

**The I as the Eye: on the Poetics of Ruins in I. Brodsky's essay  
"Homage to Marcus Aurelius"**

The philosophy of the state, its ethics – not to mention its aesthetics – are always “yesterday.” Language and literature are always “tomorrow”, and often – particularly in the case where a political system is orthodox – they may even constitute “tomorrow” [Brodsky 1987a: 201].

When history piles wreckage upon wreckage, ruins evoke not only the buildings from which they hail but also a transhistorical iconography of decay and catastrophe, a vast visual archive of ruination [Hell, Schönle 2010: 1].

**1**

One of the most influential scholars of ruins in culture and literature, Andreas Schönle, maintains that ruins complicate any given clear-cut definition of boundaries because ruins either blur boundaries, either emphasize them: “both spatially as crumbling structures colonize their immediate surroundings, and temporally, as they articulate the overlaying of temporalities” [Schönle 2006: 653; see also Hell, Schönle 2010: 8]. Ruins blur boundaries between nature and civilization, between past and present, between the East and the West. One notable literary example is Karamzin's novel “Poor Lisa”, which sets its narration at the ruins of Simonov monastery. As Andreas Schönle further elaborates, the novel could be read as a clash of the old and the new: Lisa represents “old Russia,” Erast – the westernized Russia [Schönle 2006: 656-657]. Because of her tragic destiny, Lisa is sometimes interpreted as “a symbol of the victimization of an authentic Russia” [ibid.]. The analysis of ruins in Karamzin's “Poor Lisa” laid the foundations for Schön-

le's broader cultural analysis of the East-West binary: "'Poor Liza' clearly sets the terms of a debate about ruins somewhat differently than in Western Europe. It suggests that Russia's complex identity as a country sandwiched between the East and the West and as a territory and culture exposed to foreign incursions complicates the aesthetization of ruins. <...> Less than a Simmelian reconciliation between nature and civilization, they evoke the vulnerabilities of Russian national identity and dramatize the ruination it endured over its history" [ibid.: 656]. Although the political implications of his hypothesis are not irrefutable, it is important that, in the process of art's creation, ruins can indeed release specific energy and creativity [Enderson, in ibid.: 653], as in Karamzin's story:

There, leaning against the rubble of gravestones, I hear the dead moaning of times devoured in the abyss of the past—moaning from which my heart shrinks and trembles. <...> All this refreshes in my memory the history of the Fatherland – the sad history of those times when the rapacious Tatars and Lithuanians plundered with fire and sword the environs of the Russian capital, when hapless Moscow, like a defenseless widow, looked to God alone for aid in her bitter misfortunes. But most often I am attracted to the walls of the Si... nov Monastery by the memory of the deplorable fate of Liza, poor Liza. Ah! *I love those objects that touch my heart and force me to shed tears of tender grief!* [Karamzin 1967: 79–80, emphasis mine, D. L. V.].

The work of Iosif Brodsky is more than relevant in the context of the analytical axes presented in this paper: firstly, he was "crossing borders" thorough his life and in different aspects (geographical, cultural, political). But, secondly and more importantly, as David M. Bethea maintains, Brodsky's aesthetic vision is "triangular," as he "constantly looks *both ways*, both to the West and to Russia, and as he continues Mandelstam's dialogue with Hellenicism. His vision can be called triangular in that a Russian source, say Mandelstam, is subtly implanted within a Western source, say Dante, so that each source comments on the other, but as they do so they also im-

