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Joseph Brodsky's returns to Venice in *Watermark*: Old-world cosmopolitanism revisited

Anna Ljunggren

Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark*, an essay dedicated to Venice, was completed in that city in November 1989, almost exactly two years after the author had been awarded the Nobel Prize, at the height of his fame and recognition. The work was commissioned by the consortium Venezia Nuova in an attempt to draw attention to the city's severe ecological problems. It appeared initially in Italian translation from the original English in 1989 under the title *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* (*Embankment of the Incurables*), followed by a version in English the same year published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux under the title *Watermark*. The essay is autobiographical; it combines into one text the experiences and observations from 'seventeen winters' (Brodsky 2013: 21) of Brodsky's yearly pilgrimage to Venice from the USA. Written in long retrospect after his first visit to Venice in 1972, *Watermark* should be read not as a summarized account of the poet's holiday trips from America to 'the heart of civilization' (ibid.: 12) in Europe, but as a summation of his whole life journey between cultures, from the counterculture of Leningrad in the 1960s to his status as a cosmopolitan cultural personality, an internationally acclaimed Anglo-American essayist and a Russian poet.

Watermark is a cosmopolitan text not only by virtue of being written by a Russian poet in his non-native English, nor simply through the circumstances of its publication, but intrinsically. A product of displacement and mobility, transcultural writing on the whole, and in Brodsky's case in particular, is considered here as a way of world-making that is complementary to, or to be more precise combined with, the circulation of texts. It can be regarded as a product of what David Bethea (1994: 48–9) has called a complex cultural

‘triangulation’, involving at least four literary traditions referred to and quoted in the text: Russian (Akhmatova, Pasternak), Anglo-American (Auden), French (Henri de Régnier) and Italian (Saba, Montale). ‘Triangulation’, by drawing on sources from different languages, makes visible what is easily effaced in discussions of intertextuality – the act of translation involved. In that sense, *Watermark* can be regarded as a translingual ‘event’ inviting a translingual mode of reading (Helgesson and Kullberg 2018: 150). I argue that this ‘event’ has a double action: it places the text into the wider sphere of world literature, and at the same time reconnects it to the pre-Soviet cultural tradition, reestablishing in both ways the disrupted continuity. World poetry was perceived in its entirety by Brodsky as ‘one living organism’ or a ‘cultural ocean’ (Polukhina 2005). In *Watermark*, the element of water, the ocean, which brings together those with whom he has an affinity is called the genre of the world: ‘Should the world be designated a genre, its main stylistic device would no doubt be water’ (Brodsky 2013: 124).¹

To introduce the text briefly, the narrative starts with Brodsky’s first trip to Venice and is dated indirectly by a reference to the author’s age, thirty-two, placing the events at the end of 1972, the year of his expulsion to the West. For obvious reasons it is common for the autobiography of a transcultural author to be fused with travelogue; in the case of *Watermark*, one more dimension should be added to understand the genre of this piece – poetry. Its narrative is initially set up as linear, telling a story of an encounter with and rejection by a beautiful Veneziana (Maria Doria de Zuliani, an acquaintance from his time in Leningrad). However, the love plot which sets the story in motion is soon relinquished, and the principle of composition shifts to that of poetry.² The bulk of the text is built as a series of returns to the subject of Venice in fifty-one chapters, the last being a conclusion. Through the reiteration of variations on the theme, *Watermark* achieves a ‘stanzaic congruity’ (Polukhina 1997: 230) analogous to that of a long poem or musical piece, like a concerto in prose.³ As shown below, the structural device of reiteration, along with the notion of the return both as a theme and as a conceptual frame, is fundamental to the essay.

¹ Galin Tihanov (2017) proposes including a meta-dimension in the discussion of world literature, to study images of world literature within individual literary works.

² For a detailed list of different forms of parallelism and reiteration in *Watermark* see Valentina Polukhina (1997: 223–40).

³ Valentina Polukhina mentions that some earlier poems were modelled on music by Haydn and Mozart. See some examples in Polukhina (1997: 231).

The episodes belonging to different trips to Venice are not chronologically arranged. The narrative is fluid, non-linear; the text is kaleidoscopic, combining anecdotes, fragments of memories from Leningrad times and different visits to Venice, speculations about the nature of beauty, and suggestions on how to transform and save the city of Venice and clean its bay (for which purpose the city should consult the municipality of Stockholm, where 'the salmon leap out of the water to greet you' (Brodsky 2013: 99)). These narrative fragments are spun into the web of the book's main themes: water, time and man-made beauty. These main themes return with variations throughout the text, unfolding through metaphoric (water – time – music) and metonymic (sight – eye – tear) sequences.

Venice was first seen in a photograph in Leningrad; it stands for the ideal West, the West perceived as an aesthetic phenomenon:

And the more I read them [the photographs], the more apparent it became that this was what the word 'West' meant to me: a perfect city by the winter sea, columns, arcades, narrow passages, cold marble staircases, peeling stucco exposing the red-brick flesh, putti, cherubs with their dust-covered eye-balls: civilization that braced itself for the cold times.

(Brodsky 1995: 15)

The transition presented in *Watermark* is a constant exchange between the vision of what the American anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2005: 126–207) has called the 'imaginary West' of the late Soviet era and the Venice immediately present and absorbed by all senses. Real encounters are presented as directly emanating from literary works (for instance, Brodsky's (2013: 132–3) quote from Auden's poem 'Fall of Rome' precedes the episode where the poet appears). In contrast to images emanating from literature, the beginnings of the opening chapters are all dedicated to one of the senses: first comes the smell of the frozen seaweed; then sight, the dominant sense, is represented by the eye and the tear; then hearing appears in the chimes of the bells being compared to the sound of a huge china set. Later in the text the senses are combined into synesthesia, first uniting sight and tactile perception, and further on sight and sound. The whole city by night is compared to an orchestra pit as a vision of universal musical harmony, sight and sound together: 'In fact, the whole city, especially at night, resembles a gigantic orchestra, with dimly lit music stands of palazzi, with a restless chorus of waves, with the falsetto of a star in the winter sky' (ibid.: 97).

The narrative outlined at the beginning is picked up again at the end. Two encounters frame the text: that with a Venetian beauty personifying Venice is

mirrored by the accidental sighting of Auden through the window of the Café Florian, in the company of Chester Kallman, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis with their spouses. The beauty and the poet are symmetrical; they are guides and gatekeepers in the poet's passage into the 'heart of civilization' (ibid.: 12). The episode acquires considerable weight in the text due to its semi-final position: the return from a gondola ride to San Michele (where Brodsky is buried today) concludes the main body of the text. The episode is set apart from temporal progression ('Inside, it was 195?' (ibid.: 133)), and Lev Loseff (1996) has plainly described it as fictional.⁴ In *Watermark* it acquires an additional dimension, since 'seeing something through the glass' also means seeing on the 'other side', after death. This finale makes the whole text not only a homage to Venice but also a posthumous homage to Auden, Brodsky's benefactor in his transition to the West during their brief acquaintance between 1972 and 1973. Although *Watermark* bears a dedication to Robert Morgan, an American painter residing in Venice and Brodsky's friend, the very act of writing in English itself constitutes a dedication to Auden, as explained in the essay to honour Auden's memory, 'To Please a Shadow' (Brodsky 1986: 357). Auden's face, laughing and weeping at the same time, is the last image preceding the invasion of the fog into the city, veiling the scenery.⁵

Following this chapter, the conclusion elevates the theme of Venice, the city of water, to an existential, metaphysical dimension: the city represents the materiality of art at the border of time. The theme of transition from Russia to the West gives way to that of transiency in time (Brodsky shifts here to the

⁴ Lev Loseff (1996) calls this episode 'hallucinatory'. Cecil Day Lewis died in May 1972, so Brodsky could not have met him around Christmas 1972. The episode, however, is not altogether fictional; it is probably a reconstruction based on one or a number of photographs taken during the Pen Club reunion in Venice in 1949. A series of photographs featuring all the mentioned participants of the episode in different combinations were taken in front of Café Florian. The two best known of the series feature Auden, Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender (<https://www.bridgemanimages.co.uk; MTS 617282>); for other pictures of the series taken in front of Café Florian see Bridgeman images: Auden, Natasha Spender and Chester Kallman (MTS 495694); Auden and Natasha Spender (MTS 495800), etc. Brodsky could have seen one or several of them in the Spenders' household during the years of their friendship. For photographs in connection with the theme of memory and mourning see 'In Memory of Stephen Spender' (Brodsky 1995: 466). The acquaintance with Auden starts with Brodsky's attempt to decipher his photograph published in an anthology in Leningrad. In the posthumous tribute to Stephen Spender another photograph is described: the author is already included in it, the integration in 'the mental family' having been accomplished ('In Memory of Stephen Spender', Brodsky 1995: 469).

