



PROJECT MUSE®

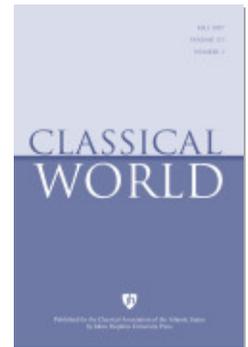
Happy Vergil Goes North: The *Aeneid* in Russian Letters

Zara Martirosova Torlone

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 27-45 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0063>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676931>

Happy Vergil Goes North: The *Aeneid* in Russian Letters

ZARA MARTIROSOVA TORLONE

ABSTRACT: This essay addresses the reception of Vergil's *Aeneid* in Russian letters, specifically its optimistic point of view. Russian interest in Vergil is a belated one and complicated by the numerous European receptions, thus offering a peculiar rendition of the great Roman epic cast in imperial, spiritual, and deeply personal lights from the eighteenth century to the present day. Despite Vergil's relative lack of success in Russian translation, the importance of Vergil for the formation of Russian literary identity remained consistent as Russian writers participated in building their own national literary canon and drew from the *Aeneid* their hope and inspiration for nation building and national consciousness.

“Vergil did not have much luck in Russia: they neither knew nor loved him.” These words belong to one of the most prominent Russian classical scholars of the later part of the twentieth century, Mikhail Gasparov.¹ This lack of interest in Vergil on Russian soil Gasparov mostly blames on the absence of canonical Russian translations of Vergil, especially the *Aeneid* (Gasparov 1979).² And yet, despite Vergil's relative lack of success in the Russian language, his importance for the formation of Russian literary identity remained consistent as Russian writers participated in building their own national literary canon. What is especially surprising about the continuous reception of the Roman poet in Russian letters is the unwavering and unapologetic optimism with which Russian writers read Vergil's great epic, an optimism, one might add, that is highly uncharacteristic of Russian literature.

¹ Detailed analysis of all the texts discussed in this essay can be found in Torlone 2015.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Russian are mine. All the Russian poems cited in this essay are translated from Russian.

The Russian Vergil, like the Vergil of any European literature, is complicated. The complication of his reception in Russia arises mainly from the fact that sometimes it is not Publius Vergilius Maro, the Roman poet of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, whom Russian writers are receiving, but a composite construct that has gone through the reception of influential (and at times even obscure) European writers and has been shaped by Russia's cultural context. The Vergil of Russian writers mirrors the social, spiritual, and personal quest of each given epoch throughout Russia's literary development. Sometimes his features are easily recognizable in poetic texts and sometimes his meaning is buried under multiple cultural layers that have very little to do with the Roman Vergil. But in every case these texts reveal to us what most Russians saw in Vergil's poems, especially the *Aeneid*. Russian authors had limitless hope and a vision of a bright future as they strove to understand Russia's destiny, her meaning, while longing for her, hating her, and desperately trying to change her.

The continuous engagement with Vergil does not start in Russia until after the reforms of Peter the Great (1672–1725) and Catherine the Great (1729–1796), who brought Russia, often forcefully, into the European family of nations. Russian reception of Vergil moved along two main avenues, but in the end these became closely intertwined. One, not surprisingly, was connected with the idea of empire and expansion, the familiar *translatio imperii*. That claim included not only imperial aspirations but also the ideals of republicanism, law and order, and most importantly civic consciousness (Toporov 1990: 73). Although strongly supported and encouraged by the Russian monarchy, the mere identification of Russia with the Roman Empire was seen as dubious. Indeed, the pagan empire of Rome fell eventually to the barbarian hordes. That is why the Russian *Romdichtung* developed its other equally important aspect, which was mystical, spiritual, deeply rooted in Christianity and the eastern region of the Roman Empire. It was this area of the Roman world that provided the Russians with their alphabet and their religion. Judith Kalb observes that “the ‘first,’ Western Rome, came predominantly to represent secular authority and imperial power to various Russian rulers and their subjects, even as the ‘second,’ Eastern Rome, while the inheritor of Rome's secular authority, could function additionally as a symbol of religious piety” (Kalb 2008: 6). Thus the Russian reception of the Roman and specifically Vergilian legacy went beyond merely claiming a European identity as a part of Russian science, scholarship, and artistic creation.

The syncretic reception of ancient Rome in Russia was inseparable from Russians' quest to seek the confirmation of their belief in Russia's "elevated soul, defined against the West's pragmatic and orderly reason" (Kalb 2008:10). Russian reception of the Roman legacy then went beyond merely claiming a European identity. As Mark Raeff explains, it enabled Russian thinkers to construct themselves through that reception, as "both the prophets and the architects" of civilization (Raeff 2003: 136). This claim manifested itself most strongly in the "messianic" responses to Vergil in the twentieth century, which had their roots in Russia's frequently discussed "Third Rome" doctrine.

