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On the “body’s absence”: The embodied experience of exile in Joseph Brodsky’s “To Urania”

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Abstract: With Joseph Brodsky’s poem “To Urania” as a case study, this article argues that a cognitive stylistic approach offers a new way into exploring literary representations of the experience of displacement. Drawing on the notion of the embodied mind in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it presents a close reading of the poem’s portrayal of exile as a “felt” absence. The tension between the immediacy of embodied experience and what lies beyond its grasp is investigated with a particular consideration of enactivism and the dynamics of reading. Metaphor is seen as a tool for enacting vicarious experiences, but also as a means of conveying the difficulty of representing an experience of displacement. The analysis thus focuses on the poem’s strategies for negotiating the discrepancy between the past and the present. These include expressions viewing memory as a space, the juxtaposition of the personal and the generic, and projected movement.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, embodiment, cognitive poetics, stylistics, memory

1 Introduction: Metaphors of dislocation

Although the body inevitably resists conceptual definition, the ways in which the materiality of the body may be present in literary texts have been debated within and across various theoretical traditions (Hillman and Maude 2015: 1). Approaches building on the notion of the embodied mind in cognitive science have added a new layer to this discussion: the cognitive turn has enabled literary scholars to systematically study poetic language from an experiential angle. This article offers a cognitive poetic close reading of a poem that explores the experience of exile in embodied terms, Joseph Brodsky’s “To Urania” (Brodsky 1988a). With this poem as a case study, I argue that poetic metaphors possess unique potential for exploring how loss of contact with the past may be presented as a “felt”

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dislocation. I draw on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), a framework that famously redefined metaphor as a pattern of thinking and claimed that bodily experience provides a tangible tool for conceptualising more abstract things (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 377). Typically, embodied metaphors invoke a sense of familiarity by resonating with the reader's own experiences (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 89; Dancygier and Sweetser 2014: 3), but in literary environments the generation of such resonance is tied to a range of additional factors that require analytical attention. The so-called second generation cognitive approaches¹ stress the importance of situating conceptualisations (Barsalou 2009; Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014: 266); the reader's simulation of vicarious embodied experience may for example involve accommodating elements for which one's own experiences do not provide a directly related schematic basis. In the case of "To Urania", this is brought into focus in how the poem seems to be about sorrow and longing in rather general terms at first, but upon closer inspection a more specific history of leaving one's home behind is revealed.

Joseph Brodsky was born in Leningrad in 1940. His poems were never particularly political, but they went against Soviet aesthetic norms, and Brodsky was sent into foreign exile in 1972. He settled in the United States, where he lived until his death in 1996. He continued to write in Russian, but also translated many of his poems into English. Although Brodsky's English poems have generally not been deemed to have reached the heights of his Russian verse (Bayley 1988), Brodsky became a celebrated essayist in English. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987 for his literary achievements in two languages. Although exile is a prominent theme in Brodsky's writing, he would not have the term be used to characterise his poetry due to its political undertones (Betha 1994: 37). Interestingly, Brodsky rejected the term specifically for not describing the experience itself: "Exile' covers, at best, the very moment of departure, of expulsion; what follows is both too comfortable and too autonomous to be called by this name, which so strongly suggests a comprehensible grief" (Brodsky 1988b: 18). The adjectives "comfortable" and "autonomous" suggest that life may go on as if of its own accord, but the statement also implies that this process is underpinned by a grief that cannot really be captured in words. These tendencies are at the core of "To Urania" in that the poem deals with everyday experiences affected by a profound sadness that proves difficult to define.

