

VARIATIONS ON A VIRGIL-THEME, FROM THE AENEID TO BRODSKY'S AENEAS AND DIDO AND ITS FURTHER PARAPHRASES

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American Nobel Prize-winner poet-essayist-professor is such an everyday companion of my life, as one of his poetical 'godmothers', Marina Tsvetaeva. My original intention – when thinking about this topic – was to compare his famous Virgilian imitation with István Baka's great and my own humble contribution, both based partly upon the *Aeneid*, partly upon Brodsky's text. But in a later phase of my preparatory work it became obvious that I can't spare a very different and rather detailed introductory part, about Brodsky's relationship to Aeneas, one of the most widely known 'displaced persons' of the antique world. Oddly enough, Joseph Brodsky composed his great imitative poem on the fourth part of the *Aeneid* at the age of 29, three years earlier than the beginning of his own involuntary exile to the USA. The importance of the question of Brodsky's pre-exilic interest in such a classical hero-in-exile figure can be indirectly strengthened by the fact that his probably closest fellow-poet, the Caribbean Derek Walcott (a poet-in-exile himself!) also composed an epic poem close to the *Aeneid*, though this author denied his connections with this ancient source of numerous modern poets.¹ It is almost evident that the 'non-Latinist' Walcott was directly or indirectly influenced by his spiritual brother's significant poem when composing his own *Omeros*. Returning to Brodsky, let me quote his own words and the comments of George L. Kline who was the translator of the first American volume of his poems² and the first American 'prophet' of his art: 'Joseph Brodsky has said (in an interview): »Perhaps exile is the poet's natural condition... I felt a certain privilege in the coincidence of my existential condition with my profession.« Growing up in Leningrad, the most deliberately willed and un-Russian of cities was a rehearsal for the condition of exile: »If it's true that every writer has to estrange himself from his experience to be able to comment upon it then the city (St Petersburg/Leningrad), by rendering this alienating service, saved them a trip.«³

Though professor Kline refers to our poet's being an inhabitant of un-Russian (because far too cosmopolitan, far too classicist to be truly Russian!) St Petersburg/Leningrad as a *rehearsal of exile*, we can also consider his Virgilian imitation as a very important moment of this long and painful rehearsal.

A great French-Swiss expert of his poetry emphasizes the ironic nature of Brodsky's journeys into the world of ancient Greece and Rome, according to him, these poems, with all their nostalgias and invisible tears, are able to maintain a healthy 'dryness' and the status of self-defence: 'The decapitated, antique statue with the sumptuous folds of its tunic (just think of the broad Greek tunic of Aeneas in our discussed poem! – É. P.) or peplum which at one and the same time reveal and conceal the body, seems to me the fundamental image... The marble toga is the unveiling of the body, modesty eternalized in stone – and total impersonalization....'⁴ The problematic of exile played such an important role in Brodsky's art that David M. Bethea dedicated a whole volume to it – which proved to be a key to Brodsky's sometimes

¹ Mary FULLER, *Forgetting the Aeneid*, American Literary History, Vol. 4, No. 3., Autumn 1992, 517–538.

² Joseph BRODSKY, *Selected Poems*, translated by George L. KLINE, Harper and Row, New York – Evanston – San Francisco – London 1973, 70.

³ George L. KLINE, *Variations on the Theme of Exile*, in: *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Lev LOSEFF and Valentina POLUKHINA, St Martin Press, New York, 1990, 56–89, 56.

