

A MEETING OF TWO POETS: JOSEPH BRODSKY'S "NUNC DIMITTIS"

I was lucky to know personally two great Petersburg poets – Anna Akhmatova and Joseph Brodsky. I don't intend to go into the details of the history of my acquaintance with them, especially as I have already discussed it in several publications. My paper is a modest attempt to contribute to an understanding of the dialogic relationship between the "younger" and "older" poet, as well as to analyze this relationship on the basis of Brodsky's poem "Сретенье" ("Nunc Dimittis"), which Kees Verheul called "perhaps the most Akhmatovian [of Brodsky's works]."¹ This poem has often been the object of close readings² but, like every significant literary text, one can analyze it many times and always discover something new. Moments preserved in my memory and journals will play some role here, though not an essential one: they may add grains of new material that could be of some use for Akhmatova and Brodsky scholars.

The two poets met for the first time on August 7, 1961. Akhmatova was half a century older than Brodsky: at the time of their first encounter he was only twenty-one, while she had already turned seventy-one. The young poet knew practically nothing about her and was even surprised to find out that she was still alive. The "Zhdanov resolution" of 1946 condemning Akhmatova for her "anti-national" poetry did not leave a trace in his child's consciousness³. He often said that he didn't understand right away whom he was dealing with. The opposite is not true: Brodsky's poems were immediately appreciated by Akhmatova. Already in the January 1963 issue of *Novyi*

¹ Кейс Верхейл, «Тишина у Ахматовой», Царственное слово: Ахматовские чтения, вып. 1 (Москва: Наследие, 1992), 16.

² See, e. g., Irene Steckler, "The Poetic Word and the Sacred Word: Biblical Motifs in the poetry of Joseph Brodsky," unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1982, 51-78 ; Valentina Polukhina, Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 66-71; Кейс Верхейл, *op. cit.*, 14-20; А. Г. Степанов, «Организация художественного пространства в 'Сретении' И. Бродского», Литературный текст: Проблемы и методы исследования, III (Тверь: Тверской государственный университет, 1997); В. Лепяхин, «Сретение Господне: Событие, праздник, икона, стихотворение И. Бродского», *Slavica* (Debrecen), XXIX (1999), 71-86.

³ Solomon Volkov, Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey Through the Twentieth Century, tr. by Marian Schwartz (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 29.

Mir, Akhmatova included Brodsky's line "Вы напишете о нас наискосок" ("You will write about us on a slant," signed "I. B.") as an epigraph to her poem "Последняя роза" («The Last Rose»). I remember that this first appearance of Brodsky in print – Brodsky being a well-known underground poet by that time – became almost the main topic of conversation in unofficial circles. By 1963 Akhmatova and Brodsky were already close friends. When some young female poets from Petersburg arrived at Akhmatova's dacha in Komarovo, proud of having "all of Brodsky" in their possession, she replied: "It simply cannot be that you have all of Brodsky; I have all of Brodsky right here – he has just gone out to fetch some water." Soon, in January of 1964, Brodsky was arrested: Akhmatova blamed herself for having unwittingly contributed to his arrest, since the KGB followed all of her acquaintances. It was precisely at this time that I myself got to know Akhmatova more closely and witnessed her courageous efforts to help the arrested and later exiled poet. These efforts proved to be successful – Brodsky was released before the end of his term, in September of 1965, while Akhmatova was still alive, and so he was able to see her again. In 1981 he told me that while he was in exile, he knew nothing of Akhmatova's efforts to save him.

Some of Brodsky's poems written in prison managed to reach Akhmatova secretly. She showed me one of them, which became part of the cycle "Инструкция заключенному" (Instructions for the Prisoner). On that same visit to her place, I read Brodsky's poem from which she took the epigraph to her poem "The Last Rose." She said, "I think it's remarkable." As a matter of fact, Brodsky himself was of a different opinion about this same poem, "Закричат и захлопочут петухи" ("The roosters will cry and plead..."). In his dialogues with Solomon Volkov, he categorized it as "rather hopeless."⁴ This is just one of the many examples of the typical differences in opinion between the two poets.

