

## Joseph Brodsky the War Poet

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It might be expected that a poet born in Leningrad in May 1940, who survived the first winter of the Siege before being evacuated with his mother in April 1942, then returned in 1944 to spend much of his childhood in streets scarred by air raids and artillery fire, would have reflected this experience in his work. It is almost certain that a poet who followed a conventional path into the Soviet literary establishment would have done so. But Joseph Brodsky did not follow such a path, and his recollections of the war did not adhere to conventional Soviet pieties. As Valentina Polukhina noted, ‘From the very beginning of his writing, Brodsky created a language which is highly distinct from the official language of the state, thereby attracting attention to himself and bringing misfortune on himself’.<sup>1</sup> The way Brodsky wrote about war emphasized his refusal to recycle the clichés of official culture, in which the 1941-45 war came to occupy a central role. So, for example, when, in the course of an essay on St Petersburg, he evokes the interiors of wartime Siege victims’ homes in a way that first suggests, and then undercuts the suggestion that their suffering has left a persistent physical trace: ‘however repainted and stuccoed, the ceilings and facades of this unconquered city still seem to preserve the stain-like imprints of its inhabitants’ last gasps and last gazes. Or perhaps it’s just bad paint and bad stucco’.<sup>2</sup> Brodsky keeps the pathos in check while also evoking the ordeal undergone by individuals and recognising their humanity.

Lev Losev’s biography of Brodsky records his early interest in military matters which was stimulated by his father’s tales of military service, the spectacle of fireworks celebrating the victory in 1945 and of prisoners of war clearing the rubble of bomb-damaged buildings, as well as regular childhood visits to the Museum of the Defence of Leningrad that was not far away from his home.<sup>3</sup> Brodsky’s interest continued into his later life in emigration, as one of his American translators, George L. Kline, recalls. Kline had seen wartime service as a navigator in military aviation. Brodsky treasured a photograph of Kline receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1944, as well as Kline’s service cap.<sup>4</sup> His essay ‘Spoils of War’ explores the war’s legacy as received by young Soviet citizens of his generation. There was pride in being on the victorious side: ‘If anybody profited from the war, it was us children. Apart from having survived it, we were richly provided with stuff to romanticize or fantasize about. In addition to the usual childhood diet of Dumas and Jules Verne, we had military paraphernalia, which always goes well with boys. With us, it went exceptionally well, since it was our country that won the war’.<sup>5</sup> Yet this patriotic pride, which aligned with official narratives of endurance and victory, was just one aspect of the war’s legacy. The war also brought an influx of objects and influences from the world beyond the Soviet Union. In ‘Spoils of War’ Brodsky contemplates the square cans of corned beef – wartime food aid from the United States – that were repurposed, when empty, for various domestic uses, as well as other items, such as the Phillips short-wave radio which brought American jazz into his home, and the trophy films with Errol Flynn, that entranced the poet and his contemporaries with a vision

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<sup>1</sup> Valentina Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky: a Poet for Our Time*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brodsky, ‘A Guide to a Renamed City’, in id., *Less than One: Selected Essays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, pp. 69-94 (91).

<sup>3</sup> Lev Losev, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> George L. Kline, Cynthia L. Haven, *The Man who Brought Brodsky into English: Conversations with George L. Kline*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2021, pp. 156-7.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Brodsky, ‘Spoils of War’, *The Threepenny Review*, 64, Winter 1996, pp. 6-9 (6).

of an utterly un-Soviet, un-Stalinist way of being.<sup>6</sup> In ‘Spoils of War’ Brodsky characterizes the war as a catalyst that helped to break through the ‘buttoned-up, rigid, inhibited, winter-minded standards of private and public conduct’; the Tarzan films, shown in the early 1950s, made, Brodsky wrote, an unparalleled contribution to destalinization.<sup>7</sup>

The association of war with the disruption of rigid and limited ways of seeing the world left its mark on the way that Brodsky represented war in his poetry. Even though war did not become one of his more prominent themes, it crops up in many different contexts, in poems drawing on episodes from classical mythology, such as the Trojan War, as well as poems responding to current events: the death of one of the most eminent wartime military leaders, Marshall Georgii Zhukov, in 1974, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in the same year, and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. There are also poems in which it is difficult or impossible to identify the war being portrayed with a particular historical event, such as *Letter to General Z. (Письмо Генералу З.)* of 1968, or the long-standing war taking place somewhere on the edge of the Roman empire in *Letters to a Roman Friend (Письма римскому другу)* of 1972, both first published in 1977.<sup>8</sup>

