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## Sexuality and Eroticism in Joseph Brodsky's Poetry: Linguistic and Thematic Peculiarities

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In this essay I propose to examine the poetry of Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), one of several recent Russian authors to be charged — in Russia and elsewhere — with including „obscenity,” explicit erotica, „amorality,” and even „pornography” in his works. I will focus specifically on several of his poems, most notably, «На смерть друга» / „To a Friend: In Memoriam” (1974) and «Посвящается Чехову» / „Homage to Chekhov” (1993), as well as touch upon the problem of representing sexualities in a literary medium and the poet's contribution to the formation of literary discourses of eroticism and corporeality. To this end, I will look at two previously unexplored sources of Brodsky's poetry: Russian criminal jargon known as *феня* and the work of the Latin poet Catullus.

### Toward the Problem of Brodsky's Use of the Russian Language

In his youth Joseph Brodsky had a passion for traveling that actually preceded and inspired his literary activities. Similar to an American Beatnik, Brodsky dropped out of high school in the mid-50s and traveled extensively with geological expeditions and seasonal workers to the Far East, the Polar North and Central Asia. He later claimed that it was on one of these expeditions that he started writing poetry. In addition, he traveled extensively in and studied the cultures of such colonized nations as Lithuania and Poland.

Traveling is a crucial, formative factor for a Russian writer because the country (the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, or Russia of today) is enormous and linguistically heterogeneous. There is a lot of

territorial variability within the Russian language today, as well as a large amount of prison („gulag“) jargon sometimes referred to as *fenya* that has penetrated the contemporary Russian language due to the enormous number of people who passed through the gulags during the Stalin era and subsequently, until the perestroika period. If a writer seeks to experience this linguistic richness, he/she must leave Moscow and St. Petersburg and become acquainted with the countryside.

Brotsky's task as a lyric poet was to create his own poetic language and „manner“ in the stifling conditions of a totalitarian regime. He managed to come up with a „monstrous amalgam,“ to use one of his favorite word combinations, of a neo-classicist high style and the extremely profane language of part of the Russian intelligentsia, which had to, or chose to, absorb Russian prison and gulag jargon in all its variety.

The cultural and linguistic value of criminal jargons and *mam* in terms of their contribution to a discourse of sex is arguably ambivalent: on the one hand, they are a resource of obscene and largely meaningless bawdy jocular or angry speech; on the other, they are part of the Russian language and culture and, as such, yield a wealth of linguistically productive vocabulary and terminology.<sup>1</sup> If used with thought and discretion in literary or even popular cultural contexts, these words and/or „terms“ could potentially enrich and empower the literati, journalists, and cultural figures both linguistically and

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<sup>1</sup> In one of his lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault discusses confession in the seventeenth century following the “cartography of a sinful body,” as the sin no longer is in the breaking of the rule of union but now it “dwells within the body itself.” This cartography includes the sense of touch, sight, the tongue (dirty words), and, finally, the ears. This is how he describes the “tongue” component:

Pleasures of the tongue are the pleasures of indecent speech and dirty words. Dirty words give pleasure to the body; nasty speech causes concupiscence or is caused by concupiscence at the level of the body. Has one uttered “dirty words” and “indecent speech” without thinking?... “Were they, rather, accompanied by bad thoughts? And were these thoughts accompanied by bad desires?” (Foucault. *Abnormal*. 188–189)

In other words, if one pushes Foucault's argument about confession mechanisms and applies it to literature, using “dirty words” inevitably brings about the development of literary discourses of eroticism and sexualities.

psychologically and enable them to bridge the enormous gap between crude expletives and coarse sex-related humor on the one hand and shameful, haughty, quasi-intellectual moralizing on the other.<sup>2</sup> Filling in this middle territory currently occupied by bashful giggles, slips of the tongue and „many different silences”<sup>3</sup> could be thus achieved without falling into the trap of traditional Russian mental attitudes of *glumleniye*, *yurodstvovavniye* and *payasnichaniye* („clowning around”).

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Lev Tolstoy in his late, extremist period (of *The Kreutzer Sonata* and other works) is associated with such moralizing but Tolstoy’s advocacy of anti-sexual, anti-erotic ideologies is all the more bizarre if one considers his own apparently strong sexual drive. Late in his life, as Maksim Gorky recalls, he

would always talk about women, quite a lot and willingly, as if he were a French novelist but always with the roughness of a Russian *muzhik*... Today he asked Chekhov:

– Did you lead a dissolute life in your youth?