The circle of young poets which formed around Akhmatova in the last years of her life produced, strictly speaking, only one truly great poet, namely Brodsky, but at the time a lot of people placed great hopes on the whole circle. Remembering this time, Brodsky remarked: "Akhmatova believed that a kind of second Silver Age was under way. I always regarded this pronouncement of hers with a certain suspicion, but you

⁴ Solomon Volkov, *op. cit.*, 233.

know, it may well be that I was wrong.”⁵ In my own jottings, I have recorded Akhmatova’s words on this subject: “The poets of Brodsky’s circle form a single school, just as we, Acmeists, did at one point. Their level of technical proficiency is quite high. There are almost no bad verses.” Actually, Brodsky repeated these same words almost verbatim towards the end of his life, when describing the young poets who would send him their poetry from Russia. Perhaps in both the former and the latter case, these pronouncements were an exaggeration.

As a matter of fact, Akhmatova was fully conscious of the fact that her experience was not fully comprehensible to the young people who grew up in less harsh times. I remember well our last conversation. It happened at the end of 1965 – I think it was after the release of Brodsky, whom I met personally only after Akhmatova’s death in 1966. On this occasion she said the following: “The young generation already know a lot, of course, but they still don’t and will never know what dirt and blood went into the making of our current life, such as it is.”

Brodsky dedicated nine poems to Akhmatova. In addition, his poem “Дидона и Эней” (“Dido and Aeneas”) is also connected with Akhmatova, and so is perhaps “Похороны Бобо” (“The Funeral of Bobo”) – something that Brodsky himself denied, as far as I remember. Four of Brodsky’s poems have epigraphs taken from Akhmatova, including such a significant work as “Декабрь во Флоренции” (“December in Florence”). A careful investigation will likely uncover many references to and exchanges with Akhmatova throughout Brodsky’s oeuvre. No less important is the fact that Brodsky wrote about Akhmatova, constantly mentioned her in speeches, interviews, and private conversations as a person who shaped to a very large degree, if not completely, his inner world. Brodsky’s existential choices, his notions of values were as if subconsciously dictated by Akhmatova: one can argue that Brodsky internalized Akhmatova, made her a part of himself (he himself probably would have said that he felt himself a part of her). A symbol of this peculiar attitude towards Akhmatova was the fact that Brodsky named his daughter Anna Alexandra Maria, thus uniting Akhmatova’s name with the names of his deceased parents. In a 1979 interview Brodsky said, “... I am in no position whatsoever to objectify her, that is, to separate her from my consciousness [...]

⁵ Volkov, 211.

Everything that I do, that I write is ultimately a narrative about Akhmatova.”⁶ In another interview from 1990, given after the reception of the Nobel Prize, Brodsky said, “I owe her 90% of my views on life (only about 10% are my own)...”⁷

I remember that Brodsky reacted very critically to many popular writings about Akhmatova – including works written by his own acquaintances and friends. He said about one such book: “There was astounding substance behind Anna Andreevna – the same substance that’s at the origin of everything. In this book there’s no trace of it.” The only exceptions for Brodsky were the journals of Lidiia Chukovskaia and especially the outwardly unpretentious memoirs of Mikhail Arlov, who managed to relate examples of Akhmatova’s humor: this humor, always underpinned by stoicism, moral fortitude, and a clear hierarchy of values, was something that Brodsky undoubtedly ascribed to the “substance” that Akhmatova embodied for him. Precisely such humor – though more incisive – was highly typical of Brodsky himself.

What Brodsky learned from Akhmatova above all else was self-irony, a sober outlook on human relationships, on history, and death. For him she was a living incarnation of Petersburg tradition and, in general, of the high tradition of Russian culture. My journal records Brodsky’s words from 1989: “There was a tradition that came from Peter, Kantemir, and it ended with people whom we still found among the living.” By “people whom we still found among the living” Brodsky meant Akhmatova and her close circle. A symbol of that tradition, actually, was the very name of St. Petersburg, and I remember well Brodsky’s enthusiasm when 55% of the population of the “renamed city” voted to restore its former name: he only regretted that neither Akhmatova nor Nadezhda Iakovlevna Mandelstam had lived to see this. Undoubtedly, Brodsky assimilated Akhmatova’s disillusioned, stoic, and scornful attitude towards the totalitarian empire in which both poets were forced to spend most of their lives. Again, I will quote two excerpts from my journal, which relate to this theme. In Brodsky’s words: “The millenarianism didn’t turn only two heads, and at that female heads – Tsvetaeva’s and Akhmatova’s” and “You and I have been very lucky in life: there was always something unexpected ahead. There was an obvious goal – ‘to defeat Barmalei,

