his conception of the poet’s mission as agent of God’s will, in Brodsky’s it tends more to symbolize the poet’s triumph as the voice of language transcending Time. The use of cultural masks is another feature common to Pushkin’s and Brodsky’s self-portraiture.<sup>25</sup> Both engage in a dialogue with world culture and they keep, in part, the same distinguished company: Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Dante. It is possible to regard these shades of the great as dreams of an ideal poet. Comparing Brodsky with Pushkin, Viktor Krivulin points out the ‘most radical similarity: ‘The fact is that both Brodsky and Pushkin, recognizing themselves to be unique personalities, were aware of the necessity of somehow hiding that uniqueness, of wearing a mask.’<sup>26</sup>

Poem by poem this implicitly critical and ironic depiction forms a crucial part of their selves. Both of possessed many contradictory qualities: intellectual vigour and passion, the fire of creative imagination combined with the coolness of reason; a light touch with breathtaking profundity. Not infrequently, Brodsky has been reproached with making his lyrical poetry too philosophically speculative, too rationalistic. Pushkin, somewhere, remarks that poetry demands thought and then more thought. Brodsky meets that requirement in full measure: every time he makes yet one more attempt to solve the

evidently insoluble problems of existence and artistic creation – the essence of life and death, of love and faith, the metaphysics of language and poetry, ‘turning up his philosophical mode of thought to full power... he provides fresh answers’.<sup>27</sup>

Brodsky is an urban poet and, essentially, the poet of that one city which he calls Peter and which is ever present, in the background. Venice, Florence, London, all of them, in his writing, take on that city’s traits “мерзнущего у моря” (freezing by the sea, III:17). In the persona of the exile from that city we recognize traits of Ovid, of Dante, of Pushkin and of Brodsky himself. Like Dante and Pushkin, Brodsky was unable to free himself from a lifelong obsession with the magic of his native city. In the eyes of many Russian poets Petersburg was the work of Pushkin as much as it was of Peter. All poets after Pushkin were affected by the resonances of *The Bronze Horseman*. Petersburg also provided both poets with a sense of estrangement: ‘the people of Petersburg... felt that they were indeed on the edge of the empire and in their poetry, they found themselves looking at the empire as if from the side. That is, it’s precisely this element of estrangement which is necessary for the writer’.<sup>28</sup> Like Dante, Brodsky tries to avoid mentioning the city by name; he even borrowed from Dante the first line of the poem “Я родился и вырос в балтийских болотах...” (I was born and grew up in the Baltic marshland, II:403). Compare with the Russian version of Dante’s line: “Я родился и возрос / в великом городе” (I was born and grew up ... in the great city, *Inferno*, XXIII:94-95).

Pushkin, talking about the dreadful events of his life and of life in Russia, wrote: ‘Shall we look at the tragedy through the eyes of Shakespeare’ (XIII:259). Brodsky extended that already distanced point-of-view immeasurably: ‘From the point of view of time’ (III:61). They don’t just see themselves from a detached point-of-view, they see themselves through different sets of eyes. The multiple point-of-view inevitably engenders a multiplicity of self-descriptions. This principle is actualized not just through a system of self-derogations, but also through the use of the objective word-image – ‘man’. The homeless, nameless ‘man in a raincoat (II:318) who appears in ‘Lagoon’ (1973) trails a whole host of lexical doubles: “Человек размышляет о собственной жизни, как ночь о лампе” (a man muses on his life, like the night on a lamp, II:362). In Pushkin, man (человек) is almost invariably rhymed with time (век) which is another way of viewing a man from the point of view of time: “Не славь его. В наш гнусный век / Седой Нептун земли союзник / На всех стихиях человек - / Тиран, предатель или узник.” (Do not praise him. In our vile age / Grey Neptune is the earth’s ally./ In all the elements man / Is a tyrant, traitor or prisoner, *To Viazemsky*, 1826). To which Brodsky doesn’t fail to respond: “Как сказано у поэта, «на всех стихиях...». / Далеко же видел, сидя в своих болотах! / От себя добавлю: на всех широтах” (As the poet said, “in all elements...” / Sitting in his bog, he saw



quite far! / And I would add: in all latitudes', *To Evgenii*, 1975; II:374). To appreciate the importance of this device we must remember what Brodsky wrote about rhyme: 'Three things about rhyme. First of all, the aspiration of the poet is to make his utterance stick. Rhyme is, apart from everything else, a terrific mnemonic device, it imparts an air of inevitability to your utterance. The most interesting thing is that the rhyme simply uncovers the dependencies within the language. It brings together those things heretofore unconnected'.<sup>29</sup>

Brodsky used this Pushkin rhyme in many of his youthful poems: "он сгорел между полюсами века: / между ненавистью человека / и невежеством человека" (he burnt up between the poles of age: / between man's hatred / and man's ignorance, 1959, I:33); "За веком век, за веком век / ложится в землю любой человек" (Age after age, age after age / every man lies down in the earth, 1961, I:99); see also I:96, 98, 104, 121, 128, 148). Lozinsky also uses the same rhyme throughout his translation of the *Divine Comedy*: *вовек/человек/amech* (*Inferno*, XXXI:62, 64, 66), *навеки/ в Человеке / Джудекки* (*Inferno*; XXXIV:113, 115, 117); *Purgatorio*: I:128, 132; V:14, 16; XIV:28, 80; XXVIII:140, 142; *Paradiso*: XIX:70, 72. I would argue that Brodsky learnt how to rhyme even more from Dante than from Rein.<sup>30</sup> If from the latter he learnt not to rhyme the same grammatical categories, like adjectives or verbs, from the former he learnt something more important, how to create a rhyme which constitutes a metaphor. We can find many examples of such rhymes in the original and in the Russian translation of the *Divine Comedy*; from the *Inferno* - *amore/ autore/ onore* (I: 83, 85, 87); *bella/stella/favella* (II: 53, 55, 57); *poeta/pieta/replete* (XVIII: 20/22/24); from the *Purgatorio* - *eterna/ lucerna/ inferna*, I:41, 43, 45); *Dio/ rio/ mio* (VII: 5, 7, 9); *spera/sera/era* (XV: 2, 4, 6); from the *Inferno* - *amore/dolore/dottore* (V:119/121/123); *gola/sola/parola* (VI: 53, 55, 57). Lozinsky rhymes in the *Inferno*: *поэт/свет/лет* (X:128, 130, 132); *устами/ стихами/годами* (XVI: 125, 127, 129); *человек/отсек/ навек* (XXVII: 80, 82, 84).