Chekhov smirked disconcertedly and, tugging at his little beard, said something inarticulate; and then Lev Nikolayevich confessed, staring at the sea:

– And I was a tireless <...>.

He pronounced it regretfully, having used a scabrous *muzhik*’s word at the end (Zholkovsky, web source).

This is really a crucial conversation involving three central figures of Russia’s literary landscape at the turn of the centuries: Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorky. But are these masters of Russian literary language really able to discuss sexuality, i. e., do they have enough *words* not to be tongue-tied about it? Gorky (the memoirist) persistently compares Tolstoy’s manner of talking about sex to that of a commoner / *muzhik*, which is a new, modernizing twist: the *muzhik*, in the eyes of writers of Gorky’s generation, is no longer a chaste, sexless figure but, quite the opposite, a depraved, lascivious creature who uses foul language that Gorky is ashamed to reproduce, despite the fact that it was the great Tolstoy who had in fact pronounced it! Chekhov was a frequenter of brothels and certainly had a lot of sexual experience in his youth but he is too bashful – or maybe just short of words? – to discuss it with the demigod of Russian letters. Finally, Tolstoy himself obviously regrets the lustfulness of his young days but, again, does not have enough words to describe it to his younger friends and uses a *mam* term (probably *ёбать/fucker*)...

<sup>3</sup> I am alluding to Foucault here: „There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; *we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things*... There is *not one but many silences*, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault. *History of Sexuality* 27. Italics added).

This point needs to be further clarified. Quite a few late Soviet and contemporary Russian authors use a lot of erotic imagery, references to and descriptions of sex acts and/or sex-related obscenity, *mat* and criminal jargons in their work (Vladimir Sorokin comes to mind as perhaps the most vivid example). But love and affection, sexual attraction and the desiring/desired body are portrayed in many of them as grotesque burlesques; the intent of these authors is often anti-sexual and anti-erotic. In what follows I will try to demonstrate that, unlike Yuri Mamleyev or Sorokin or Viktor Yerofeyev, Brodsky appears to have always aimed to treat the erotic and the corporeal without trivializing or burlesquing it.

Brodsky always faced accusations of obscenity, even from his admirers, during his lifetime. One such critic (moreover not a Soviet one but an émigré) was Yuri Kolker who in an otherwise complimentary essay on Brodsky lashed out on him for his „scabrous eroticism.” Here I will consider briefly some examples of Brodsky’s „salaciousness,” according to Kolker,<sup>4</sup> and then move on to a close reading of several of Brodsky’s poems.

Kolker’s main argument is that at some point in the late 1960’s Brodsky abandoned some sort of a „true lyricism” in representing sensuality and switched to „obtrusive, repulsive naturalism.” Early in his essay he mentions the 1968 poem „Candlestick” as an example of the emergent disgustingness. The critic is genuinely frustrated by what he sarcastically calls Brodsky’s „everyday niftiness” (Kolker, 119): how can a poet spoil philosophic verse with two references to male genitalia in a non-erotic poem? Let us briefly examine the poem itself to see if Brodsky’s use of sexual references is indeed excessive.

The poem concerns a bronze satyr, an element of the candlestick. In the first stanza Brodsky remarks that there is green oxide in the satyr’s scrotum («в его мошонке зеленеет окись»), which is intended as an ironic comment on all kinds of male „possessiveness”: he is holding the candelabrum in his hand, but the official description of this exhibit (the candlestick) states that it is he who belongs to the candlestick, not vice versa. Then in the third stanza, amid the lively imagery of life and death, blurred boundaries between the animate

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<sup>4</sup> It is beside my argument whether Kolker is a major or minor critic of Brodsky’s oeuvre. I am using his criticisms as typical of a fairly common stance on Brodsky in Russia and elsewhere when he is charged with overusing „obscurities” and „elements of pornography” in his poetry.

and inanimate, the poet again brings up genitalia: «Шагнув за Рубикон, он затвердел от пейс до гениталий» / „Having crossed the Rubicon, [the satyr] stiffened from his *peyoths* [Jewish side-locks] to the genitals” (*Избранные стихотворения* 108–109).<sup>5</sup>

It is unclear how Kolker would like the poet to express the rich allusiveness and intricate web of meanings of masculinity in this poem without mentioning the most obvious point of reference in a satyr — his sexual prowess and genitalia. What may seem nasty and inadmissible to some readers of the poem has nothing to do with obscenity and/or pornography but is organically woven into the texture of the beautifully philosophic lyric. After all, how can one write a good poem about male sexuality without referring or alluding to male genitalia, including the scrotum and other „obscene” parts of the male body?

