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CHANGING COUNTRIES: EXILE AND CLASSICAL INFLUENCES IN JOSEPH BRODSKY*

In his moral essay to Helvia on Consolation, Seneca resorts to many commonplaces to help his mother get over her grief for having a son far from the civilized world; chiefly he disapproves of people's firm belief that changing countries causes a lack of comforts: "hanc commutationem loci sequuntur incommoda" (*ad Helv.* 6.1). In fact, the wise man, even as a victim of Fate, is not at all vulnerable thanks to his own self-sufficiency: "laboravit enim semper, ut in se plurimum poneret, ut a se omne gaudium peteret" (*ad Helv.* 5.1). Seneca considers exile in a wide perspective: "nullum inveniri exilium intra mundum potest; nihil enim, quod intra mundum est, alienum homini est" (*ad Helv.* 8.5), speaking in terms of a cosmopolitism in fashion at that time as a lively philosophical attitude and, moreover, perfectly suitable to the cultural state point of the established Roman Empire.[1]

Exile may also be a starting point for sketching a psychological self portrait projected in a sort of paradoxical "retrospective" present time, so that human life is conceivable only by watching the past: Joseph Brodsky[2] in his pamphlet *The*

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[1] See also: Sen. *epist.* 28.4 and *de remediis fortuitorum* 8.1-2.

[2] Joseph Brodsky was born in 1940 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg). He began writing poetry at the age of eighteen and his poems were appreciated by Anna Akhmatova. In 1960 he was brought to trial for "social parasitism" and sentenced to five years in exile with hard labour. From March 1964 until November 1965 he lived in exile in the Arkhangelsk region of northern Russia and in June 1972 he was expelled from the Soviet Union; after brief stays in Vienna and London, he went to live in the USA. In 1987 Brodsky was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1996. See: L. L o s e v. *Iosif Brodskij*. In: *Storia della Letteratura Russa*. III: *II Novecento: 3. Dal realismo socialista ai nostri giorni*. Torino 1991 pp. 877-891.

Condition We Call Exile[3] underlines this metaphysical condition by recalling the picture of the false prophets in Dante's *Commedia, Inferno* XX: they hold their heads perpetually twisted and walk backwards. Brodsky was a refugee: although it was hard and painful to leave his native country, he moved from a negative status to a condition of freedom; on the contrary, Ovid and Seneca were compelled to leave the seductive beauty of life in Rome to go and experience the treacherous aspects of dwelling in barbaric countries.

In *The Condition We Call Exile,* Brodsky does not refer directly to Ovid and Seneca, but he talks about the most impressive drifts of population that have taken place in the last decades of XXth century, such as that of *Gastarbeiters* in Germany, the *boat people* in Vietnam, Mexican clandestines expatriated to the United States and Pakistanis in Saudia Arabia: a reference to the digression in Seneca, *ad Helv.* 7.1-3 is quite in place:

> videbis gentes populosque universos mutasse sedem [...]. Alii longo errore iactati non iudicio elegerunt locum sed lassitudine proximum occupaverunt, alii armis sibi ius in aliena terra fecerunt; quasdam gentes, cum ignota peterent, mare hausit, quaedam ibi consederunt, ubi illas rerum omnium inopia deposuit.

Augustus spared Ovid exile, but inflicted on him a *relegatio* in Tomi. In vain did Ovid beg pardon pleading for his return to Rome. His life in that barbarian country certainly was ἄβιος βίος (*Anth. Pal.* 7.715.3) and his sorrow was so deep that he felt himself like "quandam effigiem spirantis mortui" (Cic. *ad Quint. fr.* 1.3.1). When the Augustan *Weltmonarchie* was thoroughly settled, Ovid undoubtedly became a troublesome presence and hence, he was relegated to the extreme east boundary of the empire: his condition is what *perire* really refers to after having dismissed the elegiac metaphorical sense: "si modo, qui periit, non periisse potest" (*Trist.* 1.4.28); "cum patriam amisi, tunc me periisse putato: / et prior et gravior mors fuit illa mihi" (*Trist.* 3.3.53-54)[4]. It must be said that a banished man paradoxically lives a state of enslavement in a physical space of freedom; to this extent, indeed, in literature, exile also develops as a psychological metaphor, for example, in V. Hugo's *Ce que c'est l'exil*[5] and *Châtiments* (IV 109: "Je t'aime *exil*"), in Baudelaire's *Horreur sympathique* ("...Insatiablement avide / De l'ob-

[3] It is included in Brodsky's essays collected under the title *On Grief and Reason*, New York 1995 pp. 22-34.