⁴ Georges NIVAT, *The Ironic Journey into the Antiquity = Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*, Lev LOSEFF and Valentina POLUKHINA (eds), New York, St. Martin's Press; London, Macmillan, 1990, 89.

extravagant attitudes as well. Its title reveals something very similar to the above mentioned 'rehearsal-method', even in its title: 'Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile.'⁵ In the polemical introduction of this book we find Virgil's name at the beginning of the enumeration of his basic readings as a proof of a highly individual canon: "...we should always recall that he has never sought solidarity with any group or *interpretive community* other than his own private *dead poets' society*. Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Martial, Catullus, Horace, Dante, Donne, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Auden, Frost, Lowell – these are his jury of poets, his writing must meet their standards. *Joe Brodsky's list of good books*, a two-page photocopy of more than a hundred texts central to Western civilization, enjoys legendary status among Brodsky's literature students at Mount Holyoke.⁶ In this enumeration we find three great poets who – without exception – produced their own Virgilian imitations: Auden, Frost and Lowell. As we learn from Sven Birkert's article – and from numerous other sources – exactly these three literary guardian angels gathered around him straight after his exile, moreover as a 'freshman' of his new world he could immediately appear at a London poetry festival, together with Lowell: 'Auden promptly got the young poet invited to the Poetry International festival in London; there Brodsky met a galaxy of celebrated poets and shared the reading podium with Robert Lowell.'⁷ If we read Lowell's great poem, entitled *Falling Asleep over the Aeneid* we feel a deep similarity with Brodsky's much later Virgilian imitation. This earlier poem is an important item of the American cult of this Roman author: an old man in Concord forgets to go to the morning service. He falls asleep, while reading Virgil, and dreams that he is Aeneas, at the funeral of Pallas, an Italian prince...: 'I hold / The sword that Dido used. It tries to speak, / A bird with Dido's swarded breast, / Its beak / Clangs and ejaculates the Punic word...'⁸ Lowell's great poem is successfully mingling the elements of American history with some episodes of the *Aeneid*. This poem can remember us of an American academic event: a conference, organized by Sarah Pence, entitled: *Poets and Critics Read Virgil*. Brodsky – just one year before his death – played an important role in it; he was one of the keynote speakers. In the later volume of this conference Lowell's above mentioned poem is discussed with great respect by a poet-critic, J.D. McCaltchy: 'Pallas on his pyre, his head wrapped in Dido's gold-woven cloth, the trophies of war piled over the naked youth and Aeneas' tight-lipped farewell... it is at such passages that the lines blur. Rarely has a public moment rendered so intimately, nor the private so eloquently modelled into monumental scripture.'⁹

After recollecting some literary historians' and translators' opinion concerning Brodsky's ideas about the status of a poet's eternal exile and also about his Virgilian affinities, let us listen to his personal creed, in an essay of basic importance, entitled *Letter to Horace*. In one of its significant parts he analyzes the Dido-Aeneas love story, this time primarily based upon Ovid's *Heroides*: 'Equally doubtless is that Virgil never read Naso's *Heroides*; otherwise the former's treatment of Dido in the underworld would be less reprehensible. For he simply stashes her away, together with Sychaeus, her former husband, in some

⁵ David M. BETHEA, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (New Jersey), 1994.

⁶ David M. BETHEA, *ibid.* 6.

⁷ Sven BIRKERTS, *A Subversive in Verse. Review on the „Collected Poems in English” by Joseph Brodsky, ed. by Ann KJELLBERG, N.Y., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006*, New York Times, September 17, 2000. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/17/books/a-subversive-in-verse.html?pagewanted=1> (29.12.2009.)

⁸ Robert LOWELL, *Falling Asleep over the Aeneid*, in: *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, chosen and with an introduction by E. O. MATTHIJSSEN, OUP, New York 1950, 1103–1106.

⁹ Sarah SPENCE, *Poets and Critics Read Virgil, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001*, reviewed by Richard F. THOMAS, Bryn Mawr Classical Review, 2001, 12. 22. <http://bmcrc.brynmawr.edu/2001/2001-12-22.html> (29.12.2009)

