

Lithuanian Divertissement,
by Joseph Brodsky

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It is difficult and awkward to talk about poems dedicated to one's self. If I discuss Joseph Brodsky's *Lithuanian Divertissement* it is, largely, for one reason: I know better than anybody else —excluding, of course, the author— what these poems are about. Many of the works written nowadays need detailed research no less than the classics. This research must include factual and historical commentary. Without it, they are simply incomprehensible at times —and they will seem even more incomprehensible to future generations. Some people might say that Brodsky himself provided the notes to the *Lithuanian Divertissement*. But his notes are not totally accurate (sometimes, perhaps, purposefully so); and in any case they are incomplete.

The *Lithuanian Divertissement* is probably not regarded as one of Brodsky's principal works. These poems belong to the *light genre*. The very word *divertissement* is ambiguous: it means either entertainment or a digression, a step aside, and the poet plays on this double meaning. I hope, nonetheless, to be able to show that Brodsky's substantial and serious themes pervade this non-serious little thing, written as if incidentally, for the sake of relaxation. But let us say first of all on what occasion it was written.

In the spring of 1971, the Polish poet Wiktor Woroszyński, a connoisseur of Russian literature and virtually the first translator of Brodsky's works into Polish, unexpectedly visited Lithuania. Wiktor Woroszyński is now one of the principal activists of the Polish unofficial press, but even then he was quite unreliable. They did not give him a Soviet visa on the strength of my invitation, since I, too, was not a paragon of reliability; but Wiktor managed to use another invitation sent from Estonia and, together with his wife and

daughter, he came to visit me on his way to Tallinn. I put the attic I inhabited at the time at the Woroszylski's disposal, while I myself spent the night with some friends on Liejyklos Street. It is quite possible that this saved me from a lot of trouble. From the post office, I called Brodsky's place in Leningrad and asked him to come, without any further explanations. "When?" inquired Brodsky, also briefly and without unnecessary questions. "Today". "Will be there tomorrow". The next morning I met him at the airport: the three of us with Woroszylski walked all over town, sat in cafés, spoke about Lizinsky, Frost, Robert Penn Warren, and much else; I remember, we popped in at an exhibit of antique books at the university, and I showed them a treatise with the amusing title *Responsum St. Bisii ad amicum philosophum de melancholia, mania et plica polonica sciscitantem* (by the way, this is not a medieval book, as Brodsky claims, but one of the Enlightenment, written at the end of the eighteenth century). Brodsky spent the night where I did —on Liejyklos Street. This was a particular corner of the city, far way from the habitual tourist haunts —a center of sorts, but somehow at a distance. In former times, this place was inhabited by master craftsmen who cast the bells for the Vilnius Catholic cathedral. The word *Liejyklos* means "Liteinaya" (Foundry Street); that is, the street as if paralleled the Liteinyi Prospect, near which Brodsky lived in Leningrad, and to us this did not seem to be a simple coincidence. There are two churches by the side of this street; they do not rank among the famous ones, but they still display authentic Vilnius Baroque —provincial, late, lovely. The one closer by is the two-tower white church of the Dominicans, strangely and as if irregularly shaped on the inside —"God's whorled

ear" from the last poem of the cycle. Immediately beyond the churches is the entrance to the Vilnius ghetto. Two or three lanes are all that remains of it. They have been thoroughly restored and even more thoroughly stripped of everything that could remind one of the people who lived and died there. This is the topography of the *Lithuanian Divertissement*.

While we are staying on Liejyklos, the Woroszylskis ran into trouble. At four o'clock in the morning, some "art historians in civilian clothes" came to the attic. They explained to Wiktor's frightened and in dressed wife that they came to take the owner —that is, me— to some kind of military maneuvers or mobilization. Even now I don't know what that really was about —whether the military enlistment office or another, even more honorable, institution was demonstrating its capacities. The next morning we jokingly discussed the visit of the "night milkman" —a purely Soviet entertainment for tourist; but I remained on Liejyklos Street a little longer, just in case. On leaving Vilnius, already standing on the step of the train carriage, Woroszylski said, "All right, Joseph, so we met after all, even though history tried to prevent this". "Geography helped", replied Brodsky. The Woroszylskis were searched at the border —a first-class camp frisking with undressing and so forth; it is true that the authorities did not find any thing reprehensible for some reason. Later on, Woroszylski wrote a poem called *Crossing the Border*, where this experience is probably reflected.

