

stat'i. 3 vols (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1993). Vol. 3, pp.284–285. For an extended discussion of Brodsky's relation to his Acmeist predecessors, see David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), chapter 2.

Questions of Travel:

On Brodsky and Sedakova

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Russian poetry is on the move. In the late Soviet period, an increasing number of poets experienced exile and emigration, repeating the pattern of the Silver Age. Since 1990, many more have migrated freely across Russia's borders. The most impressive anthology of Russian poetry produced in the last few years is surely *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss*, a 995-page volume with the work of more than two hundred poets who reside in twenty-six countries.¹ This anthology testifies to Russian poetry's restless energy and to its ability to flourish as it moves. It might be easy to assume that this stimulating freedom of movement began only when the Soviet Union ended, but the theme of travel and the ways in which it energized poets both began earlier. The effects remain varied. Comparing the work of Joseph Brodsky and Olga Sedakova, two premier poets on this and many other topics, suggests that the theme of travel emerges as vividly in the work of those who left as in that of poets who remained. It shows as well that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not mark an unyielding boundary line in Russian poets' patterns of motion, return, and flight.

The two poets' fate could not be more different. One remains content and productive in her Moscow life in the twenty-first century, the other was famously exiled in 1972, never to return. Brodsky has been so thoroughly identified with the subject of exile that travel will seem an obvious theme in his work and it risks, in fact, appearing as a diminished version of the weightier, more political experience of exile. Yet it was travel that he sought, as the work testifies: a tabulation of poems based on geographical realia or accounts of travel would reach a third to a half of his considerable output.² His attitudes toward the sites he visited were complex; without indulging in a fantasy of Russian superiority, he rarely refrained from offering judgments about politics and culture.³ Moreover, travel within Russia before 1972 was an immensely important aspect of Brodsky's life, extending not just to his exile near Arkhangelsk but also extensive experience on geological expeditions.⁴ It would be a mistake to

imagine Sedakova as the stationary, apolitical Moscow antipode. She has traveled widely in Europe and the United States; she knows a number of European languages, ancient and modern, and has been a prolific translator. Sedakova lived briefly in China as a child, and she has long identified herself with the countryside setting of her summers since childhood, Azarovka; her poetry is most often written there. A substantial number of her poems take up the subject of travel, in fact, although not in a way conventionally associated with tourism as pleasure and discovery. She has also written two major works of prose that are tales of travel. The material, then, will emerge easily from these poets' writings, demanding that one approach it both thematically (how do the poets represent the temptations and the obstacles of travel?) and formally (how does movement across borders affect a poem's rhetoric and its acts of poetic self-creation?).

One last preliminary: two patterns of travel are embedded in our imaginations because of two powerfully mythologized and dissimilar travelers — Homer and Dante. One is pagan and telling of journeys across lands where heroes might do battle, the other is locked into a symbolic journey through stages of Christian revelation. Odysseus's journey is in the end most significant when it brings him home; the *Iliad* tells of travel as conquest and loss; Dante's tale is still more directed toward its glorious end, for his final steps lead him to paradise. Odysseus travels, one might say, but Dante transcends. It is tempting to map these two opposing figures onto Brodsky and Sedakova, all the more so as Brodsky has a poem in which Odysseus speaks to his son about his wanderings.⁵ Brodsky had what a college friend of mine used to call "global feet," with all the intensity and masculine restlessness of the Homeric epic, whereas Sedakova sees all journeys as a search for symbolic transcendence and as the means to a deeper form of homecoming. She teaches a seminar on Dante, in fact, from time to time in Moscow. Her roads could lead anywhere, and, as such, travel in her poems differs little when it is experienced in the mind or as actual physical quest.

Both Homeric and Dantesque travel may in turn seem to map on to received ideas of gender. It is another temptation. The mode of travel known as military incursion is important in Brodsky's work.⁶ His poems on ancient topics give us more than occasional generals and their armies, and a certain fascination with the theme of conquest can be found across his writings, not least in his love poetry.⁷ But in his travel poems, a quest for domination yields to the nervous contemplation of unfamiliar or even familiar sights, the impulse to measure a moment's vision against past

experiences, and the elegiac recollection of places to which the poet cannot return. For all the external trappings of the conquering male, Brodsky's poetic persona reveals many shades of vulnerability, and not just those of Don Juan weakened in the presence of a strong woman. The most interesting question about Brodsky's travel poems, I believe, is how vulnerable he allows himself to be to the places he visits, and thus one task of reading these poems is to follow the paths of psychic fortification and emotional defense along which the poet travels. The military metaphor returns, then, but re-defined as psychic and metaphysical readiness.

For Sedakova, the feminine delicacy and physical immobility that the stereotypes of gender lead us to expect do emerge quietly in both the extraordinarily precise, subtle diction of the poetry and in the stilled concentration of thought that gives great distinction to her work. But one should again be cautious in embracing the stereotype fully. When Sedakova invokes feminine imagery, she always includes a splendid charge of irony if not a delicious note of ambition.⁸ Catriona Kelly has argued that the use of grammatical gender in "Piatye stansy" ("Fifth Stanzas") is also an invocation of the feminine, an important theme to notice in this ambitious poem which is itself about poetic ambition (about the imagination of a major work of writing, a "bol'shaia veshch").⁹ A kind of femininity also returns strongly in the travel poems: femininity as absorption, receptivity, attention to others. Sedakova prizes moments of encounter or meeting. She greets novelty or surprise (often the allure of travel) joyously, and she seeks and finds rewarding instances of that which is greater than she is. Surely this is the opposite of the mode of conquest. Her model of psychic and metaphysical alertness, then, to use the same words as in speaking of Brodsky's sense of self-fortification, is on the contrary a readiness to absorb, to change. If in his work, the gesture of domination is countered by moments of vulnerability and nostalgia, then in hers there is the balancing moment of sheer exaltation at the new, the strange.