⁵ Sanna Turoma (2010: 184) observed a connection between the final invasion of the fog in *Watermark* and Auden's poem 'Thank You, Fog' in the eponymous book published posthumously: *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems by W. H. Auden* (1974) and related this parallel to the theme of immigration shared by both poets. In contrast to Turoma, I read this passage as a farewell to Auden, preparing for the closure of the text.

generalizing pronoun 'we'), with its inevitable separations and departures. The 'eye' (visual beauty) and 'tear' (related to water) are inseparable in *Watermark*.

While writing in English is a homage to Auden, the text of *Watermark* is at the same time saturated with auto-quotes from Brodsky's own poetry in Russian. His English prose and his Russian poetry are thus communicating vessels; in *Watermark*, Brodsky borrows a great deal from his Italian, particularly Venetian, poems. These auto-quotes are translations of fragments of his Russian poetry incorporated into his English text. A number of intertextual links of this kind have been identified by Polukhina (1997: 225) and Turoma (2010: 162–3), among them from the diptych 'Venetsianskie strofy' (Venetian Stanzas) (1982), 'Laguna' (Lagoon) (1973), 'V Italii' (In Italy) (1985), 'Posviashchaetsia Dzirolamo Marchello' (Dedicated to Girolamo Marcello) (1988) and 'Lido' (Lido) (1989).

Watermark, although written in English, should not only be regarded as linked to Brodsky's own poetry on this topos, but also as a continuation of the larger tradition of Russian Venetian poetry going back to the nineteenth century. Another line of Brodsky's lyrics, his Christmas poems (to write a poem each Christmas was his ritual), largely converges after his emigration with his Venetian ones, such as 'Laguna' (describing the Pension Accademia, where he first stayed, as sailing towards Christmas with the entire universe). Christmas or New Year places the text under the sign of transformation and rebirth, which Brodsky accounts for in the following way:

I simply think that water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve, in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water, preferably near a sea or an ocean, to watch the emergence of a new helping, a new cupful of time from it.

(Brodsky 2013: 43)

Saturated with quotes and auto-quotes, compositionally organized as a long poem, the text is not only about the city of Venice. As Brodsky's long-time friend, the poet and scholar Lev Loseff (1996), formulated it, the essay is a 'self-portrait in the mirror'. The text of *Watermark* corroborates this observation, describing the arrival in Venice as stepping into one's own self-portrait (Brodsky 2013: 7), or seeing oneself reflected in the waters of the lagoon (ibid.: 21). *Watermark* is, in that sense, two-dimensional: it is a piece of a poet's prose, dedicated to the encounter with the city of Venice, as well as a meta-text on the subject of the 'self' withstanding cultural transition, and, as is shown later, transforming the very notion of exile. The two dimensions of the text are encoded in the meaning of the titles, both English and Italian.

The dual title: *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* and *Watermark*

Both titles, *Watermark* and the earlier *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, were chosen for their semantic potential, and their meanings converge. The title *Watermark* refers in the immediate sense to a feature of the Venetian landscape: it is a pile marking the water level by the coast of the lagoon. However, as the text is a sample of poet's prose (a phenomenon conceptualized in Roman Jakobson's famous article on Pasternak's prose (Jakobson 1979: 416–32)), this meaning is not fixed once and for all in the narrative, but is chosen precisely because of its potential for semantic expansion. A watermark is at the same time a sign in paper certifying the authenticity of a document, and in this sense it is connected with writing as it pertains to the meta-dimension of the text as a self-portrait. In this metaphorical sense, the 'watermark' stands for Brodsky's signature – it is a sign of his individuality as a poet who has completed a transition between cultures. Speaking about exile in his Nobel lecture two years earlier, Brodsky contrasted creative individualism with the oppressive and homogenizing power of the state, quoting an expression of his favourite nineteenth-century poet Evgenii Baratynskii – the 'uncommon visage':

This flight is the flight in the direction of 'uncommon visage', in the direction of the numerator, in the direction of autonomy, in the direction of privacy.

(Brodsky 1995: 47)

Understood as a signature, Brodsky's text represents his contribution to the tradition of Russian poetry dedicated to Venice that can be traced back to the eighteenth century and flourished in the nineteenth.⁶ One can enumerate here a number of texts by Pushkin: among them are his famous digression addressed to the Adriatic Sea in *Eugene Onegin*, evoking Byron and expressing a longing for freedom; his free translation from Chénier's 'Près des bords où Venise est reine de la mer' ('Bliz mest, gde tsarstvuet Venetsia zlataia' – By the shores where the golden Venice reigns, 1827); his variation on Goethe's 'Kennst du das land' ('Kto znaet krai, gde nebo bleshchet' – Who knows the country where the sky is radiant, 1828); and his famous unfinished fragment about an old doge sailing with his young wife ('Noch' tikha, v nebesnom pole'

⁶ The links between *Watermark* and Russian Venetian texts in the wide sense have been pointed at in a number of works (Losev 1996, Mednis 1999, Turoma 2010: 192–6). On the tradition of representing the Venetian topos in Russian literature see Mednis 1999. See also a recent anthology of Russian Venetian poetry edited by A. Sobolev and R. Timenchik (2019).

– The night is silent, in the field of the sky, 1827). The latter poem provoked a number of ‘continuations’ in poetry in the twentieth century, among them one by the poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevich, ‘Romans’ (Romance), 1924. The topos of Venice gradually becomes a poetic cliché, exploited in the genre of the romance, for example in ‘Venetsianskaia noch’ (The Venetian Night) by Mikhail Glinka with lyrics by Ivan Kozlov. In the second half of the nineteenth century Pushkin’s contemporary and friend Piotr Viazemskii reintroduced the subject of Venice in two groups of poetic sketches from 1853 and 1863, written during his prolonged stays in Western Europe (Viazemskii 1887: 71–96, Viazemskii 1896: 21–37). Some are written in a playful and ironic tone, and describe nineteenth-century tourism as an invasion of locusts at Canale Grande (ibid. 1896: 28). Brodsky quotes Pushkin and talks about Viazemskii in his filmed interview entitled ‘Vozvrashchenie’ (A Return) (Iosif Brodskii 2010: IV), in conformity with the theme of return in *Watermark*. However, Brodsky’s immediate allegiance is to the modernistic continuation of the canon, transforming the poetic clichés of the late nineteenth century. Akhmatova’s words about Italy (“Italy ... is a dream that keeps returning for the rest of your life” (Brodsky 2013: 121)) and Pasternak’s image of Venice as a stone croissant (ibid.: 45) are quoted in *Watermark*. Venice stands for the Russian European dream, the Acmeists’ ‘longing for world culture’, to use Mandelshtam’s formula, quoted by Brodsky in both his Nobel lecture and the interview mentioned above. After over seventy years of interruption (Venice was inaccessible during the Soviet era), *Watermark* reintroduces the city as a poetic topos. A number of poet-travellers in the early twentieth century had dedicated poetry to Venice, among them symbolists Innoketii Annenskii, Valerii Briusov, Aleksandr Blok, Maximilian Voloshin, Vjacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Kuzmin, and in a later generation the Acmeists Gumilev, Mandelshtam and Akhmatova; in *Watermark*, Brodsky reclaims this interrupted European-oriented cosmopolitan legacy of Russian modernism. For that reason, Brodsky’s arrival in Venice is presented as a return. The theme of homecoming is intrinsically associated with being one’s authentic self, having an ‘uncommon visage’ – a subject treated by Brodsky in a succession of texts of that period, such as ‘The Condition We Call Exile’ (1987), ‘Uncommon Visage’ (the Nobel lecture in same year) and ultimately *Watermark*. Arrival and return are the two major nodes around which transcultural biographies are built (Wulff 2021). Homecoming is a recurrent pattern in transcultural writing, where it unites a native place of the past with a new one belonging to the present; *katabasis*

(going back to the native place as a descent into the past) is a chronotope shared by writers of different national origins (McConnell 2016: 225–37). However, in *Watermark* arrival and homecoming paradoxically coincide; arrival does not entail returning to his native Leningrad, which Brodsky never did, but to a place he regarded as the prototype of the visions conveyed by Westernized Russian culture: ‘I kept returning myself to the dream, rather than the other way around’ (Brodsky 2013: 121).

