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Searching for a New Self: Truth-Telling and Double Vision in Joseph Brodsky's Essay *In a Room and a Half* (1985)

This article discusses Joseph Brodsky's 1985 autobiographical essay *In a Room and a Half*. It argues that the use of the exilic discourse in the essay enables Brodsky to subvert the genre of autobiography as it was defined during the Enlightenment. His life story does not aspire to universalise. It attempts to reconcile the truth-telling mnemonic writing with the attainment of a new identity that recognises his place within the Russian and the English speaking traditions, and takes account of postmodernist theories related to historicity, ethnic identity and the decentred subject.

In many recently published studies on life writing, scholars tend to view autobiography as a discursive practice of everyday life, rather than as a genre that focuses entirely on its writer's life (Gunzenhauser 2001: 75). The term 'autobiography' entered the English language as early as 1797, denoting a specific practice as it emerged during the Enlightenment. The term is still used today in a way that foregrounds the activities of an autonomous individual engaged in the construction of the universalising life story. Such an approach has been criticised by postmodern and postcolonial critics who aim to subvert Enlightenment culture and its legacy, including Julie Rak and Leigh Gilmore. Having found disturbing the exclusionary aspect of autobiography presupposing the highest achievement of individuality in western civilisation, they urged contemporary scholars to move from the notion of autobiographical genre towards the notion of autobiographical discourse, in order to evaluate more objectively the life narratives that coexist with canonical texts. They not only wish to abandon the notion of a privileged authority recognised for personal achievements, they also think that it is important to examine the autobiographical narratives in written or in oral form by authors from different ethnic groups, marginalised communities or political associations that might be invisible in their society. Rak's understanding of autobiographical narrative as the discursive practice of truth-telling that avoids "the trappings of identification" shaped by western vision of the self and its construction (Rak 2005: ix) helps us to recognise how the formation of identities in stories produced by marginalised communities could negotiate or alter the reception of master narratives and the traditional frames of identity. Rak views autobiography not as a genre but as a figure of reading that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. For Rak, the autobiographical moment "happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (Rak 2005: 17). Gilmore links life writing to the notion of autobiographical authority and highlights its engagement with truth-telling and mendacity. She relates identity to gender and argues that life experiences differ for men and women. According to Gilmore's study, there is bias in the prevalent view that women's autobiographies tend to reflect the fragmentation and discontinuity of their lives (Gilmore 1994: x). While Joseph Brodsky's autobiographical essay *In a Room and a Half*, written in 1985, also challenges the view of autobiography shaped by the Enlightenment and its positivist ideology, it proposes the notion of fragmentation and discontinuity as a prerequisite for the construction of the exilic self, regardless of one's gender. In his essay, Brodsky creates the image of a narrator who self-aligns with postmodern and postcolonial critics questioning the stability of the self and the established view of autobiography as a genre.

Brodsky's autobiographical essay has received little attention in comparison with his poetry, interviews and other essays. It contains many elements of the postmodern mode of life writing that correspond to the above-discussed understanding of autobiography as discursive practice aiming at subverting the Enlightenment's vision of the construction of the self. Brodsky's essay illustrates well Jens Brockmeier's point about the use of autobiographical time in life writing narratives,

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in accordance with which the process of identity construction in autobiographical narratives becomes inseparable from the synthesising creation of the concept of temporality based both on the cultural and on the individual orders of time. In such narratives the author conveys simultaneously his/her unique individuality and immerses into the fabric of culture. Brockmeier argues that any ordering of self-referential forms of memory presupposes the act of ascribing the shape and interpretation of life events with personal significance. The construction of identity becomes entwined with interpreting events from the past along the lines of the narrative conventions provided by culture. Subsequently, personal experiences become "interwoven with the threads of a life history" (Brockmeier 2000: 53) and, despite the reflexive construction of one's identity, autobiographical narratives tend to be forward-looking: they anticipate the future, either explicitly or implicitly. In Brockmeier's opinion, autobiographical mnemonic writing relates to temporally distinct events and places and is usually narrated from the point of view of "a back-and-forth movement between the past and the present" (Brockmeier 2000: 54).

In the space that follows I would like to highlight the process of the construction of a new identity in Brodsky's *In a Room and a Half* and demonstrate how Brodsky shies away from the traditional notion of identity as static and substantial self. I will argue that Brodsky embraces the concept of identity that forms a part of the continuous rewriting of one's story of life because his vision of autobiographical discourse embodies the process of invention and reinvention of the self that represents the ephemeral and fluid gestalt. It offers an interesting vantage point defined in Eva Hoffman's 1991 book *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language* as a process of "double vision" triggered by the sense of dislocation from one's homeland (Hoffman 1991: 135). Hoffman's confession about the dislocation from her own centre of the world rings true for the narrator of Brodsky's essay who faces the problem of overcoming the divide between the past and the present. As an immigrant writer, Brodsky demonstrates that such issues as race, nationality and identity are problematic. That is why he moves between different understandings of these terms in his essay. The fragmented nature of Brodsky's essay matches the description of the narrator's fragmented life with the help of a self-aware thematising of the textuality of the past as it comes to the reader through references to books, media reports, museum artefacts and personal stories of other people remembered by the narrator from his youth. The postmodernist context is important for understanding Brodsky's intent: in addition to describing the material conditions of moving between cultures and generations, the author questions the ability of exiles to reclaim the object of their loss and their construction of imaginary homelands containing a degree of fictionality. By writing an autobiography for his new country, Brodsky inevitably comments on his move from one language to another and on the liberating effect that mastering the English language had on his life. The autobiographical process enables him to bring together his identities made up of two languages and two homelands but such a juxtaposition of double identities gives rise to profound uncertainties about the traces of his identity in the original culture.

To my mind, Brodsky's essay is not an "unconventional modernist autobiography", as Svetlana Boym has suggested (Boym 1996: 513). I find it difficult to agree with her definition of Brodsky as a nostalgic modernist whose works manifest a special "mode of modernist classicism" imbued with "its own Leningradian local colour" that exemplifies imperial consciousness (Boym 1996: 526). I think that Brodsky's essay embodies many tenets of postmodernist life writing, especially because Brodsky belongs to a historical epoch largely affected by World War II experiences and by Stalinism, rather than to the culture shaped by the traumas of World War I. He is a dystopian thinker, rather than a utopian one, who does not wholeheartedly relate to the ideas expressed in many works produced by Russian avant-garde artists and critics that are grounded in Russian twentieth-century utopian thought and movement practices, including the motor that stands out as an icon of modernist industrial society. As James Curtis points out in his essay on Russian Formalism, its adherents maintained personal relationships with the Futurists and they were inspired by such European thinkers as

Saussure, Husserl, and Bergson (Curtis 1976: 120). It would be difficult to see the latter list of thinkers as of importance to Brodsky, despite the cosmopolitan urban culture of the 1910s-20s being of interest to him. Unlike Russian Formalists and many modernist writers who had free access to western universities and publications, Brodsky was part of the Thaw generation with patchy knowledge of European cultural and intellectual traditions.