The questions that these poets will ask of travel, then, involve acts of self-representation and of reflection on the inherent strangeness of foreign lands. "Questions of Travel" was the title of a great poem by Elizabeth Bishop, the premier poet of travel in the modern period. It was also the title of her 1965 volume of poems, a volume which opens with the poem "Arrival at Santos":

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
 here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
 impractically shaped and — who knows? — self-pitying mountains,
 sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery.¹⁰

No Russian poet will probably ever match Bishop's brilliant mix of flat tone and whimsical readiness to rhyme "scenery" with "greenery,"¹¹ nor her re-creation of an arriving traveler's first impressions of a place that will prove equal parts meager, impractical, sad, and frivolous. Brodsky, however, can come close, and he will rewrite this kind of arrival scene more than once,¹² seeking the strong impression of chatty metaphysical insight that Bishop's poetry creates.¹³ He, too, will ask the question she posed in the poem "Questions of Travel," "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?"¹⁴

No, of course not, Olga Sedakova would answer, and Bishop would have agreed, if ambivalently.¹⁵ Bishop will fill the seen world with images that remind us of nothing so much as aesthetic creation, and Sedakova's poems will often do something similar. Bishop ends the poem "Questions of Travel" by noting that travel — needing to see it, rather than imagine it — has become associated with a "lack of imagination." She rephrases her question tellingly: "Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?" and, with that turn of phrase, she brings us back to Brodsky, for whom "home" was a more complicated concept and place than any destination or port of call.

Most scholarship about Brodsky's travel writing has focused on themes of emigration and exile, quite productively.¹⁶ Scholars have also emphasized the nothingness, the void which seems to greet Brodsky wherever he travels.¹⁷ Rather than filling up the world with sights that evoke the imagination and its bounty, as would seem to be the case with Bishop and Sedakova, Brodsky watches a world empty itself before his eyes. When he stuffs the world with objects, it is perhaps to defend against that void.

This, then, is the received wisdom. Let us look at a few of the poems to see how these premises work themselves out.

Sedakova

Sedakova has been writing poems of travel from her earliest mature work. Her range of travel writings is wide geographically, from China to Rome and, if one includes her prose, from Briansk to Tartu. But many of her travel poems name no destination, for they take movement through space as a metaphor for movement in the mind. The transit of body and

mind to new sites matters only when the result is renewal of the soul. I take St. Aleksii, Man of God, as her paradigmatic traveler. For her travel is a form of pilgrimage. It leads not to the discovery of new places of interest, but to the moment when one returns, renewed and sustained by faith. St. Aleksii, patron of beggars and wanderers, is the direct subject of three of her poems.¹⁸

Sedakova's first book, *Dikii shipovnik: legendy i fantazii* (1978), includes "Legenda sed'maia: Smert' Aleksii, Rimskogo Ugodnika," a poem that describes the sights that Aleksii would behold on his return to the house of his family. Gradually the poem speaks in his voice, as if walking his steady pace. Despite its subtitle, this poem does not tell of death. That is unusual for Sedakova's travel poems, where strange sights often prompt a revelation about the meaning of mortality.¹⁹ Instead, she ends with a statement of identity, with a speaker, Aleksii, who places himself as movement, vision, and voice:

As I walk from eye to eye
 in tears of recollection,
 I am the voice, raised in your name,
 I am the alms, given and received.

Как я иду в глаза из глаз
 уже в слезах воспоминанья,
 я — голос, поднятый за вас,
 и принятое подаянье.²⁰

Sedakova condenses this saint's particular form of humility — that he accepts alms from parents who do not recognize him — into an exchange of glances, and into charity meekly accepted. As she was to say in another poem, "Puteshestvie," the deep wish for recognition is what hides in any experience that resembles this artlessly simple legend: there she writes, "Kazhdyi khochet, chtob ego uznali."²¹ Aleksii comes home, not as a son seeking forgiveness, but as a seeming stranger who wonders whether he will be known. Travel risks making us strangers to ourselves, to borrow a locution from Julia Kristeva,²² which has to be one reason for the title of Sedakova's poem "Strannoe puteshestvie."

Like the poem "Legenda sed'maia," "Strannoe puteshestvie" appeared in her first book, *Dikii shipovnik*. It is a poem of movement and revelation.

A Strange Journey

Thus we were riding on: at times in tears, or else in pain from the white light.
I took a look around, hoping to see whether it was all visible.
"And so your soul aches and your vision wants to break —
no, to be broken by — a crooked, evil mirror, that has taught you not to love."

And so I learned with whom I was destined to be.

My friend, my first and last, unforeseen, nothing more than an effort to move
between desire and terror, only a movement
toward death by peril, to perish when one wants it least, and they do perish in
search of continuation
in this face, a face that is patient as a growing plant.

Heart of hearts, that perished at their own hand, in love with salvation.

We were riding through fields, and the fields reflected each other,
leaves were flying off from the leaves, and a circle was drawing itself out from
the circle.

Or is a meeting standing there, ready, having gone past the garden
where you cannot see me, but you will see that the leaves are looking,
the tears are burning,
and matter itself will vow
that it was a vision in the past, and to vision it will return.

The train rushes on,
and the soul moans at the reproach,
separating out the tatters of life like a barbaric, rare,
passionate form of bird-language, trying to pluck out a single word of reason...
After all you are not a meeting, not a rip in the colorful circle.

I will ride on, and think in the emptiness that comes before the heart,
riding on and on, and crying over my death
without end...

Странное путешествие

Так мы и ехали: то ли в слезах, то ли больно от белого света.
Я поглядела кругом, чтоб увидеть, как видимо это.
— Так, как душа твоя ноет и зрение хочет разбить —
зеркало злое, кривое, учившее вас не-любить.

Так и узнала я, с кем мне положено быть.

Друг мой последний и первый, невиданный, лишь напряженье
между желаньем и ужасом, только движенье
к гибели, гибнуть когда не желают и гибнут, ища продолженья

в этом лице, — терпеливо оно, как растение.

Сердце сердец, погубивших себя и влюбленных в спасенье.

Мы проезжали поля, и поля отражали друг друга,
листья из листьев летели, и круг выпрямлялся из круга.
Или свиданье стоит, обгоняющий сад,
где ты не видишь меня, но увидишь, как листья глядят,
слезы горят,
и само вещество поклянется,
что оно зрением было и в зренье вернется.

