Brodsky, Akhmatova and Народ

It is well known that the cornerstone of Joseph Brodsky's personal philosophy of art was the idea of language as a dominant force in human life. In a nutshell, we can describe these beliefs as follows.

- Contrary to the Marxist dictum, "Being predetermines consciousness," consciousness predetermines being. (Brodsky called it "a logical palindrome").
- Although thoughts in Brodsky's view are pre-verbal, verbalization is the way consciousness functions.
- Language can be used and is used by some people to affect other people's consciousnesses. It is, for example, the main instrument of totalitarian indoctrination.
- It is a moral duty of a free man to resist the linguistic tyranny of language manipulators. Poets, by the very nature of their trade, liberate language, save it from ideological mortification and thus serve their people, i.e., the people who speak the same language as they do.

Brodsky started developing this credo before he became familiar with Heidegger and Witgenstein. As he tells us in his autobiographical prose and so many interviews, it came to him as a revelation at twenty four when, exiled to a northern village, he was reading an anthology of modern English poetry and stumbled upon the famous lines in the W.H. Auden's "In memory of W.B. Yates": "Time […] worships language and forgives / everyone by whom it lives."

Hence the very conscious attitude of Brodsky towards the use of language. In 1988 he told an interviewer: "If I can be proud of myself as a poet, then only because already in one of my early poems I was the first in forty years to use the word *soul*" (Interviews, 313). "Forty years" is the period between, approximately, 1921, when the Bolsheviks gained the final victory in the civil war and also the year when the great Russian modernist poets, Aleksandr Blok, Nikolai Gumilev, and Velemir Khlebnikov, died their early deaths, and the early 1960s, when Brodsky and his peers began writing poetry free of ideological constrains. When Brodsky prides himself on the reintroduction of the word "soul" (душа) into verse, he certainly doesn't mean it in a lexical sense. He knew very well that even the propaganda

hacks used it all the time in such idiomatic expressions as "to be loyal with all one's soul to the Communist Party cause." What he means is retrieving not a lexeme but the original concept. The soul in his early poems such as "Stanzas" ("I don't want to choose a country or a graveyard…") or "To John Donne: The Great Elegy" is the Judeo-Christian soul or *anima* of idealistic philosophy.

All this is well known to the students of Brodsky's poetry. In my paper I'd like to present another case where young Brodsky challenged one of the staples of the Soviet totalitarian discourse, the concept of народ ("the people"), and tried to restore its traditional democratic meaning. I can say right away that it was a failed attempt, misunderstood even by Brodsky's immediate circle of friends. What makes, however, this episode in the poet's early period significant and even dramatic, it is the fact that the only person who understood and supported him was none other than Anna Akhmatova, who in 1965 was the only great poet of Russian Silver Age alive after the forty-year long cultural hiatus.

Akhmatova and Brodsky. Anyone who tries to put these two names together cannot fail to see their incompatibility from the point of view of poetics.

It is not impossible to find in Brodsky's poetics some elements which he has in common with Akhmatova's (in Brodsky with his oceanic eclecticism one can find anything), but it is obvious that for the most part that which is characteristic of Brodsky is alien to Akhmatova. All his life Brodsky was keen on complex metaphors, *concetti*, sometimes too idiosyncratic to be easily understood, while Akhmatova used tropes minimally: they are rare in her poetry and as a rule very clear. Bordsky's syntax is complicated (take, for example, the intricately inverted last stanza of his "On Anna Akhmatova's Centenary"), while Akhmatova's sentences are simple. Brodsky, with rare exceptions, used original, exact, sometimes extravagant, rhymes, while Akhmatova's rhymes were mostly well-used, poor and she didn't even hesitate to rhyme the verbal endings: рыдала-стояла, каменел-посмел. Akhmatova's metrical and stanzaic repertoire is traditional and limited. Even when she used once an uncommon stanza, in “The Poem without a Hero,” she had it borrowed, with slight modifications, from Mikhail Kuzmin.