Another example of scabrousness in Kolker’s view is the following lines from the poem «Конец прекрасной эпохи» / „The End of a Beautiful Era” (1969):

Жить в эпоху свершений, имея возвышенный нрав,  
к сожалению, трудно. Красавице платье задрал,  
видишь то, что искал, а не новые дивные дивы.  
И не то чтобы здесь Лобачевского твердо блюдут,  
но раздвинутый мир должен где-то сужаться, и тут —  
тут конец перспективы.

To live in the epoch of great accomplishments if you have an elevated temper is unfortunately hard. Having lifted a beauty’s dress, you see what you’ve looked for, not some new and wonderful wonders. And not that they would be observing Lobachevsky too strictly here, but the pulled apart world must somewhere get narrow, and here we have the end of the perspective” (*Избранные стихотворения* 178).

The entire poem is extremely melancholy and ironic; it commingles allusions to Russia’s history and the Bible with the profane and vulgar jargon of the Russian intelligentsia, a considerable part of which had to go through Stalin’s prisons and camps and whose lan-

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<sup>5</sup> My translation from the Russian: in order to be faithful to the author’s text, here and below I try to provide a literal translation without keeping the meter and rhyme of the original. Translations from Brodsky are mine unless otherwise marked.

guage is no longer lofty and refined. Brodsky was thirty-two when he was forced out of the Soviet Union, and, due to the fact that his formative years were spent in Petersburg, his system of linguistic and cultural values, so to speak, is obviously quite different from that of a person who grew up in the US or Western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest these references to sexuality and corporeality are not overused by Brodsky: he employs them only when they are essential to the concept and plot of a poem. Even Kolker, for all his puritanical enthusiasm, finds merely a handful of examples in all of the author's poetry. One should consider Philip Larkin, another accomplished poet of the twentieth century (whom Brodsky admired), in whom one finds several references to genitals and illicit sexual desires (but his work is not typically characterized as „obsessively naturalistic“). Russian literature has often been charged with carrying out some sort of a historical mission and being pure and uncontaminated by references to sex and genitals. Brodsky was, of course, aware of a rich tradition of eroticism and „bodily needs“ as portrayed in world poetry before him and appeared to have set himself the task of enriching Russian poetry with this previously absent element.

The last example I will consider is found in a 1976 poem dedicated to Mikhail Baryshnikov. The poem is about attending a ballet performance. Brodsky is describing the impressions of a spectator:

В имперский мягкий плюш мы втискиваем зад,  
и, крылышкуя скорописью ляжек,  
красавица, с которою не ляжешь,  
одним прыжком выпархивает в сад.

Into the imperial soft plush [of chairs] we squeeze our butts,  
and flapping the wings of the cursive of her thighs,  
a beauty with whom you will never lie,  
flits into the garden in one leap

(Избранные стихотворения 272—273).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that there is a lot of critical work on Brodsky that is markedly different from Kolker's and is in fact close to the general argument of this chapter. One such critic is Mikhail Kreps (*O poezii Iosifa Brodskogo* and other works): he is also an object of Kolker's criticism as someone who tries to explain that pretty much all contemporary poetry builds on commingling the lofty and sublime with the mundane and vulgar.

<sup>7</sup> In Russian slang, „to lie with a woman“ euphemistically implies having sex with her. A „beauty“ is Brodsky's recurrent ironic way of referring to an at-

Brodsky's supreme irony and poetic precision would have been unattainable in this lyric, which is written in the tone of a familiar friendly conversation with Baryshnikov, without this self-ironic reference to male sexual desire toward the ballerina. It is difficult to see anything scabrous or pornographic about these examples: they all seem to testify exactly to the opposite. Brodsky has always used sexual and erotic references in moderation and in highly ironic contexts.

Brodsky's unique (and largely unappreciated) achievement in Russian belles-lettres can be described as follows: he has managed to produce a postmodern discourse of sexuality based on linguistic and dialectal eclecticism and a patchwork of carefully crafted elements of both high and low styles and (sub)cultures. Let us first discuss a possible highbrow source of his poetry and then move on to examine how it was informed by Soviet Russia's low subcultures, including the criminal one.