Representations of exile have been studied extensively within postcolonial criticism (e.g. Kristeva 1991; Said 1983). Though such discussions ultimately lie

¹ See for example Noë (2004) and Zahavi and Gallagher (2008).

outside the scope of the present article, the following observation by Said brings up two tendencies important to the analysis of “To Urania”:

For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (Said 2002: 148)

Firstly, the metaphorical formulation of activities occurring “against” earlier memories is crucial. “To Urania” builds on a spatial conceptualisation of memory, but also weaves in everyday observations that contain the idea of things becoming observable against something else – a figurative application of the classic distinction between figure and ground (see for example Ungerer and Schmid 1996: 156–204), or even a “double exposure” as Svetlana Boym puts it (2001: 296). This calls attention to boundaries and how entities may be deemed distinct from each other, essentially linking with bodily experience that provides reference points for notions of interiority and exteriority. Second, this perspectival framework is complemented with patterns of projected movement, adding dynamicity to how the memory works – and thus highlighting how the old and the new are both “vivid” and “actual”. These mechanisms will be analysed later. First, I shall present a brief overview of embodiment in Conceptual Metaphor Theory and some preliminaries regarding the effects of embodied metaphors in our reading of literary texts.

2 Enacting embodied metaphors

The embodiment principle assumes that the ways in which we physically interact with the world affect how our minds work (see for example Varela et al. 1991). According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, our sense-making processes often rely both on embodied experience and metaphor in how we project the properties of tangible things onto abstract concepts, as in the ground-laying metaphor *THE MIND IS A BODY*.² Due to their nature as sets of correspondences or mappings across conceptual domains (Semino 2008: 5), conceptual metaphors can accommodate a multitude of realisations in language, from deeply conventional figures of speech to novel reimaginings. For instance, the human mind can be characterised as “racing” or “settled”, but a new point of view may also be described as physically influencing one’s mental state in the rather striking

² These conventional metaphors occurring in our everyday thought and discourse are usually formulated as propositions, “A IS B”.

manner of this line from “To Urania”: “A perspective cuts emptiness deep and even.” (Brodsky 1988a: 70) As will be shown later on, the materiality of view-point-altering experiences is the crux of the poem.

Inevitably, literary applications of CMT run into the issue of how something that is a matter of thought can be approached in terms of style (Steen 2014: 316).³ Different realisations of conceptual patterns may require varying degrees of interpretive engagement with the text, for instance. In the second-generation cognitive approaches the mind’s relationship with its environment is key, something that is usually characterised through four “Es”: embodied, embedded, enacted and engaged (see for example Menary 2010). Although diverse, the E-approaches bring in an appropriately complex foundation for considering the experiential facets of literary texts, as opposed to the more uncontextualised approaches characterising the first generation of cognitive literary study (see Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014: 261). Since reading is a physical, situated phenomenon, the task of cognitive poetics lies in accounting for ways in which style elements can be “in the mind and brain during engaged acts of literary reading.” (Burke 2013: 199)

My analysis focuses on how the notion of the embodied mind may be interpreted to be present in metaphorical expressions that convey a sense of displacement. Fundamentally, such metaphoric mappings build on embodied image schemas such as the PATH schema, the VERTICALITY schema and the CONTAINER schema (Johnson 1987: 29). For instance, the notion of feeling empty that is central in “To Urania” can be accounted for with the help of the metaphors EMOTIONS ARE SUBSTANCES and THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS. The metaphor GOOD IS UP (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 16) allows the conceptualisation of the idea that a broader perspective, seeing things as if from above, is a positive thing, which will also be very relevant in my reading of “To Urania”. It is crucial to note, however, that spatial metaphors should not simply be treated as embodied across the board, as image schemas invite “different degrees of bodily participation by the reader.” (Kimmel 2011: 197) The domains involved must be examined from a bodily-perceptual perspective, and a distinction should be made between embodied metaphors in which the target domain is body-internal, or body-external, or neither (Kimmel 2011: 216). Typically embodied metaphors involve projecting bodily experience onto body-external or wholly abstract domains, but the body may also be the target. While the former direction of mapping readily gives rise to embodied reader involvement,

3 The ways in which the situatedness of bodily experience and the systematic occurrence of embodied patterns in linguistic structures are connected is more generally a debated issue (see Gibbs 2005: 119).

it is also interesting to consider how this may occur in the latter, “internalised” scenario.

