D.O.I. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-4573e63260

ARTICLES

You Are in the Empire, Friend: The Legacy of the Russian Imperial Narrative in the Poetry of Joseph Brodsky / *Chegaste ao Império, meu amigo: o legado da narrativa imperial russa na poesia de Joseph Brodsky*

Júlia Zorattini[*]

ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the imperial element in the poetry of Joseph Brodsky through the lenses of post-colonial studies. Its ambiguity, informed by Brodsky's experience as a poet in exile, as well as his personal cultural frame, echoes that of his poetic precursors. Thus, we briefly trace the history of the connection between Russian poetry and the imperial narrative, which began with the inception of the Russian Empire itself in the 18th century. Then, we explore the nuance of the concept of empire in Brodsky's works through the analysis of the poems *Post aetatem nostram* (1970), *Torso* (1972) and *On the Independence of Ukraine* (1991). As we understand it, both the chauvinistic content of the latter poem and the positive and nostalgic aspect of empire to Brodsky reveal the longevity and the strength of the Russian imperial narrative in the country's national literature.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Brodsky; Russian poetry; Post-coloniality

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem por objetivo investigar o elemento imperial na poesia de Joseph Brodsky em diálogo com os estudos pós-coloniais. Sua conotação ambígua, permeada tanto por suas vivências enquanto poeta exilado, quanto por seus referenciais culturais, ecoa àquela apresentada nas obras de seus precursores poéticos. Portanto, traça-se um breve histórico da relação entre poesia e narrativa imperial no âmbito cultural russo, iniciada com a gênese do Império Russo no século XVIII. Em seguida, explora-se as nuances do conceito de império na obra brodskiana por meio da análise dos poemas Post aetatem nostram *(1970),* Torso *(1972) e* Sobre a Independência da Ucrânia *(1991). Entende-se que tanto o conteúdo chauvinista deste último poema, quanto o aspecto positivo e nostálgico do império para Brodsky revelam a longevidade e a força da narrativa imperialista russa presente na literatura nacional do país.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Joseph Brodsky; Poesia russa; Pós-colonialidade

[*] Master's Sudent in Literary Studies, Universidade Federal Fluminense – UFF, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6471-6866; jzorattini@id.uff.br

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Introduction[1]

Born in 1940 in Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad, and awarded with the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature, Joseph Brodsky is deemed one of the greatest Russian language poets of the 20th century (Rich, 1997). While still living in the Soviet Union, the author found himself at odds with the Brezhnev administration (Bertelsen, 2015), when censorship had once again tightened after having been briefly softened during the Khrushchev thaw. At the time, Soviet artists were expected to be politically engaged and Brodsky's prioritization of his own antipolitical intellectual life was a flagrant affront to the State doctrine.

For such reasons, the poet underwent a series of criminal trials, until he exiled himself at the age of thirty-two in the United States, where he spent the rest of his life. Not once did Brodsky ever set foot in his homeland again, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when he was invited to return to Russia. Echoing his biography, great part of the author's poetic and essayistic production is dedicated to the spatial and temporal themes related to the concepts of homeland, Empire, and exile.

Despite the status of *persona non grata* received from the Soviet authorities; Brodsky did not consider himself a dissident. Olga Bertelsen explains:

> Brodsky possessed a set of features that were suspicious to the Soviet regime: he was unemployed, or rather self-employed, a concept foreign to the Soviet authorities; and he communicated with foreigners who visited the Soviet Union and with suspicious "elements" of the Leningrad *intelligentsia*. For these reasons, he was exiled and eventually banned from the country. (...) He was not a member of any underground organization that opposed the Soviet regime, and he did not distribute samizdat in the USSR, although his poems were published in *Sintaksis*, the first samizdat poetry journal circulating in Moscow and Leningrad. In fact, Brodsky himself has insisted that he was not a dissident. Moreover, he has repeatedly stated that he was apolitical and his creativity was not informed by political history (2015, p. 264).

However, Russian literary critic Lev Loseff (1990) claims that it does not mean Brodsky refused to acknowledge the presence of political themes in his work; the poet merely sought to reinforce the autonomy and priority of poetry as an ideological activity.

[1] All dates accompanying the titles of literary works and poetry throughout this paper refer to the year in which they were first published.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Indeed, it would be difficult to argue for the complete divorce between brodskian poetics and politics when confronted with the nostalgic images he built around Empire, as seen in the poem “Tors” [Torso] (1978),[2] or with the violent aesthetics and language used in “Na nezavisimost’ Ukrainy” [On the Independence of Ukraine] (1992)[3] as a response to the historical event that served as the background for the poem. After all, each and any literary text is inserted in a certain historical and social context, according to which it is located and interpreted (Said *apud* Turoma, 2010).

Much like the works of his predecessors in the Russian literary canon, such as Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, Brodsky’s Empire takes on an ambiguous connotation, undoubtedly informed by his troubled relationship with the Soviet State, as well as his admiration for the cultural products of Empire. On one hand, the grandeur of the imperial project is exalted in his odes, where Empire plays the role of a supreme force capable of penetrating the depths of one’s soul (Sadan, 2021). On the other hand, the exiled poet rejects the oppressing Soviet Empire and depicts a declining Soviet Union about to implode (Sadan, 2021), as in the poem “Post aetatem nostram” (1970). Such dichotomy in Brodsky’s poetry will be examined in depth ahead.

It is inevitable to trace parallels between Brodsky and Pushkin, even in a biographical level. Due to his frequently adversarial stance towards the State, the latter was also politically persecuted and exiled. The works of Russia’s national poet are heavy with biting criticism to the Russian imperial project, an example being the narrative poem “Mednyi vsadnik” [The Bronze Horseman] (1837),[4] in which Pushkin displays the violence the modernizing politics of Peter I and their legacy represented to the common people. However, in “Poltava” [Poltava] (1829),[5] his characterization of rebellious

---

[2] BRODSKY, Joseph. “Torso.” In: BRODSKY, Joseph. *A Part of Speech*. Translated by Howard Moss. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, p. 73.

[3] This date refers to the first occasion in which Brodsky recited the poem at the Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, California. The poet decided not to publish “Na nezavisimost’ Ukrainy.” Therefore, the poem is only accessible to us in unofficial online publications, where Brodsky’s taped public readings were transcribed. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Hi97u8BFpQ. Accessed on Feb. 06, 2024. For the purposes of this paper, we will use excerpts drawn from the website https://www.culture.ru/.

[4] PUSHKIN, Aleksander. The Bronze Horseman: A St. Petersburg Story. Translated by John Dewey. *Translation and Literature*, v. 7, nº 1, 1998, pp. 59-71. Available at https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/epdf/10.3366/tal.1998.7.1.59. Accessed on Feb. 08, 2024. DOI: 10.3366/tal.1998.7.1.59

[5] Pushkin, Alexander. Poltava, trans. Ivan Eubanks. *Pushkin Review*, nº 11, 2008, pp. 129-171. Available at http://www.pushkiniana.org/vol11-newtranslations/22-eubanks-translation11.html. Accessed on Feb. 08, 2024.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Ukrainian Cossack Ivan Mazepa is negative, and Pushkin also celebrates Mazepa's defeat on the side of Charles XII of Sweden at the hands of the tsar's troops. Critics such as Myroslav Shkandrij (2001) see the poem as an apology for Russian imperialism.

Similarly, American journalist Elif Batuman in a piece to *The New Yorker* titled *Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War* (2023) notes the presence of literature in the narrative built by the Kremlin to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Amongst them is the frequent referencing of the "Russian world" doctrine in the speeches of President Vladimir Putin. Such concept idealizes an union between the three East Slavic nations under Orthodoxy, the Russian language and the culture of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky (Batuman, 2023), that is, under the aegis of the Russian cultural and political sphere of influence.