This doctrine originated in the early sixteenth century (around 1523–1524) when a Pskovian monk, Filofei, explicitly stated the progressive sequence of "Romes": Rome, Constantinople, Moscow (Clark 2011: 2).⁵ Until the Petrine reforms, Europeans refused to recognize Russia as an equal, and the result of that rejection was the development of Filofei's view that Russia was the last remaining Rome, the new core of Christendom, since the Byzantines had been conquered in 1453 by the Moslem Turks. In Filofei's doctrine two Russian Romes merged: *imperium sine fine* and the center of Christendom with a religious mission. Vergil came to be seen as the answer to both claims—to encompass both the imperial rhetoric and the spiritual quest for a Christian Russian soul.

Eighteenth-century Vergilian reception was mainly concerned with imperial aspirations as an initial reaction to the text of the *Aeneid* in Russian literature. This imperial rhetoric required an epic poem, since in Russia during the eighteenth century epic emerged as the only genre that afforded the claim of legitimacy to an emerging national identity and connected it with that of the European nations who had long established that identity by a similar connection with the classical heritage. Thus it was Vergil, and not Homer, who became the model for the classicist epic. By turning to Roman models, the Russian monarchy and the elite claimed much more than simply belonging to Europe: they aimed to assert Russia's new primacy as the modern empire. In eighteenth-century Russia the time was well suited for creating an epic of national rebirth in the manner of the *Aeneid*, a poem that was seen as a perfect model

⁵ In the eighteenth century, the poet Sumarokov shifted the focus to St. Petersburg by naming it "the Rome of the North" so that St. Petersburg, not Moscow, would be seen as the *new* Rome. See Baehr 1991: 160. On the connection between the Third Rome doctrine and the ideology of Russian absolute monarchy, see Wolff 1960.

for any nation-building discourse (Clark 2011: 23). Also of interest to eighteenth-century Russian men of letters was the use of the *Aeneid* as “the ideological prop for the one-man rule of the emperor” (Quint 1993: 7), a characteristic extremely attractive for the poets who attempted the Russian national epic.

Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765), a Russian polymath and one of three prominent advocates of Russian classicism (along with Vasilii Trediakovskii [1703–1769] and Alexander Sumarokov [1718–1777]),⁴ found himself in a challenging and peculiar position when he started writing his epic poem *Peter the Great*. Lomonosov started *Peter the Great* most likely in 1756, but he never finished it. Only two books ever appeared, one in 1760, the second in 1761. While the *Aeneid* was certainly a poem that was supposed to please Augustus, it was not confined to the simplistic scheme of glorifying him or his reign. Similarly, Catherine’s investment in Lomonosov’s poetic composition should be seen as an expectation of something more than a panegyric of Russian monarchy, and Lomonosov failed to deliver that. In order for the Russian epic to become canonical, it was vital that it be a spiritual and poetic reflection of the Russian national experience, the way the *Aeneid* was of the Roman. Vergil from the very beginning of the poem emphasized the price of the Roman achievement (*tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*, “a matter of so much effort was it to found the Roman nation,” *Aen.* 1.33) and focused repeatedly on the sacrifice and sorrow that accompany every victory. However, Lomonosov, while prone to contemplation of the troublesome human condition, did not want to cast a dark shadow upon his hero Peter and abandoned the epic altogether, humbled, according to his own admission, by the enormity of the task and historical closeness to his royal subject.

Other attempts at Russian national epic were even less impressive. Alexander Sumarokov first came out with his *Dmitriad* about the Muscovite Duke Dmitrii (1350–1389), the victor of the Battle of Kulikovo, a poem of only one page. In 1730, Antiokh Kantemir (1708–1744) also tried to write his *Petriad or Verse Description of the Death of Peter the Great, the Emperor of All Russia*. A great admirer of Peter and his

⁴ The representatives of Russian classicism, however, did not call it such. The term “classicism” came into use only later, during the war of the Romantics against eighteenth-century literary traditions. See Serman 1989: 63. See also Lotman 1996: 123–47 on the controversy surrounding the application of this term in Russian culture.

reforms, Kantemir limited his poem to lamenting Peter's death instead of glorifying the achievements of his reign. The poem, which ended with the first song, was undoubtedly a panegyric to the tsar-reformer, especially in Kantemir's praise of Peter's new capital and the speed of its rise, but it was also far from resembling anything close to a national epic and a literary masterpiece.

Nikolai Kheraskov's (1733–1807) *Rossiada* also contributed to the valiant but failed attempts at a national heroic epic with none other than Ivan the Terrible as the positive protagonist who fought and conquered the Tatar infidels. Although encouraged by the Russian ruling family and incorrigibly positive in their pursuit of a Russian foundation story, all these epic poems, due to their frightful tediousness, not to mention controversial heroes, failed to elicit any interest from the reading public.