[4] Ovid's exile has been widely investigated by A.D. Walker, A.J. Boyle, P.A. Rosenmeyer, C. Newlands, S. Casali, *Ovid and Exile,* "Ramus" 26:1997 No. 1.

[5] V. H u g o. *Actes et Paroles. Pendant I'exil*. Paris 1883 p. 7.

scur et de l'incertain, / Je ne geindrai pas comme Ovide / Chassé du paradis latin") as well as in Albert Camus' *L'exile et le royaume*[6].

Brodsky read Ovid on the basis of a quite similar biographical experience: from exile, they both discuss the survival of poetry: in this way, we listen to Ovid *Trist.* 1.1.1-3:

> Parve – nec invideo – sine me, liber, ibis in urbem:
> ei mihi, quo domino non licet ire tuo!
> vade, sed incultus, qualem decet exulis esse.

Now we come back to Brodsky's pamphlet on exile: the author remarks that a writer, particularly an exiled one, aims at looking at himself in a posthumous perspective, being aware that the survival of a poetical work is exclusively committed to language, since what finally remains is a saved language, powerful in preserving from every kind of barbarism and in structuring life. The *liaison* between exile and language is so close that the exiled writer is thrown, so to speak, into his mother tongue: language preserves his own identity.

Ovid's loneliness and sorrow are basically determined by his linguistic isolalation: the poet, anxious to polish his style, is defeated

> dicere saepe aliquid conanti – turpe fateri! –
> verba mihi desunt dedidicique loqui.
> Threïcio Scythicoque fere circumsonor ore,
> et videor Geticis scribere posse modis.
> crede mihi, timeo ne sint inmixta Latinis
> inque meis scriptis Pontica verba legas.
>
> (*Trist*. 3.14.45-50)

and "ipse mihi videor iam dedidicisse Latine: nam didici Getice Sarmaticeque loqui" (*ibid.* 5.12.57-58).

Furthermore:

> nec te mirari, si sint vitiosa, decebit
> carmina, quae faciam paene poëta Getes.
> a! pudet, et Getico scripsi sermone libellum,
> structaque sunt nostris barbara verba modis
>
> (*ex Pont.* 4.13.17-20)[7]

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[6] See: I. Cielens. *Trois fonctions de l'exil dans les œuvres de fiction d'Albert Camus: initiation, révolte, conflit d'identité*. In: *Studia Romanica Upsaliensia* XXXVI. Uppsala 1985.

[7] On Ovid *barbarus* see: E. L o z o v a n. *Ovide et le bilinguisme*. In: *Ovidiana. Recherches sur Ovide*. Paris 1958 pp. 396-403; N.I. H e r e s c u. *Poeta Getes*, *ibid.* pp. 404-405; R. S y m e. *History in Ovid*. Oxford 1978 pp.16-18; F. D e l t a C o r t e. *II Geticus Sermo di Ovidio*. In: I d e m. *Opuscula*. Univ. di Genova, Fac. di Lettere, Pubbl. Ist. Filol. Class. a Mediev. 50. Genova 1978 pp. 281-292; A. B a r c h i e s i. *Il poeta a il principe. Ovidio e il discorso augusteo*. Roma–Bari 1994 pp. 25-

On a poetical level, the mother tongue is outstanding, and the poet regrets: "ille ego Romanus vates – ignoscite, Musae! – / Sarmatico cogor plurima more loqui." *(Trist.* 5.7.55-56). Ovid calls himself *Romanus vates* clearly recalling Ennius, but he takes care to prevent the loss of his mother tongue, to avoid a disgraceful poetical powerlessness

> ne tamen Ausoniae perdam commercia linguae,
> et fiat patro vox mea muta sono,
> ipse loquor mecum desuetaque verba retracto,
> et studii repeto signa sinistra mei.
>
> (*Trist*. 5.7. 61-64)

Brodsky bitterly remarks that in the elusive condition of exile, except for his mother tongue, the writer is alone, often soothing the grief into unconcern: language controls literature as well as thought, perception and passion. It is also interesting to recall that David Malouf's novel *An Imaginary Life* (1978)[8] tells about Ovid's exile; in this novel, the poet comes to possess inwardly the desolate outback where he is forced to live and working on the barbarian language he can perform a metamorphosis of himself.

In the *Letter to Horace*[9], Brodsky's interest in Ovid is focussed beyond the matter of exile: Ovid is first of all a poet of metamorphosis and in this way, the *Letter,* in spite of the addressee, is actually a praise of Ovid mostly because "his game was morphology, and his take was metamorphosis". Anyhow, exile and metamorphosis are for Brodsky strictly connected: Vertumnus, the Latin god of transformation, stands for this condition in one of Brodsky's *Italian poems*, which is named after him[10].