Brodsky’s frame of reference for writing about war goes far beyond the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45. This chapter considers two of his poems related to war that enter into a dialogue with Russian poems on the same theme from earlier times: *On the Death of Zhukov (На смерть Жукова)*, written in 1974 and first published in the same year, and *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980 (Стихи о зимней кампании 1980-го года)*, written in 1980 and first published in 1981.<sup>9</sup> Others look to the literature of classical antiquity. The poem *Sonnet (Сонет)*, ‘Great Hector has been killed by arrows’ (‘Великий Гектор стрелами убит’), written in 1962 and first published in 1965, fills in a gap in the action of a tragedy by Sophocles on the fate of Ajax, one of the most powerful Greek warriors who took part in the Trojan War.<sup>10</sup> The poems to be considered in this chapter owe very little to conventional Soviet-era approaches to writing about war. The official canon of poems about World War Two represents the war as having a clear purpose and meaning. It acknowledges the suffering caused by the war, and endows it with meaning as part of a collective act of sacrifice that guarantees eventual victory and eternal memory for the dead. In a 1985 article in the *Times Literary Supplement* Brodsky considers Soviet writers’ responses to the war, finding that almost all of the prose written before the 1960s put forward an interpretation that was ‘by and large, a matter of embellishing the state-sponsored version’.<sup>11</sup> Brodsky recognises the merits of the prose written in the 1960s and later by authors including the Belarusian Vasil Bykau and Viacheslav Kondratev, in its ‘openness to individual suffering’, and declares that poetry’s affinity with tragedy enabled it to perform ‘a far more universal job’ when it came to representing the war. He singles out poets of the war generation, such as Aleksandr Tvardovskii, Sergei Narovchatov, and Evgenii Vinokurov who might, in a different cultural climate, have had a significant effect on the poetry that followed. The two poets whose war poetry Brodsky most admires are Semen Lipkin and Boris Slutskii. Of Slutskii, he writes: ‘The sense of tragedy that his poems convey frequently extends, almost against his own will, from the concrete and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Pis'mo generalu Z.*, in *Sochineniia*, U-Faktoriia, Ekaterinburg, 2002, pp. 160-5; *Pis'ma rimskomu drugu*, *ibid.*, pp. 235-8, and translated as *Letters to a Roman Friend* in *Collected Poems in English*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2002, pp. 58-60.

<sup>9</sup> *Na smert' Zhukova*, in *Sochineniia*, pp. 258-9; ‘On the Death of Zhukov’, in *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 85-6; *Stikhi o zimnei kampanii 1980-go goda*, in *Sochineniia*, pp. 524-7; *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980*, in *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 254-6.

<sup>10</sup> Brodsky, ‘Velikii Gektor strelami ubit’, in *Kholmy: stikhotvoreniia*, Azbuka-klassika, St Petersburg, 2007, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Brodsky, ‘The Soviet Union’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 May 1985, pp. 543-4 (543).

historical to the existential: where every tragedy, in the end, belongs'.<sup>12</sup> Brodsky's comment on the way Slutskii's poems reach beyond the 'concrete and historical' circumstances of war to consider questions of human existence may provide some insight into what Brodsky saw as important in poetry about war.

As this chapter will show, whether they are dealing with wars in classical mythology, wars taking place in an unspecified location and time, or particular conflicts in modern times, Brodsky's poems share similar features in the way that they represent war, the people involved in it, the environment of war and the inanimate objects in that environment. Often the war is portrayed in ways that emphasize a lack of action and movement, and it is hard to tell what the conflict is meant to achieve. It can be difficult to get a clear sense of time and place. The human beings that are involved in war appear to be passive, lack agency or even animacy; sometimes they feature only through the naming of isolated body parts. Inanimate objects, whether man-made or part of the natural world, by contrast, are endowed with agency and emotions and personified, while the people seen alongside them resemble objects. The perspective provided by the poems' first-person speaker is often detached, emotionally reserved, ambivalent.

Just occasionally there is a poem in which the speaker sets his detachment aside. *Bosnia Tune*, written in English in 1992, the year the conflict in that part of former Yugoslavia began, is an unequivocal statement on the burden of moral responsibility that rests on those in the international community who would rather ignore the mass killing in former Yugoslavia. They are complicit with the perpetrators:

Time, whose sharp bloodthirsty quill  
parts the killed from those who kill,  
will pronounce the latter band  
as your brand.<sup>13</sup>

*Bosnia Tune* condemns violence and the lack of will to protect its victims. *Letter to General Z.*, written in 1968, consists of a monologue addressed by a soldier to a general, announcing his refusal to continue serving in a war that has no justifiable, or even discernible purpose. The poem is, if obliquely, a response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which Brodsky saw as shameful. The soldier declares, sarcastically:

... сюда нас, думаю, завела  
не стратегия даже, но жажда братства:  
лучше в чужие встревать дела,  
когда в своих нам не разобраться.