In the same way Vasilii Petrov's first, unfortunate translation of the *Aeneid*, published between 1781 and 1786, reflected the tendency to glorify and idealize the ruling monarch, in this case Catherine, through Dido, as a way to promote national pride. The parallels that Petrov's contemporaries could have drawn between Catherine and Dido can be supported by numerous licenses that Petrov took while translating the text, from the depictions of Dido's court to detailed descriptions of her newly built city, which inevitably brought to mind the new Russian capital of St. Petersburg. Petrov significantly embellished the description of the rising new city, adding to it the sense of splendor, the overcoming of the "disorder" of the previous humble huts with the magnificence of chiseled and refined architecture. Catherine took much pride in continuing Peter's building program of his city.

The biographical circumstances of Dido's ascent to power, upon which she ruminates in her introductory speech in book 4, were also similar to Catherine's own. Catherine was a foreigner whose initial hold on the Russian monarchy was under threat; her willingness to defend and expand her frontiers against all internal and external enemies was impressive; and her involvement in all these affairs as well as the building of the state was profound. But one is tempted to ask if the highly educated Petrov, in his elation, was even slightly aware that the comparison of the ill-fated Carthaginian queen to the great tsarina might be seen as not altogether auspicious. Petrov, at times blatantly, glossed over the devolution of Dido's love into madness, sensing Vergil's own sympathy for his tragic heroine and enhancing it. In Petrov's rendition, Dido emerged as a great queen who succumbed to her even greater

passion. The parallel to Catherine, which could have appeared to some inappropriate, considering Catherine's numerous amorous liaisons, was turned by Petrov into a flattering (for Catherine) juxtaposition between the doomed and passion-driven Carthaginian queen and the Russian tsarina. In the end, however, the translation itself was found lacking in adequately rendering Vergil into Russian and shortly fell into obscurity.

The figure of Dido appears to have presented a special interest to Russian writers experimenting with the reception of Vergil. Iakov Kniashnin's (1742–1793) play *Dido*, staged in 1769, offered his readers an unusually politicized interpretation of book 4. It is very clear from the tragedy's text that Kniashnin was closely familiar with the Vergilian original, which he quotes sometimes almost verbatim. Kniashnin's play appeared about ten years before the publication of Petrov's translation of the *Aeneid*. It is hard not to notice the parallels in their shared interest in the figure of Dido as the *dux femina facti*, a female monarch with a strong grip on her power, an image of herself that Catherine was then trying to perpetuate. Petrov used the Dido of the *Aeneid* as a point of comparison with Catherine, a comparison beneficial for the Russian tsarina, but damaging to the queen of Carthage, whose Eastern nature he emphasized. Kniashnin's contemplations in his tragedy about the nature of female rule seem to hinge upon the same issue. Dido emerged in both works as an inferior Eastern queen, noble indeed, but unable to control her human passions. In the minds of Kniashnin's contemporaries the comparison was perhaps obvious and flattering to the tsarina in the same way as Petrov's translation. While Dido was unable to put her duty before her love, Catherine ruled Russia with never-faltering confidence despite her many "passions."

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), the most pivotal literary figure in Russia, created the nineteenth century's most influential reception of Vergil. He penned in 1833 his own diminutive epic of national pride, *The Bronze Horseman*, in which he contemplated the same issues pondered by Vergil two thousand years earlier. What animated Vergil's epic was a specifically Roman experience, the problems that Rome faced as a nation and an emerging empire, and in the end a significantly human dilemma faced by Aeneas when Vergil challenged us, the readers, to validate Aeneas' behavior. Pushkin's subtle allusions to Vergil, and especially the parallels with the *Aeneid* in *The Bronze Horseman*, must be viewed in the same light, although they by no means imply Pushkin's intentional evocation of Vergil.

The poem, one of Pushkin's masterpieces, was inspired by Étienne Maurice Falconet's equestrian statue of Peter the Great, completed in 1782, which stands in the Senate Square in St. Petersburg. The narrative of the poem is concerned with a well-known and devastating episode from St. Petersburg's history, the flood of 1824, when the Neva overflowed its embankments and claimed many lives and buildings. It is against the story of this flood that Pushkin tells his tale about a lowly government clerk named Evgenii, an insignificant civil servant, whose main concern is to secure happy domesticity with his fiancée Parasha. Caught up in the middle of the flood, he loses his beloved Parasha, the only driving force behind any ambition he might have harbored. Driven insane by these events, he starts wandering throughout the city and stumbles into the Senate Square, where he sees Falconet's famous horseman: "the idol with extended hand / sat astride his proud bronze steed." Evgenii, completely mad at this point, lashes out at the statue:

"Just wait, you miracle creator,"
Evgenii whispered angrily
And in his fear began to tremble
"I'll get my revenge!"

Pushkin 1949: 307

After his threat to the statue of the great tsar, Evgenii hastily takes off as he envisions that the statue has come alive and is pursuing him. Following this hallucinatory incident, Evgenii becomes even more withdrawn and eventually dies forgotten and abandoned by all. This is the protagonist of *The Bronze Horseman*, a man sympathetic because of his suffering but largely insignificant because of his daunting passivity. The ordinary clerk with small dreams and little ambition is pitted against the elemental forces of nature on the one hand and the "historical spirit of Russia on the other" (Gregg 1977: 169).

