

An Ethical Rupture: Brodsky's Legacy and the Politics of Reading in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract:

In an era of sharpening polarization, critics need methods beyond “defense” versus “condemnation” when confronting works that fuse aesthetic power with ethical harm. Focusing on the Anglophone reception of Joseph Brodsky after the full-scale outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war (2022), this article theorizes An Ethic of Agonistic Care. Synthesizing Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic politics and bell hooks’s ethics of love, the framework treats conflict as inescapable yet channels it toward reparative dialogue and responsibility. It is operationalized as a five-step protocol for ethical reading: positional examination, emotional diagnosis, agonistic engagement, reparative re-reading, and critical re-contextualization. Close readings of Brodsky (poetry, essays) and comparative cases from post-socialist and contemporary geopolitical literatures demonstrate the approach’s transferability and limits, showing how it avoids both facile decanonization and aesthetic exceptionalism. The article argues that An Ethic of Agonistic Care supplies a rigorous, practicable method for addressing controversial cultural legacies and re-anchors “respect” and “love” as scholarly virtues in post–Cold War cross-cultural understanding, offering a pedagogical pathway for critical civic education.

Keywords: Joseph Brodsky, ethical reading, agonistic care, cross-cultural critique, canonical reassessment, post-Soviet literature, civic education

1. Introduction

When history re-examines the hidden dimensions of literary classics, what ethical responsibilities do readers and critics face? The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war brought this dilemma into sharp focus through the case of Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), the 1987 Nobel Prize laureate and Russian-born American poet. His “foolish anti-Ukrainian poem” (*Yoteykayte* 2022) “On Ukrainian Independence,”¹ written after Ukraine declared independence in December 1991, was reactivated and went viral following the war’s outbreak. This poem rapidly became the center of a polarized interpretive conflict in the English-speaking world’s public sphere. On one hand, as perceived by observers in the English-speaking world through reports and commentary, some Russian nationalists appropriated it as a cultural manifesto supporting action against Ukraine (*Klishin* 2022); on the other hand, the harsh

condemnation from numerous Ukrainian intellectuals, along with Western critics' identification of its Russian chauvinism, constituted a more mainstream narrative in the English-speaking world (Khersonsky et al. 2022; *Margolis* 2022; Bates 2022). The complexity of this controversy stems from the internal contradictions of Brodsky's identity: he was both a faithful adherent to Russian cultural empire and a victim of the Soviet political empire.

Faced with a complex legacy like Brodsky's, neither complete boycotting nor simple separation of "art" from "artist" proves adequate. The former abandons intellectual responsibility; the latter ignores the intrinsic connection between his aesthetic beliefs and ethical blind spots. This paper proposes "An Ethic of Agonistic Care"—a more resilient and responsible critical methodology.

This framework synthesizes Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial critique, Chantal Mouffe's political theory, and bell hooks' (2004) "love ethics," achieving a dialectical unity of "struggle" and "care": maintaining care within conflict, persisting in struggle within care. Traditional care ethics appears powerless when confronting structural value conflicts, while purely agonistic theory lacks reparative goals. This methodology provides an ethical framework for handling complex cultural legacies that can neither be fully embraced nor easily discarded.

To make this theory operationally viable, the paper refines it into a "five-step protocol for ethical reading," which unfolds sequentially: Chapter Two traces the historical trajectory of the Brodsky controversy from its 2014 dormancy to its 2022 explosion; Chapter Three constructs the theoretical framework and demonstrates the model's effectiveness through a case study of "Watermark"; Chapter Four applies the model to other post-socialist writers and contemporary geopolitical conflicts, demonstrating its broader applicability.

It is particularly important to note that this study limits its analytical scope to the English-speaking world, which both remains faithful to the core phenomenon and serves as a crucial methodological strategy. The interpretive "rupture" we examine—its eruption and fermentation—occurred primarily within English academic circles and public discourse. Therefore, this focus not only ensures analytical precision but also treats the English-speaking world's "reception" itself as an analytical object, examining how a controversy originating in Eastern Europe was translated, reconstructed, and transformed by the centers of global knowledge production, thereby revealing the hidden power dynamics in contemporary cross-cultural dialogue.

2. The Return of The Repressed: Poetry, War, and The Interpretive Rupture of 2022

The reception history of Brodsky's "On Ukrainian Independence" underwent a significant rupture: from its archival dormancy within professional circles in 2014 to its viral dissemination and discursive transformation catalyzed by the 2022 war. This controversy did not lead to simple "boycott" but triggered multiple responses ranging from mainstream media's strategic silence to academic interpretive contests, ultimately achieving "critical re-contextualization"—Brodsky's legacy was reshaped as a case study for exploring the complex relationships between empire, dissidence, and nationalism.

2.1 Dormancy: A Dormant Archive (2014-2022)

Western serious attention to Brodsky's "On Ukrainian Independence" began after the 2014 Crimean crisis (Schlund 2023, 166), but this phase was characterized not by open debate storms but rather by a quiet "archival confirmation" and dormancy of evidence within professional domains. Discussions were highly concentrated in academic networks such as conferences of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) and specialized journals like *Scripta Historica*, while mainstream news media and major poetry magazines were notably absent. Key participants during this period, such as Olga Bertelsen (2015) and other Slavic studies scholars, focused their analyses primarily on "imperial consciousness," maintaining a critical but analytically rigorous tone.

The poem's potential controversy was already known to the author himself and his estate managers. Brodsky had confessed before a 1994 reading that "I'm taking a risk by doing this."² As early as 2011, his literary estate executor Ann Kjellberg had developed a preemptive defense strategy in response to Keith Gessen's article published in *The New Yorker* on May 23,³ emphasizing that the poem came from "unauthorized sources" and should not be viewed as the author's "definitive position," placing it within the specific historical context of Ukraine's 1992 attempt to control former Soviet nuclear arsenals (Gessen 2011).