Поезд несется,
и стонет душа от обличий,
рвань раздвигая живую, как варварский, птичий,
страстный язык, чтобы вынуть разумное слово ...
Ты ведь уже не свиданье, не разрывание круга цветного.

Буду я ехать и думать в своей пустоте предсердечной,
ехать, и ехать, и плакать о смерти моей
бесконечной...²³

What makes the journey strange? Among other things, "Strannoe puteshestvie" produces an encounter with abstractions, with "svidan'e," with "veshchestvo."²⁴ When the poet looks around herself, it is not to see specific sights, but to contemplate the visibility of it all. The reciprocal gaze between subject and object, so important in Brodsky's poetry, here becomes an exchange among the objects — fields reflect one another, leaves fly away from one another, a circle straightens itself, one circle emerging from another. The circularity suggests the strangest thing about the journey, the way in which it is not delineated from all the experience that came before or after. The lack of marked beginning or end could not be more striking. The opening catches the poet already in motion, and that beginning, as if mid-way through life's journey, imitates the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.²⁵ Perhaps more striking is the closing that affirms the journey's endlessness. And, because the endlessness is attributed to death, the final image is still more ambiguous, at once a sign of life's conclusion and its eternity. If a journey is not bounded, then the journey is life itself, a road on which one travels until life is over.

In this poem, the poet dispenses with all that would make travel a departure from daily routines, instead keeping it within familiar norms and expectations. As journeys go, then, it is anything but strange. In fact, Sergei Averintsev noted that the word "strannyi" here echoes "strannik," the wanderer.²⁶ "Strannoe puteshestvie" ends with a continuation of move-

ment,²⁷ but one in which the poet walks in tearful acceptance of the journey toward death. One is reminded of the way in which death enlivens the imagination of Emily Dickinson, whose poetry Sedakova has translated.²⁸ Dickinson's multitude of poems, with their incessant returns to moments of death and transcendence, became a cumulative argument against death's finality, but that has not been Sedakova's mode. She has always written (or written down) a relatively small number of poems each year. Her formal argument against death's finality comes, I think, in a different way, seen particularly well in the poetic structure of "Strannoe puteshestvie." The lines look to be of different lengths, the stanzas, too, and there are lines that stand alone as if they could not find their places in stanzaic space. We are reminded of the origin of the term "stanza" (which Sedakova, with her excellent Italian, knows well) as a room — these lines stand at the threshold of a stanza or perhaps they create corridors of meaning among the stanzas. As is so often the case with this poet, the formal decisions have created their own hidden forms of discipline: the lines are all dactylic, and, though they vary in length, the lines' rhythm provides a calm and even tone. The rhyme scheme also mixes the expected with surprises. The stand-alone lines adhere to the stanzas they follow or precede because of their rhymes, and the rhymes become all the more effective by using the same sounds, or similar sounds, over and over. Here we find not just rhyming pairs but triplets or even longer groupings, as in "razbit'," "liubit'," "byt'"; "napriazhen'e," "dvizhen'e," "prodolzhen'ia," "rasten'e," "spasen'e"; or "sad," "gliadiat," "goriat." This intensification of sound repetition in the rhymes heightens our sense of the lines' endings, but, as is the case with Sedakova's entire approach to death as an ending, this is attenuated by the very fact of the repetition, so that the poem circles back to sounds, it cannot let them go. One of the rhyme pairs, inevitably, uses the word for circle ("druga," "kruga") and the word itself circles back in the last line of the penultimate stanza, as the penultimate word. There are many other internal rhymes, as the reader will easily see, and some of them echo the end-rhymes, as in "svidan'e" "razryvanie" in that same penultimate stanza's final line. Sedakova offers one last brilliant stroke to the musical format of this poem, in her decision to place the poem's last word in its own line. She thereby interrupts the rhyme "predserdechnoi"/"beskonechnoi" with a word that has no pair, "moei," all in order to give that word "beskonechnoi" its own line, to have it read in all its ambivalent glory, to leave us again to contemplate the endless-

ness of both those endings that we call death and those endings that we think are the last lines of poems.²⁹

A brief word about Sedakova's prose. *Puteshestvie v Briansk* (*Journey to Briansk*) and *Puteshestvie v Tartu* recount journeys she took to read her poetry in the provincial city of Briansk and to attend the funeral of Yuri Lotman in Tartu. In an easy tone, they light up with self-deprecation and irony as the poet discovers that her preconceived ideas about people outside Moscow are not entirely right. She travels, then, to find out something of her own limitations. Literally, in the case of *Puteshestvie v Tartu*, which is all about the risks of border crossings. The indignities of Soviet life descend on the poet in both settings, as physical discomfort and as personal insult. Yet the tales hurtle toward conclusions where the poetry of the experience transcends all prosaic obstacles. By the end of each journey, the poet has a vision of something that vanquishes all insult, allowing her to see the Pechora caves and monastery near Pskov. In Briansk, she sees the ghost of Marina Tsvetaeva in a dream worthy of Tsvetaeva's own extraordinary dream of the dying Pushkin.³⁰ Nothing could differ more from the travel prose of Joseph Brodsky, where there is no redemption, no breathing space for a poet who finds new places that always bring him back to a sense of his own exhaustion.

Brodsky

He was to become a man who traveled compulsively, and his poetry speeds across the map of Europe and the Americas, pausing in Rome, Venice, Florence, Lisbon, Cape Cod, Brighton Rock, York, Rotterdam, and Mexico, to name only the sites that come quickest to mind. The poetry fantasizes about travels to impossible places, to Atlantis or to ancient Egypt,³¹ and it describes the landscapes seen during these journeys, landscapes marked by floods or mountaintops, by tattered huts and squabbling families. The sites can be presented as memories, as in the evocations of Leningrad or of the Russian North, or projected from an imagination rich with the examples of other poems and other art forms, painting, architecture, and sculpture chief among them. The point of all these references is perhaps their restlessness, their urgency in conjuring up movement itself from words that rest stilly on a page.