(We were brought here, I think, / not even because of strategy but because of a thirst for brotherhood: / it's better to meddle in other people's business / when we aren't able to sort out our own.)<sup>14</sup>

Although the poem does not express ambivalence about the nature and purpose of the war, the way it represents war has features that are shared by some of the poems discussed in this chapter. There is uncertainty about the time and the place in which the war is going on. The epigraph claims to be from a song about the Siege of La Rochelle, but the details in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 544.

<sup>13</sup> Brodsky, *Bosnia Tune*, in *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 491-2 (492). First published in *The New York Times*, 18 November 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Brodsky, *Pis'mo generalu Z.*, in *Sochineniia*, pp. 160-5; English translations by Katharine Hodgson for all quoted poems except those published in Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 2002.

poem are ambiguous, mixing the archaic with the modern in mentions of a ‘crusade’ but also the ‘red star’ emblem of Soviet armed forces. The modern world collides with classical mythology when the speaker refers to the gaze of the Leitz [camera] alongside the stare of the Gorgon. Spatial references are also confusing: the Equator is said to be wider than the stripe on the general’s trousers, compass directions are not reliable, distance has made radio messages indecipherable. The war offers no occasion for heroic action; it has degenerated into immobility, with little prospect of further movement. Trapped in a dead end, the army has lost all discipline and virtually disintegrated.

### ‘I feel as though I was a part of World War II’.<sup>15</sup>

In his poetry, and in his life, Brodsky drew distinctions between wars that were unjust and shameful, and those which were fought in a just cause. He expressed his support for the American involvement in the Vietnam War, as part of a necessary resistance to the spread of Communism.<sup>16</sup> There is no sign that he understood the Second World War as anything except a just war. Yet his childhood pride in his country’s victory did not translate into simplistic triumphalism in the poems that he wrote on that war. Instead, he wrote poems that reflected on the persistence of that war in its physical, concrete traces, and how the war was remembered. The three poems under discussion in this part of the chapter deal with a memorial, the side-by-side existence of the present and wartime catastrophe, and the commemoration of a leading Soviet military figure.

The first of these, *The Fountain in Memory of the Heroes of the Defence of the Hanko Peninsula* (*Фонтан памяти героев обороны полуострова Ханко*), written in 1970 and first published in 1977, concerns a monument near Brodsky’s home in Leningrad. The monument, built in 1945, comprises a façade, a commemorative inscription and a fountain. Its style echoes the Baroque style of the nearby Church of St Panteleimon, built to mark the Russian naval victory over Sweden in 1714 at Gangut, later known as Hanko; the 1945 monument commemorates Soviet troops who lost their lives in autumn 1941 defending a naval base at Hanko. Brodsky does not make the connection with Russian imperial military might explicit, however, being more concerned with the condition of the memorial in the present day. The water pipes installed by the city authorities to feed the fountain have fallen into disrepair:

Здесь должен быть фонтан, но он не бьет.  
Однако северная сырость наша  
освобождает власти от забот,  
и жажды не испытывает чаша.<sup>17</sup>

(There is meant to be a fountain here, but it does not work. / However, our northern dampness / relieves the authorities from concern, / and the basin feels no thirst.)

The opening stanza implies that the authorities are indifferent to the memory of those who died. Nature, however, compensates for their neglect by filling the basin of the fountain with rainwater. In that northern city the rainfall is, the poem concludes, more reliable than

<sup>15</sup> George L. Kline, Cynthia L. Haven, *The Man who Brought Brodsky into English*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>16</sup> See Anna Aslanyan’s blog for *London Review of Books*, ‘Brodsky Among Us’, 26 May 2015  
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2015/may/brodsky-among-us>>

<sup>17</sup> Brodsky, *Fontan pamiati geroev oborony poluostrova Khanko*, in *Konets prekrasnoi epokhi: stikhotvoreniia 1964-1971*, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1977, p. 74.

human tears. The impersonal processes of the natural world, it seems, provide a surrogate expression of ephemeral human grief and memory:

И вы, герои Ханко, ничего  
не потеряли: метеопрогнозы  
твердят о постоянстве H<sub>2</sub>O,  
затмившем человеческие слезы.<sup>18</sup>

(And you, heroes of Khanko, have lost nothing: / the weather forecasts / speak repeatedly of the constancy of H<sub>2</sub>O / which has eclipsed human tears.)

The suggestion that inanimate natural phenomena can manifest emotional responses when humans appear to have lost their capacity to do so is something that occurs in other poems which will be discussed below. The other two poems to be considered in this section are concerned with the human memory of the Second World War. *Rotterdam Diary* (*Роттердамский дневник*) was written in July 1973 and first published in 1987. In each stanza the present day co-exists with the traumatic wartime past. The city of Rotterdam is evoked in the first stanza from the perspective of the speaker who is taking shelter under an umbrella on a rainy evening. The falling rain prompts the speaker to imagine the Luftwaffe bombs that fell on the city in May 1940 and obliterated it; he recalls the event with an emphasis on the emotional indifference of the streets and buildings that were destroyed:

Города  
не люди и не прячутся в подъезде  
во время ливня. Улицы, дома  
не сходят в этих случаях с ума  
и, падая, не призывают к мести.<sup>19</sup>

(Cities are not people and do not hide in doorways / during a downpour. Streets and houses / do not, in these cases, lose their reason, / and call for vengeance as they fall.)

