

**BAROQUE INFLUENCES AND METAPHYSICAL COMPONENTS
IN JOSEPH BRODSKY'S *GREAT ELEGY TO JOHN DONNE***

**JOSEPH BRODSKY'NİN *JOHN DONNE'A BÜYÜK AĞIT* ELEJİSİNDE
BAROK ETKİLER VE METAFİZİK UNSURLAR**

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Abstract

John Donne (1572-1631) was accepted as one of the most remarkable English poets of elegiac poetry. Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) was inspired by Donne and wrote in 1963 *Great Elegy to John Donne* under the influence of his metaphysical approach. Traces of popular metaphysical characteristics of John Donne's poetry on the works of Joseph Brodsky constitute the main subject of this study. Baroque influence under socialist realist Soviet literary rule as an anti-mainstream instrument of expression in Brodsky's poetry was also discussed. The aim of the study is questioning why new artistic trends take a stand against previous genres or justify themselves referring to earlier periods in the context of intertextuality.

Key Words: Baroque, elegy, Joseph Brodsky, John Donne, intertextuality.

Özet

İngiliz şair John Donne (1572-1631) eleji türünde eserler veren en önemli edebiyatçılardan biri olarak kabul edilir. Rus şair Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) Donne'dan aldığı ilhamla, 1963 yılında *John Donne'a Büyük Ağıt* adlı elejisini, şairin metafizik yaklaşımından etkilenerek kaleme almıştır. İngiliz şairin eserlerindeki popüler metafizik özelliklerin Rus şairin eserlerindeki izleri, bu çalışmanın temel konusunu teşkil etmektedir. Brodsky şiirinde Barok etkiler de, toplumcu gerçekçi Sovyet edebî rejimi altında ana akım karşıtı bir ifade aracı olarak incelemeye dâhil edilmiştir. Çalışmanın amacı, metinlerarasılık yöntemiyle, ardıl sanatsal türlerin, neden öncüllerine karşı durma ya da onlar aracılığıyla kendilerini olumlama eğilimi gösterdiklerini tartışmaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Barok, eleji, Joseph Brodsky, John Donne, metinlerarasılık.

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INTRODUCTION

As a form of poetry early examples of elegy were given in Ancient Greek. This form of poetry emerged in Ionia and has influenced Western literature through Greek and Roman literatures. Renaissance period saw the revival of the genre. Themes of sadness, mourning, loved one's death, and mortality dominate in elegies to a great extent. John Milton, Rainer Maria Rilke, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray, Alphonse de Lamartine, Edward Young, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich von Schiller were some of the significant poets who composed elegies. In English literature elegy emerges as a tragic and grieving style, reflecting mournful, sad, melancholic emotions. In 17th century, John Donne (1572-1631) was accepted as one of the most famous poets of elegiac poetry. In addition to his elegies and love poems, Donne was considered as a metaphysical poet. Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) was inspired by Donne and wrote in 1963 *Great Elegy to John Donne* under the influence of his metaphysical approach.

Traces of popular metaphysical characteristics of John Donne's poetry on the works of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky constitute the main subject of this study. Baroque influences in Brodsky's poetry are also discussed. In this study, American scholar David MacFadyen's literary research titled *Joseph Brodsky and the Baroque* was used as a source in the analysis of the poet's *Great Elegy to John Donne*. Baroque influence in Russian literature was examined by analysing documents on the subject written by Russian philologist and art historian Dmitry Likhachov.

The aim of the study is not to put forth artificial parallels between literary periods and to emphasize all kinds of similar details in Donne's and Brodsky's poetry but questioning why new artistic trends stand against or justify themselves by previous periods and genres. Rather than the fact that history of art just repeats itself, researchers curious about why the artist experiences a conscious or unconscious return to previous styles in all stages of artistic creation.

In his work on Russian Baroque, Dmitry Likhachov (1973) explains the relation between styles as follows: Throughout the history of art there have been style couples. First ones mainly refer to primary tendencies, and the others are conceived as secondary styles. Second ones are always seen as a counterstrike and change the possibilities of the first.

BAROQUE IN RUSSIAN CULTURE AND ART HISTORY

In the 18th century Baroque as a literary term was used in the sense of “exaggeration”. In history of art, the next stage of Renaissance is called Baroque period and in history of culture, all manifestations of the 17th century civilization are referred to Baroque qualifications. Rediscovery of the style in literature has been possible with the contributions of historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) and his *Renaissance und Barock* (1888).

According to Golban (2015), in the present state of terminology, “metaphysical” and “baroque” are accepted as synonyms to describe a period of intense emotional attitudes, complexity and confusion, in which the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, and Andrew Marvell received a highest level of prominence. In order to understand Brodsky’s Baroque attitude, it is necessary to take a glance at Russian Baroque.