⁶. Иосиф Бродский, *Большая книга интервью*, 2-е изд. (Москва: Захаров, 2000), 119-120. (All the quotations of the interviews are taken from that book).

⁷ Иосиф Бродский, *Большая книга интервью*, 471.

Akhmatova would say. And that colored every action of mine.” Barmalei – the comic yet dangerous ogre from Kornei Chukovsky’s fairy tale – was the nickname that Akhmatova’s circle adopted for the powers that be.

Many critics stress the fact that Akhmatova was a moral, rather than professional, model for Brodsky. Brodsky himself spoke about this on numerous occasions. In this respect, Brodsky’s narrative in Solomon Volkov’s book is quite typical: “We were sitting on her verandah, where all our conversations took place, as well as breakfast, supper, and everything else, just as it should, and suddenly Akhmatova said: ‘Really, Joseph, I don’t understand what’s going on. You couldn’t possibly like my poems.’ Naturally, I rose up and began protesting vociferously to the contrary, but to a certain extent, as I look back on it, she was right. [...] ‘The Gray-Eyed King’ was definitely not my cup of tea, like ‘the glove off her left hand.’ None of those things seemed like such great poetic achievements to me.”⁸ In a purely professional sense, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, Khlebnikov and even Mayakovsky (though not Pasternak) were much more important and interesting to Brodsky than the early Akhmatova. Short, epigrammatic, metrically strict verses of the Akhmatovian type are rather rare for Brodsky, with the possible exception of the initial phase of his career: the further he progressed, however, the more he aimed at vast, large-scale constructions, convoluted syntax, vertiginous inversions and enjambements, complex, even shocking metaphors and, above all, at a strictly logical development of the theme. In March 1972 I jotted down his words: “Russian poetics [...] impedes the development of thought and in Russia there is a focus on the small-scale masterpiece. But Russian poetry started with Kantemir who put forth, crudely speaking, a dialectic, an exposition of various points of view and, only afterwards, of his own. Baratynsky and Tsvetaeva were also able to construct such carcasses.” Precisely such “carcasses” were the characteristic feature of mature Brodsky’s poetics, in stark opposition to Akhmatova’s. According to Kees Verheul, Akhmatova focuses on the *res*, whereas Brodsky concentrates on the *logos*: “Brodsky is a Russian poet of the verbose type, not a poet of silence, but of captivating verbal rumble.”⁹ If one is to look for precedents not in Petersburg literature, but in Petersburg

⁸ Volkov, 209.

⁹ Верхейл, 16.

architecture, then one can argue that Akhmatova orients herself towards the Classicism of Quarenghi, whereas Brodsky aligns himself with the Baroque of Rastrelli.

It may be that this opposition of the “simple,” “concrete” Akhmatova and the “complex,” “abstract” Brodsky is sometimes exaggerated. One can find many things that unite Brodsky and Akhmatova from the point of view of poetic technique, and set them apart from, say, Tsvetaeva: interest in the object, reserved tone combined with a high degree of tragic tension, predilection for aphorisms. “Akhmatova is a very capacious poet, and hieroglyphic if you like. She can cram everything into a single line,”¹⁰ Brodsky told Solomon Volkov. The same can be said about Brodsky himself: the only difference lies in the fact that Brodsky’s memorable aphorisms are not contained in short poems but are scattered over a vast space. Akhmatova’s late poems, which Brodsky liked much more than her early ones, and especially “Поэма без героя” (“A Poem Without a Hero”), which he regarded very highly, foreshadow his works with their enigmatic quality and multitude of semantic layers (by the way, Brodsky’s interest in the “beautiful epoch” can, at least in part, be traced back to “A Poem Without a Hero”). It is also noteworthy that Akhmatova knew English and was more interested in English poetry than either Tsvetaeva or Mandelstam – Brodsky apparently inherited to some extent his “Anglophone” orientation from Akhmatova. Finally, the works of these two poets are oriented toward utterance, towards the voice, and one can identify similar characteristics in their respective manners of poetry-reading performance.