The hapless Evgenii in his simple desire for individual happiness came to be seen as incapable of understanding the importance of the communal good. In his formative article "On Pushkin and Virgil," Vasily Rudich states that both authors "profoundly appreciated necessities and complexities inherent in the historical process," and that they were both "étatistes, supporters of strong statehood" (2002: 47). Both poets were preoccupied with what Rudich terms "historiodicy," a justification of history, when the sacrifice of individual happiness and maybe even life becomes a necessary condition of the historical process and progress (2002: 50).

The Bronze Horseman is in effect the first true Russian epic, not in terms of monumentality, but certainly in the sense of poetic accomplishment. It dwarfs the eighteenth century's sincere but ill-conceived attempts at a level of grandeur similar to that of the ancient epics. Pushkin had his finger on the poetic pulse of his time. He was fascinated by Russian history, and Peter was for him, unlike for Lomonosov, not a historical figure, but a manifestation of Russian identity. Like the *Aeneid* in relation to Augustus, *The Bronze Horseman* was never intended solely as a panegyric for the tsar-reformer and the city built on a swamp, but the poem still remains puzzlingly uplifting; it has the unusual quality of simultaneously lauding the vision and the will of Peter and treating the victim of that vision compassionately.

While the connection of Vergilian reception with Russia's "messianic" Orthodox mission manifested itself intermittently in secular court literature and even in Petrov's translation, the specific and pointedly deliberate articulation of that mission occurs in the literature of the beginning of the twentieth century and is represented by such formative thinkers as Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) and Georgii Fedotov (1886–1951). Both were influenced by the religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900), who saw Vergil in a messianic and prophetic light and as the source of answers for Russia's spiritual quest both at home and abroad.

Between 1881 and 1891 Solov'ev developed a friendship with the poet Afanasii Fet (1820–1892). These years also coincided with Solov'ev's intense interest in the unity of the East and the West through Christendom. In 1887 Solov'ev and Fet embarked on yet another Russian translation of the *Aeneid*. Fet was attracted to the project because it presented him with a poetic challenge. For Solov'ev, however, the *Aeneid* represented the perfect embodiment of the Roman principle of universalism. In one of his letters he even stated that he considered "Father Aeneas' along with Abraham, the 'father of believers,' to be the true ancestors of Christianity, which was (historically speaking) only a synthesis of these two forefathers" (Solov'ev and Radlov 1970: 7). There had certainly been centuries of Christianizing interpretation that viewed Aeneas "as a good proto-Christian or at least Stoic" (Galinsky 1996: 249). But for Solov'ev the historical necessity inherent in Aeneas' divinely ordained mission represented the confirmation of the idea of Rome's preeminence as the spiritual guide of the world, which then would translate into Russia's spiritual leadership.

Ivanov, although educated as a classical historian by Theodore Mommsen himself, was strongly influenced by Solov'ev's ideas. A leading figure of Russian Symbolism, the most prominent movement of the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, Ivanov saw creativity as inseparable from "a reverence for past accomplishment" and an "anxious desire to be influenced" (Wachtel 1994: 4–5). As Ivanov, following Solov'ev, contemplated the crisis of Russian national identity after the first losses in the Russo-Japanese war and then the events of the Russian Revolution of 1917, he gave the Roman poet perhaps his most messianic reception, focusing at the same time on the mission of Russia in the world. Unable to achieve its imperial aspirations and suffering defeat now by an Asian country, Russia, in Ivanov's opinion, needed to reposition itself towards its spirituality, or more specifically towards Christ. The core concept for understanding Ivanov's reception of Vergil is his view of ancient Rome not as a phenomenon of "natural" impromptu culture, but as a historical and cultural context for Christianity. In his *Roman Sonnets*, written on his emigration to Rome in 1924, Ivanov identified himself with Aeneas, who had to undergo the transformation from a Trojan into a Roman. The poet envisioned the rise of Rome out of the Trojan fire, new life being born from a destroyed civilization, in the same way he envisioned the resurrection of Russia after the traumatic events of 1917:

The Troy of our forebears we give to fire;
 The chariots' axles crack between the thunder
 And furies of the world hippodrome:
 You, king of roads, see how we are burning.

And you went down in flames and rose from the ashes;
 The mindful blueness
 Of your deep skies did not grow blind.

Your cypress, standing sentinel, remembers
 In the caress of golden dream
 How strong grew Troy as she lay burned.

Ivanov (1971–1979), 3:578

The cypress tree, in Roman poetry a traditional symbol of death, here becomes a symbol of resurrection, a new beginning that the poet anticipated in Rome, his new abode. The hope was not feigned; it was confident and exhilarating.