Due to the nature of bodily experience, many embodied metaphors are profoundly dynamic. Such dynamicity, placed in CMT under the heading of event structure metaphor (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 37), encompasses “notions like states, changes, processes, actions, causes, purposes, and means [...] characterized cognitively via metaphor in terms of space, motion, and force.” (Lakoff 2006: 204) For instance, the metaphor STATES ARE LOCATIONS gives rise to the conceptualisation of (emotional) states as locations that can be reached, entered, and left behind. Any difficulties can be understood as impediments to motion (Lakoff 2006: 204), and change is often conceptualised as movement (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014: 45). An encompassing dynamic metaphor important to many literary texts is THE MIND IS A BODY MOVING IN SPACE (see Sweetser 1990; Bradburn 2011). Even when a text’s focus is on inner matters and not events as such, protagonists may be presented as if on the move with their thought processes. In reading lyric poetry such mobility creates especially noteworthy effects as the genre is characterised by the prominence of a central consciousness.⁴

As mentioned, although embodied metaphors often contribute to a sense of tangibility in reading literature, the assumption about embodied sense-making inherent to CMT is not always directly applicable. The make-up of a poem or even a single line may shift a conventional embodied metaphor into a new angle. Furthermore, Caracciolo (2014: 51) maintains that because the felt qualities of literature (*qualia*⁵) are difficult to impart, the reader’s active *enactment*⁶ should gain emphasis in analyses instead. In my reading of “To Urania”, I apply Caracciolo’s idea that mental imagery involves experiencing a situation “as absent”, meaning that the simulation of a bodily-perceptual experience is viewed as the activation of “memories of past interactions with the world”, termed “experiential traces” (2014: 95). Specifically, metaphorical language enables the hard-to-grasp qualities of an experience to be enacted by way of association: it “picks up two experiential traces and weaves them together into a new, surprising, and sometimes unsettling expression” (Caracciolo 2014: 108). While this article cannot directly participate in the discussion on whether literary metaphors are special from a cognitive perspective (see Miall 1997;

⁴ An interesting parallel that cannot be pursued here is travel writing and the metaphorical treatment of mental journeying and space (see for example Dancygier 2005; Mikkonen 2007).

⁵ In Caracciolo’s account, the term is used to denote the ineffable qualities (“what-it’s-like”) of an experience (for a broader discussion, see for example Herman 2009).

⁶ See especially Varela et al. (1991) and Hutto and Myin (2012).

Semino & Steen 2008; Fludernik 2011), I will argue that “To Urania” prompts the reader to conflate novel, even unsettling, associations with familiar experiential traces.

A further tool for viewing metaphorical language from the standpoint of reading is the cognitive poetic notion of *prominence*,⁷ as discussed by Peter Stockwell (2009). The reading process involves the creation of a conceptual space which consists of a range of cognitive attractors, elements that gain the reader’s attention as the reading progresses and possess the potential to induce a variety of reactions in the reader. (Stockwell 2009: 20–21) Although conceptual metaphors as patterns of thought are deeply conventionalised, they may be realised in language in ways that capture the reader’s attention, on occasion also requiring the accommodation of unfamiliar associations, as outlined by Caracciolo. Furthermore, these stylistic means may themselves have significance from the point of view of interpretation. As Semino (1997: 4) argues, a lyric world – and the schematic processing of texts in general – is always framed by the discourse situation, and here linguistic details like deixis and the use of the definite article are very important to observe. They refer to things the reader should be able to abstract from the text or elsewhere (Semino 1997: 15), and in lyric texts such definiteness is usually unanchored, resulting in the effect of having been drawn into the middle of things (Semino 1997: 16, 23). Poems often open up a textual space in a particularly concise manner, which also allows for a more thorough evaluation of how different cognitive attractors interact. Embodied metaphors may then serve as the basis of conceptualisation and consequently create a sense of familiarity in reading, but the reader may also need to factor in a range of attentional shifts (Stockwell 2009: 22) relating to the embodied conceptualisations.