plicate a third source – Brodsky himself“ [Bethea 1994: 49, emphasis in original]. That “triangular” vision is, as Bethea argues, a kind of Brodsky’s signature [ibid.]. However, one border in Brodsky’s poetic and prose imagery seems largely impenetrable – that of time, which is especially intriguing if we consider that his approach to time determines his worldview: “All my poems are more or less about the same thing – about Time. About what time does to Man” [Brodsky 1987b]. He viewed life as a “one-way street,” and the overriding melancholy in his poetry and prose writings, expressed through dense metaphors that sometimes leave the impression of superfluous decor, is to a large extent connected to the impossibility to conceive such a return. As he writes in his largely programmatic essay “Less Than One” (1976), “as failures go, attempting to recall the past is like trying to grasp the meaning of existence. Both makes one feel like a baby clutching at a basketball: one’s palms keep sliding off” [Brodsky 1986: 3]. Moreover, in his poetic vision, “visual aspects of life” often mattered more than its content [ibid.: 22]. In this essay, his admiration for Samuel Beckett recalls a similar description in Marina Tsvetaeva’s “My Pushkin”: Tsvetaeva’s understanding of Pushkin was built upon Naumov’s famous painting of a duel between Pushkin and d’Anthes, which she had seen as a child, and before she was able to read any of his writings. Brodsky’s similar heuristic pattern is expressed in claims such as “I fell in love with a photograph of Samuel Beckett long before I’d read a line of his” [ibid.]. Moreover, not only does the process of writing rests upon the process of viewing, but the viewing itself becomes, like reading, “an act of complicity” [Brodsky 1995: 275], as he writes in essay “Homage to Marcus Aurelius.” To that end, ruins, indeed, as ultimate visual reminders of ambivalence of time, of its irreversible and transhistorical nature, occupy an important position in his writings as they are “the triumph of oxygen and time” [Brodsky 1987b].

In “Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life”, Lev Loseff writes that Leningrad’s “neoclassical trappings of empire did more than inspire a basic sense of patriotism” [Loseff 2011: 12]. Moreover, Loseff

contends, they played a crucial role in Brodsky's aesthetic development by teaching him that he lived "*post aetatem nostrum* (after our era)" [ibid.: 14], which in the end created an overarching "post-catastrophic" sensibility [Венцлова 2005: 113] of his writings. Furthermore, it could be claimed that ruins serve as an imaginary *genius loci* for his artistic creativity.<sup>177</sup> As an "extremely 'charged' motif" [Ungurianu 1996: 176], ruins are sometimes understood as the central element in Brodsky's poetic geography and its complex intertextuality [Blacker 2018].

The main aim of this paper is to offer a possible interpretation of the meanings attached to ruins as image and metaphor in Brodsky's essay writings, or, to be more precise, in "Homage to Marcus Aurelius" (1994), one of his essays that set their narrative world in the ruined world that surrounds the narrator, elicits an ambivalent sense of time, and provokes complex thoughts of history as an eternal cycle and dialectic process. Departing from the premises that ruins emancipate us from social constraints, free the senses and desires, enable introspection and foster creativity, I will expand the well-established (though not indisputable) thesis according to which Brodsky's writings are structured on the image of time as irretrievability and ir-reclaimability, which, in his writings, reverberates and re-creates an experience of continuous failures to discipline the memory, thus making any return impossible. Moreover, my aim is to show that the approach to Brodsky's essays from the perspective of the analysis of ruins can offer us much more: for example, it can offer valuable insights into his understanding of the agency of the authorial modernist voice in literature. Where, in a work of art, is the writer's voice located? What does it mean to see and to write, and what does it mean to read? What role, in this process, is assigned to tradition, "eternal values" and cultural heritage? The overarching hypothesis of this paper is that ruins in Brodsky's essay writing at the same time

<sup>177</sup> Different scholars argue that Leningrad's post-war ruins inspired Brodsky's fondness for the elegy [Schönle 2011; see also Rigsbee 1999]. Ruins are, as David Rigsbee maintains, "both image and metaphor through which themes of time, memory, loss and exile are explored" [Rigsbee 1999: 108].

mediate his relation to writing activity and allow him to explore his approach towards modernity – an approach that can be largely summed up by following Calinescu's statement: "True modernism is not *historically* but only *aesthetically* forward" [Calinescu 1987: 83, emphasis in original].

