

Interpretation of Poetry by J. Brodsky in the Context of the Philosophy *Tao Te Ching*

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Abstract—To explore the essence of Eastern and Western literature and philosophy and to draw inspiration for the creation of works, this paper compares works of the Western postmodernist poet J. Brodsky and Chinese classical philosophy *Tao Te Ching* based on the theory of comparative literature. Tracing back to the Russian “Silver Age” when there was a focus on Lao-Tze’s philosophy and combining the life of J. Brodsky, this paper analyzes the two works from the perspective of philosophy and art. The study concludes that there are similarities in the poetics of space and time, the philosophy about conflict (dialectics of Lao-Tze and antinomy of J. Brodsky) exceeds the opposition between Chinese and Western cultures in the traditional sense in exploring the themes about life and death, light and shadow, existence and nothingness, and reflects the interlink and confluence between Eastern and Western literature in the concepts of “Tao”, “nature”, and “return”.

Keywords—J. Brodsky, poetry, *Tao Te Ching*, philosophy, spirit

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese culture has always been one of the popular topics studied by Western scholars due to its profoundness and uniqueness. Against the backdrop of globalization, the culture exchanges between different regions have gradually increased, many scholars hope to seek the common spiritual home of humanity in the combination of Western civilization and Chinese philosophy. Lao-Tze's philosophy has drawn extensive attention from foreign scholars because of its profoundness, uniqueness, and inclusiveness, including the postmodernist poet J. Brodsky. However, due to the conceptual differences between the Eastern and Western cultures and difficulties such as limited materials and cultural differences, most of the previous studies on J. Brodsky's poetry only focused on existential philosophy, metaphysics, Christian culture and the embodiment of European and American cultures. The influence of Chinese culture, especially philosophy of Lao-Tze on the creation of Brodsky's poetry was rarely mentioned. In fact, the philosophy of *Tao Te Ching* existed in the whole life of Brodsky to some extent. The antinomy of the poetry by

Brodsky can be called the variant of the philosophy of *Tao Te Ching*. It is worth noting that the focus of this paper is not to seek the concrete manifestation of Lao-Tze's philosophy in Brodsky's poetry, but to analyze the commonalities and differences in Brodsky's poetry works and Lao-Tze's *Tao Te Ching* from the perspectives of philosophy and art, and to provide a reference for the development of current literature and philosophy.

II. THE ATTENTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF TAO TE CHING IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE AT THE TURN OF THE XX - XXI CENTURIES

As a Russian postmodernist poet in the second half of the twentieth century and A. Akhmatova's proud student, Brodsky's interest in Lao-Tze's philosophy was inseparable from the inheritance of the Silver Age's tradition, at first. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia was undergoing fundamental changes, many Russian philosophers, writers, and artists were attracted to the study of the inner nature of the world and man. In accordance with the popularity of existentialism, mysticism and dialectical materialism, many Russian intellectuals, such as L. Tolstoy, Andrey Bely, K. Balmont, A. Akhmatova, M. Voloshin realized the positive sense of Eastern culture, especially Chinese philosophy - Taoism.

As a rule, Taoism, first of all, is famous for the unity of opposites - Yin and Yang, which reveals Lao-Tze's idea about the essence of Taoism. To realize Tao, person must follow the principle of "naturalness". Lao-Tze appreciated thinking on aesthetics while not on ethics. The real meaning of Lao-Tze's “non-action” is that life itself has subjectivity. Therefore, *Tao Te Ching* begins with a discussion of Tao - the essence of all beings. Because of the incomprehensibility of the world, Lao-Tze treated everything with dialectics; because of the over-modification of the human world, Lao-Tze advocated the use of “reverse” methods to return to nature.

