

Tomas Venclova

## An Initiation to Europe

### Joseph Brodsky's Königsberg Poems

*European ruins cause one to reflect on injustice,  
greed and vindictiveness, which, as has been shown,  
have been stronger than human dignity.*  
W.H.Auden

*Looking back, I can say that we began in an empty place, or  
rather, in a place that was frightening on account of its emp-  
tiness. We endeavoured, certainly more intuitively than con-  
sciously, to re-establish the effect of the continuity of culture,  
to restore its forms and tropes, and to fill out its few intact  
remaining, often completely compromised forms with our  
own, new( or what seemed so to us), modern content.*  
Joseph Brodsky

It would probably be an exaggeration to speak of Russian literature's Königsberg text, analogous to the Petersburg text and the Moscow text, if the Baltic town had not been important for many Russian writers from the 18th century onwards. Probably the most famous description of Königsberg stems from the pen of Karamzin (1766–1826). According to *Letters of a Russian Traveller*,<sup>1</sup> he arrived at Prussia's capital via Memel (Klaipėda) and Tilsit on 18 June

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**Tomas Venclova** (1937), contemporary Lithuanian lyric poet, professor of Slavonic Literatures at Yale University, USA.



1789 at 7 a.m. That same day, he visited Kant, and towards evening, he left the town by mail-coach in the direction of Elbing. In that short space of time, Karamzin succeeded in seeing much of Königsberg. He writes about the river Pregel, the Prussian royal palace, “which is built on a promontory”, the arsenal and the library, “in which you will find several folios and quartos chained in silver”.

A separate passage is devoted to Königsberg’s cathedral, which calls to mind the past centuries of barbarism and heroism (“Only the sons of inspiration dare to summon them from the abyss of the past, like Ulysses as he called the shades of his friends from the gloomy abode of death, in order to preserve in their gloomy songs a memory of the miraculous transformation of nations. My reverie lasted about an hour as I leant on a column.”) Also mentioned are “outstanding gardens”, “where one can stroll about delightfully.” “The craftsman, artist, and scholar relax in the open air after the end of their work without any need to leave the city. Furthermore, the exhalations of the gardens refresh and purify the air, which in large cities is always full of foul particles.” Karamzin depicts Königsberg, which belonged to “the celebrated Hanseatic cities”, as a great European centre: “almost better built than Moscow”. He talks about its trade

and how densely populated it is, about its well-dressed inhabitants, who drink coffee and tea, about the “large” regiment and even refers to officers’ jokes and a “German soup”, the taste of which the author considers to be mitigated by “the aromatic vapours of the damp grass” coming from the garden. This first encounter by the curious traveller with western civilisation was crowned by a three-hour conversation with Kant, its intellectual ruler, whom Karamzin described as “a great, ... deep-thinking, precise metaphysician.” “I was greeted by a slight, thin, little old man, immaculately white and gentle.” The Russian and the European exchanged thoughts on various topics: history and geography, travel and discoveries, even China, but above all man’s moral nature.

“Kant speaks rapidly, very quietly and not clearly; as a result, I need to mobilise all my auditory nerves to listen is hard to follow; I had to fully exert my auditory nerves to understand what he was saying.” As to be expected, Kant talked about the contrast between the world of experience and the transcendental world. In the former, according to Kant, there is “no proportion between joys and woes, pleasure and suffering”. “In so far as we do not discern the goal or end of our striving in this life, we propose a future one where this knot must be untied.” It is not the pleasurable things in his life that he enjoys recalling but rather “those moments where I acted according to the moral law that is engraved in my heart. . . I am speaking about the moral law: let it call us conscience, the sense of good and evil – but it exists.” If one thinks about the life to come and the moral law, then one presupposes the existence of an eternal and creative reason. But “here reason extinguishes its lamp, and we remain in darkness; only fantasy can travel in this darkness and create phantoms.”

This extremely short, but clear depiction of Kant's metaphysics of morals, which had been set out in the *Critique of Practical Reason* a year before Karamzin's visit, also set the tone for all of *Letters of a Russian Traveller* and even for all of Karamzin's works. Moreover, the echo of the Königsberg episode of *Letters* resounded through Russian literature right up to the "antitext to Karamzin", which Joseph Brodsky created 180 years later in his Königsberg – or Kaliningrad – poems.

Before we turn to the latter, some other Russian texts should be mentioned that have a bearing on the poems. Even before Karamzin's visit, Andrei Bolotov (1738-1833) had lived in Königsberg for four years (1758-1762). His description<sup>2</sup> of the town is much more detailed but as literature less brilliant. Kant is not mentioned in Bolotov's essay, but it is interesting that, according to a suggestion put forward by Arsenii Gulyga,<sup>3</sup> it was Bolotov who was able to prevent Kant from occupying the vacant chair at Königsberg University, because Bolotov was an opponent of Wolff's ideas (Kant was considered to be an adherent of Wolff's, while Bolotov deemed the latter's teachings to be antichristian). The commonplace descriptions in Bolotov's "Königsberg text" refer to more or less the same things as Karamzin does: the Pregel, the palace with its library, the cathedral, the ramparts, the gardens, even trade and commerce, the splendour and prosperity – which, by the way, is balanced by reference to the narrowness and darkness of the streets, the monotony of the citizens' everyday life and the unsociableness of the industrious Germans, with whom the author finds it difficult to engage in conversation. A characteristic feature of the essay can be seen in his remarks about the evil influences of western society to which all the Russians who come to Königsberg are exposed – apart from Bolotov himself. He talks about the

pubs, billiard halls and other entertainment establishments as well as about the huge number of “young women, who ply a dishonourable trade, selling their honour and chasteness for money”. But Bolotov’s depiction of Königsberg by no means exhausts itself in the description of disreputable places. For him, it is a town where he has enjoyed “numerous advantages and benefits”, experienced himself, the world and his Creator, spent many “valuable and happy moments” and had left “with a heart not encumbered with worries, but overflowing with pleasant and flattering feelings of hope”. Bolotov’s words of farewell to Königsberg have an ironical effect of today’s reader:

Farewell, dear, charming town, farewell for ever! Never, I must assume, never will I see you again. May Heaven protect you from all the evil that could afflict you. And may its mercy and magnanimity be upon you.”