### Brodsky and Catullus: Toward a Possible Kinship of the Two Poetics

The most often-quoted source of eroticism in Brodsky is the Golden Age of Latin poetry, which he knew very well and which influenced his poetics in a variety of ways. Most of these influences (Ovid, Horace, Propertius, Virgil, etc.) have been thoroughly studied by Brodsky scholars both in Russia and the West,<sup>8</sup> but I would like to briefly point to Catullus (c. 84–54 BC) whose poetry can be characterized as having a „light touch” in representing his own priapic concupiscence, obsession with hetero- and homoeroticism, as well as all sorts of bodily excesses, such as (over)eating and drinking.

Whenever Catullus writes about sexual „perversions” and uses obscene terms, he makes those look and sound natural, as if the „deviant” acts he describes were absolutely normal and permissible. He seems to ignore altogether, in other words, the moral-legal implica-

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tractive woman. See below for a parallel with Catullus.

<sup>8</sup> For studies of Brodsky's dialogues with Propertius and Virgil, see, for example, Paola Cotta Ramussino «Бродский и Проперций: в поиске контекста» and Tatiana Funtusova «Бродский и Вергилий: диалог в эклогах» (Polukhina 312–327).

tions of having the „dirty mind” of a libertine. This is why his poems almost invariably include insulting and scabrous references to women and men, young boys and young girls alike. Catullus’s strategy is to balance all these torrents of obscenities and sociopathic invectives with a humorous, jocular tone, as if he thought being vulgar and nasty could be somehow redeemed by being witty. At the same time, it is to his credit that he never shies away from the corporeal needs and always generously compliments his own and other people’s sexual energy.

Some of Catullus’s poems are actually presented as mocking pieces of advice to his friends and foes, but these are invariably related to sexual behavior and corporeality:

So don't be surprised when no women want you,  
Rufus. Cover up your tender thighs. It's not  
That you don't try to loosen girls with gifts  
Or delicate crystal stones. It's this  
Horrible rumor that haunts you — how you carry this  
Ferocious goat stench in the depths of your armpits.  
Everyone's petrified of it. And it's no wonder. It's  
A horrible beast and not for any pretty girl to lie with.  
So either kill that carcass pestilent stench  
Or stop being surprised when the girls fly away  
(Catullus 115).

Some of Catullus’s references to women and sexual intercourse echo those recurrent in Brodsky’s work: *pretty girl* vs. *красавица*; *lie with (a pretty girl)* / *лечь с красавицей*. More importantly, however, Brodsky seems to have inherited his predecessor’s ability to present the jocular berating of a friend for a lack of bodily hygiene as something evidently normal and natural, sounding like a wise tip from a more experienced man. The obvious difference, however, is that Brodsky’s mind is certainly not as „dirty” as Catullus’s and he often shies away from most obscene images that are replete in the Latin poet’s oeuvre; for example, the Russian poet might have been embarrassed by the latter’s playful homosexuality (there are not many homoerotic references or even overtones in Brodsky’s work):

This is hilarious Cato. It's really funny!  
Listen to this and cackle.  
Laugh Cato, like you love Catullus!



This is hilarious. This is too funny.  
Just now I grabbed this boy who was ramming  
his girlfriend (and I hope this pleases Venus) –  
so I plugged him just as hard

(Catullus 68).

Quite often in his late poetry, however, Brodsky does reach the heights of scabrousness and profanity à la Catullus. In „Piazza Mattei” (1981), the narrator complains about the playful Michelina who was unfaithful to him with an aristocrat referred to as The Count; his invectives toward Michelina are reminiscent of Catullus’s wrath at his muse Lesbia’s unfaithfulness, a leitmotif going through many of his poems:

Граф выиграл, до клубнички лаком,  
Я тоже, впрочем, не в накладе:  
в игре без правил.  
Он ставит Микелину раком,  
как прежде ставил.

и в Риме тоже  
теперь есть место крикнуть «Бляди!»,  
вздохнуть «О Боже». [...] *(Форма времени 77).*

The Count won, getting there through his gloss,  
In this game without rules.  
He enters Michelina doggy-style,  
Just as he used to do.

I am not down either though.  
And now in Rome as well  
One can find a place to yell, „Damned whores!”  
And sigh, „Oh, Gosh!”