All three poets cultivated the theme of 'the little man', which is in keeping with the Christian spirit of their poetry:

О, люди! Жалкий род, достойный слез и смеха!  
Жрецы минутного, поклонники успеха!  
Как часто мимо вас проходит человек,  
Над кем ругается слепой и буйный век.

(O people! Pitiful race, worthy of tears and laughter! / Priests of the momentary, admirers of success! / How often does a man pass you, / Cursed by the blind and turbulent age, Pushkin, *Commander*, 1935).

Dante has also reproached his contemporaries for similar sins: 'Pride, envy and avarice are the three sparks that have set these hearts on fire' (*Inferno*, VI:75-76) and he repeats 'a people avaricious, envious and proud'

(XV:68). His own attitude to man is formulated in the final line of his *Commedia* 'were revolved by the love that moves the sun and other stars' ('l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele, XXXIII:146).

One could, using different parameters, continue to compare their poetics which would include Dante as well. The political life in both countries was, to a large extent, bound up with their personal lives. All three responded to the political pressures of the day. Without any love of politics, shunning it even, Brodsky, like Pushkin remained alert to political problems in Russia: see his poems *A Letter to General Z.* (1968), his reaction to the invasion of Czechoslovakia; or *Lines on the Winter Campaign of 1980* about the war in Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall (1980), the tension in Poland (1980) and elsewhere. It is typical of Brodsky to treat politics in terms of the age of Pushkin, even of antiquity: the key words are Empire, Caesar, tyrant, slave and Brodsky includes himself in that set with bitter irony:

Огрызок цезаря, атлета,  
Певца тем паче  
Есть вариант автопортрета.  
Скажу иначе:

Усталый раб - из той породы,  
Что зрим все чаще, -  
Под занавес плотнул свободы.

(A leftover of Caesar, of an athlete, / furthermore, of a singer / is a version of a self-portrait. / To put it differently: // a weary slave – of that breed / that's seen more often - / tasted freedom before the curtain descended. III:27).

As can be seen even in that quotation there are two echoes of Pushkin: "огрызок цезаря" (a leftover of Caesar) calls to mind "родов униженный обломок" (a humble fragment of [aristocratic] stock, II:875) and "усталый раб" (a weary slave) – "Давно, усталый раб, замыслил я побег" (*It is time, my friend, it is time*, 1834).

Discussing Brodsky's cultural endeavours in a Pushkinian context, one cannot ignore his exploration of other cultures. Milosz, having in mind Brodsky's poems about Mexico, about Washington and his Italian cycle, says 'Brodsky really has been a go-getter, conquering America and the West in general; he is something of a cultural explorer [...] The whole twentieth-century civilisation lives in the imagery of his poetry'.<sup>31</sup> Dante, of course, absorbed the entire Greek and Latin culture, literature, philosophy, history, art. Akhmatova was for Brodsky what Brunetto Latini was for Dante. Their influence on the poets shows mainly in the expansion of cultural horizons, not in poetics. Dante developed his visual imagination by wandering through the great churches of Florence. Brodsky was a frequent visitor of Leningrad's Hermitage. All three poets, like sponges, absorbed everything they felt they needed from other cultures.<sup>32</sup>

It would be relevant to compare the extent of their expansion at the level of language, with their introduction of new linguistic strata into poetry to give a fresh vitality to language. Dante's *De Valgari Eloquentia* (1304) is a prose study of poetry, of poetic language and of language in general. Brodsky never attempted anything of this sort but his preoccupation with the nature of language and its function in history is attested to. For Brodsky language is the building material out of which the world is formed; he saw it as an absolute and turned it into a kind of ideal model of the world's existence. The perfecting of the language, a harmonious relationship with it is the true task of the poet, on condition that he lives within its orbit not just on its surface. Brodsky felt part of it; its vowels, consonants, punctuation marks. It is interesting to notice that in Lozinsky's version of Dante 'word' is very often in a rhyme position, forming a metaphor, with all such words as 'heart' (в сердцах/ словах/ речах, *Inferno*, VI:74, 76, 78;), 'Deity' (слова/ Божества/ едва, *Inferno*: XI:98, 100, 102), 'substance' (существа/ слова/ естества, *Purgatorio*, III:32, 34, 36), with 'alive' (сурово/ живого/ слово, *Inferno*, XXVII:83, 85, 85 and *Purgatorio*, XI:53, 55, 57 & XXIV:5, 7, 9), 'singer' (певцов/ слов/ плодов, *Purgatorio*, XXII:128, 130, 132). If we also recall how often Dante uses such word as 'verse', 'speech', 'word', 'voice', we must allow the possibility that Brodsky learnt something very important to him from the great Italian as far as his attitude to language is concerned. Brodsky uses the lexis 'word' 215 times and 78 times in the rhyme position coupled with 'head' (голова/ слова, I:97, 109), 'dream' (слов/ снов, I:103), love' (слов/ любовь, I:235), 'blood' (в слове/ крови, I:107), rights' (слова/ права, I:108, 109).<sup>33</sup> Considering that we can also find in the same long poem *Procession*, written in 1961, such key words of Dante's vocabulary as 'hell' (ад/ виноват, I:115) which rhymes with 'guilty'; 'darkness' (тьма, I:97, во мгле, 101, 108, мгла, 120, во мрак, 123, темно, 129, темноте, 137, во мраке, 140); 'body' (тела, I:98) and 'shade' or 'shadow' (тень, I:120), 'speech' (речь, I:121), 'love' (любовь, I:95), 'good' (добро, I:97) and 'evil' (зло, I:97, 104), 'soul' (душа, I:102, 108, 122, 134), 'poet' (Поэт, I: 96), 'verse' (стих, I:128, 135), 'word' (слово, I:107), 'life' (жизнь, I:134, 139), 'light' (свет, I:109, 136), 'birds' (птица, I:100, 107, 136), God (I:100, 147, 148), 'heaven' (I:101), as well as several paraphrases of Dante: "Он вводит вас в какой-то странный мир / сквозь комнаты дремучие, как лес" (He leads you into some strange world / through rooms dense as a forest, I:108); "Какой-то темный лес" (some dark wood, I:117),<sup>34</sup> we might safely assume that Brodsky read Dante the same year and not in 1962 as he recalled later. Here Brodsky almost summarises Dante's treatment of love:

Да, многое дала тебе любовь,  
 Теперь во веки не получишь вновь  
 Такой же свет, хоть до смерти ищи  
 Другую жизнь, как новый хлеб души.