Heaven did not hear Bolotov’s prayer. But up to the 20th century, Königsberg was a flourishing western town, which Russian students, scholars, writers and travellers came to visit. Among them – apart from those already mentioned – were Fonvizin, Gertsen, Nekrasov, Shchedrin, Chekhov, Esenin and Mayakovskii. One significant aspect in the “Königsberg text” is the recollection of Kant, the town’s most famous citizen. Another Königsberg topos is that of initiation. Here, the Russian traveller encounters Europe for the first time, and also another way of life, namely that of western society, which can be viewed satirically or earnestly. In that encounter – especially when seen from the latter viewpoint – the visitor has the chance to understand himself and the world better, to meditate on ethics and life as such, no matter whether in the form of Bolotov’s naïve reflections or Karamzin’s subtle comments. It is here, for the first time, that – in Karamzin’s words – the spirits of Europe “dare to summon from the

abyss of the past” and “memory of the miraculous transformation of nations” is alive. Königsberg – and Petersburg, too, which to a certain extent it calls to mind, with its islands, bridges, gardens and situation on the bay – is a border town, on the boundary between two different civilisations that are possibly even of a dissimilar nature. It is the first, and for Russians the closest, western city. But, at the same time, it is also the last western town before the return to Russia, which cannot always be said to be a joyous occasion – indeed, far from it. Nekrasov described such a return with the following somewhat unseemly yet catchy lines:

Then I left behind me Königsberg  
And closer to that land I came  
That finds no love for Gutenberg  
Yet in crap can find no blame<sup>4</sup>

The situation in the town changed radically after the Second World War. Destroyed by British bombers and Russian artillery, it became part of Russia, its population and even its name changed. On the other hand, many other famous towns – Warsaw, Dresden and Berlin – suffered not less, but even more destruction than Königsberg. And the change in state affiliation and population was also not unusual. Yet the fate of Königsberg/Kaliningrad was indeed unique, because the former town was not only not rebuilt, even the memory of it was systematically eradicated, which continued right up into at least the 1980s.

It was assumed that instead of the Prussian fortress a new, purely Soviet town would emerge – or had already done so – a town whose history would begin in 1945. In reality, however, Kaliningrad remained a ruined city, without parallel in Europe and presumably in the world (particu-

larly since all of the other European towns and cities had been rebuilt). From being a mediator between east and west, it had become a Soviet cultural backwater. The old connections were destroyed; the town was hermetically sealed off from Germany and Poland. Even for Soviet circumstances, Kaliningrad was an isolated and not overly accessible place. This is all the more true of its environs, which could only be accessed by means of a special pass. Of all the functions of the former city of Königsberg, the new rulers had only taken over one, namely the military one. The only reminder of the past was probably Kant's grave by the wall of the destroyed cathedral. A joke made the rounds that somebody had written on it: "Now Kant knows that the world is material."

And yet former Königsberg very much occupied the minds of the younger generation of Muscovite, Leningrad and even Lithuanian intellectuals. Although it was destroyed, it was still the only western city with memories of the traditions of western culture that we could see with our own eyes. And at least for a journey to Kaliningrad, one did not need a passport, which for most people was unobtainable. In the 1960s, my contemporaries undertook pilgrimages to the town (the Lithuanians were additionally interested in it, because it formed an important part of Lithuanian cultural history). What we saw in Kaliningrad shocked us, but it also aroused romantic thoughts: ruins always create a space for the melancholy imagination. This melancholy – which probably resembled that of Karamzin – was accompanied by a merciless irony. I remember when I myself – and not for the first time – visited Kaliningrad with Leonid Chertkov,<sup>5</sup> a good friend of and poetry mentor to Brodsky. We looked for the house, or at least for the place it had stood, where Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann had been born. All that was left

left of Französische Strasse, where, according to old town maps, this house had stood, was the road surface and the tramlines. The street led to an old pond, which had run completely wild and was covered in duckweed. Here, Chertkov composed a two-line poem, which later took on a proverbial quality for us (and which also Brodsky repeated): “Look what has become of this town, In defiance of its arrogant neighbour.”<sup>6</sup>

It turned out that Brodsky was indeed the only poet in the world who was able to provide a brilliant description of postwar Königsberg/Kaliningrad. He wrote three poems on this topic: “Otryvok” (“V ganzeiskoi gostinice ‘Yakor’”, May 1964),<sup>7</sup> “Einem alten Architekten in Rom” (November-December 1964)<sup>8</sup> and “Otkrytka iz goroda K.” (probably 1968).<sup>9</sup> Although the three poems originated at different times and go back to two different visits to Königsberg, they can be regarded as a cycle. The three parts of the cycle complement each other, in that they grasp, as it were, the subject on three levels: “Otryvok” is an ironical sketch of everyday life with autobiographical motifs, “Einem alten Architekten in Rom” is a detailed philosophical (Kantian) meditation on the metaphysics of morals, and lastly, “Oktrytka iz goroda K.” takes stock of the cycle by linking it to the old genre of the “epitaph to a town”. To these Königsberg poems can probably be added a macaronic poem devoted to the German Faust theme – “Dva chasa v rezervuare” (8 September 1965).

The story of Brodsky’s journeys to Königsberg is not devoid of interest. It was recently researched by local journalists, Lt. Commander Oleg Shcheblykin and others. The first time the poet was in the Kaliningrad region was during the autumn of 1963, not long before his arrest. He had managed not only to make it right through to Kaliningrad but also to its satellite town at the entrance to the



Frisch lagoon (Frisches Haff), the no-go military harbour town of Baltiisk (Pillau). At that time, such a thing was practically impossible for the average Soviet citizen and even more so for an unreliable writer. The solution to this problem was an official trip commissioned by the children's magazine *Kostër*, where Brodsky's friend Lev Lifshits (Losev) had been working since 1962. Incidentally, *Kostër* also played an altogether not unimportant part in Brodsky's biography. For example, it was there that his very first poem in the Soviet Union ("Buksir") was published.