On the whole, it is hardly legitimate to treat Akhmatova’s and Brodsky’s poetic connection in terms of anxiety of influence: as Lev Losev rightly points out, in his attitude towards older poets – at least in this specific case – Brodsky was “quite safe from all Oedipal passions.”¹¹ In a 1991 interview Brodsky himself stated: “To say that she influenced or didn’t influence me – that is to say nothing at all.”¹² The intense internalization of Akhmatova resulted in a state where Brodsky didn’t push her away and, moreover, didn’t repeat her, but *continued* her, and this continuation had the potential of leading him to realms quite distant from Akhmatova herself. The key to his relationship

¹⁰ Volkov, 192.

¹¹ Лев Лосев, “На столетие Анны Ахматовой’ (1989)», Как работает стихотворение Бродского: Из исследований славистов на Западе (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2002), 222.

¹² Большая книга интервью, 578-579.

with Akhmatova is given in the play *Mramor (Marbles)*, where one of the characters quotes lines from Akhmatova's poem "Летний сад" ("The Summer Garden"):

Tullius: ... As the poet says:

A swan sails through the ages' repetitive din,
Admiring its faithful competitive twin.

Publius: Who said that?

Tullius: I forget. Some Scythian. Observant tribe, that. Especially when it comes to animals.

[...]

Tullius: Whereas a poet starts where his predecessor has finished. It's like a ladder except you start on the last rung, not the first. And the next one, well, you have to hammer it up yourself... For instance, in that Scythia of theirs, whoever grabs the quill now has to start precisely with that swan. Has to pull his quill, in a manner of speaking, from that white body...

Perhaps the most impressive example of the dialogue between Brodsky and Akhmatova – to continue Tullius' comparison, that "next rung" by means of which the young poet continued Akhmatova's ladder – is the famous poem "Сретенье" ("Nunc Dimittis," 1972). This is one of Brodsky's relatively few poems that can be labeled as purely religious or Christian. It is true that almost every year he wrote Christmas poems which finally came to constitute an entire small book, but "Nunc Dimittis" differs from the Christmas cycle both in terms of subject and in terms of a stricter reliance on the Gospel text.

Brodsky often credited Akhmatova with his understanding of Christianity. There are numerous testimonials to this, for instance, in the discussions with Solomon Volkov: "And with Akhmatova, if you'd never heard anything about Christianity, then you found out about it from her, by associating with her. This was a human influence more than anything else. You understand that you're dealing with homo sapiens, that is, not so

much with ‘sapiens’ as with ‘dei’¹³ (the last sentence was not included in the English translation of the dialogues). It is quite significant that Akhmatova taught one a reserved, not ostentatious, relationship with Christian values: “Well, Akhmatova does have poems that are simply prayers, but after all, any art is essentially prayer. Any art is directed to the ear of the Almighty. [...] A poem, if it’s not a prayer, then it’s at least put in motion by the same mechanism as prayer. On a purely terminological level, this is expressed most candidly in Akhmatova. As a rule, though, a decent person involved in *belles lettres* will remember one commandment: though shalt not take My name in vain.”¹⁴ “Akhmatova never flaunted her religiosity in public. [...] Moreover, there were no icons in Akhmatova’s apartment.”¹⁵

This restraint, unwillingness to take God’s name in vain, which is typical of the best Acmeists (in contrast to the Symbolists and Futurists) was, as we know, transformed into an essential principle by Gumilev: “... beautiful lady Theology remains on her throne, but the Acmeists do not wish either to lower her to the level of literature, or raise literature to the brilliant cold.”¹⁶ Gumilev and Akhmatova replace Symbolist “ecstasy” with humble everyday religiosity – both in their poetry and in their behavior. Brodsky highly respected this model of religiosity, even though he himself was not a religious man and his attitude towards God cannot be inscribed within the notion of faith (“Forgive the personal question: are you a religious man, a believer? – “I don’t know. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.” – “Not religious in the institutional sense, that’s for sure.” – “That’s absolutely for sure.”¹⁷) The profound, solemn reserve is characteristic of both Brodsky’s Christmas poems and even more so of “Nunc Dimittis.”