Brodsky's poems in this sense resemble the structures of thought found in Bishop's travel poems — the same fascination with distant places, the same attention to quirky detail. Like Bishop, he prized one destination

above all others. Italy, particularly Rome and Venice, is like her Brazil (or like her shift in allegiance from Florida to Brazil), although his affection was not locked in to one long, great love affair, as was hers with Lota Soares, and so it was not wrenched away from him when a romance went awry. Still more important than nuances of biography and emotion, however, is a larger difference of tone — how far he has journeyed from the delicacy of Bishop's work. Instead, Brodsky creates a more cumbersome metaphysical vocabulary that often relies on insistent comparisons and rhetorical questions, making the poems' revelations at once questionable and obvious. He writes with numbing frequency of his boredom, and that, too, could not be less like the sense of wonder found in Bishop's poems and, I would note, Sedakova's. His prose about travel, which is extensive, abounds in moments of utter indifference, felt even in the title of "A Place As Good as Any," for example.³² But it appears in the poetry, too, as in "Meksikanskii divertiment" (1975). In this very long poem, some passages sound like a tourist postcard, but not here:

Life is a drag, Evgeny mine. Wherever you go,
everywhere dumbness and cruelty come up and say, "Hello,
here we are!" And they creep into verse, as it were.³³

Скучно жить, мой Евгений. Куда ни странствуй,
всюду жестокость и тупость воскликнут: "Здравствуй,
вот и мы!" Лень загонять в стихи их.³⁴

The ennui may be nothing more than a stylized repetition of Onegin's yawning reaction to Petersburg theaters (as well as a reference to "Puteshestvie Onegina"), but the poet seems to know that letting the boredom into his poem carries genuine dangers.

The quickly cooling coffee in the poem cited next might be another sign of boredom, but in this passage the poet, who has ambitions not unlike those of Bishop, stumbles on cosmic meaning in the local setting of a Venice café. These lines come from the second of his "Venetsianskie strofy" (1982), the final stanza:

I am writing these lines sitting outdoors, in winter,
on a white iron chair, in my shirtsleeves, a little drunk;
the lips move slowly enough to hinder
the vowels of the mother tongue,
and the coffee grows cold. And the blinding lagoon is lapping
at the shore as the dim human pupil's bright penalty
for its wish to arrest a landscape quite happy
here without me.³⁵

Я пишу эти строки, сидя на белом стуле
под открытым небом, зимой, в одном
пиджаке, поддав, раздвигая скулы
фразами на родном.
Стынет кофе. Плещет лагуна, сотней
мелких бликов тусклый зрачок казня
за стремленье запомнить пейзаж, способный
обойтись без меня.³⁶

I have chosen the end rather than the beginning of a poem purposely. The beginnings tend to be more vulgar, with the references to masturbation, for instance, in "Lido" (1985), perverts in the 1985 poem "V Italii,"³⁷ and this tendency allows Brodsky to mark the poems' openings with signs of masculinity prerogative. That difference is enough to make one think of Lotman's theory of the artistic text that noted the encoding function of beginnings, as opposed to the generalizing function of endings. Brodsky often follows that model, encoding into the beginning a note of harsh skepticism that allows him in the endings to state more philosophically the fact of his own absence, as in the last line of these "Venetsianskie strofy."

The absence is made violent by the rhyme, "kaznia"/"menia," as if the imagined future absence of the self were a punishment for trying to fix the landscape in the mind. One is used to the idea that an artist who tries to create a stilled image of an experience has done violence to, even killed it — this is a sentiment Brodsky himself expresses in his English poem "A Photograph." But here, as is more often the case in his work, the harm moves from object to subject, like the way the retina is sliced in the conclusion of the poem written in memory of his mother.³⁸ Harm to eyes strikes at the deepest pleasure of the tourist, and disrupts the relationship between subject and object that is at the center of these poems. Brodsky writes in *Watermark*, his essay about Venice, that the "common purpose of everything here is to be seen."³⁹ To say that is to suggest that all sights and objects in a city exist only so that they may be looked at. There is no small measure of self-irony, though, in this deprecating gesture: elsewhere in *Watermark*, Brodsky notes that "one is what one looks at — well, at least partially."⁴⁰

The reverse is true as well, as the poet observes in an untitled poem that begins "Pchely ne uleteli, vsadnik ne uskakal. V kofeine..." (1989). Here, the immobilized poet ends up seeing how things "harden" ("zatverdevaiut") in order to mark their place in memory all the more firmly. He continues:

Life without us, my dear, is entirely thinkable — that's why landscapes exist, also a bar, hills, cumulous clouds in a pure sky over the famous battle field where statues grow cold, as they celebrate the victory of bodily form.

Жизнь без нас, дорогая, мыслима — для чего и существуют пейзажи, бар, холмы, кучевое облако в чистом небе над полем того сраженья где статуи стынут, празднуя победу телосложения.⁴¹

This poem comes to the same bleak vision that ends "Venetsianskie strofy": a landscape that chills into motionlessness as the poet disappears from view. Brodsky takes up common themes heard in travel poetry — that the moment of observation is fleeting, that the poet will not soon return to this site, that the site will not acknowledge the poet's presence or absence. But he renders them at once more abstract and more personal. Brodsky almost always brings this kind of meditative poetry, and here I include his travel or geographical poems in the larger context of his lyric writings, to a sternly worded, tight statement about the absence or mortality or irrelevance to others of the speaking self. This is a poet whose poems can dryly acknowledge that you could fill a city with those who have forgotten him, to choose a lavish and famous formulation of this claim.⁴² This kind of ironic summing up, which might logically come at the end of a poem, enacting the kind of generalization Lotman would have us expect, also occurs halfway through some poems, as in "Ia vkhodil vmesto dikogo zveria v kletku" ("May 24, 1980"). I take this displacement to be a formal re-enactment of what Brodsky does in his frequent use of radical enjambment and in his preference for starting sentences halfway through a line rather than allowing syntax and lineation to coincide: he unsettles our notion of the sequence beginning — middle — end, preferring to open up each element of the series and to deny a fully satisfying closure. That small point of rhetoric and form has a huge impact in conveying to the reader a sense of unease with a poem's themes or claims about death. My earlier comment about Sedakova's use of rhyme is, in Brodsky's poetry — where rhyme can also so forcefully command our attention — largely performed by the poet's refusal to let poetic lines mark the endings of grammatical sentences.⁴³ There are no endings, in fact, for all that the poems say about death, which suggests a further point of comparison with Sedakova.

