

# The Past, the Present and the Future in the Poetic World of Joseph Brodsky<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article is devoted to the disclosure of the peculiarities of the individual author's perception of the past, the present, and the future with the purpose of understanding the poetic creativity of Joseph Brodsky. The specifics and representation of the main modes of time in the poet's idiosyncrasy are determined based on the identity of their semantic volume, and it is addressed their role in the language picture of the poet's world. It is given a complex description of temporal designations affected by multiple semantic transformations, reflecting the individual author's vision of the world. The factual features of the temporal units as well as the hidden connotative elements of meaning that create a difficult semantic complex are revealed, which is the language embodiment of the idea of time in the works of J. Brodsky. In the process of studying, the following methods were used: descriptive-analytical method, method of contextual analysis of the text of literature, method for interpretation of the literary text, method of continuous sampling.

**Keywords:** Time; The Past; The Present; The Future; J. Brodsky.

## 1. Introduction

Most of the researchers of Joseph Brodsky's work (Polukhina, 1998; Vanshenkina, 1996) agree that the category of time is the centrepiece in his poetry, founded on the synthesis of philosophical, metaphysical and existential representations (Kreips 1984; Vanshenkina, 1996; Kulle 1998; Polukhina 1998; Sajareva). Time in the poetic context of J. Brodsky not only possesses a universal semantic structure characteristic of the European and Russian language pictures of

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the world, but also a number of specific, individual author's peculiarities that create a unique multilayered image of time on the pages of his works.

The artistic text, as is known, not only contributes to the development of semantic increments in the semantics of lexemes, to the emergence of various kinds of transformations and modifications (Starostina et al., 2017; Spiridonov et al., 2018; Erofeeva et al., 2018; Rakhimova & Kapustina, 2017), but also constitutes a concentrate of symbolic meanings associated with the category of time.

The main modes of time in the lyrics of Brodsky are the past, the present and the future, expressed by lexemes of the same name, synonymic constructions and words transmitting the rhythmicity of time periods. In the poetic works, these temporal layers are a way of reflection by the lyrical hero of his existence about a certain time axis (TS – Ozhegov & Shvedova, 2006; Shatilova et al., 2018).

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The material of the study is the poetic texts by Brodsky, representing the main corpus of the poet's works, as well as the fragments of his essays, interviews and conversations.

In the process of studying, the following methods were used: descriptive-analytical method, method of contextual analysis of the text of literature, method for interpretation of the literary text, method of continuous sampling.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The idea of the present, the past, and the future in the poetic texts of Brodsky conveys the substantives of the same name, used as well as in the traditional vocabulary meaning and in the occasional one, created by semantic transformations, associative links and special compatibility. In addition, the time axis is delimited by other verbal units, such as nouns (*memory, time*), adjectives (*past, present, future*), adverbs (*long ago, now, tomorrow*) and others.

The lexemes the present, the past, the future in the poetic world of J. Brodsky are inherent to the expansion of the traditional meaning ("the present, what is happening at the present time" (TS, p. 394); "preceding the present, the past" (TS, p. 628); "something, which follows the present, the forthcoming" (TS, p. 62)). This is due to the fact that the author provides these lexemes with individual connotations, creating an image of conceptual time. The peculiarity of the author's vision of Brodsky consists in the understanding of time as a sort of absolute, destructively affecting every living thing and tearing and ruining everything in its path. This position corresponds to the understanding of all temporal relations, in particular, the opposition of the past, the present and the future. In doing so, the destructive beginning in each time category is presented in a peculiar way: if the future carries with it the threat of destruction of the present and the endangerment of the past and,

in this connection, it is comprehended by Brodsky most negatively, the present is an elusive moment, which already contains the beginnings of destruction, and therefore at some point, it does not exist, does not have meaning. The past is a present lost forever, events that have already occurred, are familiar and known to the person, and thus do not represent any danger. Consequently, the past in the texts of Brodsky is a possible and acceptable medium of life, where the author finds himself confident and calm.