remote nook of Elysium, where the two forgive and console each other. A retired couple in an old people's home out of our hero's way. To spare him agony, to provide him with a prophecy. Because the latter makes better copy. Anyhow, no second corporeality for Dido's soul.¹⁰ This essay was written in 1995, the Russian original of his *Aeneas and Dido*-poem in 1969. More than a quarter of a century is the gap between these two works, but what a similarity in the tone, in the poet's attitude and also in his intentions. Namely, to mollify the tragedy of Dido, the Carthaginian queen, with the cool logic and dry irony of his typical diction, instead of the usual, often maudlin and too operatic interpretation of this legend on a great love. His Virgilian colleague (another poet-in-exile!) and tutor at the beginning of Brodsky's life in the Western world, W.H. Auden greeted Kline's translations and the Russian poet's debut in the English-speaking world with the following lines: 'One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honour to the language in which it is written. (Or even: translated into! – É. P.) Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective. What the poet says has never been said before, but, once he has said it, his readers recognize its validity for themselves.'¹¹ Professor Kline's translation follows the original title: the Trojan hero's name stands first. The 'unique perspective' is obvious on reading this very meticulous and dense poem:

Joseph Brodsky: Aeneas and Dido (excerpts)

The great man stared out through the open window;
but her entire world ended at the border
of his broad Grecian tunic, whose abundance
of folds had the fixed, frozen look of seawaves
long since immobilized.

And he still stared
through the wide window with a gaze so distant
that his lips seemed to freeze and form a seashell,
one that concealed an inward, muted roar.
the shimmering horizon in his goblet
was motionless.

But her vast love appeared
to be only a fish, a fish which yet
might plunge into the sea after his ship,
knifing the waves with its slim supple body....¹²

Without supposing any 'male chauvinism' or male arrogance on the author's behalf, or without any female arrogance in my comment, I have to announce that Aeneas is the absolute main character in this poem; Dido is such an episodist whose tragedy is of secondary importance. You may ask, why? We can risk only one interpretation: because to Brodsky – after his bitter one and a half year of exile working as

¹⁰ Joseph BRODSKY, *Letter to Horace – On Grief and Reason, Essays*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, N. Y. 1996, 428–485, 445–446.

¹¹ Wystan Hugh AUDEN, Foreword – Joseph BRODSKY, *Selected Poems*, translated by George L. KLINE, Harper and Row, N. Y. – Evanston – San Francisco – London 1973, 9.

¹² Joseph BRODSKY, *ibid.* 70.

a woodcutter (1964–1965) – the personal loss of Aeneas could have been a greater tragedy than that of Dido's. He lost Troy, his country, and began his painful loitering, his search for a new homeland. That is why we – even we, female readers – can't blame our poet for this seemingly cruel, disdainful and emotionally neutral metaphor:

'But her vast love appeared / to be only a fish...' That is why we can't hate 'the great man' either, to whom his search for a new home meant more than the ardent passion of a great woman. To those who still look upon Brodsky as a 'Dido-hater', let me mention another Brodsky-essay, entitled *In Memory of Stephen Spender*. He very tenderly mentions in it some precious items of his former Russian household, among others a recording of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, sent to him by Stephen Spender himself, smuggled to the Soviet Union by Anna Akhmatova, Brodsky's other 'poetical godmother' who visited Oxford in 1965. Between 1965-69 Brodsky's soul could have been filled with love and sympathy, for Dido, who plays the most important role in Purcell's opera. In its music and libretto much more attention is paid to her than to the homeless Trojan hero.¹³ Finally, let us look into the most authentic background story of this Brodsky-poem, told by the author himself in an interview, from the early phase of his American period, from the summer of 1973: 'Brumm: Who are your Dido and Aeneas? Brodsky: They are mythical personages. This is the first difference. If it's close to Cavafy, that's fine but I don't think I wrote this poem because of him. I remember very well what influenced me. There were two things. The first was Anna Akhmatova's cycle about Dido and Aeneas. This was a sequence of love poems about her separation from her beloved. She embodied herself in Dido (that's what I did in my version! – É. P.) and the man was some kind of Aeneas... The second thing which more or less moved me to write about that was Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. There was a certain aria which Dido sings that was so penetrating, so moving, so despairing, I remember this when Elizabeth Schwarzkopf sings, 'Remember me'. It sounds absolutely incredible. There were a couple of reasons why I wrote this poem. Moreover, this is not a love poem. *Dido and Aeneas* is a poem about destruction – the destruction of Carthage which happened before it happened in the flesh. It's rather a historical poem in some sense. Aeneas left Dido. She didn't want him to leave, but he did. But in some centuries afterward came to destroy *Carthage*. So you see what love is and what betrayal in love is. The consequences are usually invisible but I was trying to make them more or less visible...' ¹⁴

