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Time, Space and Nonexistence in Joseph Brodsky's Poetry

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TIME, SPACE AND NONEXISTENCE IN JOSEPH BRODSKY'S POETRY

by

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is twofold: first, to examine the two major themes that permeate Joseph Brodsky's works, time and space, and see how the poet employs various theoretical approaches to the topics and synthesizes them in order to deliver his unique view on both. Second, based on the examination of time and space, this study defines and distinguishes in relation to the chronotope two sorts of nonexistence – *nebytie* – heavily present in Brodsky's later works. This project demonstrates that one kind of *nebytie* is defined through spatial references and primarily addresses one's location in space or one's inability to be in the desired place; this sort of nonexistence is identified as *nebytie*. The other *nebytie* in Brodsky's works is related to temporality and is connected to one's confinement in time; this is what we are going to call *post-bytie*. Therefore, Brodsky's understanding of time and space is crucial, for his poetic concepts reveal their significance outside of the chronotope: they convey the poet's views on exile, death, and immortality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 TIME	6
CHAPTER 2 SPACE	22
Historical and Theoretical Background of the Idea of Space	22
Joseph Brodsky and Space	30
CHAPTER 3 NEBYTIE	47
<i>NE-BYTIE</i> – THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RETURN	49
<i>POST-BYTIE</i> – THE INEVITABILITY OF ARRIVAL	58
CONCLUSION.....	68
WORKS CITED	71

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Brodsky, a native of what was then named Leningrad, USSR, was a poet and an essayist of a unique sort. He was, in a sense, a successor to the Silver Age of Russian poetry, and this is especially evident in his friendship with the famous poet Anna Akhmatova. He was also a true member of the Sixties generation, with an authentic spirit of freedom, and he remained a relevant figure until the end of his life in 1996. Brodsky was truly a Russian poet on the one hand, and on the other a very Western writer whose works are in tune with the English metaphysical poets. In 1972, Brodsky was forced by the Soviet government to emigrate, and, after moving around for a while, he settled in the United States, where he became a professor. During his years in the United States, he taught at several American universities, including Columbia University and the University of Michigan. The poet mastered the English language and translated his own works from Russian into English. He began writing essays primarily in English, while continuing to write poetry in his native tongue. In 1987 Brodsky received a Nobel Prize in literature for his “all-embracing authorship, imbued with clarity of thought and poetic intensity,” and in 1991, he was appointed United States Poet Laureate.

Joseph Brodsky was both a philosophizing poet and a poetic philosopher. He was an author who contemplated metaphysical notions through describing prosaic situations and common objects, and who balanced cynicism and faith. He was a famous Soviet

dissident and has become an iconic figure for Russian youth in the twenty-first century. As the scholar G.S. Smith states: “When Brodsky died, he was well on his way to attaining the kind of celebrity that before him had only come to Russians whose principal medium of expression was non-linguistic” (400). His fame has continued to grow, as his poetry draws logo-centric attention (Brodsky’s usage of both English and Russian languages has been widely scrutinized), and also attracts interest in Brodsky’s complex ideas regarding the transcendental.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to claim that Brodsky had the goal of developing a consistent philosophical system. Lev Losev observes: “For [Brodsky], ‘to think’ was to construct a chain of syllogisms – but without testing, either empirically or analytically, the individual links” (*Joseph Brodsky* 19). After all, the poet depended on two factors that would not allow him to do that. First was his subjection to the metaphysical idea of language as he understood it: the poet could not claim any ideas unless he discovered them in language. In his interview with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky asserts:

Поэзия есть искусство метафизическое по определению, ибо самый материал ее – язык – метафизичен. Разница между метафизиками и неметафизиками в поэзии – это разница между теми, кто понимает, что такое язык (и откуда у языка, так сказать, ноги растут) – и теми, кто не очень про это догадывается. Первые, грубо говоря, интересуются языком. И, таким образом, источником всего. Вторые – просто щебечут... Ведь метафизичны не только слова как таковые. Или мысли и ощущения, ими обозначенные. Паузы, цезуры тоже метафизичны, ибо они также являются формами

времени. Я уже говорил, кажется, что речь – и даже щебет – не что иное, как форма реорганизации времени. (*Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim*)

Hence, it was Brodsky's religious dedication to language that partly defined his philosophical system. The other aspect that adds to the arbitrary nature of Brodsky's views is the poet's personal biography. The state of exile affected his views and feelings regarding such topics as time, space and existence and nonexistence within those two categories. In such a manner, for instance, Brodsky's early understanding of spatial separation was marked by optimism of the impending, universal gathering, an idea that lost relevance once the poet was forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1972.

Thus, Brodsky did not attempt to create a consistent philosophical system based on his subjective views. He believed that he was, above all, a poet. According to the scholar David Bethea, "that is what poets, especially great poets, do – they challenge our cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and metaphysical constants with their sprung logic" ("To my Daughter" 240). Further, Bethea admits that "...Brodsky...is not very understandable 'on his own'. His metaphors have coalesced into a kind of 'system', but one whose verbal layering and retrieval, whose archaeology if you will, is consistently non-rational, paradoxicalist, fragmentary ... and defiant of any explanation from origins" ("To my Daughter" 241).

In this "paradoxicalist" framework of Brodsky's poetic world, nothing can be stated for certain. This study is an attempt to trace the most consistent notions of time and space whose evolution are present throughout Brodsky's works, and to define their relation to the theme of nonexistence that takes prominence in the later poems.

Temporality and spatiality are such crucial concepts for the poet that it seems logical that *nebytie* should not be examined as a completely independent entity. At the same time, all three do overlap and sometimes contradict one another.

While both chapters about time and space provide some theoretical background for the concepts, the overarching notion for the present study is Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope. The famous Russian literary theorist and philosopher, Bakhtin, defines the chronotope in the following way:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term ... is employed in mathematics and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity... we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time... We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature... Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 84)

Bakhtin believes that "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" 85), and this concept finds an idiosyncratic expression in Brodsky's verse. People, for the poet, are immersed in the time-space continuum, and it is *nebytie* that interferes with its perfect flow. Not only do

the two kinds of *nebytie* – what we are going to call *ne-bytie* and *post-bytie* – stress either one's relation to time or space; they also demonstrate the poet's religious and philosophical journey between ancient, pre-Christian notions and ideas traditional to Christianity.

CHAPTER 1

TIME

Я думаю, душа за время жизни приобретает смертные черты.

Joseph Brodsky

Man's misfortune lies in being time-bound.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Time is undoubtedly one of the major themes in Brodsky's works. Unlike space, in which the primary preoccupation is objects, time, on a very basic level, deals with a chain of events and one's place in it. It is through objects that one discerns space, while events and references to time are the basic means for understanding temporality. The deaths of others, for example, are for Brodsky occurrences that function both as time indicators in themselves (e.g. /“Бобо мертва. Кончается среда”/), and as reminders of one's temporality and dependence on the flow of time. In his essay “Flight from Byzantium” Brodsky states: “[S]pace to me is, indeed, both lesser and less dear than time” thus asserting his personal interest in the notion of time. The poet goes as far as to say that time is a form of being:

Жизнь – форма времени. Карп и лещ –

Сгустки его. И товар похлеще –

Сгустки. Включая волну и твердь

Суши. Включая смерть. (*Sobranie* 253)

The theme of time permeates all Brodsky's works, not only on the philosophical and semantical levels, but also in the sheer structure of his verse. In his interview with the Swedish Slavist Bengt Jangfeldt, Brodsky answered the question "А есть стихотворный размер, который передает течение времени лучше, чем любой другой?" as follows: "Гекзаметр – для этого превосходно подходит гекзаметр. Потому что гекзаметр позволяет достигнуть этой жуткой нейтральности, которая и есть свойство времени."

Various scholars have examined the poet's understanding of time and temporality. In her interview with Valentina Polukhina, the Russian poet Olga Sedakova summarizes:

Time ... is one of [Brodsky's] basic themes. In his hands, Time has all the appearances of being a destructive principle: the motifs of ageing, for example, or the image of death ... that's completely in tune with the existential view of the world. And yet, on the other hand, the time he has in view is extraordinarily broad in scope, far exceeding the time of any one, individual existence – it's the time of language, of history, of culture. And this, in my opinion, is no longer existentialism. (282)

Thus, it is evident that Brodsky's use of time is ambiguous. It is useful to classify his variations of it in two categories. First is cyclical time. This kind of perception of time is derived from the ancient, pre-Christian worldview. It is defined by humans' dependence on seasons and the view of the cosmos as a closed system with unbreakable rules. Later in history, such an approach to time finds its modern philosophical

interpretation in Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) *The Gay Science* as a concept of "eternal return."

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? (194)

Existing in this kind of perpetual time, one's goal is to accept it. For the philosopher it is not the actual possibility that things can repeat themselves endlessly that is of primary importance, but how he or she deals with the very thought of the world of repetitiveness.¹ According to Nietzsche, one must develop a love for this kind of condition, so-called *amor fati*. Similar ideas of recurrence are found in the philosophical systems of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who studied repetition in relation to faith and God's sovereignty, and in the writings the atheistic existentialists of the twentieth century, such as Albert Camus (1913-1960) with his version of the Myth of Sisyphus.

¹ The same idea is stated in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* XLVI: "For whatever can run its course of all things, also in this long lane outward – must it once more run! – And this slow spider which creepeth in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and thou and I in this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must we not all have already existed?"

The other view of time, which is also present in Brodsky's thought, is influenced by Christian eschatology with linearity and a trajectory towards nonexistence (or Heaven) at its core. This time is revealed through notions of past, present and future. In his *Confessions* the theologian St. Augustine summarizes this understanding of time:

Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation. (Book 11, Chapter 20)

Both concepts of time – cyclical and linear – coexist in Brodsky's poetical world, yet, as the scholar Viktor Kulle states, for Brodsky, Christian, linear time becomes a way of breaking out from the closed cyclical time. I believe that the reason behind Brodsky's attempt to escape cyclical time lies in his view of individuality. In his interview with Solomon Volkov, the poet states: “Мы там, в Питере, все выросли убежденными индивидуалистами – и потому, быть может, большими американцами, чем многие настоящие американцы, в Штатах родившиеся. По крайней мере, это так в философском и, может быть, психологическом плане.” Similarly, Jangfeldt recalls that the reason behind Brodsky's dislike of the Eastern Orthodox Church lies in its negative, as he saw it, attitude towards individuality (*Iazyk est' Bog. Zametki ob Iosife Brodskom*, 2016).

Furthermore, many of those who personally knew him recall Brodsky's loathing of everything standardized and regulated.² The poet himself accentuates this idea in *Less than One* (1986): when describing his childhood memories, he recollects, "Anything that bore a suggestion of repetitiveness became compromised and subject to removal"; and, of course the famous line from "Ne vykhodi iz komnaty" (1970): "Не будь дураком! Будь тем, чем другие не были" (*Sobranie* 561). So, cyclical time, with its emphasis on the repetitiveness of life and the lack of metaphysical progression, understandably does not satisfy Brodsky; and, especially in his early years, he finds it hard to escape.