The identification with the Trojan hero en route to his new home was not new to Ivanov's poetry. In his first collection, *The Pilot Stars*, the poem "Cumae" (Ivanov and Deschartes 1971–1979, 1: 574) referred to Aeneas's plight again through the prophecy of the Cumaean Sibyl given to the hero during his descent to the underworld in *Aeneid* 6. That descent had been necessary for the hero to abandon his past as a vanquished Trojan and prepare for his future as the victorious if ruthless Roman. Without the descent into the underworld, the rebirth of Aeneas from the Trojan *Flammentod* would have been impossible.

Rome for Ivanov acquired a universality in which the Eastern Trojan Aeneas was transformed into the founder of the Western Roman nation and the Russian poet into a harbinger of a renewed Christian ideal, a role that Ivanov assumed persistently. For Ivanov, furthermore, Vergil stood on the threshold of a new world, bridging the gap between the pagan past and the Christian present and future (Kalb 2003: 32). Similarly, his later essay, "Vergils Historiosophie" (1931), written in German, unequivocally presents Vergil in a messianic light in tune with his medieval reception, which Ivanov, despite his fine classical training, accepted as "instinctual" when assessing Vergil. Vergil's own doubts about the brutalizing price of building Rome did not enter Ivanov's perception of Rome and his interpretation of its greatest poet.

Georgii Fedotov, like Ivanov, in his essay "On Vergil" (Fedotov 1952: 215–22), published in Paris in 1930) also voiced a reception of Vergil closely connected with his hopes of Russia's mission in the world, although his interpretation of the Roman poet in a messianic light was less pronounced, and less connected with Solov'ev's and Ivanov's ideas of Christian unity than with ideas of Russia's humanistic mission. It is clear that Fedotov's reception of Vergil is completely different from that of Solov'ev and Ivanov on one key point: he does not use Vergil's text to stress Russia's universalizing mission in the Christian context, but rather to find and offer consolation to himself and his compatriots in their forced exile, while contemplating and even predicting the future of Russia.

What all of these receptions exhibit is a certain awareness of Vergil's own ruminations about the dark side of nation-building, its human price, followed, however, by unequivocal justification of that price, or even disregard for these concerns. It is not until the latter part of the twentieth century that sensitivity towards the "pessimistic side" of the *Aeneid* becomes explicitly articulated, and even then it is somewhat marginalized.

Joseph Brodsky, a 1987 Nobel Prize winner and American poet laureate, was exiled from Soviet Russia in 1972.⁵ His late 1981 essay, “Vergil: Older than Christianity, a Poet for the New Age,” offers perhaps the most succinct summary, and closure, of the optimistic reception of the *Aeneid* in Russian letters (Brodsky 1981: 180):

Like every human being, a poet has to deal with three questions: how, what for, and in the name of what to live. The *Bucolics*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid* answer all three, and these answers apply equally to the Emperor and to his subjects, to antiquity as well as to our times. The modern reader may use Vergil in the same way as Dante used him in his passage through hell and purgatory: as a guide.

This essay belongs to the mature Brodsky, a Russian poet in exile from his native St. Petersburg, and it is written in English, the language of his new home. With Brodsky, the Russian Vergil enters the postmodernist stage, an era of self-irony and skeptical interpretation of previous conventions. Brodsky is a poet keenly aware of all of the preceding tradition, European as well as Russian. Thus his Vergil is often self-conscious and extremely personalized, as Brodsky responds to his literary heritage and carefully carves his own space within it.

Brodsky’s main preoccupation with Vergil concerns his evaluation of what is any poet’s place in the world. However, the epic or messianic Vergil is replaced in Brodsky with an individualistic reading of Vergilian poetry. I want to conclude this essay by analyzing one early poem that essentially presents a postmodernist conclusion to the optimistic reception we have seen in Russian letters. That poem is “Dido and Aeneas,” written in 1969, when Brodsky was only 29, four years after his exile in the north of Russia and three years before his permanent departure to the West. We have seen that this particular episode of the Roman epic held a special interest for the writers of the eighteenth century. What is surprising to me as I look at this poem is how Brodsky shifts the focus completely from Dido to Aeneas. Brodsky offers an unusual take on book 4 of the Roman epic:

The great man stared through the window
but her entire world ended with the border
of his broad Greek tunic, whose abundant folds
resembled the sea on hold.

⁵ See Spence 1991 on her personal correspondence with Brodsky.

But he stared out through the window, and his gaze
 was so far away from here, that his lips were immobile
 like a seashell where the roar is hidden, and the horizon
 in his goblet was still.

But her love
 was just a fish—which might perhaps
 plunge into the sea in the pursuit of the ship,
 and knifing the waves with supple body,
 perhaps yet pass it—but he,
 he in his thoughts already strode upon the land.
 And the sea became a sea of tears.
 But, as one knows, precisely at the moment
 of despair, the auspicious wind begins to blow.
 And the great man left Carthage.
 She stood before the bonfire, which her soldiers
 had kindled by the city walls,
 and she envisioned looking at the mist,
 trembling between the flame and smoke,
 how Carthage silently crumbled
 ages before Cato's prophecy.