The trip came about by chance, but the reason for it was characteristic. It concerned a bureaucratic scandal à la satirists such as Mikhail Zoshchenko or Sergei Dovlatov. The swimming team of Baltiisk's No. 6 school had participated in the finals of the pioneer championships in Voronezh and had proved to be the best, but on account of administrative mix-ups, they did not get any medals. The trainer and the head of the school (Vladimir Petrovich Lebedev and Tamara Stepanova Lebedeva, who still live in Baltiisk) wrote to the newspaper *Sovetskii Sport*, as a result of which some journalists came to the prohibited town to investigate the matter. Brodsky used this as a pretext to travel to the former Germany and the forbidden, most westerly point of the then Soviet Union. Nevertheless, he carried out his task honestly – his report "Victors without medals" appeared in *Kostër* with three photos; it was written in the disjointed, feature article style of Vlas Doroshevich or Viktor Shklovskii. According to Lebedev, there were professional errors in the report, but it had certainly given the injured party moral satisfaction.

In Baltiisk, Brodsky lived in the hotel Golden Anchor (Zolotoi yakor'), one of the buildings remaining from before the war. It now has a more prosaic name Hotel of the

**Отрывок**

В ганзейской гостинице «Якорь»  
где мухи садятся на сахар  
где боком в канале глубоко  
эсминцы плывут мимо окон,

я сживал в обществе куржки,  
глазая на мачты и пушки  
и совесть свою от укора  
спасая бутылкой Кагора.

Музыка гремела на танцах,  
солдаты всходили на транспорт,  
сгибая суконные бедра.  
Маяк им подмигивал бодро.

И часто до боли в затылке  
о сходстве его и бутылки  
я думал, лишенный режимом  
знакомства с его соержжимым.

В восточную Пруссию въехав,  
твой образ, в приспущенных веках,  
из наших балтийских топей  
я ввез контрабандой, как опий.

И вечером, с миной печальной,  
спускался я к стенке причальной  
в ломпании мыслей проворных,  
и ты выступала на волнах...

май 1964

**Fragment**

In the Hanseatic Hotel Anchor:  
where flies descend without rancour  
on the sugar, and where destroyers,  
sidle past our foyers,

I'd sit with a glass for company  
gazing at masts and gunnery,  
and deciding that all was dandy,  
with my bottle of cheap local brandy.

Music blared from the dance pistes,  
soldiers filed onto the troopships,  
their cloth thighs wrinkling wearily.  
as the lighthouse winked at them cheerily.

And often my brains I'd cudgel,  
About how this looked like a bottle,  
Familiarity with what was inside  
forbidden, because classified.

Arriving in Eastern Prussia,  
from the Baltic boglands of Russia,  
your image, with heavy eyelids  
I smuggled in like narcotics.

And evenings, with mournful mien,  
I went down to the quay,  
producing thoughts galore –  
you could be seen offshore.

May 1964

*Translated by Daniel Weissbort*

Officers Corps (Gostinica oficerskogo sostova). (Local historians have suggested that a plaque be put up there with lines of Brodsky's poetry on it.) In this connection, the poet also visited Kaliningrad. He only had a few months freedom left. The outcome of this trip was two poems that had already been written in banishment, in Norenskaya.

As far as is known, Brodsky went to Kaliningrad a second time on a one-day trip from Palanga. This was claimed by his Lithuanian friend and mentor the literary critic Petras Juodelis, who had been a political prisoner in the Stalin era. According to Lev Losev, the visit took place in March 1968. At the time, the ruins of Königsberg palace were still standing (They were pulled down at the end of the 1960s.) It is hardly possible to obtain further details about this visit, but after his banishment Brodsky often went to Lithuania, and this included visiting Palanga, which he described in his poem "Konyak v grafine tsveta yan-tara..." (autumn 1967). He preferred to be there in the off season, in the winter and early spring. On his journey from Palanga to the former Königsberg, he apparently took the same route as Karamzin, via Klaipėda and Tilsit (Sovetsk). There is only one poem about this trip. It has to be understood within the context of conversations the poet had with friends (which also explains the dedication). I remember Brodsky showing me the text and asking me what I thought was meant by "prophesies of the river". "The water reminds me of Archimedes law," I said. "That too," replied Brodsky. "But the main point is that the reflection in the river splits the palace into pieces."

Let us take a closer look at the three poems of the Königsberg cycle, not chronologically, but in terms of their mounting degree of difficulty.

“Otryvok” is, as I said, an ironical, even almost humorous sketch about life on the Baltic fleet’s most important western base, where the then correspondent for *Kostër* lived in a hotel. In 1972, Brodsky dated it Pillau, 1963, which does not refer to the place and time it was written but to the situation being described. The poem does not seem to be demanding, either in terms of form or content. It is made up of six equal four-line verses consisting of three-foot amphibrachs and feminine rhymes in pairs; the metric and rhythmic monotony is further underlined by the uniformity at the beginning of the lines (the first foot of the line generally coincides with an individual word) and by the internal rhyme in the third line: “gde bokom v kanale glubokom”. Later, the poem imitates the rhythm of a simple dance in a sailors’ club. The four-line verses are mostly self-contained, only the first and second verses merge into a single unit. But “Otryvok” quite clearly divides into three equal parts (just like every line is three-foot). In the first part (verses 1 and 2), the new arrival is seen in the hotel restaurant, drinking wine and staring out at the military scene outside in the port. In the second part (verses 3 and 4), more can be seen; instead of the unified scene, “table and view from the window”, some images follow one another, ending with that of the lighthouse, which the protagonist unfortunately cannot get to. This “regime” lighthouse near the hotel obviously left quite an impression on the poet in Baltiisk. It is even mentioned in the final sentence of the newspaper story “Victors without medals” and occupies the geometrical centre of the poem (line 12). In the third part, (verses 5 and 6), the spatial perspective opens out completely into that of a map, in which Prussia and also Petersburg are present (in the epithet “Baltic”, which refers to the Petersburg marshland, the sovietized name of the town, Baltiisk, is also sublimi-