In April 2015, Boris Vladimirovsky posted on Facebook video evidence of Brodsky reciting this poem at the Palo Alto Jewish Community Center on October 30, 1992,⁴ finally resolving questions about authorial authenticity and completing the text's "archival confirmation." However, the video's emergence did not immediately trigger widespread public or academic debate in the English-speaking world; discussions remained largely confined to Slavic studies professional circles, Russian émigré communities, and Ukrainian intellectual circles.

This "contained" state of discourse resulted from multiple structural factors. First, under the prevailing political context, Western observers generally viewed the Crimean crisis as a regional conflict, lacking widespread recognition of it as an existential threat to the entire European order. Therefore, a deceased poet's problematic poem lacked sufficient news value to shake the dominant narrative of Brodsky as a dissident hero. Second, Brodsky's canonical status as Nobel laureate and anti-Soviet icon created enormous interpretive inertia; revising this grand narrative required more powerful political momentum. Finally, despite video evidence, there was no catalyzing event capable of rapidly placing it on the agenda. Thus, this poem and its evidence resembled an archive awaiting crisis, dormant in the public sphere until a more dramatic historical moment could awaken it.

2.2 Textual Fuel: The Poem's Rhetorical Strategies and Ideological Tensions

If the 2014 discussions were dormant, the full outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, provided unprecedented political urgency for this dormant archive, ultimately igniting an interpretive explosion. The core fuel of this explosion was the enormous interpretive tension and historical complexity possessed by "On Ukrainian Independence" itself. The poem opens with a condescending ironic stance, examining Ukrainian independence within the coordinate system of Russian imperial rise:

Dear Charles the Twelfth, the Battle of Poltava,
thank God, was lost.
.....like one with a uvular 'r' would say,
"Time will show who's Kuzma's mother," ruins
with a Little Russian twang, posthumously pleased bones.⁵

Here Brodsky juxtaposes the 1709 Battle of Poltava, Lenin's accent ("one with a uvular 'r'"), and Khrushchev's famous saying ("Kuzma's mother"), reconstructing memory of the "Holodomor" through a paradoxical image—"posthumously pleased bones with a Little Russian twang." He then extends Chernobyl's trauma from Ukraine to Belarus through an "incorrect" flag reference: "isotope-corroded / green—blooming flag," which better matches Belarus's then red-over-green flag design. This complex textual strategy—invoking imperial history while deeply critiquing the entire Soviet period's governance failures, mixed with contempt for Ukrainian national identity (such as using the derogatory term "khokhol")—made it a perfect battlefield for fierce interpretive contestation in 2022's context, readable both as imperialist arrogance and as shared reflection on Soviet tyranny.

2.3 Eruption and Contestation: 2022's Discursive Rupture and Counter-forces

After the war's outbreak, figures like historian and policy analyst Kamil Galeev, who commanded massive influence on Twitter (X), served as crucial nodes translating complex Eastern European emotions for English audiences, rediscovering and amplifying this poem's significance. They quickly positioned it as an important cultural specimen for analyzing "Russian imperial mentality," with their analyses spreading rapidly across social media.⁶ This immediate, politically reactive discussion drove enormous attention traffic, migrating discourse platforms from academic circles to specialized websites like *Marginal Revolution and Politarena*, ultimately spreading to academic platforms like *Review of Democracy*.

Additionally, the discourse's core underwent radical transformation: from 2014's "literary criticism" to 2022's "moral condemnation" and systematic postcolonial analysis; analytical keywords escalated from "imperial consciousness" to "imperialism," "colonialism," and "chauvinism" (Omolesky 2022; Thompson 2022; Desnitsky 2023; Mitchell-Fox 2024).

However, this social media-driven eruption inevitably triggered responses from establishment forces, forming a complex "interpretive contest." The most notable phenomenon was the "strategic silence" of top cultural media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.⁷ Furthermore, the Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund quickly issued a statement condemning the invasion in February 2022, updating it again on March 11 to announce aid for Ukrainian writers and artists, while remaining silent about the controversial poem itself⁸—a sophisticated form of "legacy laundering."

Simultaneously, more intellectually challenging "counter-forces" emerged—attempts to complicate Brodsky's position through reinterpretation. A prominent example comes from scholar Marat Grinberg's 2024 analysis. Grinberg argued that Brodsky's core problem lay in placing aesthetics above nationalism and politics, with his position stemming from profound "cultural conservatism

and elitism” rather than simple political imperialism (Grinberg 2024, 189-194). This interpretive strategy rejected simple moral condemnation, representing intellectual efforts within English academia to preserve canonical complexity.

2.4 Effects and Reshaping: Toward “Critical Re-contextualization”

The ultimate effect of discursive contestation was not a simple “decanonization” conclusion but rather an ongoing, more profound and lasting “critical re-contextualization.” Compelling evidence for this ongoing “critical re-contextualization” comes from a continuously evolving undergraduate summer course at Hunter College, City University of New York—“*Tamizdat: Contraband Literature From The USSR And Eastern Europe*.” The course’s design and its evolution from 2024 to 2025 clearly demonstrates how academia systematically reconstructs the legacy of controversial figures like Brodsky within teaching practice.

Its 2024 syllabus already deliberately deconstructed traditional canonization models through careful course design. It positioned Brodsky alongside Poland’s Miłosz and Lithuania’s Venclova as a “trio,”—not coincidentally, but to extract him from singular Russian national poet identity and place him within a broader, multinational dialogue about empire and dissidence. Simultaneously, the course situated “tamizdat” (underground publications) within a grand historical continuum extending from 19th-century Russian Empire to contemporary Putin’s rule, constructing a cross-temporal, cross-cultural analytical framework by introducing Western writers like Orwell as reference points.