Yet Brodsky might be defined as an archaist who took the job of exploring the usable past very seriously. David Bethea credits Brodsky with the ability to revive western and Russian traditions that had been largely forgotten in the late Soviet period, and underscores how Brodsky's works conveyed a sense of discontinuity. This latter would have made impossible the revival of the imperial vision associated with the notion of the dominant centralised Russian worldview. Bethea lists among Brodsky's achievements that "he has opened up traditions that, because of the suspended animation of Stalinism, were either insufficiently known or prematurely forgotten" (Bethea 1992: 233). Brodsky's interest in Marina Tsvetaeva's strategy to present herself from the viewpoint of other people made him aware of the possibility to use exilic experiences for creative purposes. "Brodsky is most revealing on the connection between physical estrangement (exile) and poetic estrangement (elegy) in analysing Tsvetaeva's speaker in *New Year's Greetings*", notes Bethea. He asserts that "by looking at the world abandoned by Rilke at his death and forcing herself to see it as if through the eyes of his soul", Tsvetaeva "develops the capacity 'to look at herself at a distance' […], to deflect her grief by becoming the other" (Bethea 1992: 235). This stratagem constitutes Brodsky's own views about the expression of grief. It can be added to Bethea's analysis of Tsvetaeva's poem that the ability to see oneself from a distance and to align with somebody else's vision might be best understood as a manifestation of the autobiographical moment associated with an act of mutual reflexive substitution. The latter subverts the traditional genre of autobiographical writing that foregrounds the notion of a privileged authority recognised for personal achievements. The model used in Brodsky's autobiographical essay presents the narrator and the people he describes as being equally important for understanding both his own identity and the cultural roots he shared with others.

Brodsky's tendency to see himself through the eyes of his deceased parents and their friends is pronounced in his essay *In a Room and a Half*, in which his parents' flat in Leningrad looks like a mini-museum that embodies their worldview. It highlights his awareness of the existing ambivalence between being foreign and native at the same time and foregrounds the role of fictionality in the narration of issues related to race, nationality and identity. The essay dramatises the shift from problems of knowing to problems of modes of existence, thereby crossing the boundary between the world of modernist writing associated with Brodsky's parents' way of telling stories about their lives – full of gaps and veiled allusions – and postmodernist narratives that tend to fictionalise reality as discussed in Brian McHale's book on postmodernist fiction. McHale distinguishes between the epistemological dominant of modernist writing and the ontological dominant of postmodernist narratives. His list of typical postmodernist questions include such questions as "What is a world?", "What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?", and "What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world or worlds it projects?" (McHale 2001: 10). In postmodernist vein, while Brodsky was concerned with the negative effect of cliché on human behaviour and creativity, he wanted to overcome the belief of many modernists that art functions as "a mute gesture of resistance to a social order" (Eagleton 2007: 370). As Brodsky's Nobel Prize speech illustrates, his vision of art was influenced by Theodor Adorno's concerns about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Speaking on behalf of his generation of writers and poets, Brodsky states: "'How can one write music after Auschwitz?' inquired Adorno; and one familiar with Russian history can repeat the same question by merely changing the name of the camp […]. In any case, the generation to which I belong has proven capable of writing that music" (Brodsky 1987b). Brodsky's essay *In a Room and a Half* illustrates his conviction that the discourses of reason, truth, freedom and

subjectivity should be transformed radically, so that arrogance of power could be opposed with help of a new kind of politics that takes account of ethical concerns. As Terry Eagleton points out, a main preoccupation of the aesthetic is the relation between particular and universal. According to Eagleton, contemporary radical thought maintains that "for the final purpose of our universality, of our equal rights to participate in the public definition of meanings and values, is that the unique particularities of individuals may be respected and fulfilled" and its call for an equal right with others should be seen as one of the most fundamental political questions of our times (Eagleton 2007: 414). Brodsky's essay conveys his respect for all the victims of Soviet totalitarian policies and presents to the English-speaking readers a different world behind the façade of Soviet society created by Cold War propaganda narratives. Brodsky's empathetic portrayal of his parents and other ordinary citizens living in post-war Leningrad poses a question about the importance of such issues as respect and self-respect for attaining happiness at the level of a whole society. This is why the narrator of the essay assumes the role of a traveller who seeks to understand how this or that society operates and how things can be remembered. He states: "The conviction that we are somehow remembering the whole thing in a blanket fashion, the very conviction that allows the species to go on with its life, is groundless. More than anything, memory resembles a library in alphabetical disorder, and with no collected works by anyone" (Brodsky 1987a: 488).

The point of view of a disoriented traveller lacking the understanding of the notion of totalising truth in Brodsky's essay becomes sometimes overshadowed by the narrator's voice pointing to the futility of utopian thinking and of Soviet political rhetoric. Thus, are especially interesting Brodsky's comments on the communal apartment in a manner that contradicts the Socialist Realism imperative to depict life in its revolutionary development. Brodsky subverts the notion of progress based on the ideology of the Enlightenment by suggesting that many Soviet citizens had sub-standard living conditions even in the post-war period: "Of course, we all shared one toilet, one bathroom, and one kitchen. [...] For all the despicable aspects of this mode of existence, a communal apartment has perhaps its redeeming side as well. It bares life to its basics: it strips of any illusions about human nature. [...] What smells, aromas, and odors float in the air around a hundred-watt yellow tear hanging on a plait-like tangled electric cord [...] There is something tribal about this dimly lit cave, something primordial – evolutionary if you will; and the pots and pans hang over the gas stoves like would-be tom-toms" (Brodsky 1987a: 454-455). Brodsky's portrayal of the communal apartment invokes Evgenii Zamiatin's 1922 story *The Cave* in which the primordial existence of Soviet citizens becomes satirised. Here is one passage from Zamiatin's story that depicts everyday life in a dystopian way:

> In this cave-bedroom of Petersburg, things were like in Noah's ark: clean and unclean creatures in ark-like promiscuity. Martin Martinych's writing-desk; books; cakes of the stone age looking like pottery; Skryabin, op. 74; a flat-iron; five lovingly white-washed potatoes; nickelled bed-frames; an axe; a chest of drawers; a stack of wood. And in the middle of all this universe was its god: a short-legged, rusty-red, squatting, greedy cave-god: the iron stove (Zamiatin 1923: 145).

By alluding to Zamiatin's story, Brodsky contributes to the Russian literary tradition that mocks Peter the Great's vision of the city as a special kind of modern paradise. He deconstructs the powerful aura of the Petersburg myth, in accordance with which the foundation of St Petersburg was interpreted in ambivalent terms, making it potentially both heaven and hell and portraying its creator both God-like and the Antichrist. V.N. Toporov describes its main tenets as follows:

> [...] the inner meaning of Petersburg, its core tenet, is in that antithesis and antinomy that cannot be reduced to unity, which death itself makes the basis of new life, and understood as the answer to death and as its expiation, as the achievement of a higher level of spirituality. The inhumanity of Petersburg is

> organically tied to that type of humanity, esteemed highly in Russia and almost religious, which is the only one that is capable of comprehending inhumanity and of remembering it; and, with that knowledge and memory, it can build a new spiritual ideal (Toporov 2003: 5).