nally present). On the other hand, the internal space of the body is involved, “heavy eyelids” (and before that: “my brains I’d cudgel). A temporal perspective emerges. We learn about the protagonist’s past and the emotional conflict, which is only hinted at in the second verse (“deciding that all was dandy, / with my bottle of local brandy”). In this poem, the ruins, Königsberg and its environs receive no mention whatsoever. The “Königsberg code” is represented here merely by the words Hanseatic and Eastern Prussia, which are uttered by “I”, the first-person narrator, who is apparently the only person in this region that remembers the prewar era. The world that surrounds him is without memory: All that exists is the “never-ending present” of the small Soviet garrison town. The everyday life depicted here is practically not much different from Bolotov’s description of everyday life in the Russian garrison in Königsberg during the Seven Years War: the glass in the pub, the entertainment establishments where there was dancing and chance acquaintances were made (to this belong the characteristic themes of smuggling and drugs in the fifth verse). The poem employs an unaffected, semi-jocular, colloquial tone; at the same time, there are markedly literary expressions and phrases taken from official language, as is customary with Brodsky. His description is not without a nuance of self-willed sympathy with that world, in which he seems to be completely immersed. And yet he remains apart from it, in that he is the bearer of memory – of historical and individual memory, which is ineluctably linked with conscience. Towards the end of the poem the ironical *étude* is transformed into a declaration of love. It is interesting to note that “Otryvok” bears a striking resemblance to the poem “Dorogaya, ya vyshel segodnya iz domu pozdno vecherom”, written a quarter of a century later, in 1989. The latter has the same

theme, namely the memory of the loved one, far away from her in a foreign town. In this case, the tonality is inverted; the theme has, as it were, come full circle.

“Otryvok” is interwoven with the fundamental aspects of Brodsky’s work, just as it is with the tradition of the “Königsberg text”. And yet, seen against the background of the other two poems, it looks like a not quite serious exercise. “Einem alten Architekten in Rom” and “Otkrytka iz goroda K.” develop the most important themes of the “Königsberg text” in another, tragic tone.

In “Otkrytka iz goroda K.”, the name of the town is simply given as a cryptonym. As Losev points out, this is a literary game: the names “Königsberg” and “Kaliningrad” have the same first letters; moreover, E.T.A. Hoffmann (after Kant, Königsberg’s second most famous son), at the beginning of “The Serapion Brethren”, denotes the Prussian capital with the same letter: “eagerly study Kant’s philosophy at the University of K. ...”.<sup>10</sup> A further interpretation is also possible: Königsberg, which was reduced to ruins, has become anonymous, has lost its landmarks; it has been reduced to a letter. The meaning of the poem can be summed up as follows: “It is an executed town”. Anna Akhmatova did not say this about Königsberg, but about another European town that was annexed to the USSR during the Stalin era: Vyborg.

**ОТКРЫТКА ИЗ ГОРОДА К.***Томасу Венцлова*

Развалины есть праздник кислорода  
и времени. Новейший Архимед  
прибавить мог бы к старому закону,  
что тело, помещенное в пространство,  
пространством вытесняется.

Вода  
дробит в зеркале пасмурном руины  
Дворца Курфюрста; и, небось, теперь  
пророчествам реки он больше внемлет,  
чем в те самоуверенные дни,  
когда курфюрст его отгрохал.  
Кто-то  
среди развалин бродит, вороша  
листву запрошлогоднюю. То – ветер,  
как блудный сын, вернулся в отчий дом  
и сразу получил все письма.

1968 (?)



**A POSTCARD FROM THE TOWN OF K**

*for Tomas Venclova*

Ruins are a holiday for oxygen  
and time. The most recent Archimedes  
might have added something to the law,  
that a mass when lodged in space,  
is displaced by space.

The water  
shatters the ruins of the Kurfürst's palace  
in its dim looking-glass: probably  
it will now listen harder to the river's prophesy  
than in those self-confident days,  
when the Elector built it,

Someone  
is wandering in the ruins, stirring up  
the year-before-last's foliage. This is the wind.  
back now in its father's house, a prodigal son  
who gets all his letters right away.

(1968?)

*Translated by Daniel Weissbort*

The poem is in the form of a sonnet, but a sonnet in a specific sense, which is not seldom with Brodsky. It consists of 14 blank verse lines, in which the internal unity and the principles of theme development are maintained, both of which are characteristic of the sonnet. In his rejection of rhyme, Brodsky deviates radically from the normal rules of the sonnet form – as he does in many other respects. There are no gaps or full stops between quatrain and tercet. In the first quatrain, the alternating form of the sonnet gives way to clausulae – a feminine ending is followed by a masculine one, and then come two feminine endings (kislroda – Archimed – zakonu – prostranstvo), but after that, alternation is strictly observed, which accentuates the initial deviation even more strongly. After the fifth and tenth lines, a new paragraph begins, which veils the sonnet structure all the more. Typographically, the poem is divided not into four, but into three, roughly equal parts. And finally, the last verse is intentionally shortened (the four-foot iambus – instead of a five-foot iambus – produces the effect of an interruption, a breaking-off). In this way, the coda makes a particularly palpable, “rhythmic” impact.

At the same time, the distribution of the poem’s motifs follows the rules of the sonnet, albeit with some changes. The first four lines (and the beginning of the fifth) develop the motif of ruins; the following four that of reflection and splitting in water (beginning with the word water in the fifth line, which is emphasized typographically and also by its position at the end of the line and at the beginning of the phrase). The contrasting nature of stone and water provides an antithesis, which is a characteristic feature of a sonnet. From the ninth line, both themes meet in the theme of time (which was already introduced in the second line): the flowing water and the disintegrating stone are linked to

time, which is flowing quickly by. And finally, from the twelfth line, the motif of wind appears, another of the forces of nature, which is metaphorically presented as a human being. The poet resolves the main theme of the sonnet by introducing the human, psychological dimension into his coda; time and entropy are overcome when they have become conscious and expressed in words, even though to all appearances this is an illusory victory.

Thematically, the poem goes back to an old topos that was especially popular in Renaissance and Baroque poetry (where it was dealt with mostly in sonnet form), for example, the well-known "Epitaphs to Rome", the first of which was apparently written by Ianus Vitalis in the 16th century. He was imitated by Du Bellay in France, Spencer in England, Quevedo in Spain, Sep-Szarzynski in Poland, and others. The destroyed buildings in the "Eternal City" are contrasted in these epitaphs with the waters of the Tiber. The paradox, which also has a theological dimension, consists in the fact that the very thing that is apparently in a constant state of flux endures, while, on the other hand, that which is immense and overly solid proves to be transitory. In "Otkrytka iz goroda K." Königsberg plays the role of Rome. Here, as in the next poem, where Rome is present in the title, we can observe Brodsky at this early stage coming close to the Rome theme, something that was so important for the mature poet. The Tiber and the Colosseum are replaced by the invariant elements of the "Königsberg text", the Pregel and the electoral palace (dvorets kyurfyursta), the Königsberg palace.