A. Interpretation of the Lao-Tze's Philosophy by L. Tolstoy and Andrey Belys

L. Tolstoy believed that the focus of the *Tao Te Ching* was on how to achieve the transformation from physical to spiritual [1]. Especially in the dialectic of Lao-Tze, Tolstoy found the basis of his worldview - we could not treat

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violence with violence. In combination with the view of Lao-Tze "the weakest beat the most powerful". [2] Tolstoy emphasized that non-resistance and non-violence were the ways to win spiritual victory. Unlike L. Tolstoy, Andrei Bely focused more on the interpretation of existence and nothingness in Lao-Tze's philosophy. He identified the "nothingness" in the *Tao Te Ching* with the "nihilism" in the literary genre of symbolism.

B. K. Balmont and M. Voloshin's opinion on the Philosophy of Lao-Tze

Lao-Tze's philosophy is also reflected in the poem *Great Nothing* (1900) by Konstantin Balmont. According to the thought of Taoism: everything is in motion, everything is ephemeral, K. Balmont wrote: "Not able to understand the nothingness in which you and I are so insignificant" [3]. The poet also remarked that, unlike European Christianity, where there was an intermediary between God and man - prayer, the Chinese Taoism never needs anything other than human themselves. The realization of "Tao" means that a person must get rid of cumbersome and rigid forms. M. Voloshin's appreciation of Lao-Tze's philosophy was expressed as a concern for style "Fengliu" - "romantic" in the poetry of Li Bai (701-762) [4]. In short, "Fengliu" by Li Bai is distinguished by exceptional talent, preservation of individuality, not clinging to the old rules, which is the inheritance and development from the philosophy about "nature" and "freedom" by Lao-Tze and Chuang Tzu.

III. LAO-TZE'S PHILOSOPHY AND J. BRODSKY'S LIFE

The image of China attracted J. Brodsky from childhood, starting with his father's stories about China [5]. Brodsky's father had been to Shanghai from Romania during his World War II service. Brodsky wrote: "In what would be there war games in China, it may be involved, our little closet, our cupboards and wall greatly benefited from this. All works of art, decorate them, we were of Chinese origin: cork with watercolor paintings, samurai swords, small silk screens. Topsy fishermen were the last from the bustling crowds of porcelain figurines ..." [6]. The poet spent his childhood among these gadgets from China. The interesting thing is that these things themselves contain Taoist thoughts, to a certain extent, such as the image of a fisherman with a drunkenness: the meaning of drunkenness is not in wine, but in the beautiful and free wide nature; the use of ink painting in black and white colors, etc. Under such a cultural atmosphere, Brodsky dreamed of entering the oriental land of China as his father. In his youth, the poet even stopped at the border of China for a while [7].

Suggested by his friends who pursued Sinology, Brodsky tried to translate Chinese poetry. The interest in Classical Chinese Poetry was so strong that in the last years of his life Brodsky began to take Chinese lessons [5]. Brodsky's favorite Chinese poets are Li Bai and Wang Wei (701-761). On the one hand, from poetry by Li Bai Brodsky saw the same dream as his- to break free from the shackles. And from Wang Wei, the poet understands life philosophy

as "purity," "silence," and "limit". On the other hand, Taoist philosophy had deeply influenced the poetry creation of Li Bai and Wang Wei. The pursuit of freedom revealed in the words of Li Bai was first reflected in the inheritance of the philosophy of Taoism. The thinker Chuang Tzu once mentioned a person's true happiness — freedom. He took the image of a fish as an example: rather than leave them to moisten each other with their damp and spittle it would be far better to let them forget themselves in their native rivers and lakes. Brodsky also chose this image for the mediocre determination of ideal freedom: "Only fish in the seas know the price of freedom; but their silence forces us, as it were, to create our own labels and clauses" [8].

It should be mentioned that the impact of these Chinese poets on Brodsky obviously could not be put on a par with Russian or European poets, like A. Pushkin, A. Akhmatova, the Order, Eliot, etc. However, Chinese classical poems indeed influenced Brodsky's creation, such as the birth of the Chinese group poem *A Brief History of the Ming Dynasty* [8]. Although Chinese classical poetry differs greatly from Western postmodernist poetry, *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tze is like a bond, which ingeniously links Chinese ancient poetry with Brodsky's poetry. Brodsky appreciated *Tao Te Ching*. Vladimir Bondarenko mentioned that when they met at Brodsky's house, Brodsky told himself about Eastern philosophy, about the *Tao Te Ching*, quoted the eternal truths of Lao-Tze. His friend, the famous Chinese scientist A. Tatiana, wrote: "For the sake of recreation we visited various New York coffee shops and he would consult with others about words from *Tao Te Ching*" [7].