It is tempting to treat “Nunc Dimittis” within the context of Akhmatova and Brodsky’s shared idea – they discussed the possibility of transposing the Bible into poetry¹⁸. Akhmatova left three poetic retellings of episodes from the Old Testament – her “Библиейские стихи” (Biblical verses) -- “Рахиль” (“Rachel,” 1921), “Лотова жена”

¹³ Volkov, 133; Соломон Волков, Диалоги с Иосифом Бродским (Москва: Издательство Независимая Газета, 2000), 144.

¹⁴ Volkov, 92.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Н. Гумилев, «Наследие символизма и акмеизм», Собрание сочинений в четырех томах, т. 4 (Вашингтон: Victor Kamkin, Inc., 1968), 175.

¹⁷ Большая книга интервью, 565.

¹⁸ Volkov, 92, 225.

(“Lot’s Wife,” 1922-24), and “Мелхола” (“Michal,” 1922-61). It is significant that she worked on the last of these three poems during the time after she had met Brodsky. The younger poet literally stands on “the next rung” – he writes a poem about an episode from the New Testament and, more specifically, about an extraordinary biblical episode in which the Old Testament directly flows into the New Testament. Akhmatova did not retell the Gospels in poetry – she created the image of the Crucifixion only in “Requiem” (which Brodsky obviously echoed in “Nature Morte”).

The English version of Brodsky’s collection *A Part of Speech* (1980) dates the writing of “Nunc Dimittis” to February 16, 1972 (this is the Orthodox feast day of prophetess Anna according to the New Style). Brodsky’s collected works in Russian, on the other hand, give March 1972 as the date of the poem. My journal allows for a more precise determination of the date: “Nunc Dimittis” was written at the time when I was in Leningrad and described in detail in my journal every meeting with Brodsky. I’ll quote an excerpt from the entry of March 29: “[Joseph] showed me his brand new poem – “Nunc Dimittis.” Four days ago he was still only going to write it. The poem is somewhat reminiscent of late Pasternak, though it’s evidently better. According to J., ‘this is about the encounter of the Old and New Testaments.’” I’ve also written down what happened “four days ago,” that is, on March 25: on that day, we (12 people in total) gathered at the apartment of our mutual friend, Mikhail Mil’chik, and Brodsky read some recent poems, including “Nature Morte,” “Nabrosok” (“A Sketch”: “Холуй трясется...”), and “Odysseus to Telemachus.” At that time he was asking around about the details of the Gospel episode – not everything was clear to him on that day.

It therefore turns out that “Nunc Dimittis” was written between March 25 and 29, 1972. Dedicated to Akhmatova, it correlates two dates, both of them close to that four-day interval in March – the sixth anniversary of Akhmatova’s death (March 5) as well as her name day. In her “Эпические мотивы” (“Epic Motifs”), Akhmatova wrote: “Мне дали имя при крещеньи Анна / Сладчайшее для губ людских и слуха” (“They baptized me with the name Anna / The sweetest on people’s lips and ears...”). This name (meaning “grace”) was the name of the mother of the Virgin Mary, as well as the mother of the prophet Samuel. Anna Gorenko was given this name apparently in honor of Princess Anna Kashinskaya, whose feast day (June 12) was the closest to Akhmatova’s

birthday (June 11). Nevertheless, Akhmatova celebrated her name day on the feast day of prophetess Anna of Candlemas, which fell on February 16, New Style (or February 3, Old Style)¹⁹. Thus Brodsky's poem is both a commemorative prayer for the deceased Akhmatova (whose gift of prophecy was acknowledged by many, including Brodsky himself) and, simultaneously, a present on the occasion of her name day, as if she's still living.

The story of the Presentation of Our Lord at the Temple is related in the Gospel of Luke. On the fortieth day after his birth, Jesus was taken to Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord" and "to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Let us quote from Luke (2:25-38):

And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word:

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts be revealed.