Before we proceed, we should unpack the poet's views on the aspects of linear time – past, present and future. On a basic level, Brodsky's view of linear time follows Augustine's definition of time and its perception of how the poet extends different roles to the three tenses. Past in his works is linked to nostalgia and melancholy. Its importance is underscored, for instance, by the multitude of poems he wrote about antiquity. Furthermore, talking about the past is often characterized by extensive usage of such words as "эра" ("Fin de Siècle," "Iz Alberta Einsteina"), "эпоха" ("Nariady s otoplaniem v kazhdom dome"), and the semantic binary *тогда – теперь*.

The scholar Valentina Polukhina asserts that the past is more important for the poet than the present, which is illusory and cast backward to the past (*Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries* 31). In "The Condition We Call Exile" Brodsky admits, "[A] writer in exile is by and large a retrospective and retroactive being. In other words, retrospection plays an excessive role – compared with other people's lives" (16). He goes

² This fact about Brodsky is mentioned numerous times in Valentina Polukhina's book of interviews *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries*.

on to say: “Even having gained the freedom to travel, even having actually done some traveling, [a poet in exile] will stick in his writing to the familiar material of his past, producing, as it were, sequels to his previous works” (17). Therefore, the poet’s close attention to the past is directly related to his personal status of exile. The past, thus, is safer, more familiar territory than the present.

The future for Brodsky is often associated with decay and physical dilapidation. As the Russian poet and literary critic Lev Losev points out: “Если современным мифом Петербурга перед Первой мировой войной был эсхатологический миф, в котором город представал новой обреченной Александрией, то уцелевшим после войны петербуржцам пришлось столкнуться с новой реальностью: варвары пришли, вокруг руины, мы живем ‘после нашей эры.’” In other words, for Brodsky, we are, in a sense, already living in the future as in post-culture, post-epoch. This kind of future that is related to the notion of ruins finds its full realization in the concept of nonexistence-*nebytie*³ and what Viktor Kulle calls “время в чистом виде” (“Formirovanie lineinoi kontseptsii vremeni”). While Brodsky’s interest in the past is often marked by the sense of belonging and comfort, the future is doomed and is related to the idea of extinction.

Nonetheless, past and future in Brodsky’s poetical world are often linked. In his book *Styles of Ruin*, the scholar David Rigsbee notes: “The future ... takes the form of an inquiry in that it manages to solicit the answers for our becomings. It stands in the mind, therefore, as a speculative field that requests definition. In this regard, it is similar to the

³ For further discussion of the time-related *nebytie*, see chapter 3.

past – similar, too, in that both are categorized by real absence and thus answerable only in metaphor” (15). This idea is in agreement with St. Augustine, who believes in the subjective nature of time, and who, as Liliann Manning and Daniel Cassel observed, was probably the first to point out that future and past “could be seen as equivalent entities that exist, as long as they are present in our consciousness” (“St. Augustine’s Reflections on Memory and Time and the Current Concept of Subjective Time in Mental Time Travel” 239). This concept is present in “Vertumn”⁴ (1990), dedicated to the Italian critic and translator Giovanni Buttafava, where the lyrical speaker notes: “Пахнет, я бы добавил, неолитом и палеолитом. / В просторечии – будущим.” The narrator indicates that for him there is no difference between the prehistoric periods and the future. He continues:

Ибо оледененье

есть категория будущего, которое есть пора,

когда больше уже никого не любишь,

даже себя. Когда надеваешь вещи

на себя без расчета все это внезапно

скинуть

⁴ In what is rare for Brodsky, this poem was published with the poet’s explanatory note: “Вертумен – языческое божество, в римской мифологии бог перемен (будь то времена года, течение рек, настроения людей или созревание плодов). Джанни Буттафава (1939-1990), чьей памяти посвящена поэма, – знаменитый критик театра и кино и переводчик, открывший итальянскому читателю романы Достоевского, произведения многих современных прозаиков и поэтов.”

в чьей-нибудь комнате, и когда не можешь
выйти из дому в одной голубой рубашке,
не говоря – нагим. (*Sobranie* 524)

The Ice Ages, millions of years in the past, are a synonym in the poem for the future. At the same time, for the lyrical speaker, this future is defined by his aging, his lost ability to be a lover and his fading body. Moreover, “Vertumn” is based on the narrator’s memories and thus focused on the past; yet, it uses these memories as means for talking about the future. Further, in his article “To Urania,” the scholar Barry P. Scherr states that Brodsky sees time as “both unknowable in its behavior and as indifferent to people; the main trait of both the past and the future is our absence from them ...” (103). The narrator did not witness the pre-historic era, just as soon enough his aging body will enter nonexistence, or “оледенение” and will not be able to partake in this world’s joys.

Another example of the juxtaposition of past and future is found in one of Brodsky’s late poems, “Arkhitektura” (1993), in which the narrator claims: “Архитектура, мать развалин.” and “Но будущее – вещь из камня, / и это – ты” (*Sobranie* 500). Since it is the mother of the ruins, architecture is older than the ruins are, yet the lyrical speaker calls it “future.” Therefore, the past and the future are connected in the sense that both cannot be understood directly without resorting to metaphors or using one another as references.

Also, it is precisely the absence of the speaker in either that makes past and future an interesting topic for the poet in exile, who is doomed to live in the state of “absence.”

Ruin, for instance, becomes a prominent trope for describing both the poems about the past and the ones about the impending future because “Век на исходе. Бег / времени требует жертвы, развалины” (*Sobranie* 507). That is why the narrator of “Открытка из города К.” (1968) states “Развалины есть праздник кислорода / и времени” (*Sobranie* 137). Once again, while in the texts about the past, ruins represent memory, nostalgia or Empire, the image of ruins in the future is employed to highlight the approaching of nonexistence; in either usage they are, however, the “celebrations of time” and its major markers.

Despite Brodsky’s fascination with ruins and antiquity and veneration in relation to the future, his thought is also focused on his time. The poet Aleksandr Kushner believes that

[n]ot just the contents of [Brodsky’s] poetry, but his whole vocabulary is contemporary. I don’t know anyone else who so completely reflects our times ... And, of course, it isn’t possible to separate, to sunder that specific historical time from universal, ontological time in his poetry; that latter time is there like that wash which an artist applies to his canvas before he starts to paint in oils. (*Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries* 128)

However, the notion of the present is rather elusive for Brodsky. Jangfeldt maintains that for the poet “Существование приобретает ‘статус реальности’ только постфактум” (*Iazyk est’ Bog. Zametki ob Iosife Brodskom*). The poems that are set in “today” are usually rather retrospective and focused on the memories from the past or, more rarely, contemplations about the future. As scholar and poet Ian Probshtein points

out: “The present according to Brodsky ... is absorbed by the past ...” (216). In “Дорогая, я вышел сегодня из дому поздно вечером” (1989), for example, the lyrical speaker provides the time reference “tonight.” He decides to spend this “tonight” at the beach to “подышать свежим воздухом”; yet, soon afterward, in the next stanza switches to the past:

Четверть века назад ты питала пристрастие к люля и к финикам,

рисовала тушью в блокноте, немножко пела,

развлекалась со мной; но потом сошлась с инженером-химиком

и, судя по письмам, чудовищно поглупела.

When the narrator returns to the present in the third stanza, the present is marked by deaths: “Теперь тебя видят в церквях в провинции и в метрополии / на панихидах по общим друзьям, идущих теперь сплошной / чередой ... /” The funerals that go one by one not only disturb the speaker’s moment of romantic reminiscing about the past, but also remind him about everyone’s unavoidable future. The funerals described as “идущие теперь сплошной” function as time markers: the speaker prefers to define the ephemeral present through the cyclical nature of other people’s deaths as they go one by one and surely will not stop. The last line “курю в темноте и вдыхаю гнилье отлива” stands in direct opposition to the first stanza with its romantic walk at the beach. The journey into the narrator’s memory back in time and the awareness of the nature of the future turn his present dark and unpleasant. This poem is a farewell to the love the narrator has lost, and it reads as a firm statement that one cannot go back in time, thus

emphasizing Brodsky's conviction that linearity and orientation toward the future, however bleak that might be, is the only possible way to live.

This brings us back to the conflict in Brodsky's work between the two understandings of time. In "Я как Улисс" (1961) the lyrical speaker observes his position as cyclical: "я двигаюсь, и, кажется отрадно, что, как Улисс, гоню себя вперед, но двигаюсь по-прежнему обратно." The poem "Sovremennaia pesnia" written in the same year, is an effective illustration of how Brodsky employs the notion of cyclical time further. The title of the poem is intended to claim that the theme is topical. It is supposed to be a song about something relevant to the speaker and the audience.

Человек приходит к развалинам снова и снова,

он был здесь позавчера и вчера

и появится завтра,

его привлекают развалины. (1961)

First, the narrator notes that there is something intrinsic in ruins that draws the attention of the person. In other words, one is fascinated with the past and this attraction perpetually brings the person to the ruins. Similarly to what we have seen in "Dorogaia, ia vyshel segodnia iz domu pozdno vecherom" (*Sobranie* 504), where deaths are symbols of cyclical reoccurrences that "punctuate" time, here, it is ruins (another image of decay) that function as references to repetitiveness.

Он говорит:

Постепенно,

постепенно научишься многим вещам, очень многим,
научишься выбирать из груды битого щебня
свои будильники и обгоревшие корешки альбомов,
привыкнешь
приходить сюда ежедневно,
привыкнешь, что развалины существуют,
с этой мыслью сживешься.

The lyrical speaker underscores the gradual nature of how one gets caught in cyclical time by repeating “постепенно” and “привыкнешь.” This and the eerie “научишься многим вещам, очень многим” create a passive-aggressive undertone in the poem: one does not have a choice but to conform to the perpetuity. The role of linear time, on the other hand, is challenged as such references to it as alarm-clocks (future) and photo albums (memory and past) are part of the “развалины.”

Later in the poem, the meaninglessness of cyclical existence along with the notion of the crowd (“изобилие городов”) bear the idea of passive acceptance of repetitiveness. The one person in the poem who comprehends this is categorized as stoic (“эти люди обычно не плачут”), because this realization requires Nietzschean *amor fati*.

Кто-то строит дома,
кто-то вечно их разрушает, кто-то снова их строит,

изобилие городов наполняет нас всех оптимизмом.

Человек на развалинах поднял и смотрит,

эти люди обычно не плачут.

Даже сидя в гостях у – слава Богу – целых знакомых,

неодобрительно смотрят на столбики фотоальбомов.

“В наши дни, – так они говорят, – не стоит заводить фотографий”

In cyclical time, we do not need photos as there is no past, everything repeats itself, and clinging to memories will only evoke disapproval from others, from those who prefer not to question the monotonous temporality (“неодобрительно смотрят на столбики фотоальбомов”). In his discussion with Jangfeldt, Brodsky explains “... [П]овторение учит только до известного предела. Я согласен с Кьеркегором, но только отчасти: с течением времени повторение отупляет, оно превращается в клише – а на клише нельзя ничему научиться. Происходит такое переключение от Кьеркегора к Марксу – история повторяется и т. д.” (*Jazyk est' Bog. Zametki ob Iosife Brodskom*).