Gordin 2001, 2: 313

In order to understand this poem one must put it first in the context of Brodsky's "mythological" poems, specifically his allusions to heroic myth. Brodsky's ancient heroes, Odysseus, Hector, Ajax, and Theseus, appear in his early poetry with remarkable frequency and are a large and enduring part of his "masculine" poetics.⁶ These heroic figures from Greco-Roman mythology almost always are seen as examples of the brutalizing price of any significant achievement, of the realization that with any heroic journey victory comes inseparable from defeat.

Brodsky's Aeneas therefore must be read in this very context of "mythological inversions," the impossibility of rewarded heroic endeavor and the inevitability of significant emotional sacrifice inherent in man's quest for the meaning of life, as he attempts to make deliberate, conscious, and often irrevocable choices. Brodsky's "Dido and Aeneas," however, is a poem that requires careful unwrapping, a palimpsestic reading as Brodsky subtly moves between ancient and modern influences, between biographical allusions and fictional lyric personae. This poem is one of

⁶ A detailed and most recent analysis of Brodsky's mythological poetics is offered in Torlone 2009.

the most eloquent illustrations of what Michael Kreps calls Brodsky's "making a contemporary of myth" (Kreps 1984: 147–48).

Vergil was by no means the only source for Brodsky's take on Dido and Aeneas. In fact, in one of his interviews Brodsky mentioned two other influences that shaped his interpretation of the affair: Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's cycle about Dido and Aeneas, and English composer Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (Brumm 2002: 15). Akhmatova's lyric cycle that Brodsky refers to here is the 1962 collection of poems *A Wild Rose Is Growing* ("Shipovnik rastet"). The themes explored in this cycle are traditional for Akhmatova's poetics: the appearance of a mysterious guest from a faraway land, love, betrayal, abandonment, separation. The fourteenth poem of that cycle was published in 1962 under the title "Dido Speaks":

Do not be scared—I can with even more likeness
 Depict us right now,
 Although you either are a ghost or a passerby,
 I, for some reason, keep your shadow.

You were not my Aeneas for long—
 Back then I got away with bonfire only.
 We can keep silent about each other.
 And you have forgotten my cursed house.

You have forgotten those hands,
 Stretched across the fire in horror and agony,
 And the news of the damned hope you have forgotten too.

You do not know how much forgiveness has been granted to you . . .
 Rome is built, the herds of fleets are passing,
 And the flattery glorifies victory.

Kralin 1990: 421

It is rather strange that Brodsky lists this poem as a source of inspiration for his poem, because it appears that he writes from the exact opposite gender perspective. Akhmatova's dark poem is an articulation of Dido's anguish over her abandonment, and Aeneas is only behind the scenes. In Akhmatova the bonfire is not Dido's final moment, but a mild punishment for the forbidden passion ("I got away with bonfire only"). She clings to Aeneas' ghost and her memory of him, while he is presumed to have forgotten everything, even her agony on the pyre. But the poem ends on the note of forgiveness still mixed with lingering attachment,

certainly unimaginable for the Vergilian Dido, who categorically declares that her enmity will last for centuries to come (*nullus amor populis nec foedera sunt*, “let there be neither any love nor truce between our peoples,” *Aen.* 4.624). Akhmatova’s Dido sees her house “cursed” and her hope “damned,” but she does not curse or damn the beloved who betrayed her. And the last stanza explains why: Rome is built, the great fleet is sailing by, and the air resounds with glory of the man’s achievement. The high price for it was paid by a woman who is destined to fade into obscurity and insignificance. I will try to demonstrate that in these lines precisely lies Brodsky’s inspiration for his own creative and gendered “misreading” of the Vergilian Dido.

Before we move to Brodsky’s poem, however, I would like to look briefly at his other self-proclaimed source, Purcell’s opera with libretto by Nahum Tate. In the opera as well as in Akhmatova’s poem, Dido is resigned to her fate and departs from the stage with no words of reproach. Purcell’s Dido is also surprisingly passive, and in fact Aeneas is her pursuer, with a strength of passion uncharacteristic for the Vergilian Aeneas. Both Akhmatova’s and Purcell’s Didos set the stage for Brodsky’s queen as a woman seduced and abandoned, but not powerful and most certainly not vengeful.

Brodsky’s Dido is also completely marginalized, and the focus is primarily on the man and his mission. Like Purcell’s Dido, she expresses no anger and little bitterness as she becomes only a bleak shadow on his destiny, almost an annoying obstacle to his divinely inspired designs. While Dido is referred to only as “she,” Aeneas is twice described as a “great man,” and in a peculiar ironic twist his greatness is especially emphasized when he decisively leaves Carthage and Dido behind. Here Brodsky’s classical metaphor evokes in a much more defined way Akhmatova’s and Purcell’s two radically different views of love: “his” and “hers.” These views alternate as the poet goes back and forth between the two contrasting perspectives (“but she,” “but her love,” “but he”), described in terms of “movement” and “immobility.” The caesura in the poetic line (“in his goblet was still. || But her love”) appears before the change in gender perspective and serves as a symbolic divider, reflecting two different psychological worlds and two completely different approaches to emotion (Verheul 1973).