Of course, Brodsky introduces his own motifs into the old genre, for example, in the scientific sounding lines in which he speaks of "the new Archimedes" (Archimedes, the legislator of physics, possibly refers to Kant, the legislator of metaphysics). The notion of space that is displaced

by the buildings set into it goes back to the recurring opposition in Brodsky's work between the "temporal" west and the "spatial" east that is displacing it. Apart from that, there seems to be a metonymy. Königsberg not only repeats Rome's fate but also to a certain extent that of Brodsky's home town, Petersburg, which for him (and also for Aleksandr Pushkin, Andrei Belyi and Osip Mandel'shtam) was at the same time an inclusion of the west in the unstable "spatial" east, an inclusion that was always threatened by geography. Another new motif emerges on the edge of the subject. One of the forces of nature, air, is introduced in the first line of the poem (*Razvaliny est' prazdnik kisloroda / I vremeni* – Ruins are a holiday for oxygen and time). But towards the end of the poem, it undergoes a typical transformation: Instead of the emphatically neutral chemical term (oxygen is not only a component of air but also of water and stone), the poetic word "wind" is employed. It is emphasized by various means, for example by onomatopoeia (*sredi razvalin brodit, vorosha / listvu zaproshlogodyuyu*) and the full stress of the thirteenth line. The wind is, as I said, personified. Here, Brodsky draws on two biblical subtexts: Ecclesiastes ("It blows to the south, and shifts to the north, it shifts again and again, the wind blows and to its circling paths the wind returns"),<sup>11</sup> and the parable of the prodigal son. At the end, the poem takes a biting ironical turn: now it is about words, interpersonal communication; it is also about the same memory that is bereft of content in a world of ruins and is compared to dead leaves.

The special effect created in "Otkrytka iz goroda K." is also achieved by many other means. For example, the name of the town is not given but is coded in the form of an anagram: the sounds k, n, g, z (the phonetically assimilated s), b, and r are repeated in diverse combinations

throughout the text, beginning in the first line. The middle section of the poem is taken up with the description of water, which “splits” the ruins. Here, the words “razvaliny... razvalin” (ruins) with regard to the word “voda” (water), the icon of reflection, are almost in symmetrical order, with the “small step” also creating the icon typographically by splitting the fifth and tenth lines. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that “Otkrytka iz goroda K.” is one of the most perfect poems written, not only by the young Brodsky.

And finally, “Einem alten Architekten in Rom”, or “To an Old Architect in Rome”, Brodsky’s most extensive poem (114 lines) on the topic of Königsberg (simply called “Königsberg” by his friends). The description of a ghost-like traveller’s odyssey in a coach through ruins and shadows, and of his philosophical reflections on death and the nature of the soul, establish the clearest link to the previous works making up the “Königsberg text” in Russian literature, above all to that of Karamzin. However, as is generally known, there is a further subtext – the famous poem “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” by Wallace Stevens<sup>12</sup> – which is already present in the title. Let us dwell for a while on this subtext.

To an “Old Philosopher in Rome” is regarded as probably the highest achievement by the American poet, whose works Brodsky loved and read more intensely in the early 1960s. It is dedicated to the philosopher George Santayana<sup>13</sup> and was composed some months before his death in a Catholic monastery in Rome. As a young man, Stevens knew Santayana well, visited him in his house in Harvard and read his poems out to him (Santayana himself had also written poetry, but gave it up for philosophy). In terms of genre, the poem is a cross between, on the one hand, an elegy, in which he says farewell to his dying teacher, and

on the other, a panegyric, which is dedicated to him. The meaning of the poem is also twofold in its ambivalence. Santayana was religious, Stevens an agnostic. In the poem there is an unsolved contradiction between two ideas of immortality – one is religious, the other not (immortality in the sense of being preserved in tradition, in “solemn names / In choruses”, the fusion of the spirit with the physical world).

The whole poem is built up on a large number of opposites and parallels existing between the flesh and the spirit that merge into one another in the final lines. In the last hour of his life, Santayana sees a religious procession in front of his window. The participants become gradually smaller and are transformed into heavenly visions, their banners become wings, the muttering of the paperboys turns into echoes from the next world, the smell of the medication into a celestial aroma. In short, the pitiful details of human existence attain another dimension, the chaos turns into a cosmos imbued with meaning. The philosopher himself, “the shadow of a shape / In a confusion on bed and books”, finds himself on the outer limits of the two worlds, between “The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme / Of the unknown”, of the lower and the higher Rome. The flame of the candle by his deathbed strives to “be part only of that of which / Fire is the symbol”, i.e., part of the transcendental world, which is defined, however, simply as the “celestial possible”. Right up to the end, it is not clear whether this world just exists in the ideas and thoughts of the dying Santayana, the “inquisitor of structures”, or whether it exists independently of any ideas or thoughts. Critics see the poem either as a manifesto on behalf of pure aestheticism (the only god is the philosopher and artist, who imbues chaotic nature

with meaning), or in terms of a Christian approach, albeit without any connection to a particular dogma.

Undoubtedly, Brodsky learned the art of contemplation from Stevens (and other Anglophone poets), in which poems that are replete with involved syntactic constructions and transpositions are transformed into almost philosophical prose. The poem on Königsberg is to a certain extent an answer to "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" and takes over some of its elements in terms of contents and form. However, the two poems are by no means connected in a straightforward manner. As regards form, it must be pointed out that Stevens's poem consists of 16 unrhymed five-line stanzas that follow the iambic metre of Shakespeare (there are repetitions at the end of the lines and random rhymes), whereas Brodsky's poem consists of 15 rhymed verses, basically eight lines long and in five-foot iambic metre (in places there are six-line verses or four-foot lines or an alteration in the rhyming pattern). The search for direct comparisons remains fruitless. At most, it is possible on the level of individual words or images, e.g. ruins ("the afflatus of ruin" – Stevens), birds ("bird-nest" – Stevens) etc. All in all, Brodsky's poem is completely independent. It is only in the common theme that there is correspondence between the two texts: the paradoxical relationship between matter and spirit on the threshold to death, the insoluble antinomy of the transcendental-immanent. The connection between this theme and Kant's philosophy is not difficult to see.