¹⁹ See М. Б. Мейлах, «Об именах Ахматовой: I. Анна», *Russian Literature*, 1975, 10/11, 33-57.

And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity;

And she was a widow of about fourscore and five years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

The holy day of Candlemas has been celebrated at least since the 4th century AD and was officially accepted by the Church at the time of Justinian (541-542). In the Orthodox Church this holy day falls on February 2, Old Style (February 15, New Style) and the next day is dedicated to St. Simeon and the prophetess Anna. Simeon's words "Ныне отпускаещи" ("Nunc dimittis," Luke 29:32) are repeated daily by the congregation during the vespers chants at sunset. The story of Simeon and Anna has become surrounded with apocryphal tales. According to one of them, Anna was Mary's guardian during her tutelage at the temple. In liturgical chants Anna is celebrated as an "all-praiseworthy widow," "divinely inspired," "virtuous and glorious prophetess."

Russian folklore plays with the word "сретенье," which means "encounter." The beginning of February is seen as the moment of seasonal change. There are several well-known sayings in this connection: "На Сретение зима с летом встретилаь" ("Winter met summer on Candlemas"), "В Сретение солнце на лето, зима на мороз поворотили" ("On Candlemas the sun turned to summer, and winter to the cold"). The Church understands Candlemas in a stricter theological sense as a meeting of the deity and mankind as well as of the Old and New Testaments: according to theology, he saintly old man was a representative of the whole Old Testament and, simultaneously, a preacher of the new grace. This interpretation, as we have already seen, was especially attractive to Brodsky, whose faith, according to Kees Verheul, developed in "the no-man's land between Old and New Testament, between Judaism and Christianity."²⁰ In terms of religion, Brodsky who was close in many respects to Sören Kierkegaard and Lev Shestov, often said that he preferred the Old Testament to the New because the Old Testament was more elevated and less all-forgiving: in the New Testament he

²⁰ Верхейл, 17.

particularly favored the things that developed the theology of the Old Testament. In one interview Brodsky pointed out an additional meaning of Candlemas – according to him, it can be viewed as a meeting of the end and beginning of life²¹. Some critics have argued that there is a personal element in this poem – a feeling of parental joy: the poet confirmed this, saying: “Besides, this is to some extent an autobiographical poem because my son was born on that day.”²² Actually, in 1972 Brodsky’s son Andrei was already five years old, and they practically never saw each other. David Bethea’s argument that “Nunc Dimittis” deals with the border between two stages in Brodsky’s life – in Russia and in emigration²³ – seems a bit farfetched. Brodsky learned of his impending emigration only in May 1972; according to my journal, on May 1, a month after writing “Nunc Dimittis,” Brodsky still had no clue concerning his emigration.

Some critics have also discussed the connection between this poem and painting. Candlemas has been depicted by Carpaccio, Bellini, Cima da Conegliano and others; Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s remarkable portrait of the prophetess Anna is also well-known. Brodsky himself claimed that his poem is based to a large degree on Rembrandt’s painting “Simeon in the Temple,” of which he had seen only reproductions²⁴. There have been attempts to compare the poem with Russian icons as well²⁵. But the poet once noted that he wanted to compile an anthology of Russian biblical poetry illustrated with icons, and suddenly realized that he wouldn’t be able to include his own poem “Nunc Dimittis” in it²⁶.

Let us examine the text of the poem more closely. It seems unusual against the general background of Brodsky’s poetics. Like the poem “Dido and Aeneas,” also connected with Akhmatova, “Nunc Dimittis” is constructed on the basis of “minus-devices” (to use Iury Lotman’s term). There are no lengthy digressions here, no complicated stanzaic forms, virtuoso rhymes, and much else that is typical of almost any other mature work by Brodsky. Also, there are none of Brodsky’s beloved juxtapositions of elevated style with slang – this poem sustains a restrained biblical (and also

²¹ Большая книга интервью, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 298.

²³ David M. Bethea, Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 172-173.

²⁴ Верхейл, 17.