These visceral emotional responses are set at a distance from the people who experienced the destruction of the city in 1940. By separating the emotions from the people who felt them, the poem foregrounds the speaker's air of detachment, as does the oddly euphemistic phrase 'в этих случаях' (in these cases) used to denote the violent destruction of cities by aerial bombardment. This sense of ironic detachment persists in the second stanza, in which the speaker, viewing the high-rise buildings which have replaced the old city, reflects that Le Corbusier and the Luftwaffe both expended considerable efforts on transforming Europe's appearance. It is only in the final stanza that the violent deaths of the inhabitants of wartime Rotterdam intrude less obliquely on the present-day city. Using the metaphor of a stump left after the amputation of a limb, that continues to cause pain even after many years have passed, the speaker acknowledges the persistence of painful memories, of the city and its people who were destroyed, but not entirely erased from memory. The speaker, high up in one of the city's tower blocks, realizes that he and his companions are sharing the same space as the victims of the air raids thirty years before:

Ночь. Три десятилетия спустя

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Brodsky, *Rotterdamskii dnevnik*, in *Chast' rechi, izbrannye stikhi 1962-1989*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1990, pp. 223-4 (224).

мы пьем вино при крупных летних звездах  
 в квартире на двадцатом этаже –  
 на уровне, достигнутом уже  
 взлетевшими здесь некогда на воздух.<sup>20</sup>

(Night. Thirty years later / we drink wine under the large summer stars / in a flat on the twentieth floor, / at a height that was already reached by those who, / at one time, flew up into the air here.)

The image of the stump, a reminder of severe bodily injury, is presented in an oddly disembodied and abstract way. The final stanza, however, goes on to evoke the violent deaths of many individual people, translating this abstract image into broken human flesh. The poem closes with an uncomfortable contrast between people enjoying a pleasant summer's evening together in the present and the bodies of those killed in the bombing that were flung into the air by the force of the explosions. The reality of the way the people of Rotterdam died, more or less suppressed in the first two stanzas, breaks through in the final line, even though the speaker does not voice an emotional response directly. His language suggests detachment: in the first stanza, when the people, defined as the thing that cities are not, are named as 'люди' (people). When it comes to evoking their horrible fate, they are unnamed, referred to only in a participial construction: 'those who flew upwards'. In a poem which maintains its emotional distance on the level of language, the final contrast between past and present is shockingly abrupt, as imagination bridges the gulf in both space and time between the peaceful city and the horrific deaths of the people of Rotterdam in 1940.

The brutality of war is acknowledged in *On the Death of Zhukov*. Here, however, the carnage is attributed not to enemy action, but to the actions of one of the most celebrated Soviet military leaders, Marshall Zhukov. The way the war was officially remembered in the Soviet Union was silent about the human cost of the war that had resulted from Soviet generals' often casual attitude towards sustaining heavy losses in battle. Official memory also preferred to overlook Zhukov's own unjust treatment by Stalin, who demoted him and sent him to a posting in the provinces far from Moscow only a few months after he had played a central part in the Victory parade there.

Brodsky's poem is not unwilling to recognise Zhukov's merits, acknowledging that he led his forces in a just cause ('к правому делу' ['in a just cause']), admires his military brilliance, and acknowledges his role as a saviour of his country.<sup>21</sup> It also notes, with some sympathy, Zhukov's post-war demotion, and sets him alongside Roman generals Belisarius and Pompey, who like him paid a price for military success and were mistreated by the state they served. But the poem also expresses considerable ambivalence towards Zhukov. This is achieved in part through the way it deploys allusions to a poem of 1800 by Gavriila Derzhavin commemorating a celebrated Russian commander of an earlier era, General Aleksandr Suvorov.<sup>22</sup> The meter, language and style of *On the Death of Zhukov* echo Derzhavin's poem, suggesting their affinity. Yet Brodsky's poem is more like a mirror-image of Derzhavin's than a copy, an image that is inverted even as it is reproduced. Music, or its absence, is a prominent feature in each poem. Brodsky begins his poem with the absence of sound: he can see the funeral procession and the trumpets being played, but the wind carries away the sound of the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Brodsky, *Na smert' Zhukova*, in *Sochineniia*, p. 258; 'On the Death of Zhukov', *Collected Poems in English*, p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Gavriila Derzhavin, *Snegir'*, in *Stikhotvoreniia*, Sovetskii pisatel', Leningrad, 1951, p. 283. For more on the connections and contrasts between the two poems, see Mikhail Lotman, 'On the Death of Zhukov', in Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina, eds, *Joseph Brodsky: the Art of a Poem*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999, pp. 44-58.