Both Zamiatin and Brodsky challenge Peter the Great's notion of progress and doubt whether the elemental chaos of life could be suppressed by artificial means and abstract ideas about human condition. Given the fact that some scholars underscored the bond between the Petersburg myth and the Russian idea of salvation through suffering exemplified by Toporov's interpretation of the Petersburg myth (Hellebust 2003: 507; Reynolds 2005: 311), it is noteworthy that Brodsky always shied away from the cult of self-denial and self-sacrifice subordinated to lofty cause because this mentality, he believed, turned Russians into victims (Verhuel 2002: 178). Brodsky and his fellow writers, who were part of the Petersburg unofficial culture, were keen to abandon the conformity and the notion of collective identity found in Socialist Realist narratives that promoted the cult of sacrifice among Soviet citizens.

Thus Andrey Bitov, who knew Brodsky personally, affirms in his interview with Elisabeth Rich:

> I am a fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-generation Petersburger, and that is the main influence there is in me. That is why Joseph Brodsky often emphasizes, and my generation maintains as well, that it is the city that formed and reared us – the city not in the strictly urban sense, but rather in the sense of the tradition of Petersburg individualism, because the stones of the city were not subjected to the rigors of ideology. […] If Moscow was reconstructed along Socialist lines, then Petersburg remained a sort of lost silhouette in the Soviet structure. People found themselves in a situation that they did not recognise and could not fully grasp. But even so, Petersburg's culture, traditions, and so forth, were still in the air. And then, when things started to happen in 1956 with the Thaw, we began, bit by bit, to bring back the culture that had been lost. This characterises that entire generation, but especially the part of that generation that comes from Petersburg (Perri and Rich 1995: 28).

It is evident from Bitov's remarks that his generation of writers and poets felt proud of their ability to distance themselves from the state propaganda and political life in order to focus on spiritual life and on eternal truths that enabled them to transcend the problems of the the social system they belonged to. The sense of displacement experienced by those Leningrad writers of the 1960s-70s opposed to the official culture is also felt in their search for a new identity with the help of allusions to imaginary travel featuring different locations and historical epochs. It is not coincidental that Brodsky's essay contains several episodes describing the Navy museum where Brodsky's father worked. The essay implies that the time that Brodsky spent in the museum as a child, especially outside the opening hours, was much more beneficial to the formation of his poetic mind-set than the time he spent at school. Brodsky explains his fascination with the Russian Navy and its history in highly idiosyncratic terms that invoke both Charles Baudelaire's poem *Le Voyage* and Tsvetaeva's translation of Baudelaire's poem in 1940 in Moscow. Tsvetaeva's version of the poem highlighted her vision of imaginary travel as a manifestation of her displacement from Soviet political reality and conveyed her denunciation of Soviet censorship (Smith 2004). Brodsky writes in terms similar to Baudelaire and Tsvetaeva who suggest that poets can be equated with young children dreaming of visiting various distant places and the past. Brodsky asserts that the imagination of young children presupposes them to understand poetry and to associate poetic practice with the sense of discovery and self-discovery: "A child is always first of all an aesthete: he responds to appearances, to surfaces, to shapes and forms" Brodsky 1987a: 466). His childhood experiences made him see the Navy Museum as an embodiment of freedom of movement and of imaginary journeys. Brodsky's explanation of his admiration for the Russian Navy's history is far from being apologetic for the expansion of

the Russian empire in modern times. It is presented as a highly subjective point of view. Brodsky states:

> It is my profound conviction that apart from the literature of the last two centuries and, perhaps, the architecture of the former capital, the only other thing Russia can be proud of is its Navy's history. Not because of its spectacular victories, of which there have been rather few, but because of the nobility of spirit that has informed its enterprise. Call it idiosyncrasy or even psycho-fancy, but this brain child of the only visionary among Russian emperors, Peter the Great, seems to me indeed a cross between the aforementioned literature and architecture. Patterned after the British Navy, but less functional than decorative, informed more by the spirit of discovery than by that of expansion, prone rather to a heroic gesture and self-sacrifice than to survival at all cost (Brodsky 1987a: 466).

The above quoted description of the Russian Navy shows that Brodsky favours the notion of self-sacrifice as a matter of personal choice rather than the mode of behaviour imposed by the government on its citizens in order to fulfil the function of survival at all cost.

Furthermore, Brodsky's cinematographic-like representation of the past assembled out of disparate images and phrases promotes the construction of the self in accordance with the back-and-forth movement between the past and the present. The non-linear depiction of various recollections of the past enables him to undermine the imperial vision and the model of patriotism based on the celebration of Russian heroic battles and on the linear vision of progressive development that the museum of Russian naval history was supposed to instil in the minds of its visitors. Brodsky's memories form part of the landscape made out of people explored by a flâneur who grows to appreciate time as mnemonically defined space. As Frederic Jameson presupposes, due to the death of modernism time itself had become a nonperson, "as it was widely rumored that space was supposed to replace time in the general ontological scheme of things" (Jameson 2003: 695). Viewed in this light, the title of Brodsky's essay might be understood not only literally as a space comprising a room and a half allocated to Brodsky's parents in a communal apartment but also as a space that defies rigid definitions. Symbolically, it signifies an ex-centric point of view, invoking playfully Federico Fellini's film *Eight and a Half*, containing an autobiographical reference to the number of films he created. The connection between Brodsky's imaginary autobiographical travelogue and Fellini is not far fetched, in that Fellini inspired many innovative writers and authors of Leningrad's unofficial culture in the 1960s-70s. Ellen Chances claims, for example, that Fellini's use of the journey as a backdrop, against which the depiction of human condition becomes possible in *La Strada*, was used as a model for Andrei Bitov's travelogues *Our Country* (Chances 2006: 31-32). Likewise, Brodsky's essay is richly laced with various allusions to travelling in order to presents the notion of home as being unstable. His vision of human condition in modern times is narrated from the point of view of the exilic self. It alludes to Georg Lukács's essay *Die Theorie des Romans* (written in 1914-1915), in accordance with which the transcendental closed world of the Homeric epic gave rise to the novel that reveals a world that "had been abandoned by God" and whose hero displays a demonic psychology (Lukács 1971: 88). Lukács's observation that a modern world "makes the glimpsed shadow of God appear demonic" because "he cannot be comprehended and fitted into some kind of order from the perspective of earthly life" (Lukács 1971: 102) help us to understand better the use of metaphysical imagery and themes in Brodsky's essay. They relate both to Brodsky's reassessment of the notion of social engineering and its impact upon human life and to his corrective use of irony in relation to the portrayal of Russian history. Thus Brodsky refers to the Russian saint Andrew as a person who should have provided Russia with proper spiritual guidance in the twentieth century. Brodsky replaces his perspective of a child who grew in awe of the Russian Navy with the perspective of a present-day historian who is highly skeptical of Russian imperial policies. He writes:

> To this day, I think that the country would do a hell of a lot better if it had for its national banner not that foul double-headed imperial fowl or the vaguely masonic hammer-and-sickle, but the flag of the Russian Navy: our glorious, incomparably beautiful flag of St. Andrew: the diagonal blue cross against a virgin-white background (Brodsky 1987a: 467).