## 2

The essay "Homage to Marcus Aurelius" begins by intriguing and thought-provoking sentences: "*While antiquity exists for us, we, for antiquity, do not. We never did, and we never will. This rather peculiar state of affairs makes our take on antiquity somewhat invalid. Chronologically and, I am afraid, genetically speaking, the distance between us is too immense to imply any causality: we look at antiquity as if out of nowhere*" [Brodsky 1995: 267, emphasis mine]. After the first three chapters, which are rather philosophical and general (on the ambivalent nature of time, aesthetics, and the ethics of literature), the plot begins with a scene, supposedly in 1981, describing Brodsky's one of the most vivid encounters with Rome after he emigrated. The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, which the narrator sees through the window of a taxi, inspires the writer's creative energy, proving that for Brodsky, there is no clear-cut division between acts of seeing and remembering: one often "enters" into the other, and vice-versa. The essay also describes another encounter with the monument, presumably in the year when the essay was written (or close to that year). Shortly before returning to the United States, after "one of the most disastrous evenings in my entire life" [ibid.: 292], he and a stray Dalmatian, standing on the square during heavy rain, stare at Marcus Aurelius's statue. For a moment, the narrator transforms into Pushkin's unfortunate character Evgeniy from *Bronze Horseman* as he sees that "the shining statue <...> seemed to be moving": "Not at great speed, and not out of this place, but enough for the Dalmatian to leave my side and follow the bronze progress" [ibid.: 293].

These examples show that, firstly, Brodsky puts on the mask (as in his poetry and other writings) of a guardian of eternal values in the ruined world: “Mostly left to decay slowly while it conserved a modicum of humanist culture, Leningrad in the Soviet years became a single extended ruin, which underpinned the identity, poetic voice, and historiographic musings of Joseph Brodsky“ (Hell, Schönle 2010: 3). Secondly, he confronts his personal biography of a poet in emigration with universal parameters – cultural, historical, and philosophical (see also Čilić’s analysis of Herbert’s poetry in: Čilić, 2020). This dichotomy, i.e. the double affiliation to both homelands – cosmopolitan, universal, transhistorical, and concrete, national (Russian / Soviet), historical, will find its full and analytically intriguing expression in the scene describing his Roman encounter with the monument of Marcus Aurelius, which fosters his childhood memories: “‘Marco Aurelio’, I repeated to myself, and felt as if two thousand years were collapsing, dissolving in my mouth thanks to the Italian’s familiar form of this Emperor’s name. <...> The Roman! Emperor! Marcus! Aurelius! This is how I knew him in high school, where the majordomo was our own stumpy Sarah Isaakovna, a very Jewish and very resigned lady in her fifties, who taught us history. Yet for all her resignation, when it came to uttering the names of Roman emperors, she’d straighten up, assuming an attitude of grandeur, and practically shout, well above our heads, into the peeling-off stucco of the classroom well adorned with its portrait of Stalin: Caius Julius Caesar! Caesar Octavian Augustus! Caesar Tiberius! Caesar Vespasianus Flavius! The Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius! And then – Marcus Aurelius!” [ibid.: 270–271]. In this narrative sequence, the monument to Marcus Aurelius “unfolds” itself and melds in dense linguistic echo: the monument becomes an intense sound metaphor, the ultimate allegory of power (Stalin and Caesar), which confirms one of the seemingly obvious assumptions, namely, that all languages are figurative before they are mimetic or literal. With this process of the “unfolding” of a visual motif in a rich audible allegory of (imperial) power, Brodsky demonstrates

that, even in his essays, he is primarily a poet, and therefore aims to turn his readers' attention to the rhetorical origins of his voice and to encourage their critical reception of linguistic representations of any kind and the knowledge they produce and mediate. In other words, he reminds us that, if the words have the ability to claim what they did not attempt to claim in a first place, the so-called authentic authorial voice, and the so-called authentic, objective reality, are not only untrustworthy, but also decidedly unattainable. Despite its autobiographical mask, Brodsky's essay does not seek to imitate "the nature of things," but, rather, it strives to re-create, establish and facilitate new, albeit largely inaccessible realities and meanings.

One of the meanings that are being inaugurated and mediated by unfolding the visual motif into an audible allegory of power is associated with Brodsky's poetics of memory and accompanying themes of the nature of an event, aporia of historical knowledge and, in that framework, of an individual as an authentic and trustworthy witness of historical events. His thoughts about the unreliability of the modernist view of history are shaped by the narrator's asking himself of what an ancient Roman would see, were he to wake up in our times: "Finding himself in our midst, he at best would have a sensation similar to that of a moon landing, i.e., not knowing what is before him: the future, or the distant past? *A landscape or a ruin? These things, after all, have great similarity*" [ibid.: 267, emphasis mine]. Two conclusions could be drawn from the quoted sentences. Firstly, what one sees is always a byproduct of what one is able to recognize because the history is a construction built around social frameworks (Halbwachs claims that "No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections," Halbwachs 1992: 43), but also that the way the narrator remembers is essentially governed by the position he occupies at the moment of writing. Or, in the narrator's own words, "Antiquity is above all a visual concept, generated by objects whose age escapes definition" [ibid.: 282]. Secondly, the time from which he writes is recognizably the Derridian time "out of joint"