In „Roman Elegies” (1981), he refers to Catullus somewhat disparagingly, using his name as a common noun, not even capitalizing it, but he also mentions Lesbia, the addressee of many of Catullus’s poems:

Лесбия, Юлия, Цинтия, Ливия, Микелина.  
Бюст, причинное место, бедра, колечки ворса.  
Обожженная небом, мягкая в пальцах глина –

плоть, принявшая вечность как анонимность торса.  
 Вы — источник бессмертья: звавшие вас нагими  
 сами стали катуллом, статуями, трояном,  
 августом и другими. Временные богини!  
 Вам приятнее верить, нежели постоянным.  
 Славься, круглый живот, лядвие с нежной кожей!  
 (Форма времени 100)

Lesbia, Julia, Cynthia, Livia, Michelina. —  
 Bosoms, ringlets of fleece: for effects, and for causes also.  
 Heaven-baked clay, fingertips' brave arena.  
 Flesh that renders eternity an anonymous torso.  
 You breed immortals: those who have seen you bare,  
 They, too, turned Catulluses, statues, heavy  
 Neros, et cetera. Short-term goddesses! You are  
 Much more a joy to believe in than a permanent bevy.  
 Nail, the smooth abdomen, thighs as their hamstrings tighten.  
 (Collected Poems in English 278).

One notices Catullus's influence in a poem by Brodsky devoted to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, „Verses about the 1980 Winter Campaign” (1980): „Убийство — наивная форма смерти / тавтологи-  
 гия, ария попугая, / дело рук, как правило, цепкой бровью / муху  
 жизни ловящей в своих прицелах / молодежи, знакомой с кро-  
 вью / понаслышке или по ломке целок” (Форма времени 83)<sup>9</sup> or in  
 «Представление» / „The Performance” (1986), a burlesque-style satir-  
 ical jab at Russia's literary giants of the nineteenth century peppered  
 with some of the most obscene popular sayings of the Brezhnev peri-  
 od: „Харкнул в суп, чтоб скрыть досаду. / 'Я с ним рядом срать  
 не сяду.' / 'А моя, как та мадонна, / не желает без гондона” (Фор-  
 ма времени 83).

It is important to emphasize that this essay is not about the use of substandard language (such as *мат*) and criminal and convict jar-  
 gons by the Soviet/Russian intelligentsia. Rather, I am interested in  
 exploring Brodsky's libertinism in expressing the sexual and the eroti-  
 c; he seems to have used *мат* and *феня* terms only when they were  
 absolutely necessary and essential to the concept of a given poem. It  
 happens that in the concept, or message, of most texts mentioned in

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, how else would Brodsky have arrived at the shocking simile limit-  
 ing the young soldiers' lack of experience with blood to deflowering their fe-  
 male mates back in the Soviet Union?

my essay had to do with the erotic and the sexual. In other words, I am not a linguist and am interested in these argots only insofar as they are used by Brodsky to make his contribution to creating a modernized Russian literary language of sexuality and eroticism.

At the same time, Brodsky's affinity with Catullus lies in what can be termed intellectual, or poetic, rowdyism: both poets appear to be prepared to make use of obscenities and profanity simply out of pure mischief. However, they are also guided by a genuine desire to create a poetics of libertinage, to find a way to verbalize sexual desire or energy without being squeamish or bashful.

Catullus was known to quite a few Russian poets before Brodsky (both Pushkin and Fet translated some of his less sexually explicit poems), but perhaps the most interesting admirer of his poetry was Aleksandr Blok who wrote the essay „Catiline: A Page from the History of World Revolution,” which contains a discussion of Catullus's enigmatic poem about Attis (# 63) and Ibsen's 1850 play, in 1919. Needless to say, despite all the obvious continuity between Silver Age sensitivities and Brodsky's poetics, Blok's take on Catullus (whom he dubs as none other than the „Latin Pushkin”) is strikingly different. He blames Catullus for being afraid of his own allegoric creation — the castrate Attis (according to Blok, none other than the rebellious Catiline presented in the Aesopian language) who emasculates himself with a stone knife at the beginning of the poem. After that, he feels elation and lightness in his body; his feelings are akin to the way members of the Russian sect of castrates — the Skoptsy — expressed their feelings after removing their genitals. According to Blok, this act is what makes Attis / Catiline (a patrician who unsuccessfully conspired to dethrone Emperor Sulla in 63 BC) symbolically akin to the Bolsheviks; Blok calls Catiline the „Roman Bolshevik,” although he is careful to put the latter word in parentheses. Following Fyodorov and Solovyov, Blok believed in the emergence of a sexless world order, in which the coitus itself will be abolished and replaced with some sort of spiritual communication between what used to be man and woman.