mournful music. At the conclusion of his poem, Brodsky calls for music. At the start of Derzhavin's poem, the speaker twice instructs a bullfinch not to sing its martial tune, insisting that the death of Suvorov is more fittingly marked by the music of the lyre than by a march for a leaderless army. Brodsky's poem ends with an inversion of Derzhavin's order to the bullfinch not to sing, as he calls for military music from the drum and fife (the instrument to which Derzhavin compares the song of the bullfinch).

The different ways that the two poets evoke music and its absence is, however, not the only striking contrast that emerges from a comparison of their work. Their portrayals of the two deceased military leaders have nothing in common. Derzhavin has nothing but admiration for Suvorov and sorrow at his loss; his poem emphasizes Suvorov's self-sacrifice, his willingness to endure cold, heat, to sleep on straw, if at all, in devoted service of the monarch. Brodsky admires Zhukov's skill and achievements, but when it comes to sacrifice, he speaks only of his apparent indifference to the loss of life, his readiness to sacrifice the lives of his own soldiers and so to buy military success with the price of their blood. In Brodsky's portrayal of Zhukov there is no account of his heroic actions, in fact there are only a limited number of verbs that denote actions carried out by him. The first stanza ends by reporting his journey into death: 'В смерть уезжает пламенный Жуков' ('thundering Zhukov rolls towards death's mansion'), and the third begins with an evocation of the price that his soldiers paid as they followed Zhukov's orders: 'Сколько он пролил крови солдатской' ('How much dark blood, soldiers' blood, did he spill then'). The verbs in the third stanza that follow are questions and speculation. The one piece of reported speech attributed to Zhukov is what he might say to his soldiers if he encountered them in hell: 'Я воевал' ('We were fighting to win').<sup>23</sup>

### War as Estrangement

Zhukov's imagined response in the afterlife to the soldiers who died under his command suggests an understanding of his role as military commander that exempts him from any responsibility for the human cost of his decisions. The chilly detachment demonstrated by Brodsky's Zhukov is echoed, at least in part, in the three poems discussed in this section, all of which represent war observed from a perspective of detachment and estrangement. The violence of war is often described in ways that make it seem impersonal, something that takes place without human intervention. The people that are represented appear to have little or no agency; inanimate objects, on the other hand, can be personified and act independently. The first two poems are connected with classical antiquity: one by virtue of its setting on Cyprus, the other because it concerns the death of Greek hero Ajax, an episode from the Trojan War that is told both in the *Iliad* and a tragedy by Sophocles. The third poem, on the Soviet war in Afghanistan, depicts a shameful campaign which reveals the degradation of humanity, now on the verge of climbing back down the evolutionary ladder.

*War in the Refuge of Aphrodite* (*Война в убежище Киприды*), written in 1974 and published in 1987, prompted by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus that took place in that year. 'Kiprida' is another name for the Greek goddess Aphrodite, whose home was believed to be on the island of Cyprus. In the first two stanzas, classical antiquity and the natural world provide Brodsky with the means to set the violence of war at a distance. At the start of the poem the war is aestheticized by descriptions of violence through comparisons drawn from nature: an explosion is likened to a momentary palm tree swaying in the breeze. The poem's title might lead readers to expect some kind of retelling of an episode from mythology. This is provided in the second stanza, which alludes to the story of Phaethon, the son of Helios the sun

<sup>23</sup> Brodsky, *Na smert' Zhukova*, in *Sochineniia*, p. 258; 'On the Death of Zhukov', *Collected Poems in English*, p. 85.

god who insisted on driving his father's sun-chariot across the skies, only to be struck down by one of Zeus's thunderbolts as a punishment for having lost control of the chariot and set the world on fire. In the context of modern warfare, the story loses its association with the gods: the modern-day equivalent of Phaethon is an airman whose plane has crashed into the sea. In the third and final stanza, classical references and imagery drawn from the natural world are set aside. The poem presents a scene that is shaped by comparisons drawn unmistakably from the modern world, in which Cyprus is a popular holiday destination rather than a retreat for a goddess:

И в позах для рекламного плаката  
на гальке, раскаленной добела,  
маячат неподвижные тела,  
оставшись загорать после заката.<sup>24</sup>

(And in poses fit for an advertising poster, / on white-hot pebbles, / motionless bodies loom, / remaining there to sunbathe after sunset.)