Brodsky's metrical and stanzaic variety and ingenuity are unparalleled in Russian poetry (see Scherr 1986/2001). We see the same contrast when comparing genre variety in both poets. Finally,

genre notwithstanding, the very concept of a poem appears to be different in the minds of two poets: a poem by Akhmatova is lapidary, understated and presented as a fragment of some larger text unknown to the reader (see Eichenbaum 1923), while Brodsky always strives to explore his theme exhaustively. When Akmatova writes about a sleepless airless frightful night, she creates a 12-line long poem, "The moon stood still over the lake…» ("Над озером луна остановилась…"), Brodsky treats the same subject in his "Cape Cod Lullaby," which consists of twelve parts thirty lines each. In his essay dedicated to Akhmatova, "The Keening Muse," Brodsky quotes Buffon's popular aphorism: "Style is man." One can see with a naked eye that as a man and stylistically Brodsky was related not to Akhmatova but to her polar opposites such as Maiakovsky, Tsvetaeva, and, perhaps, Pasternak.

Brodsky fully realized that himself and he explained:

> We did not go to her for praise, or literary recognition, or any kind of approval for our work. […] We went to see her because she set our souls in motion, because in her presence you seem to move on from the emotional and spiritual – oh, I don't know what you call it – level you were on. You rejected the language you spoke every day for the language she used. Of course, we discussed literature, and we gossiped, and we ran

> out for vodka, listened to Mozart, and mocked the government. Looking back, though, what I hear and see is not this; in my consciousness surfaces one line from the same "Sweetbriar in Blossom": "You do not know what you were forgiven." This line tears itself away rather than bursting out of the context because it is uttered by the voice of the soul, for the forgiver is always greater than the offense and whoever inflicts it. This line, seemingly addressed to one person, is in fact addressed to the whole world. It is the soul's response to existence.
>
> It is this, and not the ways of verse-making, that we learned from her.
>
> (Volkov, 240)

This spirited and heartfelt statement seems to settle the Akhmatova-Brodsky theme, at least as far as literary scholarship is concerned, because a literary scholar should analyze two writers' relationship by analyzing their verses comparatively. Such notions as "soul" and "spiritual" are not operative in literary scholarship. They belong to the realms of religion or moral philosophy, and literary scholars are generally interested in exploring the ethical or religious issues in two writers' relationship only as they appear in their works – as echoes, polemics, direct or hidden quotations, and other manifestations of intertextuality. Over the last few years I have been working on a rather detailed

commentary to Brodsky's poems. In the process I came to realize that responses to Akhmatova's texts are relatively infrequent in Brodsky: besides a group of juvenile poems and two mature ones dedicated to Akhmatova (the latter are "Nunc Dimittis" and "On the Centenary of Anna Akhmatova"), cryptic or half-cryptic quotations from Akhmatova or allusions to her texts can be found, in some cases only very tentatively, in just twelve poems. It is interesting that the majority of these echoes were not recognized by the author, i. e., committed unconsciously. Answering a reader who wanted to check with the author her findings of Akhmatova's "presences" in Brodsky's poetry, Brodsky wrote:

> The poems where A.A.A. is "present" are as follows: "Nunc Dimittis" and "In Italy." Perhaps, there are some more but at the moment I can't recall any (which doesn't mean a thing, naturally). Of the ones that you have listed, "Anno Domini" has no relation to A.A.A., neither does "Florence" ["December in Florence" with an epigraph from Akhmatova]. There is a number of poems, among the early ones, just dedicated to her, written for her birthdays, but I cannot recall any of first lines this very second. As for "The Sibyls" ["Eclogues," IV and V] and "Manuscripts in a Bottle" ["The Letter in the Bottle"], they have absolutely no relation to Anna Andreevna, but this is just to the degree I can be aware of it.

(Brodsky's Archive; no date; early 1990s?)

In one of Brodsky's poems Odysseus suggests to Telemachus an interesting version of the Oedipal complex: "away from me you are quite safe of all Oedipal passions." Brodsky spent several years between 1961 and 1966 in close proximity to Akhmatova but, quite obviously, didn't suffer "anxiety of influence," this litcrit equivalent of the Oedipal complex.