Furthermore, while his gaze wanders far into the beckoning horizon that awaits him, she cannot see beyond the folds of his tunic, where “her world ends,” not only figuratively but literally, as we see later in

the poem. *Her* perspective is limited by the sight of *him* and she cannot see anything beyond that. For her the whole world is the room in which the separation occurs; for him it is the sight of the sea where his future awaits and to which his longing gaze inevitably turns as he is about to leave her in the confining space of that room full of tension. The recurrent imagery of the sea, which in Brodsky often appears as a metaphor for freedom (Loseff 1990: 38), intensifies the fact that Aeneas' immobility is only temporary: his tunic is like a sea that has stopped its motion (his freedom thus is curtailed by his pause with Dido), his lips resemble a seashell, the horizon reflected in his goblet is a sea horizon, and he himself is a ship which Dido (the fish) is ready to follow. In contrast to this picture of his immobility stands the description of Dido's emotional state. That state, completely locked inside, is full of motion, speed, and impulsiveness. But as his plans are about to be set into motion, even her interior mobility would freeze. The phrase "whole world ends with the border of his . . . tunic" acquires then both temporal and spatial meaning. The folds of his tunic on which her adoring eyes linger reflect his temporary halt in time and space contrary to his predestined duty and predict Dido's limitations and future inability to follow Aeneas on his journey. At the moment of *her* ultimate despair, *his* "auspicious wind begins to blow."

The Vergilian Dido, *dux femina facti*, who angrily confronts Aeneas after his attempt to leave her secretly, is replaced by Brodsky with a Dido who only looks on as speechlessly as a fish, as Aeneas "already strode upon the land."⁷ Fish do not live on land; Aeneas belongs to a realm where Dido has no natural place. Furthermore, the comparison to the fish has a deeper connotation in Russian, evoking a proverb "mute as a fish." Not only is Dido banned from any land where he will settle, she is also deprived of the power Vergil gives her to express her anguish, her anger, and her determination to retaliate even beyond her grave. By contrast, Brodsky's Dido is more evocative of the Dido Aeneas encounters in the underworld in book 6, sullen and speechless. However, even in that last encounter of the two lovers in the *Aeneid*, Vergil emphasizes her superior strength of character with the simile "[she stood there] like a stern rock crag or cliff of Marpesus" (*quam si dura silex aut stet*

⁷ These lines were also evocative of the Nisus and Scylla episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8.

Marpesia cautes, 6.471). This simile echoes Aeneas' earlier comparison in book 4 (441–446), as he is besieged by Dido's pleas, to an oak tree that cannot be moved even by the gusty winds because it reaches high into the sky with its branches and deep into the earth with its roots. Dido's comparison to a cliff underlines her immobility, which is picked up also by Brodsky; but the Vergilian immobility displays her emotional steadfastness, her insistence on never forgiving him even after his impassioned plea of regret. At the end of the episode, however, it is *she* who takes off in flight (*tandem corripuit sese atque inimica refugit*, "at last she snatches herself away and hostile flees," 472), away from *him*.

Brodsky's poem is explicitly and solely concerned with Aeneas' destiny and duty. The Vergilian hero's constant characteristic of *pietas*, dedication to destiny, and to the divine will enables him to endure the loss of his homeland and of every meaningful human connection and to "command our great respect" (McLeish 1990: 141). Although the sea of his journey turns out to be the sea made of Dido's tears (the idiomatic Russian phrase *more slez*, "sea of tears," is cleansed here by the poet of its clichéd meaning), Brodsky never questions the inevitability or moral virtue of Aeneas' choice. Outlined already in Akhmatova's poem, the theme of Aeneas betraying his savior Dido is closely connected with his mission as a founder of Rome. It is because of that mission that Brodsky's Dido foresees Carthage crumbling in the fire that is her own funeral pyre. If Dido has no place in the future of Rome, he must let her go, leave her defeated, predicting thus the defeat of her city by the race he is about to engender. The Vergilian bonfire upon which Dido throws herself in her final hour of despair becomes a conflagration that will eventually consume Carthage, her proud legacy. Unlike the Vergilian heroine, in the departure of Aeneas Brodsky's Dido does not predict Hannibal's attack on Italy during the Punic Wars: she foresees even further the undoing of her own Carthage, reduced to ashes at the end of those wars. Her vision foreshadowing Cato's *Carthago delenda est* ("Carthage must be destroyed") is consistent with the Dido of the whole poem. Without Aeneas there is no Dido, and without Dido there is no Carthage.

The theme of revenge is also completely excised by Brodsky. In this brief poem Dido becomes the passive victim not even of divine ordinances but of the "great man's" decisions. The tragic monumentality of her final suicidal act, the result of her excessive emotion, all but disappears in Brodsky's lyric rendition. The Vergilian grandiosity of epic

design has no place in Brodsky's lyric poem, which becomes a contemplation of an irrevocable separation between a man and a woman.