(in the previous example, the narrator writes that “we look at antiquity as if *out of nowhere*,” *ibid.*: 267, emphasis mine). This is important to emphasize because it provides access to a more profound understanding of the authorial voice in the essay: it manifests itself through the figures of speech, or even through the monument to Marcus Aurelius respectively. The monument to Marcus Aurelius, transmuted into an allegory of power, allows the author to withdraw, clearing out the space for the inauguration of the textual “I” that will guide the development of the text and whose task is to domesticate (false, distorted) images of reality that the empirical “I” has once, as a child, adapted: “I suppose, history is best taught in childhood. At the age of twelve, one may not grasp the intrigue, but a strange sound suggests an alternative reality. ‘Marcus Aurelius’ certainly did to me, and that reality proved to be quite vast: larger, in fact, than that Emperor’s own. Now apparently came time to domesticate that reality, which is why, I suppose, I was in Rome” [*ibid.*: 271]. The verb “to domesticate” means “to adopt,” “to adapt over time from a wild of natural state,” but it also indicates several appropriations: “to make fit for domestic life,” or “to bring to the level of ordinary people” [“Domesticate”]. Unlike Tsvetaeva, who in aforementioned essay “My Pushkin”, for various reasons insisted on her childhood / barbaric vision of Pushkin [see, for example, Бенчич 2002], Brodsky, surmounted by the personal, historical, and collective transhistorical post-war experience of decay and the surrounding iconography of ruination, writes about the values devoid of any moral content and the instability of truths on which the world was built in the first place.

On the other hand, the writer’s return to the sources of culture is not mere uncritical observing.<sup>178</sup> Moreover, this process is

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<sup>178</sup> In her recently published monograph “Three Faces of the Author. Różewicz, Miłosz and Herbert”, Croatian scholar Đurđica Čilić recognizes similar pattern in Zbigniew Herbert’s understanding of cultural heritage, and in Miłosz’s construction of the poetic authorial voice [Čilić 2020]. These parallels are not surprising: different scholars referred to Brodsky’s connection with writers such as Miłosz and Herbert as “a rich one and in need of further investigation” [Bethea 1994: 268].



not only accompanied by the realization that the past is unknowable because the subject is scattered (writing is the space of re-establishing identity, and in Brodsky's essay, his empirical "I" is reenacted into a fully-functional, textual "I," i.e. the narrator), but also by the overarching skepticism and the understanding that tradition and cultural heritage cannot be directly transported and implemented in the present moment, that is, that the voices that speak from that source are not prescriptive [Čilić 2020]. Historical figures such as Marcus Aurelius and Caesar, to whom Brodsky refers in his essay, have undergone significant transformation in this essay's new, apocryphal version. Recreated, these symbolic figures do not appear in their fullness, but only in one dimension which, precisely because it is singled out and highlighted, illuminates a certain idea within new circumstances. In the essay, Marcus Aurelius is represented as a monument, and as the author of *Meditations*, while Caesar is just one in the "rows and rows of marble portraits of <...> emperors, dictators, *augusti*" [ibid.: 274], the one that is barely imaginable without a bust, the one that would be, in our times, "the most 'photographed' person" [ibid.]. The illuminating voice of tradition is not necessarily the one that is good, sometimes it is just the opposite [Čilić 2020]. What makes the essay "Homage to Marcus Aurelius" unique in the context of Brodsky's essayistic writings in general, is that critically listening to the messages of the tradition, the narrator, despite "moving" historical figures into the new surroundings, analyzes them as an acute and profound observer in their natural environment, i.e. Rome.<sup>179</sup> Therefore, when he speaks about coming to Rome to domesticate the reality he first heard about in a Soviet school, the narrative voice, in fact, confirms itself as a genuine modernist voice because it encourages us to understand it as the one who is "as torn between his urge to cut himself off from the past – to become completely 'modern' – and his dream to found a new *tradition*,

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<sup>179</sup> This natural environment is, as Hell and Schönle emphasize, "one of the most enduring topoi of the ruin archive, the theme of the rise and decline of empires" [Hell, Schönle 2010: 2].

recognizable as such by the future” [Calinescu 1987: 66, emphasis in the original].