These ideas may seem obsolete today, but it is quite remarkable that Brodsky was clearly among those post-Silver Age Russian writers and thinkers who firmly opposed this utopian vision held by many Russian philosophers and literati at the turn of the century. In his anti-utopianism and acceptance of the carnal and the corporeal,

he is arguably a follower of such figures as Rozanov, Mandelshtam, Kuprin, Zamyatin, Georgii Ivanov, and Nabokov. His deep-seated elemental resistance to Russian utopianism was already conspicuous in his early work; although the poet seldom wrote explicitly political or social criticism (he was hardly a dissident), he was viciously and consistently attacked by the Soviet regime in the 1960s before eventually being forced into emigration in 1973. It remains somewhat of an enigma why the authorities hated Brodsky so passionately, but his openness to representing sexuality and powerful, albeit elemental, anti-utopianism may have caused this unbridled hatred of the poet by communist ideologues. I am not trying to explain why Brodsky was hated and attacked by the Communist authorities (it was probably a matter of a constellation of complex factors), but his linguistic and intellectual openness to the sexual and erotic (his „libertinism,” in other words) was, I believe, an irritant for his censors.

Just like Catullus two millennia before him, Brodsky was able to freely play with obscenities and profanities in his work; just like his Russian Silver Age forerunners, he appears to have always maintained a unique fascination with the jargon and subcultures of common people combined with his highbrow reading in Greek, Latin, British, Polish or North American poetry.<sup>10</sup>

### Genital Allusions in „To a Friend”

„To a Friend: In Memoriam” (1973) was written in response to a false report of the death of a Moscow fellow poet. It was subsequently translated into English by Brodsky himself for the *The New Yorker* in 1985. The translation, however, does not appear as complex and intricate as the Russian original: in translating his own work, Brodsky aimed at retaining rhyme at all costs. In one of his interviews he mocks Nabokov’s work on *Eugene Onegin* for its unreadable and unnecessary complexity. As we will see in the cases of both poems considered here, the poet may well have jumped to conclusions on the matter.

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<sup>10</sup> Blok’s Catiline essay and its sources (Catullus, Ibsen, etc.) are discussed at length by Aleksandr Etkind (*Содом и Психея* 59-139).

The whole poem will not be analyzed here: what concern my argument are only 2—3 lines but I will quote the English translation of the initial several stanzas to provide context:

Имяреку, тебе, — потому что не станет за труд  
из-под камня тебя раздобыть — от меня, анонима,  
как по тем же делам, потому что и с камня сотрут,  
так и в силу того, что я сверху и, камня помимо,  
чересчур далеко, чтоб тебе различать голоса —  
**на эзоповой фене** в отечестве белых головок,  
где на ощупь и слух наколол ты свои полюса  
**в мокром космосе злых корольков и визгливых сиповок...**

It's for you whose name's better omitted — since for them it's  
no arduous task  
to produce you from under the slab — from one  
more *inconnu*: me, well, partly  
for the same earthly reasons, since they'll scrub you as well off the cask,  
and because I'm up here and, frankly, apart from this paltry  
talk of slabs, am too distant for you to distinguish a voice,  
**an Aesopian chant**, in that homeland of bottle-struck livers,  
where you fingered your course to the pole in the moist universe  
**of mean, blabbering squinchers and whispering, innocent beavers...**  
(*Collected Poems in English* 212. Emphasis added)

The notes at the end of the Farrar edition are quite laconic (to the point of merely further confusing the English-language reader): „Aesopian chant” is a „conversation in riddles to elude informers”; „squinchers” and „beavers” stand for Russian „korol'kov and sipovok, criminal jargon for female sex organs” (*Collected Poems in English* 517—518).

„Aesopian chant” in Brodsky's original is *Эзопова феня*: the aforementioned *fenya* has nothing to do with chanting whatsoever. It is a generic name for the argots of Russian thieves and a general point of reference to criminal and/or gulag jargons. *Корольки* and *сиповки* are *fenya* classification terms for women with normal and „narrow” perinea respectively, i. e., while *сиповка* refers to a short distance between the anus and vaginal entrance, *королёк* implies a normal distance. In the criminal subculture it is assumed that *корольки* are „mean” (as they know what they are worth as ideal coital partners and are therefore full of self-conceit) and *сиповки* for some reason are squeaky (in Brodsky's original, literally, „squeaky sipovki”).