In his 1981 essay on Vergil, mentioned above, Brodsky notes that "Vergil was a realist; an epic realist to be precise, because speaking numerically, reality in itself is epic" (Brodsky 1981: 180). For Brodsky the "reality" of life replete with loss is an epic when viewed diachronically, as two lovers on the verge of separation become but a small episode in an epic chain of life that eventually must amount to some meaning. The achievement of the meaningful goal becomes associated with an ultimate sacrifice of genuine feeling, for the hero (or the poet) must act alone, unburdened by any personal attachment. In this approach to Dido and Aeneas one can also hear Akhmatova's gendered interpretation of the unfortunate affair: men always leave, forsaking love for the pursuit of a higher cause, and women are always left behind bewailing their fate. The high price of heroic achievement is once again justified, in tune with the overall reception of Vergilian epic in Russia: the man has to pay a price of personal loss and forsaken love in order to fulfill his destiny; the woman fails to understand the importance and consequences of that choice, which is never questioned. I am reluctant to draw here any precise biographical parallels, mindful of Bethea's and Loseff's warnings against them (Bethea 1994: 8, 34; Loseff 2006: 11–12). However, it is hard not to notice that in 1969, two years before Brodsky's final exile to the West, the figure of Aeneas might have appeared to the poet as a suitable metaphor for the poet's own plight and his own looming destiny.

Many years later Brodsky would return to Aeneas again, briefly and yet compellingly offering a fitting closure to Russian reception of the *Aeneid*. Brodsky's 1993 poem "Ischia in October" describes an abandoned beach in the fall, where the lyric protagonist, accompanied by his wife and daughter, contemplates the passage of time. The poem ends with the following stanza:

The three of us are here, and I bet
that what we see together is three times
more in need of an address, and bluer,
than what Aeneas was gazing at.

In the 1969 poem Aeneas was looking towards the sea where his destined land was waiting. That land had no name and no geographic address yet. Lost in the blueness of the sea, it was not even visible from the towers of Carthage. The future back then did not have any recognizable

features. In this later poem, it still does not. The sea still holds the mystery of the final destination, although the lyric protagonist is not embarking on it alone any more. It is his future times three, and in that the poet finds his consolation and his hope—an uplifting closure to Aeneas' Russian travels, very different from anything one would expect from a Russian writer in exile.

Conclusion

I started this essay with an excerpt from this statement by Mikhail Gasparov about Vergil's fate in Russia. It seems appropriate to finish with the full quotation, as it emphasizes the continuous optimism of Vergilian reception in Russia (Gasparov 1979):

Vergil did not have much luck in Russia. They neither knew nor loved him: "reshaped" *Aeneids* of various authors were more familiar to the Russian reader than the real *Aeneid*. At the beginning it was the disgust engendered by the gymnasium education that hindered closeness to Vergil, and then it was the language barrier. The poems in which narrative is everything can please in translation; but the poems in which each word is alive and resounding (and that is Vergil), demand a translator who is a language-maker, and that is rare. Gnedich became that translator for Homer; for Vergil there was none. None, because the romantic nineteenth century, dreaming about natural and spontaneous poetry, did not like the civilized Roman classics and preferred the Greek one to it. The twentieth century, upon parting with Romanticism, understood that naturalness and spontaneity in poetry are myths and that the bulky complexity and contradictory tension of Roman civilization are closer to our times. That is when Vergil was received and valued again. The last fifty years in Europe have truly marked the Vergilian Renaissance and its tide is reaching us as well. This is joyful: for Vergil's poetry is poetry that is open to the future, and is close to every culture that is not afraid of the future.

In 1979, when Gasparov's essay on Vergil was written, the belief in the power of Vergilian verse for Russia was indeed in tune with Russian authors' reception of the Roman poet. However, despite all the optimistic predictions of the Russian writers we encountered in the preceding pages, the twenty-first century did not see a significant revival of interest in Vergil.

The essence of being Russian, the content of Russian patriotism, and the nature of Russian national identity no longer hinge on Russia's

position in relation to the West. In a sense, Europeanness became a problem for Russian national identity, and the long anxiety about “belonging” to the West has been replaced with the shift to “unlearning” the West and embracing a unique Russian identity conditioned by Russia’s peculiar geopolitical situation. With that shift Vergil lost his relevance. However, the history of thought sometimes pursues cyclical movement. The author of this essay dares to hope that Vergil will again return to the Russian literary landscape and offer an opportunity for new explorations that will satisfy the new cultural framing and craving of the modern Russia. *Pro captu lectoris, habent sua fata libelli.*⁸

MIAMI UNIVERSITY
torlonzm@miamioh.edu

⁸ “Books have their fates according to the capacity of the reader” (Terentius Maurus [second-century grammarian] 1286).