(Yes, love gave you much, / Now you'll not receive for all time / Such a light, even if you search to the end of your days / Another life, like new bread of the soul, I:109)

The supreme power of love is one of the major, common themes for Dante, Pushkin and Brodsky. Like Dante, Pushkin has exalted Anna Kern in an unprecedented way:

Я помню чудное мгновенье:  
Передо мной явилась ты,  
Как мимолетное виденье,  
Как гений чистой красоты.

(I recall the wondrous moment: / You appeared before me,  
/ Like a fugitive apparition, / Like the genius of pure beauty.)

The poem was written in 1825, after a year of exile to Odessa, where Pushkin learnt Italian and read the *Divine Comedy* in the original.<sup>35</sup> Brodsky has his own Beatrice, addressing her or dedicating to her all the poems collected in the book *New Stanzas to Augusta*; more followed, some remind us of Dante's treatment of Beatrice:

Я был просто слеп.  
Ты, возникая, прячась,  
Даровала мне зрячесть.  
Так оставляют след.

(I was simply blind. / You, appearing and hiding, / gave me my sight. / Thus traces are left (III:42). As with Dante, love is identified now with death (amore / una morte), now with the deity.

In Naiman's opinion, Pushkin and Brodsky 'possess this epigrammatic ease with which they react to events as they happen. This lightness of touch is loaded with meaning'.<sup>36</sup> Brodsky's wit and talent shine particularly brightly in his occasional pieces. Gordin recounts how they collaborated on a humorous epistle to Kushner on the occasion of his birthday (1969): Gordin improvised the subject matter and Brodsky turned it, at a moment's notice, into poetry:

Ничем, Певец, твой юбилей  
Мы не отметим, кроме лести  
Рифмованной, поскольку вместе  
Давно не видим двух рублей.  
[...]  
Мы предпочли бы поднести  
Перо Монтея, скальпель Вовси,  
Скальп Вознесенского, а вовсе  
Не оду, Господи прости.  
[...]  
а ты – ты думаешь сейчас:

спустить бы с лестницы их всех,  
задернуть шторы, снять рубашку,  
достать перо и промокашку,

расположиться без помех

и так начать без суеты,  
не дожидаясь вдохновенья:  
“Я помню чудное мгновенье,  
Передо мной явилась ты”.<sup>37</sup>

(Singer, we can celebrate / your birthday only / by rhymed flattery, / because neither of us has seen / a rouble and a rouble together for a long time...// We would prefer to bring to you / Montaigne’s pen, Vovsi’s scalpel, / Voznesensky’s scalp, but certainly / no ode, God forgive us...// But you are now thinking: // I’d rather kick them all downstairs, / draw the curtains, take off my shirt, / get out my pen and blotting paper, / settle myself without hindrance / and start without fuss / not waiting for inspiration, as follows: / ‘I remember the miraculous moment / when you appeared before me).

Straightforward references to Pushkin or imitations of his work are to be found in many of Brodsky’s humorous poems, for example to *Arion*, in *A Sonnet on the Occasion of Lena Valikhan’s and Alik Dobrovol’skii’s Marriage* (1960): “Уже сейчас, близки и далеки, / Вы пьете мир из собственной реки. / А я все гимны прежние пою, / Свою одежду ветхую сушу...” (Already now, close and far / You drink the world from your own river. / But I sing the same old hymns, / Dry my worn out clothes...). In this analogy to Pushkin’s ‘Album Verses’, the ‘merry Brodsky’, as Iakov Gordin called him, appears in all his charm.<sup>38</sup>

Brodsky often includes lines from Pushkin and events in his life in his own poetry as, for example, in *On the Death of a Friend*: “сочинителю лучших из од / на паденье А.С. в кружева и к ногам Гончаровой” (to the writer of one of the best odes / on A.S.’s falling into the lace and at the feet of Goncharova, 1973, II:332); as well as Pushkin himself: “Входит Пушкин в летнем шлеме, / в тонких пальцах – папироса” (Pushkin enters in a pilot’s helmet, / between his slender fingers is a cigarette, ‘A Performance’, 1986, III:114). And without a trace of irony the unnamed Pushkin symbolizes an unfree Russia:

И отлит был  
Из их отходов тот, кто не уплыл,  
Тот, чей давясь, проговорил  
«Прощай свободная стихия» рот,  
чтоб раствориться навсегда в тюрьме широт,  
где нет ворот.

(And he was cast / out of what is left [after the fetters have been made] he who didn’t sail off, / he whose mouth choking, uttered, / “Farewell free element”, / so as to dissolve forever in the prison of latitudes / where there are no gates. *At The Pushkin Monument in Odessa*, 1969-70, IV:9).

Brodsky himself acknowledged that his *Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots* ‘are largely based on para-

phrases of Pushkin... The beginning of Sonnet 20 is pure Aleksandr Sergeevich in sound<sup>39</sup>: “Пером простым – не правда, что мятежным! - / я пел про встречу в некоем саду...” (With a simple pen, it is not true that it’s rebellious, / I sang about our meeting in some park, II:345).

The borrowing and quotations from Pushkin, as Tomas Venclova remarks in another context, are sometimes ‘parodic and shocking’.<sup>40</sup> It is sufficient to recall how Brodsky parodies the theme of love in Pushkin: “Я вас любил. Любовь еще (возможно, / что просто боль) сверлит мои мозги. / [...] Я вас любил так сильно, безнадежно, / как дай вам Бог другими – но не даст! (I loved you. My love (or maybe / it’s just a pain) is gnawing my brain... // I loved you so strongly, so hopelessly / as God grant [you may be] by others – but He won’t! II:339); or from the ‘Prophet’: “уже ни в ком / не видя места, коего глаголом / коснуться мог бы” (no longer / seeing a spot where I might touch anyone / with words, II:209), com. to Pushkin: “Моих зениц коснулся он”; “Не стану жечь тебя / глаголом, исповедью, просьбой, / проклятыми вопросами – той оспой, / которой речь с пелен / заражена” (I will not burn / you, with words, with a confession, with a supplication, / with the accursed questions – that smallpox / with which speech, / almost from cradle, / is infected, II:209) – “Глаголом жги сердца людей” (with the word burn the heart of people), etc.