In Russia Renaissance only emerged as a preliminary period. Baroque takes place of Enlightenment in some cultures, just like in Russia, where Renaissance could not develop for some reason. Russian intellectuals first meet Polish and Ukrainian Baroque movements, then European Baroque. Baroque is accepted as a developmental stage of Renaissance and Enlightenment cultures. Moscow Baroque is not noble, it is based on a local culture. Europe Baroque is an extension of Renaissance, however, before the Moscow Baroque there was a culture of the Middle Ages. Therefore, Renaissance principles are stronger in the Moscow Baroque (İnanır, 2003).

Russian writer Nikolay Gogol, who is accepted as a representative of the Baroque in Russian literature, was born in Ukraine, where the Baroque culture is transmitted rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries and his works were influenced by Baroque style to a certain extent. According to the Russian art historian Grigory Pavlutsky, Baroque culture has come to Ukraine through Poland, influencing all the artistic genres including painting and architecture (Shapiro, 1986).

Late 17th and early 18th century Russian culture is accepted as Baroque. The artists of this age turn their eyes to new formations around the world, and the medieval forms of the earlier era are no longer valid. Behind this expansion lie monumentality, dynamism and enthusiasm of the Baroque style, which is highly suitable for the demands of the period, the moving rhythm of the age and the desired revitalization of national awareness (Uzelli, 2007).

Parallels between the art of rebellion of the 20th century and the Baroque period are drawn in David MacFadyen's *Joseph Brodsky and the*

Baroque as one of the most comprehensive studies on this relationship. According to MacFadyen, Baroque sometimes requires the examination of various schools and practices of pre-Soviet period and 20th century literature. Baroque is compared to Futurist literature in that it gives similar reactions to different historical facts. Parallels can be extended from 17th century painting art to Cubism and then to Futurism. Both Cubism and Futurism recreate the elements of Baroque's reaction to the world. New aesthetic and modern receptions were also been experimentally acquired at a time when traditional realistic acceptance of the history was rejected.

Baroque period between Renaissance and Classicism, then Decadence -a transitional period between realism and Soviet socialist realism- are both worthy of comparison in terms of recurrence of artistic forms and as responses given to these forms. Also pejorative terms were attributed to both of them: *el barocco* (means pearl with an irregular shape originally and extravagance in art) and *decandence* (means moral decline, immorality). The rejection and questioning of a single reality in Baroque and Decadence periods occurred with scientific progress, and interestingly, both periods were followed by a canonical realistic tradition. So the cycle was repeated: The calmness, reality and simplicity of the Renaissance leave its place to unexpected, fantastic, surreal and exaggerated world of Baroque (MacFadyen, 1998).

English translation of *Great Elegy to John Donne* in this study belongs to George Louis Kline (1921-2014), who is known as Brodsky's translator. It is obvious that Klein translated the elegy without losing the original Russian rhythm, the musical structure in poems is still strong in translation, as can be seen in the next section.

GREAT ELEGY TO JOHN DONNE

Joseph Brodsky created *Great Elegy to John Donne* in 1963. He shows great interest in British metaphysical poetry. Since elegical form is a recognizable sign of many poems written by Donne, Brodsky's elegy, without any hesitation, turned out to be a homage to Donne's poetry by giving the same kind of work. In this elegy, reminiscents of British life is reflected by images and traditional British atmosphere, especially indoor one, is created in Russian poetry. Brodsky is highly focused on the theme of death, which was a great passion and even an obsession for Donne:

*“John Donne has sunk in sleep . . . All things beside
are sleeping too: walls, bed, and floor—all sleep.
The table, pictures, carpets, hooks and bolts,
clothes-closets, cupboards, candles, curtains—all*

*now sleep: the washbowl, bottle, tumbler, bread,
breadknife and china, crystal, pots and pans,
fresh linen, nightlamp, chests of drawers, a clock,
a mirror, stairway, doors."*

In following lines, the poet reflected his sorrow using dark images. The time is midnight, and it takes a long time to see sunrise. It is apparent that sleep state is associated with death. Brodsky argues that, while sleeping Donne's poetry is buried under sleep and silence. It can be said that Russian poet intentionally celebrates a mournful mood on these expressions:

*"Night everywhere,
night in all things: in corners, in men's eyes,
in linen, in the papers on a desk,
in the wormed words of stale and sterile speech,
in logs and fire-tongs, in the blackened coals."
of a dead fireplace—in each thing."*

...
*"All the birds sleep. Their songs are heard no more.
Nor is the crow's hoarse caw. 'Tis night.
The owl's dark, hollow laugh is silenced now.
The English countryside is still."*