This is the real subtext of the *Lithuanian Divertissement*. Memories from other visits, from Kaunas and Palanga, are also stirred in these poems —Brodsky loved Lithuania and visited it five or six times. Besides, there is not a single word in the whole cycle about the

Vilnius meeting, about its participants and events —“(...) what he hounds,/a well-placed coat of arms blots out”. What remained, however, are the names, the details of the local Baroque, the memory of the dead from the Vilnius ghetto, the strange collision of history and geography, the plica of time and space, the oppressive and maddening presence of the unnamed Empire. Everything is presented as if by chance, in a half-joking “amusing Russian style” —an authentic, unstylized voice breaks through only toward the very end. The essence of the verse, as is typical of Brodsky, is contained in the interweaving of motifs, which I would call baroque and musical.

Brodsky is ranked among the poets of classical or neoclassical bent. This is true, but there is something else to him. The whimsicality of this thought, the wit and sharpness of the images, the cult of concept, the ironic rhetoric are more characteristic of the Baroque than of “normal classicism”. The Baroque Vilnius turned out to be a wonderful testing ground for this poetics. As a matter of fact, this city is not just a city of architectural Baroque. In the seventeenth century, a Baroque literary school existed here, remotely similar to the English metaphysical school, loved by Brodsky. Even with all the differences in scale, Maciej Sarbiewski wrote in Latin here, Daniel Naborowski in Polish, Konstantinas Sirvydas in Lithuanian, something reminiscent of John Donne. Of course, one cannot speak at all of their direct influences on Brodsky, but it is nonetheless delightful to notice these remote echoes. The Baroque is a school which felt more intensely than previous ones the weight of antinomies and opposites; which sensed that the futile, unstable, base world was but an emblem of the stable and eternal world; which

elevated the variety of style, direction, and idiom to a principle. In the complex, rhythmically exquisite baroque structures there was room for everything: for the classical, the biblical, and the local, for tragedy and satire, for hedonism and mysticism, for high literature and naturalism, for litanies and risqué jokes. Languages clashed and struck discordant notes, which also happened on a superficial level, in the phenomenon of macaronism. The respect for tradition went side by side with a deliberate distortion and rethinking of it. The attitude toward God and dogma was complex, lively and intense. The Mediterranean system of symbols, which had served as a support for the theologian and the poet of the past, was falling apart; religious incandescence was accompanied by a powerful sensation of divine desertion, an understanding of God as a *Deus absconditus*; man no longer perceived himself as the center and the crown of creation, but found himself at the periphery. Either the Copernican system was to blame or the Copernican reversal itself was the consequence of more profound processes in the realm of the spirit. In any case, Baroque writers started to seek earnestly —sometimes almost recklessly— a new metaphor, a new thought, a new and personal relationship with the universe. I suppose that this brief and approximate description of Baroque poetics is also a brief and approximate description of Brodsky’s poetics —and, if you like, of the poetics of the *Lithuanian Divertissement* in particular (let us remember that the genre of literary travels is also a Baroque genre to a significant extent). Of course, periods in literature do not repeat themselves anywhere. But sometimes the transitions between periods repeat themselves with amazing clarity. Although it is now common to see some Baroque

features in the works of Simeon Polotsky, Lomonosov or Derzhavin, it is unlikely that anyone would deny the absence of real Baroque—as well as Renaissance—in Russian poetry. But there was a transition, analogous to the transition between the Renaissance and the Baroque. This was the transition from the Silver Age to the period of Brodsky and his contemporaries, which has sometimes been called—and not altogether fairly—the Copper Age. What lies between these two periods is the Copernican reversal of the gulag.