Returning to Venice as if it were his birthplace, i.e. Leningrad, also has implications for writing about Venice. A number of images featured in Brodsky’s essay on Petersburg, ‘A Guide to a Renamed City’, are transferred to *Watermark*: among them water as a condensed form of time, the wind, the smell of weed, buildings compared to fragile china and the city as ‘mirror for a lonely planet’ (Brodsky 1986: 77, 89, 94, 90) have all travelled to Venice in *Watermark*.

The cultural homecoming is paradoxical in yet another respect: the ‘heart of civilization’ (Brodsky 2013: 12) is displayed as a peripheral region (‘It felt like arriving in the provinces, in some unknown, insignificant spot – possibly one’s own birthplace – after years of absence’ (ibid.: 8)). In the provincial, peripheral, even ‘wild’ Venice (as in Saba’s poem ‘In fondo all’Adriatico selvaggio’ – In the depth of the wild Adriatic, earlier translated and quoted by Brodsky), the cultural myth of the city is reshaped.⁷ This image can be related to Brodsky’s poetry, where the periphery of empire – a liminal topos, open to the borderless space of water – is a recurrent motif: ‘Litovskii divertisment’ (Lithuanian Divertissement) (1971) and ‘Pis’ma k rimskomu drugu’ (Letters to a Roman Friend) (1972). Similarly, the essay ‘The Guide to a Renamed City’ (Brodsky 1986) connects the rise of Russian literature to the outside position of St Petersburg in the Russian Empire. Provinciality, understood as being at the periphery and yet simultaneously at the ‘heart of civilization’, is a paradox that can be elucidated through reference to another essay in which the element of water plays a prominent part – Brodsky’s ‘The Sound of the Tide’, dedicated to the poetry of Derek Walcott: ‘Contrary to popular belief, the outskirts are not where the world ends – they are precisely where it unravels’ (ibid.: 164). This interpretation of the world-creating capacity of provincial regions harks back to the description of Christianity as arising at the periphery of the Roman Empire and forever changing the world; it is transferred by Brodsky to the description of

⁷ The topos of Venice is an example of ‘significant geography’, combining mythic, literary and biographical layers of narrative (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018: 303–7).

a rise of poetry in the Caribbean region.⁸ However, the predilection for liminal topoi should not be read strictly in geographic terms: it is in keeping with the status of non-official culture, both marginal and at the same time central in the dynamics of the pre-*perestroika* period. The aesthetic choices here, including the geographic ones, are expressions of the non-conformist tastes and attitudes, the *habitus*, that developed in the post-Cold War period into a position of 'partisanship' opposing the cultural mainstream (Brodsky 2010: IV).

The Italian title, *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, refers to a toponym: its exact form is 'Zattere agli Incurabili' (Embankment [literally rafts] at the [Hospital of the] Incurables) where incurable syphilis patients were kept from the early sixteenth century. As to its meaning, similarly to *Watermark* it should not be defined solely by the single episode where the toponym is mentioned, but broadly in the context of the entire work and against the background of the mythology of poetic creation.⁹ *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* appears in the story of Susan Sontag's and Brodsky's visit to Ezra Pound's widow Olga Rudge, who tells them the same story over and over, trying to justify Ezra Pound's involvement with the Italian fascist party and refute his alleged antisemitism. This incorrigibility, or incapacity to change, metaphorically amplifies the meaning of the toponym in the vicinity of which the story takes place. Brodsky explains that his fascination with the name of the embankment has to do with its semantic aura, its capacity for metaphoric expansion, hinting at a potential plot. In other words, the title shifts from being about Ezra Pound and Olga Rudge and becomes a name for that which is unchangeable, the kernel of personality, which overlaps with the meaning of the 'watermark' as a sign of authenticity. Brodsky describes himself as incurable in a number of ways, including his physical condition at that time: he ironically designates himself as 'a cardiac cripple' (Brodsky 2013: 31). The first connotation of being incurable mentioned in the text, though, is his declared propensity for unrequited love ('hidden dramas and incongruities long since had become my forte' (ibid.: 5–6)), which is later reiterated in the episode with a weeping Auden abandoned by his lover. Another dimension has to do with writing, with the mythology of poetic creation, as reflected for example in the title of Pasternak's poem 'Vysokaia bolezni' (The High Malady) (1923–1928). The gradual semantic expansion of Brodsky's title ultimately leads to the statement that 'metaphor is incurable' (Brodsky 2013: 77). The metaphorical dimensions

⁸ Boris Pasternak (1959: 54) in *Doktor Zhivago* describes Christ as being both human and provincial.

⁹ There is a subtle yet significant shift from location to condition in Brodsky's title.

of both titles ultimately overlap; they both refer to the essence of personal and cultural identity, 'regardless of the nature of your malady', as stated by Brodsky (ibid.: 78).

Exchange rates and images of transition and transformation

The first lines of the essay about the poet's first arrival in Venice combine a poetic expression – 'many moons ago' – with a sharp prosaism, a mention of the exchange rate (one dollar to 870 lire), which serves as an initial chronological marker. The juxtaposition of high and low is characteristic of Brodsky's poetics; the low is presented and subsequently elevated to the level of the mythic or abstract, shifting to involve fundamental existential questions. The exchange rate is the first mention of transition as a transaction to appear in the text and is one of many, not unexpectedly as the text concerns transition between cultures. Trade and cultural interchange go hand in hand: in *Watermark* the mention of the exchange is subsequently amplified in the text. In the very first episode the currency exchange is immediately metaphorically equated with language communication, as a conversation in rudimentary Italian takes place ('My sole currency in their language, the term "espresso" was already spent' (Brodsky 2013: 4)). Money as a means of exchange is fluid and borderless, and it is compared to the element of water in *Watermark* as well as in a later Venetian text, the poem 'S natyry' (From Nature) (1995), dedicated to Girolamo Marcello, where the wave licking the steps is compared to a blue banknote. Closely associated with the theme of Venetian trade is the motif of the city's riches, the material manifestation of civilization. The initial arrival by the waters of the canal is presented as a passage through the mythic treasures of Venice:

The boat's slow progress through the night was like the passage of a coherent thought through the subconscious. On both sides, knee-deep in pitch-black water, stood the enormous carved chests of dark palazzi filled with unfathomable treasures.

(Brodsky 2013: 12–13)

The treasure chests observed during the passage through the canals return in the description of the shops in the streets, which are like wardrobe racks: 'all the clothes are of dark peeling fabric, but the lining is ruby and shimmering gold' (ibid.: 104).

The metaphorically amplified exchange is accompanied by the theme of transition as movement in space. Apart from the 'primordial' experience of travelling by water (ibid.: 14), transition reappears in various shapes: it is a visit to an old palazzo, which felt 'like an underwater journey' for 'a school of fishes passing through a sunken galleon loaded with treasure' (ibid.: 51–2), or a walk through the tunnel left by a body while passing through thick fog (ibid.: 59), or wandering through the labyrinths of the city not knowing 'whether you are pursuing a goal or running from yourself' (ibid.: 85).