“Sovremennaia pesnia” was written by the young Brodsky, years before his exile and some thirty-five years before his death. During the following decades, the poet never stopped writing about time, but the second half of his life was marked by what we can call breaking though cyclical temporality into linearity. In cyclical time, everything repeats itself, but the poet believes that “there is a limit to everything, including sorrow” (“To Urania” 93). While the positive aspect of it is the idea that everything will reappear, for Brodsky, the focus is on the repetition of deaths, and he cannot accept that because as

pessimistic as he might seem, every story must have its end. In this framework, the poet would rather accept the orientation towards singular death as the destination than the idea of many deaths. In his essay “Catastrophes in the Air” Brodsky notes:

Now, the idea of paradise is the logical end of human thought in the sense that it, that thought, goes no further; for beyond paradise there is nothing else, nothing else happens. It can be safely said, therefore, that paradise is a dead-end; ... the peak from which there is nowhere to step – except into pure Chronos; hence the introduction of the concept of eternal life... Existence in the dead-end is not limited by anything. (286)

According to Brodsky, the literary idea of the linearity of time was brought up by Virgil, who “it appears, was the first – in literature at least – to apply the linear principle: his hero never returns; he always departs” (“Flight from Byzantium”). For the poet, the vicious circle of “eternal return” not only feels confining, but it also removes one’s individuality; yet Christianity as the foundation of Western culture brings us to the nexus of the notion of linearity and individualism:⁵

В русской поэтической традиции больше писали о Пасхе, но Бродского занимало именно Рождество Христово, событие, которое, помимо всего прочего, означало радикальное изменение в летосчислении. С рождением

⁵ As the scholar Lidia Andreevna Kolobaeva points out, “античность в понимании поэта остаётся для современного человечества на равных с христианством... В представлении поэта язычество и христианство смешаны” (Связь времён: Иосиф Бродский и Серебряный век русской литературы. Вестник Московского университета. 2002. 6. P. 24).

Богочеловека время стали структурировать в “до” и “после”. Именно это интересовало Бродского, а вовсе не доктринарные аспекты – появление Христа как подтверждение прихода Мессии и т. д. “Что включается в это ‘до’? – спрашивал он и сам отвечал: – Не только, скажем, цезарь Август или его предшественники, но обнимается как бы все время, что включает в себя геологические периоды и уходит тем концом практически в астрономию.”

Уникальность Иисуса в том, что с его рождения хронология стала связываться с жизнью определенного индивидуума; в этом смысле он был первым человеком. (Jangfeldt)

Christ’s birth and the chronology based on his person is the beginning of the individual-oriented perception of time. However, Christ’s life was extremely death-oriented according to the Christian tradition, because his life’s climax is the Cross – a symbol of death. Therefore, death becomes the apogee of individualism in Brodsky’s system; it helps one break away from perpetual time with its many deaths that “[идут] теперь сплошной чередой.”

Perhaps Brodsky’s unwillingness to return to St. Petersburg is defined by his individualism that conquered the cyclical nature of time. In his interview with the writer Liubov’ Arkus, the poet shares his thoughts on a possible visit to his homeland:

Я ... не маятник. Раскачиваться туда-обратно. Наверное, я этого не сделаю. Просто человек двигается только в одну сторону ... И только. И только – от. От места, от той мысли, которая приходит ему в голову, от самого себя. Нельзя дважды в одну и ту же реку. И на тот же асфальт дважды не ступишь. Он с каждой новой волной автомобилей – другой. Это моя старая

шутка, что на место преступления преступнику еще имеет смысл вернуться, но на место любви возвращаться бессмысленно ... Но дело в том, что либо просто с моим личным движением физическим, либо просто с движением времени – становишься все более и более автономным телом, становишься капсулой, запущенной неизвестно куда. И до определенного времени еще действуют силы тяготения, но когда-то выходишь за некий предел, возникает иная система тяготения – вовне. (*Seans*)

It has been observed by many scholars that time has a prominent place in Brodsky's poetic worldview; it is of even greater significance than the second important theme of his – space. Despite his interest in the notion of cyclical time that is extensively expressed in his earlier poems, the poet eventually finds that this type of time suppresses one's individuality. Linear time thus becomes a breakaway from perpetuality and its "eternal return." For Brodsky linear time consists of the intangible present, nostalgic past, and fatal future. Furthermore, the most attractive aspect of linear time is its accentuation of individualism: time becomes one's own orientation toward one's own death. Unlike cyclical time with numerous births and resurrections, linearity climaxes in singular death. Any repetitiveness, according to Brodsky, undermines this paradigm. The poet viewed the prospect of his return home as stepping into the cycle of perpetuality and, therefore, he never did. Therefore, it can be said that this is the case when Brodsky's views on time dictated his decision-making regarding space.

CHAPTER 2

SPACE

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE IDEA OF SPACE

The correlation between text and space in a poet's poetic worldview is complex and has to be defined on an individual basis for each author. However, first, one must examine what kind of space the poet is using: the space within the composition of a given text, or the space in the cosmological picture; the "territory" between symbols on paper, or objects in the physical world with tangible factors. Or is the space a metaphysical entity, whose primary role is to unify a set of rather abstract categories that help the author to avoid religious language, while focusing on the invisible, transcendental features of the world?

As this is a literary study more than a linguistic one, for our purposes it is important to focus on the philosophical idea of space rather than only its linguistic expressions (examples of which would be arrangements of letters and words in lines in a poem). It is important, therefore, to trace schematically the evolution of the abstract idea of space in literature.

The advent of the metaphysical view of space goes back to mythological cosmology, where space is often seen as animate. Additionally, its character is usually either positive or negative in relation to the human. Although space deals with abstract concepts, such as good and evil, here, space (re: its "character") is still understood

primarily in relation to its physical features; space is viewed as “box” in which one dwells.

In later ancient, Western philosophical texts, the understandings of space that we encounter still do not resemble modern perceptions of the concept. In Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus*, we read, “...Space [...] is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things and is apprehended without the help of sense ... that what is neither in heaven nor in earth has no existence.” Space is merely a physical repository, the existence of which is so obvious that it does not even require deep analysis. Furthermore, as the literary critic Lada Gennad’evna Panova points out, Plato’s student Aristotle studied space in relation to a concrete place (*topos*), as well as motion. Some ancient texts also touch upon space-related topics such as emptiness (*κενόν*) and air (*πνεῦμα*); however, space is not employed in a chronotope-esque manner and its importance in relation to objects is not emphasized.

It is only in modern history that we begin to see the idea of space develop further. Space starts being perceived as more abstract, and authors’ major interest becomes the nature of the relationship between space and objects. Space is traditionally perceived in two ways.⁶ The first is the Newtonian approach, in which space is viewed as a separate entity that exists on its own and that exists independently of the objects it contains. The other school of thought can be traced back to the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm

⁶ For an extensive survey on the historical development of the philosophical idea of space and literature, see. J. J. Van Baak, *The Place of Space in Narration: A Semiotic Approach to the Problem of Literary Space, with an Analysis of the Role of Space in I.E. Babel's Konarmija* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983.

Leibniz (1646-1716). According to Leibniz' view, space is determined by the world of objects, and therefore is not an independent entity.⁷

In the twentieth century, our understanding of space began to change with the development of modern physics. The Theory of Relativity with its emphasis on the correlation between space and time was appropriated by philosophers and literary critics. Among the various Russian literary theorists who wrote on this issue, it is worth mentioning the Orthodox priest and philosopher Pavel Florensky (1882-1937).⁸ Florensky holds the importance of space in high regard, because he believes that “*Вся культура может быть истолкована как деятельность организации пространства*” (*Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khudozhestvenno-izobrazitel'nykh proizvedeniakh*). He is particularly interested in revising Euclidian geometry in which space is “*однородно, изотропно, непрерывно, связно, бесконечно и безгранично,*” and he examines non-Euclidian geometry. Moreover, Florensky goes against a geometrical approach established by the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) in 1766 in *Laocoon*. In Lessing's view, architecture, sculpture, and other visual arts encompassed the realm of pure space, while music and poetry were dominated by the concept of time, and their convergences were occasional and insignificant. Such a division, Florensky states, is harmful for a theory of art. In other words, Florensky claims that space in music and poetry cannot be analyzed outside the realm of the chronotope (Bakhtin does not develop the term until 1937, when he writes “Forms of Time and of the

⁷ The connection between space and things or their perpetual conflict becomes one of the prominent themes in Brodsky's texts on the topic and will be discussed further.

⁸ I am choosing Florensky's work not only because I find his argument engaging, but also due to his religious/metaphysical interests as a priest. I believe both Florensky and Brodsky were occupied by very similar philosophical ideas and questions in their works.

Chronotope in the Novel”), because it is impossible to separate it from time, which is the fourth dimension of space. Florensky continues to highlight the role of space by saying:

Пространственность, как всегдашняя и необходимая сторона всякого опыта, и переживаемого и мысленного, есть тем самым и наиболее известная нам сторона действительности. И потому обсуждать пространственность в художественном произведении, казалось бы, самый доступный и самый легкий из моментов художественной критики. Все остальное, будучи частным, требует и соответственных специальных знаний; только пространственность, непосредственно данная произведением, говорит сама за себя и, следовательно, предполагает в критике лишь некоторую внимательность к тому, что он видит и слышит. (*Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khudozhestvenno-izobrazitel'nykh proizvedeniakh*)

Florensky asserts that the obviousness of the presence of space in works of art does not lead to a comprehensive study of space. Moreover, it is the major reason that, in most cases, space fails even to be recognized by the viewer/reader/critic. While this sort of rare spatial analysis is usually related to the visual arts, “в поэзии [характеристиками ёмкости соответственных пространств] опять служат те же метры и ритмы, мелодия и инструментовка, а также образы зрительные, осязательные и другие, вызываемые посредственно.” Thus, Florensky points out the qualities of poetry which make it an adequate tool with which to examine space.

Although Florensky discusses space in literature, his primary focus is visual art. It is the semioticians, who composed the next generation of thinkers, who significantly

contributed to the study of space in literature. We are going to briefly review two brilliant theorists: Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman and Vladimir Nikolaevich Toporov.

For Lotman, space is of primary interest, and for him, “Язык пространственных отношений ... важен, так как принадлежит к первичным и основным. Даже временное моделирование часто представляет собой вторичную надстройку над пространственным языком” (“Khudozhestvennoe prostranstvo v proze Gogolia” 293). Lotman believes that the language of spatiality is a perfect channel for conveying meanings and designates it as the most meaningful narrative category. For example, when commenting on Aleksander Griboedov’s *Woe from Wit*, Lotman claims:

...текст развертывается в пространстве дома Фамусовых, но моделирует Москву. А поскольку столь территориально неравные пространства, как дом и город, объявляются идентичными, то обнаруживается, что общность их имеет не вещественно-протяженный, а топологический характер. Именно топологические свойства пространства создают возможность превращения его в модель непространственных отношений. (“Khudozhestvennoe prostranstvo v proze Gogolia” 258n1)

Moreover, Lotman believes that the behavior of the characters in the text is dictated by the textual space in which they are placed, and that the process of moving from one space to another alters one’s character, as well as the characters’ actions.