IV. THE CONCEPT OF POETICS OF SPACE AND TIME IN THE WORKS OF LAO-TZE AND J. BRODSKY

A. Subject of Superiority over Space and Time

Lao-Tze considered acquaintance with space and time as a search for the source and the law of motion of all beings. Noticing the ephemeral in eternal space (heaven and earth), Lao-Tze emphasized the action of Tao, which is independent from space and time: "the Tao stands alone and does not change, operates everywhere and has no obstacles" [2]. By revealing the existence of Tao, man overcomes the emptiness of relative meaning and achieves eternal existence.

If from the view of Lao-Tze - Tao stands above space and time, then J. Brodsky valued poetry as the highest existence. Poetry is superiority over time, and time is superiority over space. Such an idea will be found in the poem *The Lullaby of the Cod Cape*: Time is greater than space. Space is a subject. Time, in essence, is thought [8]; from great things are the words of the language [8]. Considering poetry as the most powerful instrument, Brodsky believed that poetry complemented emptiness both in culture and in time. Poetry is like a delicious bread for the hunger time and civilization.

Although the span of poetry seems to have begun with the title and ended until the last autograph, the spirit of

poetry is forever transmitted. The existence of Tao manifests itself in the same way. Having universality, Tao has its own death in personality. However, whether in the "Tao" by Lao-Tze or Brodsky's poetry, conflict is always indispensable to both philosophy and art.

B. *Physical Qualities of Space*

The philosophy of Lao-Tze and Brodsky's poetry are equally distinguished by their nested structure. Emphasizing the embedding of space, Lao-Tze did not forget coexistence: "There are four great ones in the universe, and man is among the four. Man follows the laws of the land. Earth follows the laws of heaven. Heaven follows the laws of Tao, and Tao follows itself" [2]. Here the growing influence ends with the infinity of Tao. In contrast, Brodsky's nested structure is based on daily life and geospatial perception, and in most cases appears in metaphorical form. The most obvious metaphorical nesting is in the first section of his group poem *The Lament of Rome*. Reading it, it is not difficult to notice that one of the elements of a private apartment is mahogany furniture. The private apartment exists as a part of Rome city. And Rome exists as one area of the world. At the same time, the sculpture which is desperately placed in the dwellings is forgotten by the time after condensing the opposite poles - birth and death.

Regarding the pursuit of the spatial direction of "up" or "down", Lao-Tze and Brodsky made the opposite choice. In the book of *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tze repeatedly used the image "river" and "sea" as examples to emphasize the practical significance of being good at "living down". Lao Tzu and Brodsky's pursuit of "up" and "down" is not a geometric relationship of superficial meaning, but a spatial requirement of a spiritual level. Lao-Tze stressed that strong things win by modesty, it is to warn people to be humble and not to provoke an aggressive war by fame and fortune. Only by abandoning too much desire can people achieve spiritual peace and harmony, achieve the so-called "eternal". Under the influence of metaphysics and Christian culture, Brodsky gave the lofty spiritual significance of "upward". For example, in the long poem *The Great Lamentation of John Dunn* [8], Brodsky compared the deceased John Dunn as a sleeping bird, which was flying to the sky in its dream. In addition, in the face of imagery "plain" and imagery "hill", Brodsky chose to give the latter the meaning of existence. Imagery plain is like simple, magnified space and exaggerated emotions for Brodsky; imagery hill highlights the complexity and height of space. Brodsky's pursuit of "upward" is also reflected in the respect of Urania, the astronomical goddess of the Muse. The poetry collection *Urania* shows the emptiness and loneliness of the poet, and expresses the poet's desire to transcend the secular world and explore the origin of life.