Transition in space is closely followed by the theme of transformation in time, in the form of a human being's primordial memory of being another chordate, a fish. All mythological hybridized monsters, dragons, Minotaurs, sphinxes, centaurs and chimaeras are, according to Brodsky, images of evolution, 'our self-portraits' (ibid.: 82); they are, in this sense, also related to the theme of metamorphosis and rebirth.

The metaphorical criss-crossing interchange takes place between the *terra firma* and the water, enacting the ancient emblematic union of elements, the firmament and the sea. The city is compared to a 'mesh caught in a frozen seaweed' (ibid.: 46), shoes in shop windows are scattered like 'all sorts of boats upon the *laguna*' (ibid.: 27–8), Murano lamps are likened to octopi (ibid.: 105), while gondolas are like the necks of violins (ibid.: 97) and barges, in turn, are like 'scattered old shoes' (ibid.: 80), the latter being an auto-quote from Brodsky's poem 'Lido'. The topos of Venice is the topos of fusion, at once periphery and centre, a place where the opposites of water and *terra firma*, or East and West, meet.

The riches of Venice: Artefacts as metaphors

The pile measuring the water level on the coast of the regularly flooded city and the toponym of the *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* are not the only details of the Venetian landscape subjected to metaphorical amplification. Connected to the theme of trade, the material riches of Venice, its treasures, stand for the abundant but fragile materiality of its civilization. These riches are products of local artisanship, including Murano glass, lace and mirrors as well as a variety of clothes on display in the shops, different kinds of fabric and marble and brick, the material of buildings. The dense concentration of artefacts is presented through lengthy enumerations:

That's why furs fly here, as do suede, silk, linen, wool, and every other kind of fabric.

(Brodsky 2013: 26)

It's also the marble lace inlays, capitals, cornices, reliefs, and moldings, inhabited and uninhabited niches, saints, ain'ts, maidens, angels, cherubs, caryatids, pediments, balconies with their ample kicked-up calves, and windows themselves, Gothic and Moorish, that turn you vain.

(Ibid.: 27)

Venetian products (the Murano glass of the lamps, mirrors in all their semantic functions, collections of clothes and art) are all on display. The world is turned inside out, the churches belonging to the external cityscape being compared to the tea service of the domestic interior:

On days like this, the city indeed, acquires a porcelain aspect, what with all its zinc-covered cupolas resembling tea-pots or upturned cups, and the tilted profiles of campaniles clinking like abandoned spoons and melting in the sky.

(Ibid.: 29)

As a material expression of civilization, the artefacts 'tell more about ourselves than our confessions' (ibid.: 61). Particularly clothing, fabrics and textures are consistently and meticulously described, such as the London fog cloak and the Borsalino bag – items in the author's possession upon his arrival in the city. Materials such as marble and brick, as well as water, are not only seen but touched. The tactile sense, as the most intimate and immediate type of perception, is repeatedly conveyed, for example in a comparison of water to skin, and brick to an inflamed muscle or flesh ('an alternative order of flesh' (ibid.: 61)).

Fine lace, a famous product of Venice, appears first as metonymy, in relation to the beautiful Veneziana, who was tainted ('soiled') by a love affair Brodsky condemns as a breach of taste (ibid.: 11). Further on, the lace weaves together images belonging to land and water, connecting the images (reflections in the water) to their origins, the architecture of Venice.

The upright lace of Venetian façades is the best line time-alias-water has left on *terra firma* anywhere. Plus, there is no doubt a correspondence between – if not an outright dependence on – the rectangular nature of that lace's displays – i.e. local buildings – and the anarchy of water that spurns the notion of shape. It is as though space, cognizant here more than anywhere else of its inferiority to time, answers it with the only property time doesn't possess: with beauty. And

that's why water takes this answer, twists it, wallops and shreds it, but ultimately carries it by and large intact off into the Adriatic.

(Ibid.: 43–4)

The theme of weaving is further developed into a comparison of old women weaving lace to the Parcae, and of the city itself to Penelope, weaving and unravelling its own texture, while the threads of the 'incurable' metaphor (ibid.: 7) keep unfolding in the images of the text.

Aesthetic objects, parts of interiors on display, 'marble inlaid tables, porcelain figurines, sofas, chairs, the very parquet' are all bordering on non-being. The textures of draperies and lace are on the brink of materiality, dissolving into nothing, dust being 'the flesh of time' as the auto-quote from the poem 'Nature-morte' (1971) says in *Watermark* (ibid.: 56).

Venice does not only occupy a liminal position in space; it also exists on the brink of times. Three episodes disrupt the continuity of the text, introducing the theme of death. Apart from the fictional post-mortem encounter with Auden discussed earlier, the central chapter in the book, which lacks any relation to its topos and subject, describes a seemingly incoherent picture (one more photograph used in its extemporizing capacity) of some prisoners in Lithuania at the moment before their execution during the Second World War. It is the moment when what is to come was 'death, not pain' (ibid.: 68). The third episode is a story of a visit to an old Venetian palace, of wandering through it as through layers of time before starting to lose oneself in the emptiness of a big gallery. The opulent material riches of Venice border on non-being. The artefacts are subject to decay and entropy, and are opposed to the regenerating fluidity of water that stands for time in its life-giving capacity, renewal and transformation.

The eel from the Baltic and the orata with eyes the colour of mustard and honey

The fish, an inhabitant of the water that keeps reappearing in Brodsky's text, is a multifaceted image. It is emblematic of Venice by virtue of the fish-like shape of the city's map;¹⁰ it is also associated with the theme of evolution as the primordial existence of chordates. As a literary motif it is a product of cultural triangulation,

¹⁰ I thank my colleague Cecilia Schwartz, a specialist in Italian literature, for indicating to me this popular image.

as mentioned earlier. It can be traced simultaneously to a double intertext with roots in the poetic thesaurus of both Russia and Italy.

The eel from the Baltic Sea, which appears in the text a number of times, is an elaboration of Montale's poem 'L'Anguilla' (The Eel) (1948):¹¹

L'anguilla, la sirena
dei mari freddi che lascia il Baltico
per giungere ai nostri mari,
ai nostri estuari, ai fiume
...
l'iride breve, gemella
di quella che incastonano i tuoi cigli
e fai brillare intatta in mezzo ai figli
dell'uomo, immersi nel tuo fango, puoi tu
non crederla sorella?

(Montale 1980: 234)

(The eel, the siren / of the cold seas who leaves the Baltic / to reach our seas, / our estuaries, rivers ... a brief rainbow, the twin / of the one framed by your eyelashes, / shining intact amidst sons / of men, immersed in your mud, / could you not believe her, sister? –Translated by the author.)

In the poem by Montale there is a chain of images: 'anguilla' ('eel') – 'sirena' ('siren') – 'gemella' ('twin') – 'sorella' ('sister'), governed by the grammatical feminine of 'anguilla'. In the text Brodsky refers to the 'protagonist' of Montale's poem as a clearly feminine being, a 'sirene': 'the Baltic, the home of that wandering siren from the Montale's poem' (Brodsky 2013: 6). Further on in the text the 'eel' who fled the Baltic refers to the author himself and is understood to be masculine, corresponding to the underlying masculine grammatical gender of the Russian word for 'eel' – *ugor*. The divergence of the grammatical genders in Russian and Italian generates a bifurcation of this image in the English text of *Watermark*: Brodsky keeps 'the eel' for himself and later introduces an '*orata*' as the feminine counterpart of the 'eel'.

The casting of the *orata* as a feminine character follows the feminine of the Russian for 'fish' (*ryba*). The *orata* fish is endowed with the eyes of a companion of Brodsky's mentioned a number of times in the text, which are the colour of 'mustard and honey'.

¹¹ On Brodsky and Montale see Alessandro Niero (2000: 307–30).

Should one ask a simple *orata* – not even a caught one, in a free state – what it thinks one looks like, it will reply, You are a monster. And the conviction in its voice will be oddly familiar, as though its eye is of the mustard-and-honey variety.