Brodsky first met Akhmatova on August 7, 1961. He was twenty one at the time and Evgeny Rein, who took him to visit Akhmatova at her Komarovo "kiosk," was twenty five. Pilgrimages of young poets to great survivors of the Silver Age were common then. Five years earlier your obedient servant knocked at Pasternak's door in Peredelkino. By 1961, of the great Russian poets, only Akhmatova survived and visiting her was the only available form of receiving poetic communion. Akhmatova was used to such visits. Even during the years of her life in the limbo of Stalin's inferno some fearless admirers managed to find her, and in the times of Khrushchev a young man or woman emerging in her doorway with a bunch of flowers in one hand and a bunch of poems in the other became a usual sight.

(After Akhmatova's death in 1966 this tradition had naturally ceased, but young poets' desire to touch a living genius before the time gap became unsurpassable remained; a poet of the next after ours generation, Yury Kublanovsky, told me that when he was fifteen he came to Moscow, found Andrei Voznesensky's address, and spoke to the maestro after which he had a dream that he had a conversation with Akhmatova.) Unusual in the two young men's visit to Akhmatova in August of 1961 was the fact that one of the two, Joseph, didn't think of the trip as of a pilgrimage to a sibyl's sanctuary, he had a rather faint idea of who that little old literary lady was, and he went just to keep Rein company and spend a day outdoors. Of course, he knew Akhmatova's story in general as well as few of the poems that had made her famous many years before, but, as he reminisced later: "None of those things seemed like such great poetic achievements to me" (Volkov, 209). Neither did he have a philological interest in that which she remembered: «[A]s someone with a deficient education and upbringing, I wasn't very interested in all that, all those authors and circumstances" (Volkov, 212).

The further history of Akhmatova and Brodsky's relationship is well known. "[O]ne fine day,

coming back from Akhmatova's in a jam-packed commuter train, I suddenly realized – you know, suddenly, it's like a curtain rising – whom, or rather what, I was dealing with" (Volkov, 208). Brodsky became a regular visitor. His poetry impressed Akhmatova deeply, and on a personal level that special mutual trust was established between them, which on some occasions exists between blood relatives separated by a generation. I am trying to avoid that nice Russian word, "бабушка," because this very homely word doesn't fit the perennially homeless Akhmatova. By its "inner form," the English "grandmother" (or "grand-mere," or "Grossmutter"), with capital G and M, Grand Mother, would be more appropriate. Akhmatova was very friendly with the young poetic band that surrounded her during her declining years: Natalia Gorbanevskaia, Dmitry Bobyshev, Mikhail Meilakh, and, of course, her personal secretary, Anatoly Naiman, but her attitude toward Brodsky, the man and the poet, was very special. In Brodsky's life, the years of friendship with Akhmatova were grueling: the tragic break-up with the woman he loved, the suicide attempt, the insane asylum, the prison, the nightmarish trial, a friend's betrayal, exile – it appears that all this worried Akhmatova on a more intimate than just friendly level. As

evidence I'd like to cite three episodes – one somewhat comic in nature and the other two touching.

In one of his memoirs Anatoly Naiman wrote:

> [W]hen Joseph's love affair […] shifted from the poetic to the pedestrian plane, [Akhmatova] said: "After all, shouldn't a poet distinguish between a muse and a cunt[1]." (It sounded deafening, like "Fire!" and a simultaneous blast; […] never before or after did she use *this kind* of words[.]). (Naiman, 7)

If this story is true, what we have here is evidence of Akhmatova's exclusive attitude toward young Brodsky: a person of legendary self-control, she was so deeply offended by what had happened to Brodsky that she lost control and used an obscenity which was so uncharacteristic of her.

