

Title: Faces (and Spaces) of Exile: Examining Motifs in Joseph Brodsky's and Anna Akhmatova's Late Poetry

Author: Miroslava Nikolova, Brown University

Abstract:

First delivered at a conference on the topic of literature in exile in December 1987, Joseph Brodsky's essay "The Condition We Call Exile" resonates with the state of the world decades later. What the former Soviet poet described as he acknowledged the migrants whose voices remained unheard—Turkish gastarbeiters in Germany, Mexican refugees on foot in the deserts of California and Pakistanis seeking work in Middle Eastern nations—renders a depiction of the trials and chaos brought about by displacement still ubiquitous (and, perhaps, even more palpable) in the 21st century.

I would like to explore two literary embodiments of the theme of exile in the late poetry of Brodsky and his mentor Anna Akhmatova. Akhmatova never left Russia or the Soviet Union during her lifetime and does not fit the conventional mold of an émigré poet. Nevertheless, a growing sense of isolation, estrangement and external silencing left both a quantitative and qualitative imprint on her late poetic output. Exile in Akhmatova's oeuvre is seen in the images of physically constricting and shrinking spaces as well as the trope of *zazerkal'e* (space behind the mirror) that permeates her final poems. Brodsky's late works, on the other hand, bind the themes of exile and immigration to open spaces, vast horizons and a recurring image of islands. This literary analysis is meant to be a parallel case study of the two poets who have been grouped together before in scholastic work due to their close professional relationship. I would like to trace the ways in which each poetic voice depicts and copes with exile, rather than to look for direct comparisons or influences between the artists. These are just two of the poetic faces of exile in the context of Russian literature as crafted by two different, yet inextricably related poetic agents