(Ibid.: 84)

This image, the fish-eye, following Montale's mention of the iris of the eye ('Iride breve') is fused in *Watermark* with the beginning of Mandelshtam's famous essay 'Vypad' (A Challenge) (Mandelshtam 1928: 14), where a different 'piscine' perspective is used to describe the distorted perception of an ungrateful reader incapable of appreciating contemporary poetry.

Montale was neither the only nor the first person to introduce this bold trans-gendering shift while personalizing the fish. It was done before him by Jacques Prévert (1992: 15) in his widely known 'La pêche à la baleine' (1946), famous as a song set to music by Joseph Kosma in 1949, where 'the beautiful animal' (both *bête* and *baleine* are feminine in French) with blue eyes metamorphosizes in a surrealist mode into a masculine figure (the father who fished it) having the same blue eyes. The whale becomes a speaking character in the story, and ultimately, having stabbed the father, walks out of the door.¹² The personalization of a fish was undertaken by Brodsky in his Russian-language 'Kolybel'naia Treskovogo mysa' (Lullaby of Cape Cod) (1975), where the cod appears at the door as a character of undefined sex. The tension between the character and the grammatical gender of the Russian for 'cod' (feminine *treska*, similarly to *ryba*) had to be resolved: the feminine is neutralized in the poem by a swift replacement of the feminine 'cod' (*treska*) with a generalized masculine 'passer-by' (*prokhozhi*), appearing at the threshold of the house.

In *Watermark* we see, however, a different procedure: Montale's 'anguilla', the eel, becomes a couple, a 'he' (the eel, a stand-in for the author himself) and a 'she', the *orata*, generated by language forces at play in a translingual text. Translation implicit in intertextuality is quite visible here.

¹² There does not need to be an immediate genetic intertextual connection between Montale's and Prévert's texts, both being a belated continuation of surrealists' experiments with the metamorphosis of images, such as Max Ernst's 'L'évadé', representing a fish with one enlarged eye on a slightly human body.

A paradox of exile: Anonymity and self-portraits in the Italian style

Like any other autobiographical text, *Watermark* is a story of becoming, where the self of the protagonist (his alienated self-image) is on the way from then to now.¹³ A transcultural autobiography has, however, some specific features: the journey from one culture to another is frequently perceived as a transformation accompanied by the motif of self-alienation, equally and primarily characteristic of Brodsky's poetry of exile.¹⁴ The continuity of self-perception being disrupted, mirrors do not reflect a recognizable image of oneself, but of an anonymous stranger:

Inanimate by nature, hotel room mirrors are even further dulled by having seen so many. What they return to you is not your identity but your anonymity, especially in this city.

(Brodsky 2013: 22)

The traveller becomes a trespasser: projecting oneself into a new setting is both dangerous and liberating at the same time, akin to the carnivalized loss of self:

If you're lucky, you may find an apartment, which, naturally, comes with the owner's personal taste in paintings, chairs, curtains, with a vague sense of illegality to your face in his bathroom mirror – in short, with what you precisely wanted to shed: yourself.

(Ibid.: 23)

Alienation goes hand in hand with anonymity. The latter is an ambiguous category; its meaning shifts depending upon the cultural context. In Russian post-modern literature it has different modes, encompassing Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag GULAG* (*The Gulag Archipelago*), written between 1958 and 1968, where the theme is related to the nameless victims of the camps. Brodsky initially followed this line, treating anonymity as depersonalization in a totalitarian society; however, already in the essay entitled 'On Tyranny' (1980), he expands it to include the condition of the mass culture of the contemporary world: 'The idea of one's existential uniqueness gets replaced by that of anonymity' (Brodsky 1986: 115). As a response to depersonalization, Brodsky focuses on the private

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin describes autobiography as a process of self-objectivization in an aesthetic form. In Brodsky's case, it becomes self-alienation (Bakhtin 1979: 132).

¹⁴ On self-alienation and fragmentation of the self in exile see Valentina Polukhina (1991: 13–14).

and individual experience of art. At the same time, one more facet is added to the notion: anonymity is also conceived of as a form of transcultural experience. In an essay titled 'The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh', first written as a paper in 1987, the very notion of exile is subjected to reconsideration, as it is considered insufficient, describing only the fact of departure (Brodsky 1995: 31). The text is an apology for exile and presents its paradoxes, arguing that the evils of exile are necessary and even good. The loss of significance that comes with the loss of one's native linguistic environment and cultural milieu pushes one, according to this text, towards the fundamentals of the human condition, its metaphysics. The poet is alone with the language, which 'accelerates' (Brodsky's favourite term) the process of writing. As to the state of living and writing outside one's culture, this state 'lacks the name' (ibid.). This condition without a name leads to the conclusion that its real name is precisely anonymity. *Watermark* continues in its own way to elaborate on and modify this subject in a positive direction. 'Shedding oneself' is presented as an after-life or an Edenic experience, and allows the dissolution of the self into the city: 'The city is narcissistic enough to turn your mind into an amalgam, unburdening it of its depths' (Brodsky 2013: 22).

The theme of alienation goes back to Brodsky's earlier poetry, where there is a character called Nobody (Laguna).¹⁵ In *Watermark* estrangement from oneself is transposed into a somewhat different key, appearing as a travesty: upon arrival in the city, the poet designated himself as a silhouette dressed in clothes of recognizable brands:

In the unlikely event that someone's eye followed my white London Fog and dark brown Borsalino, they should have cut a familiar silhouette.

(Ibid.: 4)

The loss of oneself in this context leads to carnivalization, traditionally associated with Venice. Dressing up, being on display, associates the text with traditional theatricality; at the same time, these phenomena are connected with the constant mentions of fabric standing for materiality ('in this city a man is more a silhouette than his unique features, and a silhouette can be improved' (ibid.: 27)). A costume is a material expression of aesthetic achievements of culture, as suggested in the chapter about the Veneziana in Leningrad: 'what she wore, transparent things included, belonged to civilization' (ibid.: 11).

¹⁵ Lev Loseff noted that Nobody in Brodsky's poetry is not just a pronoun but also a name (Polukhina 1991: 13).

Venice as a fitting-room implies not only self-adornment induced by the city; it also means trying on new roles, where the traveller assumes the role of a local. Autobiography expands into side-plots, fictional extensions of one's life. The invented self-representation is projected onto the new cultural setting as a fictionalized character, inspired by literature or film. In two instances these side-plots are filmic stylizations that go back to Leningrad times. One of them comes from the opening sequence of Visconti's *Death in Venice*, with Dirk Bogarde approaching the coast of Venice on board a steamer – a scene that made the author regret that he was not mortally ill (ibid.: 40). Another imaginary filmic self-portrait even gets a title, *Nozze di Seppia* (*Wedding in Sepia Tones*). Its plot has but one scene, depicting a couple's reunion: the hero is the author's stylized Italian alter-ego wearing 'a cloth cap, dark serge jacket, and a white shirt with an open collar, washed and ironed by the same strong, tanned hand' (ibid.: 65–6). The owner of the 'strong tanned hand' is identical to the owner of the eyes 'the colour of mustard and honey' (eyes with which even the *orata* fish is endowed). She is an Italian Slavist who would be reading Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* or, as another option appropriate for an Italian poet, Propertius' love elegies, *Monobiblos*.

Yet another imaginary plot is also indirectly related to a marriage in the Italian style. It is described in the subjunctive mood, as a fictionalized scenario:

Later he [a local solicitor or pharmacist] might invite me over to his place for supper, and his pregnant wife, rising above the steaming pasta, would berate me volubly for my protracted bachelorhood.

(Ibid.: 63)

Settings, presented through the enumeration of the details in an Italian household (and what they are made of), are similar in pattern to 'This is the house that Jack built.' These objects generate concise 'never-to-be' plots, in the form of imagined and at the same negated life scenarios:

So I never slept, let alone sinned, in a cast-iron family bed with pristine, crisp linen, embroidered and richly fringed bedspread, cloudlike pillows, and small pearl-encrusted crucifix above the headboard. I never trained my vacant stare on an oleograph of the Madonna, or faded pictures of a father/brother/uncle/son in bersagliere helmet ... or porcelain or majolica jug atop a dark wood chest of drawers filled with local lace, sheets, towels, pillowcases, and underclothes washed and ironed on the kitchen table by a young, strong, tanned, almost swarthy arm, as a shoulder strap slips off it and silver beads of sweat sparkle on the forehead.