Musicality is the second term that suggests itself in the description of Brodsky's poetics. By this, of course, I do not mean the trivial kind of musicality that is sometimes seen in the smoothness of the verse, in its saturation with singing intonations, in the unnatural percentage of sonorants. There is no such musicality at all in Brodsky's mature works. What is more, Brodsky's poetic universe is, as a rule, deeply disharmonious. It appears before us precisely in the state about which Gogol used to ask with horror, "If music, too, left us, then what would happen to our world?". And still, one should not forget that *divertissement* means not only entertainment. It is also a strict musical form—also pertaining, by the way, to the Baroque—which reached perfection in the works of Haydn and Mozart, as well as in those of Stravinsky and Bartok. Undoubtedly, Brodsky's cycle is related to the *divertissement* precisely in this musical sense of the word. The disharmony of the fallen entropic world is balanced and somehow overcome in the cycle by means of a virtuoso grouping, positioning, and combination of themes. A search for strict parallels is, perhaps, superfluous: the laws of poetry and music cannot coincide. But many similarities are obvious.

A musical *divertissement* (*divetimento*) consists of several different parts; there can be five or more, up to thirty (there are seven in Brodsky's case). In addition, the *divertimento* is cyclical: its canon structure assumes the shape of *allegro minuet-andante-minuet-allegro*. It is not difficult to see the compositional connections or oppositions, which also constitute a type of connection between the first and seventh, the second and sixth, the third and the fifth parts of the *Lithuanian Divertissement*. This web of cyclical correspondences is enveloped in another one. On the levels of meter and rhythm, the first part unites with the fifth (iambic tetrameter), the third with the sixth (Brodsky's *vers libre*, built mainly on the basis of combinations of three-syllable feet, with changing numbers of ictuses in the line). Thus the harmony of the strict cycle—as one should have expected—turns out to be displaced and broken, but still perceptible. One can also find other musical devices—the introduction and development of opposite themes, modulation, etc.; these parallels with the musical form will be partially clarified in the course of the exposition, though I will not let myself get too carried away.

I. INTRODUCTION

A modest little country by the sea.
It has its snow, an airport, telephones,
its Jews. A tyrant's brownstone villa.

A statue of a bard is there as well,
who once compared his country to his girlfriend.

The simile displayed, if not good taste,
sound geography: for the southerners

make Saturday the day to go up north,
 from whence, a little drunk, on foot,
 they have been known to stay into the West—
 a good theme for a sketch. Here distances
 are well designed to suit hermaphrodites.

Noonday in springtime. Puddles, banked-up clouds,
 stout, countless angels on the gables
 of countless churches. Here a man
 becomes a victim of a jostling crowd,
 or a detail of the homemade baroque.

The first part of the cycle, written in classical blank verse, is strictly arranged (five-line stanza, seven-line stanza, five-line stanza) and is the most lengthy. The parts tend to get shorter toward the end: there are seventeen lines in the first one, sixteen in the second, twelve in the third and fourth, fourteen in the fifth — an exception (this is an English sonnet)— and only eight in the sixth. The seventh part is the shortest one and by virtue of this —as well as much else— it countervails the first one: it has seven lines and a half. But the first part is an introduction, a calm, thorough, and unhurried story that ushers in the main themes of the cycle. It ends at a key word, a “meta-word”, that describes the stylistics and poetics of the *Lithuanian Divertissement*; this is the word Baroque.

The main topic at the beginning is space (let us note yet another key word in the seventh line —geography). The first five lines describe the country, the last five the city, the capital (a classical opposition of *orbis/urbs* that is significant for Vilnius as well as for Rome). Squeezed in between them are seven lines, written, as it often happens in Brodsky’s works, in a somewhat parodic,

half-scientific style according to which the ramifying, logically constructed phrase is interrupted by a somewhat indecorous, but also semi-scholarly, joke. By the way, the poet who “once compared his country to his girlfriend” is the Lithuanian classic Maironis (1862-1932), whose monument stands in Kaunas; the topic of the joke is his poem *First Love*, popular in Lithuanian Communist Party, a person remarkable in many, often unexpected, respects.