## EINEM ALTEN ARCHITEKTEN IN ROM

## I

В коляску – если только тень  
действительно способна сесть в коляску  
(особенно в такой дождливый день),  
и если призрак переносит тряску,  
и если лошадь упряжи не рвет –  
в коляску, под зонтом, без верха,  
мы молча взгромоздимся и вперед  
покатим по кварталам Кенигсберга.

## II

Дождь щиплет камни, листья, край волны.  
Дразня язык, бормочет речка смутно,  
чьи рыбки навсегда оглушены,  
с перил моста взирают вниз, как будто  
заброшены сюда взрывной волной  
(хоть сам прилив не оставлял отметки).  
Блестит кольчугой голавель стальной.  
Деревья что-то шепчут по-немецки.

## III

Вручи вознице свой сверхзоркий Цейсс.  
Пускай он вбок свернет с трамвайных рельс.  
Ужель и он не слышит сзади звона?  
Трамвай бежит в свой миллионный рейс.  
Трезвонит громко и, в момент обгона,  
перекрывает звонкий стук подков.  
И, наклонясь – как в зеркало – с холмов  
развалины глядят в окно вагона.



## EINEM ALTEN ARCHITEKTEN IN ROM

## I

Let's take a carriage – if indeed a shade  
can really ride upon a carriage-seat  
(especially on such a rainy day),  
and if a shade can tolerate the jolting,  
and if the horse does not tear off the harness –  
then we will find a topless carriage, spread  
umbrellas, climb aboard, and clatter off,  
wordless among the squares of Königsberg.

## II

Rain nibbles at the leaves, stones, hems of waves.  
The river licks its chops and mutters darkly;  
its fish look down from the bridge railings, stunned  
sheer out of time, into eternity,  
although thrown up by an exploding wave.  
(The rising tide itself has left no mark.)  
A carp gleams in its coat of steel chain-mail.  
The trees are vaguely whispering in German.

## III

Hand up your Zeiss field-glasses to the cabby.  
Let him turn off and leave the trolley tracks.  
Does he not hear the clanging bell behind us?  
A streetcar hurries on its millionth run.  
Its bell bangs loudly as it passes us,  
drowning the clip-clop beat of horses' hooves.  
High ruins on the hills bend down and peer  
into the mirror of the streetcar's windows.

## IV

Трепещут робко лепестки травы.  
Аканты, нимбы, голубки, голубки,  
атланты, нимфы, купидоны, львы  
смущенно прячут за собой обрубки.  
Не пожелал бы сам Нарцисс иной  
зеркальной глади за бегущей рамой,  
где пассажиры собрались стеной,  
рискнувши стать на время амальгамой.

## V

Час ранний. Сумрак. Тянет пар с реки.  
Вкруг урны пляшут на ветру окурки.  
И юный археолог черепки  
сыпает в капюшон пятнистой куртки.  
Дождь моросит. Не разжимая уст,  
среди равнин, припорошенных щебнем,  
среди больших руин на скромный бюст  
Суворова ты смотришь со смущеньем.

## VI

Пир... пир бомбардировщиков утих.  
С порталов март смывает хлопья сажки.  
То тут, то там торчат хвосты шутих.  
Стоят, навек окаменев, плюмажи.  
И если здесь поковырять – по мне,  
разбитый дом, как сеновал в иголках,  
то можно счастье отыскать вполне  
под четвертичной пеленой осколков.

## IV

The leaves of grass are trembling timidly.  
Acanthi, nimbi, doves (both male and female),  
atlantes, cupids, lions, nymphs, all hide  
their stumps behind their backs, plainly embarrassed.  
Narcissus could not hope to find a pool  
more clear than that retreating streetcar window,  
behind which passengers have formed a wall,  
risking amalgamation for a moment.

## V

Twilight of early morning. River mist.  
The windswept butts of cigarettes are circling  
the trash bin. A young archaeologist  
pours shards into the hood of his striped parka.  
It's drizzling. In the midst of vacant lots,  
among vast ruined buildings powdered over  
with broken stone, astonished, you behold  
a modest bust of Field Marshal Suvorov.

## VI

The noisy banquet of the bombing planes  
is still. March rain scrubs soot-flakes from the portals.  
Rudders of wrecked planes jut up here and there.  
Tall plumes of broken walls now seem immortal.  
And if one were to dig here – I would guess –  
these battered homes, like haylofts under needles,  
would give good grounds for finding happiness  
beneath a quaternary shroud of fragments.

## VII

Клен выпускает первый клейкий лист.  
В соборе слышен пилорамы свист.  
И кашляют грачи в пустынном парке.  
Скамейки моknут. И во все глаза  
из-за ограды смотрит вдаль коза,  
где зелень распустилась на фольварке.

## VIII

Весна глядит сквозь окна на себя.  
И узнает себя, конечно, сразу.  
И зреньем наделяет тут судьба  
все то, что недоступно глазу.  
И жизнь бушует с двух сторон стены,  
лишенная лица и черт гранита.  
Глядит вперед, поскольку нет спины...  
Хотя теней – в кустах битком набито.

## IX

Но если ты не призрак, если ты  
живая плоть, возьми урок с природы.  
И, срисовав такой пейзаж в листы,  
своей душе ищи иной структуры!  
Отбрось кирпичь, отбрось цемент, гранит,  
разбитый в прах – и кем? – винтом крылатым,  
на первый раз придав ей тот же вид,  
каким сейчас ты помнишь школьный атом.

## VII

A maple tree flaunts its first sticky leaves.  
Power saws are whining in the Gothic church.  
Rooks cough in the deserted city playground.  
Park benches gleam with rain. A nanny-goat  
behind a fence stares at the distant spot  
where the first green has spread across the farmyard.

## VIII

Spring peers through empty windows at herself,  
and knows herself in instant recognition.  
The tides of war reveal to human sight  
what hitherto was hidden from man's vision.  
Life rages from both sides of broken walls,  
through lacking trait of stone or face of granite.  
It looks ahead, since there's no wall behind...  
Although the bushes are alive with shadows.