(Ibid.: 64–5)

The story of transition into a new cultural sphere is not just about becoming, but also about imagining; it comes in a cloud of stylized, fictionalized plots, self-portraits in the Italian style, all being projections of earlier cultural (literary or filmic) experiences. Anonymity and invented auto-protagonists are counterparts, two sides of the same coin. Playing with roles, however, only stresses the issue of authenticity, which remains irredeemable and 'incurable', and is resolved in *Watermark* in terms of the paradox of an actor and his role.

In Henri de Régner's old Venetian mirror: *The Encounter and Watermark*

One life scenario, 'a perfectly decadent dream' (ibid.: 41), dreamt in Leningrad and set up in Venice, was at least in part shaped by Brodsky's reading of the French symbolist poet and prose writer Henri de Régner (1864–1936).

And I vowed to myself that should I ever get out of my empire, should this eel ever escape the Baltic, the first thing I would do would be to come to Venice, rent a room on the ground-floor of some palazzo so that the waves raised by passing boats would splash against my window, write a couple of elegies while extinguishing my cigarettes on the damp stony floor, cough and drink and when the money got short, instead of boarding a train, buy myself a little Browning and blow my brains out on the spot, unable to die in Venice of natural causes.

(Ibid.)

References to Régner are scattered in Brodsky's text, and it is clear that Régner's writing on Venice is an essential source and model for *Watermark*. It is at the same time a link binding together Brodsky's prose with the pan-European tradition of modernism, both Russian and French in this instance. The question remains, however: what was the source? Since there are a number of erroneous suggestions on this account among Brodsky scholars (provoked by Brodsky himself), this issue is dealt with below in detail. In his *Watermark*, Brodsky (ibid.: 36) mentions three of Régner's 'moribund' books, which he got hold of published 'in translation' by Mikhail Kuzmin, an outstanding homosexual modernist poet. The books were procured by Brodsky's friend Gennadii Shmakov, a connoisseur of Kuzmin's life and work who belonged to the underground homosexual subculture of Leningrad in the 1960s. Although reading of Régner is acknowledged by Brodsky as an influence in regard to his

essay, the number of books and their titles have remained uncertain.¹⁶ Brodsky confesses to not remembering exactly either titles or plots, just certain images, the genre ('a cross between picaresque and detective novels' (ibid.: 37)), the sense of place ('twilit and dangerous' (ibid.)) and the rhythm of composition (a 'brisk pace' of short chapters (ibid.)). Being unable or unwilling to verify which novel it was (Gennadii Shmakov passed away in 1988, i.e. a year before publication of *Watermark*), he calls it in his mind *Provincial Entertainments* ('I could double-check, of course, but then the friend who lent them to me died a year ago; and I won't' (ibid.)).

Leaving things as they are, partly in homage to his deceased friend, led to a persistent aberration among Brodsky scholars, who, in spite of the author's warning, continued to see Régnier's *Provincial Entertainments* as Brodsky's inspiration.¹⁷

Venice was one of Régnier's favourite settings; a number of works translated into Russian are set either exclusively there ('La courte vie de Balthazar Aldromin, vénitien', *L'Entrevue*, 'Le Testament du Comte Arminati', 'Le Portrait de la comtesse Alvenigo', 'Regret', 'Au café Quadri') or in part, as in his novels *La Peur de l'amour*, *Le Passé vivant* and *Marceline, ou la punition fantastique* (the latter and *L'Entrevue* were parts of the volume of *Histoires incertaines* (1919) translated into Russian as *Zagadochnye istorii* (*Mysterious Stories*)).¹⁸ *Le Divertissement provincial* (1925), (*Provincial Entertainments* mentioned by Brodsky) is definitely not the source, since its action never leaves France. Its plot carries the ruined protagonist, who has been betrayed by his mistress, from Paris to a small provincial town, where the devastated hero ultimately goes insane. It is possible, of course, that *Provincial Entertainments* could be one of the three novels. Confused with other texts, it could have even provided the plot, described by Brodsky (2013: 37) as 'love and betrayal'. While details of the plot were forgotten, the title was retained in the poet's memory because of its

¹⁶ Brodsky mentions four books and two novels set in Venice in winter in his interview with Solomon Volkov (2007: 379) and just two books in 'Spoils of War' (Brodsky 1995: 14).

¹⁷ To give some examples, Silvia Paniciari (2016: 120) cites *Provincial Entertainments*; Valentina Polukhina (1997: 232) suggests Régnier's 'Cité des eaux' as a source, which is not a novel, as she indicates, but a collection of poems dedicated to Versailles and cannot be related to Venice. It is only Nina Mednis (2011) who briefly mentions Régnier's *Encounter* as a possible source of Brodsky's *Watermark*.

¹⁸ Not all works by Régnier were translated into Russian, and some, like the collected sketches of *L'Altana, ou la vie vénitienne* (1988–1924), the collections of short stories of *Contes vénitiens* (1927) and *Le Voyage d'amour, ou Initiation vénitienne* (1930) reached Russia too late to become part of his collected work in the translation of Academia (1923–1927), so some of Régnier's later texts on Venice should be excluded as a possible source.

semantic aura, well in keeping with the motif of the margins of empire recurrent in Brodsky's own poetry as well as the 'wild Adriatic' from Saba's poem.

The most probable source for Brodsky's *Watermark* is the short novel *Vstrecha* (*Encounter*, the original title is *L'Entrevue*). Its title refers to an encounter of a young Parisian, recovering from a life crisis in Venice, with the phantom of the ancient owner of the eighteenth-century Palazzo Altinengo, where he is renting a floor (as Régnier's characters from Paris usually do, setting an example that Brodsky intended to follow). A sculpted portrait of a patrician that has 'escaped' from its place at the museum through black magic – and not without the assistance of a picaresque character called Prentinaglia – begins to inhabit a mirror in the rented palace. It is thus a mystery story set in Venice in winter, in an abandoned palazzo, with sumptuous and shabby interiors, fitting Brodsky's description. An accidental meeting with Prentinaglia takes place in Café Florian, establishing a pattern of coincidences and encounters to be deciphered. As the hero begins to lose his reflection in the mirror (a clear diabolical sign), the ghost acquires more and more substance. The encounter between the young man and the ghost culminates in a clash that destroys the entire building and leaves the young man injured. This struggle stands for an irreconcilable conflict arising from a confrontation between the aestheticized past and modernity, a recurrent pattern in a number of Régnier's novels. The trajectory of the story is traced by solitary walks of the protagonist through the city and his trips to the islands. Descriptions of the artefacts adorning the old palazzo and the islands where they are produced are abundant and detailed, in keeping with the aesthetics of artificiality espoused by French Decadence. A beautiful and decayed object is a symbol, an expression of the subjective, often eccentric will of its creator. At the centre of these artefacts adorning Régnier's novel is the mirror, which is compared to the deep waters where the transition to the other side takes place.

All these features fit into Brodsky's description of the text he had in mind, as 'the main events were taking place on the other side of the amalgam, within some abandoned palazzo' (ibid.). It is said of Régnier's novel that 'Its atmosphere was twilight and dangerous, its topography aggravated with mirrors' (ibid.). Brodsky mentions the length as typical of the 1920s ('Like many books of the twenties, it was fairly short – some two hundred pages, no more – and its pace was brisk' (ibid.). The length fits the description, as the text is about 120 pages in Russian translation, varying slightly between editions. Brodsky could have confused the time of the translation (1924) and the date the work was published (1919). As to the brisk pace of the chapters which Brodsky mentions, their length varies,

with some longer and some shorter; on the whole they do not keep pace with Brodsky's *Watermark*.¹⁹

The question about the third of the three books remains open; one possibility is that it could have been *Marceline, or an Extraordinary Punishment*, the third of the three novels. Also set in part in Venice, it is the story of a man driven to insanity by his marriage, from which he is rescued by the dolls of an ancient marionette theatre purchased in the city, which suddenly become animated. Both *Encounter* and *Marceline* were published under the common title *Mysterious Stories* in volume XVI in the Russian translation of the Academia edition.²⁰ The three novels procured by Shmakov could, in that case, be two books: *Provincial Entertainments* and *Mysterious Stories*.