Another quarter of a century passed after Professor Kline's interpretation, and a young Russian-American expert of classical philology – whose parents were Brodsky's personal friends –, Zara M. Torlone translated this poem again. As she told me in a letter, she is always ready to illustrate his essays, articles with her own adaptations. It happened so in the case of her very remarkable *Classical Myth in Joseph Brodsky*. This excellent work clarifies many details of the Dido-Aeneas relationship in Brodsky's poem: 'However, in Brodsky's poem, Aeneas is the focus of the work and Dido his shadow, almost an annoying obstacle to his divinely inspired designs. Here Brodsky' classical theme evokes two radically different views of love: "his" and "hers". The two contrasting perspectives are described in terms of "movement" and "immobility". The recurrent imagery of the sea only intensifies Aeneas' temporary immobility: his tunic is like a sea that has stopped its continuous motion, his lips resemble a seashell, the horizon reflected in his goblet is the sea horizon, and he himself is a ship which Dido (the fish) is ready to follow. The contrast to this picture of his immobility is immediately followed by the description of her emotional state.

¹³ Joseph BRODSKY, *In Memory of Stephen Spender – On Grief and Reason*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, N. Y. 1996, 459–484, 460.

¹⁴ Anne-Marie BRUMM, *The Muse in Exile: Conversations with the Russian Poet, Joseph Brodsky*, Mosaic 8:1 (1974 Fall) 229–246.

Her love is full of motion, speed and impulsiveness. But as his plans are set into motion, her mobility will freeze. ... Aeneas of Brodsky's poem is departing on an important journey where there is no place for her. In fact, Dido is only referred to only as "she", whereas Aeneas is twice described as a "great man" ... The Vergilian grandiosity of epic design has no place in Brodsky's lyric intending to show the final separation between man and woman. Aeneas pays a private price for national greatness, one of personal loss and forsaken love.¹⁵ Back to the old and new translations: the basic difference between the two interpretations can be seen in the reversed order of the names in the title. The one generation younger female translator probably intended to 'correct' Brodsky's original Russian title, with this change in the order of the two names:¹⁶ *Dido and Aeneas*.

Dido and Aeneas by Joseph Brodsky

The great man stared through the window
but her entire world ended with the border
of his broad Greek tunic, whose abundant folds
resembled the sea on hold.

And he still stared out through the window, and his gaze
was so far away from here, that his lips were immobile
like a seashell where the roar is hidden, and the horizon
in his goblet was still.

But her love
was just a fish—perhaps which might
plunge into the sea in the pursuit of the ship,
and knifing the waves with the supple body,
perhaps yet overtake him—but he,
he in this thoughts already strode upon the land.
And the sea became a sea of tears.
But, as one knows, precisely at the moment
of despair, the auspicious wind begins to blow.
And the great man left Carthage.
She stood before the bonfire, which her soldiers
had kindled by the city walls,
and she envisioned between the flame and smoke of the fire
how Carthage silently crumbled
ages before Cato's prophecy.

Translated by Zara M. Torlone

I would not risk interpreting it as a feminist gesture, but rather as a gesture of compensation on behalf of a female translator/literary historian: to offer a more noble position to a martyr of love. In other words: MsTorlone intended to restore Dido's position and tried to depict her as a heroine – and not as an

¹⁵ Zara M. TORLONE, *Classical Myth in Joseph Brodsky* in: *Classical and Modern Literature*, 23/1 (2003) 95-114, pp. 105, 107.