Russian writers of the last decades have often turned to the Baltic theme, besides in Brodsky, one can also find it in Aksenov, in Gorbanevskaya, and in many others. Perhaps there is even a certain parallel here with the “Caucasus theme” of Russian classics (it is curious that the Caucasus has preserved its importance nowadays for minor Soviet and half-Soviet authors). The Orient glimmered beyond Caucasus, while the Baltic States were perceived as the West. This was a realm where one was able, at least for a time, to breathe in a somewhat different kind of air, to hide oneself, at least partially, from the “all-seeing eye and the all-hearing ears”. Brodsky creates his own Baltic realm, detached, presented with deep irony. It is as if the traveler does not see Lithuania or the Soviet Union, but some kind of generalized small state from the mid-twentieth century. But the real situation is still easily perceptible. The memorable image of the country and city is created by means of a poetic game on different levels —grammatical, syntactical, semantical.

These are the provinces as such: the provinces which insist on their own, particular, private, the provinces situated somewhere on the outskirts of the Empire, on the threshold of another (not necessarily better) world, but completely subordinate to imperial laws. The par-

ticularity in them turns into a collapse of the world into separate parts. Space is presented by means of short “freeze frames”; declarative sentences and nouns (there is a total of thirty-five nouns in the Russian original, as opposed to five finite verbs) predominate. Time stands still: the poet has chosen not only grammatical forms denoting repetitiveness, but also a particular hour (noon) and a particular time of year (spring that is still snow-covered: the vernal equinox) when one feels the duration and immutability most intensely. This is a world of substitutions: the singer is replaced by his statue, the dictator by his villa; the dead Jews of the disappeared ghetto are equated with the snow. This is a soundless, purely visual world of missing communication, of silent (but, maybe, tapped) telephones. The semantics of closure, stagnation, narrowness, loss, asphyxia is emphasized. There is no movement —at best, there is a senseless flitting, accidental change of directions, jostling. The topology of this country is curious, so to speak: it has south and north, the east is not mentioned at all, while the West is intentionally presented with a capital letter —it does not refer to the country itself any more; the motif of border crossing, crucial for the cycle, is presented in the tone of vaudeville or, more precisely, of a drama of the absurd. The whole panorama resembles a *nature-morte* —absolutely everything is synchronous, estranged and identical; even the “countless angels on the gables / of countless churches” (a new and important motif) are dead and interchangeable. Man is equated to a thing and transformed into nothing.

This general semantic theme is refracted in its own way in the very grammar of the story. The introduction does not include either a first or a second person, that

is, either an obvious addresser or an obvious addressee. The speech is impersonal —ironic, stylized, unemotional. The narrator can be reconstructed almost solely on the basis of his tone: he is either some vulgar dandy, gone astray from the “beautiful epoch”, or a contemporary city dweller, “a victim of a flits, doubles up, coincides and fails to coincide with the author. Most likely, this is simply a point of view, not a real person. A perfect nobody, a man in a macintosh”.

II. LIEJYKLOS

To be born a century ago
 and over the down bedding, airing,
 through a window see a garden grow
 and Catherine’s crosses, twin domes soaring;
 be embarrassed for Mother, hiccup
 when the brandished lorgnettes scrutinize
 and push a cart with rubbish heaped up
 along the ghetto’s yellow alleys,
 sigh, tucked in bed from head to toe,
 for Polish ladies, for example;

and hang around to face the foe
 and fall in Poland somewhere, trampled-
 for Faith, Czar, Homeland, or if not,
 then shape Jew’s ringlets into sideburns
 and off, on to the New World like a shot,
 puking in waves as the engine churns.

