

A SKY'S LIEUTENANT: JOSEPH BRODSKY, TWO EMPIRES, AND THE POWERFUL POET

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Overview

We do not often think of our poets as military men or men of power, but Joseph Brodsky's 1994 poem "Taps", in which Brodsky calls himself "A Sky's Lieutenant," presents the poet, both ironically and with some degree of seriousness, in precisely that way. Brodsky had good reason to address the question of the poet's power – after all, after being forced from his homeland because of his poetic influence, he had been the US poet laureate, had received the Nobel prize, and had lived long enough to see the country that exiled him hold public celebrations of his birthday in his honor. Indeed, "Taps" is not the first time Brodsky addressed the question of the poet's influence — what the poet does, who he does it to, what he does it for, and how he does it. Rather, the vision of the ironically powerful poet is central to Brodsky's entire poetic project, from its earliest days until, and beyond, its end.

The question of power reframes how we see Brodsky's evolution and place, both in the Russian and American traditions, and gets at the center of what makes this poet so affecting and effective. It allows us to weave together the disparate lines of scholarship of the poet's work: the focus on his life and personality that has dominated much of the scholarly production emerging in Russia over the last decade; the promising but still underdeveloped work on Brodsky's early period in the Soviet Union, where Brodsky was not a lone genius poetic voice but part of a broader renaissance of the poetic word; and the productive question of how to understand Brodsky's English-language production, and indeed, his place in the larger cultural evolution of both Russia and the US. I argue that Brodsky's concern with a poetic text that is both powerful and open is in many ways emblematic of the poetry of his generation both in Russia and in the West. Seen within the context of the Soviet post-Thaw generation, Brodsky's attempt to invigorate poetry through imbuing the reading (and writing!) process with integrity acquires a historical dimension. Seen within the context of the modernist erasure of the lyrical self that precedes Brodsky,

the communicative aspect of Brodsky's work becomes a function of an under-appreciated trend that Brodsky picks up on in modernist literature, and may be theorized to be an important aspect of a postmodern poetics. In order to explain how and why Brodsky develops this strong authorial presence, I analyze how he utilizes poetically hallowed metaphors for the poet's position. My research incorporates archival work conducted at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg and at the Beinecke library at Yale. Ultimately, I argue, Brodsky's powerful poetic voice works by requiring the reader's maximal involvement in the text's (co)creation.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction

The Introduction presents basic biographical facts about Brodsky and explains the unusual nature of his poetic project as spanning two separate languages and two literary cultures. An analysis of the last poem to appear in print during Brodsky's life, "Taps", shows in practice how Brodsky made the metapoetic question of the poet's power central to his work. Further analysis shows that "Taps" is connected to three different modes through which Brodsky suggests the poet's powerful position – the poet-prophet, the elegiac voice, and the monument. The history of each of these modes is briefly sketched out through a look at key relevant poems in the Russian and Classical traditions. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how all three modes intersect and are grounded in the cultural context of Russia's 1960s and in the US cultural sphere.

Chapter One: The Poet's Voice

The first chapter goes further to set Brodsky in his cultural context in late 1950s/early 1960s Soviet Union. After explaining the extent to which the poetic underground was focused on poetry seen as oral performance, I focus on Brodsky's early poems that are explicitly concerned with finding a voice appropriate to his era. Brodsky's focus on the oral and aural is connected to his interest in the elegy (an interest mediated, for Brodsky, by the figure and work of Evgeny Baratynsky), and the individual experience. I trace Brodsky's maturation as a poet as he experiments with importing jazz rhythms into poetry, acquiring key tools for

controlling his emotional voice. The second half of the chapter treats Brodsky's rethinking of the motif of voice after emigration. Although it may seem that the voice recedes for Brodsky as he matures, and emigration signals a type of loss of voice, I show that Brodsky's work with voice and elegy in his later period develops two complementary modes – the nostalgic mode characteristic of the émigré (“Rain in August”), and one focused on deriving a new manner of speaking based on his experience (“Lullaby to Cape Cod”).

Chapter Two: Monuments, Real and Imagined

In the second chapter, I analyze Brodsky's complex mythology of the poetic monument and the statue, which link him to Horace and Pushkin's “exegi monumentum” while emphasizing the creative, rather than mimetic, potential of the word. First, I explain the Soviet propensity for monumentalism, in statuary and word, and explain its empire-building and odic connotations. Brodsky's early “monument” poems, notably through his interaction with Pushkin's version of “exegi monumentum,” show Brodsky both partaking of and ironically undermining that motif. As Brodsky matures, his practice of statuary acquires more elements of the elegiac; building on the work of Anna Akhmatova, who makes of her own body a statue, Brodsky endows his statues with the deeply personal energy of the elegy, without giving up the monument's suggestions of power. In poems such as “Tors” and “Bust of Tiberius,” Brodsky directly confronts the notion of the poet as akin to the empire-building ruler. Poems such as “Aere Perennius” and “Centaur” further engage with the idea of the poetic monument to suggest a hybrid sense of the poet's power – the poet may, like any ruler, be able to construct new monuments to showcase his power, but his creations exist, partly, in an alternate reality.