¹⁶ Joseph BRODSKY, *Dido and Aeneas*, translated by Zara M. TORLONE, <http://nauplion.net/DIDO.html> (29. 12. 2009)

Everywoman, a plain, unnamed 'she'. The same attitude can be witnessed in the probably best translation of this poem, created by István Baka, the poet laureate of Szeged, a quasi-Virgilian, exile-near character himself. Baka, the best Hungarian translator of the best of Russian poets, offers us a great invention in his own version: „Dido szerelme / halacska volt csak” – ‘The love of Dido was but a small fish...’¹⁷ This diminutive attribute – small – does not follow the Russian original, but it follows – with great empathy – the author’s original intentions. Namely: to reduce the tragic features of this classical ‘grand passion’, in order to defend Aeneas, the seemingly cruel and carrier-hunter ‘womanizer’. But István Baka went much further: after translating – or while translating – a rich collection of Brodsky’s poems, he risked to wear Brodsky’s mask when writing a great poem of his own, entitled *Aeneas and Dido*. Thanks to Baka’s (and also my own) excellent British-Hungarian translator, Peter Zollman, this poem can be read in English as well. Baka’s intention was an extremely unusual one: to describe the tasteless days of Aeneas in Rome, with his passive and neutral young wife, Lavinia who was unable to offer him a new home instead of Troy, the lost homeland:

István Baka: *Aeneas and Dido* (excerpts)

Our bed. Lavinia slumbers. Not a stir.
She’s younger, firmer-fleshed than you could claim,
yes, but flames that turn the human frame
into an altar, have never burnt in her.

Conceiving and bearing without any joy,
she fills up like a larder every year.
My sons will be cold eyed, puzzling to hear,
all Latin speakers and strangers to Troy.

God save my new, still unimportant place.
Why do I miss my Troy much less than Carthage?
Although I’ve lost most of my valiant band,

why you alone enjoy the moot advantage
of me still yearning after your fading grace?
Dido, my gracious queen, I hate this land.

translated by Peter Zollman

Baka’s paraphrase gave me the idea to re-create his poem and also Brodsky’s one in an imitative verse, this time primarily from Dido’s perspective, or in Dido’s mask. This very poem became the title-giving one of my eleventh volume of poetry: *Dido’s Last Message*. Its frontispiece was painted by Márton Barabás, under the very strong influence of Purcell’s ‘Dido-friendly’ opera. This much shorter and surely weaker imitation of mine also has an English version, thanks to Bernard S. Adams, an excellent interpreter of Miklós Bethlen and Bethlen Kata and other early modern Hungarian authors.

¹⁷ Jozsif BRODSZKIJ: *Új élet*, BAKA István fordításában, Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs 1997, 18.

Éva Petrőczy: Dido's Last Message

*„Our bed, Lavinia slumbers. Not a stir.
She's younger, firmer fleshed...”*

Baka I.: Aeneas and Dido

I see you weary of Lavinia
and every fibre of your being
cries out for me, for Dido.
for me, who no longer am in

the first flush of youth, but am
destiny attained
and left forlorn,
she who so has loved

the man of Troy
that even from afar it pains his eyes,
salt-soaked and beauteous,
that he will never see me more.

Beneath me wails the pyre
on which you too, my love, are burnt.
You too, my love, though you live on:
an empty, frigid sea-shell of yourself.

(Translated by Bernard S. Adams)

I am very much contented with his version, apart from the closing line in which he has changed the 'empty sea-shell' of my original text into 'frigid shadow'. Through this radical change the seaside scenery -- which is of basic importance from Virgil's time until now -- totally disappears. My own version is partly the result of the seminars and doctoral school tutorials where I had the privilege to analyze Brodsky's prose and poetry with my students. It does not mean -- I hope, at least -- that my small poetical effort is just a barren appendix to the precious works of my predecessors. I hope it is evident to the listeners/readers of my Dido-poem that I intended to throw light upon the afterlife of Aeneas from an undoubtedly feminine perspective. In other words: to show his personal fiasco when trying to find the lost homeland without Dido, the only woman who could be his home, his shelter. I do not blame the hero of Troy, one of the legendary founders of Rome, but the sad results of self-denial must be described sometimes. The other basic idea of my work is a plain, but rather up-to-date one: glory to the strength, to the splendour of youth, but the altar-building, the stone-melting passion of riper age can't be neglected; not even nowadays, when to be aged is considered to be a shame, a sin.