The first of the other two episodes we find in Volume II of Lidia Chukovskaia's "Notes on Akhmatova," where a great many pages are dedicated to the efforts to rescue Brodsky from his exile. On April 22, 1964 Chukovskaia recorded these words of Akhmatova:

> [O]ur hero isn't behaving very well [.] Even not well at all. […] Imagine: Iosif says: "Nobody

[1]The exact translation of "блядь" is "whore" but in Russian "блядь" has a status of an unprintable obscenity on the level of "cunt."

> wants to lift a finger on my behalf. If they wanted, I'd be out of here in a couple of days." […] He is suffering a typical prison camp psychosis, which I'm familiar with: Lyova [L. N. Gumilev, Akhmatova's son] once told me that I didn't want him to come back and deliberately kept him imprisoned[.]
>
> (Chukovskaia, 207)

About a year and a half later, in September 1965, Akhmatova herself wrote in her diary:

> Iosif is free by decision of the Supreme Court. This is a great and fair joy. I saw him a few hours before the news.[2] He was in a terrible state, as if on the verge of suicide. […] He read to me his "Hymn to the People." Either I don't know a thing about poetry, or as a poem it is a stroke of genius, and in terms of moral path it is precisely what Dostoevsky is saying in "The House of the Dead": not a shadow of vengeful bitterness or haughtiness, which Fedor Mikhailovich teaches us to be afraid of. This is what broke my son. He began to despise and hate people and ceased to be human himself. Let Lord enlighten him! My poor Lyovushka.
>
> (Akhmatova, 667)

These two last episodes are emotionally opposite: Akhmatova is indignant in the first one and she admires Brodsky and is moved by his moral stance in the second. But there is a common denominator: in

[2]Brodsky was on furlough, when the news of his sentence being commuted came.

both cases thinking of Brodsky automatically triggers thinking about her own son, whose improved version Brodsky represents in her mind. By the way, Chukovskaia too explains Akhmatova's outburst by her special, quasi-maternal, attitude toward Brodsky: «[I]osif can think and say about us [i. e., Chukovskaia, Vigdorova and other intercessors for Brodsky] whatever he likes, but she cannot take it: Iosif is her discovery, her pride" (Chukovskaia, 208). This elective affinity was equally felt by both parties. Brodsky loved his birth mother, M. M. Volpert, dearly, but in all his books he placed next to the poem, "In Memory of My Father: Australia," not the one written in memory of his mother, "The thought of you is receding like a chambermaid given notice…," but "On Centenary of Anna Akhmatova." True, "In Memory of My Father…" and "On Centenary…" were written in the same year, 1989, and the poem in his mother's memory two years earlier, but Brodsky never observed strict chronological order in the composition of his books instead grouping poems by thematic and stylistic correspondences, which were sometimes evident to a reader but sometimes to the author alone.

Let us make it clear that the aforementioned elective affinity was intellectual and emotional in

nature and never meant any excessive familiarity between the two. The funniest thing I ever read on our subject was the comment of a western scholar to the following lines from Brodsky's "Fifth Anniversary": "Я вырос в тех краях, я говорил «Закурим», их лучшему певцу…" ("I grew up in that land; I used to say, 'Got a smoke?,' to its best bard"). The commentator commented: "The 'best bard', i. e., Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966)." Of course, they never were on "Hey, Annie, got a smoke?" terms (Brodsky himself explained that he meant Evgeny Rein).

On the other hand, there was something not very common in this maternal-filial relationship. The usual order of respect being paid by the junior to the senior was here often reversed and that was always done by Akhmatova. As some of us remember, reverence for authority was not among the distinctive features of the young Brodsky, he would argue with elderly writers and professors about subjects of their expertise without batting an eye and sometimes quite aggressively (see, e. g., Chukovskaia, 3, 71; Naiman, 11), only with Akhmatova was he always respectful. It was Akhmatova who was eager to level the field and who addressed him in the "you and I" manner: "Joseph, you and I know all the rhymes in the Russian

language" (Volkov, 240). It was Akhmatova who likened her friendship with Brodsky to that with Mandelstam (Akhmatova, 523).