It is no surprise that the story of the poet's visit to a Venetian palazzo in *Watermark*, in spite of its satirical overtones, contains an explicit reference to Régnier and closely follows *Encounter* ('I begin to understand Régnier' (ibid.: 55)). The host of the party, the new owner of the old palazzo, is treated rather mercilessly by Brodsky, being 'a bit of a playwright and a bit of a painter', dressed in a 'gray double-breasted suit of very good cut' (ibid.: 49). The walk through the room interiors on the upper floor (its most ancient part, as in Régnier's Palazzo Altinengo) represents losing oneself:

Each room meant your further disappearance, the next degree of your nonexistence. This had to do with three things: drapery, mirrors and dust.

(Ibid.: 53)

The end point of the passage is a confrontation with a mirror, an encounter with a non-being, since the mirror does not send back a reflection, being as black as Malevich's famous 'Black Square' (1915):

I stood by the door leading into the next chamber, staring at a largish, three-by-four-foot gilded rectangle, and instead of myself I saw pitch-black nothing.

(Ibid.: 55)

¹⁹ Another prototype that may have influenced both the style and composition of *Watermark* is a collection of thirteen short stories called 'Contes pour les treize'. It includes some of Régnier's poems in prose set in Venice, such as his renowned 'Au café Quadri'. The stories, translated by Olga Broshnikovskaia and Mikhail Kuzmin, were included in a volume of the Academia edition of Régnier's complete works entitled *Dymka vremeni* (approximately *Veil of Time*, the original title was *Couleur du temps*) (Renie 1927).

²⁰ *L'Entrevue* as a part of *Histoires incertaines* was translated for the Academia edition by the poet Vsevolod Rozhdestvenskii, who was associated with Acmeism in the 1920s, and Aleksandr Smirnov (Anri de Renie 1924).

In his passage dedicated to Régnier, Brodsky mentions at the same time the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, not just as the translator of Régnier but as a major attraction for him as a reader (Volkov 2007: 378). The juxtaposition and fusion of the two names, Régnier and Kuzmin, is significant here because of the unique role that Régnier played during the transformation of Russian symbolism into the later movement of Acmeism in the 1910s, and it would be insufficient to treat Régnier's work simply as a French source.

Régnier was introduced to Russian readers by the French-oriented Russian symbolists Maximilian Voloshin, Innokentii Annenskii and Valerii Briusov, who were all – with Mikhail Kuzmin – the first translators of Régnier's poetry. Introducing Régnier in his essays from 1910 to 1911, Voloshin praises his 'apollonian transparency' and later compares his style to transparent waters (Anri de Renie, Voloshin 1988: 69, 616; 'Apollon i mysh', *ibid.*: 102). Kuzmin, who called for a return to clear and harmonious poetry and prose from the obscure style of the 'younger' generation of symbolists, elaborates the theme of transparency in his manifesto 'On the Beautiful Clarity. Notes on Prose', where he calls Régnier 'inimitable' and extols his prose as a model to be followed (Kuzmin 1910: 7). At the same time, separate publications of Régnier's prose in translation began to appear, among them an attempt by the Moscow publishing house Orion to publish his collected works in 1911. After the revolution Régnier's popularity continued, and a multivolume edition of his prose was ultimately undertaken in the 1920s by the editorial house Academia (1923–1927).²¹ Translations of the Academia edition were made under the supervision (called 'general redaction') of Mikhail Kuzmin, another major symbolist poet Fiodor Sologub and the critic and translator Aleksandr Smirnov, who also authored a short biography of Régnier as an appendix to the publication (Smirnov 1926).

Works by Régnier were translated into Russian or given a preface – or both – by a number of Russian poets: apart from the already mentioned Voloshin, Briusov and Sologub, the former Acmeists Mikhail Lozinskii and Vsevolod Rozhdestvenskii contributed as translators. Mikhail Kuzmin himself translated four volumes of this edition: *Le Passé vivant*, *Amphisbène*, *Les Rencontres de Mr de Bréot*, *Le Bon plaisir* – none of which fits Brodsky's description.

²¹ Régnier's separate works appeared in other publishing houses, even in the popular editions in the late 1920s. 'Au café Quadri' ('V kafe Kvadri') was published with *L'Amour et le plaisir* (*Liubov' i naslzhdenie*) in the popular series 'Seiatel' (N33).

For Kuzmin's part, the major translation project of the 1920s originated in his earlier translation of Régnier's erotic poetry ('Sem' liubovnykh portretov' (The Seven Love Portraits) (1921), the original title was 'Le Miroir des heures'), as well as his own original work wherein he exploited the Venetian, and more broadly, the Italian theme. Venice is a topos of Kuzmin's poetic travelogue 'Glinianye golubki' (Clay Pigeons) (1914), mentioned by Brodsky in *Watermark*. A number of poems in 'Glinianye golubki' and one entire chapter of this collection – 'Snova Venetsia' (Venice Again) – are set in Venice. One should also mention here Kuzmin's play 'Venetsianskie bezumtsy' (The Venetian Madmen) (1915), written in Gozzi style, as well as his novel set partly in Italy, *Chudesnaia zhizn' Iosifa Balsamo, grafa Kaliostro* (*The Wondrous Life of Giuseppe Balsamo, the Count of Caliostro*) (1919).

The multivolume Academia edition created a platform for collaboration between remaining representatives of Russian modernism belonging to its different segments and stages of the pre-revolutionary literary scene. A number of artists with varying degrees of association with the World of Art movement either illustrated or designed covers of Régnier's editions in Russian: Dmitrii Bouchène, Nikolai Akimov and Dmitrii Mitrokhin (the latter two were the authors of the covers for the Academia volumes).²² The aestheticized, nostalgic, *passéiste* universe of Régnier overlapped in time with that of the avant-garde and constructivism, and almost outlived it, lasting until Socialist realism was already in sight. It is a belated manifestation of modernist art, a publishing endeavour that harboured under its auspices a group of survivors from the pre-Soviet period of Russian culture.

The novels that Brodsky refers to most likely belong to the Academia edition. It was this cultural endeavour, a concrescence of Régnier and Kuzmin, a manifestation of the Russian-French modernism, that provided Brodsky with the images to which he would return decades later to recreate his version of the cumulative 'imaginary West' of the late 1960s in Leningrad.

One essential addition to Yurchak's very useful notion of the 'imaginary West' should be brought up in this context. The 'moribund' books are also relics, or 'trophies', as well as other artefacts in Brodsky's possession at that time: a set of old sepia postcards he tries 'to read', the old piece of tapestry retrieved by

²² Dmitrii Mitrokhin illustrated *The Seven Love Portraits* for the bibliophile edition by Petropolis (Renie 1921); a book comprising three stories for the Akvilon edition was illustrated by Dmitrii Bouchène (Renie 1922).

Brodsky's mother representing the Palazzo Ducale and a toy gondola acquired by his father. They not only point outward, towards the West, but equally back in time, representing a return to the earlier, modernist layer of the palimpsest of the Soviet culture. The retrieval of the culture of the pre-Soviet past, with its emphasis on the supremacy of aesthetics ('aesthetics is the mother of ethics,' as Brodsky (1995: 49) stated in his Nobel lecture) and its cosmopolitan 'longing for world culture', to use Mandelshtam's famous formula, is what Brodsky considered the major cultural achievement of his generation:

The fact that not everything got interrupted, at least not in Russia, can be credited in no small degree to my generation, and I am no less proud of belonging to it than I am of standing here today. And the fact that I am standing here is a recognition of the services that generation has rendered to culture; recalling a phrase from Mandelstam, I would add, to world culture. Looking back, I can say again that we were beginning in an empty – indeed, a terrifyingly wasted – place, and that, intuitively rather than consciously, we aspired precisely to the recreation of the effect of culture's continuity, to the reconstruction of its forms and tropes, toward filling its few surviving, and often totally compromised, forms, with our own new, or appearing to us as new, contemporary content.