Sanna Turoma explains in her insightful book on Brodsky's travel writing that, albeit Brodsky's self-representation as a traveller pertains to romantic and modernist models of travel and exile, it transformed into an autobiographical figure and became not only the lyric hero of Brodsky's travel texts, but also the hero of his life story and of the autobiographical discourse employed in Brodsky's post-1972 travel writing. She also mentions Brodsky's irony:

> The ironising of nostalgia in Brodsky's travel writing is his way of responding to the realisation of the position of the literary exile and adventurous male traveling writer, which occupied a central role in modernist high culture, is challenged in the era of postmodern tourism and global mass migration (Turoma 2010: 61).

Turoma underscores a significant tension between Russian logocentric culture and the Western aesthetic affected by postmodernist thinking. The above tension is visible in his essay *In a Room and a Half*, too. While revisiting his past in this essay, Brodsky acquires a vision of his new self who belongs to both the Russian and the western literary tradition. His self-ironising gaze of the literary exile and the adventurous male traveller permeates the whole essay and creates an open-ended conclusion, suggesting that in future the author might discover a different kind of truth, should he again travel down his memory lane. Such a perspective is different from the utopian aspirations of Russian avant-garde thinkers and writers who heavily relied on modernist poetics and European notions of national identity and tradition. Eschewing tourism as a modernist concept, Brodsky espouses the notion of pure travel through time and space subordinated both to the evaporation of meaning and to the act of self-effacement presented in his essay in the transcendental terms described in Ihab Hassan's 1992 book *Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*.

In Hassan's opinion, the postmodern worldview focuses on the notions of dispersal and peripheral. Hassan highlighted how in the 1970s-80s the concepts of peripheral and marginal, entwined with the ex-centric perspective, outgrew their initial association with the silenced because they became synonymous with aspects of innovation and renewal (Hassan 1992: 267-268). His book demonstrates how postmodernist aesthetic foregrounds the expression of the previously marginalised and silenced voices that undermine the legitimacy of established conceptual centralisation, hierarchical order and totalisation. Similarly, Brodsky's essay portrays a decentered universe of the postmodern that challenges centres of authority and power with the help of the point of view of a young child. The decentred point of view is also articulated sometimes by his parents and other representatives of the generation of the 1910s-20s, including Anna Akhmatova. In Brodsky's essay, post-war Leningrad is described as a colonised periphery upon which Moscow – as the centre of Soviet empire – projected its authority and values. The neoclassical beauty of St Petersburg/Leningrad stands out in *In a Room and a Half* as a symbol of the melancholic mourning of the Eurocentric cultural tradition that has been mutated and altered in an irrevocable manner. Yet, unlike Akhmatova who is mentioned in the essay as the author of *Northern Elegies*, Brodsky ironises over any manifestations of lamenting and melancholic style associated with counterfactual thinking. While mimicking Akhmatova's lines "Just like a river, I was deflected by my stalwart era," Brodsky draws a different conclusion from Akhmatova and embraces the notion of indeterminancy associated with chance and self-discovery. His autobiographical discourse becomes permeated with future-oriented overtones. A passage about the river mentioned in Akhmatova's poem becomes rendered into a different text altogether. Brodsky strips Akhmatova of the authoritative

voice and portrays himself as a postmodernist truth-seeker who understands the fluid nature of identity:

> A deflected river running to its alien, artificial estuary. Can anyone ascribe its disappearance at this estuary to natural causes? And if one can, what about its course? What about human potential, reduced and misdirected from the outside? Who is there to account for what it has been deflected from? Is there anyone? And while asking these questions, I am not losing sight of the fact that this limited or misdirected life may produce in its course yet another life, mine for instance, which, were it not precisely for that reduction of options, wouldn't have taken place to begin with [...] No, I am aware of the law of probability. I don't wish that my parents had never met. I am asking these questions precisely because I am a tributary of a turned, deflected river. In the end, I suppose, I am talking to myself (Brodsky 1987a: 482-483).

The ethical concern expressed in the above statement is linked to the notion of respect discussed earlier.

Brodsky's tribute to the victims of Stalinism is conveyed in a moving way: he does not want the victims of Stalin's political regime to appear as silenced and traumatised individuals. He portrays them as ordinary individuals whose relationships, family life and everyday complexities of life demonstrate their ability to remain human and compassionate despite the totalitarian policies that deprived them of human dignity. The lack of freedom disgusts the narrator of Brodsky's essay most of all. One of the bitterest passages of the essay states:

> But what about someone born free but dying a slave? Would he or she – and let's keep ecclesiastical notions out of this – think of it as a solace? Well, perhaps. Most likely, they would think of it as the ultimate insult, the ultimate irreversible stealing of their freedom. Which is what their kin or their child would think, and which is what it is. The last theft. (Brodsky 1987a: 478).

The assessment of ordinary people as victims of theft in the above passage corresponds to Walter Benjamin's distinction between history proper and the tradition articulated in the narrative of the dispossessed.

For Benjamin, any recollection of the past is inseparable from taking control of memory. He elucidates it succinctly:

> To articulate what is past does not mean to recognise 'how it really was'. It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. [...] In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it. For the Messiah arrives not merely as the Redeemer; he also arrives as the vanquisher of the Anti-Christ. The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious (Benjamin 1940).

Benjamin urges historians to break with the rigid mould of Marxist determinism in order to convey empathy for people who lived in the past and to re-experience an epoch. It requires one to remove everything one knows about the later course of history from his/her head. Brodsky's desire to estrange himself from his past and to look at himself from a distance has a similar goal. He achieves such an act of estrangement, inseparable from his empathy for ordinary people who lived in Stalin's and post-Stalin Russia, with the help of the figure of the Jew. The latter is often conflated in his travelogues and autobiographical narratives with the figure of the flâneur able to experience the city as a landscape comprising living people. Brodsky's narrator acts as a flâneur eager to leave "the historical *frissons*" to the tourist who is more than happy "to trade all his knowledge of artists' quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile" (Benjamin 1999: 263). The flâneur-tourist dichotomy is one of the most important features of the essay because Brodsky portrays his native city of the 1950s-70s as a landscape

inseparable from people who contributed to its atmosphere and its cultural life.