Generally speaking, the second part stands in sharp contrast to the introduction. This contrast can be noticed on the level of rhythm (the blank verse is replaced by energetic tetrameter), of grammar (the

nouns are crowded out by the huge number of verbs in the infinitive), of syntax (instead of a multitude of short, minced, declarative sentences, an endless phrase emerges and starts creeping from line to line). Geography is replaced by history; the frozen present is turned into a past (subjunctive and imaginary, by the way). The world becomes much more concrete: this is no longer a generalized imperial province and frontier land, but a real Wilno from a century ago. The poet introduces toponyms and microtoponyms, the typical vocabulary from that period, its details, emblems (even the two-tower cathedral of St. Catherine is purposely called “two-headed Katherine”). Time seems to shift from stasis: it becomes possible —though only in thought— to change one’s situation in it, to play out different versions of fate. The partitioned space of the introduction is transformed into a unified one (the gaze is transferred from the hidden, intimate corner of the room to the window, to the garden behind the window, and, finally, to the endless horizons of Galicia, the Atlantic, and the New World). The world loses the symptoms of stationariness and soundlessness. This fact is particularly emphasized in two lines that display a very subtle play on phonology:

telezhku s rukhljad’ju tolkat’
po zhelytm pereulkam getto.

and push a cart with rubbish heaped up
along the ghetto’s yellow alleys.

At last, the narrator or addresser himself changes. Now he is not simply a reduced “point of view” but, rather, a concrete individual with a concrete fate; still,

as before, he is doubled and trebled. He appears simultaneously in the guise of a poet narrating the past and of a double of his who was and was not a boy from the Wilno ghetto, who either perished on the “blue Carpathian heights” or crossed the border, changed empires, and dissolved in foreign space. Both versions of his fate are extremely ironic: the letter wipes out the person; Faith, Homeland, World War I, the New World are all something equally distant and meaningless. The same indirect mode has been preserved, as well as the same antipathos that was present in the introduction; as a matter of fact, this is a habit of Brodsky’s, which he rarely transgresses (hence the greater import of the transgressions).

The themes or motifs presented in the introduction are developed in a purely musical fashion in the subsequent poems of the cycle. Let us note here, in the second part, the motif of Jewishness: it is important for Brodsky, but important in the Tsvetaevan sense, that is, the sense in which every outcast —and the poet, first of all. Becomes equated with a Jew. This is also the motif of man in a hostile world, created and defined by a stranger’s gaze (“with brandished lorgnettes”), by a stranger’s language, by foreign insignia, ideology, history. Let us also note the motif of carnal, sexual life —detrimental, fruitless, shameful, resulting, ultimately, in loneliness. Both themes, along with others, will pass through the subsequent parts in various instrumentations.

III. CAFE NERINGA

Time departs in Vilnius through a cafe door
accompanied by sounds of clinking forks and spoons,

while Space screws up its eyes from booze the night before
and stares at Time's slowly retreating spine.

A crimson circle, with its far side off,
now hangs moored in utter stillness over roof tiles
and the Adam's apple sharpens, quite as if
the whole face had shrunk to its sheer profile.

Obeying commands like Aladdin's lamp,
a waitress decked out in a cambric halter
saunters about with legs recently clamped
around the neck of a local footballer.

The third part resembles a short sequence from a contemporary film. The rhythm and grammar change again (an approximate balance of nouns and verbs is established, and the sequence consists of three stanzas, every one of which is a complete phrase). The introduction provided a broad spatial panorama; in the second poem — a temporal one as well; here the world suddenly narrows down, space and time— Brodsky's favorite and constant heroes, finally called by their real names, are turned into characters, visitors of a provincial café. The horizon is limited by the door and the nearest roofs; one after the other, the ensuing close-ups are deprived of three-dimensionality and depth. There is also no movement —something was probably still happening a minute ago but it ended, ran dry. The theme of the desolate, damned, entropic city is developed, which, by the way, is very common in the poetry of Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Eliot, as well as Sluchevsky, Annensky, and Zabolotsky. Once again, the motifs of muteness and pseudo-communication come through (“commands like Aladdin's lamp”), as well as

that of carnal, sexual life —in its basest, accidental, naturalist version. The narrator is once again emphatically ironic with respect to his own self: his gaze is a gaze from aside and in profile.