3 Exile as embodied absence: “To Urania”

“To Urania” combines the discussion of a profound dilemma with descriptive details that may seem arbitrary at first sight. The juxtaposition of large-scale commentary and micro-observations is accompanied by spatial metaphors that focus the reader’s attention on the interiority of the mind in its (non-native) environment, but also enable temporal shifts through presenting memory as a

⁷ A concept derived from Langacker’s notion of profiling prominence in his Cognitive Grammar (1991: 308). This is something I have previously discussed in the context of Dylan Thomas’s “After the funeral” (Päiväranta 2014).

location. As the title suggests, there is a mythical or a cosmic viewpoint alongside a more grounded experiential one. In addition, the poem projects movement onto what is essentially a progression of thoughts unfolding, creating a certain dynamicity into a personal history. Crucially, it can be argued that the idea of the intimate and the universal meeting in this way is present in the concept of embodiment itself: embodied metaphors typically have a strong felt quality to them, but the principles of embodied experience are generalisable, even universal to some extent.⁸

In “To Urania” the spatiality of the mind (THE MIND IS A CONTAINER) is treated as a sort of a given, but the poem also deploys novel linguistic metaphors for experiencing the finiteness of our existence and a melancholy stemming from absence. For example, while the opening line alluding to the theme comes across as somewhat obvious, the metaphor following it adds a subtle defamiliarising effect: “Everything has its limit, including sorrow./A windowpane stalls a stare.” (Brodsky 1988a: 70) It is easy to imagine someone struck by sorrow staring out of the window for long periods of time, but the impersonal tone devoid of personal pronouns (“*Everything* has its limit”, “a stare”) underplays any active contribution by a human agent and thus contrasts with the emotive import. The subject of the second sentence is “windowpane”, leaving the person looking outside as an implied, passive patient whose gaze is limited by an inanimate thing, a frame. Thus the environment appears more prominent than the experiencer in the second line, which could, however, suggest that there may be a comfort in how the external world can intervene or provide distraction in such a situation. Indeed later on in the poem the speaker’s perception is not bounded in this way.

It is worth noting here that metaphoric patterns of projection often involve imposing bodily experience onto something that exceeds our detecting capabilities. Even if things are not clearly defined or bounded when observed, they can still be categorised as if they were, for example large physical phenomena like mountains (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 25). Visual fields are typically perceived as containers themselves, as exemplified by the term “visual *field*” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 30), and although it is our perception that is limited, the limitation is often projected onto the object instead. The windowpane line seems to be commenting on this tendency: our inner world easily becomes bound to our surroundings in a way that limits the gaze, both literally and metaphorically.⁹

⁸ This is a generalisation in itself, of course; the importance of the situatedness of embodiment or the “viewpointed” nature of embodied experience (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014: 2) have been brought up in many studies.

⁹ Compare with the conceptual metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING.

Moreover, due to the lack of personal pronouns the opening lines of the poem leave room for identification: these thoughts could be anyone's. At the same time, the specificity of the experience at hand is implied: the obviousness of the statement about sorrow having a limit suggests the presence of a person who has suffered exceptional "amounts" of it. The line then builds on the BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS metaphor to zoom in from a generalisation; the quota for grieving has been filled and no more can be accommodated. Additionally, the somewhat unusual depersonalised way of presenting the mundane activity of looking through the windowglass could be seen to reflect the experience of starting over in a new place: things are much the same but also different.

In a similar vein, "To Urania" also upholds a constant tension between (seemingly) indefinite and particular referents through a careful use of articles and pronouns. Consequently, referring back to Semino's ideas on the role of deixis and definiteness in construing a lyric world, the reader is faced with fusing unanchored unfamiliar elements with familiar experiential traces. As argued above, this has to do with the private experience of something that is essentially quite universal, but there are other interesting subtleties to the pattern. To go back to the opening stanza, the setting can fairly easily be identified as domestic, possibly in an urban environment, but there also linguistic details that require a bit more unpacking to be accommodated:

Everything has its limit, including sorrow.
 A windowpane stalls a stare. Nor does a grill abandon
 a leaf. One may rattle the keys, gurgles down a swallow.
 Loneliness cubes a man at random.
 A camel sniffs at the rail with a resentful nostril;
 A perspective cuts emptiness deep and even.
 (Brotsky 1988a: 70)