In that context, it is worth asking why this monument (and not any other) attracted the writer’s attention in the first place. On one hand, apart from initiating childhood memories, Marcus Aurelius, as one of the most prominent ancient Stoics who did not repudiate public service because of his Stoic belief in the obligation to serve, endeavored to harmonize the role of a leader with his fondness for art and culture. As we know, for a true stoic, the inner voice of conscience is the only rule to faithfully follow. Such a philosophical conception of the inner voice as the voice of conscience is close to Brodsky’s philosophical views, and Marcus Aurelius in the essay can therefore be read as the only shield against barbarism. After all, Marcus Aurelius depicted the Rome of his time as a worn-out and exhausted space. His “Meditations” shaped Brodsky’s understanding that the Roman version of Stoicism “shouldn’t be characterized as love of knowledge. It was, rather, a lifelong experiment in endurance, and a man was his own guinea pig (a person or thing used as a subject for experiment)” [Brodsky 1995: 283]. All these ideas closely resonate with Brodsky’s worldview. On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that around the time of Brodsky’s first encounter with the monument, it was moved to the Capitoline Museum for conservation reasons (to my knowledge, it has been located in the museum ever since) – therefore, the monument Brodsky laid his eyes upon was either a dilapidated construction, or the statue’s high-tech copy, replication of a displaced monument. In other words, the monument here functions beyond its traditional function “to gather what <...> should be pervasive memory into a single spot” [Young 1999]. When Brodsky was looking at the monument, it was rather a counter-monument, the one that captures *the process* rather than endurance and which facilitates reflection on the briefness of material culture and human life. To that end, the fact that the monument to Marcus Aurelius, dispersed into a dense allegory of imperial power (Marcus Aurelius – Stalin – Caesar), shows not only that the his-

tory is a "murderous dialectic process" [Hell, Schönle 2010: 1] but also that, as Walter Benjamin emphasizes, the ruin and the allegory share striking similarity because the ruin in the realm of things can be understood as the allegory in the realm of thought, "for both ruin and allegory speak of a disruption in the relationship between form and meaning" [Benjamin, in *ibid.*: 7].

Moreover, the narrator writes later in the essay: "The most definite feature of antiquity is our absence. The more available its debris and the longer you stare at it, the more you are denied entry. <...> Reaching us intact or in fragments, these things strike us, of course, with their durability and tempt us to assemble them, fragments especially, into a coherent whole, but they were not meant to reach us. *They were, and still are, for themselves*" [Brodsky 1995: 272, emphasis mine]. Quoted sentences resonate with the beginning of the essay: "*While antiquity exists for us, we, for antiquity, do not. We never did, and we never will. <...> we look at antiquity as if out of nowhere*" [*ibid.*: 267, emphasis mine]. The most obvious explanation of these sentences is that Brodsky at this point debates with one of the main premises of modern thought, namely with the idea of modernity as a product of a certain historical development [Hunt 2008: 77]. To put it more concretely, Brodsky questions the perception of modernity not only as decidedly distinct in its *historical* superiority over all other times, but also in its attempts to aestheticize that seemingly superior status. If the main characteristic of antiquity is not its "firstness," as Brodsky claims elsewhere in the essay, but, rather, our absence in it, what does, in fact, our obsession with antiquity stand for, and what does it symbolize? If antiquity and ruins (or, to be more precise, antiquity in ruins) in Brodsky's essay are born resisting the very premises of their birth (they are not resilient, and above time, but, rather, they are, as Elizabeth Blackmar writes, they are "the sheer pictorial allure of vulnerable buildings set against an aggressive or indifferent present," Blackmar 2001: 324), and if reconfiguring the past is one of the premises modernity is largely based on, then Brodsky's essay exposes modernity's im-

tence to do precisely all that. The metaphor of a ruined monument to Marcus Aurelius abolishes the opposition between civilization and barbarians and shows that the truth does not always come under the guise of the aesthetic – it is sometimes envisaged only by its removal: “Each new ruination claims to offer a privileged conduit into reality. Does this betray a sense that in our digitized world, reality can be apprehended only as destruction?” [Hell, Schönle 2010: 4]. Daniel Herwitz’s words, according to which “Nothing is more monumental in the landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than ruins” [Herwitz 2010: 232], resonate with the following words from Brodsky’s essay: “Perhaps given the material’s aspiration for permanence, the best subject for a monument is indeed destruction” [Brodsky 1995: 279].