In her poetry, all travel is travel toward death. The encounter with the end of one's life defines the only journey that matters. Brodsky does not

share Sedakova's focus on that story, but death haunts his lyric world with a looming presence and here he seeks no defenses. In one of her earliest statements about Brodsky's poetry, Sedakova emphasized that "the basic liberating element in Brodsky is his consciousness of death. There was some sort of early and extremely powerful intimacy with death, mortality, temporality. It's the key motif in many of his poems."⁴⁴ Brodsky and Sedakova differently understand and react to reminders of mortality, but movement that might seem to escape such inevitability draws them back into the circle where life cannot but end in death. In this they depart radically from any model found in the work of Elizabeth Bishop; note how far we have come from a conventional notion of travel poetry, even one so brilliantly realized as that of Bishop.

In the poetry of both Brodsky and Sedakova, this meeting with death is presented as something of a return. In his poetry, this is an elegiac scene of return that begins in his earliest poetry, for example, in the 1962 poem "Ot okrainy k tsentru" (this is the poem that begins "Vot ia vnov' posetil" ["And so, once again, I revisited"], as if in casual reprise of Pushkin's great 1835 Mikhailovskoe elegy). Brodsky's poet wanders no further than the outskirts of Leningrad, but all the same he feels intensely estranged.⁴⁵ He is ambivalent about whether he has actually returned, in the end, so fully does the place not recognize him. That concern with recognition is perhaps more powerfully felt in Sedakova's poetry, where the tale of return is above all that of Saint Aleksii, as we have seen. She has an extraordinary way of making the moment of recognition both the pivot on which the saint's life turns, and the detail in which saintliness takes on its most human dimension. In her most recent poem about Aleksii, "Sant Alessio. Roma," she comments near the poem's end: "Ne uznali — da i kto uznaet?" ("He went unrecognized — well, who can do the work of recognition?").⁴⁶ My translation is wordy, compared to her compact formulation, but it is meant to show how Sedakova translates between theology and psychology, how she inserts into this poem a calm faith that it is only God who can fully recognize in us who we are.

Sedakova's work includes several poems about the Prodigal Son, as well. This tale creates for her another narrative of return, but without that pivot of recognition.⁴⁷ Brodsky's poetry tends not to rely on biblical figures for this topos, instead writing typically in the first person about the experience of seeing a place anew.⁴⁸ A later example would be his untitled 1990 poem dedicated to Tomas Tranströmer, which begins "Vot ia i snova pod etim bestsvetnym nebom."⁴⁹ Note again the casually Pushkinian

reference. For both poets, then, this inevitable ending is imagined as a return. In theological terms, there is no surprise here, for we are born unto dust and to dust we return. But the structure of return means that the journey toward death has more familiarity than strangeness, and it is more a source of comfort than dismay.⁵⁰

I conclude with the final stanza of a poem about Florence, which reflects more generally on the nature of cities to which one cannot return. That of course is the quintessential expression of the exile theme in Brodsky, and this poem was written in 1976, only four years after his departure from Russia in 1972 and thus at a moment when the reality of exile was settling on the poet.⁵¹ Florence is the city most associated with Dante, whose exile from the city is invoked by Brodsky by means of his epigraph from Akhmatova (it comes from her 1936 poem, "Dante," and surely her poem's opening lines, which Brodsky does not cite, are what really matters here: "On i posle smerti ne vernulsia V staruiu Florentsiu svoiu."⁵² Here is the ninth and final stanza of "Dekabr' vo Florentsii" (1976).

IX

There are cities one won't see again. The sun
throws its gold at their frozen windows. But all the same
there is no entry, no proper sum.
There are always six bridges spanning the sluggish river.
There are places where lips touched lips for the first time ever,
or pen pressed paper with real fervor.
There are arcades, colonnades, iron idols that blur your lens.
There the streetcar's multitudes, jostling, dense,
speak in the tongue of a man who's departed thence.⁵³

IX

Есть города, в которые нет возврата.
Солнце бьется в их окна, как в гладкие зеркала. То
есть, в них не проникнешь ни за какое золото.
Там всегда протекает река под шестью мостами.
Там есть места, где припадал устами
тоже к устам и пером к листам. И
там рябит от аркад, колоннад, от чугунных пугал;
там толпа говорит, осаждая трамвайный угол,
на языке человека, который убыл.⁵⁴

These lines begin as if the subject were still December in Florence, but surely Leningrad is the city with frozen windows reflecting a golden sun, the city with contemptible iron monuments. There, the poet remembers

places where kisses were exchanged, places where he would write with fervor; and he remembers the press of the crowd laying siege to a tram, but speaking his language. This poem, which had offered its readers sustained descriptions of Florence before striking the languid note of its conclusion, becomes a meditation not on the cycle of returns that can constitute travel, but on the distant appraisal of a city that is never to be seen again. Brodsky more directly described Leningrad in the essay "A Guide to a Renamed City." There he writes that "this is the city where it's somehow easier to endure loneliness than anywhere else: because the city itself is lonely."⁵⁵

All his travel poetry, it should be said, is permeated by this loneliness. If one had to mark one element of the poetic world, then, against which the travel poetry tries to defend this poet (and fails), it would be this loneliness.⁵⁶ This extreme inability to make of the journey a set of human encounters marks Brodsky's radical difference from Dante. I say this, even knowing that Sedakova, writing after Brodsky's death, called him "our Dante."⁵⁷ I do so with an eye to something said in Susan Stewart's splendid essay on Dante, which focuses on the importance of meetings in Dante's journey. She writes:

The poetry of meeting involves a lived encounter or exchange and so includes an open possibility of transformation by means of language. Visions and beholding may be involved in these poems of meeting; but because the speakers of such poems are not alone, sublime experiences do not lead to silence and speechlessness.⁵⁸

That is the risk, of course, in a landscape of loneliness, that one will confront instead "silence and speechlessness." This may seem a counter-intuitive approach to Brodsky, who was so prolific, who so completely seemed able to adapt to any verbal situation, to write his way out of any dead end, but it is also a way to understand the defensive function of all those references to writing, grammar, punctuation, alphabets, and the like in his work. The distant tram is full of people speaking his language, but so what? Brodsky's loneliness is not only personal, which is why it is so intense. One senses as well a feeling of having been abandoned by God. Writing of Brodsky's poetry, Aleksandr Skidan has said that he seems to describe a world that God has left, in fact,⁵⁹ again, one comes upon a very sharp distinction from the world of Olga Sedakova, where all meetings — and her poetry abounds in meetings — are approximations of the encounter with God's grace.

Although I have singled out these two poets, they belong to a larger

context where the theme of travel — imagined or real — would take poets to places that stimulate or surprise them, where turns to other poetic traditions would become a form of mental travel and a source of new energy, and where some poets would embody the experience of travel not as journeys outward but as ever more intense flights into retreat. In her own work, Sedakova does all these things, as have Viktor Krivulin, Inna Lisnianskaia, Elena Shvarts, to name only a few poets whose works belong in this discussion. I am also implicitly arguing that Brodsky's work remains a point of departure, if you'll excuse the travel pun, for an astonishingly wide range of topics within contemporary poetry. Claims that he had no worthy followers are probably true, but good poets aren't followers, they journey off in their own directions. Still, they may go off in directions opened by a poet of Brodsky's stature and originality and, for Russian poetry, this has been true for several decades now.

Indeed, how could it be otherwise? The question is where and how we look for original, interesting evidence of Brodsky's impact. Aleksandr Skidan quite remarkably said, look at the women poets.⁶⁰ That is another reason why it has seemed particularly apt to read Brodsky's work alongside that of Sedakova. If one follows through the logic of Skidan's claim, then it stands to reason that, as we write the history of contemporary Russian poetry, we will be writing a history in which women play a very significant role.

Notes

¹Dmitrii Kuzmin, ed. *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss: sovremennaia russkaia poeziia za predelami Rossii* (Moscow: NLO, 2004). Kuzmin has also edited a volume of poetry from the Russian provinces: *Nestolichnaia literatura: poeziia i proza regionov Rossii* (Moscow: NLO, 2001).

²I base that estimate on the precise but partial calculation in Petr Vail', "Prostranstvo kak metafora vremeni: stikhi Iosifa Brodskogo v zhanre puteshestviia," *Russian Literature*. Vol. 37, nos. 2–3 (1995), *Joseph Brodsky: Special Issue*, p. 406. He writes that 43% of the poems in *Chast' rechi* (1976) have geographical references and half are about travel; the number drops to 25% in *Uraniia*, but, as he notes, travel themes in the prose become much more prominent than as well. Vail' includes the essay as an afterword to a handy volume he edited, with forty of Brodsky's poems set outside Russia: Iosif Brodskii. *Peresechennaia mestnost': Puteshestviia s kommentarii*, ed. Petr Vail' (Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1995).

³G.S. Smith noted that younger Russians regard Brodsky "as a pioneer of transnationalism." See "Joseph Brodsky: Summing Up," *Literary Imagination*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2005), p. 406.

⁴Gerald Smith rightly pointed this out to me, for which I am grateful.

⁵The poem, however, is less about Odysseus's return than his wandering, as Michael Wachtel kindly pointed out in reminding me of the pertinence of this poem. For the poem, "Odisei Telemaku," see *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1998), 6 vols. to date, vol. 3, p. 27. Brodsky's English translation appears in Joseph Brodsky. *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), p. 64. It would be supremely logical, according to the argument advanced by Andrew Reynolds, that Brodsky would de-emphasize the moment of homecoming, even in this poem written so early (1972, the year of his exile). See Reynolds, "Returning the Ticket: Joseph Brodsky's 'August' and the End of the Petersburg Text?" *Slavic Review*. Vol. 64, no. 2 (Summer, 2005), pp. 307–332.

⁶See, for example, "Lines on the Winter Campaign, 1980" ("Stikhi o zimnei kampanii 1980-go goda") and "Cappadocia" ("Kappadokiia," 1992) — Brodskii. *Uraniia* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1987), pp. 97–99 and *Peizazh s navodneniem* (Dana Point: Ardis, 1995), pp. 108–110. For translations into English, see Brodsky. *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 254–256, 409–411.

⁷For readings of the rhetorical complexities of one of the military poems, see "Joseph Brodsky, 'On the Talks in Kabul': A Forum on Politics in Poetry," ed. Catherine Ciepiela and Stephanie Sandler, *Russian Review*, vol. 61, no. 2 (April, 2002), pp. 186–219.

⁸See, for example, the ironic speech in "Figure of a Woman" ("Zhenskaia figura"), by a woman who has turned her back on her readers; and "The Old Women" ("Starushki") in the cycle "Starye pesni" — Ol'ga Sedakova. *Stikhi* (Moscow: NFQ/To Print, 2001), pp. 156, 241.

⁹Kelly argues that the "bol'shaia veshch'" of that poem is as much a feminine creation as it is a vessel for the mind's ideas and creative dreams. See Catriona Kelly. *A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 430–432.

¹⁰Elizabeth Bishop. *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 89.

¹¹She may have heard the rhyme in the 1927 Rodgers and Hart song "Mountain Greenery," recorded by Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Tormé, and others in the 1950s, a splendid possibility suggested to me by Gerald Smith.

¹²For example, "Odnazhdy ia tozhe zimoiu priplyl siuda" — Brodskii. *Peizazh s navodneniem*, pp. 61–62. In English: "Homage to Girolamo Marcello," *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 397–398.

¹³Brodsky met Bishop in Mexico in 1965 at an event organized by Octavio Paz. He described her as the most significant American poet of the twentieth century, and recalled that she asked him many questions about Akhmatova. See Brodskii. *Peresechennaia mestnost'*, p. 158.