Even stranger, reading her diaries one gets the impression that in some ways the 75-year old Akhmatova considered the 25-year old Brodsky to be wiser than herself. She more than once returns to Brodsky's apothegmatic statement, "What is most important in poetry is the magnificence of the project." She writes in her diary: "And again surfaced the salutary words: 'What is most important is the magnificence of the project'" (Akhmatova, 588); and in the draft of a letter: "I am constantly thinking [about the magnificence of the project], about our last meeting and I am grateful to you" (Akhmatova, 601); and in another letter: "And your last year's words remain valid: 'What is most important is the magnificence of the project'" (Akhmatova, 637). At one point she gives us an example of a "magnificent project" in the manner of Brodsky's, she writes: "To take an epigraph for 'Pages from a Diary' from I. B[rodsky]'s letter: '[W]hat he (Man) consists of: Time, Space, Spirit? A writer, one should think, in his striving to recreate Man, should write [about] Time, Space, Spirit" (Akhmatova, 724). And elsewhere, when in deep doubt, she writes: "And

where is the salutary 'magnificence of the project' which saved Iosif?" (Akhmatova, 679). It all sounds as if near the end of her days Brodsky revealed, finally, to her the secret of her vocation, the art of poetry to which she had dedicated her whole life.

But maybe he did not reveal anything but reminded her of something or someone? I would like to quote from one of Akhmatova's peers, a statement which I find startling in the way it reveals reception of Brodsky by the last Mohicans of the Russian Silver Age. In 1962-68 G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov published in the U. S. the 4-volume Collected Works of Nikolai Gumilev. The last volume had as an introduction an essay by Vladimir Veidle, "Petersburg Poetics." Veidle, one of the foremost experts on Russian poetry, offers there a survey of the Russian poetry scene in the first quarter of the 20th century free from the conventional and artificial labels of "Symbolism," "Acmeism," and "Futurism" and he succeeds in demonstrating fundamental similarities between Gumilev, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Komarovsky, and Kuzmin, Blok, Khodasevich, and Tsvetaeva in the years immediately preceding World War I. Veidle ends his 30-page long essay, unexpectedly, with a somewhat mystically hued paean to Brodsky:

> I know: he was born in 1940, and he cannot remember. And yet, reading him, I always think: yes, he does remember, through the haze of deaths and births he does remember Petersburg of 1921, the year of the Lord 1921, Petersburg where we buried Blok and could not bury Gumilev.
>
> (Veidle, xxxv-xxxvi)

In addition to this *cri du coeur*, amazing and almost inappropriate there where we find it, let us remember that from the beginning Brodsky's exceptional talent was recognized not only by his peers but also by the cultural elite of the older generation – scholars, scientists, writers, and musicians, many of whom so valiantly rushed to his defense in 1964. What was it in the young man with no manners that made the guardians of the Silver Age traditions recognize him as a legitimate heir of the Silver Age titans?

Before we try to answer this question, let us examine one episode in the history of Akhmatova and Brodsky's friendship, which many find puzzling. We know that Akhmatova rated Brodsky's talent very high in general but we do not have many documented expressions of her opinion about individual works of Brodsky. Those which we have can literally be counted on the fingers of one hand. About the poem which Brodsky wrote for her birthday in 1962, "The

cocks will crow and flap their wings…," she remarked that it was not a "poem for the album," i. e., more serious (Akhmatova, 234), and she took a line from it, "Вы напишете о нас наискосок…" ("You will write about us slantwise") as epigraph for "The Last Rose." She approved of Brodsky's long biblical poem, "Isaac and Abraham"; she copied two lines of it in her diary, the ones about the meaning of the sound A, i. e., her initials, A. A. A.: "По существу же это страшный крик / младенческий, прискорбный и смертельный…" ("Ultimately, it is a terrible cry: infantile, grievous, and lethal") (Akhmatova, 390). (Initially she wanted to make them an epigraph for her poem, "The Name," but changed her mind; probably, she realized that a 2-line epigraph for the 4-line poem would look awkward.) Some people remember – with some variations – Akhmatova's phrase, "You yourself don't understand what you have written!", said to Brodsky upon listening to his "To John Donne: The Big Elegy." In Brodsky's personal myth this phrase signified the moment of the hero's initiation. But there is only one poem about which we have Akhmatova's written opinion: enthusiastic and accompanied by some explanation of her enthusiasm for it. I have already quoted it. Let me repeat it. Following her meeting with