These are not sunbathers oblivious to the fact that the sun has already set, but dead bodies lying on the beach. The image of corpses as sunbathing holidaymakers is a macabre parody of the everyday life which the war has interrupted. The agents of this catastrophe are unnamed and invisible, but more powerful than Zeus and his thunderbolts, their victims more numerous and innocent of any misdemeanours that might have provoked divine wrath.

In Brodsky's 1962 sonnet, 'Great Hector has been killed by arrows' there is no collision of the ancient and modern worlds, but a close-up view of a legendary combatant, the Greek warrior Ajax. According to legend, earlier in the Trojan War Hector and Ajax fought one another in single combat. Neither could prevail over the other, and they parted amicably, having exchanged gifts: Hector gave Ajax his sword, while Ajax gave Hector a belt. Brodsky's poem portrays no military action, but shows instead the aftermath of Hector's death, as his soul drifts across dark waters while his widow, Andromache, weeps unseen in the distance. The last ten lines of this sonnet focus our attention on Ajax as he wades along a river. He seems to be following Hector and mourning for him, although what runs from his eyes are not tears, but life:

Теперь печальным вечером Аякс  
бредет в ручье прозрачном по колено,  
а жизнь бежит из глаз его раскрытых  
за Гектором...<sup>25</sup>

(Now, in the sad evening, Ajax / wanders up to his knees in a transparent stream, / and life runs from his open eyes / after Hector...)

Ajax, wading downstream, appears to be drawn onwards by his sword, which, in spite of its weight, is nevertheless borne along by the current. The heroic warrior seems to be in the grip of mysterious forces, unable, or unwilling to resist them.

Without knowledge of the context, readers face a considerable challenge in making sense of this enigmatic short poem. The tragedy *Ajax*, by Sophocles, tells the story of the hero's madness and suicide. The action begins after Ajax has slaughtered large numbers of cattle and

<sup>24</sup> Brodsky, *Voyna v ubezhishche Kipridy*, in *Oseniii krik iastreba: stikhotvoreniia* (St Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2008), p. 162.

<sup>25</sup> Brodsky, 'Velikii Gektor strelami ubit', in *Kholmy: stikhotvoreniia*, p. 36.



sheep, suffering from delusions that he is in fact killing Odysseus and his soldiers, with whom he is engaged in a feud. When Ajax comes to his senses he is overwhelmed by shame and speaks of his intention to head for the seashore and wash in the waters of the ocean, then find somewhere to bury his sword. The action represented in Brodsky's poem, it seems, takes place in between the scenes of Sophocles' play, showing Ajax's journey from the site of his mass slaughter of animals towards the shore where he takes his own life.

The story of Ajax, as told by Sophocles, reveals the hero's sense of complete disorientation. He has lived by a code which tells him to harm his enemies and help his friends. His recent experience has shown that an enemy, Hector, can become something closer to a friend; while some among the Greek forces, including Odysseus, can become deadly enemies.<sup>26</sup> In a world where deceit and changeability are in the ascendant the code by which Ajax has lived cannot serve. In legend, Ajax had the reputation among the Greeks as being second only to Achilles in military skill and courage. In Brodsky's poem he is being drawn towards solitary death, a dead man walking, stripped of any agency, in thrall to an inanimate object – the sword given to him by Hector – that he will shortly use to end his life.

If heroism is in short supply in Brodsky's portrayal of Ajax, it is completely absent from the battlefield represented in *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980*, on the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Like the poem commemorating Zhukov, this poem signals its connection to the Russian literary tradition. In this case it is the poem's epigraph which directs readers to Mikhail Lermontov's 1841 poem *The Dream (Сон)*, linking together a nineteenth-century war of imperial conquest with a military intervention that was claimed by the Soviet authorities to have been launched in response to an invitation from the Communist regime in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> The epigraph reproduces the first line of Lermontov's poem: 'In the midday heat in a valley in Dagestan', with just one change: the word 'жар' ('heat') is replaced by a synonym, 'зной'. It is perfectly logical that Brodsky's evocation of the war in Afghanistan is defined by the cold: the poem's title refers to a 'winter campaign'. The fact that the epigraph brings together both war and heat implies a relationship between the poems which rests both on similarity and contrast.

The cold, its manifestations, and its effects, pervades Brodsky's poem from start to finish, keeping this point of contrast to the fore. The poem begins by describing bullets moving urgently through the cold air in search of the warmth offered by human muscle and sinew, and ends with references to a white snowy world from which all human existence appears to have vanished. The cold appears at first to be confined to the immediate setting of the battlefield: the second stanza begins by evoking the invading forces as a personification of the North, spreading cold as they go, and describes the scene, in another distorted echo of Lermontov's line, as a 'Ясный морозный полдень в долине Чучмекистана' ('A bright, frosty noon in a Wogistan valley' – the place-name 'Chuchmekistan' does not denote a real place but expresses a dismissive attitude to non-Russians).<sup>28</sup> Towards the end of the poem our attention is directed much farther afield, into the airless cold of space, the lifeless stars, and a dog abandoned in its spacecraft. Finally, the poem returns to earth, a close-up view of a snowed-in hen coop, and to the prospect that no other colours now remain on the snowy white surface of the planet.