IV. ESCUTCHEON

St. George, that old dragon slayer,
spear long lost in allegory's glare,
has kept in safety up till now
his sword and steed, and every place
in Lithuania pursues, steadfast,
his aim unheeded by the crowd.

Who now has he, sword clenched in hand,
resolved on taking? What he hounds,
a well-placed coat of arms blots out.
Who can it be? Gentile? Saracen?
The whole world, perhaps? If that's so, then
Vytautas knew well what he was about.

The fourth part is very different from the rest. This is the compositional center and core of the cycle. On the other hand, this is as it were “a digression from the digression,” “a divertimento in the divertimento,” something hardly connected with the remaining poems —and, in this sense, it is zero point. It is made to stand out by means of size, stanzaic structure, and theme. The poet shifts from a description of the world to a description of the sign, emblem of this world —in other words, to a meta-description. He speaks about Vytis, the coat of arms of medieval Lithuania and also of the independent sword, a white figure on a red background, similar to but not identical with Saint George;

by the way, he is not at all seen “every place” in Lithuania —in any case, he is seen no more often than the two-headed eagle is seen in Russia.

The description of the coat of arms, the so-called *Subscriptio*, is quite a typical Baroque genre. The Baroque in general was interested in hieroglyphics, and large numbers of poems remotely similar to Brodsky’s were created in Lithuania and Poland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were written in Polish, Lithuanian, and Latin. Of course, Brodsky considerably modernizes and transforms the ancient form, which he is very unlikely to have studied purposely. But he repeats consciously some of its features: a certain mysteriousness combined with rhetorical rationalism, a particular emphasis on the structure of the utterance—for example, the exquisite anagram of the headword *gerb* (coat of arms):

Drakonoborcheskij Egoriji,
kop’è u gornile allegorij...

St. George, that old dragon slayer,
Spear long lost in allegory’s glare...

On the other hand, the somewhat mocking thematic reversal at the end could be hardly thinkable in the context of a solemn Baroque genre. And still, despite this crudely ironic note, the general sense of the poem is rather serious: in the past, the country valued honor and purpose, religion and culture, the universal whole, from which it is now torn away and estranged. There is perhaps another meaning as well: the poem about the coat of arms regards not only the world described in the text, but also the text itself. The coat of arms repeats an

important quality of the text: something substantial is assumed, rather than simply given, in it. Perhaps this is the author and listener; but, most likely, this is God.

V. AMICUM-PHILOSOPHUM DE MELANCHOLIA,
MANIA ET PLICA POLONICA

Sleeplessness. Part of a woman. A glass
replete with reptiles all straining to get out.
The day’s long madness has drained across
the cerebellum into the occiput,
forming a pool; one movement and the slush
will feel as if someone, in that icy blot,
has dipped a sharpened quill that, after a pause,
deliberately traces the verb “hate”
in oscillating scribbles to reverse
the brain-wave pattern. Something lipsticked stuffs
the ear with lacerating lengthy words,
like running fingers through a hairdo stiff
with lice. Alone and naked in your sack,
you lie there, fallen from the Zodiac.

After the central fourth poem, the parts of the cycle seem to be played through in reverse order. The fifth part is symmetrical to the third and similar to it in terms of mood and theme. This is still the same fallen and desolate world, falling apart in front of our eyes, lacking depth, presented by means of metonymy and close-ups—a world of missing communication, of destitute carnal (sexual) life, of non-freedom and lies, of despair and death. Once again, space is reduced to closed room; once again, there is no authentic movement and action—that is, no authentic time. Now the scene does not take place in the evening but at night (it

is curious that the *Lithuanian Divertissement*, as well as some other works by Brodsky, spans a whole twenty-four-hour cycle —from noon, through the evening and night, to the next day). The “melancholy, mania and plica” of the title are repeated in the deliriously expressionist (and science-like) images of the text, as if this were a panorama of the carnal realm —the one about which another poem said, “I think it is dark inside us”.