## IX

But if you are no apparition, if  
you are living flesh, then take a note from nature.  
And having made a sketch of this terrain,  
find for your soul a wholly different structure.  
Throw out dull bricks, throw out cement and stone,  
battered to dust – by what? – a winged propeller.  
And lend the soul that open, airy look  
remembered from your classroom's model atom.

## X

И пусть теперь меж чувств твоих провал  
начнет зиять. И пусть за грустью томной  
бушует страх и, скажем, злобный вал.  
Спасти сердца и стены в век атомный  
когда скала – и та дрожит, как жердь,  
возможно нам, скрепив их той же силой  
и связью той, какой грозит им смерть;  
чтоб вздрогнул я, расслышав слово: "милый".

## XI

Сравни с собой или примерь на глаз  
любовь и страсть и – через боль – истому.  
Так астронавт, пока летит на Марс,  
захочет ближе оказаться к дому.  
Но ласка та, что далека от рук,  
стреляет в мозг, когда от верст опешишь,  
проворней уст: ведь небосвод разлук  
несокрушимей потолков убежищ!

## XII

Чик, чик, чирик. Чик-чик. - Посмотришь вверх.  
И в силу грусти, а верней – привычки,  
увидишь в тонких прутьях Кенигсберг.  
А почему б не называться птичке  
Кавказом, Римом, Кенигсбергом, а?  
Когда вокруг – лишь кирпичи и щебень,  
предметов нет, а только есть слова.  
Но нету уст. И раздается щебет.

X

And let an empty space begin to gape  
among your feelings. After languorous sorrow  
let fear explode, followed by cresting rage.  
It's possible in this atomic epoch,  
when cliffs tremble like reeds, for us to save  
both hearts and walls – if we will reinforce them  
with that same power that now portends their death.  
I trembled when I heard the words 'My darling'.

XI

You may compare, or weigh in the mind's eye,  
true love, and passion, and the listlessness  
that follows pain. An astronaut who streaks  
toward Mars longs suddenly to walk on earth.  
But a caress remote from loving arms,  
when miles take you aback, stabs at your brain  
harder than kisses: separation's sky  
is solidier than any ceilinged shelter.

XII

Cheep, cheep-chireep. Cheep-cheep. You look above  
and out of sorrow or, it may be, habit  
you glimpse a Königsberg among the twigs.  
And why shouldn't a bird be called a Königs-  
berg, a Caucasus, a Rome? – When all  
around us there are only bricks and broken  
stones; no objects, only words. And yet –  
no lips. The only sound we hear is twittering.

## XIII

И ты простишь нескладность слов моих.  
Сейчас от них – один скворец в ущербе.  
Но он нагонит: чик, Ich liebe dich.  
И, может быть, опередит: Ich sterbe.  
Блокнот и Цейсс в большую сумку спрячь.  
Сухой спиной поворотись к флюгарке  
и зонт сложи, как будто крылья – грач.  
И только ручка выдаст хвост пулярки.

## XIV

Постромки в ключья... Лошадь, где?.. Подков  
не слышен стук... Петля там, в руинах,  
коляска катит меж пустых холмов...  
Съезжает с них куда-то вниз... Две длинных  
шлеи за ней... И вот – в песке следы  
больших колес... Шуршат кусты в засаде...

## XV

И море, гребни чьи несут черты  
того пейзажа, что остался сзади,  
бежит навстречу и, как будто весть,  
благу весть – сюда, к земной границе, –  
влечет валы. И это сходство здесь  
уничтожает в них, лаская спицы.

1964



## XIII

You will forgive my words their clumsiness.  
That startling, finding them a provocation,  
draws even with me: cheep, ich liebe dich,  
and then leaves me behind: cheep-cheep, ich sterbe.  
Put sketchbook and binoculars away  
and turn your dry back on the weathercock.  
Close your umbrella, as a rook would close  
its wings. Its handle-tail reveals the capon.

## XIV

The harness traces stand in shreds ... Where is  
the horse?...The clatter of his hooves has died...  
The carriage rolls among the empty hills,  
looping through ruins, coasting fast. Two long  
breech-straps trail out behind it ... There are wheel-tracks  
in the sand. The bushes buzz with ambushes ...

## XV

The sea, whose crests repeat the silhouettes  
of landscapes that the wheels have left behind them,  
draws its billows to the land's frontier,  
spreading them like the news – like the Good News –  
and thus destroys the likeness of the waves  
and hills, caressing the wet carriage-spokes.

1964

From *Selected Poems*, translated and edited by George  
Kline (New York 1973), pp. 116–120

The title of the poem by Stevens has been transformed in a complex way. First of all, it is written in a different language from that of the main text; second, English is replaced by German; third, the philosopher has been changed into an architect. It must be assumed that we are dealing here not only with a reference to the irreparably destroyed architecture of Königsberg (as Losev assumes). The title of the poem is based on several metonymies. The use of German here is a metonymy for English: Rome a metonymy for Königsberg; similarly, the “old Architect” is most likely a metonymy for the “old Philosopher”, in this case for Kant, the “slight, thin, little old man, immaculately white and gentle”, as Karamzin described him. One of the summarizing chapters of *A Critique of Pure Reason* has the heading “The Architectonics of Pure Reason”. And, after all, from time immemorial, it has been common practice to compare philosophers and those who probe into (and create) structures of consciousness and intellect with architects. Kant is not mentioned by Brodsky – nor is Santayana by Stevens – but there are indications that his name, as well as those of Hoffmann and Kleist, appears as an anagram in the poem (it is also mentioned in a fragment that was discarded). But the spectral ride through the ruins of Königsberg is obviously a ride with Kant, a conversation with his ghost, which is a continuation of Karamzin’s conversation of long ago.