²⁵ See В. Лепехин, *op. cit.*

Akhmatovian) tone throughout. The formal structure is simple and monotonous: the poem consists of 18 quatrains (72 lines) with paired rhymes – masculine in the first half of the stanza and feminine in the second. It would be useful to remember here Brodsky's words from his essay on Akhmatova, "The Keening Muse": "... love as content is in the habit of limiting formal patterns. The same goes for faith."²⁷

The meter of "Nunc Dimittis" is amphibrachic tetrameter without any innovations. As has already been noted on many occasions, his metric choice is a turn towards the Akhmatovian tradition. Akhmatova used this very same meter in her biblical poems "Rachel" and "Lot's Wife" (in "Michal" the amphibrachic tetrameter alternates with amphibrachic trimeter). Incidentally, Akhmatova also employs this meter in three other remarkable poems: the epilogue of "Requiem" (1940), "ОПЯТЬ ПОДОШЛИ 'НЕЗАБВЕННЫЕ ДАТЫ' ..." ("Once again the 'unforgettable dates' are drawing near...", 1944), and the already mentioned "Summer Garden" (1959). Thus the meter of "Nunc Dimittis" can be viewed as a semantic factor.

In fact, however, the situation here is not so simple. Rhyme schemes and the very stanzaic structure of the mentioned poems by Akhmatova are, as a rule, different from the ones in "Nunc Dimittis" (only "Lot's Wife" is written in quatrains). Furthermore, amphibrachic tetrameter, as some scholars have noted, is also the meter used in Pasternak's Gospel poems "Рождественская звезда" (Christmas Star/Star of the Nativity) and "Чудо" (Miracle) – maybe as a result of Akhmatova's influence. Brodsky loved and highly respected these poems: "I'm very fond of Pasternak's poems from *Doctor Zhivago*. They're remarkable poems, especially 'Christmas Star.' I think of them often."²⁸ We will return shortly to some echoes between "Christmas Star" and "Nunc Dimittis." But let us note for the moment that Pasternak's stanzaic pattern is also different from Brodsky's and, furthermore, "Christmas Star" doesn't always stick to the amphibrachic tetrameter.

As for Brodsky, he makes use of amphibrachic tetrameter on very rare occasions: out of almost 700 works analyzed by Barry Scherr, only 8 are written in it, that is, 228

²⁶ Большая книга интервью, 15.

²⁷ Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 45.

²⁸ Volkov, 225.

lines out of 30,353 total (or 0.75%)²⁹. After “Nunc Dimittis,” this meter becomes exclusively associated with Gospel themes: it is used in the poems “Бегство в Египет” (“Flight into Egypt,” 1988), “Представь, чиркнув спичкой, тот вечер в пещере” (“Imagine striking a match that night in the cave,” 1989), “Неважно, что было вокруг, и неважно...” (“No matter what went on around them, no matter...,” 1990), “Presepio” (1991), “25.XII.1993” (as well as in the much earlier poem “Рождество 1963 года”/ “Christmas of 1963”). “Presepio” replicates exactly the stanzaic structure of “Nunc Dimittis”:

Младенец, Мария, Иосиф, цари,
 скотина, верблюды, их поводыри,
 в овчине до пят пастухи-исполины
 -- все стало набором игрушек из глины.
 (The wise men; Joseph; the tiny Infant; Mary;
 the cows; the drovers, each with his dromedary;
 the hulking shepherds in their sheepskins—they
 have all become toy figures of clay.

Trans. by Richard Wilbur)

The strictly followed amphibrachic tetrameter lends the poem a quality of monotonous solemnity³⁰. It would be useful to remember here Brodsky’s words about Akhmatova and another beloved poet, Robert Frost: “To a certain extent, there is a common trait inherent in both Akhmatova and Frost – the monotone of their meter, the monotone of their sound. [...] We hear the sound of time itself.”³¹ This theme is picked up, by the way, at the end of “Nunc Dimittis” (line 65): “он слышал, что время утратило звук” (“The rustle of time ebbed away in his ears”). The sensation of monotony is emphasized by the fact that the boundaries of poetic feet often coincide with word boundaries throughout a whole line or even two consecutive lines (“И старец воспринял младенца

²⁹ Барри Шерр, «Строфика Бродского: Новый взгляд», Как работает стихотворение Бродского: Из исследований славистов на Западе (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2002), 286 sqq.