Deliberate allusions to Pushkin’s “Не дай мне Бог сойти с ума, / Нет, лучше посох и сума” (God, don’t let me go mad, / No, better a staff and a bag, 1833) can be seen at the beginning of Brodsky’s poem “В эту зиму с ума / я опять не сошел, а зима / глядь и кончилась” (This winter / again I didn’t go mad, and in a trace / winter was over, II:257). Paraphrase from Pushkin’s “Вновь я посетил...” (Again I have visited, 1835) could be found in “От окраины к центру” (From the Margin to the Centre, I:217) or Pushkin’s “Здравствуй, племя / Младое, незнакомое!” (Greeting, tribe, / young, unknown!) is placed in ironic context: “Здравствуй, младое и незнакомое / племя! Жужжащее, как насекомое” (Greeting, young and unknown tribe! / The buzzing, insect-like, II:290).

We are presented with a fairly complex network of references to Pushkin’s texts. Brodsky’s ‘pushkinisms’ can be serious, or light-hearted. Pushkin’s words “Страдать есть смертного удел” (To suffer is the normal lot for mortals, Reminiscences in Tsarskoe Selo, 1814) find a serious echo in Brodsky’s view of the world in which, he opines, tragedy is the norm: “Поскольку боль – не нарушение правил: / страданье есть / способность тел / и человек есть испытатель боли” (Inasmuch as pain is not the breaking of the rules / suffering is / the capability of bodies, / and man is the endurer of pain, II:210). On the other hand, Brodsky, not without a trace of mischief, exploits the tragic Pushkinian situation in the poem *At the Pushkin Monument in Odessa* (IV:7-10):

...там стыл апостол перемены мест

спиной к отчизне и лицом к тому,  
в чью так и не случилось бахрому  
шагнуть ему.

[...]

И я там был, и я там в снег блевал.

(the apostle of changing places froze there / with his back to the fatherland, and facing the fringes [of the sea] / where he never happened to step...// And I was there, and there I threw up in the snow, IV:8).

Just collecting these many references to our first poet one comes to realize how much Brodsky draws from Pushkin.<sup>41</sup> Brodsky himself has admitted, ‘all of us, to some degree and in one way or another, continue writing *Evgenii Onegin*. We do so perhaps to free ourselves from this music’.<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, I will say that in his relationship to Pushkin Brodsky remained true to himself: on the one hand he followed in his steps, just as he, in general, followed the tradition; on the other hand, he made a decisive break with tradition and, in many ways, departed from Pushkin’s path, but only so as to continue his work. He could be describing his own work when he said of Pushkin, ‘he is, to a certain degree, a sort of lens into which the past goes and out of which the future emerges’.<sup>43</sup>

Brodsky said in one of his interviews that he read Dante in 1962 at the same time as he read the Bible.<sup>44</sup> I think his memory is slightly at fault here, insofar as we can safely assume that he read Dante at least a year earlier, before he wrote his long poem *Procession* (Autumn 1961) which is thick with Dantean allusions. The many voices and allegorical characters in this poem remind us of the densely populated world of Dante. Here Brodsky uses allegory and symbols: a liar, an honest man, a thief. There are 16 other characters and their shadows, some are also in Dante: a Poet, a King, lovers and the Devil. The lovers resemble Paolo and Francesca who “в холодной мгле навеки обнялись” (embraced for ever in cold darkness, I:98). There are several direct references to Dante’s text: “я правду говорю, / но дьявольски похожую на ложь” (I’m telling the truth / but it looks devilishly like a lie, I:108). Compare to Dante’s lines in Lozinsky’s translation: “Мы истину, похожую на ложь, / Должны хранить сомкнутыми устами” (A man should always close his lips, as far as he can, to the truth that has the face of a lie, *Inferno*, XVI:124); “Нет мне изгнания ни в рай, ни в ад” (There is no exile for me to heaven or hell, I:115); “Какой-то темный лес” (Some dark wood, I:117); “посередине жизни” (in the midst of life, I:139). Here some of Dante’s ideas have been assimilated: «живя в добре и зле» (living in good and evil, I:124); man is searching for something in heaven (“что-то ищет в небесах”, I:101). He believes, there is no end to life and death (“жизни и смерти нет конца”, I:116), and there is something higher than man, besides fear of the Devil and

God (“кроме страха перед дьяволом и Богом, / существует что-то выше человека”, I:148). It is here, in *Procession*, that Brodsky rhymes “человек” (man) with “век” (century, eternity) seven times. It is here that Brodsky reintroduced the word “душа” (soul) into Russian poetry. We can assume that this key word also has its precedent in Dante, or at least that Dante reinforced its use in Brodsky’s poetry – altogether 204 times. Here for the first time Brodsky used some of his favourite antinomies: плоть и тень (flesh and shadow): “Нам нелегко, ведь мы и плоть и тень / одновременно, вместе тень и свет” (It’s not easy for us, since we are flesh and shadow, at the same time, light and dark together, I:128). The image of shade or shadow appears in the poem *Zof’ia* written in 1962,<sup>45</sup> also emphasising the opposition between darkness and light. Brodsky plays graphically with the word АД (Hell) in the rhyme “кЛАД / хЛАД” (Treasure/Cold). And with particular intensity appears the image of the soul, beginning and ending a stanza: “Ничто твоей души не сокрушит” (Nothing will crush your soul) and “от Страшного Суда душа спасет (your soul will save you from the Last Judgement, I:179). Jadwiga Szymak-Reiferova reminds us that *Zofia* is the Polish version of the Greek name Sofia (i.e. Wisdom), having acquired a few additional meanings – Sophia – Anima Mundi, mystic soul of the world, Gnostic soul, which is pre-human, who sacrificed himself”.<sup>46</sup> These two poems of 1961 and 1962 bear witness to Brodsky’s spiritual search, in which Dante, along with the Bible and various thinkers (Russell, Shestov, Kierkegaard) played a significant part.

Dante remains in Brodsky’s consciousness the next year as well, when he wrote *The Great Elegy to John Donne* (1963). For a description of the posthumous wandering of the poet’s soul he borrows from Dante the very structure of the poem, the circular movement. Brodsky himself doesn’t mention this directly, and explains the notion of a circle differently: “The main reason for the poem was the possibility of centrifugal movement [...] First the room, then the neighbourhood, London, the whole island, the sea, and the location in the world”.<sup>47</sup> John Donne’s soul, unlike Virgil’s leads him not just to the gates of Paradise, but into Paradise itself: «И Ад ты зрел - в себе, а после - в яви. / Ты видел так же явно светлый Рай» (And you saw Hades in yourself and later in reality. / You also saw a bright Paradise very clearly, I:250). The centrifugal structure Brodsky varies 12 years later in *The Hawk’s Cry in Autumn* (1975), once more returning to the Dantean allegory of the poet’s image as a bird “Подобье птиц” (Like a bird, I:251), repeating almost literally the Russian version of Dante’s simile (*Inferno*, III:117; IV:96), and the bird itself “сродни звезде” (similar to a star, II:379). Significantly, that the *Great Elegy to John Donne* with the image of a star, seems to echo the famous end of the *Divina Commedia*:

Того гляди, и выглянет из туч



Звезда, что столько лет твой мир хранила.