I started my survey with quoting from a few theoretical works on Brodsky, and then I turned to some examples of poetical practice. Finally, let me return again to theory, to Dryden's words from *The Preface*

to *Ovid's Epistles*. The steps of text-transformation in this famous preface can be perfectly illustrated by the translations and variations mentioned in my presentation. Dryden – the most famous English translator of the full text of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1697) – offered three categories which seem to be clear-cut and logical even nowadays: 'All Translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads. First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an Author's word by word, and line by line, from one language into another. [G. L. Kline's and Zara M. Torlone's Brodsky-translation belongs to this category.] The second way is that of Paraphrase or Translation with latitude when the Author is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not alter'd. [It's the case of Baka's translation.] The third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator (if now he has not lost that Name) assumes the liberty not one to vary from the words and sence [sense], but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases.'¹⁸ (The latter group can be illustrated by Brodsky's, Baka's and finally by my own poem.) Dryden – thanks to his genius and wisdom – did not blame any of these types of poets when recreating a grand theme. All of them can have a reason for existence, if they are not false and cheap. And, besides, variations guarantee the survival of the most important representations of world-literature. In this continuity the very often unjust and rude 'major poet', 'minor poet' labels disappear and only pure poetry remains. That is why I do not feel like an intruder when stepping into the everlasting footprints of Virgil, Brodsky, Lowell, Baka and the other nobilities of the Dead Poets' Society.

Abstract

Joszif Brodskij "Dido és Aeneas" című versét 29 évesen, három esztendővel kényszerű amerikai emigrációja előtt írta, mintegy "lelki főpróbaként" a hontalanság elfogadására. A parafrázis nyersanyagát Vergilius Aeneisének negyedik része szolgáltatta, a festmények sokaságán, Purcell operájában stb. Megjelentett szerelmi dráma, amelyben a trójai hős – épp a honvesztés állapotában – beleszeret Dido királynőbe, de hamarosan elhagyja, mert üzi az új haza – Róma – megalapításának kényszere. Joszif Brodskij (angolul: Joseph Brodsky) Nobel-díjas orosz-amerikai költő-egyetemi tanár eredeti és új hazájában is "deáktalan", azaz nem latinos kultúrájú ország lakója volt, mégis bizvást nevezhetjük a "leglatinosabb" huszadik századi költők egyikének.

A számúna legfontosabb költők sorában ott találjuk Vergilius mellett Catullust, Ovidiust és Martialist, s jellemző az is, hogy egyik kötetének igen kifejező latin címet adott: "Post actatem nostram". Választása, latinosság-mániája nem egyszerű különység, elitizmus volt, hanem sok versében a hanyatló Róma képeivel érzékeltette a széteső szovjet birodalom légkörét. Visszatérve jelen versére: ő, mint annyi poeta a világirodalomban, Aeneas szemszögéből láttatja a történetet. Így írta tovább az ő versét Brodskij kiváló magyar fordítója, sok szempontból már-már alteregója, Baka István költő-műfordító is. Ezt a "férfiszempontú" olvasatot törte meg tizenegyedik verseskötetem címadó költeménye, a "Dido utolsó üzenete", amely a szerencsétlen sorsú szerelmes asszony szemszögéből láttatja a történetet, vállalt szereplőként. A dolgozatban amerikai klasszika-filológusok írásai mellett felhasználtam a legkiválóbb Brodskij-szakértők, -fordítók munkáit, Kevin L. Kline-tól Zara M. Torlone-ig.

¹⁸ JOHN DRYDEN, *From the preface to Ovid's Epistles*, in: *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence VENUTI, Rutledge, New York – London 2006, 38–63, p. 38.