The past in the works of the poet acquires a predominant role over everything occurring, as often transfers the meaning not of what it was, but of what it is, thus pushing back the plan of the present. In other words, the past becomes the only existing reality, replacing the existence of the present and the approach of the future: *Живем прошедшим, словно настоящим,/ на будущее время не похожим,/ опять не спим и забываем снящих,/ и так же дело делаем все то же* (*We live the past, as if the present, / does not look like the future, / we do not sleep again, and forget sleeping, / and also we're still doing the same thing*) (I.B.). The past in the understanding of the poet prevails not only over the present: *Действительно, прошлого всюду было гораздо больше,/ чем настоящего* (*Indeed, the past everywhere was much more / than the present*) (I.B.), but over the future. The future in the texts of J. Brodsky regardless of the past, it needs him, as the essential predecessor: *Как войску, пригодному больше к булочным/ очередям, чем кричать "ура",/ настоящему, чтоб обернуться будущим,/ требуется вчера* (*As troops, more suitable into the bakeries / queuing than shouting "Hurray", / to the present, to turn out the future, / yesterday is required*) (I.B.3). This position of the author emphasizes the significance and importance of the past, in which the poet sees greatness: *В нашем прошлом – величье. В грядущем – проза* (*In our past, greatness. In the future – prose...*) (I.B.2). Everything described and perceived relates to the works of J. Brodsky to the field of the past, thus forming an idea of the future as a distant past: *Пахнет оледененьем./ Пахнет, я бы добавил, неолитом и палеолитом./ В просторечии – будущим. Ибо оледененье/ есть категория будущего, которое есть пора,/ когда уже никого не любишь, даже себя....* (*It smells like ice. / It smells, I would add, like Neolithic and Paleolithic. / Colloquially – like the future. Since glaciation / there is a category of the future, which is the time, / when you already don't love anyone, even yourself ...*) (I.B.). However, it may be noted that, despite the apparent dominance of the past, it is interrelated with the future and the present and forms relations of syncretism between them. So, in Brodsky's poetic texts, the connection of these temporal categories and dependence of one from the other appear: *Там, где прошлое плюс/ будущее вдвоем/ бьют баклуши, творя/ настоящее, вкус/ диктует массам объем* (*There, where the past plus / the future two / twiddle their thumbs, creating / the present, the taste / dictates to the masses the volume*) (I.B.) or *Как войску, пригодному больше к булочным/ очередям, чем кричать "ура",/ настоящему, чтоб обернуться будущим,/ требуется вчера* (*Like the troops more suitable into the bakeries / queuing than shouting "Hurray", /*

*to the present, to turn out the future, / yesterday is required (I.B.) or Помни, что прошлому не уложиться/ без остатка в памяти, что ему/ необходимо будущее... (Remember that the past is not kept within / without a trace in the memory, that he / he needs the future...)* (I.B.). Consequently, the semantic fullness of the lexeme of the past in the work of the poet consists of the following meanings: "precedence", "past", "represents worth", "memory, recollection", "replacement of the present and the future", "the only possible sphere of human existence".

When considering the lexeme, the future in the texts of J. Brodsky, the following semantic components come to the fore: "the forthcoming", "inevitable", "irreversible", "unknown", "without a person". The traditional meaning of this lexeme ("time and events following the present" (TS, p. 62)) in the works of the poet acquires additional shades. The individual-author's understanding of the future is related to J. Brodsky, with the hero's fear of the unknown. The poet relates to the future cautiously, with fear, since he cannot assume its consequences, does not know what will happen next, however, his imagination, obeying to the negative vision of the imminent time, draws the darkest pictures to the author. This is confirmed by the lexical environment of word forms with the meaning of the future, which has a negative coloring: *Но будущее, в сущности, во мгле (But the future, in essence, in darkness)* (I.B.) or *Грядущее есть форма тьмы,/ сравнимая с ночным покоем./ В том будущем, о коем мы/ не знаем ничего, о коем,/ по крайности, сказать одно/ сейчас я в состоянии точно:/ что порознь нам суждено/ с тобой в нем пребывать... (The future is a form of darkness, / comparable to the quiet night. / In that future, about us / we do not know nothing about anything, / at least, to say one thing / now I am definitely perfectly capable: / that we are destined to be apart / with you to stay therein...)* (I.B.). The understanding of the future as a unique form to separate is evident in many works of J. Brodsky: the future neutralizes feelings and leaves the person alone: *Когда человек один,/ он в будущем, ибо оно способно/ обойтись, в свою очередь, без сверхзвуковых вещей,/ обтекаемой формы, свергнутого тирана,/ рухнувшей статуи... (When a person is alone / he is in the future, for it has the capacity / gets by, in its turn, without supersonic things, / streamlined form, deposed tyrant / collapsed statue ...)* (I.B.) or *В определенном смысле,/ в будущем нет никого; в определенном смысле,/ в будущем нам никто не дорог (In a certain sense, there is no one in the future; in a way, / no one is a dear of ours in the future)* (I.B.). In the solitude and uncertainty of the future, a person can only be unhappy: *Когда человек несчастен,/ он в будущем (When a person is unhappy, / he is in the future)* (I.B.).