(Any time, from behind the clouds / the star will appear,  
which protected your world for so many years, I:251).

All three parts of Dante's *Commedia* end with this image: "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele (*Paradiso*, XXXIII:145). The image of a 'star' will become one of the constant images in Brodsky's poetry – altogether 157 times. It seems that since *The Great Elegy to John Donne* Brodsky has been seeking to recreate the life of a soul. In a poem written in 1994, a year before his death, Brodsky talks of his own death: "Но скоро [...] / я стану просто одной звездой" (But soon [...] I shall be simply a star, IV:26) with reference to Dante's *Paradiso*: "всякая душа взойдет опять / к своей звезде" ('Dice che l'alma a la sua stella riede', IV:52). There are a few more borrowings from Dante, especially repeating the opposition of the 'soul' and the 'body': "Нельзя туда прийти мне во плоти" (I cannot come there in the flesh, I:250); compare with Dante's "здесь я во плоти" (Here I am in the flesh, *Purgatorio*, XXVI:56).

Apart from the long pieces mentioned above in the 60s, Brodsky also wrote *A Petersburg Novel* (1961), *Isaac and Abraham* (1963) and *Gorbunov and Gorchakov* (1968). We are puzzled at the young Brodsky's tendency to write long poems. Possibly this also attests to Dante's influence, since these works too contain some Dantean allusions: "Я чувствую, что шествую во сне я / ступеньками, ведущими из тьмы / то в бездну, то в пределы эмпирея" (I feel as though I'm striding through a dream / upstairs to light, downstairs to the abyss, / up to the threshold of Elysium, II:134). His debt to Dante continues to accumulate and takes many forms and shapes: from direct quotations such as "как журавлиный клик, когда он берет / курс на Юг" (like the wedge shaped formation of cranes, / heading South, II:438) from the *Inferno* "Как журавлиный клин берет на юг" (V:46) to separate words. One of the clearest example of the latter is Brodsky's famous poem *Я входил вместо дикого зверя в клетку...* (III:7, I, instead of a wild beast, entered the cage..., 1980)<sup>48</sup> with a dense cluster of lexical references to Dante's *Inferno*, giving the theme of the poet in exile a universal character: дикий (wild, III:25), зверь (beast, I:43, 88; II:48, 119; VII:15; IX:72; XVII:1; 30, 114). In the *Purgatorio* Dante also compared himself to a beast (III:126 & XXIV:135, in the Russian version).<sup>49</sup> There are other examples of a common word store: с высоты ледника (from the heights of a glacier, *Inferno*, VIII:128), озира́л (view, *Inferno*, I:26; X:36; XV:19), вопли (cries of frenzy, *Inferno*, I:115, III:61; VII:27; XIV:27), хлеб изгнания (the bread of exile, *Paradise*, XVII:58-59), вой (wailing, *Inferno*, V:29; VI:19), горе (grief, *Inferno*, II:130; III:84; XVII:45), благодарность (gratitude): Что я поднесь благодарю Творца, 'I still give praise and thanks to God for it', VIII:60). The last word expresses Brodsky's credo: grateful acceptance of all life's trials:

Но пока мне рот не забили глиной,  
Из него раздаваться будет лишь благодарность.  
(But whilst my mouth is not yet packed with clay, / it'll  
resound only with gratitude, III:7).

This concluding line becomes the centrepiece of a fresco if we examine the fate of the word 'gratitude' and other words related to it by root throughout his work. It is to be found at the opening of the poem 'Procession': «Пора давно за все благодарить, / за все, что невозможно подарить» (It has long been time to give thanks for everything, / for everything that is impossible to bestow, I:95) as well as in many other poems. Like Dante, he is grateful to his beloved "всем сердцем Вас благодарю / - спасенным Вами" (I give thanks to you with all my heart / saved by you', I:351); or: "тебя, ты слышишь, каждая строка благодарит за то, что не погибла" (can you hear, every line / gives thanks to you for the fact that you did not perish, I:353). Gratitude becomes an evocation: "Пусть он звучит и в смертный час, / как благодарность уст и глаз / тому, что заставляет нас / порою вдаль смотреть" (Let it [poetic song] ring out even in the hour of death / as gratitude of mouth and eye / to Him who forced us, at times, to look into the far distance', I:414). With the years, the feeling of gratitude became part and parcel of the poet's stoic ethic:

Там наверху –  
Услышь одно: благодарю за то, что  
Ты отнял все, чем на своем веку  
Владел я. Ибо созданное прочно,  
Продукт труда  
Есть пища вора и прообраз Рая,  
Верней – добыча времени...  
(There, up above, / you listen, one thing: I thank you because / you took everything that I, in my time, / possessed. For what is solidly created / is thief's food and the prototype of Paradise - / more exactly – the spoils of time... II:212).

In this poem *A Conversation with a Celestial Being* (1970) there are several references to Dante: "идешь на вещи по второму кругу" (you encounter things in the Second Circle, II:211), "я ныне глух" (I now deaf, II:211). The last one is an echo of a line from the *Purgatorio*: "И глух и нем ... Я долго шел" (And deaf and dumbfound then I moved, XXVI:100-101) which Brodsky has already used in a poem of 1963 (I:257) and will repeat again later in *Nazidanie* (1987): "Будь глух и нем" (Be deaf and dumb, III:131). The third stanza of *Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scotts* (1974) begins with a quotation from Dante: "Земной свой путь пройдя до середины" (In the middle of the journey of my earthly path, II:338).