At first, the unexpected grammatical negation ("nor") connects rather intuitively with the qualitatively negative state implied in the first two sentences, but upon closer inspection there may be a similar comfort in this negation as with the stalled stare. Through the use of an indefinite article the image of a leaf on a grill is presented as if it was an example of something – and indeed there appears to be a hidden significance to this observation. The verb "abandon" implies volition, perhaps even an anthropomorphising aspect, suggesting that the grill is there to not allow the leaf to fall. Because of the negation "nor", the image is grammatically tied to the previous sentence (though it seemingly lacks the counterpart "neither"), and thus the implied experiencer in the poem, and it could then be seen as a metaphor for the external world in some way supporting an individual. However, the enjambment makes the idea of abandonment linger

for a while, and the subject position of “loneliness” in line four reinforces its prominence again. In my reading, these little twists in the poem’s texture bring into focus how the emotive words, “sorrow”, “abandon” and “loneliness”, underlie ordinary everyday experiences like seeing a leaf on a grill, swallowing, or the rattling of keys. This brings to mind the contrapuntal coexistence of the memory of a previous home and experiences in a new environment, as described by Edward Said: the memories of home are a constant through experiencing longing and sadness, while everyday activities in the present become set against that constant and may occasionally provide distraction.

I have already suggested that the juxtaposition of the generic and the specific is one of the key literary techniques used in “To Urania”, and if one takes another look at the initial lines of the poem from this perspective, the metaphorical reading of the leaf on the grill forms an interesting parallel to the rather surprising appearance of a camel in line five. The reader may have been able to draw on embodied memories associated with sadness up until now, but how can the camel be connected to such everyday experiences? The reader has been thrown into the middle of a situation where connections between things are rather implicit. What the camel is described doing is key: it is sniffing at a rail, thus it appears to be in captivity, most likely in a zoo. Moreover, the rail brings to mind the grill against the leaf. Both are set against something, imprisoned in a way: the leaf cannot just fly off or be flushed away, and the camel is not in its natural habitat. This can then be related back to the speaker’s stalled gaze in the beginning, and a person’s thoughts more generally being affected by the physical constraints of one’s existence, as per the *MIND IS A CONTAINER* metaphor. The adjective “resentful” strengthens the impression, and more importantly, so does the next line: “A perspective cuts emptiness deep and even.” In fact, this abstract sounding statement places even more interpretive significance on the technique of juxtaposition: detailed images and bold yet abstract statements alternate in the poem.

What is interesting about the statement is how the abstraction is turned tangible: through the projection of a human element (“perspective” standing for perception), emptiness becomes something that can be worked like a material. Cutting also includes the idea of something sharp against the material to be cut, bringing to mind the leaf and the camel: the visual image of one thing set against another is present in all of these. Based on the earlier lines, it seems natural to interpret the emptiness metaphorically as an emotion, making the projection in a way doubly body-internal: as in the opening line about sorrow, a person is seen as a container that can be filled with thoughts and emotions. In this inward projection a mind conceptualised as contained is layered over a different version of the contained mind, which can be argued to amplify the

sense of containment, but also to suggest change. Unlike before, here that container is devoid of any substance. Again an indefinite article is used, however, so this is likely to be merely a theoretical assertion, a possibility – but a cautiously hopeful one, perhaps, as emptiness is not overwhelmingly shapeless in this metaphorical visualisation.

Similarly, the earlier statement that “[l]oneliness cubes a man at random” is tangible but abstract at the same time: an emotion is given grammatical agency. As such, the statement is a realisation of EMOTION IS A FORCE: loneliness has palpable power over a person, with the addition of “at random” making that power seem particularly formidable. The verb can be understood in many ways, though: as cutting or confining, which would link to the earlier suggestions of containment, or even in the mathematical sense of the word, as multiplying. To my mind, all of these meanings are relevant as they prompt enactment of different aspects of experiencing loneliness: it may be painful (cutting), suffocating (confining), or perspective-altering in that one’s sense of self is heightened (multiplying). While the first two can be seen to call for fairly commonly shared experiential traces, the latter is less obviously embodied due to the scientific association, thus resulting in an effect of novelty if mapped onto the metaphor. Ambiguity, distancing as it may appear at first sight, is a deliberate strategy in the poem, allowing for the universal and personal levels to intermingle. In addition to the use of the indefinite article, the use of the pronoun “one” highlights this tendency: “*One* may rattle the keys, gurgle down a swallow.”¹⁰ What is more, the speaker does not say “I” once in the poem, but occasionally uses the pronoun “you”, which leaves room for identification, but also underscores the sense of alienation that is unfolding in the poem.