Brodsky on September 11, 1965, she entered into her diary:

> He read to me his "Hymn to the People." Either I don't know a thing about poetry, or as a poem it is a stroke of genius, and in terms of moral path it is precisely what Dostoevsky is saying in "The House of the Dead": not a shadow of vengeful bitterness or haughtiness, which Fedor Mikhailovich teaches us to be afraid of.

Today only those who have access to the samizdat (Maramzin's) edition of Brodsky's Collected Works can check whether Akhmatova knew something about poetry or did not for the poem in question – its correct title is "Народ" ("The People") – was never printed.[3] The genre of it is the ode; it consists of 36 anapestic lines of various length, mostly tetrameter, with plain masculine rhymes. It begins:

> Мой народ, не склонивший своей головы,
> мой народ, сохранивший повадку травы:
> в смертный час зажимающий зерна в горсти,
> сохранивший способность на северном камне расти… –

My people, who never bowed [before anything],/ my people, who are used to living like grass: /

[3]I would like to publish it in the appendix to the Biblioteka Poeta edition, which I am preparing, if I am able to secure permission of Brodsky's estate.

grasping seeds in the moment of death, / preserving the ability to grow on northern rocks…

and it ends:

> Припадаю к народу, припадаю к великой реке.
> Пью великую речь, растворяюсь в ее языке.
> Припадаю к реке, бесконечно текущей вдоль глаз
> сквозь века, прямо в нас, мимо нас, дальше нас.

I fall down to the people, I fall down to the great river. / I drink its great speech, I dissolve myself in its language. / I fall down to the river, that flows endlessly before our eyes / through ages, right into us, past us, beyond us.

Eventually Brodsky rejected this poem as he rejected some other rhetorical pieces of the same period. I have reason to believe that he did it out of aesthetic considerations, but the common opinion among his samizdat readers of the time was that "The People" was written as a "паровозик" (a little engine): in the lingo of the Soviet literati this was a term for politically correct poems, written for the sole purpose of "pulling" other, politically not so correct ones, into print. As early as 1974, V. R. Maramzin pointed out that this could hardly be the case, because Brodsky wrote "The People" in exile in December 1964, i. e., a long time before he could hope to have anything

published in the USSR (see Maramzin, 488). As we know, Akhmatova did not share that common opinion; on the contrary, "The People" was for her a manifestation of true genius. Many still find her opinion perplexing. In 1997 Anatoly Naiman proposed his explanation:

> As for her opinion of a poem which he had written in exile in response to the authorities' invitation to write something patriotic and which he had published in a local newspaper […], a clarification is due. Her opinion, "Either I don't know a thing about poetry, or it is a stroke of genius," expressed aloud when I brought this poem to her and [then] entered into her diary, means most likely that Brodsky, without much effort, brilliantly did that which the powers-to-be had once expected from her and that which she absolutely couldn't do right but did almost as a parody. [Her] cycle "Glory to Peace" is labored and helpless. Not accidentally, the next thing she mentions in her diary is her son, because the whole thing was done for his sake. In other words, one can interpret her phrase this way: "I, as you well know, know poetry, and I say that a poet has to know how to do everything in verse, even on commission, and Brodsky did it as a genius.
>
> (Naiman, 8)

Some things in this story are just plain wrong: "The People" was never published. The only poem that Brodsky published in Prizyv, the district newspaper for Konosha, was "Tractors at Dawn"