The fate of man confronting time and eternity is also a main concern in the *Divine Comedy*: "Я вижу время"

(‘A time I see’, *Purgatory*, XX:70); “время здесь всевластно” (‘for time is precious here / In this domain’, *Purgatory*, XXIV:91-92). Poetry, love and faith are man’s principal weapon against time. Poetry and the image of the poet is another theme common to Brodsky and Dante. Dante resurrected many dead poets, great and small, knowing that posterity would remember their names because they were alluded to in his masterpiece. Brodsky has his own “dead poets society” which includes many members of Dante’s company. Their great shadows are not just a convenient source of quotations for Brodsky, but an inspiration, helping Brodsky to digest and develop certain images and ideas; they showed him the way. Hence his lesson to the young poets: ‘I think no one has the right to write in the English language without reading Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The same goes for Homer and for Dante [...] In general, one should have his left hand on Homer, the Bible, Dante, and the Loeb Series, before grabbing the pen with the right’.<sup>50</sup> Like Dante, he navigated freely among different cultures divided by centuries.

In one of his interviews, Brodsky lamented the fact that he hadn’t written his *Divine Comedy*. It is too late now, he said. The material I have collected show that actually he continued writing his *Divine Comedy* in one way or another all his life. In *Watermark* Brodsky sees America as a kind of *Purgatorio* and Italy as a version of Paradise.<sup>51</sup> We can only guess which country is most suitably regarded as Hell. Fragments of many of Dante’s themes can be found in Brodsky’s poetry. We might safely assume even that Dante supplied Brodsky with all the basic philosophical categories for his Universe: man – time, faith – love, creativity (art, poetry) – language. And of course, the motif of a journey is also present in Brodsky. Each of these themes forms a centre for a separate fresco. Light and darkness fuse with and modulate one another. In fact, Brodsky’s frescos are painted almost exclusively in black and white with a stroke of bright colour. The allusions unmistakably lead us to Dante.

One common theme is belief in the power and spiritual authority of the poetic word, because both poets are faithful servants of language. Brodsky identified himself with the word, with the letters of the alphabet, with punctuation marks even: “я, бормочущий комок / слов (I, a mumbling heap / of words, II:295); “я / в глазах твоих – кириллица, названья...” (I, / in your eyes am the Cyrillic, names, III:148). Such metaphorical substitutions of grammatical categories for the self are not found in Pushkin or Dante. However, in the Russian version of Dante the word ‘poet’ rhymes with ‘light’ and ‘years’: поэт / свет / лет (*Inferno*, X:128, 130, 132; *Purgatorio*, V:44, 46), with ‘answer’ (*Purgatorio*, XV:23, 25, 27 & 38, 40, 42; XXV:32, 34, 36), with ‘advice’ (*Purgatorio*, XXI:14, 16, 18). We also find many similar significant rhymes in the original: poeta / pieta / replete (*Inferno*, XVIII:20, 22, 24), bella / stella / favella (*Inferno*, II:55, 57, 59); stelle / favelle / elle (*Inferno*, III:23, 25, 27); gola / sola / parola (*Inferno*, VI:53, 55, 57) or sole / parole / vole (*Paradiso*, XI:50, 52,

54). Dante also used the word 'rhyme' in the rhyme position: cima / prima / rima (*Inferno*, XIII:44, 46, 48). He associates language with life and work (campare / andare / parlare, II:68, 70, 72). Some of these surfaces in Brodsky's poetry.

These frescos, as I have called them, or fragments are linked by 'the movement of his soul' ("движение его души") as well as 'the grandeur of inspiration' ("величие замысла"). In Brodsky's view, one of the poet's tasks is to illuminate the meaning of all he has inherited. Persistent reading of Dante undoubtedly helped him in his investigations.<sup>52</sup> There is evidence that at the end of his life Brodsky read Dante in the original.<sup>53</sup> All the allusions, quotations, paraphrases from Dante as well as some of Dante's rhymes and other devices provide material for a more comprehensive study than is offered here. Even the title of one of Brodsky's collections, *To Urania*, is influenced by Dante. When he was asked what this Muse, patron of Astronomy, signified to him, he replied: 'Quite a lot. But if you want to know precisely what, look at Canto XXIII, I think, of the *Purgatory*. It is all there.'<sup>54</sup>

Dante is grateful to Brunetto Latini: 'you taught me how man makes himself immortal ('come l'uoma s'eterna', *Inferno*, XV:85). That same lesson comes to Brodsky via Dante. Hence, the recurrent image of a 'star' as a glance of God, derives from Dante's *Comedy*:

Издадека,

Из глубины Вселенной, с другого ее конца,  
Звезда смотрела в пещеру. И это был взгляд Отца.

(...from afar, / from the depth of the Universe, from its other end, / a star looked into the cave. And this was the Father's glance. III:127).

The totality of vision, described by Dante in the *Paradise* "А зренью мощь заслугами дана" (Of this sight merit is the measuring-rod, XXVIII:112), was vouchsafed to Brodsky. Where with Dante all the 'wheres' and 'whens' have merged in God, with Brodsky they merged in causes and effects, i.e. of the Almighty. The religious mission of the poetic word and the poet himself might have become the theme for one more fresco. If Dante rhymes "Творец / вконец / певец" (Creator / finally / singer, *Paradise*, XXX:18, 22, 24, in the Russian version), the young Brodsky identifies with Orpheus: "возлюбленный твой – нынешний Орфей" (Your beloved is a contemporary Orpheus, I:179), and Orpheus is identified with Christ "Так шествовал Орфей и пел Христос... Так шествовал Христос и пел Орфей" (Thus Orpheus walked and Christ sang [...] Thus Christ walked and Orpheus sang, I:181). As is well known, in early Christian times the figure of Orpheus in the frescos on the stone walls of the catacombs symbolised Christ. Dante also called Christ a singer: "Там на корме стоял певец небесный" (Da poppa stava il celestial nocchiero, *Purgatoria*, II:43). In the Russian version Lozinsky rhymes поэта/ света (*Inferno*, IV: 79, 81).