(Ibid.: 55)

The panaesthetic legacy of Russian modernism is reborn in the tense political climate of the 1960–1970s, when the focus on aesthetics becomes a common denominator of the entire generation of the non-official culture to which Brodsky belonged. It was best expressed as the famous motto of the dissident writer and critic Andrei Siniavskii during his political trial in 1966: 'My disagreement with the Soviet power is purely stylistic.'

Boris Pasternak's *Safe Conduct* and Brodsky's *Watermark*: Performativity of autobiography

One more precursor of *Watermark* within the Russian tradition is presented here: Boris Pasternak's famous autobiographical essay *Safe Conduct* (1930–1931), undoubtedly presents as a famous sample of poet's prose and a generic prototype of Brodsky's essay (Polukhina 2005). The second part of Pasternak's book is dedicated to his trip to Marburg and Venice as a student during the summer of 1912. Chronologically, the two texts mark the onset of the totalitarianism of the Soviet state and its dismantlement respectively: *Safe Conduct* was written

at the onset of the terror, and *Watermark* was completed two years before the USSR was dissolved in 1991. Both texts on Venice not only share the topos of Venice and a genre (autobiographical essays written by poets), but have a deeper affinity, as is shown below.

Pasternak is quoted twice in *Watermark* in connection with Venice: the first quote is the image from the opening stanza of his poem 'Venetsia' (Venice) (1913) comparing Venice with a 'swollen stone croissant' (Brodsky 2013: 45). The second is a paraphrase, a quote from the same poem appearing in a conversation with Brodsky's editor where he explains why he prefers the winter season for his trips: 'it's like Greta Garbo swimming' (ibid.: 101). This image is a rearrangement of the last line of Pasternak's poem comparing Venice to a Venetian girl who jumped from the embankments to swim.

Both titles, *Safe Conduct* and *Watermark*, refer to authenticity; in Pasternak's essay the title has a talismanic function, procuring him safe passage in the threatening atmosphere of the 1930s.²³ Both autobiographies are statements, verbal acts, and both have a performative, safeguarding function.²⁴ As to *Safe Conduct*, its catalyst was the arrest of Pasternak's acquaintance, the futurist poet Vladimir Sillov. Another crucial event was Mayakovsky's suicide in April 1930 (Aucouturier 1979: 345–6). Venice as depicted by Pasternak is a disguised portrait of the totalitarian state with an oppressive fleet, with ships spying through the windows and Venetian lions decorating boxes where written denunciations were put (Pasternak 1982: 248–9). As shown by Pasternak scholars, these allusions point to the political climate of Moscow (Aucouturier 1979, Fleishman 1980: 255–68); but there is another dimension which is no less important. Similarly to *Watermark*, *Safe Conduct* is a manifestation of fidelity to the European cultural roots of Pasternak's youth in the climate of growing isolationism and antagonism between the USSR and the West. The experience of Venice is one of interconnectedness, the tangible unity of the Russian and the Western European cultures (Pasternak 1982: 251). As in *Watermark*, the claimed affiliation of Russian art is twofold, pointing both to the West and to the earlier

²³ On the function of *Safe Conduct* protecting him from both the threat of persecution and recognition by the state see Michel Aucouturier (1979: 334–7).

²⁴ According to J. L. Austin (1975: 12), not all utterances are statements; there is a category of performatives in which 'to say something is to do something'. Austin's foundational lectures published in 1962 were followed and further developed by a number of scholars, among them J. Searle (1969) in *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* and P. Bourdieu (1991) in *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*. With regard to autobiography, Elisabeth Bruss (1974: 14–26) argues that it has a performative function, i.e. it should not necessarily be read as a descriptive utterance.

shared culture of modernism. *Safe Conduct* is dedicated to Rilke's memory, and its beginning goes back to the childhood memories of 1900, when Pasternak as a boy meets Rilke and Lou Andreas Salomé on their way to visit Tolstoy. A parallel to this dedication can be found in *Watermark* in the episode of catching a glimpse of Auden 'through the glass', as a posthumous salute to Auden. Both Rilke and Auden epitomize the European poetic tradition; they are chosen to preside as patrons over the passage to the European tradition of Europe-oriented Russian cosmopolitan authors. In both instances the dedications are posthumous, so the transition acquires metaphysical overtones as a transition to another world.

As their titles suggest, both essays have a performative meaning, i.e. self-protective and self-asserting; their challenges, however, are different. Those of *Watermark* are related not so much to the totalitarian state left behind as to the conditions of an exiled poet, described in the eponymous text as anonymity and loss of significance ('the reality of [an exiled writer] consists of ... constantly fighting and conspiring to restore his significance, his poignant role, his authority' (Brodsky 1995: 26)). The answers to both challenges are nevertheless quite similar: both *Safe Conduct* and *Watermark* are intended to protect the right to one's individuality ('uncommon expression of the visage'), as well as to safeguard a place in contemporary culture, be it native or adopted.

Beyond exile

It has already been observed and commented upon that Brodsky persistently resisted the role of the exiled writer, or at least avoided the politicization of it (Polukhina 1991: 9–10). His long-time friend and translator George Kline even traced a chronology of the transformation of Brodsky's position in regard to exile in an article on the subject (Kline 1990: 56–7, 88). Brodsky's trajectory from his earlier poetry of the 1970s to *Watermark* shows his transition from exile to cosmopolitanism. First, the experience of exile is more existential than social, and in that sense universal, belonging to the 'incurable malady' of being a writer. Two features define his 'uncommon visage': Brodsky's non-conformism, inherited from the non-official culture that he describes as partisanship in the post-Cold War era, and his traditionalism. Being sceptical of the language of political power, Brodsky places himself at the confluence of two linguistic and cultural realms, the Russian and the anglophone. The dominant themes of the

earlier poetry of the 1970s – exile, nostalgia and separation – are inverted in *Watermark*: it is no longer a matter of loss but of retrieval and integration into the family of anglophone literature. The multiple returns that are described in this essay are not a homecoming to one's native place, not a *katabasis* but an ascent to the prototype of the cultural visions of Russian modernism in an endeavour to regain its pan-European grounds. Brodsky's brand of cosmopolitanism is of the West-oriented kind, inherent in the pre-revolutionary Russian cultural tradition.

Brodsky's autobiographical trajectory entails not only self-assertion and self-creation, but also brings about a significant shift in the Russian writer's mythology. While it was earlier epitomized in the Christ-like figure of Iurii Zhivago, a victim and observer of his times, it takes a new turn in 1980–1990s: the new cultural hero is one who, like Brodsky or Nabokov, leads Russian literature both out of its cultural isolation from the West and equally out of the marginalization and isolation of exile to the wide spaces of world literature, reclaiming its pre-Soviet roots. The boom that began with Brodsky's Nobel Prize was gaining strength in the 1990s, with the celebration of the end of Soviet isolationism, and is still ongoing, though it now takes a somewhat different form. Today, we see an attempt on the part of Russian cultural institutions to reclaim the great literary exiles such as Nabokov and Brodsky, to bring them back home symbolically in spite of their decisions and expressed wishes.

In *Watermark* the shift from exile to cosmopolitanism is fully achieved; the challenges of exile are overcome, not only in the process of radical change (switching from native Russian to English), but also through self-preservation understood in a double sense – as an affirmation of the validity of one's difference, one's 'uncommon visage' within one's adopted culture, and as an act of reconnection with the legacy of modernism after a half-century of disruption. Water, called by Brodsky (2013: 124) 'the genre of the world', knows no limits. This is what *Watermark* manifests; it 'performs' world literature, adding a new link to the Russian Venetian canon and bringing it out into the open, as its title, related to the element of water, promised.

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