This pedagogical strategy became more explicit and radical in the version planned for 2025 in Riga, Latvia. The course description not only upgraded its focus to “the colonial history of the Baltic states and their literary relationship with Russia,” completely placing it under postcolonial criticism’s purview,⁹ but its teaching content directly echoed current geopolitical realities—the course explicitly connected historical “tamizdat” phenomena with “‘tamizdat’ publishing institutions like Meduza and Babel after 2014.”

This series of incontrovertible evidence demonstrates that Brodsky’s “stains” did not lead to his abandonment by academia. On the contrary, these “stains” themselves enabled him to acquire deeper interpretive value in new cross-cultural studies and contemporary political analysis contexts. He is no longer merely a literary icon but has been transformed into an indispensable, tension-filled key textual resource for understanding the complex relationships of “empire, dissidence, exile, and censorship” across two centuries from Tsarist Russia to Putin’s era.

Meanwhile, the publishing world’s impact from this controversy remains inconclusive, constituting a gap in available data. In the future, how any new authoritative collected edition’s introduction handles this controversy will undoubtedly serve as an important barometer for measuring the evolution of his canonical status. In summary, Brodsky’s legacy has not perished; it is being controversially rewritten. This debate surrounding a single poem ultimately demonstrates how cultural classics are continuously renegotiated, utilized, and endowed with new meaning in a rapidly changing world.

3. The Reader's Burden: Forging an Ethics of Reading in The Wake of Rupture

The interpretive “rupture” revealed in Chapter Two not only reshaped Joseph Brodsky’s literary legacy but also profoundly destabilized the relationship between readers and his texts, marking the end of stable interpretive subjectivity. Readers—especially those who once viewed him as a hero of resistance—face a profound ethical and emotional dilemma. This torn contract, sense of betrayal, and irreconcilable dissonance together constitute “the reader’s burden.” Faced with this now-tainted literary legacy, what should we do? This chapter aims to answer this question, exploring a path toward more responsible ethical reading that moves beyond simple praise or condemnation.

3.1 Ruptured Contracts: The Reader's Emotional and Ethical Predicament

The ethical and emotional predicament triggered by Brodsky’s legacy is not an abstract product of theoretical speculation but a widespread, painful, and concretely observable cultural phenomenon in the English-speaking world. From personal blog confessions to serious academic journal reflections to practical challenges in teaching practice, this predicament manifests in various forms throughout the English-speaking world’s literary public sphere.

This pervasive sense of disillusionment first erupted in unfiltered form in digital public squares. In Reddit’s literary discussion forum “r/AskLiteraryStudies,” one reader admitted that after 2022, he found Brodsky’s works particularly “difficult to approach these days are Nabokov and Brodsky, both with rather vicious anti-Ukrainian sentiments.”¹⁰ This seemingly bland expression—“difficult to approach”—actually precisely captures a dual emotional and intellectual barrier: the chasm between former reverence for a resistance hero and current moral repugnance toward his imperialist sentiments has become insurmountable. Another reader compared this shock to “rediscovering Ezra Pound’s cantos in praise of Mussolini,”¹¹ a comparison marking the reader’s forced repositioning within their own literary map, moving a former hero to a new location adjacent to figures like Pound—combining genius with evil through fascist sympathies.

However, when this personal-level emotional upheaval enters public discourse, it acquires a more complex and disturbing political dimension. Critics discovered they must bear not only personal moral disillusionment but also confront a real-time cultural and political reality: Brodsky’s literary legacy was being systematically “weaponized,” becoming a core tool in the Russian state discourse machine’s cultural legitimization of its military actions in Ukraine (“have been weaponized and are used to legitimize the illegal actions of the Russian government in Ukraine”) (Noubel 2022).

The most symbolic case comes from the careful orchestration by Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russian state broadcasting company RT and state media group “Russia Today” (Rossiya Segodnya). She chose February 24, 2023—the politically sensitive first anniversary of the invasion—to post both graphic and recitation video versions of the poem on Twitter and Russian social media platform VK under the title “Joseph Brodsky ‘On the Independence of Ukraine,’”¹² directly embedding this literary text into that day’s official propaganda discourse production chain.

For Brodsky readers in the English-speaking world, this appropriation constituted a dual

cultural shock: they had to endure not only the personal pain of discovering their author's ethical stains but also witness their once-cherished literary work being transformed in real-time into a cultural justification tool for actual political violence. As many observers sharply revealed, this event exposed a structural truth long obscured by Western liberal narratives: "Ukrainians have long noted that Russian liberalism ends at the Ukrainian border" (Tsurkan 2022)—that Russian intellectuals' anti-authoritarian positions often coexist with their imperialist cultural unconscious, forming a profound historical paradox.

Faced with this public-level ethical crisis, academia found itself in an unprecedented state of professional conflict. The dual identity of intellectuals—as individual citizens with moral positions and as professional scholars bearing objective analytical responsibilities—created irreconcilable internal tension. Andrey Desnitsky, in a 2023 reflective article, captured this professional and ethical torn state with painful honesty: as a conscientious modern person, he could not avoid the moral judgment that this poem appears "completely unacceptable" in the current historical context; however, as a research scholar bearing academic responsibility, his professional training demanded that he move beyond simple value judgments to "analyze and explain" the text's complex historical causes and cultural logic (Desnitsky 2023, 609).