Considering the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, it is of essence to reflect on the Russian imperial mentality and its construction, in which poetry played an instrumental role as we seek to demonstrate in this study. The fact that Brodsky expressed such resentment over Ukrainian independence only a little over three decades ago, despite his difficult, and in many ways negative, relationship with the Russian State and its policies, is evidence of the strength of such imperial thought.

Therefore, it is useful to preliminarily examine the relation Brodsky's work holds with that of his predecessors, in particular the poetry of the neoclassical and romantic eras, as well as to analyze the ways in which the concept of empire has changed throughout the centuries.

1 Poetics of Empire

Before we delve into the attitudes of the Russian poets of the 18th and 19th centuries towards the empire and the way they are featured in their work, it is important to underline the impact of the modernizing reforms of Peter the Great in Russian culture. The victory in the Great Northern War (1700-1721) solidified the status of the Tsardom of Russia as a major European power: geographically and symbolically, "Europe was now accessible as it had never been" (Berman, 1988, p. 177).[6]

[6] BERMAN, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*: The Experience of Modernity. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

One of the key elements of the reforms was the transference of the imperial capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. It represented an attempt to abandon the religious and "backward" legacy the old capital embodied and to head down a fresh path based on the European standard.

Indeed, the architectural project of the Northern capital was conceived as to abide by the Western urban planning tradition founded in the Renaissance, with its geometrical and rectilinear design unprecedented in Russia up until that moment (Berman, 1988).[7] The architecture of the new city was based on urban centers such as Amsterdam and Venice and developed by Italian, German and French architects imported by Peter I. Initially, Petersburg was mainly inspired by the baroque aesthetic, but in the following centuries rococo and neoclassical features were incorporated to its landscape as well, which granted the Northern capital an eclectic style (Buckler, 2007). Today such stylistic blend is further complexified by the presence of Soviet and Post-Soviet era buildings.

Thus, although it was shaped after European models, the Petersburgian landscape became something unique, with an identity of its own. Not even the city project could be executed as planned - it faced nature challenges: the terrain could not be tamed as to allow for the wide and rectilinear avenues. As stated by Edélcio Américo (2006, p. 33), "Petersburg was, from the very beginning, man and Science's struggle against nature."[8]

Marshall Berman (1988)[9] enumerates other circumstances surrounding the founding of the city which set it apart from its Western counterparts. Firstly, raising the new capital from the ground in less than a decade was only made possible by the absolute power the emperor held over an almost infinite mass of workers; secondly, such a feat imposed an incalculable toll on human life. These aspects informed the mythology around Saint Petersburg, whose connotations became essentially negative by the mid-1800s. In works of literature such as Dostoyevsky's *Dvoinik* [The Double] (1846)[10] and Nikolai Gogol's *Nevsky Prospekt* [Nevsky Avenue] (1835),[11] the city exerts a maddening influence over its inhabitants.

---

[7] For reference, see footnote 1.
[8] In Portuguese: "Petersburgo foi, desde o início, uma luta do homem, da ciência contra a natureza."
[9] For reference, see footnote 1.
[10] DOSTOYEVSKY, Fyodor. *The Double and The Gambler*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.
[11] GOGOL, Nikolai. *The Overcoat and other tales of Good and Evil*. Translated by David Magarshak. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

However, until then the new capital would only occasionally appear in poetry amidst the odes and panegyrics of the 1700s. At that time the image of Saint Petersburg was linked to the many conquests of Peter the Great (Buckler, 2007). According to Julie Buckler, it is difficult to define when the city first appeared in Russophone literature. Nevertheless, she adopts the milestone set by Soviet historian Nikolai Antsiferov: the connections Aleksandr Sumarokov established between Russia's past and the city through the figure of Grand Prince Aleksandr Nevsky, as well as his allusions to the glorious future of Petersburg with the bestowal of the title "new Rome" (Buckler, 2007). Regarding Nevsky, it is relevant to remember he was thus baptized after the victory of his troops in the Battle of the Neva (1240), which took place on the river on whose shores Petersburg was built.

Similarly, Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan (2021) claims there is a relation between the opening of the imperial chapter in Russia, symbolized by the founding of Saint Petersburg in the 18th century, and the increasing affinity for the classical tradition, evident in the poetry of Gavrila Derzhavin, in which "(...) pyramids, obelisks, pillars, palaces, and idols become positively the signature of his style" (Pumpiansky *apud* Buckler, 2007, p. 66). This return to classical culture, according to Rafael Frate (2019), is a tendency nearly logical in nature if one considers the ideology that began taking shape since the reign of Peter I: "If the new empire wished to impose a splendor compatible with that of its European absolutist peers, it would need to look back and project onto itself their own aesthetic standards."[12]

Therefore, the beginnings of Russian poetry were sowed alongside the rise of the Empire and of the new capital. With the Petrine social reforms, poets limited themselves to replicate foreign models, mainly the French one. That changed with Romanticism, when elements specific to Russian society began to be incorporated in poetry, freeing it from the chains of form and rhetoric (Belinsky *apud* Ram, 2003).

Harsha Ram (2003) theorizes that since Russian poetry was supposedly born with the empire and as an imperial subject, some perceived continuities in the country's literary culture would be justified. The poet's initial subordination to autocracy would then inform

[12] In Portuguese: "Se o novo império quisesse impor um esplendor que se coadunasse com o de seus pares absolutistas europeus, ele precisaria voltar e projetar os modelos estéticos deles mesmos."

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

their stance on themes related to the imperial project. That way, as the national literary tradition solidified, the relation between poet and empire would grow more complex.

The odes of Gavrila Derzhavin and Mikhail Lomonosov aptly illustrate this phenomenon. Their poetry heralded the achievements of the empire, which in their turn were intimately related to the enlightened ideals of progress espoused by Catherine the Great:

> The challenge posed to imperial governance by a multiethnic and multireligious populace was to be resolved through the codification of universal legal principles, equally binding on all. The empress's initial enthusiasm for Enlightenment ideals created the makings of a Catherinian myth whose chief symbol was a hypostasis of the Law. It was Derzhavin's designated task to corroborate this myth (Ram, 2003, p. 7).

Thus, the imperial campaigns in the Caucasus and in Persia were celebrated by the works of these poets in their odic evocations of the glory and the power of their motherland. Derzhavin would make use of allegories to exalt the figure of the empress (Ram, 2003; Sadan, 2021). In his turn, Lomonosov advocated for the seizure of the Amur region in his "Oda na den' vosshestviia na Vserossiiskii prestol Eio Velitchestva Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Elisavety Petrovny 1747 goda" [Ode on the Day of the Ascension to the All-Russian Throne of Her Majesty the Empress Elisaveta Petrovna, the Year 1747] (1747),[13] where the poet anticipated the riches that would flood the imperial vaults following the new conquest (Shkandrij, 2011). To Sadan (2021), the empire's self-perception as a champion of Enlightenment in Asia and the works of such poets were harmonically related.

Ram signals to a contradiction in the civilizing ideals and the expansionism practiced in Catherine II's administration, and upon such realization, the poets were compelled to introduce satirical elements in their verses. However, that did not diminish the enthusiasm caused by territorial conquest (Ram, 2003). Here the first seeds of the

[13] LOMONOSOV, Mikhail. "Ode on the Day of the Ascension to the All-Russian Throne of Her Majesty the Empress Elisaveta Petrovna, the Year 1747." *In*: SEGEL, Harold. *The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia*: An Anthology of Russian Literary Materials of the Age of Classicism and the Enlightenment from the Reign of Peter the Great, 1689-1725 to the Reign of Alexander I, 1801-1825, vol. 1. New York: Dutton, 1967.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

ambiguous concept of empire that would be taken on by the next generations of poets were sowed.