‘Of course, it would be far more pleasing to write another *Divina Commedia*, said Brodsky, [...] but that’s not within my power. But I somehow have the conviction, not the conviction, but somehow... I have the conviction that what I’m doing, in the final analysis, is to the glory of God. I don’t think that it could be regarded by Him (as far as I can fashion Him). I don’t think that it is against Him. No matter what drastic statements I can make here and there, even those should be to His liking in one way or another’.<sup>55</sup> These words almost repeat what Virgil said to Dante: “То, видя путь твой, небесам угодный» (If thou follow thy star thou canst not fail of glorious haven, *Inferno*, XV:55-56). ‘It is quite simple, continues Brodsky, that is how you fashion the Supreme Being or Supreme Entity, according to you doctrine or your own ability [...] I think what we are doing in poetry is simply trying to elucidate the Bible. That is what it’s all about. In the final analysis, that’s what it is’.<sup>56</sup>

Surely, this is the source of Brodsky’s direct identification with Dante: “И новый Дант склоняется к листу / и на пустое место ставит слово” (And a new Dante bends over the page / and puts a word in the empty space, II:309). One must remember that Pushkin too draped himself in Dante’s mantle, writing on his self-portrait: ‘il gran’padre A.P.’ having in mind a well known verse by Alfieri. Each of them in his own way paid his debts to the great Florentine. As Virgil was “родник бездонный” (‘e quella fonte’, I:79) for Dante, so Dante himself became a similar source for many poets, ‘...the poetry of Dante is the one universal school of style for writing of poetry in any language, wrote T.S. Eliot [...] there is no poet in any tongue – not even in Latin or Greek – who stands as a model for all poets’.<sup>57</sup>

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> All references to Brodsky's poetry in this article are to *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*, Pushkinskii Fond, St Petersburg, 1992-1999. This quotation is from vol. II, p. 309: 'And a new Dante bends over the page / and puts a word on the empty space', translated by Daniel Weissbord. The Pushkin quotations are to be found in the 17 volumes of 'Complete Works', published by the Academy of Sciences, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 17-ti tomakh*, Akademiia nauk SSSR, Moscow, 1937-59. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Pushkin and Brodsky's originals will be my own. I am grateful to Daniel Weissbord and Chris Jones for helping me with the English literal translations.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, London, 1965, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> See articles by D.S. (V.A. Saitanov) 'Pushkin and Brodsky' in L. Loseff's, ed. *Poetika Brodskogo*, Hermitage, Tenefly, New Jersey, 1989, pp. 207-18; A. Kalomirov (Viktor Krivulin), 'Iosif Brodsky (mesto)', *ibid.*, pp. 219-29; A. Zholkovskii, "'Ja vas liubil...'" Brodskogo: interteksty, invarianty, tematika i struktura', *ibid.*, pp. 38-62; S. Kuznetsov 'Pushkinskie konteksty v poezii Iosifa Brodskogo', *Materialy III i IV Pushkinskogo kollokviuma v Budapeshtem*, 1991, 1993. Budapesht, 1995. pp. 223-230; see also 'O Pushkine i ego epokhe' in Lev Loseff and Petr Vail, eds., *Iosif Brodskii: Trudy i dni*, Nezavisimaia gazeta, Moscow, 1998, pp. 13-39; I. Kovaleva, A. Nesterov, 'O nekotorykh pushkinskikh reministsentsiakh u I.A. Brodskogo', *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta*. Seriya 9. Filologiya. 1999, no. 4, pp. 12-17; E. Semenova, 'Eshche raz o Pushkine i Brodskom', in Ya. Gordin, ed. *Iosif Brodskii i mir. Metafizika. Antichnost'. Sovremennost'*, Zvezda, St Ptb., 2000, pp. 131-38.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Brodsky interviewed by Annie Epelboin, July 1981, in V. Polukhina, ed. *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, Zakharov, Moscow, 2001, p. 149. In one of his interviews Brodsky said that he began reading Pushkin when he was five years old and that in his childhood he knew *Evgenii Onegin* by heart. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> N.N. (Anatolii Naiman), 'Zametki dlia pamiati', *Ostanovka v pustyne*, Chekhov Press, New York, 1970, pp. 7-15.

<sup>6</sup> See my interviews with these poets in *Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1992, pp. 1-52, 74-93, 176-99. See also the enlarged Russian edition *Brodskii glazami sovremennikov*, Zvezda, SPb., 1997, pp. 31-74, 87-100, 169-86.

<sup>7</sup> Introduction in *Trudy i dni*, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, op. cit., pp. 116 & 678.

<sup>9</sup> According to Natal'ya Strezhevskaya, in the 150 years since Pushkin's death there has been no other poet in Russian literature so close to Pushkin in the nature of his talent. See her *Pis'mena perspektivy*, M., 1997, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> The Italian quotations are taken from *Divina Commedia* Biblioteca Economica Newton, Roma, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> All English quotations from *Purgatory* and *Paradise* are taken from Peter Dale's translation, Anvel Press, L., 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', *The Complete Critical Prose and letters*, Ann Arbor, 1979, p. 406.

<sup>13</sup> All English translations from *Inferno* are taken from John D. Sinclair's translation, NY, 1969.

<sup>14</sup> Petr Vail, Vsled za Pushkinym, *Trudy i dni*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Kheifits, "Iosif Brodskii do *Rozhdestvenskogo romansa*", *Russkaia mysl'*, V-XI, July 1997, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Trudy i dni*, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> All Russian quotations are taken from M. Lozinsky's translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, 3 vols, Vita Nova, S-Ptb., 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from Yu.M. Lotman, *A.S. Pushkin*, Iskusstvo-SPb, St Petersburg, 1997, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Inscription on the copy of In the Vicinity of Atlantis, given to Elena Chernysheva 22 January 1996. Quoted in A. Sumerkin's article 'Skorb' i razum', *Russkaia mysl'*. Spetsial'noe prilozhenie, 12-22 may 1996, p. iii.

<sup>21</sup> See other functions of negative pronouns in Brodsky's poetry in I. Kovaleva, 'Odisei i Nikto', *Staroe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2001, 2, pp. 75-80.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Lotman writes about the interdependence of the theme of death and language in Brodsky in his article 'Poet i smert' (iz zametok o poetike Brodskogo)', Lea Pild and Galina Ponomareva, eds., *Blokovskii sbornik*, XIV, Tartu University Press, Tartu, 1998, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> In the opinion of Viktor Yukht, the sculptural myth in Brodsky is directly opposed to the corresponding myth in Pushkin described by Jakobson ('The Statue in Pushkin's Poetic Mythology' in Roman Jakobson, *Language and Literature*, Krystina Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, eds., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 318-67). In Pushkin, maximal semantic tension occurs at those moments when statues (the Commendatore, the Bronze Horseman, the Golden Cockerel) start to move, that is death starts to act like the living (static - dynamic). See Viktor Yukht, 'K probleme genezisa statuarnogo mifa v poezii Brodskogo (1965-1971gg)', *Russian Literature*, XLIV-IV (1998), pp. 409-32.