¹⁴Bishop. *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

¹⁵As she writes in the poem "Questions of Travel": "Surely it would have been a

pity/ not to have seen the trees along this road,/ really exaggerated in their beauty,/ not to have seen them gesturing/ like noble pantomimists, robed in pink." — Bishop. *Complete Poems*, pp. 93–94.

¹⁶See especially David Betha. *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁷Božena Shallcross. *Through the Poet's Eye: The Travels of Zagajewski, Herbert, and Brodsky* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002); Sanna Turoma, "Poet kak odinokii turist: Brodskii, Venetsiia, i putevye zametki," *NLO* 67 (2004), pp. 164–180. The theme is not confined to poems of travel. See the apt formulation in G.S. Smith, "'Long Growing Dark': Joseph Brodsky's 'August,'" *Rereading Russian Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Sandler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 248–255, who notes "Brodsky's studied self-denigration and calculated self-abnegation, his obsession with *absence*" (p. 254).

¹⁸See "Vozvrashchenie: Stikh ob Aleksee," in the cycle *Starye pesni*, in Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 147; and "Sant Alessio. Roma," in *Nachalo knigi*, in *Stikhi*, pp. 327–328. The third poem is discussed below.

¹⁹For example, "Puteshestvie," from *Starye pesni*, briefly discussed below.

²⁰Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 24.

²¹Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 158.

²²Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

²³Sedakova. *Stikhi*, pp. 36–37. Here and elsewhere, translation into English is mine, unless otherwise noted. The tears and pain in line 1 of this poem compare well to the motion of walking in pain and grief in "Po doroge dlinnoi, po doroge pyl'noi," in Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 165.

²⁴Compare "Vozvrashchenie bludnogo syna": "my kak slepsy poslednie, idem — / kak zren'e, sdelannoe veshchestvom." See Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 29.

²⁵In his introduction to Sedakova's 2001 volume of poems, Sergei Averintsev commented on the same type of beginning for the poem "David poet Saulu"; see Sedakova. *Stikhi*, p. 11.

²⁶See Sergei Averintsev, "Metafizicheskaia poezii kak poezii izumleniia," *Kontinent*, 120 (2004).

²⁷I note in passing that Sedakova loves that kind of narrative progression — compare the triptych "Selva selvaggia," which ends with "Ballada prodolzheniia." See *Stikhi*, pp. 30–31.

²⁸Sedakova gravitated toward the theological and end-of-life scenarios in Dickinson's work. Her eleven translated poems include "Success is counted sweetest," "The Soul selects her own Society"; and, in a way pertinent to the argument of this paper, "Our journey had advanced." In "My daleko zashli —," Sedakova adds an emphasis on the moment of divine recognition. I wonder, too, whether "Eternity's White Flag" isn't an inspiration for the white light ("belyi svet") in "Strannoe puteshestvie." See Sedakova. *Stikhi*, pp. 444–449.

²⁹These observations were inspired by Paul Muldoon's *The End of the Poem* (New

York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2006), which appeared as I was writing this paper.

³⁰See Marina Tsvetaeva. *Neizdannoe. Svodnye tetradi*, ed. E.B. Korkina and I.D. Shevelenko (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997), p. 451. I discuss this dream in *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 262–264.

³¹My favorite of these is the journey to prehistoric, pre-Ice Age lands in "Nariadu s otopleniem, v kazhdom dome," *Peizazh s navodneniem*, p. 95.

³²For a good discussion of the exhaustion that marks much of the travel writing, see Sanna Turoma, "Poet kak odinokii turist: Brodskii, Venetsiia, i putevye zametki" (pp. 174–175). For the essays, see Brodsky. *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), pp. 35–43 (for "A Place As Good As Any"); see also "After a Journey" (pp. 61–80), among others.

³³Brodsky. *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 87–97.

³⁴Brodskii. *Chast' rechi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), p. 71. Turoma comments astutely on Brodsky's use of the verb "stranstvovat": It is Pushkinian, he reminds us, appearing in both *Evgenii Onegin* and *Andzhelo*, and Brodsky uses it in the first lines of "Pered pamiatnikom A. S. Pushkinu v Odesse," and in a poem of 1968 "Elegiia." In "Pered pamiatnikom," the verb opens up the discourse of travel in a Pushkinian spirit, with his inevitable themes of freedom and exile. But the verb functions differently in "Meksikanskii divertisment," notes Turoma: here it creates a caustic, ironic contrast with the tourist experiences of the author. Brodsky faces commonplace problems of travel inherent in contemporary life. He described his trip to Mexico in rather more exotic terms in *Peresechennaia mestnost'*, pp. 154–155, noting that these lines are addressed to the poet Evgenii Rein.

³⁵Joseph Brodsky. *Collected Poems in English*, p. 308.

³⁶Brodskii. *Uraniia*, p. 107.

³⁷Brodskii. "Lido," *Peizazh s navodneniem*, p. 65, translated as "Venice: Lido," in *Collected Poems in English*, p. 386; "V Italiu," *Uraniia*, p. 181, translated as "In Italy," *Collected Poems in English*, p. 340.

³⁸Brodsky, "A Photograph," *Collected Poems in English*, p. 444. See particularly these lines: "It's strange and not very pleasant/ to think that even metal knows not its fate/ and that life has been spent for the sake of an apotheosis/ of the Kodak company, with its faith in prints/ and jettisoning of the negatives." See also "In Memoriam," *Collected Poems in English*, p. 341; "Mysl' o tebe udaliaetsia, kak razzhaloovannaia prisluga," *Uraniia*, p. 181.

³⁹Brodsky. *Watermark* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), p. 28.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 30; cf. p. 110, for a similar opinion about being and looking.

⁴¹Brodskii. *Peizazh s navodneniem*, p. 47.