In the epigraph, the substitution of the word 'зной', a synonym for the original 'жар', in Lermontov's line is more likely to be a deliberate misquotation rather than accidental

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Ajax's predicament, see Bernard M. W. Knox, 'The Ajax of Sophocles', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 65 (1961), p. 1-37, and M. Sicherl, 'The Tragic Issue in Sophocles Ajax', *Greek Tragedy*, Yale Classical Studies, 25, T. F. Gould and J. C. Herington, eds, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 67-98.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Lermontov, *Son*, in *Stikhotvoreniia. Poemy*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1984, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> Brodsky, *Stikhi o zimnei kampanii 1980-go goda*, in *Sochineniia*, p. 524; *Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980*, in *Collected Poems in English*, p. 254.

misremembering. This ‘wrong word’ seems to prompt readers to go back to Lermontov’s poem and encounter there something else that pervades Brodsky’s poem: an unsettling sense of human existence in which the boundaries between being alive and being dead are blurred and inconsistent. The first-person speaker in Lermontov’s poem, a soldier, speaks of lying in a valley in Dagestan with a bullet in his chest. He seems to be speaking of his own death, of a dream experienced post mortem, but is not aware of his death, saying only that he slept a ‘dead sleep’ (‘спал я мертвым сном’). In this ‘dead sleep’ he dreams of a young woman back in Russia who is suddenly visited by a dream of his ‘familiar corpse’ (‘знакомый труп’) lying in Dagestan. The poem’s uncanny evocation of a liminal existence between death and life echoed in several ways by Brodsky’s *Lines on the Winter Campaign*. The combatants as portrayed in the first and third stanzas are evoked as body parts, dead flesh, barely sentient creatures. They are described first in terms of muscle and sinew in which the bullets seek warmth, and through reference to blood spurting after an explosion, and then as the ‘мерзнущая, сырая человеческая свинина’ (‘freezing / sprawling piles of human pig meat’) which lies on the ground.<sup>29</sup> Those who remain physically undamaged, for now, exist in a squalid limbo, their bodies evoked sketchily by reference to the effects of the cold and dirt in which they live. The soldiers’ external appearance as uniform as their inner lives, their memories outnumbered by the shells that are the tools of their trade:

Глеет кизяк, ноги окоченели;  
пахнет тряпьем, позабытой баней.  
Сны одинаковы, как шинели.  
Больше патронов, нежели воспоминаний...<sup>30</sup>

(‘The fuel dung smolders, legs stiffen in numbness. / It smells of old socks, of forgotten bath days. / The dreams are as identical, as are the greatcoats, / Plenty of cartridges, few recollections’).

These are human beings stripped of individuality and agency, they have no significant inner life to speak of. Meanwhile, objects that are part of the natural world are granted agency and manifest emotional responses: the mountains pass on their immobility to the bodies of the dead; the moon hides in the clouds from fear. The man-made objects created for the war, like the bullets at the start of the poem, are also personified. In the second stanza a tank with a landmine in its path is described as a ‘mechanical elephant’ confronted with a mouse. The machine’s metal form is described as an animal or human body: its gun is an elephant’s trunk, the process of firing the gun disgorges the lump in its throat caused by the horror of this confrontation. As it carries out this act of destruction, this now seemingly animate machine is possessed by the thought that it might, like Mohammed, move mountains:

Механический слон, задирая хобот  
в ужасе перед черной мышью  
мины в снегу, изрыгает к горлу  
подступивший комок, одержимый мыслью,  
как Магомет, сдвинуть с места гору.

<sup>29</sup> Brodsky, *Sochineniia*, p. 524; *Collected Poems in English*, p. 254.

<sup>30</sup> Brodsky, *Sochineniia*, p. 525; *Collected Poems in English*, p. 255.

(‘A mechanical elephant, trunk wildly waving / at the horrid sight of the small black rodent / of a snow-covered mine, spews out throat-clogging / lumps, possessed of that old desire / of Mohamet’s, to move a mountain’.)<sup>31</sup>

While objects take on a life of their own, the poem portrays human beings whose existence is diminished and deprived of meaning. The penultimate stanza, addressed by the speaker to unspecified listeners, or maybe just to himself, issues instructions in anticipation of a new ice age of slavery that is approaching: it is a strategy of immobility and muteness, hiding from the cold and passively awaiting the prospect of human evolution going into reverse:

Бормоча, выкатывая орбиты,  
мы превращаемся в будущие моллюски,  
ибо никто нас не слышит, точно мы трилобиты.