C. *Poetics of Time*

The concept of Lao-Tze about time is born in the contrast between the long-lasting heaven, earth, and the short life of a person. Such concept of eternity is similar to the human eternity from the perspective of a mosquito

depicted by Brodsky. Based on Tao, Lao-Tze only mentioned two points about the concept of time: first of all, the fluidity of time; secondly, death is an inescapable destination. In the recognition of these two points, Brodsky and Lao-Tze shared a similar view. In Brodsky's poetry, time is the ocean, the river, and death is the measure of time. As he wrote in *The End of a Beautiful Era*: "Time is shaped by death; it is needed for the flesh and other things; the attributes are found in sour vegetables" [8]. Here it is necessary to dwell on the fact that the material transience gives the meaning of the eternity of ideology. Despite the fact that Brodsky did not identify death with a cruel judgment, the pessimism of existential philosophy made him always have a negative attitude toward death. This fear of death is manifested in the poet's early poetry. In *The Great Lamentation of John Dunn*, the poet wrote: "Whether these turbulent turns of the mill's grindstone, it is milled in this world. The same rough valley. Because even though our lives can be shared, who in the world will share our death." [8] However, the poet finally realized that Lao-Tze's so-called life is like dust, and its essence is the philosophy of the void. Those who care about their lives but die prematurely, because their desire for life is too strong to be peaceful. Thus, Brodsky wrote: "For dust might be the flesh and blood" [8].

D. *Loneliness Born in Space and Time*

The natural of the life by Lao-Tze and Brodsky is loneliness. Such loneliness is reflected in Brodsky's metaphor: "You see: life, it's like your island. / And you met the ocean: only darkness surround you, only darkness and howl" [8]. In front of the vast ocean, the island (protagonist) suffers from the loneliness of dual space: inner loneliness and the loneliness of the outside world. With this expansion of loneliness, the two spaces blend with each other until they are connected to the universe, becoming a space that is invisible but envelops people. Under the pressure of endless loneliness, every day is equal to a life. Time is like the sea, and it is destined to face the loneliness of life. "Loneliness teaches the essence of things, for the essence of them is the same loneliness" [8]. In contrast to the tragic gaze of Brodsky, Lao-Tze considered loneliness as an ideal state of human existence: "Let the neighboring states look at each other, listen to each other's roosters crowing and dogs barking, and people do not visit each other until their later life and death" [2]. Lao-Tze's loneliness is the "ideal country" in the human mind, the source of Utopia. It emphasizes the spiritual world that space and time cannot affect. It will be implemented only in a society with a high level of cultural development. The loneliness promoted by Lao-Tze represents the highest combination of spirit and mind.

V. CONFLICTS - THE KEY LINK BETWEEN THE TWO WORKS

The conflict involves not only the opposite poles, but also a close connection. For the interpretation of conflict, philosophy by Lao-Tze is prone to Hegel's dialectics, and Brodsky's poetry tends to Kant's antinomy. However, Lao-

Tze's wisdom is far above contradictory dialectics. Philosophy by Lao-Tze does not fall into the unilateral extremes caused by rational logic like the understanding about dialectic by Kant. Realizing the existence of unsolvable contradictions (antinomy), Lao-Tze hoped to pull people back from the bigotry to the root of all things. Therefore, Lao-Tze's philosophy also contains the factors of antinomy. This is why Brodsky resonated when reading the *Tao Te Ching*. Different from Lao-Tze's universal philosophy, the antinomy of Brodsky's poetry shows his uniqueness of literature and art. In the poem *Chair* [8], Brodsky raised the relationship between nails and chairs to the antinomy of Jesus and suffering (fixed to the cross); in the poem *Commemorating Anna Akhmatova's Hundred Years* the poet used words to link the two opposites - death with life. Whether it is the calm and concealed philosophy by Lao-Tze, or the slightly sad and helpless poetry by Brodsky, it is not to focus on the discrimination of right and wrong, but to show people the origin of all things in the world.