What we observe here is a rude distortion of the Russian original. Whose fault is it? On the one hand, Brodsky had never studied the English language systematically and it is not surprising that he could confuse *chant* with *cant* and be in general not the best translator of his own work. Furthermore, in the 12 intervening years between writing and translating the poem Brodsky might well have forgotten what these *fenya* terms represented (it is often difficult for an emigrant to remember such minor details). On the other hand, there are the editors of the Farrar volume whose admiration for the poet is ill informed and ultimately counterproductive for his legacy, as he may simply be understood as a „literary pornographer.“ Poems like this one require extensive cultural-literary commentary and adequate, professional translations (as in a critical edition) if one is to publish them in English.

The next question these lines raise is, of course, why would *si-povki* and *korol'ki* be situated *в мокром космосе / in the moist universe*. Again, „universe“ is not the best translation since the word „kosmos“ in ancient Greek meant some sort of order or harmony. Therefore, if translated correctly and supplied with commentary, this stanza from „To a Friend“ will be interpreted as it should be: Brodsky is pointing to the ancient roots of the „moist kosmos,“ associating female genitals (vagina) with a cave, which is simultaneously a cosmos.<sup>11</sup>

For Brodsky, this ordered universe of female genitals might also mean a symbolic and highly ironic extension of a well-known metaphor expressed in the Russian *mat: мы все в низде / „we are all in the cunt“* — meaning that the Soviet Union’s „endless deadlock“ is truly hopeless. Therefore it now becomes clear why the poet ironically refers to *fenya* as being Aesopian: it is indeed highly allegorical.

Apart from elaborating a habitual juxtaposition of Eros and Thanatos, sexuality and death, Brodsky appears to be creating an al-

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<sup>11</sup> Aleksei Losev points to the Greeks’ equation of a cave with cosmos, quoting Proclus and Porfirius: «О том, что понимание пещеры в виде космоса не было чуждо грекам говорят некоторые тексты. ...неоплатоник Прокл, обобщая опыт греков писал: ‘Древние называли космос пещерой’»; «Космос, уже давно трактовался у древних как пещера. Но это особенно ярко выражено у Порфирия. То, что космос здесь оказался пещерой, вовсе не какая-нибудь случайность или какая-нибудь внешняя поэтическая метафора... у Порфирия подчеркивается, что это есть результат космической мудрости Афины Паллады, причем свойственная этой богине функция разума не только охватывает собой всю землю, но и действует совместно с судьбой» (Losev 100, 109).

ternative world — or, as it were, an underworld — of sensuality and eroticism, deliberately posited at the border of high poetry with the obscene and the lowbrow: poetry becomes an intellectual loophole into this scrupulously ordered universe. Surprisingly for a Russian poet, Brodsky's fictional world is not only devoid of sexophobia: it is, in fact, constructed around a profoundly sympathetic, laudatory vision of sexuality. In this regard (as in many others), Brodsky's work is of course one of the most significant contributions of Russia to world literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

### Anatomizing Anton Chekhov

Помнишь скромный музей, где не раз видали  
одного реалиста шедевр «Не дали»?

Remember a modest museum where we saw more than once  
a masterpiece by one realist titled „We didn't get laid“?  
«Михаилу Барышникову» (1992)

Brodsky's late poem „Homage to Chekhov“ (1993) was allegedly translated into English under the poet's supervision but, again, as in the case with „To a Friend,“ the determination to keep the meter and rhyme at all costs in tandem with the editors being unable to accompany the text with some cultural and critical commentary resulted in publishing an English-language version that would hardly make much sense to readers.

Why did Brodsky choose to write a jocular poem about Chekhov? He was reported to be polemicizing with critics who repeatedly found „Chekhovian lyricism“ in Brodsky's poetry (Akhapkin, web source). This is irrelevant for my purposes here, just as another critic's argument that the poet was disgusted by Chekhov because he was an „heir“ of Akhmatova, Mandelshtam and Tsvetayeva (who all hated Chekhov) appears to me simply too superficial and irrelevant to the poem. Finally, I find it hard to believe, along with Andrei Stepanov, that Brodsky saw it as some sort of a „competition“ with Chekhov and evidence of a surreptitious or even subconscious reverence for the latter (Stepanov, web source).