Chapter Three: Deflating the Poet-Prophet

The third chapter examines the issue of the poet's perspective as a question of physical and metaphysical vision. The chapter first examines the poet-prophet motif in Russian letters and in Western literature, with a special focus on the poet's position and the functioning of optics and perspective. In the poem “Conversation with a Heaven-dweller” Brodsky directly confronts the legacy of the poet-prophet motif, with some suggestive revisions of Pushkin's text. More suggestive, however, is Brodsky's commitment to optics as a key tool of poetic power even as he deflates any neo-Romantic claims of the poet-prophet. Brodsky uses the

tools of the visual arts – painting, photography, film, and iconography – to suggest a lyrical hero that provides the reader with multiple coexistent perspectives. Poems such as “At Karl Veilinke’s Exhibition” suggest a re-envisioning of the poet’s perspective in a way that foregoes the notion of the poet-prophet without giving up all of the power of that position; especially interesting from this perspective are Brodsky’s Christmas poems, whose turn to the Biblical text engages with the prophetic in a different way.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I look at how Brodsky’s construction of his poetic authority interfaces with the issue of his reception, in the Soviet Union, in the US, and in post-Soviet Russia. I analyze recent attempts to interpret Brodsky as a Russian patriot and as empire-building monumentalist in light of Brodsky’s own poems dealing with monument-building and with the poet as mouthpiece. After looking at early reactions to Brodsky’s English language work, I address Brodsky’s place in US letters by analyzing which aspects of Brodsky’s English-language production and presentation of poetic power connect him to the English-American poetic tradition. Finally, I look again at the imagery of stars and sieves, that we saw in “Taps”, in order to make broader concluding comments about the relationship between the poet and reader.

Scholarly Significance

Although Joseph Brodsky’s work and life has aroused considerable scholarly interest in the last 30+ years, both in the US and in Russia, it has been some time since a significant monograph on the poet’s work has hit the US market. The proposed monograph will bring to the US market a new perspective on Joseph Brodsky’s work that will build on and tie together the several productive strains of research that have characterized Brodsky studies over the last decade, while offering a reading of the poet’s work and life in its totality.

As a monograph offering a complete interpretation of Joseph Brodsky’s work, *A Sky’s Lieutenant* will provide a needed fresh perspective. *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* remains foundational to understanding Brodsky’s work, but, having been published when the poet was still alive, cannot set the poet’s work into the broader contexts now visible through the lens of time. Lev Loseff’s *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Biography* and his annotated

edition of Brodsky's poems are thorough, deep, insightful, and indispensable to the researcher, but Loseff understandably shies away from any overarching vision of the work of a poet who was a close friend. Sanna Turoma's *Brodsky and Empire* sets Brodsky within broader cultural debates of the late twentieth century, pointing to the anachronism of some of his positions and reading him as a cultural conqueror, an imperialist representative. Although her work offers an important corrective to overly flat readings of Brodsky's work and raises the issue of the poet's position within and through the two traditions he both partakes in and represents, it focuses on Brodsky's travel poems and does not offer a broader reading of the poet's work. Most recently, Alexandra Berlina's *Brodsky Translating Brodsky* has made a thorough and thoughtful contribution to the work of understanding Brodsky as a bilingual and bicultural writer; one who is best understood as a member of both the Russian **and** the US traditions. In that, her work is very much kin to the project that I am proposing. Indeed, her work is evidence that Brodsky studies are ripe for precisely this kind of approach of poetic position and influence. However, Berlina limits her approach to looking at the poet's self-translations, whereas *A Sky's Lieutenant* will take a broader view.

Audience

A Sky's Lieutenant will appeal to researchers and students who are studying Brodsky's work, the late-Soviet and post-Soviet literary/cultural space, émigré writing, the literary relationship between the US and Russia, and those interested in studying American letters of the late 20th century. I believe it may be of use in courses on the late-Soviet period in Russian departments. Although it is a scholarly volume, the work is written to be accessible to the interested non-specialist – whether that non-specialist is interested in Brodsky in particular, or in the question of the power of poetry more generally.

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