Lotman also points out the importance of spatial binaries, such as “close-distant,” “left-right,” and “high-low.” He states that spatial metaphors are not arbitrary and are derived from the cultural experiences of the subjects of the text, hence such

juxtapositions as “positive-negative,” “свой-чужой,” and “holy-wicked” can be examined through the lens of spatiality.

When discussing space, Lotman introduces the important term “semiosphere” to define how space relates to language. For him, language is space – and without space, the concept of language does not exist. In *On the Semiosphere*, he asserts: “[T]he space of the semiosphere carries an abstract character. This, however, is by no means to suggest that the concept of space is used, here, in a metaphorical sense. [It is] a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space. Only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realized” (207). Therefore, for the theorist, the semiosphere is linguistic space, the precondition for discussing the concept of space.

Toporov’s discussion of spatiality stresses the need to distinguish between “everyday space,” “scientific” (Newtonian) space, and what he calls “mythopoetical space.” The latter, he argues, opposes Newtonian space and emphasizes its connection to time (this is a point of contention between Toporov and Lotman). For Toporov, this type of space embodies archetypal images and cultural memory, and this memory holds the greatest value (“Poetika Dostoevskogo i arkhaischeskie skhemy mifologicheskogo myshleniia” 193-257). He writes regarding mythopoetical space:

Прежде всего в архаичной модели мира пространство не противопоставлено времени как внешняя форма созерцания внутренней. Вообще применительно к наиболее сакральным ситуациям (а только они и образуют уровень высшей реальности) пространство и время, строго говоря, не

отделимы друг от друга, они образуют единый пространственно-временной континуум (ср. 3 + 1-мерность как основное топологическое свойство пространственно-временной структуры мира в современной физике, а также роль скорости как понятия, объединяющего пространство и время) с неразрывной связью составляющих его элементов. (“Prostranstvo i tekst” 232)

Similar to Lotman’s views, Toporov believes in the power of the role of spatiality in the text. For Toporov, space and time are not passive elements in the background; they define characters and determine plot. Moreover, Toporov states that space does not exist without objects/things, which correlates with the conception of space in the mythological cosmology discussed earlier. According to Toporov, space without objects is chaos.

To conclude the history of the philosophical concept of space, it is important to mention the works of the Yi-Fu Tuan, a contemporary academic, and one of the major figures in today’s studies of spatiality. In his acclaimed work *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan states: “Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other” (3), and “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place’” (6). Tuan distinguishes between space and place by claiming that the latter requires a personal connection. In other words, space becomes a place after we become acquainted with it. Furthermore, Tuan points out that we comprehend both spatial categories of space and place with the help of other senses, not just vision. According to Tuan, space becomes a superior category, which encroaches on the perception of other senses. This theory echoes Lotman’s, who regards space both as part of the chronotope and separately from it, and views it as a primary category. It could be argued that even on a more abstract level, we use spatial vocabulary when referring to subjects metaphorically. For

example, when describing relationships, one might use the words “close,” or “distant,” in relation to the other person and the quality of the communication between the two.

The above is a very brief survey of the development of the concept of space. Space, as we see in some of the earliest sources, was understood through its direct relation to the world of objects. Within this framework, space serves as a storehouse for the products of life. Depending on how this repository relates to humankind, it gets ascribed various qualities. Here, space can be “good” or “bad” in terms of associations with that space, but it is of no further interest to the insider (the character) or the reader. Ancient Greek philosophy took no particular interest in the idea of space, other than regarding it as a place where one dwells. The Greek language did not even have a word that would indicate spatiality as a concept; space was regarded only in relation to objects, and not as an independent entity.

The next phase of the study of spatiality and text is marked by the ideas of Bakhtin and Florensky. They both believed in the importance of studying space in conjunction with time. Florensky stresses the ubiquity of space and specifies that poetry employs elements that deal with spatiality and space in a no less meaningful manner than the visual arts. Later in the twentieth century, the semioticians discuss the role of space in the text, in their works, and developed into an elaborated system. While they disagree about the role of time in the chronotope, they agree on the significance of language in relation to space. Language is understood as metaphorical semiotic space; to communicate we have to be within that space. Moreover, according to Lotman, the process of interpretation is only possible within the semiosphere – a space that functions as a precondition for any communication. Yi-Fu Tuan’s study provides a relevant

conceptual distinction between space and place, proving the abstract nature of the former. He also suggests the necessity of motion in relation to space, saying: “Space ... is given by the ability to move” (12).

JOSEPH BRODSKY AND SPACE

While the works of Joseph Brodsky often examine space in direct conjunction with time, one should not disregard the importance of space on its own, as it is sometimes even outside of the chronotope, in which the “chronos” element is often given priority in the time-space continuum. Space is a major theme in Brodsky’s poetic world. His famous memoir “A Room and a Half” (1986) uses a spatial measurement in its title; his genuine fascination with the geometry of St. Petersburg is indisputable; his numerous references to space in his poems – all indications point to Brodsky’s undeniable preoccupation with the theme of space, *prostranstvo*. Furthermore, as the scholar David Bethea observes: “[Brodsky] is probably the most traveled Russian poet ever, endlessly searching space for the answers to time and history” (*Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* 166). Perhaps traveling could be both the result of and reason for his fascination with space.

The uniqueness of Brodsky’s approach lies in his comprehensive understanding of the notion of space. As with a mythological cosmology, the reader senses the importance of the fact that space is filled with objects and is actualized through them. Brodsky plays with the primeval value of spatiality as the container of objects⁹ and examines the space-

⁹ Brodsky’s understanding of objects and things is similar to Viktor Shklovsky’s “объект художественного изображения,” which is being defamiliarized. For more, see “Art as

object interdependence, as well as their conflict. The place-space distinction in Brodsky's works is often channeled through objects. The familiarized space, what others would call place, for Brodsky becomes simply "object filled space,"¹⁰ with certain feelings attached to the objects and a venerating and submissive attitude towards the space. Furthermore, the poet's idea of the chronotope is shaped by his mysticism (that is skillfully channeled through his discussion of the mundane aspects of *byt*), which resonates with Florensky's ideas about space. Brodsky's views on the most important elements of chronotope duality shift throughout his works, but the emphasis on the deterministic omnipresence of the time-space continuum remains one of his chief approaches to the issue.

Another lens through which Brodsky discusses space is language; thus his views resonate with the concepts proposed by semioticians. For Brodsky, language often functions as space, whether by creating safe territory for the marginalized figure of the poet, or by functioning as the border between time and non-existence (*nebytie*).¹¹ Besides, as the art historian Era Korobova notes: "... within the context of any given poem [space] can take on different and contradictory meanings" (qtd. in Losev and Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky: The Art of a Poem* 101). Often, however, all of these approaches merge, constructing a convoluted microsystem: the space of Brodsky's poem.

This study focuses on Brodsky's later poetry, as it touches upon the theme of space in a more explicit and more intricate manner. His 1988 poem "Novaia Zhizn'" is a

Technique" (1917). In addition, Brodsky's "вещи" obtain their own social *bytie*, similar to humans.

¹⁰ With some exceptions; usually the texts that explicitly talk about St. Petersburg.

¹¹ For further discussion on the idea of *nebytie*, see chapter 3.

rarely analyzed work that nonetheless is a perfect example of Brodsky's encompassing view on space. The first lines introduce space as a unifying element:

Представь, что война окончена, что воцарился мир.

Что ты еще отражаешься в зеркале. Что сорока

или дрозд, а не юнкерс, щебечет на ветке “чирр.”

Что за окном не развалины города, а барокко

города; пинии, пальмы, магнолии, цепкий плющ,

лавр. Что чугунная вязь, в чьих кружевах скучала

луна, в результате вынесла натиск мимозы, плюс

взрывы агавы. Что жизнь нужно начать сначала. (*Sobranie* 483)

First of all, the poem thoroughly examines the notion of space – the sheer length of the work emphasizes the importance of the concept. The poem consists of 72 lines and 9 stanzas.

The narrator begins the poem by establishing a sense of peace after an unnamed, abstract war. This feeling of peace is made possible by (re)arranging space in a certain manner. For example, the baroque style that the author references is often associated with beauty in a general sense, and, as Viktor Kulle points out, with the English metaphysical poetry of which Brodsky was so fond. Peace, therefore, is connected to a space that, while being a physical object-related entity, also carries metaphysical elements to it.

Nevertheless, a few lines down, the narrator connects space – which has just been defined through objects arranged in an orderly fashion – to language, whose role is highlighted as more important than that of people: “Люди выходят из комнат, где стулья как буква “б” / или как мягкий знак” (*Sobranie* 484). This line contains two important points: first, the agency of space that gives it the capacity to force people out, *вытеснять*, and secondly, space’s connection to language. Mikhail and Yuri Lotman note the ability of Brodsky’s space to expel or evict. In their article, “Между вещью и пустотой,” they state, “...речь идет о чем-то более общем – о вытеснении человека из мира, об их конечной несовместимости....Однако “вытеснённость” поэта, его место “вне” – не только проклятие, но и источник силы – это позиция Бога.” Thus, on the one hand, our eventual *вытеснённость* from the space of objects refers to our finite nature – our ultimate orientation towards nonexistence – *nebytie*. On the other hand, the poet is a *вытесненная* figure as it is, especially a poet in exile.

The poet and critic Michael B. Kreps interprets one of the Brodsky’s earlier poems, “Pen’ e bez muzyki” (1970), through a similar lens of space’s agency:

Рассмотрим же. Всему свой срок,
поскольку теснота, незрячесть
объятия – сама залог
незримости в разлуке – прячась
друг в друге, мы скрывались от
пространства, положив границей

ему свои лопатки, – вот

оно и воздает сторицей. (*Sobranie* 182)

In his book, *O Poëzii Iosifa Brodskogo*, Kreps points out space's agency, claiming that the separation of the characters of the poem marks the revenge of a personified space (93). The lovers minimized the space between them and for that are being punished. Not only will they eventually be evicted from the space in the future into *nebytie*, but now they are being thrown into different spaces, making their parting an intervention on space's behalf.

In “Novaia Zhizn’,” people leave the room, but the language remains; hence, we see that people are not the only agents of language. The furniture that fills the space occupies the semantic role. Therefore, language is bigger than the poetic “I,” because the latter can be replaced after exiting. Furthermore, the basic elements of language (letters, symbols) that “спасают от головокруженья” help one stay sane and not be as overwhelmed as one would be, had one not been “grounded” by language. In other words, space is filled with objects that function as a medium for language, whereas people (including the poet) are not necessary components for the materialization of metaphysical language. It is people that require the space of language in order to function, not vice versa.

In addition to the language of letters, Brodsky introduces his idea of mathematics and its symbols¹² as part of language as well: “Они не нужны, никому, только самим

¹²It might be suggested that Brodsky's interest in the intersection between mathematics and poetry is a result of his fascination with English metaphysics, especially the work of

себе, / плитняку мостовой и правилам умноженья.” In the interview with Valentina Polukhina, Brodsky states: “[Ц]ифры тоже как элемент языка. То есть это такое, как бы сказать, если говорить о векторе, то это вектор в ничто” (431). The emphasis that mathematics is language allows the poet to articulate the abstract nature of language. Language is another step towards abstraction, similar to the manner in which Pythagoras understands mathematics as the most adequate expression of transcendental concepts. In “Polden’ v komnate” (1978), Brodsky even claims that sometimes the language of numbers can speak more loudly than words alone:

Мысль о пространстве рождает “ах”,

оперу, взгляд в лорнет.

