the spoken language. An accurate rendition of the sound of a spoken idiom is no more "elective," no more a matter of arbitrary choice, than the correct accentuation of a polysyllabic word or than a rise in the pitch of the voice at the end of an information-eliciting question or than the additional force of utterance of an exclamation. Such productions, or reproductions, are the property of speaker and listener, poet and reader, alike.

Without seeing any examples, I cannot tell what Sokol means by the "aural harmonies" he believes Frost produced in the "poetic imitation[s] of his *abstract* 'sound of sense' " by the sequencing of vocalic formants. If indeed Frost manipulated such sequences in his dramatic poetry to create patterns of sound appropriate to the "characters," and particularly to the "emotional states," of the speakers, then those effects are no more "abstract," no less linked with meaning, than the ones I describe in my essay. And I stand by my statement that a comparative dearth of sound systems—that is, of conspicuous repetitions of the same or similar vowels and consonants—is one of the features that distinguish Frost's speaking voice from his chanting voice. Their absence would never lead me to call the language of the speaking voice "flat or prosaic," as Sokol seems to imply, but I would look elsewhere for the sources of its poetic power.

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Joseph Brodsky and Modernist Poetics

To the Editor:

Being of Lithuanian origin on my mother's side of the family and a longtime student of modern poetry, I read with interest Joseph Brodsky's "Poetry as a Form of Resistance to Reality" (107 [1992]: 220–25) and was pleased to learn about the life and work of the Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova. Brodsky's statements about Venclova the man and poet—for example, Venclova was an active participant "in the Lithuanian dissident movement" and is a democratic poet whose "body is too involved in the whirlpool of history" (223, 224)—are particularly timely because of the recent liberation of Lithuania and the Baltic states. This foreword to a Polish edition of Venclova's poetry certainly stirs democratic and nationalistic feelings of pride.

These feelings aside, I have serious reservations about this foreword's credibility and rigor because the person and poetry of Tomas Venclova are ultimately reduced to propaganda instruments that Brodsky uses to disparage "modern aesthetics" and "modern" movements in the arts, which he terms "extreme means of expression" (220). An apparent classicist, humanist, and defender of traditional poetic forms, Brodsky as poet reacts strongly against the apparent formlessness or organicism (222) of much modern verse, making remarks meant to inflame the opposition and gain sympathy from emerging and amateur poets. For example, he writes, "The unprejudiced individual cringes at the mountain of bodies that gave birth to the mouse of vers libre. He cringes even more deeply at the demand during less dramatic times, in periods of population explosion, to make this mouse a sacred cow" (220). In such statements, Brodsky relies on emotional appeals instead of sound reasoning to sway his audience. In the heat of argument, he has seemingly forgotten that modern painters, sculptors, writers, and poets like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and T. E. Hulme decomposed in that mountain of World War I dead.

Brodsky's objections to the purveyors of vers libre and to their supposedly superior technical means—"Until relatively recent times, means of expression were not grouped in autonomous categories, and there was no hierarchy to them"—are the real subjects of this foreword, wherein Brodsky is intent on devaluing those manifestations of "modern aesthetics" that he believes have "subjugat[ed] the song of art." He maintains that "[e]very ism is both evidence, direct or indirect, of art's defeat and a scar covering up the shame of this defeat," and he seems bent on making these isms pay for roughing up art. Brodsky seems to think naively that he can exist inside "the noise of history" yet remain superhumanly unaffected by it. In fact, he momentarily believes that poetry possesses such a quality: "The twentieth century, now nearing its end, seems to have had its way with all the arts except poetry." Time and history are apparently no match for poetry. Or are they? Brodsky reluctantly concedes that "existence has proved capable of defining the artist's consciousness . . ." (220).