The rejoicing of the grandeur and might of the Russian nation aided in the foundation of the imperial myth:

> A literature glorifying imperial rule was a powerful factor in shaping public attitudes and disseminating a pro-tsarist ideology. It formed the background of expectation, the norm against which rare refusals of support or even rarer statements of opposition acquired significance. Extolling the empire's vastness and military invincibility had by the nineteenth century become a well-established tradition among major writers (Shkandrij, 2011, p. 9).

Ram (2003) considers this mediation between literary form and political ideology the Russian version of the sublime mode. It is through this mode that poet and reader establish connections from matters of poetic genre, lyrical subject, and lexical choice to the political scenario of the Russian Empire.

In this preliminary stage, it manifests itself in the panegyrics which starkly tie the country's historical progression to its territory, thus establishing a relationship between the power of rhetorical or poetic language and autocratic might. The lyrical subject is subordinated to the sublime spectacle of history and identifies himself with the empire in an impersonal manner. Such model would be revised, updated, and subverted by the following generations.

At this point, it becomes relevant to discuss the important role played by discourse and narrative in the colonial enterprise, as remarked by post-colonial theorists. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said (1994, xii-xiii) notes:

> The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.[14]

[14] SAID, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books: 1994.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Moreover, Bill Ashcroft *et al* stress the teaching of language and literature as a tool of colonial domination, which by establishing imperial culture as a prestige and power factor, become actors of an alleged civilizing mission (Ashcroft; Griffiths; Tiffin, 2003). Thus, the elevation of metropolitan culture to the sublime and the transcending creates a sense of cultural authority, within both the colonies and the metropolis (Loomba, 1998).

It should be noted that such theories were conceived with the Western colonial in mind (Said, 1994).[15] Russia and its ambivalent self-perception, by not being a perfect fit into the East/West binary, challenge that perspective and demand an adaptation of the concepts employed by post-colonial theory. As we will see, Russia's limited cultural identification with Europe also translates itself into an exaltation of Asia in certain measure (Koplatadze, 2019), mirroring in the Asian colonies the ambiguous relationship Russian poets had with their own State.

That aspect begins to show itself in the Romantic era, namely in the poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, who were both exiled in the Caucausus. In that period, the odic mode lost protagonism due to the authors' search for artistic emancipation, which transformed their relationship with the imperial authorities. It is no longer enough to the Golden Age poet to limit his art to the celebration of State achievements, as it was to the previous generation. Thus, through the employment of the elegiac mode, he turns inwards. The mode's strong subjectivity allowed for the exploration of the author's personal feelings and opinions, as well as serve as a strategy to convey subversive ideas (Sadan, 2021). Pushkin and the poets of his generation, with their French-inspired liberal ideals, became disillusioned with poetry's alleged political mission and began to question it (Ram, 2003), which in turn placed them in an adversarial position in the eyes of the government:

> Whereas the Empire continued to provide a historical context for the Romantics, it ceased to be the exclusive means for experiencing the sublime. Poets' self-perception as seers in the wake of the Romantic pivot also entailed an affirmation of their own greatness, which naturally aroused the suspicion of the authorities. The contrast between the elitism of 19th-century poets and the regime's oppression alienated them from the state. Henceforth, the imperial sublime was experienced as a violent force directed against these poets (Sadan, 2021, p. 124).

[15] For reference, see footnote 6.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Monica Greenleaf argues that elegy appears as a subversive alternative to18th century poetics, which were closely linked to the State project:

> Modern elegiac verse has tended to make its appearance as a part of a nation's or city-state's Golden Age, as a correlative of national formation and empire building. Just as the Roman elegiac poets were criticized for trivial, personal pursuits out of keeping with Rome's civic and historical mission, modern elegy appears to rise on the back of political centralization, either as a product of the civilized leisure and education it enables or as a subversive response to the official discourses of public life (Greenleaf *apud* Turoma, 2010, p. 100).

Despite the many quarrels between poet and the State, the Golden Age poets did not question the need for empire; they simply could not relate entirely to its victories (Ram, 2003). Thus, the sublime is transposed from the field of rhetoric to that of aesthetics (Ram, 2003). The Romantics take on a melancholic and nostalgic tone, which Ram refers to as elegiac sublime:

> The text, then, creates a paradoxical time-space that will repeatedly shift the reader's attention away from the poem's ostensible focus: a present figured spatially as landscape is finally overwhelmed by a past that appears as a function of memory. This hypertrophy of memory is typically elegiac and generally functions within the lyric to enrich but also to complicate the terms of the encounter between mind and nature (…) Even as it seeks a sympathetic reflection in the outer world, elegiac consciousness always contains excess (a residue of the past or more rarely a premonition of the future) that nature, history, or the beloved cannot adequately reflect, and it is this failure of reciprocity that precipitates the need for mourning. More than just the elegy's theme, mourning is also its temporal condition, preventing the specular reconciliation of subject and object by introducing the phantasm of an unresolved past or an uncertain future (Ram, 2003, p. 183).

Such spatial matter is particularly noticeable in the Caucasian cycle. While away from the motherland, the poets search for freedom in nature, in the love of Circassian women. In these works, duality brews conflict, notedly, the clash between civilization, embodied by the metropolitan poet, and nature, represented by the native peoples of the Caucasus and its landscape (Ram, 2003).

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

In poems such as Lermontov's "Son" [The triple dream] (1841),[16] the environment acts as a mediator of the elegiac impulse of nostalgia. Amidst the Dagestani terrain the lyrical subject, after having been fatally wounded in combat, dreams of his native land in his last breath and regrets his inability to return; he dies for the imperial cause, and in exchange it forsakes him in the very land he fought to occupy (Ram, 2003). Lermontov also criticized the Russian Empire's violence against the Caucasian population in works such as "Izmail-Bey" [Ismail-Bey] (1832),[17] in which his motherland is portrayed as a "Roman" State that subjugates harmonic peoples (Layton, 2005), and *Mtsyri* [The Novice] (1839).[18]

The ambiguity factor is particularly remarkable in the works of Pushkin, namely in the poem "Kavkazskii Plennik" [The Prisoner of the Caucasus] (1822)[19] and in the travel essay *Putieshestvie v Arzrum* [A Journey to Arzrum] (1836).[20] In the narrative poem, the lyrical subject's perception regarding the landscape and the individuals surrounding him shifts throughout the verses: if at one point the mountainous terrain is beautiful as a painting, at another point it bores him; if at one point his captors are "wonderful people," at another point the lyrical voice witnesses their "bloody amusements" (Ram, 2003). Such "bloody amusements" are in turn juxtaposed to the dueling culture, which was still very much in effect in imperial Russia at the time. In doing so, the poet forces the reader to question who the barbarian in this scenario truly is: the "savage Other," or the colonizer, the "civilized us" (Layton, 2005).

Highly complex, although it is efficient in making the reader wonder about the fairness and the morality in the colonial enterprise, "Kavkazskii Plennik" [The Prisoner of the Caucasus] is hardly free of issues. The discourse it conveys is essentially monologic, that is, individual and one-sided (Voloshinov, 1973).[21] Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin considers monologism as a typically poetic form of discourse, which is to say the

---

[16] NABOKOV, Vladimir. Translator's Foreword. *In*: LERMONTOV, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. Translated by Vladimir Nabokov and Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Doubleday, 1958. pp, v-xix.

[17] "Izmail-Bey" [Ismail-Bey] has not been translated into English. In References, we cite a compendium of Lermontov's poetic works (*Sotchineniia v dvukh tomakh* [Works in two volumes], vol. 1), which was published in the Soviet Union in 1988, that features the poem in question.

[18] LERMONTOV, Mikhail. The Novice. Translated by Charles Johnston. In: *Narrative Poems by Alexander Pushkin and by Mikhail Lermontov*. New York: Random House, 1983. pp. 82-106

[19] PUSHKIN, Aleksandr. *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. Translated by Jacob Krup. Great Steppe Press, 2019.

[20] PUSHKIN, Aleksandr. A Journey to Arzrum. Translated by Birgitta Ingemanson. New York: Ardis, 1974.