This dual burden of scholars reveals a significant epistemological predicament facing contemporary humanities: when academic objectivity requirements fundamentally conflict with ethical position commitments, what principles should intellectuals follow to balance these legitimate demands? The institutional consequences of this predicament have profoundly affected all aspects of academic production. In publishing, a work hailed as "most significant book devoted to him in the last 25 years" had to explicitly acknowledge in its 2024 introduction the fundamental impact of 2022 geopolitical events on Brodsky studies paradigms: "changes have... been especially evident since the events of February 2022... several discussions of Brodsky's poem on Ukrainian independence" (Andrew et al. 2024, 1). In teaching, the pressure for reassessment is more direct and urgent. Andrea Kokobobo (2022) representatively proposed that under current historical circumstances, Russian literature pedagogy should "interrogate Russia's imperial mission in how we present Russian culture to students" and must systematically reintroduce voices long "erased" by Russian-centric narratives—particularly Ukrainian, Belarusian, and other post-Soviet countries' cultural perspectives—into the core of classroom discussion. This call for pedagogical paradigm reform marks "the reader's burden" transforming from purely personal emotional experience and moral distress into collective intellectual responsibility that the entire Slavic studies discipline must bear.

These widespread personal accounts, public discussions, and academic reflections point toward a deep psychological and ethical phenomenon that can be systematically theorized. This phenomenon's starting point stems from an "ethical pact" being retroactively torn (Small 2020). This contract was built on Brodsky's identity as a victim of the Soviet empire, with readers universally presupposing an anti-totalitarian ethical position when approaching his texts. However, the imperialist ideology exposed by "On Ukrainian Independence" fundamentally violated this contract, leading to

its retroactive destruction by historical information. At the psychological level, this contract's tearing triggers a traumatic "Parasocial Breakup" (PSB), inducing real grief reactions including loneliness, sadness, disappointment, and anger (Cohen 2004). This intense emotional response manifests in the reading experience as profound affective dissonance—the simultaneous existence of pure aesthetic pleasure from Brodsky's poetic language and moral disgust toward his ethical defects. This creates an irreconcilable tension that forces the reader into complex "cognitive coping strategies" to manage the conflict between aesthetic appreciation and ethical judgment (Korsmeyer 2011, 8).

3.2 Theoretical Tensions and Two Temptations: Between "Struggle" and "Care"

The ethical and emotional burden readers bear due to Brodsky's legacy is not an isolated individual case but a collective cultural experience. This experience forces critics to turn to theoretical dimensions, seeking analytical frameworks sufficient to respond to complexity. However, in integrating theoretical resources, we must confront internal tensions. Chantal Mouffe (2013) and bell hooks (2004) respectively represent two seemingly opposed orientations: the former emphasizes conflict's insolubility, viewing "struggle" as democracy's normal state; the latter centers on "love ethics," combining critique with repair, justice with care, striving to achieve healing in interpersonal and group relations. The two differ ontologically and teleologically: Mouffe insists "irresolvable conflict" is politics' background color, while hooks advocates "transformative care" can provide liberating direction.

This difference is not an obstacle but the starting point of theoretical synthesis. Without the "struggle" dimension, care would degenerate into hollow moral rhetoric, even becoming unconscious reproduction of power structures; without the "care" dimension, struggle might slide toward nihilism, degenerating into endless hostility. Precisely in this dialectical mutual constraint, "An Ethic of Agonistic Care" establishes its foundation: conflict is inevitable, but conflict must lead toward care and responsibility; critique is indispensable, but critique must aim at liberation and growth.

However, when facing Brodsky's legacy, readers and academia often choose two seemingly simple paths: one is complete boycott, canceling author and work, expelling texts from the canonical temple. This "boycott impulse" can bring immediate moral satisfaction, but it evades responsibility for dialogue with complex history. The other is complete separation, dividing Brodsky's artistic achievements from his ethical positions, continuing the "author is dead" critical tradition. But in Brodsky's case, imperialist ideology is not external impurity but a component of his poetics itself: he suffered from Soviet authoritarianism while remaining blind to his obsession with Russian linguistic empire. Boycott and separation therefore cannot adequately handle Brodsky's complexity. Thus, we must open a "third way," a reading practice that simultaneously encompasses struggle and care.

3.3 Forging the Third Way: Ethical Reading as Dialogue and Self-Examination

The so-called "third way" is forged in this study into a "five-step protocol for ethical reading." It is not an external technical checklist but a critical framework generated from the dialectics of

“Agonistic care.” Reading here is understood as an active, responsible practice that must both reveal contradictions and seek possibilities for understanding and repair within contradiction.

First is positional examination. Any cross-cultural interpretation is never “transparent”: interpreters’ historical positions, disciplinary training, and ideological backgrounds unconsciously shape reading directions. Postcolonial critique (Spivak 1988) continuously reminds us to reflect on “complicitous agency”: do imaginations of “exile poet”/“dissident” carry Cold War context residues? Does aesthetic faith in “Russian poetics” naturally occupy value heights? Without this reflexive starting point, subsequent ethical judgments easily circulate within old orders.

Second is emotional diagnosis. Reader response theory (Iser 1978) demonstrates that meaning generates in text-reader interaction; the disillusionment, shame, anger, and loss presented in 3.1 are not “inappropriate interference” but components of “textual effects.” Naming and analyzing such intense feelings both avoids “retaliatory reading” shortcuts and prevents “defensive advocacy” self-anesthesia, transforming traumatic experience into critical cognitive resources. In other words, diagnosis doesn’t cool down but converts thermal energy into power that can drive argumentation.