A. *The Incomprehensibility of the World*

To explore the subject of conflict in works by Lao-Tze and Brodsky, we must first focus on the knowability of the world. Obviously, both Lao-Tze and Brodsky recognized the integrity of the world, the infinity of nature, and the limitation of human cognition. This finiteness reveals the unpredictability of the loopholes and objective laws which must exist in human logical thinking. Therefore, both Lao-Tze and Brodsky had a position against anthropocentrism. Lao-Tze believed that although people had great initiative, they were only a part of the world. They are not enough to compare with the world, and it is even more impossible to acquire equivalent position like the Tao. Agnosticism to the world of Brodsky is obviously influenced by Heidegger's existential philosophy: the world is not an object that needs rational analysis, and the world has an unconstrained nature. Brodsky uses the image "island" to describe the human condition, which implies the incomprehensibility of the world outside the island. In addition, absolute belief in language of Brodsky is also based on the ignorance of the world. Brodsky believed the words by Heidegger: "Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells" [9].

B. *Opposite but Dependent Two Levels*

1) *Life and death*. For the relationship between life and death, Lao-Tze interpreted it as "born to death" and "death without death" [2]. The former emphasizes that "life" means "death", and "death" is actually "life", which is the return of life. The latter reveals that the essence of "life" is the realization of the Tao and the spirit lasts forever. Similarly, the lyrical protagonist of poetry by Brodsky pursues the hills, Urania, etc., both as a question of the highest spiritual level of life and as a close to death.

2) *Light and shadow*. "Light" and "shadow" appear as "Yang" and "Yin" in philosophy of Lao-Tze. In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tze said: "All things are both Yin and Yang,

there is a universality of contradictions" [2]. The verb "Fu" emphasizes two meanings: relying on and against. In other words, Lao-Tze revealed the inevitability and relatively negative effects of the existence of "Yin". The "Yin" and "Yang" in the *Tao Te Ching* actually proceed from the negative and positive in the traditional sense, and summarize all the material and ideology in the world. "Yin" is evil, illusory, weak, death; "Yang" is good, real, strong, life. They depend on each other and transform from each other. The "light" and "shadow" in poetry of Brodsky firstly come from a relatively specific material world: "light" is originated from candles, crystal chandeliers and sun; "shadows" is originated from the interaction between light and space. This sense of consciousness then rises to the emotional and philosophical level, as he evoked in *The Lament of Rome*: "The light is harvested more than it is planted; the object can hide, but it cannot hide from the shadow" [8]. Whether in the short poem *Life, in the Light of Dispelling* or the long poem *I am sitting in the shadows*, Brodsky's "light" can never escape the shackles of "shadow". Although poet realizes the inevitability of the existence of "shadow", he also fall into the negative influence of his existence.

3) *Existence and nothingness*. Both Lao-Tze and Brodsky believed that nothingness was the body of all things, nothingness and existence coexist at the same time. The "nothingness" of philosophy by Lao-Tze is closely related to the fleeting and unpredictable things in the world. The "nothingness" of poetry by Brodsky is reflected in the meaninglessness of the distinction between the past, the present and the future, the equal status and transformation of man and material, the lack of relativity between good and evil, chaos and order. In the poem *Cafe* [8], the existence of everything - the lyrical protagonist or the whole human being, the eucalyptus or any tree, lost its targeted value and were shrouded in a huge void without time or space. In the poem *The Water of the Cup* [8], Brodsky combined the destiny of the water in the cup with that of the lyrical hero.

VI. CONCLUSION

The exploration for time and space, life and death, existence and nothingness of *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tze and poetry by J. Brodsky, reflects the unremitting efforts of mankind for the origin of life and spiritual endurance for two thousand years. The similarities and differences in philosophy and art between the two, especially the adoption and development of the factors of antinomy in Lao-Tze's philosophy in Brodsky's poetry, not only show the nationality and universality of culture, but also give birth to a new vision and a new realm for literary creation.

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