[21] VOLOSHINOV, Valentin. Verbal Interaction. *In*: VOLOSHINOV, Valentin. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar Press, 1973, pp. 83-98.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

poetic genre is not usually marked by the interaction between diverse discourses, in a way that language fulfills itself "as something undoubtable, indisputable, encompassing" (Bakhtin, 2002, p. 94, our translation)[22] and poetic discourse takes on a unique and incontestable character. Such aspects intensify the authority exerted by the poet over his object. In the poem in question, we become acquainted with the Caucasian people exclusively through the lenses of the narrator; in the verses of "Kavkazskii Plennik" [The Prisoner of the Caucasus] they are given no opportunity to voice their own feelings and experiences.

The captors are speechless; the power of the spoken word is only given to the lyrical subject and the Circassian damsel. Nevertheless, the love discourse they share is unitary (Zhirmunsky *apud* Layton, 2005): the Russian lyrical voice takes upon himself the prerogative to dictate who those Circassians are; they do not have the autonomy to do so for themselves. Such poetic authority is further corroborated by the ethnographic notes added by Pushkin to the poem, which were widely considered as proof of his objectivity in the portrayal of the natives by critics at the time (Layton, 2005). As pointed by Said in *Orientalism* (1978), to usurp the ability to narrate oneself from the colonized peoples is to exert authority and domain over them (Said, 1979).[23]

Moreover, the poem closes in a rather contentious way: the lyrical subject glorifies the conquerors of the Caucasus, Yermolov and Kotlyarevsky, who were responsible for the decimation of entire tribes, much like the black death. Although Layton (2005) theorizes such ending might have been a placatory gesture towards the Russian authorities, made with the intention of reverting Pushkin's own condition of exile, it was negatively received by critics. In correspondence with Aleksandr Turgenev, prince Pyotr Vyazemsky wrote: "If we were bringing enlightenment to the tribes, then there would be something to sing about. Poetry is not the ally of butchers" (Vyazemsky *apud* Layton, 2005, p. 107).

This comment satisfactorily summarizes the most liberal stance at the time: although the brutality of the colonial enterprise is questioned, its supposed civilizing mission is not. Quite the opposite, in fact – it is not only justified, but also desired. Thus, the Russian Empire holds a liminal identity. If on one hand it is stigmatized by the West

---

[22] In Portuguese: "como algo indubitável, indiscutível, englobante."
[23] SAID, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

as a “barbarian kingdom” (Layton, 2005), on the other, it presents itself as the bearer of the flame of Enlightenment before the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Even though the Golden Age poets were not concerned with lending their efforts to the consolidation of a narrative that legitimizes the expansionist policies of the States, as were their predecessors, their timid and conditional opposition to colonialism also plays a relevant role in the shaping of public opinion and national culture regarding such themes.

Now that we have traced this brief background, we proceed to examine the influence of such cultural and identitarian baggage on Brodsky and his poetics.

2 Brodsky’s Two Empires

Joseph Brodsky fills a role in Russian culture which resembles that of his antecessors. Despite having been a metropolitan man, he was persecuted in his native land due to his individualistic approach to artistic production, as well as his Jewish heritage, reason for which he was not accepted into the Soviet naval academy (Brodsky *apud* Sadan, 2021). Before his exile in the United States, Brodsky was subjected to internal exile in the Arkhangelsk region in Northern Russia from 1964 to 1965. Like Pushkin and Lermontov, the condition of exile shows itself in his poetry through nostalgic reflection of spatiotemporal dimensions, as we will soon see.

As mentioned, the poet was brought up in the city of Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad, surrounded by the imperial legacy of Peter the Great, which could be sensed mainly in the city’s Western style architecture. This factor greatly influenced a young Brodsky:

> Just as his first notions of the naked female body came from the marble statues of the Summer Garden, more abstract aesthetic concepts like symmetry, perspective, and proportion came from the neoclassical buildings all around him. In the child’s mind and the child’s world, there grew an image of an ideal country, an empire whose might and glory were founded—improbable as it might seem—on harmony and proportion rather than violence and death. (...) this private utopia had nothing to do with the real, historical Russian empire. As a child, Brodsky gave little thought to the empire; as an adult, he regarded Russian imperialism and militarism with undisguised scorn (Loseff, 2011, p. 12).

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

It is also worth mentioning the historical period in which Brodsky's Petersburgian childhood took place: the aftermath of World War II. The Northern capital was held captive by one of the longest sieges in history during the conflict and its restoration demanded decades worth of efforts on the part of Soviet workers (Buckler, 2007). Even prior to the city's factual destruction in the past century, Petersburg was already associated with the notion of ruin, which also carried both positive and negative connotations.

On one hand, novelists such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in his *Dnevnik pisatelya* [A Writer's Diary] (1873),[24] connect Petersburg's image as a city shrouded in debris and dust to its state of permanent creation, which would only be completed once the Venice of the North reached its full glorious potential (Buckler, 2007). On the other hand, it appears as a "sepulcher of imperial Russian culture," where history is preserved in "petrified ruins" (Skidan *apud* Buckler, 2007). The latter perspective is mainly related to the failure of the imperial project (Buckler, 2007), materialized by the two occasions when the role of the center of the Russian political power was returned to Moscow. On the first one, it occurred in a temporary fashion, soon after the death of Peter the Great. On the final occasion, after the Bolshevik Revolution, the change was definitive.

Therefore, to Brodsky, his hometown symbolizes not only the forgone motherland in exile (Américo, 2006), but also the fallen Empire, whose legacy lives on, even if timidly, in the architecture of the previous capital, destroyed both literally and symbolically. This image of the enduring, though decaying Empire will be particularly relevant to the analysis of the poem "Tors" [Torso] in the following section.

In his imagination, Empire is an impersonal entity of immense cultural power, tied to Enlightenment era ideals of rationalism and burdened with the safeguard of the "civilized" world as a supposedly enlightened nation (Sadan, 2021). The contrast between such conception and the material reality of the Soviet Union, oppressive of the individual freedoms of its citizens, creates the tension of works such as "Post aetatem nostram" (1970), which will be examined here, and "Anno Domini" (Loseff, 2011).

It should be noted that that does not mean Brodsky did not consider his homeland an empire. However, in conditioning the artistic expression of its society to political factor

---

[24] DOSTOYEVSKY, Fyodor. *A Writer's Diary*. Translated by Kenneth Lantz. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

and in persecuting those who dared to escape the established standard, the Soviet empire was unable to fulfill the Brodskian ideal of an imperial state:

> The concept of empire emerges in Brodsky's works as one of the essences structuring his historical and geographical imagination, as well as his understanding of cultural signification. Brodsky's experience of the Soviet Union, and his understanding of the country as an empire, was crucial to his understanding of empire both as a historical fact and a metaphysical concept. In his creative imagination empire was a cultural given, which provided the conditions necessary for a civilization with its arts, philosophy, and moral order to develop, while it could also exhibit the "human negative potential," as was the case, in Brodsky's view, with the Byzantine empire, imagined in "Flight from Byzantium" as the historical predecessor of the Soviet empire (Turoma, 2010, p. 63).

Thus, to Brodsky, Empire is a concept which takes on positive and negative connotations. That becomes clearer in the first stanza of "Konets prekrasnoi epokhi" [The End of a Beautiful Era] (1969):

> Since the stern art of poetry calls for words, I, morose,
> deaf, and balding ambassador of a more or less
> insignificant nation that's stuck in this super
> power, wishing to spare my old brain,
> hand myself my own topcoat and head for the main
> street: to purchase the evening paper (Brodsky, 1987).[25]

To Sanna Turoma, the use of the expression "more or less insignificant nation" holds double meaning: it refers both to the Russian Empire as an entity shaped in the image of the Western powers and the Soviet Union, seen by the author as an inauthentic power (Turoma, 2010). The Brodskian concept of "authenticity" is linked to historicity and originality, which are opposed to modernity and contemporaneity. The image of a nation trapped in another evokes the idea that Russia, as a country, is a victim of the Soviet regime (Turoma, 2010).