В цифрах есть нечто, чего в словах,

даже крикнув их, нет. (*Sobranie* 366)

In this stanza, the poet connects space, language and mathematics as having the same origin, yet places the latter on a higher pedestal. For Brodsky, language, including mathematical language, is primarily a space – a destination to which we are headed – however, mathematical language allows us to talk about this destination in more transcendent terms.

In her interview with Brodsky, Valentina Polukhina asks the poet to define language. He replies: “[Язык – это] нечто мистическое. Нечто огромное. Неясно, откуда он взялся. В языке всего столько, что мы не используем и одну десятую его

John Donne. For example, see Donne’s *The Primrose* or *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*.

богатства. Тот, кто дал нам язык, больше нас. Дающий всегда больше того, кому он дает. Мы пришли в язык, а не создали его. Мы открываем язык, каждое поколение открывает язык ” (439). In other words, language, besides having a metaphysical, even mystical nature, is something into which we come. We enter language as a sacred space.

At the end of stanza 8 of “Novaia Zhizn’,” Brodsky continues:

Многое можно простить вещи – тем паче там,

где эта вещь кончается. В конечном счете, чувство

любопытства к этим пустым местам,

к их беспредметным ландшафтам и есть искусство. (*Sobranie* 485)

Here, the poet reiterates the hierarchy of the object-space relationship: objects cease to be, and the true poet is the one who, as Florensky notes, is capable of perceiving pure space in the context of this hierarchy. Objectless spatiality is harder to conceptualize, but that is what makes it an enticing entity for a poet, who uses such opportunities to broach that space before it evicts him.

This idea of a poet occupying only a little space in the periphery occurs in various poems. For example, in “Primechanie k prognozam pogody,” written in 1986, we read:

Узнать,

что тебя обманули, что совершенно

о тебе позабыли или – наоборот –

что тебя до сих пор ненавидят – крайне

неприятно. Но воображать себя

центром даже невзрачного мироздания

непристойно и невыносимо. (*Sobranie* 487-88)

David Bethea notes that “self-deprecating wit is the special signature of the poet” (“To My Daughter” 252), and in this case, the self-deprecation is made evident through limiting one’s place in space. Time and again, the poet establishes the hierarchical order in which space is greater than objects, but the latter are metaphysically greater than humans. As the scholar G. S. Smith puts it: “... for him, matter is not fundamental and inert, but in fact is more human (that is, spiritual) than human beings. But Brodsky’s materialism is not a humanist attitude: for him, man is not the measure of all things, but in fact stands below animals and matter in the hierarchy of creation” (409).

Likewise, in “Pchely ne uleteli, vsadnik ne uskakal. V kofeine...” (dated 1989), Brodsky summarizes this idea of space being superior to humankind:

Жизнь без нас, дорогая, мыслима – для чего и

существуют пейзажи, бар, холмы, кучевое

облако в чистом небе над полем того сраженья,

где статуи стынуг, празднуя победу телосложения. (*Sobranie* 510)

The sheer existence of space and the entities that fill it emphasize for the poet the fact that people are not the central figures of the universe. He delivers this verdict by

stating an obvious yet unpalatable truth: the world will continue to function after we cease to exist. Space is what will remain.

A few years later, not long before his death, Brodsky writes “Posviashchaetsia Piranezi” (1995):

В худшем случае, карандаш
или игла художника изобразят пейзаж
без нас. Очарованный дымкой, далью,
глаз художника вправе вообще пренебречь деталью
– то есть моим и вашим существованьем. Мы –
то, в чем пейзаж не нуждается как в пирогах кумы. (*Sobranie* 613)

First, Brodsky points out that the main occupation of an artist is interaction with space. This relationship, however, is not one of equals: space will prevail, and a new generation of artists will come to try to comprehend it through their art. The lyrical speaker and his alter-ego of the poem will vanish, as they are merely “a detail,” upon which space does not depend for its existence. For the narrator, this rather somber realization is viewed as the “worst-case scenario,” yet is accepted as an inevitability, because, as he states a few lines down, space has a habit of disposing of things as it wishes.

Brodsky begins to develop the tone of self-deprecation of one’s relation to space in the 1970s in his 1977 poem, “Piataia godovshchina,” in which he writes:

Теперь меня там нет. Означенной пропаже

дивятся, может быть, лишь вазы в Эрмитаже.

Отсутствие мое большой дыры в пейзаже

не сделало; пустяк; дыра, но небольшая... (*Sobranie* 398)

In Brodsky's poetical system, space serves as the only entity within which one can function and use language: the semiosphere. Humans' presence in this space, however, is limited by time, and their eviction from the space that they inhabit is unavoidable. Still, the poet repeatedly employs space to assert that people's existence in it is their chief defining element.

The semiosphere as a linguistic space is referenced in another Brodsky poem, "Vertumn," dated 1990.

Но менее странным был факт, что меня почти

все понимали. Дело, наверно, было

в идеальной акустике, связанной с архитектурой. (*Sobranie* 526)

The narrator claims that a perfectly arranged space facilitates communication, emphasizing the interconnectedness of spatiality and language. Echoing the idea of the importance of space in establishing peace, as examined above in "Novaia zhizn'," here, architecture – organized space – enables effective discourse, without which peace is unthinkable. Hence, the interrelation of space and language pushes humans downward in

the world order, but emphasizes a person's dependence on it, as a species whose well-being hinges upon language.

While there is a certain determinism in the poet's view on space, Brodsky is not ready to fall into total anti-humanism, and he stresses the interconnectedness of the poet and space. The very last stanza of "Nazidanie" (1987) reads:

пространство, которому, кажется, ничего

не нужно, на самом деле нуждается сильно во

взгляде со стороны, в критерии пустоты.

И сослужить эту службу способен только ты. (*Sobranie* 492)

When one becomes aware of the ubiquity of space one acquires the power to ascribe qualities to space, determining in a primeval manner whether it is "good" or "bad." Brodsky advises resorting to this "когда ты невольно вздрагиваешь, чувствуя, как ты мал." Therefore, this judgment of the value of space is given to humankind in order to help overcome the dread of one's insignificance. It is interesting that the poem claims that space itself needs the application of such assessments and evaluations. Space therefore admits humans' ability to use language as the most valuable feature of humankind.

Furthermore, the space conquered by objects is fighting for the right to be present, of which it has been deprived by the things that people use. In "Nariadu s otopleniem v kazhdom dome..." (1993), Brodsky touches upon the concepts of absence and void:

Наряду с отоплением в каждом доме

существует система отсутствия. Спрятанные в стене

ее беззвучные батареи

наводняют жильё неразбавленной пустотой

круглый год, независимо от погоды,

работая, видимо, от сети

на сырье, поставляемом смертью, арестом или

просто ревностью. (*Sobranie* 545)

So far in this thesis, we have focused on space that is filled with objects that exist in the time-space continuum and will eventually cease to exist. These objects, according to Brodsky's lyrical speaker, are still more important than humans, simply because their longevity surpasses that of humans. In this last poem, however, mysterious and eerie space is viewed as an independent entity that is usurped by objects, but whose autonomy will never be conquered. Space is a silent "система отсутствия," and "неразбавленная пустота," which is connected to physical death and the death of freedom.

The lyrical speaker continues:

Узурпированное пространство

никогда не отказывается от своей

необитаемости, напоминая

сильно зарвавшейся обезьяне

об исконном, доледниковом праве

пустоты на жилплощадь. (*Sobranie* 545)

The narrator defines one who dwells in the space of their apartment as a “зарвавшейся обезьяной.” The word “зарвавшимся” usually refers to those who overestimate their power and rights. For Brodsky, people taking up space are just monkeys (meaning they are still stuck on the previous step of evolution, which most notably for the poet includes the lack of language) who believe that they can possess space. In her interview with Valentina Polukhina, the poet Tatiana Scherbina recalls “...[Brodsky] always maintained that emptiness is not the most frightening thing; worse is the degradation which we are witnessing today...” (392). In his famous poem “Fin de Siècle” (1989), Brodsky uses enjambment to highlight his attitude to what he perceives as moral decline.

Новые времена! Печальные времена!

Вещи в витринах ...

... вы приравниваете к мечте

человечества – в сущности, от него

другого ждать не приходится -- о нео-

душевленности холуя и о

вообще анонимности. Это, увы, итог

размножения. (*Sobranie* 507)

“Нео-одушевленность” thus creates a double meaning. First, the obvious: inanimacy. Material objects are inanimate entities that fill up space and, misleadingly (according to Brodsky), occupy the highest place in the world-order of one’s imagination. Secondly, the enjambment emphasizes the “нео” part that alludes to the meaning of new. A new kind of “soulfulness” for Brodsky is a preoccupation with the material, which ironically leads to the loss of the soul and to degradation.

Likewise, in the later stanzas of “Nariadu s otopeniem v kazhdom dome...” the reader sees that in this era of materialism and false belief, people rule over space:

Отсутствие есть всего лишь

домашний адрес небытия,

предпочитающего в итоге,

под занавес, будучи буржуа,

валунам или бурому мху обои.

Чем подробней их джунгли, тем несчастнее обезьяна. (545-46)

The obsession with the material, therefore, becomes the “подробные джунгли.” As the scholar Maija Könönen points out, the overflow of things – the congestion of space with meaningless objects – is one of the major features of the modern world in Brodsky’s opinion. Mediocrity and standardization are forcing space to expand. People believe that they can own space and instead of relating to space as they should (i.e. define

it as either “bad” or “good” and embellish it with architecture). In addition, they attempt to fill it with objects that create the illusion of dominance over space. G.S. Smith asserts that in contemplating space, Brodsky “...invests these geographical and climatological preferences not just with aesthetic, but also with moral and ethical significance” (408). Therefore, according to the poet, the way people treat and view space is of ethical value. Besides, one needs to know his or her place in the world hierarchy, which underscores space’s autonomy and agency and humans’ powerlessness. Nevertheless, one’s judgement about space does not change his or her place in the hierarchy.

Such a view might seem inhumane. The Russian poet Elena Shvarts comments on this feature of Brodsky’s poetry when asked: “You said of Brodsky’s new way of thinking that it was alien to the Russian mindset. What exactly did you have in mind? – [His] coldness and rationality. They are not major characteristics of Russian poetry. It is characterized by deep inner emotional turmoil” (Polukhina 261). Brodsky’s view on space follows this description: for him, space is a notion with which, as Czesław Miłosz notes, humanity is at odds: “Man against space and time. These two words which are crucial for his poetry are invariably given ominous connotations by Brodsky” (“A Struggle Against Suffocation”).