(August 14, 1965). Parts of Naiman's story contradict other memoirists: A. Zabaluev, who was a junior editor at Prizyv and who befriended Brodsky in exile, wrote that the local party bosses never invited Brodsky "to write something patriotic" (Zabaluev, 154-161). According to Naiman, Akhmatova read "The People" when he brought it to her, while according to Akhmatova, Brodsky recited it to her during his September 11 visit. More important, the whole interpretation of the episode as Akhmatova's cynical praise of Brodsky's conformist hackwork doesn't make sense. Five days later, September 16, the day following a bout of heart pain, Akhmatova writes in her diary: "If only Brod[sky] could come and read me 'Hymn to the People' again" (Akhmatova, 669). A strange desire indeed, if we accept that Akhmatova praised this poem just for its mercenary craftsmanship! And how should we understand, in the light of Naiman's interpretation, Akhmatova's comparison of Brodsky's poem to "Notes from the House of the Dead"? I repeat, Naiman was not alone in thinking that "The People" was an attempt at a compromise with the regime, others, as I remember, thought so, too, only without his spite.

I believe that here we hit the barrier separating the two poets from the Soviet

intelligentsia, those who, in Pasternak's words, "did not know that the bane of mediocre taste is worse than the bane of tastelessness" (Pasternak, 474). The word "народ," together with the corresponding notion of belonging to the *people*, was compromised in the minds of the Soviet (i. e., silently anti-Soviet) intelligentsia because since the post-World War II years it pertained to the Stalinist ideological lexicon. Many, perhaps the majority, of Brodsky's readers, admirers, and friends could explain his writing of a poem about the *people*, non-ironic and without any Aesopian double-entendres, only by plain opportunism or by the pressure of circumstances, and only a few accused Brodsky of the former and the majority found the latter excusable.

The aesthetic criteria of the majority are well illustrated by this exchange recorded by Sergei Dovlatov: "И антисоветская книга может быть бездарной," ("An anti-Soviet book can be untalented too") says Dovlatov to which his more mainstream friend replies: "Бездарная, но родная" ("Untalented but such a darling"). Brodsky's intellectual horizons were immeasurably broader than those determined by the Soviet/anti-Soviet dichotomy. Very early in his life he realized that shaping one's world-outlook as a mere reaction to the

Soviet ideology spells narrowing that outlook to the same ideological scope. For Brodsky "Народ" was not a figment of propaganda – he had learned not to notice it – but real people, those with whom he worked as a fifteen-year old apprentice at the factory and later on geological expeditions and in the fields of the Archangel countryside, his fellow patients in the insanity asylum and fellow prisoners. As a staunch individualist he never treated them in his poetry with humiliating sentimentality and, by and large, avoided treating ordinary people as an undifferentiated mass of *hoi polloi*: usually they appear in his poems named – Ivanov, Petrova, Semyonov, Pesterev, Antsiferova. People with individual names are people with individual lives, individuals. Together with the poet they constitute "народ."

Brodsky always remembered his exile as a happy period in his life.

> When I used to get up with the dawn there and early in the morning, at six or so, walk to the office for my duty detail, I realized that at that very hour all across what's called the great Russian land the same thing was happening, people were going to work, and I really did feel <u>that</u> I was a part of this nation. And this was a tremendous sensation!
>
> (Volkov, 79; same Interview, 282, 434)

This is the same experience that Brodsky tried to describe in "The People," and one doesn't need to go back to Nekrasov's time to find the roots of this "populism" for it is also close to Pasternak's philosophy (" Я льнул когда-то к беднякам не из возвышенного взгляда, но потому то только там шла жизнь без помпы и парада" ["I once tried to join poor people not out of some lofty aspirations but because life without pomp and circumstance was happening only there"]), and it is a pronounced motif in Mandelstam ("Я тоже современник…" ["I am a contemporary too"])[4], and, of course, most dramatically the same theme was developed by Akhmatova in "Requiem," the work which Brodsky especially loved (see Brodsky, 41). "Requiem" is an account of a personal tragedy – the poet's only child is taken away by the Stalin's torturers – but it begins with lines "Я была тогда с моим народом, Там, где мой народ, к несчастью, был…" ("I was then with my people, There where my unfortunate people were").