Thus, a melancholic aura is formed around this Russia of the past due to its untapped potential to become an authentic empire, which was nipped in the bud before it

---

[25] BRODSKY, Joseph. The End of a Beautiful Era. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *A Part of Speech*. Translated by David Rigsbee and Joseph Brodsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. pp. 34-36. *In* Russian: "Potomu chto iskusstvo poezii trebuiet slov, / ia – odin iz glukhikh, oblysievshikh, ugriumykh poslov / vtorosortnoi derjavy, sviazavsheisia s etoi, — / nie jelaia nasilovat' sobstvennyi mosg, / sam sebe podavaia odejdu, spuskaius' v kiosk / za vietcherniei gazietoi."

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

had the opportunity to flourish. Those of Brodsky's poems that explore the positive aspect of Empire lament what could have been but never was.

We find in the Brodskian portrayals of Saint Petersburg/Leningrad the beginnings of such an approach. As mentioned, with the decline of the ode, celebratory of the Northern capital as one of Peter I's great achievements, the myth surrounding the city took on a phantasmagoric aspect due to the violence its construction demanded and the general understanding of Petersburg as a representative of central power. However, Brodsky subverts such tradition:

> The meanings Brodsky invests in Leningrad/Petersburg and its monumental buildings from his Soviet post-utopian, or post-Stalin perspective, produce a nostalgic and affirmative attitude toward Russia's imperial past, which, in turn, reconstructs Petersburg as the center and a major achievement of Russia's imperial power, with the latter emerging as an object of the author's nostalgia, too. Brodsky's dissenting politics of imperial nostalgia produces a perception of the historical Russian Empire as the authentic and legitimate empire, as opposed to the Soviet imperial absurdity he left behind. Poetry emerges from these conjectures as a product of an authentic imperial culture, as well as a means of maintaining it (Turoma, 2010, p. 82).

Brodsky thus melancholically meditates on the Petersburgian space. Being unable to connect his country's present reality to a sublime past was a source of distress to him. However, as it seems, the poet's nostalgia and admiration did not fall on the imperialist and colonial practices carried out by the Russian Empire, but on the aesthetics and the cultural products of said "authentic empires" (Turoma, 2010). In consequence, his Leningrad adopts the image of a decaying Constantinople, whilst the imperial Petersburg of yore mirrors the Roman Empire.

In this framework, in one of his essays, Brodsky claims that empires are upheld by language, not by military might. In doing so, he cites the Roman Empire and Hellenic Greece as examples. Even after the collapse of their respective political centers, such civilizations endured for centuries due to the strength of the Latin and Greek languages (Brodsky *apud* Turoma, 2010).

Moreover, the Brodskian gaze often searches for vestiges of such an authentic empire in the landscape, mainly in architecture. To find them is to identify buildings projected in the European standards of the 18th and 19th centuries. Their absence is devaluing. In *After a Journey, or Homage to Vertebrae* (1978), written after his short stay

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

in Rio de Janeiro during the PEN Congress, which had taken place in the previous year, Brodsky describes the scenery he glimpsed:

> The two- or three-kilometer strip between the ocean and the looming cliffs is entirely overgrown with utterly moronic- a la that idiot Le Corbusier -beehive 'structures.' As though the vista denies man's imagination. Perhaps it does. The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are completely wiped out. Occasionally you can bump into the debris of the mercantile style of the turn of the century, with its surreal medley of arcades, balconies, winding stairs, turrets, gates, and whatnot. But this is rare, and of no relief. And equally rare and relief-free are the small three- or four-floor hotels in the back streets behind the concrete-cum-stucco giants, or in the narrow lanes climbing up the hills at a minimum seventy-five-degree angle, winding up into an evergreen forest, the real jungle. There, in these narrow streets, in little villas and cobbled-up tenements, dwells the local population, employed mainly by the tourist outfits: extremely poor, somewhat desperate, but on the whole not overly protesting (Brodsky, 1995, p. 64).

By establishing a dialogue between Mary Louise Pratt's studies on British colonial practices, Turoma (2010) underlines the high degree of assertiveness the author employs in his description of the city, even though Brodsky himself admits having so little knowledge about Brazil, his poem about Rio de Janeiro may well have been written without his leaving New York (Brodsky, 1995).

More than that, the dehumanizing description of the favelas as "the real jungle" and the trivialization of the Brazilian landscape, which even dampens the author's imagination, are part of what Pratt considers to be the aesthetic key of the metropolitan representations of post-coloniality:

> Not having the historical tie with Brazil that Pratt claims Theroux and Moravia should acknowledge with Guatemala and Ghana, Brodsky creates one—not in order to critique the postcolonial relations of subjugation, but, on the contrary, to claim a right to his metropolitan position: Brodsky invents a European identity, and he does so by way of negation. Because of the strangeness of local vegetation and the absence of colonial architecture, the author of Brodsky's travel account argues, Rio de Janeiro cannot produce any memories 'no matter how many years you spend there' (according to the author himself, he spent a week there). 'For a native of Europe,' he continues, 'Rio is biological neutrality incarnate,' the local vegetation 'neither corresponds to nor echoes any species a European is used to' (Turoma, 2010, p. 110).

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Through such assertions, Brodsky alludes to a certain absence of history in the Rio de Janeiro landscape, since it does not feature European points of reference in culture and nature (Turoma, 2010).

Furthermore, the author makes use of generalizations commonly found in colonialist discourse: the mellow, "though not devoid of brutality" (Brodsky, 1995, p. 75) Southern character, the idea that poverty and the general sense of hopelessness are inherent to the country, and not consequences of its history of socioeconomic exploitation.

Thus, much like Pushkin and Lermontov's perspective on the Caucasus, Brodsky displays his admiration for European models of culture, his nostalgia for the Russian imperial past and a certain amount of contempt and paternalism with which he faces the societies that do not fit his standards of civilization. In this context, Brodsky's condescension falls on the Third World.

In his travel guide to Saint Petersburg, published in *Vogue* magazine in 1979, Brodsky traces a "genealogy" of Russian poetry. To him, the heirs of Derzhavin, Pushkin and Lomonosov would be the Silver Age poets Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam:

> Every criticism of the human condition suggests the critic's awareness of a higher plane of regard, of a better order. Such was the history of Russian aesthetics that the architectural ensembles of St. Petersburg, churches included, were—and still are—perceived as the closest possible incarnation of such an order. In any case, a man who has lived long enough in this city [St. Petersburg] is bound to associate virtue with proportion. This is an old Greek idea; but set under the northern sky, it acquires the peculiar authority of an embattled spirit and, to say the least, makes an artist very conscious of form. This kind of influence is especially clear in the case of Russian or, to name it by its birthplace, Petersburgian poetry. For two and a half centuries this school, from Lomonosov and Derzhavin to Pushkin and his pleiad (Baratynsky, Vyazemsky, Delvig), to the Acmeists—Akhmatova and Mandelstam in this century—has existed under the very sign under which it was conceived: the sign of classicism (Brodsky *apud* Turoma, 2010, p. 72).

Instead of bringing back the themes traditionally featured in the works of the Golden Age poets, whose influences could be placed in the phantasmagoric urban mythology of the Northern capital, the author re-signifies such myth through the idealization of Petersburg's neoclassical aesthetic (Turoma, 2010).

Therefore, it becomes apparent that Brodsky borrows elements from the two great poetic generations of imperial Russia. His stance regarding his own country is ambiguous

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

given his marginalized social position in the Soviet Union, akin to that of the Romantics. However, whereas the imperial project seemed to prosper in their lifetime, Brodsky searches for his sublime in the past, in the ruins of an Empire devoured by a farse.