Space, for Brodsky, together with time, creates a crucial poetic motif that permeates all of the poet’s works and serves as the background for other themes. He constantly uses geometrical terms not only to describe individual places, but also his personal cosmology. For instance, in “Vid s Kholma” the narrator says: “Вот вам большой набор / горизонтальных линий. Почти рессора / мироздания” (*Sobranie* 550). Therefore, Brodsky assigns physical attributes to space in order to regard it in an

often-metaphysical manner, in which space becomes a universal repository of things and language, an omnipresent agent that is higher than human beings. As Mikhail Lotman observes: “And so for Brodsky an empty space, if not transcendental, is at least otherworldly; it is codified in images almost sacred ... This emptiness, this void, is the material of things – it is their essence – or rather, their absolute remainder. It is precisely because there is a void that the thing is not finite” (*Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* 253-254).

It is important that Brodsky introduces new semantic layers to the notion of space, not only in conjunction with time but also as an independent entity. It is often impossible to ascertain which aspect of the chronotope Brodsky regards as more significant, as his lyrical speaker and his own interviews make contradictory claims about the nature and role of spatiality in relation to the time-space continuum. He also balances between the ancient understanding of space and more contemporary views on it.

Toward the end of his life, Brodsky establishes a metaphysical system of space in relation to language and physical objects. In this paradigm, the role of a poem is to recognize the power of space and appreciate language, which, according to Brodsky, we enter as a form of spatiality and without which we cannot function. The poet is destined to live in anticipation of an eviction from space that resonates with the notion of exile that is so crucial for Brodsky’s poetic worldview. Moreover, it is the poet’s responsibility to use his language to provide space with his judgement. Vain attempts to possess spatiality by obtaining objects that fill it only serve to debase humanity. Carl Proffer recalls Brodsky’s words: “[T]he first thing is knowing the dimensions (*масштаб*) of things and

knowing his [person's] place in the chain of things" (Polukhina 239); and that requires a deep understanding of space.

CHAPTER 3

НЕБЫТИЕ

Что, в сущности, и есть автопортрет.
Шаг в сторону от собственного тела,
повернутый к вам в профиль табурет,
вид издали на жизнь, что пролетела.
Вот это и зовется “мастерство”:
способность не страшиться процедуры
небытия – как формы своего
отсутствия, списав его с природы.

Joseph Brodsky, “Na vystavke Karla Veilinka” (1984)

The last aspect in the triad of the present study is nonexistence, *nebytie* (not-being). It is fair to say that nonexistence becomes the focus of Brodsky’s philosophical discourse, especially in his late poems. However, the descriptions of *nebytie*, like the concepts of time and space, do not all align or create a united and comprehensive doctrine. In addition, the reader often encounters the opposite claims about the definition of nonbeing, its nature, and the poet’s feelings towards it. Nonetheless, these ideas are always connected to the time-space dichotomy and are developed through the relationship of nonexistence to the chronotope. I believe that for Brodsky there are at least two kinds of nonexistence. One is the forced *nebytie* related to the state of exile; the other is the universal and inescapable orientation towards death.

The first understanding of nonexistence is linked to Brodsky's views on space and includes eviction. This sort of *nebytie* is defined through the space that Brodsky had to leave, and it might be argued that it originates in the poet's condition of exile. We are going to call it *ne-bytie*, as in *не быть* somewhere. In the case of Brodsky that obviously means *не быть* in Russia, precisely in St. Petersburg. As Arkady Arkadievich Chevtaev, professor at the State Polar Academy in St. Petersburg notes: "События биографического порядка и специфика мироощущения способствовали тому, что проблема бытия/небытия выходит на первый план: перспектива изгнания понимается как перспектива перехода в пустоту" (123). Not being able to write in Russia, being physically separated from what the poet used to view as his home, creates the idea that *ne-bytie* can be understood as *bytie* outside of something.

The other approach to nonexistence is related to the notion of time and its end. This category of nonexistence mostly deals with death or death-related concepts but is not limited to them and can be called *post-bytie*. In "Profile of Clio," Brodsky states: "If we have anything in common with antiquity, it is the prospect of non-being. This alone can engender the study of history, as perhaps it did, because what history is all about is absence, and absence is always recognizable – much more so than presence" (115). The poet connects time and impending nothingness, history and nonexistence, future and past, which, as we have seen in chapter 1, often go together.

Therefore, it can be surmised that emigration, as physical *ne-bytie*, can be defined as time without one's natural space, the space that the poet used to observe and evaluate.¹³ *Post-bytie*, then, is space in abundance without time, when one's time is

¹³ For further discussion, see chapter 2.

completed; it is a condition that is an inevitable result of everyone's temporality and their reflections on mortality. The former sort of nonexistence is, naturally, not universal, while the latter is part of being human, since being human entails looming death.

NE-BYTIE – THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RETURN

In his interview with Polukhina, Brodsky describes his understanding of the development of life and its orientation:

Мы воспринимаем нашу жизнь как линию развития – линейно. Можно предположить, что где-то есть конец. Может быть, там что-то есть или нет ничего. Почему бы не довести эту идею до логического конца? Человек, когда он думает, двигается, он не двигается по линии. Он посылает сигналы во все направления, может быть, где-то эхо откликнется, а чаще не отзывается. (“Vektor v nichto: Interv’iu Valentiny Polukhinoi s Iosifom Brodskim” 439)

For Brodsky, movement in multidimensional directions is the trajectory of life. Such movement does not have to be confined to linearity – the feature he here ascribes to time – and therefore the progress of existence can be defined through the terms of dimensional spatiality as well. Brodsky repeats this idea in “The Condition We Call Exile,” saying: “Exile brings you overnight where it normally would take a lifetime to go” (18).

Therefore, exile, in a sense, breaks the time-space continuum by suddenly placing one in a completely unfamiliar space, leaving one with progressing time. This notion of space alien to the lyrical speaker is touched upon in “V gorakh,” dated 1984:

Снятой комнаты квадрат.

Покрывало из холста.

Геометрия утрат,

как безумие, проста.

The narrator is alone in a rented apartment, where he contemplates his exile. The very idea of loss and rootlessness is conveyed through geometry; exile thus is a form of space that has not yet or never will become one's "place."

As discussed in the previous chapter, in Brodsky's system one of the major features of space is its ability to evict one from it. Hence, we can define *ne-bytie* as the state of being evicted. This does not, however, have to be a negative term, and we can see how his actual physical exile changes Brodsky's view on the idea of *вытеснённость*. In an early poem "Ot okrainy k tsentru" (1962), for instance, written before the poet's expulsion from the Soviet Union, the thought of being outside, in the periphery, is viewed in rather romantic terms, and spatial expulsion is understood as a positive and unifying element that brings people together.

Starting from its title, "Ot okrainy k tsentru" (*Sobranie* 14-18) focuses on movement in space. The poem is composed of 21 stanzas. The first stanza is composed of seven lines, written in anapests. The first stanza prepares the reader for the irregularity in rhythm: there are two feet in the first line, followed by 4 feet, 4 feet, 2 feet, 2 feet, 3 feet, with the seventh line being the longest, having 5 anapestic feet. The rhyme scheme is xAxAxBB. The uneven number of the lines and the fact that not all the lines rhyme create a beat-like rhythm. Moreover, the meter varies from stanza to stanza and reminds the reader of the sporadic pattern of jazz, a musical style that was known to be dear to the poet and is mentioned several times throughout the poem.

The speaker begins his journey in the Malaia Okhta (Малая Охта) – one of the historically industrial districts of St. Petersburg. As he moves toward the city center, the speaker begins to notice aspects of the region that he appreciates. In his interview with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky coins the phrase “poetics of the new era,” and points out that this part of the city is “an antithesis of the center” (*Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim*), that part of the city which is traditionally acclaimed as gorgeous and museum-like. Brodsky asserts that he used to feel the discrepancy between the city center and its periphery deeply, but in this poem, the speaker realizes that “the periphery is the beginning of the world, and not its end. It is the end of the familiar world, but it’s the beginning of the unfamiliar world, which is, of course, much larger.” He goes on to state: “moving to the periphery, you move away (become estranged) from everything and enter the real world” (*Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim*). Hence, the admired center of St. Petersburg for Brodsky is a mystical, decorative by-product of the reality that is concentrated in the outskirts of the city. *Вытеснённость*, then, is recognized as worthy of celebration, as it leads to something greater.

Volkov also suggests that Brodsky’s interest in the periphery is related to the poet’s personal status as an outcast. This is connected to both Brodsky’s biography and the more universal role of the poet as an observer. It is the poet’s estrangement from everything and everyone that allows him to create. “Не жилец этих мест / не мертвец, а какой-то посредник,” “Слава Богу, чужой,” “Слава Богу, что я на земле без отчизны остался” – all these are references to the grateful acceptance of the status of an individual who does not belong anywhere, someone who does not view himself as the center of attention, but rather as a marginal element of society. Furthermore, binaries like “свой -

чужой,” “жилец – мертвец,” in addition to verbs in reference to spatiality, such as “река распласталась” and “гонит вдаль” underscore the role of space in this kind of journey.

НИКОГД

A break from physical walking to a more abstract concept of roaming occurs in the fourth stanza, which, unlike the other 20 stanzas, consists of 6 lines instead of 7, possibly suggesting the fleeting nature of the encounter described as this is also the point in the poem where the reader is first introduced to the addressee of the text:

В ярко-красном кашне
и в плаще в подворотнях, в парадных
ТЫ СТОИШЬ НА ВИДУ
на мосту возле лет безвозвратных,
прижимая к лицу недопитый стакан лимонада,
и ревет позади дорогая труба комбината.

The unusual number of lines in this stanza requires a stop – a change in the rhythm. The speaker pauses to notice an entity that he refers to as “you,” which is later revealed to be his youth. He is not speaking directly to it yet, but merely examining it without introducing it. At this time, “труба комбината” is loud, but for the moment, the poem is focused on the second person; the noise is somewhere behind, while the focal point is the second person. The unfinished lemonade reappears later in the poem and is compared by the lyrical speaker to the value of his life. In stanza four, the drink is not yet finished – life continues, despite his lamentation that the years cannot be returned. The speaker has not yet arrived at his destination, and so he believes that he must continue on. The scholar Boris Roginsky summarizes this idea:

Всякое расставание будет безнадежным расставанием навсегда, и всякая утрата будет бессмысленной, если жизнь – пустой круговорот времен года, но если движение человека и мира бесконечно и поступательно, то, удаляясь друг от друга, от своей прекрасной юности, от отчизны, – мы неуклонно приближаемся ко всему этому, но уже за гранью нашего мира. (“Ето такаиа моиа sverkhidea”)

The poem contains a number of strong verbs of motion such as “несутся,” “вылетают,” and “пробежал,” which create a sense of speeding up that begins after the fourth stanza and reaches a climax in “Невозможно отстать. Обгонять – только это возможно.” In “Ето такаиа моиа sverkhidea,” Roginsky points out, these verbs of motion are accompanied by a reoccurring theme of light in lines such as “Современный фонарь смотрит мертвенным оком / предо мною горят / ослепительно тысячи окон” and “Кто-то новый царит, / безымянный, прекрасный, всеильный, / над отчизной горит, разливается свет темно-синий.” Thus, where there is movement, there is light.

At this early phase in Brodsky’s life, the realization of the repetitiveness of the world order and the ultimate reunion of everyone is connected with darkness and eventual immobility, as all must arrive at the bridge where youth is standing.