Third is agonistic engagement. At this stage, criticism manifests and organizes conflict through oppositional close reading: bringing textual imperial aesthetics, other-deprecation, and historical erasure back to the scene, breaking texts’ monologic nature through evidence juxtaposition and polyphonic reading. This is the practical level of Mouffe’s “channeling passion toward democratic design”: conflict is not to be smoothed over but institutionalized as argumentative tension, allowing different positions to “appear as adversaries rather than enemies.” Regarding Brodsky, rereading controversial texts like “On Ukrainian Independence” requires letting Ukrainian/Eastern European readers’ and scholars’ voices enter the same interpretive space; regarding his essay “Watermark,” aesthetic worship of “Venetian beauty” must be juxtaposed with “ethical costs of imperial nostalgia.” Engagement’s essence lies not in “defeating” the author but in allowing obscured histories and discourses to regain voice.

However, struggle is not the endpoint. The fourth step is reparative re-reading, introducing care’s dimension after critique. Struggle without repair falls into nihilism; repair without struggle degenerates into whitewashing. hooks’ care ethics emphasizes “promoting growth through truth”: repair doesn’t cancel critique but creates conditions for continued reading without withdrawing revelatory results—acknowledging textual contradictions, acknowledging harm caused to others, acknowledging readers’ trauma, while rebuilding understanding chains between responsibility and compassion. For Brodsky’s texts, this means acknowledging imperial perspective’s damage while discerning how poetic intensity becomes established and can be reunderstood under new historical knowledge conditions.

Finally comes critical re-contextualization. Rereading’s goal is not returning to “original state” but establishing “annotated positions” for controversial texts within canonical genealogies and public memory: neither hastily decanonizing nor using aesthetic heights to obscure moral deficits; but at institutional levels—through introductions, annotations, parallel texts, and course design in

textbooks, translations, and collections—making “complexity” visible, learnable, and discussable public resources. Here, individual ethical experience transforms into public humanistic practice, reading acts acquire “institutional warmth.”

3.4 Practice Case: Re-reading “Watermark” with Ethical Eyes

To demonstrate our theoretical model’s effectiveness, we apply it to rereading Brodsky’s core essay “Watermark.”

The first step acknowledges and analyzes the text’s aesthetic seductive power. Readers are undoubtedly captivated by “Watermark’s” linguistic magic. Brodsky, with his signature meditative, aphoristic style, depicts Venice as a poetic labyrinth of water, reflections, light, and decay. He compares a boat’s slow progress through night to “a coherent thought through the subconscious” (Brodsky 1992, 12), palaces to “enormous carved chests of dark palazzi filled with unfathomable treasures” (Brodsky 1992, 12). This language constructs powerful aesthetic attraction, “seducing” readers into a purely aesthetic world.

However, ethical reading requires our second step—employing an oppositional reading approach, revealing its imperial gaze and ethical blind spots. Brodsky defines Venice as “the greatest masterpiece our species produced,” with standards that are aesthetic, not democratic (Brodsky 1992, 116). He nostalgically recalls Venice Republic’s maritime glorious history, lamenting “no longer have doges,” believing modern Venice’s 50,000 residents are “guided not by the grandeur of some particular vision but by their immediate, often nearsighted concerns” (Brodsky 1992, 112).

This unconditional embrace of imperial aesthetics sharply contrasts with his attitude toward non-Western civilizations. For example, he once argued that Spanish colonizers introducing smallpox and firearms remained a “better choice” compared to Aztec civilization practicing human sacrifice (Ранчин 2024, 289). This explicit civilizational hierarchy reveals his Venice contemplation as not pure aesthetic experience but value judgment deeply embedded in specific cultural hegemonic narratives. He explicitly declares “Aesthetics’ main tool, the eye, is absolutely autonomous... Aesthetic sense is the twin of one’s instinct for self-preservation and is more reliable than ethics” (Brodsky 1992, 109). This aesthetic-supremacist position provides excuse for appreciating imperial spectacle while evading its moral costs.

The third step deploys the “Baldwin model” (generative) internal critique. We discover “Watermark’s” text already contains self-subversive elements. Brodsky’s obsession with “decay” inadvertently reveals imperial beauty’s fragility and historicity. He notices palaces where “Every surface craves dust, for dust is the flesh of time” (Brodsky 1992, 56). His fixation on “reflection” ultimately leads to acknowledging this narcissistic hollowness: “A reflection cannot possibly care for a reflection... unburdening it of its depths” (Brodsky 1992, 22). These internal textual contradictions prove it has unconsciously criticized its surface imperial nostalgia.

The fourth step is ultimate ethical critique using “the son’s spear against the son’s shield.” We confront Brodsky’s core creed from his 1987 Nobel Prize lecture—“aesthetics is the mother of

ethics” (Brodsky 1987)—with his practice. We can sharply ask: if aesthetics is ethics’ source, why didn’t his deep immersion in Venetian imperial beauty “birth” an ethic enabling him to recognize Russian imperialism’s ugliness? If “political evil is always a bad stylist” (Brodsky 1987), doesn’t the existence of that stylistically poor, hate-filled “On Ukrainian Independence” precisely prove that when embracing ugly politics, he himself violated his most cherished aesthetic principles?

Finally, we reach the fifth step—proposing a responsible “critical care” position. Ethical reading of “Watermark” doesn’t aim to negate its intoxicating artistic achievement. On the contrary, it requires us to simultaneously embrace its aesthetic heights and ethical failures, recognizing that precisely this irreconcilable contradiction constitutes Brodsky’s most enduring and debate-worthy legacy as writer and thinker.

3.5 From Emotional Trauma to Critical Reconstruction: The Rewards of Ethical Reading

Although “An Ethic of Agonistic Care” requires readers to bear burdens and face discomfort, this doesn’t mean the entire process only yields negative emotional experiences. On the contrary, this “difficult reading” can produce more profound, lasting positive emotional rewards, thus addressing the special issue’s call for attention to “pleasure” and “curiosity.”