At the same time, this search brings him closer to the classicists, whose poetry becomes an aesthetic norm to him: "Russian poetry has set an example of moral purity and firmness, which to no small degree has been reflected in the preservation of so-called classical forms without any damage to content" (Brodsky *apud* Turoma, 2010, p. 81).

Finally, we must verify how such ideas manifest themselves in Brodsky's poetry. To illustrate the brodskian imperial dichotomy, we shall analyze the poems "Post aetatem nostram" [Post aetatem nostram] (1970), "Tors" [Torso] (1972) and "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" [On the Independence of Ukraine] (1992).

3 Is the Empire a Country for Fools?

The first poem describes scenes of a decadent empire in a setting Loseff (2011) even describes as dystopian: a despotic governor orders the killing of a royal cook due to a faux pas made at a State banquet; the use of enslaved labor, as well as gladiator fights are present; government officials coerce each other and congratulate one another when they are able to create laws that make the lives of the impoverished even more difficult. All is observed from a distance by a Greek wanderer, who ultimately chooses to cross the border and leave that "country of fools."

The poem is divided into twelve sections, and some receive titles according to the location they are set in or the characters they are centered on. It begins with a brief description of the agitation caused by the arrival of the emperor in the city, which is barely noticed by the Greek, who was busy playing a game of dominoes at an empty café behind the palace. Next are the scenes set in the palace, followed by the tower, the caged beast, and finally, the emperor himself.

On the surface level, the reader is brought back to Ancient Rome: the palace is decorated with marble statues of satyrs and nymphs, the figure of the legionnaires is present, the deadly combats open to the public still exist and the image of the upside-down Vesuvius is employed to symbolize the oncoming implosion of the empire. However, there is a direct reference to another Russian poet, which redirects the analysis:

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

In a 'Message to the Rulers' which is posted
on large billboards a well-known local bard,
seething with indignation, boldly calls
for prompt removal of the Emperor's likeness
(in the very next line of his appeal)
from every copper coin (Brodsky, 1973, p. 152).[26]

That is an allusion to a poem written by Andrei Voznesensky and published in 1967, whose first and second verses are, respectively, "Remove Lenin / from [our] money!" (Loseff, 2011). The lyrical voice sees the well-known bard's public, yet ambiguous statement as a display of both courage and servility: the quintessential mark of poetry.

As noted by Turoma (2010), Brodsky does not resort to Roman references only in his portrayal of the sublime; they are also used to display the absurd character or the moral decay of the Soviet empire. Loseff (2011), in his own analysis of the poem, underlines the violent contrast between the author's utopian vision regarding the ideal State and the Soviet reality as the underlying personal conflict that serves as the background for the composition of "Post aetatem nostrum."

It is also worth mentioning the predominately negative portrayals of the government officials: as they watch the spectacle at the stadium, the governor laughs, and his face resembles a festered udder; the emperor's constipation is compared to the country's stagnation (Loseff, 2011). Without a doubt, such tyrannical figures are given a mundane treatment - a common feature in many other works of Brodsky. The emperor in particular is only recognizable as such because the lyrical subject explicitly refers to him by that title. There are no traces of reverence whatsoever for that man who, while locked up in the grand palace, is reminiscent of the Minotaur at the center of the labyrinth of Crete (Kline, 1990).

Moreover, his only appearance in the poem is associated with the lower body: the emperor is on the latrine, trying to defecate. In many ways, that resembles Seneca's satire of emperor Claudius, referenced by Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and His World* (1965). In the

[26] BRODSKY, Joseph. Post aetatem nostram. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems.* Translated by George L. Kline. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 149-159. *In* Russian: "V raskleiennom na ulitchnykh shchitakh / "Poslanii k vlastiteliam" izvestnyi, / izvestnyi miestnyi kifaried, kipia / niegodovan'iem, smielo vystupaiet / s prizyvom Impieratora ubrat' / (na slieduiushchei strotchke) / s miednykh dieneg."

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Roman satire, the dethroned monarch had also spent his entire life on the chamber pot. Such mundane, and even grotesque, representation removes the imponent a political figure of such importance usually carries in the collective imagination, thus promoting its resignification (Bakhtin, 1984).[27]

However, to Bakhtin, the "downward" motion, which highlights the excretory organs and excrements, means both the death of what is old and the birth of something new. Although Brodsky's poem signals to the forthcoming collapse of the empire, it seems like there is no place for hope of effective change or of the betterment in the country's situation, even if Vesuvius does in fact erupt. Such hopelessness is further corroborated by the Greek's departure.

George Kline draws attention to the fact that this poem was where the category of empire was first introduced to Brodsky's work as a universal domain, with no clear historical or geographical delimitations; "It is impersonal, alienating, godless - in opposition to the free, or freedom-seeking individual" (Kline, 1990, p. 62).

Such individual in the poem is represented by the Greek, whom researchers such as Sadan (2021) compared to the author himself and his dissatisfaction with the state of individual freedoms in his homeland. The decision to assign a specific nationality to the migrant is also relevant: the Greek recalls another decadent empire, as well as a classical culture. Such ambivalence reflects the bipolarity Brodsky attributes to his own motherland, the Soviet Union.

The end of the traveler's journey is displayed in "Tors" [Torso]. In the 1972 poem, Empire is portrayed as a safe harbor, affected only by the passage of time. Once more, the marble statues are present, and the lyrical voice invites the weary newcomer to stand in an empty niche in the room and to become himself a sculpture. By doing so, he loses his head and arms, thus becoming part of the Empire's impersonal power exhibit (Nivat, 1990).

Jana Kostincová (2006) notices that the statues tend to symbolize empire in Brodsky's poetry, whether it is the Roman Empire, the Soviet Empire, or the American Empire. That way, even though marble conveys an idea of perpetuity, its presence does

---

[27] BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

not imply the poem or the category of empire it displays carry a positive connotation. After all, the image of the sculptures is also remarkable in “Post aetatem nostram.”

However, unlike their poetic predecessors, the statues in “Tors” [Torso] are not mere witnesses of the scenes of violence and corruption in a ruined empire. Here they embody the legacy of a cultural power, which may have been eroded by time, but is still capable of withstanding the passing of the ages due to its strength, much like Leningrad in Brodsky’s imagination. In his analysis of the poem, Sadan (2021) conditions the survival of the empire to its revitalization, which would be promoted by newcomers. In exchange, the empire would grant them protection and immortality.

It is meaningful that this imperial entity is presented not only as the final destination in the search for freedom, but also as the end of all things. Although this power is now more evocative of a room in a museum exhibit than of an extensive cultural and geographic domain, it is still representative of an apex, of an ideal to be achieved.

Empire is also compared to a mirror that must be crossed. The mirror imagery is frequent in Brodsky’s poetry and takes on a series of different meanings. In *Torso*, it plays the role of a divider between life and death (Loseff, 2011). Thus, crossing the border between the external world and Empire is a promise of transcendence solidified by the traveler’s transformation into a statue.

It is noteworthy that such a process involves the individual’s depersonalization through the loss of the sculpture’s head, so that only its torso remains intact. Such idea converges with the poet’s understanding of Empire as an impersonal concept.

As we have seen, the positive aspect of Empire to Brodsky is intimately connected to Greco-Roman culture and the ideals of civilization which originated in Western Europe. Undoubtedly, his predilection for the classical aesthetic echoes the emulation of the Greek and Roman aesthetics by the post-Petrine era poets in their attempts to reproduce the cultural splendor of those empires in the Russian context (Frate, 2019).