As regards Horace, Brodsky turns his attention to the *Carmina,* where the poet's skill in mastering the metres is absolute:

> [...] You start talking your Rufus Valgius out of his protracted grieving by evoking the waves of Mare Caspium [...]. An exotic name and, on top of that, one connoting the farthest point of your Pax Romana [...]. The main thing, though, about "Caspium" is that this word is dactylic. That's why it sits at the second line's end, where every poem's meter gets established. And you are consoling Rufus in an asclepiad.
>
> (*Letter to Horace* pp. 441-442)

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30. See also: A. D e l i b e s - V i d e a u. *Parole de l'interruption, interruption de la parole. Sur les Tristes d'Ovide*. "Bulletin de l'Association G. Budé" 47:1988 pp. 26-37; B. P o u l l e. *Le regard porté par Ovide sur les Gètes.* "Bulletin de l'Association G. Budé" 49:1990 pp. 345-355.

[8] David Malouf was born in Australia, but he is of English-Lebanese origin. He now lives in Sidney and in Tuscany.

[9] It is included in Brodsky's *On Grief and Reason*. New York 1995 pp. 428-458.

[10] On Ovid's Vertumnus see: S.H. L i n d h e i m. *I am dressed, therefore I am?: Vertumnus in Propertius 4.2 and in Metamorphoses 14.622-771*. "Ramus" 27:1998 pp. 27-38.

Moreover, he notes that "tetrameters are tetrameters, no matter when and no matter where. Be they in Greek, Latin, Russian, English. So are dactyls, and so are anapests". Of course, poetry is not conceivable without prosody, for the metre defeats every useless redundance, like W.H. Auden, when he claims "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts free from the fetters of Self" (*Shorts II*): Brodsky chose these lines to introduce his collected essays *On Grief and Reason*.

The *Letter to* Horace begins with the reference to Suetonius' news about Horace's erotic taste "to enjoy coitus from every angle" by means of mirrors lined along his bedroom walls[11]: this absolutely unpoetical memoir is an exciting and informal standpoint to introduce a really doctrinaire discussion on classical poetry:

> [...] Because when one writes verse, one's most immediate audience is not one's own contemporaries, let alone posterity, but one's predecessors.
>
> (*Letter to Horace* p. 439)

In spite of many metrical difficulties and allusive complications, Horace is readable in the translation: Brodsky is provoking the reader by a funny understatement:

> [...] my Latin stinks; that's why I read you all in Russian [...]. But I suspect that in your native Latin, too, your readers seldom knew what the next word was going to be. It's like constantly walking on broken glass, limping and leaping.
>
> (*Letter to Horace* pp. 434 and 437)

Leaving the *Letter to Horace*, we find other important resonances of the classical authors in almost each one of Brodsky's essays. In *Flight from Byzantium*[12] – this title is clearly the reverse of W.B. Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium* –, Brodsky declares that Ovid is "psychologically infinitely more subtle" than Virgil; in fact, the Latin elegiac poets were far from the epic since they spread the idea of a personal and private art against a civic poetry of Augustan propaganda and "Virgil appears with his hexameters and gigantic 'social order'"[13]. But Brodsky goes on:

> [...] Nothing corresponds better to the rhetorical system of thought than the elegiac distich, which provided a means of expressing, at a minimum, two points of view, not to mention a whole palette of intonational coloring permitted by the contrasting meters [...]. And it is Virgil's concept of linear movement, his linear model of existence, that the elegists find so exasperating in him.
>
> (*Flight from Byzantium* pp. 400 and 402)

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[11] *C. Suetonii Tranquilli quae supersunt omnia*. Rec. C.L. Roth. Lipsiae 1883 p. 298, 20.

[12] It is included in *Less Than One. Selected Essays.* New York 1986.

[13] On Virgilian *Fortleben* in the Russian literature, see: R.I. C h l o d o w s k i. *Russia*. In: *Enciclopedia Virgiliana*. Vol. IV. Roma 1988 pp. 608-617.