First is intellectual satisfaction from confronting complexity. Avoiding contradictions might provide temporary peace, but courageously entering texts’ “gray zones” and seeking logic within internal contradictions brings unique cognitive achievement. When readers successfully employ “generative” critique, discovering texts have unconsciously subverted their surface arguments, this discovery’s pleasure far exceeds simple worship or condemnation.

Second is ethical comfort from rebuilding more honest “love” through critique. Through “righteous reading,” readers establish ethical solidarity with voices marginalized by texts. Furthermore, through “critical care,” readers and authors establish new, more mature relationships—no longer based on blind worship but on honest acknowledgment of their complete complex humanity. This more resilient, authentic “love” is itself profound emotional comfort.

Finally is dialogue’s pleasure. Viewing texts as equal “adversaries” rather than sacred idols transforms reading from passive acceptance into vibrant intellectual wrestling. In this interaction, readers are no longer merely meaning consumers but meaning co-creators. This interactive pleasure of equal intellectual engagement with great minds is the highest-order reading pleasure “An Ethic of Agonistic Care” can provide.

It must be clarified that our proposed model doesn’t aim to replace aesthetics with ethics but to reveal their inseparable internal connection. In a politicized world, insisting on so-called “pure” literary autonomy is itself a political gesture, and our methodology precisely demands more honest, self-reflective aesthetic practice. Through the “Watermark” case analysis, we proved this method’s effectiveness and revealed how “the reader’s burden” is not only burden but responsibility and opportunity.

4. Beyond Brodsky: Ethical Reading as Cross-Cultural Dialogue Practice

The previous chapters, through deep analysis of the Joseph Brodsky case, revealed a profound interpretive “rupture” and forged a critical practice aimed at serious intellectual engagement with complex cultural legacies—“An Ethic of Agonistic Care.” This chapter aims to expand this model from a solution targeting a specific author into a universal methodology applicable to handling complex cross-cultural texts. We will argue that this five-step operational protocol encompassing “positional examination,” “emotional diagnosis,” “agonistic engagement,” “reparative re-reading,” and “critical re-contextualization” is not only an effective analytical tool but also a systematic exploration of more responsible cross-cultural dialogue practice.

4.1 Historical Echoes: Handling the Complex Legacies of Post-Socialist Writers

To test the universality of “An Ethic of Agonistic Care,” we first apply it to handling other “Second World” writers—that is, writers from the former socialist bloc (Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, etc.)—who share similar paradoxes of victimhood and complicity with Brodsky. The logic of selecting these cases lies in their sharing a similar historical context with Brodsky while each presenting different dimensions of ethical complexity, thus testing our model’s adaptability when handling different types of historical controversies.

Milan Kundera was once hailed as a literary giant resisting totalitarianism, yet this former strong Nobel Prize candidate continuously faced questioning from feminist critics. Joan Smith, in her influential 1989 critique, directly pointed to systematic “hostility” toward female characters in Kundera’s works, arguing that women in his writing were either objects of sexual fantasy or “heavy” symbols threatening male freedom (Smith 1989, 85-102). Meanwhile, the 2008 exposure of a Czech intelligence archive alleging that Kundera had informed authorities about a Western spy in 1950 further complicated his moral image with this “informant” scandal (Novák 2008).

Facing such a complex case combining resistance hero aura with serious ethical accusations, our ethical reading practice must first examine the positional issues in Western readers’ reception of Kundera. As Maria Nemcová analyzed, Kundera’s canonization process in the West was largely built on his shaping as a cultural symbol of “the free world against communist tyranny” (Nemcová 1998, 414-436). This politicized reception context might cause Western readers to develop “selective oversight” toward gender political blind spots in his works, because acknowledging these problems would threaten his perfect image as an anti-communist hero. When feminists criticized misogynistic tendencies in Kundera’s works, many admirers experienced strong cognitive dissonance, with this emotional conflict’s deep roots lying in readers often idolizing authors, expecting a political victim to be progressive on all ethical issues.

However, through agonistic engagement’s critical practice, we should seriously consider criticisms raised by critics like Smith. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, female characters are indeed often reduced to carriers of male existentialist anxieties—Tereza represents “heaviness,” Sabina represents “lightness,” functioning more as personifications of philosophical concepts than complete subjects.

But as John O'Brien pointed out in his post-structuralist analysis, this surface "misogynistic" narrative strategy might serve more complex textual purposes (O'Brien 1995, 3-18). Through reparative re-reading, we discover self-critical dimensions exist within Kundera's narrative strategies. In *Life Is Elsewhere*, poet Jaromil's romantic passion ultimately leads to political informing and moral corruption—this narrative structure itself constitutes profound irony toward male-centric romantic imagination. More importantly, Kundera's continuous critique of "kitsch" actually points toward all ideological constructions that simplify reality's complexity, including male chauvinism.

Czesław Miłosz presents another type of ethical complexity. As a "political thinker who disliked politics," Miłosz spent his life making painful choices between homeland and world, faith and betrayal, national sentiment and universal values (Haven 2017, 45). Western readers' reception of Miłosz was often simplified into romanticized imagination of "Eastern European dissident intellectuals." As Tony Judt observed, Cold War-era Western intellectual circles tended to view writers from communist countries as "martyred saints," this projection ignoring internal contradictions and historical complexity in their thought (Judt 1992, 112-134).