Значит, нету разлук.

Существует громадная встреча.

Значит, кто-то нас вдруг

в темноте обнимает за плечи,

и полны темноты,

и полны темноты и покоя,

мы все вместе стоим над холодной блестящей рекою. (*Sobranie* 15)

Here darkness is associated with tranquility and stillness, as well as togetherness. The stanzas thus indicate that all people are moving in different directions, drawn to light, and that this pursuit is repetitive, and, though seemingly individualistic, is undertaken by everyone. The silence, by contrast, is the collective, the destination for all:

То, куда мы спешим,
этот ад или райское место,
или попросту мрак,
темнота, это все неизвестно,
дорогая страна,
постоянный предмет воспеанья,
не любовь ли она? Нет, она не имеет названья. (*Sobranie* 17)

This journey is characterized by a universality that is not recognized by common individuals, however; it is the poet who has the ability to apprehend the journey. Nevertheless, *ne-bytie* serves as a unifying element, to which everyone arrives. This sort of nonexistence is positive and possible to achieve through motion in space, as is evident from the verbs of motion and spatial references. Even the encounter with the narrator's youth (i.e. mental travel in time) is initiated by the speaker's physical walk.

The mood of "Ot okrainy k tsentru" is rather positive. Being evicted from space and moving towards *ne-bytie* is viewed as a universal destiny, in which a poet has a special role. Ten years later, after Brodsky was forced to emigrate, he wrote another poem about the state of nonexistence in relation to the spatial realm. "Odissei Telemaku" however, takes a more somber perspective on the idea of nonexistence.

The poem is divided into two uneven parts and is written in iambic pentameter with no rhyme. It clearly reflects the poet's personal drama of leaving his son in Soviet Russia after being exiled. In contrast to the earlier poem, the pace in "Odissei" is slow, and there are no sharp changes of tempo, no forced speeding up for the reader as the poem progresses. Such a slow, reflective mood and the state of detachment and loneliness thus conveyed are also reinforced by a lack of strong verbs of motion. The poem is very static: Odysseus is stuck in one place.

И все-таки ведущая домой
дорога оказалась слишком длинной,
как будто Посейдон, пока мы там
теряли время, растянул пространство. (*Sobranie* 326)

For the speaker, a waste of time is synonymous to stretching space. Even the word "растянул" is primarily used to describe space (Zubova), and secondly emphasizes the slow plasticity of the tone once again. In the earlier poem, moving is inevitable, as it is a part of life. Here, Odysseus realizes that all the movement he has made so far is hollow and does not lead to anything. Rather, it leaves him alone and does not bring any sense of interconnectedness. The narrator feels he has been outcast, evicted from the space in which he wants to dwell, and has been in some sort of vacuum, or *ne-bytie*.

"Odissei Telemaku" reads as a solemn contemplation of the themes raised in "Ot okrainy k tsentru." It is an examination of one's journey that does not admit company. While in "Ot okrainy k tsentru" there is "разбегаемся все, только смерть нас одна собирает," here, despite the "столько мертвецов," the focal point is Odysseus' physical and mental exhaustion. The narrator is alone and confined in a limited space; the space is

outside of his natural habitat, to which he longs hopelessly to return. Unlike the earlier poem, being a *вытеснённая* figure has not brought peace. The lyrical speaker is left only with nostalgia for the space he had to leave.

“Odysseus” deconstructs the story of a hero coming back home to a faithful family and reformulates the very need of *nostos*: the speaker does not return home. Lacking the physical ability to move, the speaker’s only movement is in his memory, engaging with all he has: a surfeit of time. Furthermore, there is no repetitiveness or hope for any universalizing union – not even death – because the journey is not universal to begin with. Unlike the other form of nonexistence, the *ne-bytie* in Brodsky’s poems after his emigration is a very personal, painful and uncommon version of nonexistence.

Furthermore, in “Odissei Telemaku” the periphery-center dichotomy does not play a significant role as there is no center – everything is blurry. The space outside of the desired space is not detailed, and objects do not matter. This kind of space is not a familiarized place and does not have potential to become such, and therefore the poet loses the ability to ponder it and ascribe qualities to it. Hence the lyrical speaker’s inner confusion and disillusionment: “Кто победил – не помню,” “Мне неизвестно, где я нахожусь,” “и мозг уже сбивается” and “Не помню я, чем кончилась война, и сколько лет тебе сейчас, не помню.” This is not the Homeric Odysseus, with a clear vision of where he is going and where he came from. Homer’s Odysseus shares detailed accounts of his travels with those he encounters on his way back to Ithaca, and he always keeps a focus on the final destination. Brodsky’s *ne-bytie* after emigration is hazy and with no prospect for conscious movement.

Although *Малая Охта* in which “*Ot okrainy k tsentru*” is set is a restricted area within a closed country, the discovery of the beauty of the district introduces one to the unfamiliar, hence widening one’s world. The narrator of “*Odissei Telemaku*” is similarly confined, in terms of space, to an island. Still, his contemplation and excavating his memory do not have the same effect as for the speaker of “*Ot okrainy*” He does not idealize the idea of transcending space and does not find escape. The closest he gets to it is the hope he has of Telemachus having a less troubled life, which is only possible by being estranged from his father, in other words, by staying in different places.

Homer’s Odysseus spends ten years trying to get back home and reestablish order there. He perceives being away from Ithaca as something that needs to be fixed. There is no freedom or true meaning until he arrives there. Brodsky’s lyrical speakers take the notion of alienation and try to deal with it on a different level. “*Ot okrainy k tsentru*” views separation as an opportunity for liberation and a way of widening one’s grasp of the world-order. Ten years later, “*Odissei Telemaku*” deals with a forced kind of rootlessness that seems while expanding one’s perspective to be a mental burden. Both poems deal with spatiality and the notion of *вытеснённость*. While the first text, somewhat naively, understands it as a means of bringing people together in harmony, the latter poem discovers the loneliness and anguish of existence outside of one’s natural environment. *Ne-bytie* as the state of not being somewhere is mentally agonizing; this condition brings one to using fading memory as a tool for moving back in time. Thus, emigration takes away one’s comfortable space and leaves one with an abundance of time in which to contemplate the past.

POST-BYTIE – THE INEVITABILITY OF ARRIVAL

While, according to Brodsky, the ability to sense space is a noble quality that the poet needs to cultivate, the deep understanding of time is linked to one's longing for and fear of nonbeing. Usually, this eerie anticipation is innate in humankind, yet in Brodsky, the perceptiveness of it is especially sharp. As G. S. Smith observes:

The fundamental concern of Brodsky's poetry, expressed ever more explicitly as his career went on, was a longing for absence, even oblivion – an escape from his own individuality and, more generally, from humankind. Brodsky's lyrics eventually give the impression that he would have preferred to have been born a fish or a bird, inhabiting the frigid northern seas or skies. This situation would provide a refuge from the burdens of individuality and history. Brodsky increasingly relished the prospect of the end of the world (from natural entropy, not nuclear disaster or other man-made agency), when everything would become cold, dark, and eternal, with the earth losing its special status and becoming just one more dead star. (408)

There seems to be, then, a certain anticipation of nonexistence on Brodsky's part; his deep acceptance of the inevitability of the end is akin to that of existentialists.¹⁴ The Russian poet Olga Sedakova compares Brodsky's views on death with those of the Christian existentialist Paul Tillich: "I don't think that an awareness of one's mortality is pessimism. It is a necessary precondition of maturity (Paul Tillich's 'courage to be')."

¹⁴ For further discussion on Brodsky's existentialism, see MacFadyen, David. *Joseph Brodsky and the Baroque*. Montreal; Kingston; London; Ithaca: MQUP, 1999.

Without it 'optimism' is mere illusion and turns into neurosis. People who find Brodsky's view of the world 'horrific' are simply afraid to look things squarely in the face" (281).

In fact, though, Brodsky's attitude towards nonexistence is ambiguous. His lyrical speaker often admits the fear of death as a notion that saturates one's existence and poisons it. In his essay "After a Journey" (1978), Brodsky states: "... I babble something about Kantemir, Derzhavin, and the like, while they listen with an open mouth, as if there were something else in the world besides despair, neurosis, and the fear of going up in smoke any second" (80). Life in this telling is nothing more than anxiety about impending death and a profound sense of desperation.

The ambivalence of Brodsky's attitude towards nonexistence can be understood through the notions of hell or heaven; interestingly, the former is viewed more positively than the latter. Tomas Venclova recollects what the poet said before leaving the Soviet Union: "Я не Конрад и не Набоков, меня ждет судьба лектора, возможно, издателя. Не исключено, что напишу 'Божественную комедию' – но на еврейский манер, справа налево, то есть кончая адом" ("O poslednikh trekh mesiatsakh Brodskogo v Sovetskom Soiuzе" 409). Thus, for Brodsky, hell is not necessarily a synonym of *post-bytie*; yet heaven is. He views paradise as nothingness. Mikhail Kreps summarizes Brodsky's understanding of it: "В Раю нечего делать, не о чем беспокоиться, нечего желать, некого любить, не с кем общаться, не к кому стремиться, некуда спешить. Человек в Раю перестает быть синтезом времени и пространства, ибо время умирает в нем, жизнь в Раю – безвременье..." (206). Hell, however, Kreps continues, "не так неприятен и страшен для Бродского, как Ничто, ибо Ад – это отражение форм земной человеческой жизни, и какой бы жизнь в Аду ни была – это все-таки

жизнь со всеми ее чувствами, переживаниями и страданиями. Ничто же – пустота, небытие, жизнь со знаком минус” (206). Therefore, hell can be regarded as a part of the *ne-bytie*, as it still leaves one with earthly passions, while the *post-bytie* is oblivion, where time has ended because in heaven there is “некуда спешить” and it is categorized by atemporality.

In “Pokhorony Bobo” (1972) we read: “Идет четверг. Я верю в пустоту. / В ней, как в Аду, но более херово” (*Sobranie* 211). The narrator is not yet dead, although he realizes that the only true faith he has is the assurance of death. Because the speaker has not yet dissolved into nothingness, he clings to the notion of time and its indicators – “идет четверг” – that anchor him in *bytie*. This resonates with a famous poem written in the same year, “Pesnia nevinnosti, ona zhe – opyta”: “Мы боимся смерти, посмертной казни. / Нам знаком при жизни предмет боязни: / пустота вероятней и хуже ада” (*Sobranie* 217). It is significant that, unlike hell, emptiness is guaranteed to happen, proving again that *ne-bytie* is not a universal condition, whereas nothingness as *post-bytie* is for all.