It should be also noted that Brodsky's writings often present a figure of the Jew as the symbol of nomadic lifestyle. It might be seen as a symbol of an ethical mode of thinking oriented towards the Other. It was partially discussed in Bethea's aforementioned article that claims that from "early on Brodsky gave evidence of the 'nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal' poetic imagination" defined by Edward Said as a worldview shaped by the exile (Bethea 1992: 234). Bethea's observation notwithstanding, it might be also possible to talk about Brodsky's interest in the nomadic self in terms of secular Jewish poetics. It was identified in Marat Grinberg's 2011 book on Boris Slutsky as poetics comprising Jewish themes, biblical references and "indecipherable Jewish intonation" (Grinberg 2011: 27). Viewed in this light, Boym's statement that the essay *In a Room and a Half* functions both as a peculiar form of commemoration "of those for whom exile was unavailable (or inconceivable)" and provides the narrator with a symbolic survival kit (Boym 1996: 528) could be interpreted as a recognition of the importance of biblical references to the construction of Brodsky's poetic identity. It aspires to bring together the universal and the particular through the allusions to an imaginary transcendental space. The use of the English language enables him to achieve such a goal. Boym thinks that Brodsky likes foreign languages as tools for the construction of an imaginary reality because they are not aligned with the past or the present in a straightforward manner: "Once it is discovered, one can never go back to the monolinguistic existence. When exiles return 'back home' they occasionally discover that there is nothing homey back there" (Boym 1996: 529). According to this logic, any return to the country of birth might turn into a defamiliarising experience. Yet, given the fact that, as Caren Kaplan noted, "the postmodern discourses of displacement link modernity and postmodernity" (Kaplan 1996: 67), Brodsky's use of the English language throughout the whole essay might be seen as a tool enabling him to mould a new identity in such a way that the process of self-effacement becomes entwined with the back-and-forth movement between the present and the past. It highlights how the evolving of the new self is always oriented towards the future. Furthermore, Kaplan's above-mentioned observation on the sense of continuity achieved through the use of the trope of displacement could be easily extended to Brodsky's portrayal of his parents whose partial estrangement from the reality imbued with Soviet political symbolism appears to prefigure the formation of his own nomadic self. It functions as a manifestation of his transnational identity, too. The English voice acquired by the narrator represents Brodsky's new self and stands out as a symbol of self-discovery. It is partially a product of his imaginary travelling associated both with the fascination with the Russian Navy and with British metaphysical poetry that Brodsky grew to appreciate as early as the 1970s.

Since Brodsky's early manifestations of the formation of his cosmopolitan identity found in his poetry of the 1960s-70s, the discourses of displacement became highly prominent in the area of transnational studies. According to Steven Vertovec, "One of the hallmarks of diaspora as a social form is the 'triadic relationship' [...] between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came" (Vertovec 1999: 449). Thus Brodsky's portrayal of his parents as representatives of the ethnic group, marginalised by Russian and then Soviet imperial policies, makes his own sense of displacement more aligned with the worldview of diaspora communities of the past through the established of a certain kind of lineage. Albeit the term 'diaspora' derives from the word 'diaspeirein' (which means 'to distribute' in the Greek language) and was invented by the Greeks living abroad in the 4th century B.C., the paradigmatic use of the term has become associated with the scattering of the Jews after the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. The term was closely linked with the Jewish historical experience for many centuries but nowadays it often denotes a group of dispersed people sharing a common set of religious beliefs and cultural values. The term was revived in the 1960s and appropriated for the description of African exilic communities in the United States and elsewhere (Brubaker

2005: 2). Since the 1990s it became widely used in postcolonial and cultural studies for the analysis of political, ethnic, or economic communities that live abroad.

In addition to the expression of the exilic discourse in Brodsky's essay, it is worth highlighting another concern of the essay that deals with the author's personal memories. It appears that Brodsky foregrounds the notion of historicity by articulation of the author's experience of the changing conditions of life in space and time. Some recollections from the past are presented in his essay as repressed and recovered through the act of writing in the form of complex images. Brodsky is aware how it is not possible to convey decontextualised memory separately from the range of contexts and rhetorical frameworks with which the individual is engaged. The deployment of meta-memory as the main organising principle of his autobiographical narrative enables the reader to establish analogies between the human brain and museum. The exploration of subjectivity in Brodsky's essay is done against the backdrop of the museum culture governed by the principles of scientific truth and objectivity. In some ways, it muses over the popular scientific belief that the brain could be understood in physiological terms as a store of information from which it permits mechanical retrieval. The image of Peter the Great invoked by the description of the city and the Navy Museum in Brodsky's *In a Room and a Half* suggests the presence of the mechanical reproduction of the past and the archival impulse embedded in the Enlightenment projects promoted by Peter the Great and his followers.

According to Sergei Dovlatov, Brodsky was a living example of estrangement from the mainstream of Soviet culture and politics because he "created an unheard-of model of behavior", living "not in a proletarian state, but in a monastery of his own spirit" to the extent that "he did not struggle with the regime" but "he simply did not notice it" (Dovlatov, quoted in Yurchak 2008: 715). Yet, as the recollections of Bitov and Brodsky about the past demonstrate, their generation devoted itself to the recovery of forgotten traditions, experiencing them anew and saving them from conformism. It is not coincidental that both Bitov and Brodsky became interested in the use of memory in archives, libraries and museums because their sense of the living tradition was heightened by their conversations with the representatives of the modernist culture, including Akhmatova and Lidiia Ginzburg. Their perception of archival aspects of memory gave way in their writings to extensive use of intertextuality that brings together mnemonic functions of poetry and archival aspects of memory. According to Maurice Halbwachs, memory is intrinsically archival: it is not a private matter but a part of the communal experiences because it is determined by the social milieu in which it functions. The latter shapes the lens of the collectively determined perception through which the subject experiences events, even if they are viewed in isolation from historical events that pertain to collective commemorations, rituals and identity. He states:

> We are unaware that we are but an echo. The whole art of the orator probably consists in his giving listeners the illusion that the convictions and feelings he arouses within them have come not from him but from themselves, that he has only divined and lent his voice to what has been worked out in their innermost consciousness. In one way or another, each social group endeavors to maintain a similar persuasion over its members (Halbwachs 1980: 45).

Halbwachs identifies several groups of people who shape our memories, including tourist guides, historians, parents, and friends. For him, "memories remain collective" because they "are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned" (Ibid.). According to this logic, individuals are never alone because even in situations when other people are not physically present, individuals always carry with them information obtained from other people and remember stories told to them by distinct persons. Thus Brodsky recalls how his parents, their colleagues and friends spoke to him and how they would tell him about Soviet war and postwar history. His personal involvement with the tradition of oral history made him aware of the existing tension between Soviet media accounts of history and

the personal stories he heard as a young man growing up in 1950s-60s Leningrad. Viewed in this light, the use of English in Brodsky's essay might be interpreted not only as an estrangement device but also as an indication of Brodsky's desire to make available to the outside world personal stories about life in post-war Leningrad. It is also indicative of Brodsky's desire to distinguish his highly personal recollections of childhood from the cultural metanarrative comprising many similar stories about traumatic events.