Because the essay is poetically biased, its meditations on modern versification are confused and reductive. Although Brodsky chooses to denigrate "the low-calorie diet of vers libre" (221), his real target is the modernist poetic tradition, and he specifically criticizes the self-defeating, abstract "act[s] of self-effacement" that necessarily distance poets from their intended audiences. Brodsky contends that "a poet eager to demonstrate his ability for self-effacement should not be content with using neutral diction: in theory, he ought to take the next logical step and shut up altogether" (222). Brodsky's inability to appreciate the rich complexities

of modernist poetics (for example, the modernist contributions of self-effacement and of spatial form and technique) shows itself in his superficial and sometimes contradictory statements about the topic, statements that have been influenced, ironically enough, by his reading of the poetry and early literary essays of T. S. Eliot.

I am responding to the bias against modern versification evident in this foreword. Had Brodsky championed vers libre or modernist poetics at the expense of classical or Renaissance poetics, I would have been compelled to write a letter defending the latter traditions. As Brodsky well knows, all self-conscious poets participate in a historical tradition that they feel in their bones and that they use out of necessity. He writes that poets are aware of their debts to their predecessors, that "[t]his debt is expressed in the feeling every more or less conscious writer has, that he should write in such a way as to be understood by his ancestors—those from whom he learned poetic speech" (222). In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot comments explicitly on this feeling of indebtedness in a much quoted passage that has recently drawn the fire of ideological and cultural-studies critics. Eliot writes that necessarily having a sense of history compels the poet to compose with the feeling of being supported by the entire literature of Europe. This sense of history, which is timeless and time-bound, makes the poet simultaneously traditional and contemporaneous. For Eliot, the poetry of one generation achieves timelessness as it takes its place within a greater historical tradition composed of generations of poetry. Had Brodsky considered the truth of this paradox, he would not have had to worry about freeing modern poetry from history since that poetry has always been free—history is its ally as well as its enemy.

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Slavists after the Soviet Union

To the Editor:

As a graduate student looking forward to working on the cusp of Slavic and comparative literatures, I welcome Gary Saul Morson's introduction to the recent Russian cluster (107 [1992]: 226–31). The rapprochement between Russian and Western literary culture and theory has had a long if fitful history of failed encounters and delayed fruition. Morson's thoughts constitute a timely glance backward at this immediate past, in the wake of the recent and astonishing collapse of the Soviet Union.

Few would dispute the need for such a rapprochement. I write, then, only to ask whether Morson's historicization of the currently nervous dialogue between Slavic and Western theory displays the breadth equal to the questions at hand. The anxieties that mark this dialogue certainly merit the attention Morson accords them; yet it seems to me that his manner of articulating them reproduces the ideological polarizations of an era just completed, condemning any future dialogue to yielding little more than the limited polemical truths of the cold war.

Morson's immediate purpose is to throw light on the skepticism with which literary theory has been met in Slavist circles. This attitude, he clarifies, results from the specificity of the Soviet experience, which makes Slavists resistant to the "politicization of current criticism" (227). To be sure, the Stalinist legacy is an irreducible fact, and Western criticism's sporadic awareness of it remains a scandal. My only reservation, from which other consequences stem, concerns the way in which Stalinism as a historical burden can be hypostatized as a form of closure within a particular debate. In Morson's introduction this legacy functions to polarize two monoglot options (us and them) instead of serving as a difference that is negotiated between and through these options and within a global cultural field that is surely wider than he suggests.

Morson's rendering of the debate certainly reflects real disciplinary hostilities. These tensions could be attenuated in the first instance through a more reciprocal sense of intellectual history, one that would not only communicate to the West the risks implicit in the recent waves of antihumanist theorization but equally reveal to Russians the breadth of Western and Third World socialist cultures, to which, despite appearances, they have had little access since the twenties.

Yet I wonder whether such a resolution, like Morson's own representation of the debate, ultimately rehearses the nineteenth-century confrontation between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, as well as the spatial assumptions of that encounter. To be sure, the confrontation has been significantly transformed on American soil, resulting in an occasionally awkward alliance between Russian émigré culture and American academic liberalism. It is surely this intellectual matrix that has, by and large, characterized Slavic studies and carefully marked its distance from the vicissitudes of American literary theory. It seems to me in no way an excessive politicization of academic criticism to regard this configuration as a complex expression of American cold war culture, whose greatest insight—the appre-