For the first time a second person emerges —some “you”, an addressee. It is difficult to say who this is —maybe “a philosopher friend” from the eighteenth century, maybe the person to whom the poems are dedicated, maybe the author himself, or the boy from the second part, now older by five or six years —or, more precisely, by a hundred. (The comparison with the sign of the Zodiac refers to a Vilnius architectural detail: the signs of the Zodiac, including the naked Gemini, are the decorative details of the university observatory, which also dates back to the eighteenth century). A kind of speech emerges —for the time being, only “a part of speech”, the unnamed words of the woman and one other word, named but unsaid, taken in quotation marks, as if representing its own self; it is not included in quotation marks, as if representing its own self; it is not included in the language of the currently unfolding scene, but in the language of the scene’s description. The fact that this word is being prepared phonetically is typical: all its unuttered sounds are already present in one of the preceding lines:

Nekto u ledjanuju etu zhizhu
...nenavizhu

... as if someone, in that icy blot
...the verb “hate”

VI. PALANGA

Only the sea has power to peer en face
at the sky; and a traveler in the dunes
lowers his eyes and sips at his metal flask
like a king in exile, with no psalm-like tunes.

His house ransacked, flocks driven to foreign land
Son hidden by shepherds inside a cave.
And before him lies just a hem of sand
but his faith’s not enough for a walk on waver.

The short sixth part is symmetrical to the second at least in two respects. If the second part provided a temporal perspective, transported us a hundred years into the past, the sixth one provides a spatial perspective, transports us a few hundred kilometers to the seashore (the theme of the sea —of the border, the end of the earth, the threshold of the other word— is significant for the whole cycle and is presented, as a matter of fact, in its first line). If the second part sketched out the theme of the outcast, of the eternal Jew in “this most Christian of all worlds”, now the theme is fully deployed, given in a highly biblical and partially classical key. The narrator man —unable to make up his mind to cross the border, but sensing that he will have to walk on waves— merges with David, the psalm singer, and, furthermore, with Saint Peter. This brings us near the High flight of the last part.

VII. THE DOMINICANS

Turn off the thoroughfare, then into
 a half-blind street, and once inside
 the church, which at this hour is empty,
 sit on a bench, adjust your sight,
 and, afterward, in God's whorled ear,
 closed to the clash of day's discord,
 whisper four syllables, soft and clear:
 Forgive me, Lord.

The last part is made up of a single phrase, uttered in a single breath, cut short in the midst of a word, in the midst of a sigh, phonetically carried out by means of whisper, by a barely perceptible movement of the lips. It closes the cycle by reversing and transforming it completely. From the point of view of grammar, it is built on imperatives —as before, the poet sees himself from aside, addresses himself as “you”, but he has already found the real addressee; he is no longer locked up in the world of his own personality, amongst his numberless doubles. The fallen city, infinitely distant from the heavenly City, has turned out to be the place of the meeting with God, after all. The decline and segmentation of the world are overcome; space is being opened upwards; this is precisely a genuine border crossing, an exit from the absurd, an entrance into meaningful time. Apparently, it is given for a limited period only and with great difficulty each time, but it is still given. The anti-speech, anti-dialogue of the cycle forces its way to a super-dialogue where each question or request is simultaneously a response. The one who has understood his personal responsibility for the absurdity of the world has already overcome, by virtue of

this understanding, the muteness, the absence of communication, the absence of an interlocutor. Four syllables are sufficient to do this —the only four uttered syllables in the night scene. The whole space of the cycle is enclosed between the two shortest phrases —a night one and a day one, an absurd one and a meaningless one, one talking about God. Between four syllables and another four syllables —between *nenavizhu* (“I hate”) and *prosti menia* (“forgive me”). ■

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Translated by Mina Nedialkova Daube.

The translation of the poem is by Alan Myers.