As Laurence Kirmayer points out, while personal recollections of the past become shaped "by the personal and social significance of specific memories," they also "draw from meta-memory – implicit models of memory that influence what can be recalled and cited as verified" (Kirmayer 1996: 175). This is precisely what Brodsky has attempted to convey in his essay: he argued compellingly that trauma is inseparable from a discursive presence, including silence which might be part of the response to painful recollections of the past associated with traumatic events and experiences. He creates an imaginary space of exile where he and his deceased parents could have a family reunion. Brodsky writes:

> May English then house my dead. In Russian I am prepared to read, write verses or letters. For Maria Volpert and Alexander Brodsky, though, English offers a better semblance of afterlife, maybe the one there is, save my very self. And as far as the latter is concerned, writing this in this language is like doing those dishes: it's therapeutic (Brodsky 1987a: 461).

Despite Brodsky's approach to estrangement from the perspective of a somatics of literature – associated with the phenomenological tradition that promotes 'mindful body', he also underscores political overtones of his montage-like activities of translating his parents' lives into a new context. "I write in English", affirms Brodsky,

> because I want to grant them a margin of freedom: the margin whose width depends on the number of those who may be willing to read this. I want Maria Volpert and Alexander Brodsky to acquire reality under 'a foreign code of consciousness' [...] I want English verbs of motion to describe their movement. This won't resurrect them, but English grammar may at least prove to be a better escape route from the chimneys than the Russian. To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity, their reduction to insignificance, resulting in mechanical annihilation (Brodsky 1987a: 460).

What is at play here is the avoidance of somatic mimeticism explained in Douglas Robinson's study on somatics of literature as "the almost instantaneous mimicking of another person's body states with your own, which serves to infect you with the other person's feelings" (Robinson 2008: 23). Brodsky's decision to tell the story of his childhood and about his parents' lives in the post-war period in Leningrad might be best described as "the somatic transfer through story" that Robinson also labels as somatic exchange based on "narratively triggered somatic mimesis" (Robinson 2008: 25). Viewed through the lens of constructivist psychological theory, somatic response appears socially conditioned through guided choice. Its phenomenological aspects are linked to displacement. Robinson explains that somatic response is "soft-wired by impersonal experience into our neural functioning" so that it "offers stabilising behavioural guidance" (Robinson 2008: xvi).

Similarly, Brodsky wishes to re-experience his childhood and everyday life with his parents out of its original context that had been largely shaped by the trauma of existence in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in the post-Stalin period for therapeutic purposes. The trauma experienced by Brodsky could be detected in several omissions and semi-veiled allusions to the Soviet ideological space and its impact on everyday post-war life. Thus Brodsky's description of a chest of draws in his parents' room lists various items of memorabilia – including his father's military decorations, his mother's scarves and fans, and his parents' correspondence, among other things – ending up with bitter comment on the lack of freedom and total isolation from the West in the Soviet period. Brodsky explains:

> To say the least, all these things were part of my parents' consciousness, tokens of their memory: of places and of times by a large preceding me; of their common and separate past, of their youth and childhood, of a different ear, almost of a different century. With a bit of the same hindsight, I would add: of their freedom, for they were born and grew up free, before what the witless scum call the Revolution, but what for them, as for generations of others, meant slavery (Brodsky 1987a: 459-460).

On another occasion, Brodsky recollects that in 1950 his father was demobilised by a Politburo ruling prohibiting people of Jewish origin to hold high military rank. Furthermore, Brodsky's father was not able to find work as a photographer and journalist because he became a victim of the campaign against rootless cosmopolites. Brodsky also refers to the 1953 Doctors' Plot. As he puts it, "it did not end in the usual bloodbath only because its instigator, Comrade Stalin himself, all of a sudden, at the case's nadir, kicked the bucket" (Brodsky 1987a: 470). The above statements reflect Brodsky's self-awareness of himself as a mouthpiece for young post-war writers who believed in the necessity of a large-scale destalinisation. Curiously, there is no mentioning in the essay that there were signs of social conformity in his parents' flat. According to Lev Losev's biography of Brodsky, some archival documents also suggest that Brodsky's parents had a bust of Lenin at some point which in less dangerous times became replaced by a marble bust of an old-fashioned lady topped with a fancy hat. Losev also talks about how, before Stalin's death, Brodsky's parents kept a photograph of Stalin above their son's bed that was meant to suggest to visitors that Joseph Brodsky was named after Stalin (Losev 2008: 19). Losev affirms that Brodsky was strongly opposed to Stalin's totalitarian policies and despised severely all the manifestations of anti-Semitism he witnessed in his childhood and youth in the Soviet Union. The latter traits of his outlook are exemplified by how, in his autobiographical essay, Brodsky refers to his encounters with bullies at school and with the KGB officer who tried to convince him to renounce his views openly, so he would not undermine his parents' precarious position in an anti-Semitic society.

Despite Brodsky not being accepted into a navy college because of his nationality (Losev 2008: 37), he omits any references to this episode in *In a Room and a Half*. It appears that he wanted to differentiate himself from his father who was a navy officer, suggesting thereby a different kind of lineage based on cultural rather than blood ties. "In the linguistic and cultural sense," affirms Losev, "Brodsky was Russian. As for Brodsky's self-constructed identity, in his period of maturity, he liked to repeat his laconic formula that states: 'While I'm Jew, I'm also Russian poet and American citizen'" (Losev 2008: 33). In a 1995 interview with the Polish journalist Adam Mikhnik, Brodsky was reluctant to discuss whether he was brought up as a Jewish or Russian person. Yet he confirmed that he saw himself as Jewish not only because of his parents but also because of his tendency to believe in the absolute truth. In the same interview, Brodsky also refers to his aloofness towards religious beliefs and claims that the notion of God infers the existence of violence. He adds that he feels undermined by the image of the Father embedded in the Old Testament on the subconscious level without any rational explanation of the existence of such a feeling (Losev 2008: 36).

The ambivalence in Brodsky's perception of the father figure is mimicked in his essay's description of the father-son relationship. Writing about his father's Navy uniform that he wore for some two more years after his military service and his father's work in the photography department of the Navy Museum, Brodsky constructs an interesting link between himself and his father, implying thereby that his poetic imagination was triggered both by his father's travels and his father's belonging to the world of mobility. It was associated in his mind with the transnational identity comparable to the fluid identity of Brodsky the author of the essay whose exilic identity appears to be shaped by his father's memories about travels. Brodsky creates a heterotopy-like existence on the margins of Russian imperial history through his story featuring visits to the Navy Museum and his own imaginary travels

inspired by photographs he saw in that museum. He writes:

> The best times were when he was the evening duty officer, when the museum was already closed. He would emerge from the long, marbled corridor, in full splendor, with that blue-white-blue armband of the duty officer around his left arm, the holstered Parabellum on his right side, dangling from his belt, the Navy cap with its lacquered visor and gilded 'salad' above covering his disconcertingly bald head. 'Greetings, Commander,' I would say, for such was his rank; he'd smirk back, and as his tour of duty wouldn't be over for another hour or so, he'd cut me loose to loiter about in the museum alone (Brodsky 1987a: 465).