When readers discovered that Miłosz had worked for the Polish People's Republic's cultural departments in the 1950s, they might feel "betrayed." This emotional response reflects unrealistic expectations Western readers held toward Eastern European intellectuals. We must confront contradictions that indeed exist in Miłosz's thought. In *The Captive Mind*, his critique of communism sometimes slides toward suspicion of the entire modernity project, displaying conservative tendencies (Miłosz 1953). However, precisely these contradictions constitute Miłosz's thought's unique value. His refusal to provide simple answers itself constitutes profound resistance to totalitarian thinking modes. In *Native Realm*, through reminiscences of childhood Lithuania, he displays complex historical consciousness that neither indulges in nostalgia nor blindly embraces modernity (Miłosz 1984).

Through critical re-contextualization of these two writers, we neither need to defend their limitations nor completely negate their literary achievements. Instead, we can place their works in a more honest historical context: as intellectuals forming thought under totalitarian oppression, they indeed displayed limitations of their era and class, but these limitations themselves constitute important materials for understanding 20th-century Eastern European intellectuals' complex predicament.

4.2 Contemporary Battlefields: Literature Crossing Contemporary Political Divides

Turning from historical cases to ongoing contemporary conflicts, our model faces new challenges when handling "contentious" issues, requiring greater emphasis on its public intervention dimension. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as one of contemporary geopolitics' most complex disputes, presents equally profound ethical challenges in its literary manifestations. Traditional "empathy" and "dialogue" models based on liberal humanism face questioning from postcolonial critics for potentially obscuring profound power inequalities. A simple "listen to both sides" symmetrical model might unconsciously constitute what Gayatri Spivak called "epistemological violence" (Spivak 1988, 280-285).

Taking Israeli writer Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* as examples, these two works represent typical narrative strategies from both sides of the conflict. Oz, through personal memoir form, describes Israel's nation-building process as a complex procedure filled with humanitarian ideals but also accompanied by moral costs (Oz 2004). Abulhawa, through a Palestinian family's tragedy, directly accuses Israeli state violence of systematic trauma inflicted on the Palestinian people (Abulhawa 2010).

When Western readers encounter these texts, they must first reflect on media narrative presets they carry. As Edward Said revealed in *Covering Islam*, Western media reporting on Middle Eastern conflicts often contains directive framing (Said 1981, 3-28). For most Western readers, Israel is preset as a "democratic country," while Palestine is often associated with "terrorism." When readers simultaneously read Oz's humanitarian appeals and Abulhawa's victim accusations, they might experience intense moral discomfort. This discomfort's root lies in conflicts between emotional responses triggered by two narratives and moral predicament readers encounter when trying to find "balance" between them.

The "agonistic respect" advocated by our model, borrowing from Chantal Mouffe's thought, doesn't presuppose reconciliation but requires readers to conduct serious, contextualized intellectual engagement with both narratives under the premise of acknowledging conflict's irreconcilability, while remaining vigilant about power differentials (Mouffe 2013, 6-8). Regarding Oz, we can question how his humanitarian rhetoric might obscure structural colonial relationships; regarding Abulhawa, we can analyze how her victim narrative reconstructs Palestinian subjectivity. Through more detailed textual analysis, we discover self-critical dimensions exist within both narratives. When describing early Zionist pioneers, Oz actually also exposes their Orientalist prejudices and colonial mentality (Oz 2004, 156-178). When showing Palestinian resistance, Abulhawa also avoids reducing them to pure victims, instead emphasizing their agency and creativity.

Turning to contemporary Chinese literature's reception in the West, taking Liu Cixin's *Three-Body trilogy* as an example, this work's enormous success in the West both marks Chinese science fiction literature's international breakthrough and triggers intense debate about its political implications and cultural representations. When Western readers receive this work, they often fall into two interpretive traps: either Edward Said's criticized "Orientalism," reducing the work to political allegory for understanding "mysterious China"; or a "depoliticized" naive reading that ignores profound Chinese historical and political realities behind the work (Said 1978, 1-28).

Our positional examination requires Western readers first to reflect on their cultural positions and reading expectations. *Reading Three-Body* often carries Western complex emotions toward China's rise: both awe for its technological progress and unease about its political system. As Zhang Longxi analyzed, contemporary Western reception of Chinese culture still deeply influenced by 19th-century "Yellow Peril" theory and "Oriental despotism" stereotypes (Zhang 1992, 1-15). Western readers' discomfort with certain value concepts in *Three-Body* requires honest diagnosis and analysis. For example, sympathizing with Ye Wenjie's trauma during the "Cultural Revolution"

but feeling confused about her later logic of choosing “Three-Body civilization invasion”—this emotional response hides specific historical imagination and political presets.

When analyzing *Three-Body’s “Dark Forest Law,”* we must both critically examine social Darwinist tendencies in Liu Cixin’s writing and seriously consider his warning about human civilization’s fragility. Through reparative re-reading, we might discover *Three-Body internally* contains complex questioning of its surface positions. In the third volume *Death’s End*, the failure of Cheng Xin as a “Madonna” figure superficially seems to negate humanitarian values, but careful reading reveals Liu Cixin actually explores ethical tensions between “goodwill” and “responsibility” rather than simply embracing cold realism (Liu 2016, 400-450).

4.3 Ethical Reading as Reparative Critique: The Universal Significance of Methodology

Through analysis of the above cases, we have proven “An Ethic of Agonistic Care” as a cross-cultural dialogue practice’s effectiveness and universal significance. From Kundera’s gender political blind spots to Miłosz’s historical contradictions, from Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s narrative politics to Chinese literature’s Orientalist traps, our five-step operational protocol demonstrates powerful capability in handling complex cultural legacies and contemporary controversies.

Ultimately, this paper’s constructed “An Ethic of Agonistic Care” is not only a literary critical method but also a systematic exploration of deeper, more responsible cross-cultural dialogue ethics. This exploration’s core lies in viewing critique itself as a reparative rather than purely deconstructive action. As we demonstrated in analyzing “Watermark,” the most powerful “critical care” is “using the son’s spear against the son’s shield”—employing authors’ own highest standards to measure their ethical failures.