How does all of the above-mentioned complement Brodsky’s multifaceted philosophy of time? We should look for the answer in another one of Brodsky’s essays, structured around classical tradition and around the world of the so-called classical/eternal values, his “Letter to Horace.” In this essay, the narrator claims: “when one writes verse, one’s most immediate audience is not one’s own contemporaries, let alone posterity, but one’s predecessors” [Brodsky 1995: 439]. In his highly complex and perplexed meditations over the nature of time and our obsession with firstness (who was the first to discover America; who was the first to set foot on the Moon; who fired the first bullet), Brodsky, in fact, disputes modernity’s imperative to encourage the politicization of time by fostering an idea that the control over time is in anyone’s hands: “maybe we are just better at counting than at thinking, or else we mistake the former for the latter? Why is it that we are always so interested in knowing when truth was uttered for the first time? Isn’t this sort of archaeology in itself an indication that we are living a lie? In any case, *if Meditations is antiquity, it is we who are the ruins*” [ibid.: 293–294, emphasis mine]. The final quoted sentence can be understood as a political statement which declares that the 1990s, when Brodsky’s essay was in the making, are not a postmodern, but rather a pre-modern (or mid-

dle age) condition. The 1990s, after all, were the decay of what was the twentieth century's commanding vision of the future. But I think it is also important to notice Brodsky's insistence on the importance of gaze, of a perspective, in almost all of the aforementioned examples ("I first saw this bronze horseman...", "the longer you stare at [the antiquity]", "Antiquity is above all a visual concept", *ibid.*: 285, etc.). In fact, as Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle argue, "the beholder defines the ruin" [Hell, Schönle 2010: 7] in "a playground of speculative strategies" [*ibid.*] and, as such, the beheld risks saying "more about the beholder than about the ruin or its individual environment" [*ibid.*], which often creates new ruins.<sup>180</sup> To that end, the ruins can also be read as the epitome of modernist subjectivities, scattered and split, tragically anchored in the space between the past and the future. Similarly to the ruin, which "seems to have lost its function or meaning in the present, while retaining a suggestive, unstable semantic potential" [Hell, Schönle 2010: 6], the empirical "I" of the modernist identity can be reconstructed only in the textual "I," which is, as mentioned earlier, always figural and never literal, and therefore its rhetorical feature requests a critical reception.<sup>181</sup>

For this analysis, it is important to emphasize that Brodsky's usage of the Roman Empire is to a large amount related to a different positioning of the writer in emigration. To illustrate this, I will turn to an example from "Roman Elegies" (1981), where, according to Sanna Turoma, this new orientation was introduced: "To a home-

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<sup>180</sup> In his book "Writing Postcommunism. Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins", David Williams writes that ruins "are the ultimate exercise in polysemy – signifier and signified often float free" [Williams 2013: 2]. The fall of the Wall, which for the majority represented "the end of the Cold War," "the end of ideologies," "the end of history" etc., tragically and traumatically "crumbled down" upon the heads of the people in besieged Sarajevo and the region [*ibid.*: 9].

<sup>181</sup> As Hell and Schönle write, "In its ambivalence and amorphousness, the ruin functions as a uniquely flexible and productive trope for modernity's self-awareness. Indeed, it is one of the master tropes of modern reflexivity, precisely because it encapsulates vacuity and loss as underlying constituents of the modern identity. It is the reflexivity of a culture that interrogates its own becoming" [Hell, Schönle 2010: 6–7].