It follows that life with integrity – and that is the only kind of life a true poet can lead – is an exercise of decay. In the book that he gave his friend Yevgeny Rein, Brodsky wrote this epigraph:

Прислушайся: картавый двигатель

Поет о внутреннем сгорании,

А не о том, куда он выкатил

Об упражненьи в умирании –

Вот содержание “Урании.” (Vail and Losev, *Iosif Brodsky: trudy i dni* 171)

Brodsky calls himself a “картавый двигатель” who wrote a collection of poems not about his place in space (“не о том, куда он выкатил”), but about his attempts to come to terms with the idea of death. The poet is an engine that is gradually burning out in preparation for his demise (упражненьи в умирании). Thus, Brodsky equates life with constant awareness of post-*nebytie*. A similar idea is repeated in his 1985 poem “Mukha”:

смущать календари и числа

присутствием, лишенным смысла,

доказывая посторонним,

что жизнь – синоним

небытия и нарушенья правил. (*Sobranie* 466)

For time, our being in it is inconvenient (смущать календари) and even meaningless. A human’s life is a disturbance in pure Time, and post-*bytie* is the direct result of this interruption. Without people, there would only be pure Time with no distinction between “before” and “after.” Life is, however, essentially defined by looming extinction thus becoming a synonym post-*bytie*.

Вычестъ временное из

постоянного нельзя,

как обвалом верх и низ

перепутать не грозя. (“V gorakh”)

Time, the way we perceive it with clocks and calendars, depends on humans similarly to the way space depends on one’s ability to evaluate it.

Consequently, the inevitability of death makes it seem as if death is an occurrence that has already happened or at least is happening. The future is here, and for Brodsky it is very prosaic. The poet and scholar Ian Probststein writes, “Brodsky ... speaks of the influence of nonexistence on being and brings in the motif of his own worn-out heart in a rather reserved and distanced manner ...” (198). Hence, often instead of directly talking about death, Brodsky examines the trifles of daily life, which becomes his manner of discussing *post-bytie*, because, again, life can be defined as the movement towards death. In “Iz Alberta Einšteina” (1994) the narrator describes this mundane nature of future nonexistence:

Вчера наступило завтра, в три часа пополудни.

Сегодня уже “никогда,” будущее вообще.

То, чего больше нет, предпочитает будни

с отсыревшей газетой и без яйца в борще. (*Sobranie* 609)

“Отсыревшая газета” and the lack of “яйца в борще” would hardly be traditionally viewed as appropriate objects to use in discussing such a serious and terrifying theme as nonbeing. Besides, *post-bytie* is linked to a concrete time frame (в три часа пополудни),

because it is necessary to define nonexistence through concepts of appropriation of time; otherwise the fact of one's existence is too vague and revolting.

Стоит сказать “Иванов,” как другая эра

сразу же тут как тут, вместо минувших лет.

Так солдаты в траншее поверх бруствера

смотрят туда, где их больше нет. (*Sobranie* 609)

Mikhail Lotman notes that in Brodsky's poem-elegies “[н]езначительность – как будто бы – умершего подчеркивает значимость самой смерти” (“Mezhdu veshch'iu i pustotoi”). We see the same here: the ephemerality of Ivanov's life is compared to the deaths that await soldiers. It does not matter if one is in a battlefield or at home – nonexistence is the universal destiny. Or, as Lev Losev puts it: “Элегия, ностальгический по своей сущности жанр, имеет дело не с настоящим, а с прошлым, то есть с проблемой времени – не с жизнью как таковой, а с жизнью в виду смерти” (*Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*). Moreover, in this stanza, it is language that serves as a milestone between existence and nonexistence (сказать “Иванов”); one's life is reduced to the act of speech. This idea of language being the chief distinguisher between *bytie* and *post-bytie* is brought up as well in an earlier poem, “Chaepitie” (1970). The poem is about a female friend of the lyrical speaker who is retelling a dream in which she saw a person she used to know.

Сегодня ночью снился мне Петров.

Он, как живой, стоял у изголовья.

Я думала спросить насчет здоровья,

но поняла бестактность этих слов. (*Sobranie* 196)

That man died, and when she encounters him in the dream, she knows he is dead, yet he looks very much alive. She wants to ask him questions about his health but realizes the absurdity of such questions. It is the ability to have ordinary small talk that would make him truly alive, and, as he is dead, he is deprived of it. The absence of language is what separates Petrov from her, or post-*bytie* from *bytie*. Chevtaev notes:

“Экзистенциальное преодоление ужаса перед небытием возможно только посредством речи” (132), and for this character that is definitely true.

A similar idea is present in a poem dedicated to Brodsky’s father, “Pamiati ottsa: Avstraliia” (1989):

Все-таки это лучше, чем мягкий пепел

крематория в банке, ее залога --

эти обрывки голоса, монолога

и попытки прикинуться нелюдимом

в первый раз с той поры, как ты обернулся дымом. (*Sobranie* 504)

In this poem, the narrator’s father comes back from *nebytie* and complains about the climate, the apartment, and his slippers. It is not what he is talking about that matters as much as the ability to speak that he practices as soon as he is resurrected in the speaker’s dream, as though speech is what separates them.

Next, in returning to “Chaepitie,” the last two stanzas of it leave the reader with a rather romantic view of those who are already gone:

Чай выпит. Я встаю из-за стола.

В ее зрачке поблескивает точка

звезды – и понимание того, что,

воскресни он, она б ему дала. (*Sobranie* 197)

The lady imagines that her deceased friend continues his existence as one of the numerous stars. Besides, as mentioned above, one of the differences between *ne-bytie* and *post-bytie* is that the latter lacks any passions and feelings in its oblivion; and the woman looking at the star that represents Petrov realizes that they will never be able to have a sexual relationship in his *post-bytie*. Thus, lack of language and physical pleasure are, once again, underscored, as traits of heaven or nonbeing in Brodsky’s eschatological system.

Она спускается за мной во двор

и обращает скрытый поволокой,

верней, вооруженный ею взор

к звезде, математически далекой. (*Sobranie* 197)

The last stanza of “Iz Alberta Einšteina,” written 24 years after “Chaepitie,” also employs the idea that stars represent *post-bytie*, although this poem does that in a much less idealistic way:

Так смеркается раньше от лампочки в коридоре,
и горную цепь настораживает сворачиваемый вигвам,
и, чтоб никуда не ломиться за полночь на позоре,
звезды, не зажигаясь, в полдень стучатся к вам. (*Sobranie* 610)

The stars are no longer faraway objects; they are dull (не зажигаясь) and might arrive unpredictably (в полдень). Thus, Brodsky's idea of *post-bytie* loses its sentimental aspect, similar to how his view of *ne-bytie* morphs into more pessimistic. Nonbeing will arrive at a very unexpected time, but its approach is definite. Time and again, the poet emphasizes such features of *post-bytie* as certainty, mundanity and ironically, lifelessness. Being immersed in time, people acquire their temporality as their major condition and constantly move towards nonexistence.

Brodsky's understanding of the state of nonbeing and humans' mortality is multifaceted. If examining it through the lens of the time-space duality, it is evident that there are at least two sorts of *nebytie*. The first one is related to the notion of space. This version of nonexistence is referred to as one's inability to be in a desired place, and in the case of Brodsky this painful incapacity is associated with the poet's state of exile. That becomes clear when one compares works from before and after his emigration: in the later poems, the idea of space in relation to *ne-bytie* (not being somewhere) is more pessimistic and loses universality, as not everyone is destined to undergo the agony of spatial nonexistence.

The second kind of *nebytie* is developed in Brodsky's works in conjunction with the idea of time. *Post-bytie* is the condition toward which everyone is headed. It is

inevitable and its presence is palpable in daily life. While one can see some hope in resorting to linear time in contrast to cyclical pre-Christian ideas of time, towards the end of his life, Brodsky concludes that post-*bytie* in his eschatology does not bring liberation. Nonexistence is also categorized by one's dissolving in pure time; when one's personal time ends, with its calendars, years and clocks, the river of pure time consumes the person and takes away their ability to use language. The role of the poet is, if not to perfectly define this process, then at least to be talking about it.

CONCLUSION

Time and space are the most significant topics for Joseph Brodsky. Throughout his life, as it is evident from his works, he struggles with each of them; they also become the notions through which the poet comes to define other aspects of life. In his book *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, David Bethea states that for Brodsky “[p]oetry is temporalization (or dematerialization) of space, while empire, including social utopias and applied Christianity (e.g. Marxism), is the spatialization of time” (52). The poet thus processes the most crucial aspects of life – language and existence in general – with these two themes. Such an approach brings together aspects of the chronotope, in Brodsky’s thought, with the ideas of death and nonexistence.

Brodsky’s views of time undergo changes due to the poet’s battle with the idea of cyclical time. As a zealous champion of individualism, the poet believes that the repetitiveness, so integral to cyclical time, deprives one of his or her individuality: hence Brodsky’s stress on linear time, which he associates with Christianity. That is why the poet wrote twenty-three Christmas poems: the birth of Christ for Brodsky manifests the breakaway from perpetuity, which he interprets as perhaps the most important event in history. In this sense, Brodsky sees salvation in the individuality of the birth and death of Jesus. Cyclical (re: pagan) time is conquered by the advent of what the poet sees as Western individualism with its roots in Western Christianity.

While Christian concepts help Brodsky to find escape from repetitiveness and “eternal return,” they do not provide hope regarding his understanding of nonexistence. Commenting on the poem “Pesnia nevinnosti” the Russian literary critic Irina Sluzhevskaja writes in “Brodsky: ot Khristianskogo teksta – k metafizike izgnaniia”:

“Это образ небытия, категорически внеположный христианским представлениям. Никаких дилемм при этом уже не решается, никаких выходов не возникает ... Вот почему это стихотворение кажется нам антикульминацией сюжета о Боге – достижением а-христианского дна.” There is no Christian heaven as eternal joy and peace in the poet’s eschatology; there is only nothingness. Brodsky’s *ne-bytie*, as tragic as it might be, highlights one’s individuality: the fate of an exiled poet adds some exclusivity to his or her biography. In *post-bytie*, on the contrary, the only redemption is language, which allows one to create what will remain after one’s death, the only true legacy in Brodsky’s view. Time will absorb everyone, and as a poet Brodsky feels compelled to process this fact linguistically. In his play *Mramor*, one of the characters Tullius, exclaims:

Как сказано – у поэта. Про другого поэта... Классик классиком становится, Публий, из-за времени. Ни того, которое после его смерти проходит, а того, которое для него и при жизни и потом – одно. И одно оно для него, заметь, уже при жизни. Потому что поэт – он всегда дело со временем имеет. Молодой или старый – все равно. Даже когда про пространство сочиняет. Потому что песня – она что? Она – реорганизованное время... Звуки, они, допустим, разные, а секунды – они всегда те же. Но из-за звуков ... и секунды становятся разными. (*Sobranie* 676)

Language, Brodsky believes, does not only allow one to leave a legacy after one's death, but it also affects time by "reorganizing" it. Hence the poet's attitude towards such tools as caesura that both indicate the manipulations of time and cause them. Moreover, language for the poet is a medium for dealing with space and its tendency to "evict" humans. The power of language is tacitly understood and accepted by space, which recognizes its own need to be evaluated by linguistic means, and the poet is the one who takes up this role of assessment. In relation to nonexistence, language serves as a way to overcome one's dread of one's inevitable mortality; by using language to talk about death in trivial terms, one becomes accustomed to the daunting idea. Besides, language for Brodsky, is the link between *bytie* and *nebytie*, and the living's most valuable possession. Therefore, language becomes the only possible conqueror of the time, space and nonexistence triad, thus, enabling a poet, the possessor of language, to gain the ability to break the world hierarchy, in which he, otherwise, would take the lowest level.

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