This idea that the West is the only bastion of “high culture” is made quite clear in Brodsky’s essays, especially in those written after his travels to periphery countries. It must be recalled that this affiliation to a Eurocentric outlook on culture is closely tied to the antagonizing stance taken on by Brodsky against the Soviet regime, even though the Western cultural practices began to be harshly criticized from the 1970s on (Turoma, 2010). That way, as it was to Pushkin, Europe represents freedom to Brodsky.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Another of the poet's complex facets is the one unveiled in "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" [On the Independence of Ukraine]. The poem was read by the author in 1992 at an event in the Palo Alto Jewish community center in California, but it was not ever officially published. Loseff (2011) considers this Brodsky's only act of self-censorship in his life.

In its verses, the lyrical subject laments the emancipation of the neighboring nation and curses it with the prediction that Ukrainians will recite not their national poet Taras Shevchenko's "bullshit," but instead lines from Pushkin in their deathbed.

The poem's resentful tone features the use of derogatory terms directed to Ukrainians, as well as Poles and Germans, at whose mercy the lyrical speaker leaves his neighbors who now can no longer count with Russia's protection. Brodsky also employs a jargon typically associated with the incarcerated population. According to Bertelsen (2015), such lexical choices are an attempt to portray Ukrainians as a rude and crass people in opposition to the high culture represented by Pushkin.

Moreover, she understands that the lyrical subject expresses the certainty that Ukraine will perish without Russian influence in final stanza, "becoming a desolate place, physically, culturally and intellectually" (Bertelsen, 2015, p. 278):

> God be with you, fugitives, Cossacks, hetmans, and bosses!
> But listen up: when death comes for you crooks
> while scratching at your deathbeds, you will wheeze
> not Taras' bullshit, but verses from Aleksandr (Brodsky, 1991).[28]

One of the reasons that makes Brodsky's outrage so surprising is that, despite his skepticism of the notion of national sovereignty and independence as requisites for the welfare of a country, the emancipation of other nations that were part of the Soviet Union did not provoke the same sort of reaction (Loseff, 2011).

Shkandrij (2001) attributes such hostility to the trauma of decolonization, which implies a rejection on the side of the metropolitan population when the peoples that find themselves under their sphere of influence struggle for emancipation. Moreover, the idea that Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine are in fact one nation that inherited of the legacy of

[28] Our translation from the Russian original. In Russian: "S Bogom, orly, kazaki, getmany, vertukhai! / Tol'ko kogda pridyot i vam pomirat', bugai, / budete vy khripet', tsarapaya kray matrasa, / strochki iz Aleksandra, a ne brekhnyu Tarasa."

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Ancient Rus' due to their cultural proximity and shared history (Shkandrij, 2011) was widely spread. In that sense:

> It became obvious that in his mind the Baltics, Central Asia, and the Caucasus were separate countries and nations—but the space that stretched from the White Sea to the Black, from the Volga to the Bug, was a single land, and it was his native one. He was not alone in thinking so: "An imperial . . . mentality was as characteristic of inhabitants of Poltava and Zhitomir, Nezhin, Chernigov, Gomel and Polotsk as it was for those of Tver or Vyatka. That is, from the earliest days of empire, from the days of Peter the Great, this mentality has counted Kiev and Belarus part of the metropolis. And how could it be otherwise for people who had learned from first grade that 'Kiev is the Mother of Russian cities'?" (Loseff, 2011, p. 242).

Thus, it becomes clear that Brodsky's distress regarding such a historical event is connected to the Russian imperialist discourse, which in its turn is deeply rooted in the country's literary tradition, with particular intensity in the periods that informed the poet's cultural background. That way, to Brodsky, Ukraine would be a mere continuation of the "Russian space" (Bertelsen, 2015).

The sentiments of aversion and the hostility conveyed in the verses of "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" [On the Independence of Ukraine] have precedents in Russian poetry, Pushkin's "Klevetnikam Rossii" [To the Slanderers of Russia] (1831)[29] being a prime example of that. This poem was written in response to the Western support of Polish insurgents during the November Uprising. Besides threatening powerful military retaliation, the lyrical subject diminishes the significance of the movement by claiming it is nothing, but a family quarrel the West would not be able to understand. There is also an allusion to Russia's supposed superiority before the other Slavic nations, the latter being compared to streams which will inevitably meet in a Russian ocean.

Although Loseff (2011) recognizes the political connotations of "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" [On the Independence of Ukraine] and argues that Brodsky's awareness in that sense motivated his choice not to publish it, the Russian critic defends

[29] PUSHKIN, Aleksandr. *To the Slanderers of Russia*. Translated by Thomas Budd Shaw. Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry Project, pp. 150-151, jun. 2023. Available at https://dvpp.uvic.ca/blackwoods/1845/pom_11026_to_the_slanderers_of_russia.html. Accessed on 27 November 2023.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

a stance similar to the poet's: his work must not be read as ideology, but as lyrical prose in a series of impressions Brodsky never closes in a conceptual system.

Nevertheless, the critical analysis of the imagery, references, and themes present in his poetry is an important means to the understanding of the persisting Russian imperial mentality. Poetic writing is not merely the act of sculpting with words; the poet himself is shaped by his time, by the social role he plays and by his cultural background.

In Brodsky's example, his nostalgic and imponent representation of Empire was influenced both by his non-conformism to Soviet political impositions and his own Eurocentric outlook on "authentic culture." The role played by the Russian literary tradition on his world view must not be underestimated; as we have seen, even when Russian poets opposed the government, their criticism of the colonial and expansionist enterprises was timid, when present. Emancipation and contestation movements are seen as threats to the "Russian space," and the oppression faced by the colonized peoples is hardly ever regarded.

To interpret such works of literature as transcendental constructs conceived by "geniuses," completely divorced from their sociohistorical context, means to perpetuate such pernicious narratives. Promoting a critical reading of those authors, however, does not devalue their legacy; it only lends deeper nuance to our understanding of the times and societies in which they lived.

REFERENCES

AMÉRICO, Edélcio Rodiney. *Texto de São Petersburgo na literatura russa*. 2006. 148 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literatura e Cultura Russa) - Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2006. Disponível em https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8155/tde-14122022-170120/publico/2006_EdelcioRodineyAmerico.pdf. Acesso em 11 ago. 2023.

ASHCROFT, Bill; GRIFFITHS, Gareth; TIFFIN, Helen. Introduction. *In*: ASHCROFT, Bill; GRIFFITHS, Gareth; TIFFIN, Helen. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Nova Iorque: Routledge, 2003. pp. 7-11.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *A cultura popular na Idade Média e no Renascimento:* o contexto de François Rabelais. Tradução Yara Frateschi Vieira. 3. ed. Brasília: Hucitec, 1996.

BAKHTIN, Mikhail. O discurso na poesia e o discurso no romance. *In*: BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Questões de literatura e de estética:* a Teoria do Romance. Tradução Aurora Fornoni Bernardini, Augusto Góes Júnior, Helena Spryndis Nazário, Homero Freitas de Andrade e José Pereira Júnior. 5. ed. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2002, p. 85-106.

BATUMAN, Elif. Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War [Relendo os clássicos russos à sombra da guerra na Ucrânia]. *The New Yorker*, Nova

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Iorque, n. 30, 23 jan. 2023. Disponível em https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/rereading-russian-classics-in-the-shadow-of-the-ukraine-war. Acesso em 11 ago. 2023.

BERMAN, Marshall. *Tudo o que é sólido se desmancha no ar*: a aventura da Modernidade. Tradução Carlos Felipe Moisés; Ana Maria L. Ioriatti. 2. ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1986.

BERTELSEN, Olga. Joseph Brodsky's Imperial Consciousness. *Scripta Historica*, Slupsk, v. 21, pp. 263–289, 2015. Disponível em https://www.academia.edu/26054913/Joseph_Brodsky_s_Imperial_Consciousness. Acesso em 20 mai. 2023.

BRODSKY, Joseph. "Post aetatem nostram" [Após a nossa era]. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*. Vol. 2. São Petersburgo: Puchkinskii fond, 2001. p. 397-405.

BRODSKY, Joseph. "Tors" [Torso]. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*. Vol. 3. São Petersburgo: Puchkinskii fond, 2001. p. 36.