In the second part of the poem, John Donne's soul speaks. In his review *History of English Literature* Mina Urgan (2013) writes on John Donne's concept of soul and death. Donne was obsessed with death and he reflects his complex personality to *Death, Be Not Proud* written around 1610 and published in 1633. Donne's talk to death is reflected to Brodsky's lines:

*"No, it is I, thy soul, John Donne, who speaks.
I grieve alone upon the heights of Heaven,
because my labors did bring forth to life
feelings and thoughts as heavy as stark chains.
Bearing this burden, thou couldst yet fly up
past those dark sins and passions, mounting higher."*

According to Mina Urgan, death is an obsession in his poetry and is magical at the same time. His poems, reflecting well the complex and original personality of Donne, are full of striking thoughts and surprises as well. Donne blames himself for his religious doubts and sins and his poetry were full of dualistic divisions and inner conflicts between holy and evil powers. Donne was in a constant battle with himself and with God as a consequence of his contradictory sensual lifestyle. Brodsky's elegy walks the line between good and evil too:

*"All soundly sleep: the saints, the Devil, God.
Their wicked servants. Children. Friends."*

According to his contemporaries, Donne gave his last sermon *Death's Duel* a few weeks before he died in 1631. He speaks as if he should die soon, as if he should think, rather than others on his own death. As already understood from his sermons and his poetry, death has been a fascination for Donne. His obsession with death is so unhealthy that he is known for his fascination of death. Although the Christian Church considers suicide to be a greater sin than killing another, this strange man goes so far as to argue that under certain circumstances suicide is the only way out (Urgan, 2013).

As Brodsky himself expressed 17th-century English poet John Donne became one of his idols, and his influence has increased over the years. "After all, when Brodsky left Russia, all he took with him was a typewriter, a small Modern Library volume of Donne's poems, and a bottle of vodka" (MacFadyen, 1998). Brodsky was reading Donne's poems while reading Kierkegaard and the Bible at the same time. This explains the metaphysical mood and existential problematics in his verses. The idea that objects have a spirit and the things falling asleep with Donne (actually dying) in Brodsky's poem reflect his interest in metaphysical theme:

*"The salt sea
talks in its sleep with snows beneath her hull,
and melts into the distant sleeping sky.
John Donne has sunk in sleep, with him the sea."*

...
*"John Donne has sunk in sleep. His verses sleep.
His images, his rhymes, and his strong lines
fade out of view."*

...
*"The poet's fame sleeps soundly at its side.
All trials, all sufferings, are sunk in sleep."*

Brodsky's notable aspect in his artistic career is the connection with Baroque art in his poems. MacFadyen finds similar approaches between 17th century aesthetics and Brodsky's art. The city of St. Petersburg, which has an important role in Brodsky's poetry was established in Baroque style and this fact demonstrates why Baroque art is so effective in his lines, according to MacFadyen. The author emphasizes that Brodsky was influenced by metaphysical poets and he has repeatedly quoted Baroque spirit. Brodsky's poetry has included "progress and decay" at the same time, just like Baroque. Actually, this is a typical characteristic of turn of the century spirit in Russian literary tradition, that the poet inherited from the Russian Silver Age.

CONCLUSION

In 17th century English poetry, Baroque and metaphysics were generally used in the same sense, more precisely, metaphysical poetry developed as one of the branches of Baroque. In literary terminology, the concepts of “metaphysics” and “baroque” are accepted as synonyms for describing the complex period in which intense emotional attitudes prevail. Brodsky’s poetry, that takes a significant amount of inspiration from John Donne naturally contains metaphysical and Baroque elements.

After Joseph Brodsky emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1972, his poems were recognized by the western world and became frequently a subject of academic criticism and comparative literary studies. Especially during the Cold War era, this exile story became popular among American researchers and journalists and increased the poet's reputation.

Brodsky was awarded the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature, however, due to his apolitical works deprived of Soviet “class consciousness” accused of being anti-soviet. Ironically, he was found guilty of “social parasitism” in 1964, and in 1972 exiled by Soviet government. This literary identification as an “other” is the first attribute to make Brodsky's poems Baroque.

Baroque is a rebellion as an exaggerated and spectacular genre contrary to order and rationalism, just like mystical poetry in Soviet socialist realism. Naturally, there was no room for metaphysical elements in a literary atmosphere where socialist realism was dominated by solid rules. In this respect, Brodsky's themes were totally contrary to Soviet mentality. This is the second feature that makes his poems Baroque.

The fact that the city of St. Petersburg, built in Baroque architectural style constitutes an important place in the works of the poet is another feature that adds Baroque soul to his poetry.

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