

Title: Addition and Subtraction: The Strange Case of Joseph Brodsky and Samuel Beckett
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Abstract:

I analyze thematic, philosophical, and psychological connections between Joseph Brodsky and Samuel Beckett, using “Gorbunov and Gorchakov” (1965-8, publ. 1970) and *Waiting for Godot* (written 1948-9, produced 1953) as my primary texts. The connection between the two writers was established by Brodsky himself in his short oral remarks on the poem, but it has not received sufficient critical attention and has remained largely outside the scope of Brodsky studies. Lev Losev in his 2006 biography of the Russian poet, for instance, notes the fact that Brodsky may have read Beckett as early as 1961, but passes over the theme of the dialogue between Brodsky and Beckett, even in his analysis of “Gorbunov and Gorchakov.” The scope of Brodsky’s interest in Beckett is particularly apparent from the memoirs of Carl Ray Proffer and Ellendea Proffer Teasley, published in 2017. In this paper, I argue that the temperamental and artistic differences between the writers, noticed and articulated by the poet Seamus Heaney in the early 1990s, do not quite apply to the young poet’s period of literary apprenticeship, and that Joseph Brodsky’s brush with Soviet punitive psychiatry in 1963 and 1964 and his reading of Samuel Beckett’s dramatic works in the early 1960s shaped the concept of the absurd as evidenced in “Gorbunov and Gorchakov.”