BRODSKY, Joseph. "Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy" [Sobre a independência da Ucrânia]. 1992. Disponível em https://www.culture.ru/poems/30468/na-nezavisimost'-ukrainy. Acesso em 10 ago. 2023.

BRODSKY, Joseph. After a Journey, or Homage to Vertebrae [Depois de uma jornada, ou homenagem às vértebras]. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. Tradução Alexander Sumerkin e Joseph Brodsky. 1. ed. Nova Iorque: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1995. p. 61–80.

BRODSKY, Joseph. "Konets prekrasnoi epokhi" [O fim de uma bela era]. *In*: BRODSKY, Joseph. *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*. Vol. 2. São Petersburgo: Puchkinskii fond, 2001. p. 311.

BUCKLER, Julie. *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape*. 2. ed. Nova Jersey: Princeton Press, 2007.

DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Diário de um escritor*. Tradução de Daniela Mountian. 1. ed. São Paulo: Hedra, 2016.

DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *O duplo*. Tradução de Paulo Bezerra. 1. Ed. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2013.

FRATE, Rafael. O início da História: os pioneiros da literatura russa moderna. *Estado da arte*, São Paulo, 17 out. 2019. Disponível em https://estadodaarte.estadao.com.br/o-inicio-da-historia-os-pioneiros-da-literatura-russa-moderna/. Acesso em 11 ago. 2023.

GÓGOL, Nikolai. *Avenida Nievski*. Tradução de Rubens Figueiredo. 1. ed. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2012.

KLINE, George. Variations on the Theme of Exile. *In*: LOSEFF, Lev. POLUKHINA, Valentina. *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*. 1. ed. Nova Iorque: Macmillan Press, 1990. pp. 56–83.

KOPLATADZE, Tamar. Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies. *Postcolonial Studies*, Melbourne, v. 22, pp. 469–489, 2019. Disponível em

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13688790.2019.1690762. Acesso em 17 jun. 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2019.1690762.

KOSTINCOVÁ, Jana. Word - Shape - Substance: Time and Human Form in Joseph Brodsky's Poetry. *Problémy poetiky*, v. 1, pp. 99–102, 2006. Disponível em https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/_flysystem/fedora/pdf/132670.pdf. Acesso em 17 jun. 2023.

LAYTON, Susan. *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. 2. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

LIÉRMONTOV, Mikhail. "Izmail-Bey" [Ismail Bei]. *In*: LIÉRMONTOV, Mikhail. *Sotchineniia v dvukh tomakh*. Vol. 1. Moscou: Pravda, 1988. Disponível em https://feb-web.ru/feb/lermont/texts/lerm04/vol02/l42-134-.htm. Acesso em 10 jun. 2023.

LIÉRMONTOV, Mikhail. "Mtsyri" [O noviço]. *In*: LIÉRMONTOV, Mikhail. *Sotchineniia v dvukh tomakh*. Vol. 1. Moscou: Pravda, 1988. Disponível em https://ilibrary.ru/text/991/p.1/index.html. Acesso em 14 jun. 2023.

LIÉRMONTOV, Mikhail. "Um sonho". Tradução de Boris Schnaiderman e Nelson Ascher. *Folha de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, 19 jun. 2016. Disponível em https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2016/06/1782773-leia-cinco-poemas-russos-de-liermontov.shtml. Acesso em 10 jun. 2023

LOMONÓSSOV, Mikhail. "Oda na den' vosshestviia na Vserossiiskii prestol Eio Velitchestva Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Elisavety Petrovny 1747 goda" [Ode ao dia da coroação da Tsarevna Elizaveta Petrovna no ano de 1747]. *In*: *Russkie poety. Antologiia russkoi poezii v 6 tomakh*. 1. ed. Moscou: Detskaia literatura, 1996. Disponível em https://web.archive.org/web/20111216045615/http://litera.ru/stixiya/authors/lomonosov/nauki-yunoshej-pitayut.html. Acesso em 8 jun. 2023.

LOOMBA, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 2. ed. Nova Iorque: Routledge, 1998.

LOSEFF, Lev. *Joseph Brodsky: a Literary Life*. Tradução Jane Ann Miller. 1. ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

NIVAT, Georges. The Ironic Journey into Antiquity. *In*: LOSEFF, Lev. POLUKHINA, Valentina. *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*. 1. ed. Nova Iorque: Macmillan Press, 1990, pp. 89–97.

PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. "Kavkazskii Plennik" [O prisioneiro do Cáucaso]. *In*: PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. *Sobranie sotchnenii v desiatikh tomakh*. Vol. 3. Moscou: Khudojestvennaia literatura, 1959-1962. Disponível em https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/02poems/01poems/0785.htm. Acesso em 15 ago. 2023.

PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. "Klevetnikam Rossii" [Aos caluniadores da Rússia], 1831. In: PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. *Sobranie sotchnenii v desiatikh tomakh*. Vol. 2. Moscou: Khudojestvennaia literatura, 1948. Disponível em https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/01versus/0423_36/1831/0564.htm. Acesso em 15 ago. 2023.

PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. "O cavaleiro de bronze: conto de Petersburgo". *In*: PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. *O cavaleiro de bronze e outros poemas*. Tradução: Filipe Guerra; Nina Guerra. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 1999. p. 32–73.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. “Poltava”. *In*: PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. *Sobranie sotchnenii v chestnadsati tomakh*. Vol. 3. Moscou: Khudojestvennaia literatura, 1948. Disponível em https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/02poems/01poems/0791.htm. Acesso em 13 jun. 2023.

PÚCHKIN, Aleksandr. “Viagem a Arzrum”. *In*: GOMIDE, Bruno Barretto (org.). *Nova antologia do conto russo (1792-1998)*. Tradução: Cecília Rosas. 1. ed. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2016. p. 36–80.

RAM, Harsha. *The Imperial Sublime*: A Russian Poetics of Empire. 1. ed. Madison: The University of Winsconsin Press, 2003.

RICH, Elisabeth. Joseph Brodsky *in Memorian*: The Russian Perspective. *South Central Review*, Baltimore, v. 14, n. 1, p. 10–31, 1997. Disponível em https://www.jstor.org/stable/3189752. Acesso em 20 mai. 2023. DOI: 10.2307/3189752.

SADAN, Rafi Tsirkin. Genre and Politics: The Concept of Empire in Joseph Brodsky’s Work. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Baltimore, v. 19, n. 1, pp. 119–143, jan. 2021. Disponível em https://muse.jhu.edu/article/779887. Acesso em 30 abr. 2023. DOI: 10.1353/pan.2021.0006.

SAID, Edward. *O orientalismo*. Tradução Tomás Rosa Bueno. 2. ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

SAID, Edward. *Cultura e imperialismo*. Tradução Denise Bottmann. São Paulo: Companhia de Bolso, 2011.

SHKANDRIJ, Myroslav. *Russia and Ukraine*: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times. 1. ed. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 2001.

TUROMA, Sanna. *Brodsky Abroad*: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia. 1. ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.

VOLÓCHINOV, Valentin. (Círculo de Bakhtin). *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem*: problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem. Tradução Ekaterina Vólkova Américo e Sheila Grillo. 2. ed. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2018.

Translated by the article’s author.

Received August 16, 2023

Accepted February 08, 2024

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana.* Revista de Estudos do Discurso [*Bakhtiniana.* Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

All content of *Bakhtiniana.* Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

Review I

The text is perfectly adequate to the proposed theme and develops its theoretical assumptions with coherence. The article brings an interesting and rare contribution to the field of Russian Studies in Brazil, with its reflections on authors and works from different eras regarding the notion of "Empire." The writing is clear and in line with the language of a scientific work. APPROVED

Sônia Branco Soares - Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2168-8767; sbranco@letras.ufrj.br

Reviewed on October 29, 2023.

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0