

WORD – SHAPE – SUBSTANCE: TIME AND HUMAN FORM IN JOSEPH BRODSKY'S POETRY

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Reading Joseph Brodsky's poetry as well as his prose means reading about time. He himself admitted on different occasions, in his prose, in interviews that he was concerned above all with the problem of time. In his essay *A Journey to Istanbul* he wrote: „Space for me is indeed less dear, and less than time. Not because, however, it is less but because it is a thing, whereas time is a thought about a thing. In choosing between a thing and a thought, say I, the latter is always preferable (Brodsky, 1986: 102).“

Thomas Venclova in his analysis of this essay states: „Journey interweaves, in rather complex fashion, personal time and historical time – the fifth, ninth, twentieth and many other centuries. For Brodsky, history is something close and intimate, something physical, something in the blood. The poet is a natural inhabitant of the sphere in which history unfolds, i. e. time (Venclova, 1990: 138).“

Valentina Polukhina in her essay *Similarity in Disparity* cites the poet's own admission she recorded when interviewing him in 1980: that he writes „exclusively about one thing: about time and what time does to a man“ (Polukhina, 1990: 167).

So these were two out of the three starting points which formed the basis for my rereading of Brodsky's poetry: the central position of time in Brodsky's poetry and the interweaving of personal and historical time. The third one is Brodsky's poem *August – Aazyem*, possibly his last poem, written in January 1996, and its analysis given by G. S. Smith in his essay *Long Growing Dark: Joseph Brodsky's August*. In this essay Smith states that „in this short utterance, every formal and thematic aspect is shaped in the manner that Brodsky in effect patented in the course of his three decades as a major Russian poet“ (Smith, 1999: 249). And indeed, the theme of time in the poem is closely connected with two motifs I would like to concentrate on – human form both corporeal and embodied in a statue.

That's why I'm going to focus not only on time but also on its representation in the images of human form. I would like to show how shape and substance is put into words in Brodsky's poetry, and is consistently connected with time – the course of human life and the course of history – throughout his all work.

In his poetry statue always represents an empire and, be it the Roman empire, the Soviet or American empire, there is always present Pushkin's tradition – power and self confidence embodied in stone or metal, forcing people to feel insignificant. Explicitly, the statue is connected with empire in *Torso - Торс* from 1972: *Если вдруг забредаешь в каменную траву,/ /выглядыющую в мраморе лучше чем наяву/.../можешь выпустить посох из натруженных рук:/ты в Империи, друг./.../Воздух, пламень, вода, фавны, наяды, львы,.../все,.../превращено в камень или металл./Это – конец вещей, это – в конце пути/зеркало, чтоб войти./ (253)¹*

The image of a mirror, as will be shown later, is frequently connected with the theme of ageing, but in this context its function is different. Unlike the mirror into which a person looks to see his own reflection, this one invites him into the space „ behind the mirror“ where the passing of ages will reveal to him.

Vertical dimension is frequently stressed when Brodsky presents the images of the insignificant individual in confrontation with symbols of imperial power. The individual is always explicitly or implicitly placed below the monument:

/и там были бы памятники. Я бы знал имена/не только бронзовых всадников, всунувших в стремя/истории свою ногу, но и ихних четвероногих,/учитывая отпечаток, оставленный ими на/населении города./ (453)

Not only a statue with human form but also an obelisk as in *Вид с холма* from 1992 evokes the worthlessness one can feel when confronted with a sign representing the grandness of an empire: */И площадь, как грампластинка, дает круги/от иглы обелиска. Что-то случилось столет назад, и появилась вежа./Вежа успеха. В принципе, вы – никто./Вы, в лучшем случае, пища эха./ (665)*

At the same time, when observed from a historical perspective, these statues represent the deterioration, the decline of any empire, no matter how powerful and compelling it once was. *Металл не вечен* from *Found-*

¹ Numbers in parentheses signify page numbers in Бродский, И.: Сочинения. Екатеринбург 2002.

tain – Фонтан, 1967, at the same time says „empires are not eternal“ and *Что-то случилось сто лет назад*, without saying what happened carries the same message: it is over, it is forgotten. And so a statue is not so much a thing, in my opinion, as a thought of a thing. It is an interpretation of an empire – on the first level it is the empire's self interpretation, it presents the empire as a self confident and of its own strength convinced producer of statues. On the second level it is its interpretation seen through the prism of time and this shows oblivion (*что-то случилось сто лет назад*) and the deterioration of both statues and empires.