Brodsky interweaves into the story of free and unrestricted movement inside the Navy Museum (opposed to his description of Soviet school uniform and Soviet schools that were meant to turn all students into obedient soldiers) with the discussion of his admiration for Russia's Navy's history, linking thereby his own initiation into the world of the Russian Navy's past with the symbolic bond with Peter the Great, the father of the modern Russian state and the founder of the Russian Navy. Brodsky is engaging in self-ironising in these passages because his story is told to readers of the 1980s from the viewpoint of the displaced subject of the Russian empire. Compared to Peter the Great, the infallible patriarch and father of both Russian navy and empire, Brodsky's own father is depicted more as a dreamer rather than a visionary imbued with imperial consciousness. He is also described as a victim of the state whose heroic contribution to the Soviet Union's victory in the World War II was downplayed by the authorities who eventually forced him to resign from the Navy. By depicting his father in a state of psychological distress, Brodsky subverts the myth of fatherhood prevalent in Russian nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. While Brodsky appears to destroy the image of archetypal father, he nostalgically idealises him and mourns him after his death.

To some extent, Brodsky's image of the father appears more iconic than real. In Lacanian vein, it is ascribed with the qualities of a marker of the symbolic order (le nom du père) who performs the rite of initiating his son into Soviet society. Lacan's ideas are anchored in psychoanalysis and language and his association between the father figure and the established order highlights the legislative and prohibitive role of the symbolic father. He writes:

> [...] if the symbolic context requires it, paternity will nevertheless be attributed to the woman's encounter with a spirit at such and such a fountain [...] in which he is supposed to dwell. This is clearly what demonstrates the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of the real father, but of what religion has taught us to invoke as the Name-of-the-Father. Of course, there is no need of a signifier to be a father, any more than there is to be dead, but without a signifier, no one will ever know anything about either of these states of being (Lacan 1996: 464).

According to Lacan, the paternal metaphor serves as an embodiment of the law of the father and precludes the individual from desiring the mother. Unlike his father who served in the Russian Navy and did not challenge the existing social order, Brodsky identifies himself as an outsider who developed a desire to transgress established boundaries and to embrace longing for a world culture inseparable from the notion of imaginary community. Brodsky writes about his vision of social structures from the detached point of view through the prism of a young child:

> There is hardly anything that I've liked in my life more than those clean-shaven admirals, en face and in profile, in their gilded frames looming through a forest of masts on ship models that aspired to life size. In their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century uniforms, with those jabots or high-standing collars, burdock-like fringe epaulets, wigs and chest-crossing broad blue ribbons,

> they looked very much the instruments of a perfect, abstract ideal, no less precise than bronze-rimmed astrolabes, compass, binnacles, and sextants glittering all about (Brodsky 1987a: 466).

Given how scenes of exploration of the Navy Museum feature in Brodsky's childhood experiences that took place after his school lessons, one can suggest that passages describing the Russian Navy's history have far-reaching implication. They point to the existence of alternative worlds and imaginary communities that lie outside the control of the Soviet Empire. Brodsky's synthesising vision in the essay is foregrounded with the help of the estrangement device: through the eyes of himself as a schoolchild Brodsky portrays Russian history as a living tradition represented by the interaction of the museum space and the space of St Petersburg as a capital of Russian empire. This ability to see different artefacts from the past as juxtaposed in an animated imaginative flow of psychological time accords well with Michel Foucault's modern perception of time as something that is experienced differently in the age dominated by spatial categories. It is subordinated to the vision of time as a space that comprises both a simultaneous flow of different temporalities and a new kind of juxtaposition of the scattered (Foucault 2000: 175). Brodsky's merger of urban experiences with lyric poetry that emerges out of his impressionistic snapshots of modern life invokes Tsvetaeva's description of Boris Pasternak's poetry. In her 1932 essay *Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii* Marina Tsvetaeva depicts Pasternak as "an *invitation au voyage* of self-discovery and world-discovery" to the effect that the reader acts as a co-author of Pasternak (Tsvetaeva 1992: 119). Likewise, Brodsky chooses an opportunity in his essay to oppose his vision of psychological time to his father's acute interest in contemporary history and linear vision of history. It helps him to impose upon his reader a different kind of sensibility that brings museum culture back to life as a space full of scattered and disparate objects of the past that can be assembled in a new way. The latter sensibility is entwined with the poetic outlook.

Such a perspective imbued with nostalgic overtones allows Brodsky to engage with the myth of the father that informs Russians' approach to their homeland and national identity. Similar preoccupation with patriarchy and national identity is found in Andrey Tarkovsky's 1974 film *Mirror*. A certain feminisation of the figure of the father is portrayed in Brodsky's *In a Room and a Half*. The reader's gaze is diverted to an emasculation and relegation to a nostalgic past that is long gone: it is presented in the mythopoeic way to the extent that harsh aspects of the behavior of Brodsky's father become totally omitted from the narration. According to Losev, Brodsky's relationship with his father was far from smooth: he could enjoy long walks and intellectual conversations with his son, but on some occasions he would display a bad temper and would beat his son up with his belt for bad marks or for lack of discipline (Losev 2008: 20). Instead of stereotypical and glorious images of a New Soviet Man and a World War II veteran, Brodsky weaves into his narration several images of fatherhood that subvert established notions of the masculinity found in Russian films and books featuring military officers. Here is one example:

> This six-foot-tall Navy commander knew quite a lot about civilian life, and gradually I began to regard his uniform as a disguise; more precisely, the idea of distinction between form and content began to take root in my schoolboy mind. His uniform had to do with this effect no less than the present content of the façades he was pointing at. In my schoolboy's mind this disparity would refract, of course, into an invitation to lie (not that I needed one); deep down, though, I think that this taught me the principle of maintaining appearances no matter what is going on inside (Brodsky 1987a: 467).

Brodsky's image of his father alludes to Russian icons that feature saints. As Dutch scholar, poet and translator Kees Verheul, who knew Brodsky well, observed, Brodsky's faith developed in "the no-man's land between Old and New Testament, between Judaism and

Christianity" (Verheul 1992: 17). Verheul suggests that Brodsky's hagiographic depiction of Akhmatova and those people who were dear to him resembles that of Akhmatova. This analogy could be extended to Brodsky's portrayal of the stoic qualities of his father's character: he appears to be both as a victim of Soviet ideology and as a martyr-like stoic figure preferring to get on with his life and accept his destiny. That is why Brodsky's iconic image of fatherhood overshadows the depiction of his father as a real person. It illustrates well some contradictions in the representation of the Russian nation in terms of motherhood (rodina-mat') and fatherhood (otechestvo). In her article *The Gendered Trinity of Russian Cultural Rhetoric Today – or The Glyph of the H(i)eroine*, Helena Goscilo notes that while Russian nationhood is usually seen as an embodiment of the maternal, Russian politico-military leaders are often characterised as the Father of the People who enables discipline with power to punish or glorify (Goscilo 1995: 69). Viewed in this light, Brodsky's description of his parents in English rather than in Russian appears to be triggered by a conscious desire to forge his own independent identity as an exercise of a special kind of estrangement. Such an act provides a new phenomenological experience and enables Brodsky to affirm the notion of indeterminacy that presupposes an autonomous co-existence of different worldviews.