less torso and its idle, grabby / mitts, there's nothing as dear as the sight of ruins. / And they, in their turn, see themselves in the broken Jewish / r no less gladly" [Turoma 2010: 65]. Now, unlike before emigration, his lyrical 'I' desires to situate himself "at the center of the imperial space and history of classical Rome" [ibid.: 64], indicating that the marginalized poet, with a broken Jewish r, finds his impossible home by looking at Roman ruins. Moreover, in the above-mentioned essay "Homage to Marcus Aurelius," the question of what Mieke Bal in "The Laughing Mice" assigns to as "narrative embedding," is paramount. Just to shortly recall, Mieke Bal explains her theory of narrativity with the analysis of the seventh-century *Arjuna's Penance*: "The elements of this sign, the standing Arjuna, the standing cat, the laughing mice, only have spatial relations to one another. The elements of the fabula – Arjuna assumes a yoga position, the cat assumes a yoga position, the mice laugh – do not form a coherent significance as such. The relation between the sign [the relief] and its content [the *fabula*] can only be established by meditation of an interjacent layer, the view of the events. The cat sees Arjuna. The mice see the cat. The spectator sees the mice who see the cat who has seen Arjuna. And the spectator sees that the mice are right" [Bal 1981: 203]. The narrative trigger in Brodsky's essay was the narrator's gaze at the statue of Marcus Aurelius through the windshield of the taxi, and, later, during his last encounter with Rome, when he and middle-sized Dalmatian "For a while <...> both stared at the horseman's statue" [Brodsky 1995: 292]. To that end, the meaning of the claim according to which "for antiquity, we do not exist" becomes clearer, hence antiquity equals the "standing Arjuna," who – despite attracting attention – cannot see anything on his own, and therefore cannot offer an answer or a solution because he himself is – in fact – pure effect of rhetorical stance.

In "Homage to Marcus Aurelius," Brodsky writes directly of the importance of the gaze, of a perspective, and even reclaims awareness that the relation between embedding and embedded el-

ements is hierarchical.<sup>182</sup> For example, "Nothing exists for the future's sake; and the ancients couldn't in nature regard themselves as the ancients. Nor should we bill ourselves as their tomorrow" [ibid.: 272]. Or, "As absorbing as Roman antiquity appears to be, perhaps we should be a bit more careful with our retrospective proclivity. What is man-made chronology but a self-fulfilling fallacy, a means of obscuring the backwardness of one's own intelligence? What is it's just a way of justifying the snail's pace of the species' evolution? <...> What if our concept of antiquity, for example, is but the switching off of an alarm clock?" [ibid.: 293]. As the narrator continues to look at Marcus Aurelius, the mirroring of Leningrad's Bronze Horseman (i.e., Peter the Great), and Rome's Bronze Horseman (i.e. Marcus Aurelius) becomes a mergence; time and material, antiquity and ruin become one, and it becomes clear that time is not structured as a nonreplicable progression, but, instead, as a repository of repeatable events, material objects, and subjectivities: "So in the end you are bound to recognize yourself in one of them. For there is no Caesar without a bust, as there is no swan without a reflection. Clean-shaven, bearded, bald, or well coiffed, they all return a vacant, pupil-free, marble stare, pretty much like that of a passport photo or the mug shot of a criminal" [ibid.: 273–274].

### 3

Ruins in Brodsky's essay verbalize and materialize the deeply complex dichotomy of Brodsky's empirical and textual "I", which is especially challenging due to the multi-perspectivity of his personal gaze: Brodsky was at once a Soviet, a Russian, an emigree, and a citizen of the twentieth century. Ruins express his displaced authorial position, but they are also an attempt to draw his personal experience from a zone of destruction and pain. Ruins in Brodsky's eyes (they

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<sup>182</sup> I'm grateful to my colleague, Tanja Petrović (Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences), for sharing her thoughts about the importance of gaze in the analysis of ruins.