The experience of space – be it a feeling of confinement or painful lacking – undergoes a significant change halfway through the poem. The speaker asks: “And what is space anyway if not the/body’s absence at every given/point?” (Brodsky 1988a: 70) The question in itself is profound and I shall come back to it soon, but it is noteworthy that after this the speaker’s perspective shifts, resulting in a significant attentional change in reading: “That’s why Urania’s older

10 Interestingly, Brodsky’s use of “one” is something that Boym (2001: 295) connects to the influence of his mother tongue, but also to a significant pattern of thinking as regards his views of home: “Brodsky loves sentences starting with the ambivalent *one*, which signifies not a singular individual, but rather ‘anyone,’ ‘a person,’ suggesting either more universal experience or a common Soviet one. Besides being a feature of old-fashioned English one would learn in a Soviet-language manual, this kind of syntax reflects an attempt on the poet’s part to transmit the tension between personal and impersonal. In describing his Soviet childhood, Brodsky alternates between using *one* and *I*, *we* and *they*; in these pronominal vacillations reside the nuances of his nostalgia, the tension between longing and estrangement.”

than sister Clio!” In order to account for readerly effects of this kind, Stockwell (2009: 25) borrows the terms *shift*, *zoom* and *state change* from cognitive scientist Kai-Uwe Carstensen. These describe changes to do with motion and spatial relationships: a shift involves apparent movement, a zoom is an apparent change in size, and a state change refers to a sense of newness or a sudden appearance (Stockwell 2009: 25). Carstensen (2007: 8) argues that a state change is most likely to capture one’s attention. However, as Stockwell points out, after the field has been established, attention can be shifted, involving “distraction from one figural attractor to another”, or affected by patterns of zooming in or out. (Stockwell 2009: 31) Earlier in the poem, the mundane details underpinned by the emotions of sorrow and loneliness featured shifting from one figural attractor to another (the leaf and the camel), but also from the level of observation to the level of abstraction.

The perspectival shift that occurs in the middle of the poem turns the previously inward-looking gaze towards the sky: Urania is the muse in charge of astronomy, while Clio is the muse of history and event, and the exclamation raises Urania above history¹¹ – space¹² is infinite and ancient, something that our pasts or futures cannot fill. It is significant that such a canonised personification, the embodiment of an abstraction, is used: once again a feeling is exemplified through tangible yet generic means, which can be read as highlighting how insignificant the events in a single person’s life are on a grander scale. The speaker goes on to present the world from this higher perspective: “In daylight or with the soot-rich lantern,/you see the globe’s pate free of any bio,/you see she hides nothing, unlike the latter.” (Brodsky 1988a: 70) The pronoun “you” seems to be used to convince oneself and the reader of the astronomical viewpoint’s superiority against Clio, who is accused of hiding things (a realisation of GOOD IS UP), but at the same time the speaker’s stance is a clear projection. Although it is not revealed what exactly Clio is hiding, the exclamation implies that the hiding itself might be negative, and yet the speaker zooms in on a landscape from the past:

There they are, blueberry-laden forests,
rivers where the folk with bare hands catch sturgeon
or the towns in whose soggy phone books
you are starring no longer [...]
(Brodsky 1988a: 70)

11 This move could also be connected to how humans’ fascination with astronomical phenomena arguably goes further back in time than the practices of recording history.

12 The perspectival shift also plays on the double meaning of the word “space” (astronomical concept vs. room) – another expression that adds to the sense of distancing.