⁴²Brodskii, "Ia vkhodil vmesto dikogo zveria v kletku," *Uraniia*, p. 178; "May 24, 1980," Brodsky. *Collected Poems in English*, p. 211. Compare the rhetorically similar claim in "V Italiu": "No tekh, kto liubili menia bol'she samikh sebia/ bol'she netu v zhivyykh" (*Uraniia*, p. 181); "But those who have loved me more

than themselves are no/ longer alive" (*Collected Poems in English*, p. 340). Note the added strong enjambment in the English, produced no doubt for the created rhyme (with "domino").

⁴³Sedakova puts this element of Brodsky's poetics into play in her poem in memory of Leonid Gubanov and Sergei Morozov, "Elegiia osennei vody." See Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 290–293. For her comment that Brodsky is "in the rhythm of this poem," see Sedakova, "A Rare Independence," in *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries*, ed. V. Polukhina (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1992), pp. 237–259; quotation from p. 253. The poem is given there, in a translation by Robert Reid.

⁴⁴Sedakova, "A Rare Independence," pp. 244–245. Compare her lines, "Poet — eto tot, kto mozhet umeret' / tam, gde zhit' — znachit: doiti do smerti"; Sedakova, "Elegiia osennei vody," *Stikhi*, p. 292.

⁴⁵Brodskii, *Ostanovka v pustyne* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1970), pp. 28–32. Sedakova astutely observed that Brodsky uncovered a radically centrifugal and necessary force in his poetry, which she connects to his having refused an official, public role for the poet in the Soviet context. See Sedakova, "[Volia k forme]," *NLO*, no. 4–5 (2000), pp. 232–236; see p. 233. I return to this idea at the conclusion of this paper.

⁴⁶Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 328.

⁴⁷See "Vozvrashchenie bludnogo syna," "Pobeg bludnogo syna," "Blydnyi syn vozvratitsia, Iosif pridet v Khanaan" as well as poems in which the Prodigal Son is a key image, e.g., "Stansy pervye. Elene Shvarts," all in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 26–29, 38–39, 174–175, 220–222.

⁴⁸A very large digression could open here, in which his annual Christmas poems could be compared with Sedakova's legends about saints.

⁴⁹Brodskii, *Peizazh s navodneniem*, p. 63. This poem evokes the landscape around Stockholm, where Brodsky spent some weeks during summers 1988–1994. But the northern scene calls to mind sights more Russian for this poet, and the poem has verbal clues that link it quite precisely to "Ot okrainy k tsentru." It remains mysterious to me why the poem mentions a fifty-year interval between visits (although the poet was fifty when he wrote the poem). Note the Homeric reference, however, which also links the poem to travel motifs found elsewhere in Brodsky's work.

⁵⁰The comfort comes in part because such thinking models itself on deeply familiar poetry, particularly that of Osip Mandel'shtam. The way in which Mandel'shtam's own poetry returned to themes of earlier poets has been well studied, as has the theme of return in his work. See the general approach to the Silver Age as a repetition and renovation of Russia's Golden Age in *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, ed. Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Hughes, and Irina Paperno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). See there the essay by Boris Gasparov on Mandel'shtam, which has since appeared in English: "The Iron Age of the 1930s: The Centennial

Return in Mandelstam," in Sandler, ed. *Rereading Russian Poetry*, pp. 78–103.

⁵¹The cycle "A Part of Speech," "Chast' rechi" from 1975–1976 perhaps speaks to this the most eloquently. See Brodskii, *Chast' rechi*, pp. 77–96.

⁵²Anna Akhmatova, "Ja — golos vash" (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1989), p. 150. In a commentary to the poem, Brodsky observed that the poem was Dantean to a certain degree. *Peresechennaia mestnost'*, p. 174.

⁵³Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, p. 132.

⁵⁴Brodskii, *Chast' rechi*, p. 113. This poem is formally unique in Brodsky's extremely varied oeuvre, as Barry Scherr has noted: it is his only poem with nine-line stanzas. Note as well the rare rhyme pattern for nine-line stanzas of AAABBBCCC, with all feminine rhymes. See Barri Sherr, "Strofika Brodskogo: novyi vzgliad," *Kak rabotaet stikhotvorenie Brodskogo*, ed. L.V. Losev and V.P. Polukhina (Moscow: NLO, 2002), pp. 269–299, see p. 279.

⁵⁵Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), p. 90.

⁵⁶See Sedakova's observation, in "[Volia k forme]," that Brodsky's task was to create a sense of isolation, to put a man into a one-on-one relationship with the landscape of the universe (p. 233).

⁵⁷Sedakova, "Konchina Brodskogo," p. 830. The epigraph to this essay comes from "Konchina Brodskogo" as well (p. 837).

⁵⁸Susan Stewart, "Dante and the Poetry of Meeting," *American Poetry Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, (July/August, 2006), pp. 39–42, quotation from p. 39.

⁵⁹Aleksandr Skidan, writing in "Desiat' let bez Brodskogo," *Vozdukh*, no. 1 (2006), pp. 131–133, first lists poems he finds to be among the late masterpieces, and we might note that three of his four are poems of travel: "Temza v Chelsi," "Chast' rechi," "Venetsianskie strofy," and "Rimskie elegii." Skidan says that "their main theme is decidedly not nostalgia, but the sense of being abandoned by God [*bogoostavlennost'*], even, I would say, the world without God's blessing, a world in which incomprehensibly but unquestionably there is some place for grace (*milost'*). It is a form of atheistic Christianity" (p. 131).

⁶⁰Skidan's claim is this: "If one turns to the most recent period, then for some reason it seems to me that Brodsky is heard most powerfully in our women poets, who in general and with no connection to Brodsky, have taken the lead in poetry, they have become its cutting edge. Perhaps it's because women can permit themselves more, they are bolder than men; or perhaps the weight of tradition does not press on them so heavily; after all, this tradition was formed almost exclusively by men. Or perhaps, from the beginning, they find themselves in the weak position, put there by our chauvinistic culture, the most chauvinistic culture in Europe, and this weakness revolutionizes their unconscious? It's an interesting question..." Skidan, "Desiat' let bez Brodskogo," p. 132. Skidan was to go on to make good on his intention to study women poets separately: see "Sil'nee urana," *Vozdukh*, no. 3 (2006), pp. 153–169.

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