This “An Ethic of Agonistic Care” ultimately advocates a civic education practice aimed at addressing contemporary challenges. In a “post-truth” era troubled by information fragmentation and political polarization, this “difficult reading” insisting on intellectual wrestling with the most difficult texts is precisely core training for cultivating “democratic citizens” capable of responsible thinking in plural, conflicted societies (Nussbaum 2010, 95-112). Through critical reading, we can truly know the full complexity of an author or cultural tradition; by activating agonistic dialogue within and beyond texts, we can listen to suppressed voices; finally, by confronting rather than evading contradictions, we can participate in deeper, more honest respect and love.

5. Conclusion

The interpretive rupture exposed by the Joseph Brodsky legacy crisis is far from an isolated literary event but a symptom forcing us to confront a fundamental question: in a world of increasingly intensified value conflicts, what ethics should critical inquiry itself follow? In response to this challenge, this paper constructs “An Ethic of Agonistic Care.” This framework provides a substantive answer that combines theoretical depth with operational value. We examined the profound paradox between “victim” and “imperial thinker” in the Brodsky case. We analyzed complex legacies of writers from the former socialist bloc like Kundera and Miłosz. We applied our approach to highly polarized contemporary issues, including Israeli-Palestinian conflict literature and Chinese science fiction. These applications

demonstrate the explanatory force and broader applicability of the “five-step protocol for ethical reading” as cross-cultural dialogue practice.

This theoretical construction's core contribution lies in its critique and reconstruction of traditional humanistic values. It critiques liberal dialogue models that seek false consensus, revealing their limitations when facing structural power inequalities. It also transcends purely deconstructive poststructuralist critique by refusing to suspend all value judgments in relativistic void. The “agonistic respect” we advocate acknowledges opponents' legitimacy and engages in principled debate rather than forcing harmony; the “critical care” we practice refuses to idolize authors, dedicating itself to discovering complexity and enduring value in their legacies through relentless critique.

More importantly, this reading practice seeking care within conflict while maintaining struggle within care constitutes core educational strategy for addressing “post-truth” era challenges. In an era of information fragmentation and political polarization, this “difficult reading” provides essential mental discipline. It trains citizens to resist propaganda and engage in responsible thinking by wrestling intellectually with challenging texts. It is not only methodological innovation in literary criticism but also a core path for cultivating critical citizens in democratic societies.

Here, it is necessary to reaffirm this study's focus on the English-speaking world as a strategically significant academic choice. This focused approach provided necessary analytical depth. It enabled us to trace how an Eastern European literary controversy was absorbed, negotiated, and given new meaning in global academic discourse. This process reveals that the English world's “reception” is far from passive mirroring but an active meaning-production process filled with internal tensions, reflecting its own distinctive post-Cold War anxieties, imperial memories, and theoretical traditions. Therefore, this study's contribution precisely lies in its deep analysis of this crucial cross-cultural mediation process. Future studies of this controversy in Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, or other linguistic contexts will be crucial. However, this study provides an indispensable foundation by revealing the complex field of power and discourse that any “local” controversy must navigate when becoming “global.”

Ultimately, through this reading practice seeking care within struggle, we participate not only in reunderstanding literary classics but also in imagining and constructing more honest, more resilient democratic life itself. This is precisely the path opened by “An Ethic of Agonistic Care”—leading toward deeper humanistic understanding and more responsible public engagement, a path that neither avoids conflict nor abandons repair.

Endnotes:

1. There is debate over whether the composition date was 1991, 1992, or 1994, but according to Balashov (2013), Brodsky recited “On Ukrainian Independence” in Stockholm, Sweden on August 25, 1992. In 2015, video evidence appeared on Facebook of Brodsky reciting the poem on October 30, 1992. Therefore, the composition date can be confirmed as between December 1991 and August 1992.
2. Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grFRNnPePJw&t=1s>.
3. The article has been deleted; the link <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/23/the-gift-7> is no longer functional.

4. Facebook video: <https://www.facebook.com/boris.vladimirsky/videos/10152890184162545>.
5. The text initially published in Kiev's *Stalitsa* (Capital) No. 13 in 1996, transcribed from the 1992 Palo Alto Jewish Center recitation recording, but contained numerous errors. On May 17, 2008, Gorbanevskaya published the corrected version on Livejournal blog platform. The English translation is based on Kamil Galeev's April 19, 2022 version with modifications.
6. Galeev, Kamil. 2022. Twitter thread on Joseph Brodsky's "On the Independence of Ukraine." Twitter, April 19, 2022. <https://x.com/kamilkazani/status/1516162437455654913>.
7. In 2011 alone, *The New Yorker* published 4 articles reviewing Brodsky; from 2014 to present, there have been none.
8. Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund. "A Statement from the Brodsky Fund." Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund. 2022. <http://www.josephbrodsky.org/news-single35>.
9. Hunter College study abroad program information, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://hunter.cuny.edu/students/opportunities/study-abroad/summer-programs/tamizdat-contraband-literature-from-the-ussr-and-eastern-europe>.
10. notveryamused_. "Joseph Brodsky and Ukraine." Reddit, r/literature, June 29, 2022. https://www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/vx5w52/joseph_brodsky_and_ukraine.
11. econoquist. "Joseph Brodsky and Ukraine." Reddit, r/literature, June 29, 2022. https://www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/vx5w52/joseph_brodsky_and_ukraine.
12. Simonyan, Margarita. "Иосиф Бродский, 'На независимость Украины' [Joseph Brodsky, 'On the Independence of Ukraine']." Twitter, February 24, 2023. https://x.com/M_Simonyan/status/1628955033130729473.

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