The introductory “[t]here they are” works as a cue here: something familiar is about to follow. This casual deictic phrase places the reader in a setting they do not know, but expect to become acquainted with as they have joined the speaker’s mental journey into the past. Absence from “soggy phone books” suggests a place one no longer lives in, and although the pronoun “you” is used again, it is reasonable to assume this is the speaker’s (distanced) past home. Since the phonebooks metonymically represent the towns’ inhabitants, a further sense of absence is created via the use of metonymy: the absence of this “you” from the phonebooks is a change to how things were (“no longer”), and the person now only belongs in the metonymical constellation by negative extension. The fact that a part-whole relationship in which the detail is foregrounded over the larger context is employed recalls the sense of isolation and awareness of boundaries from before, but due to the higher perspective and the implied motion in the shift there seems to be added agency here. Interestingly, the verb “star” seems both sarcastic and literal in that the speaker’s perspective is “among the stars”.

After this, the perspective shifts again:

[...] farther eastward surge on
brown mountain ranges; wild mares carousing
in tall sedge; the cheekbones get yellower
as they turn numerous. And still farther east, steam
dreadnoughts or cruisers,
and the expanse grows blue like lace underwear.
(Brotsky 1988a: 70)

As opposed to “having a limit”, “stalling” or “cubing”, the movement in the verb phrases in these rather distant observations is uninhibited. It is as if the speaker’s memory *was* that previous place, with towns whose phone books he no longer features in, and it has now been left behind. This is quite a complex realisation of the STATES ARE LOCATIONS metaphor: tracing the trajectory of the MIND IS A BODY MOVING IN SPACE metaphor, the reader has arrived at a place in the speaker’s past, characterised by a melancholy embodied absence carried along from the starting point of the poem and also reinforced in linguistic details describing the scene (the phone books). However, as the verbs suggest, this new perspective on the absence also seems to make it possible to travel elsewhere again, to return to the big rhetorical question presented earlier: “What is space anyway if not the/body’s absence at every given/point?” The journey appears to be one of transition but not of change as such, refusing the conventional resonance of the CHANGE IS MOTION metaphor and creating an interesting contrast to a typical pattern of compensation in exile literature, that of transforming a “figure of rupture back into a ‘figure of connection’” (Seidel 1986: x).

The cosmic scale may then provide escape but not a destination, a state of rest. Or, as John Bayley (1988) puts it, the poem is about “the sadness of space, whether infinite or intimate”. It is worth exploring this rather gloomy thought a bit further, however. Are there any details that could provide some sense of comfort, as before? Despite the elevated perspective, the ending of the poem seems to abandon the admired Urania for a more grounded viewpoint: the military ships (“dreadnoughts or cruisers”) refer to historical events, and the visual image of the coastline/sea turning into lace underwear hints at earthlier seductiveness than that of a muse of astronomy. In fact, one way of looking at the key juxtapositions in the poem is the division between natural and man-made things. The latter category connects to how we build our lives in our immediate surroundings, and also contains the idea of confinement, which in turn can be “internalised” as an embodied emotional response, as discussed before. Such pairings include the leaf and the grill, the camel and the rail, daylight and the “soot-rich lantern”, and a natural setting and people catching fish¹³ with their bare hands.

Furthermore, “the globe’s pate” and “wild mares carousing” build on the human scale in a distancing manner: the former shrinks the earth into a visualisation of a human’s head, which then contrasts with the global scale, and the latter projects social behaviour typical to humans onto wild and unattainable creatures. While these are examples of the default type of embodied metaphoric projections, body-external, the zoomed-out perspective makes it hard to see them as particularly resonant conceptualisations. Rather, they appear to testify to a prominent tendency that does not offer any immediate cognitive pay-off. Similarly, the sea turning into underwear and wild creatures into battleships are shifts from the natural world to a man-made universe, but these shifts do not really suggest a comforting human-shaped closure. This could also be paralleled with the fact that the visual field the reader is asked to adopt is no longer bounded in the same way as in the beginning. Also, it should be noted that the poem ends with a simile, not a metaphor directly identifying referents with each other. Simile is often mentioned as the most visible type of realisation when discussing the foregrounding of conceptual metaphors (e.g. Browse 2016; Steen 2008), and here the surprising connection between the seascape and underwear highlights such visibility: “the expanse grows blue like lace underwear.” What the reader is left with is a realisation of *THE MIND IS A BODY MOVING IN SPACE* that consists of an active verb phrase in which a natural threshold