Among the poets of the Augustan epoch, Brodsky prefers, without exception, Ovid, for being eloquent and subtle in weaving intricacy of poetry and politics. From Suetonius' description of Horace, *brevis atque obesus,* with a surprising anachronism, Brodsky renders a look like portrait:

> [...] you most likely looked like Eugenio Montale or Charlie Chaplin in the *King in New York* period. The one I can't picture for the life of me is Ovid [...]. I never could conjure Naso's face [...]. Naso was a very protean fellow, with Janus no doubt presiding over his lares.
>
> (*Letter to Horace* pp. 432-433)

The reference is to the epiphany of Janus in the prologue of the *Fasti*: "Tunc sacer ancipiti mirandus imagine Ianus / bina repens oculis obtulit ora meis" (1.95-96)[14]. We have from antiquity a famous mosaic portrait of Virgil. Ovid, both frivolous and proud, the poet of changing reality, of metamorphosis, has no face, since the portrait belongs as a distinctive right to the authority basically established on the ethical background of *mores antiqui*[15].

In Brodsky's drama *Marbles* (*Mramor*, 1984), only the busts of Ovid and Horace, among those of the other classical authors, are saved from ruin. This *pièce* takes place in a cell, inside a tower. Still, the tower itself is a widespread literary *topos,* e.g., from Apuleius (*Met.* 4.6.5; 6.17.9; 6.20.13 Helm) to Calderón, Hofmannsthal, Yeats; on a deadpan scene, Brodsky creates an absurd neoclassicism that Samuel Beckett would like[16]. In *Tórs,* a poem dated 1972, the archaeological ruin is the last spark of the ancient world that voracious time has destroyed, it is something recalling Piranesi's landscapes or Quevedo's sonnet *A Roma sepultada en sus ruinas.* Moreover, Brodsky transferred the theme of the busts emerging from the dust of centuries on a metaphysical background (may we recall Giorgio De Chirico's paintings?) and we have two of his *Italian Poems* dedicated to the busts of Tiberius and of Cornelio Dolabella: with scathing irony, the latter is sketched after having had a shower and holding a towel.

In the third act of *Marbles,* Brodsky quotes some lines from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* epilogue (15.871-872):

> Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira nec ignis
> nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere vetustas

and from the same passage (15.877):

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[14] A. Barchiesi (*Il poeta a il principe* pp. 218-225) indicates the rule of Janus in Ovid's *Fasti.*

[15] A detailed survey on the portraits in the Augustan epoch is found in P. Z a n k e r. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor 1988.

[16] J. B r o d s k y. *Poèmes 1961-1987*. Préface de M. Aucouturier. Paris 1987 pp. 8-11.

quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris,
ore legar populi.

zooming the following lines 878-879:

perque omnia saecula fama,
siquid habent veri vatum praesagia, vivam.

The doubt on poets' foreseeing contrasts with Horace's faith in poetical everlasting fame:

Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius,
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum.

(*Carm.* 3. 30. 1-5)

a passage quoted towards the end of the first act of *Marbles.*

But against Horatian perfection and Virgilian triumphal epic, Brodsky sympathize with Ovid's human weakness and poetic pride.

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ZMIENIAJĄC KRAJE
WYGNANIE I WPŁYWY KLASYCZNE U JOSIFA BRODSKIEGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie niektórych wpływów klasycznych w twórczo∇ci Josifa Brodskiego, zaczynając od topiki wygnania u Owidiusza i Seneki. Istotnie, wygnanie jest nie tylko bolesną zmianą kraju, pełnym napięcia doświadczeniem życia, lecz także szansą, by wygnany człowiek mógł jeszcze raz popatrzeć na swoje życie i umocnić swoją duszę. Istnieje bardzo silna więź między wygnaniem i językiem, ponieważ język ojczysty jest środkiem do zachowania tożsamości poety: samotność i smutek Owidiusza zasadniczo określa jego językowa izolacja (por. np. *Trist.* 3.14.45-50; 5.7.55-56; 5.12.57-58; *ex Pont.* 4.13. 17-20). Brodski zaznacza, ∫e w warunkach wygnania język sprawuje kontrolę tak nad literaturą, jak i my∇l , percepcją i uczuciem. Zainteresowanie Owidiuszem u Brodskiego wychodzi ponadto poza sprawę wygnania: Owidiusz jest przede wszystkim poetą metamorfozy, a *List do Horacego* Brodskiego, pomimo swego adresata, stanowi właściwie pochwałę Owidiusza, ponieważ metamorfoza i wygnanie ściśle się ze sobą łączą. Brodski woli Owidiusza od Wergiliusza. Owidiusz, jako poeta zmieniającej się rzeczywistości, zostaje przeciwstawiony Wergiliuszowi, poecie augustowskiej propagandy.

Z angielskiego przełożył Jan Kłos

S≈owa kluczowe: wygnanie, zmiana kraju, Josif Brodski, wpływy klasyczne, Owidiusz, Seneka, Wergiliusz.

Key words: exile, change of country, Joseph Brodsky, classical influences, Ovid, Seneca, Virgil.