In addition, the idea of death is connected with the future in the work of J. Brodsky, the idea of the complete absence of a person: *Будущее всегда/ настает, когда кто-нибудь умирает./ Особенно человек. Тем более – если бог... (The future always / there comes, when someone dies. / Especially a person. All the more – if God...)* (I.B.). In general, in the poet's understanding, the future rejects the person,

it is thought without people, there is no place for them: *Помни, что люди съезжают с квартиры только когда возник/ повод: квартплата подпрыгнула, подпали под сокращение;/ просто будущему требуется помещение/ без них (Remember that people move out of an apartment only when a cause arises / reason: the rent has jumped, they fell under the reduction; / just the future requires a room / without them)* (I.B.). The only thing that will remain after humanity in the future is human speech, which is per se valuable: *и при слове "грядущее" из русского языка/ выбегают мыши и всей аравой/ отгрызают от лакомого куска/ памяти, что твой сыр дырявой. <...> От всего человека вам остается часть/ речи. Часть речи вообще. Часть речи... (and with the word "future" from the Russian language / mice run out and throughout Arava / chew away from a tasty treat / memory that your cheese is full of holes. <...> From the whole person you have a part / speech. Part of speech in general. Part of speech)* (I.B.). Moreover, as A. Chevtaev notes in his work “Narrative as a realization of the concept of time in the later lyrics of J. Brodsky,” even the possibility of the existence of a human language in the future in the poet’s works is questionable: *Крики дублинских чаек! Конец грамматики, / примечание звука к попыткам справиться / с воздухом... / раздирали клювами слух, как занавес, / требуя опустить длинноты, / буквы вообще, и начать монолог свой заново / с чистой бесчеловечной ноты (The cries of Dublin seagulls! The end of the grammar, / The note of the sound trying to cope / with the air ... / torn by beaks out loud, like a curtain, / demanding to lower longs, / letters in general, and to start a new monologue / with a pure inhuman note)* (Chevtaev, 2019).

The most important means of expressing the content of the future in the texts of J. Brodsky, besides the substantive of the same name, are the names of the units of time measurement and uncertain time periods, indicating the moment of fulfillment of a future event, the following events in time (later), the proximity of the future in comparison with the present (now). The analysis of definitions, that actualize the implicit senses of time in the poet's works, showed that the volume of the concept of the future is composed by such components as “moment”, “misfortune”, “loneliness”, “darkness”, “end of life”, “absence of man”, which give a negative connotation to the future and reflect the world view of time by J. Brodsky himself.

The paradoxical perception of time arouses in the works of the poet the identity of the past and the future, which forms the present (*Там, где прошлое плюс/ будущее вдвоем/ бьют баклуши, творя/ настоящее... (There, where the past plus / the future two twiddle their thumbs, creating / the present...)* (I.B.)). An individual-author's understanding of the present is manifested in its indispensable connection with the past: *...Не нужно быть сильно пьяным,/ чтоб обнаружить сходство временного с постоянным/ и настоящего с прошлым (...you do not have to be badly drunk, / to find the similarity of temporary with the permanent / and the present with the past)* (I.B.) or *Два прошлых дают одно/ настоящее (Two pasts give one / the present)* (I.B.). Another feature of the poet’s understanding of the present in

conjunction with the past is noted in the work “The emigrant note in J. Brodsky’s Lyrics of the 1970s- 1980s” I. Zahariyeva, who asserts that the present lived by the author “joined the general category of time and conceived by the literary artist words as a part of the universal historical past” [Zahariyeva]. This ideological position of J. Brodsky was directly reflected in his poetic works: *сказуемое, ведомое подлежащим, / уходит в прошедшее время, жертвуя настоящим* (*predicate, slave subject, / leaves the past tense, sacrificing the present*) (I.B.).

The main means of updating the present in the texts of J. Brodsky are the nominations of parts of the day, months, the names of the units of time measurements indicating the correlation of time periods with the plan of the present. In addition, verb forms, grammatical transpositions and their contextual environment play an important role in the designation of the plan of the present.

In addition to the means of nomination, various types of predication are an important way of expressing the length of time in the texts of J. Brodsky. Predicates dominate in the works of the poet, expressed in nouns and adjectives, verbs and adverbs. These predicates are used to characterize time periods, and enable them with special features that create a conceptual image of time. The bright expression in the artistic texts of J. Brodsky finds a verbal predicate expressing actions or states, and endowing temporal units with anthropomorphic characteristics (impersonation technique). As a result of the analysis of words in the predicate function, it was established that the past, the present and the future in the texts of J. Brodsky are particularly presented in many different ways, and contain the following poetically actualized components of meaning: the past – “past”, “represents worth”, “memory, recollection”, “life”; the present – “something non-existent, elusive, illusory”; the future – “the coming of something new, unknown, representing a danger to the person.”

#### **4. Summary**

Temporal units (the past, the present, the future) in the works of the poet contain within the semantic structure both the main nominative generalized meanings and the individualized ones, formed by the author's intention and generated by the text. The poetic language of J. Brodsky is characterized by a variety of semantic shades of temporal lexemes and their conceptual interpretation, issuing the unusual thinking and cosmovision of the author.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Thus, the past, the present and the future in the poetic works of J. Brodsky are objectified in a significant amount of linguistic means and have a particular individual author's content. Temporal units become a key component of the author's

macrocosm, determining the semantic diversity and multidimensionality of the poetic text and including it in the expression ideo-artistic content of the works.

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