„Homage to Chekhov“ recreates a microcosm of Chekhov's plays in accordance with a template familiar to his readers: six male charac-

ters, three female; the „chronotope” of a lakeside summer cottage in twilight; everybody is suffering from boredom and playing cards, etc. It is obvious from the initial lines that Brodsky’s tone is humorous and his main intent is parody:

Закат, покидая веранду, задерживается на самоваре.  
Но чай остыл или выпит; в блюдце с вареньем — муха.  
И тяжелый шиньон очень к лицу Варваре  
Андреевне, в профиль — особенно. Крахмальная блузка глухо  
застегнута у подбородка. В кресле, с погасшей трубкой,  
Вяльцев шуршит газетой с речью Недоброво.  
У Варвары Андреевны под шелестящей юбкой  
ни-че-го.

Sunset clings to the samovar, abandoning the veranda,  
but the tea has gone cold, or is finished; a fly scales a saucer’s *dolce*.<sup>12</sup>  
And the heavy chignon makes Varvara look grander  
than ever. Her starched cotton blouse is staunchly  
buttoned up to her chin. Vialtsev, deep in his chair, is nodding  
over the rustling weekly with Dubrovo’s latest swing  
at the Cabinet. Varvara Andreevna under her skirts wears not  
a thing

*(Collected Poems in English 428).*

The last two lines are crucial for understanding the poem: to be more exact in translation, Brodsky says that „under Varvara’s rustling skirt there is no-thing [ni-che-go]” (*В окрестностях Атлантиды* 62 — 63). This statement is ambiguous: it implies both that she may have no underwear (reflected in the Farrar translation) and that she maybe a sexless creature like a US Barbie doll, i.e., she has no genitals under her skirt. The latter implication is ignored by the English translation.

This is precisely what the critics of Brodsky tend to underplay or miss altogether: the poem is largely a satire of Russian literature (not necessarily only Chekhov) for being sexually repressed and repressive; it could be read as a literary joke, almost an epigram. Erlikh, one of the characters, is very much akin to T. S. Eliot’s Alfred Prufrock in his existential indecisiveness, pathetic erotic reveries and petty im-

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<sup>12</sup> This is a very bizarre translation indeed: Brodsky’s line literally means „a fly is stuck in the saucer with jam”. Flies are, in fact, sometimes associated with voluptuousness in Russian slang. Ranchin (*Ranchin* 428—442) and other critics appear to have ignored this as a possible interpretation of the fly motif in the poem.





„Homage to Chekhov“ is a virtuoso travesty of Russian literature; it is an anatomy (a miniature Menippean satire) of morbid mental attitudes to sexuality embedded therein. These attitudes and values were fundamentally alien to Brodsky who had set himself the task of estranging himself from the Russian intellectual tradition of the anti-corporeal and anti-sexual, to break free from the grip of Gogol, Chekhov or Dostoevsky’s strategy of silencing and/or burlesquing human sexualities.<sup>14</sup> Brodsky’s traveling with geologists in his teens, his genuine interest in Polish and Lithuanian languages and cultures in his twenties and thirties and, finally, his lifelong almost Nabokovian or Borgesian *Anglomania* are all manifestations of not just a Mandelshtamian „yearning for Western culture“ but of his intellectual freedom from the confines of Russian literary history — indeed, to paraphrase Joyce, a nightmare, from which Brodsky so successfully managed to awake.

Amongst Brodsky’s most significant contributions to Russian letters is his role in developing Russian literary *libertinage*. The subtradition of socio-political and sexual freethinking began (largely overlapping with the evolution of anti-utopianism in Russia’s intellectual history) in the Golden Age with Pushkin (and some lesser poets like Yazykov and Kukhelbeker), evolved through the work of Nikolai Leskov and blossomed in the late Silver Age period, especially thanks to the influence of Vassily Rozanov’s philosophy of sexualities. Brodsky’s openness to representing the carnal and the corporeal was inherited not only from the French- or English-language traditions, some of which he had studied thoroughly, but also from his Russian progenitors, such as Pushkin, Leskov, Rozanov, Kuprin, Sologub, Khodasevich, Mandelshtam, Georgii Ivanov, and Nabokov. But his interest in representing sexual and erotic matters was clearly supported by his knowledge of such predecessors as Catullus and of Russian criminal argot known as *феня*.

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the discourse of corporeality and eroticism (Ranchin 428—442).

<sup>14</sup> The brevity of this essay necessitates much generalization with regard to the oeuvres of Chekhov and Tolstoy and their impact upon subsequent decades of writing. These authors’ failure to produce “Russian *libertinage*,” i. e., sexual freethinking combined with socio-political freethinking, has been noted by some critics, e. g., by Georges Nivat (Nivat, web source).

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