13 A further stylistic detail connecting back to the juxtaposition of the generic and the personal is the fact that “sturgeon” (as well as “sedge” later on) is the common name for several species.

is seemingly crossed (“the expanse grows blue”) and an additional man-made referent that disrupts the movement with its initial incompatibility with the panned landscape. I would argue that the syntactical prominence of the verb phrase causes the appositional human element to be accommodated into the visual image, which could be read as highlighting the longevity of nature over the actions and desires of a single man.

In fact, Brodsky differs from many exiled writers in the way that his poetry does not contain a clear evaluative polarity between the past and the present – for many writers the new situation makes the memories of the old homeland become “golden” in retrospect (Bethea 1994: 40–41; see also Boym 2001). This can be accounted for with what Brodsky called *poetic thinking*, an effort to demonstrate the mutual dependency of the semiotic and the symbolic (Bethea 1994: 42), or the power of language even amidst difficult experiences:

To be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man hurtled into space in a capsule (more like dog, of course, than a man, because they will never bother to retrieve you). And your capsule is your language. To finish the metaphor off, it must be added that before long the passenger discovers that the capsule gravitates not earthward but outward in space. (Brodsky 1988b: 18)

The metaphors in this description have rather obvious connections to the conceptualisations in “To Urania”, but with the significant addition of one’s personal space being language – thus one is in a way shielded by language even if the distance from the world seems to grow. Although language is not a medium for transportation as such (compare with *CHANGE IS MOTION*), the experience of movement is still a key component in one’s existence in this unpredictable reality.

4 Conclusion: Playing at causes

While the experiential core of “To Urania” is constructed so that it has the potential to resonate with the reader’s experiences, the poem backs away from a treatment of the theme that would allow for a detached dramatising of the poet’s and others’ plight (Bethea 1994: 39). It is a very human tendency to paint what has been left behind in altered colours, but Brodsky (1988b: 16) puts his own experiences into context by arguing that “[d]isplacement and misplacement are this century’s commonplace.” In Brodsky’s view, what can make a difference in this situation is finding ways of reclaiming one’s agency. Even though one might find oneself in a trajectory one cannot change, as in the capsule metaphor

quoted above, being free means there is always the possibility of siding with Clio rather than just floating:

Given the opportunity, in the great causal chain of things, we may as well stop being just its rattling effects and try to play at causes. The condition we call exile gives exactly that kind of opportunity. (Brodsky 1988b: 19)

From this perspective it makes perfect sense that the contrapuntal progression of “To Urania” does not have a fixed counterpoint, that is to say the mental journey undertaken does not strictly speaking take us anywhere in the end and thus does not present an unambiguous conclusion either.

In addition to a self-reflexive use of the STATES ARE LOCATIONS metaphor, in my analysis I found that the linguistic (and typographic) subtleties in the poem add an attention-requiring yet resonant layer to familiar metaphors. For instance, removing human agency from clausal structures and using indefinite articles and impersonal pronouns contribute to a more distanced take on projecting bodily experience whilst unpacking metaphorical language. A general boundedness of perception was challenged in the course of the poem for example in the form of curiously remote yet sequenced figural attractors and the strategically placed zooming out on the way towards the past. Most centrally, perhaps, the conceptualisation of core emotions related to the experience of exile placed emphasis on the embodiedness of these experiences, but in a manner that also foregrounded their hard-to-grasp nature. Active sentence constructions turned meaningfully ambiguous through article use and choice of verb, and the physical aspect of processing the sensations of loneliness or emptiness was put in a kind of a poetic isolation as a result. That said, the absence of an “I” and the potentially inclusive “you” left room for identification. Although more could have been said about individual mappings, I hope to have illustrated the significance of the poetic context to the rhetorical weight of ground-laying embodied metaphors. As universal as the principles of embodiment are, analyses of literary representations of such topics as exile and sensory memory may provide valuable insights into the nature of bodily experience.

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