(‘Muttering, rolling our eyeballs upward, / we are becoming a new kind of bivalve, / our voice goes unheard, as though we were trilobites’.)<sup>32</sup>

Yet, although the speaker appears to count himself among those who must face this journey down the evolutionary ladder, he, like Lermontov’s mortally wounded soldier, continues to communicate from a liminal space, existing simultaneously as a ‘new kind of bivalve’ and a speaking human subject. Unlike the lyric subject in Lermontov’s poem, the speaker in Brodsky’s poem is not involved in the war, he merely observes and comments.

Brodsky’s poem does not state exactly what has precipitated humanity’s degradation; the war seems to have accelerated the process. There is nothing in the way war is represented here to suggest any kind of heroism or glory. Brodsky identifies the callow soldiers’ acts of killing as murder. Yet he bestows glory on the Soviet women who, in the 1960s, took the decision to kill their unborn children, declaring:

Слава тем, кто, не поднимая взора,  
шли в абортарий в шестидесятых,  
спасая отечество от позора!

(Glory to those who, their glances lowered, / marched in the sixties to abortion tables, / saving the homeland its present stigma’.)<sup>33</sup>

In this poem, as in his poem commemorating Zhukov, Brodsky speaks of saviours of the nation in connection with wars. Zhukov saved the nation from its enemies in a war seen as brutal but justified, while the women here are said to have saved it from disgrace by their refusal to give birth to those who would have fought in a needless, dehumanizing war.<sup>34</sup> The final stanza returns to this theme in its mention of shame, as the speaker describes the almost entirely white surface of the planet, seen as if from space, and comments that the red blush of shame has been used up for flags:

Склоны, поля, овраги  
повторяют своей белизною скулы.

<sup>31</sup> Brodsky, *Sochineniia*, p. 525; *Collected Poems in English*, p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> Brodsky, *Sochineniia*, pp. 526-7; *Collected Poems in English*, p. 256.

<sup>33</sup> Brodsky, *Sochineniia*, p. 525; *Collected Poems in English*, p. 255.

<sup>34</sup> The importance of shame and disgrace in the poem is highlighted by A.V. Korchinskii in his article “‘Novoe oledenenie’: Iosif Brodskii i global’nye ugrozy’, *Novyi filologicheskii vestnik*, 3: 54, 2020, pp. 213-24 (219-20).

Краска стыда вся ушла на флаги.

(‘Slopes, fields, and gullies / repeat in their whiteness cheekbones / (the colour of shame has all gone to the banners)’.)<sup>35</sup>

This metaphor recalls the earlier instances in the poem of human emotional responses transferred to inanimate objects. Humanity’s failure to make appropriate use of shame seems to have led it into reverse evolution, emptiness, wordless silence.

The concluding stanza evokes a white planet gripped by cold, above which a dog in a spacecraft makes a desperate call for a radio response from ‘Sharik’, which is both a commonly used name for a pet dog and a diminutive form of a word ‘шар’, meaning ‘globe’. ‘Sharik’ is repeated three times in just two lines of verse, giving its sound a particular prominence, as if to highlight its similarity to the word ‘жар’ (heat) that Brodsky has substituted in the poem’s epigraph. The earth’s globe has been transformed into a state where heat is present only in the similarity of the sounds of the words.

The only living creatures named in the final stanza are animals – not the ‘mechanical elephant’, but the hens in their coop that lay immaculately white eggs. In the final image of the poem, the human and the animal worlds meet. If there is anything black in the near-total whiteness, we are told, it is black letters, likened to the tracks of a hare that has, miraculously, survived. If Brodsky is following Lermontov’s lead by presenting us with a speaker who is able to communicate from an ambiguous state of being both dead (for the woman he dreams of) and not yet dead, still capable of speaking and dreaming, these black letters are implicitly a message from a survivor, which might yet offer readers a path back from the shameful degradation of humanity. Crucially, the speaker in Brodsky’s poem is not a participant in the war itself. By contrast, in the poem by Lermontov which provides Brodsky with his epigraph it is a combatant who speaks. By placing his speaker as an observer rather than as a participant, Brodsky lays claim to a certain amount of detachment and moral authority as he takes a specific conflict as a point of departure for a broader exploration of human existence under threat from humanity’s own ethical shortcomings.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered just some of Brodsky’s poems that are connected with war. It was a subject that he wrote about in the Soviet Union, and in the United States, in work written across his entire poetic career, from the early 1960s into the 1990s. While it would be inappropriate to claim Brodsky as a ‘war poet’, his repeated attention to this subject-matter seems to invite further exploration of the place it occupied in his reflections on human existence. The poems discussed here bring together myths of the ancient world, historical events from Brodsky’s own lifetime, and literature from the classical and the Russian tradition, and infuses them with his own distinctive voice and use of language.

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