In Lacanian vein, the narrator of Brodsky's essay acts as the split subject in hope that his desire for language would enable self-realisation despite its simultaneous obstruction by language in its quest for wholeness. As Lacan puts it, "It is only when it finds that this image is not its own—that is the play of light on a mirror, the gaze of a completely separate subject or a word in the mouth like 'I' that may seem to represent the self, but is equally the property of others—that it senses its identity as being sucked away from it into a public, shared world of orders and hierarchies" (Lacan, quoted in Mansfield 2000: 45). Lacan's explanation about the desire to reclaim one's identity accords well with Losev's observation that Brodsky's outlook was largely shaped by post-war Leningrad where the notion of façade played an important role. He writes:

> In the central part of the city many ruins were covered up by screens featuring imaginary facades created by artists. The local authorities wanted to make sure that local population of the city exhausted by hunger and destroyed to a great extent by war will perceive such a trick as a sign of the return to normal everyday life. Yet the effect from this metamorphosis was the opposite: Leningrad streets had started to resemble an empty theatrical stage (Losev 2008: 24).

Losev thinks that this sense of emptiness invoked Avdotya Lopukhina's prophesy stating that Petersburg was doomed to vanish one day. In a Lacanian sense, the language learnt from such an environment predetermined Brodsky's special liking for elegies. "The impressions from the destroyed city," asserts Losev, "influenced the fact that elegy became the central genre of Brodsky's oeuvre" (Losev 2008: 25-26).

Can Brodsky's essay *In a Room and a Half* be defined then as a melancholic narrative? In his study of melancholia in the writings of several male thinkers and psychologists, Donald Capps maintains that "men are more likely than women to experience 'home-sickness' and to express the melancholy view that 'you cannot go home again'": that is why they "often experience themselves as strangers and intruders in that most of familiar of places, the home" (Capps 1997: 20). Capps links melancholia to the notion of uncanny and claims, that, in order to overcome conflict with maternal authority, the male child relies on the restorative role of humour or play. As Capps puts it, "the relationship between a boy and his mother is central to his development of a melancholy self" (Capps 2007: 369). Capps draws on Sigmund Freud's idea that in melancholia the lost object becomes internalised to the extent one experiences both sadness over the loss of the mother's unconditional love and the feeling of rage triggered by a deep sense of injury:

> This self-inflicted rage explains why a melancholic individual engages in excessive self-reproach, for much of the reproach is actually directed against the internalised lost-object –

> the mother who treated her child with unconditional love (Capps 2007: 370).

Brodsky's claim that "every child feels guilty towards his parents, for somehow he knows that they will die before him" (Brodsky 1987a: 478-479) links his melancholic mode of thinking more with his mother than his father. Thus, describing a theft of a large amount of money from his mother, he writes:

> In the end my father and I came up with the money, and she went to the sanatorium. However, it wasn't the lost money she was crying about… Tears were infrequent in our family; the same goes to a certain extent for the whole of Russia. 'Keep your tears for more grave occasions', she would tell me when I was small. And I am afraid I've succeeded more than she wanted me to. I suppose she wouldn't approve of me writing all this, either" (Brodsky 1987a: 480).

The suppressed pain and anger are referenced in the essay as a manifestation of the ritualised stoic type of behaviour which Brodsky deems excessive:

> This was not some brand of stoicism. There was no room for any posture or philosophy, however minimalist, in the reality of that time, which compromised every conviction or scruple by demanding total submission to the sum of their opposites. […] It was simply an attempt to keep one's back straight in a situation of complete dishonor; to keep one's eyes open. That's why tears were out of the question (Brodsky 1987a: 480-481).

Another important episode described in Brodsky's essay relates to his identity as a poet who learnt how to recite poems and read books from his mother who was a great admirer of Russian classical literature. He asserts that he spent more time with his mother than with his father and acquired many of her habits:

> She taught me how to read at the age of four; most of my gestures, intonations, and mannerisms are, I presume, hers. Some of the habits, too, including the one of smoking (Brodsky 1987a: 485).

Brodsky ironically observes that her mother's Jewish background did not affect her career to the same extent as it affected his father's employability, due to her attractive North European looks which, in his opinion, were a blessing:

> She had no trouble getting employment. As a result she had to work all her conscious life. Presumably having failed to disguise her petit bourgeois class origins, she had to give up her hopes for higher education, and spent her entire life in various offices, as either a secretary or an accountant (Ibid.).

Brodsky states proudly that she refused to join the Communist party and declined a job offer at the Defence Ministry by humorously replying that she did not want to salute her husband at home and did not wish to turn her wardrobe into an arsenal (Brodsky 1987a: 486). It appears that even his mother's name Maria invoking the Mother of God is given several variants in the essay, so the complexity of her character and elusiveness of her identity could be highlighted.
Most importantly, Brodsky draws the reader's attention to how his mother's devotion to reading books was religious-like:

> Returning from work, my mother would invariably have in her string bag full of potatoes and cabbage a library book wrapped in a newspaper cover to prevent it from getting soiled (Brodsky 1987a: 488).

This observation is indicative of the fact that Brodsky having experienced life in the West, which he had grown to idealise as a Russian dissident in the past prior to his emigration to America, started to realise that modern ethical thought produced a false assumption suggesting wrongly, as Eagleton reminds us, that "love is first of all a personal affair rather than a political one" (Eagleton 2007: 413). The materialist philosophy foregrounded the evolutionist view of personal development and promoted the understanding of ethics as

aesthetic associated with pleasure, fulfillment and creativity. Brodsky's essay *In a Room and a Half* advocates the view that love as reciprocal self-fulfillment represents the highest human value and should be extended to a whole form of social life. In this sense, his view of love and family appears to be informed not only by his mother, a lover of the Russian nineteenth-century novel, but also by Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky whose influence on the development of dialogic imagination in the twentieth-century thought is immense. Brodsky embraces Dostoevsky's passionate rejection of the utilitarian use of literature and his commitment to the idea of truth free from all distorting influences. Paradoxically, by executing a journey down the memory lane in an adopted language, Brodsky rediscovered his roots and renewed his bond with Russian literary tradition. Yet Brodsky abandons canonical use of the autobiographical genre for the construction of the universalising life story and celebrates the attainment of a special kind of double vision that brings together his Russian and American identities.

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