In the last stanza of "The People" poem Brodsky says: "Припадаю к народу, припадаю к великой реке. Пью великую речь, растворяюсь в ее языке…" ("I

[4]Incidentally, Mandelstam's "Ode" traditionally regarded as a powerful but opportunistic poem Brodsky explained as a masterpiece and sincere expression of Mandelstam's innermost views (see Volkov, 31-32).

fall down to the people, I fall down to the great river. / I drink its great speech, I dissolve myself in its language"). (Incidentally, even in the solemn ode Brodsky observes the Saussurian juxtaposition of *langue* and *parole*; that which the poet hears and "drinks" is *la parole*, "речь", while that in which his creative self is being "dissolved" is *la langue*, " язык".) What Brodsky said about Akhmatova can be said about him:

> If her poems weren't exactly the *vox populi*, it's because a nation never speaks with one voice. But neither was her voice that of the creme de la creme, if only because it was totally devoid of the populist nostalgia so peculiar to the Russian intelligentsia. The "we" that she starts to use about this time in self-defense against the impersonality of the pain inflicted by history was broadened to this pronoun's linguistic limits not by herself but by the rest of the speakers of this language.
>
> (Brodsky, 42-43)

We remember that Brodsky often uses the narrative "we" in his historical meditations even though it makes him say, "мы сломали Греческую церковь" ("we demolished the Greek church"). His proviso concerning the *vox populi* did not prevent him from claiming Akmatova's becoming the voice of her

people to be her greatest achievement: thanks to her the native land acquires "the gift of speech amidst the deaf-mute universe" – which echoes Akhmatova's own "my tortured mouth through which 100-million strong nation cries."

Akhmatova and Brodsky are two central actors in the process of preservation and development of Russian poetic tradition. This tradition is outside the realm of poetics and in the realm of the philosophy of poetic art, namely, the poet's identity and social functioning of poetry. As such it can be described neither in terms of old-fashioned literary history (the history of influences) – "Lomonosov begat Derzhavin, Derzhavin begat Zhukovsky…" – nor in terms of the Formalist "theory of evolution" nor in psychoanalytical terms of Bloomian "anxiety of influence."

In "The Keening Muse" Brodsky clearly outlines three main lessons that one can draw from Akhmatova's life and poetry: (1) "More than any other art, poetry is a form of sentimental education, and the lines that Akhmatova readers learned by heart were to temper their hearts against the new era's onslaught of vulgarity"; (2) Akhmatova's poetry "is tinged with the note that was destined to become her imprimatur: the note of

controlled terror"; and (3) "[t]he poet is a born democrat not thanks to the precariousness of his position only but because he caters to the entire nation and employs its language" (Brodsky, 40-42).

The Russian tradition relayed to Brodsky by Akhmatova is formulated in these three remarks about poetry's didactic function, about the moral fortitude given to the poet by his vocation, and about the inherently democratic nature of that vocation. The latter reminds us of an overused motto by Nekrasov, "You are not obliged to be a poet, but you are obliged to be a citizen," except that in the Akhmatova-Brodsky version it would become: "Being a poet you are a citizen, take it or leave it." All that was perfectly clear to Czeslaw Milosz, who more than twenty years ago wrote about Brodsky:

> I find it fascinating to read his poems as a part of his larger enterprise, which is no less than an attempt to fortify the place of man in a threatening world. Contrary to the tendency prevailing today, he believes that the poet, before he is ready to confirm the ultimate questions, must observe a certain code. He should be God-fearing, love his country and his native tongue, rely upon his conscience, avoid alliances with evil, and be attached to tradition. These elementary rules cannot be forgotten or ridiculed by a poet, since absorbing

> them is part of his initiation, more exactly ordination, into a sacred craft.
>
> (Milosz, 23)

The tradition mentioned by Milosz was the subject of this paper. I am convinced that Brodsky honorably maintained it, and sometimes I think that he was the end of it.