A person is thus confronted with time on several levels – there are the reminders of one's insignificance, the representatives of historical time which at the same time reveal themselves as being also subject to time. Then there is the constant awareness of one's ageing and the course of personal time. The latter is frequently expressed through the image of a shadow or a mirror, be it a glass mirror or a water surface – a river or a sea: */это ты там, внизу, вдоль оврагов ты вьешь свою нить,там куда-то во тьму от дороги твоей отбегают ручьи,где на склоне шуришит твоя быстрая тень/по спинке кирпичей.../кто стоит на коленях в темноте у бобровых запруд,/кто глядит на себя, отраженного в черной воде./*(33) */и море все морщинистей, и лица /А ветра нет./*(130)

In *Прачечный мост* the river first reflects the parting of young lovers, their last embrace, then it serves as a mirror to a fisherman who observes in it his own ageing. But the image of young couple is not lost. The unrealized possibility of their lives, the memory of it is reflected in the closing lines of the poem: */Ему/река теперь принадлежит поправу,/как дом, в который зеркало внесли,/но жить не стали./*(60)

Sometimes the person reflected in the mirror is even identified with the mirror – they become one object, as in *Колыбельная Трескового мыса* from 1975: *Как хорошее зеркало, тело стоит во тьме:/на его лице, у него в уме/ничего, кроме ряби.../человек есть конец самого себя/и вдается во Время./*(297)

In *рябь – ripples* time is presented in two ways, as an image of movement on the surface of the sea, the motional image of passing time and at the same time as a visual image of wrinkles on a human face – the traces of this movement, of the passing time.

The identification of a person and a mirror appears in *Полдень в комнате*, here connected directly with the theme of death and also with the image of another. */Мы не умрем, когда наш час придет!/Но посредством ногтя/с амальгамы нас соскребет/какое-нибудь дитя!/* (464)

The child from this poem corresponds with the image of a young man in Brodsky's last poem *Август*. There „ The tanned youth ... takes away the future from you“, */Загорелый подросток/.../у вас отбирает будущее./.../* (Smith, 1999: 249). This *подросток* appears in the third stanza and is thus placed in a parallel position to the mirror in the second stanza, convincing the reader that these parallel images are synonymous – looking into the mirror and looking at the other has the same effect, it makes one aware of one's own ageing and approaching end.

This is not an exceptional case when in Brodsky's poetic texts the other person becomes a mirror, a reflection of one's own desires and anxieties. In other cases, however, it is usually a lover – mirror in which one does not see a reflection of merciless reality but in which one can seek comfort, even though only temporarily. *Венецианские строфы: /Лянет раздеться, скинуть суконный панцирь, /рухнуть в кровать, прижаться к живой кости, /как к горячему зеркалу, с чьей амальгамы пальцем/нежность не соскрести./*(530) Or, as in *Ниоткуда с любовью*, probably one of Brodsky's best known poems, one becomes a mirror reflecting the other in an expression of desperate desire and vain longing: */в темноте всем телом твои черты, /как безумное зеркало повторя./*(429)

From these examples it can be seen that the image of statue in Brodsky's poetry corresponds with what he said about time – that it is not a thing but a thought of a thing. Statue serves in Brodsky's poetry as a thought of an empire – both a self interpretation and an interpretation of an empire. The reflection of human form in a shadow or in a mirror (a mirror – object or a mirror – person) can be put in the same category – it is a self interpretation of a person. When considering Brodsky's definition of time as a thought of a thing it becomes clear why these motifs are so closely connected with time; the person's reflection in a mirror or in the other is not a thing but a thought of a thing, a thought of self or/and the other.

References

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