<sup>24</sup> For this see my article 'Exigi Monumentum Iosifa Brodskogo' in Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina, eds., *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1999, pp. 68-91. The extended Russian version of the article may be found in the collection Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina *Kak rabotaet stikhotvorenii Brodskogo*, NLO, Moscow, 2002, pp. 133-58.

<sup>25</sup> Yu.M. Lotman writes that 'Pushkin's romantic conduct is distinguished by its peculiarity: it entails not an orientation towards one particular type of behaviour but a whole assortment of different "masks" which the poet varies, changing his type of behaviour.' See Yu.M. Lotman, *A.S. Pushkin*, p. 99. For a study of Brodsky's masks see my article 'Metamorfozy "ia" v poezii postmodernizma', *Slavica Helsingiensia*, XVI, 1996, pp. 391-407.

<sup>26</sup> Viktor Krivulin, 'Slovo o nobelitate Iosifa Brodskogo', *Russkaia mysl'*, 11 November 1988. Literaturnoe prilozhenie, no. 7, pp. ii-iii.

<sup>27</sup> Evgenii Rein, interviewed by the author of this article, *Brodskii glazami sovremennikov*, Zvezda, Sp Petersburg, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Brodsky interviewed by Annie Epelboin, *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>30</sup> Brodsky, *Less Than One*, Penguin, 1986, p. 315.

<sup>31</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, 'A Huge Building of Strange Architecture', in Valentina Polukhina, *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries*, op. cit., 326.

<sup>32</sup> A vast list of Pushkin's reference to Dante is discussed by B. Gasparov 'Funktsii reministsentsii iz Dante v poezii Pushkina', *Russian Literature*, XIV, 1983, pp. 317-330.

<sup>33</sup> All statistics are taken from Tatiana Patera's *A Concordance to the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky*, 6 vols., The Edwin Mellen Press, NY, 2002-2003.

<sup>34</sup> Lozinsky uses the following adjectives describing the wood: "sumrachnyi, dikii, dremuchii i groziashchii" (I:2, 5).

<sup>35</sup> M. Rozanov, 'Pushkin i Dante', in *Pushkin I ego sovremenniki*, vol. XXXVII, Leningrad, 1928, pp. 11-41. Pushkin even has chosen an epigraph from Dante: 'Ma dimmi: al tempo d' I dolci sospiri' (*Inferno*, V:118) to chapter XVII of *Evgenii Onegin*, but later changed his mind. Not all Pushkin scholars agreed that he read Dante in the original. B.V. Tomashevsky thinks that Pushkin read *Divina Commedia* in French in Antoni Deschamps' translation, see *Pushkin Today*, David Bethea ed., Indiana UP, 1993, p. 47. See also V.T. Danchenko, *Dante Alig'eri. Bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, M., 1973.

<sup>36</sup> Anatolii Naiman interviewed by Valentina Polukhina, *Brodskii glazami sovremennikov*, op. cit., pp. 45-6.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Iakov Gordin's 'Drugoi Brodskii' in G. komarov, ed. *Iosif Brodskii razmerom podlinnika*, Tallin, 1990, pp. 215-21. With additional examples this is reprinted as 'V svoem krugu', *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 20-21 sentiabria 1997, p. 39. The quotation 'I remember the miraculous moment' is the beginning of Pushkin's famous poem *To A.P. Kern*, 1825.

<sup>38</sup> Iakov Gordin, 'V svoem krugu', op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Brodsky interviewed by Annie Eppelboin, *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>40</sup> Tomas Venclova, 'O stikhotvorenii Iosifa Brodskogo 'Litovskii Noktiurn: T.V.', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, XXXIII, 1998, p. 212. For the English version of this article, see the collection, Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina, eds., *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1999, pp. 107-49.

<sup>41</sup> There are several articles about reminiscences of Pushkin in Brodsky's poetry, for example, Andrei Ranchin, "'Sluzhen'e muz chego-to tam ne terpit': Iosif Brodskii i poeziia Pushkina", *Strelets*, I, 1999, Paris-Moscow, New York, pp. 214-34 and 'Ob odnom poeticheskom treugol'nike: Pushkin – Khodosevich – Brodskii' in A.I. Zhuravleva, ed., *A.S. Pushkin: sbornik statei*, Filologicheskii facul'tet, Moscow, 1999, pp. 266-75; Irina Kovaleva i Anton Nesterov, 'O nekotorykh pushkinskikh reministsentsiakh u I.A. Brodskogo', *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta*, seria 9, Filologiiia, IV, 1999, pp. 12-17; Natal'ia Galatskaia, 'Ia zarazhen normal'nym klassitsizmom' (Pushkin i Brodskii), a paper to 'A.S. Pushkin 2000 Years. The Russian Romantic in European Context', Uppsala, April 21-25, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Brodsky interviewed by Annie Eppelboin in *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, cit. op., p. 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, *ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>45</sup> For a close reading of this poem see Yadwiga Szymak-Reiferova, "Zof'ia" in Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina (eds.), *Kak rabotaet stikhotvorenie Brodskogo*, cit.op., pp. 10-32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, cit. op., pp. 154-55.

<sup>48</sup> The detail analyses of this poem see my article in *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem*, Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina, eds., Macmillan, 1999, pp. 68-91.

<sup>49</sup> David Bethea has noted another links with Dante's beast in Brodsky's essay on Tsvetaeva: 'she sets on this "journey", not frightened by a Dantean leopard blocking her path, but awareness of abandonment'. David Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and Creation of Exile*, Princeton, 1994, p. 265, note 32.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Jacoby, 'Joseph Brodsky in Exile', *Change*, 1973, vol., 3, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*, London, 1992, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Remembering his meeting with Robert Lowell in 1975, Brodsky said: 'We talked about this and that and finally settled on Dante. It was the first conversation about Dante since Russia which really made sense to me. He knew Dante inside out, I think, in an absolutely obsessive way'. Brodsky interviewed by Sven Birkerts, *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, cit. op., p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> His wife Maria Brodsky, who is of Italian origin herself, confirmed in correspondence with me that Brodsky read Dante in Italian.

<sup>54</sup> Brodsky interviewed by Yurii Kovalenko in 1990, *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, cit. Op., p. 472. Brodsky made a mistake, Urania is mentioned in Purgatorio, Canto XXIX:41 – 'On convien che Elicona per me versi, / e Uranie m'aiuti col suo core'.

<sup>55</sup> Brodsky interviewed by David Bethea, *Bol'shaia kniga interv'iu*, cit. op., p. 513.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>57</sup> T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London, 1932, p. 268.