are both a verbal and visual tropes) tell stories, and memory operates largely by means of these visualizations. Ruins are also profoundly narrative since they plot out Brodsky's image of temporality – they can be read as allegories that question and eventually cancel out modernistic “utopia of freedom and progress, linear time and geometric space” [Huyssen 2006: 19]. At the same time, with an analysis of ruins as an image and as a metaphor, I questioned the widely accepted assumption that Brodsky's philosophy of time reverberates his desire to return to the beginning (or, as I have mentioned earlier, his dream of finding a new tradition, recognizable as such). His intense search for this beginning (“Christmas Poems” are often interpreted as the poet's passionate search for the beginning) gives rise to the overarching melancholy in his writings. My analysis shows that things are more complicated than that. The defining pathos of Brodsky's worldview lies in the impossibility of return not because of the tragic irreversibility of time, but because temporality is not a set of clearly marked transitions: it does not derive from objective properties of events and the relations between them, but rather from subjective responses to such events [Evans 2005: 21]. Also, if culture, in its ethical and aesthetical being, has temporal direction, then it is always “reverse temporality” – humanity does not progress from the worse to the better and to the best. Ruins and antiquity, or, to be more precise, antiquity in ruins, in Brodsky's essay make this dense and complex temporal philosophy visible. Finally, I believe that Brodsky's writings, observed from this perspective, reclaim the vision of literature as always “a form of cultural traveling, a means of transporting words into other worlds, of making crossings and forging connections between apparently conflicting worlds” [Susheila 2004: 6].

When the narrator writes that “Nothing exists for the future's sake; and the ancients couldn't in nature regard themselves as the ancients. Nor should we bill ourselves as their tomorrow” [Brodsky 1995: 272], he is in fact making a double statement. On the one hand, when the writer dies, he will be outlived by his voice (written words



are timeless, and therefore they are the equivalent of pure transcendence); on the other hand, the modernist subject, enclosed within the skepticism towards himself and in the world that surrounds him, can offer in his literary work no more than an illusion of meaning because authentic meaning is irretrievably lost and decidedly unattainable in the delayed figurability of seeing, imagining, writing, and creating.

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## Summary

The main aim of this chapter is to offer a possible interpretation of the meanings attached to the ruins as both the image and the metaphor in Brodsky's essays, or, to be more precise, in "Homage to Marcus Aurelius" (1994), an essay that sets its narrative world in the ruined world that surrounds the narrator, elicits an ambivalent sense of time, and provokes complex thoughts of history as an eternal cycle and dialectic process. Departing from the premises that ruins emancipate us from social constraints, free senses, and desires, enable introspection, and foster creativity, I expand the well-established thesis according to which Brodsky's writings are structured on an image of time as irretrievability and irreclaimability, which, in his writings, reverberates and re-creates an experience of continuous failures to discipline the memory, thus making any return impossible. Moreover, my aim is to show that the approach to Brodsky's essays from the perspective of an analysis of ruins can offer us much more: for example, it can offer valuable insights into his understanding of the agency of the authorial modernist voice in literature. Where, in a work of art, is the writer's voice located? What does it mean to see and to write, and what does it mean to read? What role, in this process, is assigned to tradition, "eternal values," and cultural heritage?

**Keywords:** Iosif Brodsky, essay, ruins, boundaries, time, modern subjectivity, textual "I," Marcus Aurelius.

## **Аннотация**

**Даниела Лугарич-Вукас**

**Я как Глаз: к поэтике руин в эссе И. Бродского**

**«Посвящение Марку Аврелию»**

Основная цель этой статьи – предложить возможную интерпретацию значений, придаваемых руинам, как образу и метафоре в очерках Бродского, или, если быть более точными, в «Посвящении Марку Аврелию» (1994), эссе, которое помещает свой повествовательный мир в разрушенный мир, окружающий повествователя, вызывающий двойственное чувство времени и сложные мысли об истории как вечном цикле и диалектическом процессе. Отходя от посылок, разрушающих освобождение от социальных ограничений, свободных чувств и желаний, способствующих самоанализу и творчеству, я расширю устоявшуюся точку зрения, согласно которой произведения Бродского построены на образе времени как безвозвратности и невозвратимости, а также то, что в своих сочинениях поэт отражается и воссоздает переживание непрерывных неудач в формате памяти, что делает невозможным возвращение. Более того, моя цель – показать, что подход к эссе Бродского с точки зрения анализа руин может предложить нам гораздо больше: например, он может дать ценную информацию о его понимании роли авторского модернистского голоса в литературе. Где в произведении искусства находится голос писателя? Что значит видеть и писать и что значит читать? Какая роль в этом процессе отводится традициям, «вечным ценностям» и культурному наследию?

**Ключевые слова:** Иосиф Бродский, очерк, руины, границы, время, современная субъективность, текстовое «Я», Марк Аврелий.