To a certain extent, the poem is cyclically structured. In the first two verses, a coach-ride in the rain is described, which is reminiscent of the “Russian traveller’s” ride in a bygone time. In the last two verses, the ride ends – the coach, which has been falling apart during the journey, leaves the town and heads towards the sea, which gradually loses its similarity with the landscape of ruins – the “good news” of nature triumphing over the decline of

syntax and history. Verses 3–8 describe in detail the odyssey through the ruins. Behind the carriage, a tram appears whose windows, like mirrors, reflect grass-covered fragments of the architecture. Its shape doubles in size – it might be real (the trams in Königsberg still run on the lines put down before the war), but it might also be a phantom, like “the lost tram” (“zabludivshiisya tramvai”) in Gumilëv’s poem.<sup>14</sup> The deserted town is described in detail. Reference is made to the usual elements that appear in the “Königsberg text” (the hill, the river, the park, the cathedral etc.), but Königsberg takes on a perceptible similarity to Rome. This is achieved in particular by means of references to the mythology of antiquity. (There is a subliminal association between the driver and Charon).<sup>15</sup> The initiation to Europe proves to be an initiation to ruins. Here, Rome plays its usual role as the symbol of the relentlessly changing times, as the incarnation of an ancient culture that was destroyed by a barbaric invasion. Some “Roman” details have an ironic tinge. For example, a trash bin turns out to be an ancient urn, rich pickings for the archaeologist (this passage is ceremoniously marked by onomatopoeia: Sumrak. Tyanet par s reki. / Vkrug urny plyashut na vetru okurki), the Kalinin-grad goat resembles those goats who grazed on the Forum after the destruction of Rome, even Suvorov’s bust, which stood in the ruins of Königsberg palace, can appear as the bust, shall we say, of Tiberius. The cathedral, where Karamzin, like Odysseus, had called forth the ghosts “from the gloomy abode of death”, has transformed itself into a kind of sawmill, but all around it, the place is “teeming” with “ghosts”.

Verses 12–13 counterbalance the spatial description of the town. As with Stevens, in Brodsky’s work, the material and the spiritual, the living and the dead, ambivalent

metamorphoses are present throughout, they merge into each other and are interchangeable. When, in the second verse, the little metal fish on the parapet of the bridge seem to be alive, hurled up by some exploding wave, things turn into words and Königsberg (already directly compared here to Rome) into a singing bird. Its futile yet animated song is actually the only possible response to the catastrophe. This is a literary technique used by Brodsky at almost the same time, in January 1964, in the remarkable poem “Proshchal’naya Oda”. Everything visible becomes sound, the fragments of architecture turn into scraps of phrases, the starling, like the trees in the second verse, speaks German – “ich liebe dich, ich sterbe” (I love you, I am dying). The protagonist in the poem identifies himself with the bird: incidentally, his “bird guise” is reminiscent of the silhouettes in German Romanticist drawings, even of the famous caricature silhouette of Kant by Puttrich. But the silhouette, too, gets lost – all that is left is the terrible anonymity of workaday routine.

The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal ‘field of forces’ of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive. The fact of existing imposes itself when there is no longer anything. And it is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself. It is impersonal like ‘it is raining’ or ‘it is hot.’<sup>16</sup>

In the middle of the poem, between the descriptive verses, comes a philosophical digression (verses 9 to 11). There, it is claimed that those who are “of flesh and blood” – in contrast to the spirits – are destined to defeat the unstable, impersonal nature of the ruins, and to find “another structure” for the soul. Here, in Brodsky, there are overtones of both Kant and Stevens, who, as we know, described Santayana as the “inquisitor of structures”. If there is no proportion between “joys and woes, pleasure and suffering”, some new approach will have to be found, “where this knot must be untied”. For Brodsky, like many post-catastrophe poets, this new approach consists in love, which, as it says in chapter eight, verse six of the Song of Solomon, is “as strong as death” (It’s possible in this atomic epoch, / ... for us to save / both hearts and walls – if we will reinforce them / with that same power that now portends their death). Love, both personal and all-embracing, is embodied in absence, in disappearance, in separation, but “separation’s sky/ is solidier than any ceilinged shelter.

Whether this is the pledge of immortality in the transcendental world or only in the world of ideas, thoughts and memories, we cannot know. The sea, the description of which brings the poem to a conclusion, can turn out to be good news or simply as indifferent nature. As Kant said to Karamzin: “Reason extinguishes its lamp, and we remain in darkness; only fantasy can travel in this darkness and create phantoms.”

*Translation from German by James Kerr, Langen, Hesse*

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- <sup>1</sup> Nikolai Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (Oxford 2003), pp. 38–43. Russian: Nikolaj M. Karamzin, *Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika. 1791–1795* (Moscow 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> Andrej Timofeevich Bolotov, *Zhizn' i prikljucheniya Andreyja Bolotova, opisannye im samym dlya svoich potomkov. 1738-1795*, Vol. 1-3 (Moscow 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Arsenii Gulyga, *Kant* (Moscow 1981). Available in English as Arsenii Gulyga, *Immanuel Kant: His Life and Thought* (Boston 1987).
- <sup>4</sup> Russian original: Nakonets iz Kenigsberga, Ya priblizilsia k strane, Gde ne lybyat Gutenberga, I nachodyat vkus v govne, English translation J.K. Chertkov, Leonid Natanovich (1933–2000), poet, literary scholar, translator.
- <sup>5</sup> Russian original: Vo chto sei prevrashchen, nazlo nadmennomu sosedu, English translation J.K.
- <sup>7</sup> In *Sochineniya Iosifa Brodskogo*, Vol. 1 (Petersburg 1992), p. 330.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 375–378.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p.100. English translation is available in *Selected Poems* (New York 1973), pp. 116–120.
- <sup>10</sup> Hoffmann, Ernst Theodor Wilhelm. *Die Serapionsbrüder*, in idem: *Poetische Werke in sechs Bänden* (Berlin 1958), Vol. 3, p. 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes (or Kohelet) 1:6.
- <sup>12</sup> Wallace Stevens, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York 1954), pp. 508–511. The works of the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) are eminently important for an understanding of Brodsky's poetry.
- <sup>13</sup> George Santayana (full name: Jorge Augustin Nicolás Ruiz De Santayana), Spanish-American philosopher and poet.
- <sup>14</sup> Nikolai Gumilëv, “Zabludivshiisya tramvai”, idem, *Ognënniy stolp* (Rostov 1989), p. 252.
- <sup>15</sup> Death's ferryman in Greek mythology.
- <sup>16</sup> Generally seen as being French, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (b. 1906 in Kaunas) is of Jewish-Lithuanian extraction, which had a strong influence on his philosophy. The above quotation is taken from Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh 1994), pp. 46–47.