³⁰ See on the “neutrality” of the amphibrachic tetrameter: Большая книга интервью, 558.

³¹ Volkov, 85.

из рук” – “The holy man took the babe up in his arms;” “И только на темя случайным лучом” – “And only a chance ray of light struck the hair,” etc.) Extrametrical stresses are relatively few; they accumulate only in Simeon’s prophecy (lines 40-44): “И тем же оружием, Мария, которым / терзаема плоть его будет, твоя / душа будет ранена. Рана сия / даст видеть тебе, что сокрыто глубоко / в сердцах человекoв, как некое око” (“and that very steel which will torture his flesh / shall pierce through thine own soul as well. And that wound / will show to thee, Mary, as in a new vision / what lies hidden beneath in the hearts of all people” – trans. by George Kline). In one line (63) the stress on the first foot is omitted and this omission is iconic: “но в глухонемые владения смерти” (“but rather the deaf-and-dumb fields of death’s kingdom”).

The same effect of solemn biblical monotony is achieved on the level of rhyme and syntax. The rhymes in this poem are traditional and predictable on the whole, as is usually the case with Akhmatova’s. There are frequent isogrammatic and isosyllabic rhymes (твоя – сия, смерти – тверди); the poem is concluded by means of emphatically primitive verb rhyme (случалось – расширялось). Let us note a subtle move, though: the rhymes in the first stanza are based on stressed “а” (внесла – числа – постоянно – Анна), whereas in the fourth stanza they are based on stressed “о” (лучом – ни о чем – сонно – Симеона), that is, they reflect the sound of the names of the prophetess Anna and the old sage Simeon, which conclude the two stanzas respectively.

In terms of syntax, “Nunc Dimittis” contains mostly simple sentences (20 out of 34). 14 sentences (or clauses of compound sentences) start with the conjunction “и” (“and”), which is typical both of the Bible and of Akhmatova’s poetry. Brodsky’s parallel structures have a “biblical” flavor: “от взгляда людей и от взора небес” (“from the looks of men and from the gaze of heaven,” line 10), “что в силах взлететь, но не в силах спуститься” (“that is capable of soaring, yet incapable of descending,” line 28), “Светильник светил, и тропа расширялась” (“The old man’s torch glowed, and the pathway grew wider,” line 72). The compound sentences (as well as the extrametrical stresses) are located primarily within Simeon’s prophecy. These prophecies – unclear and difficult parts of the text by definition – also abound in inversions that are so typical for Brodsky.

A non-coincidence of meter and syntax disrupting the overall monotony is realized by means of enjambements, which are Brodsky's signature. There are numerous enjambements in "Nunc Dimittis," but as a rule, they are not overly emphasized and do not affect the movement of the verses. The one exception can be found in the abrupt enjambements, further complicated by inversions, which set off the theme of the propheticess (lines 54-57): "Лишь голос пророчицы сзади когда / раздался, он шаг придержал свой немного: / но там не его окликали, а Бога / пророчица славить уже начала" ("When Anna's voice sounded behind him, he slowed / his step for a moment. But she was not calling / to him; she had started to bless God and praise Him"). A particularly powerful effect is achieved here through interlinear enjambement: at first it seems that the word "окликали" (calling) refers to God (which indeed turns out to be the case).

The vocabulary of the poem is in unison with its traditional meter, an uncomplicated rhyme scheme and syntax. Brodsky has often been defined as a "poet of the noun." In "Nunc Dimittis" nouns are significantly rarer (and therefore weightier) than is usually the case with Brodsky. Out of a total of 412 words in the poem, only 132 are nouns (or 32.2%; by way of comparison, nouns make up 42.9% of "Lithuanian Nocturne"). On the contrary, the emphasis in this poem is on verbs: there are 79 of them, if one counts participles and gerunds (or 19.3%, as opposed to 13.4% in "Lithuanian Nocturne"). Many words are repeated: there are only 66 nouns which are not repeated, that is, exactly half of all nouns (in "Lithuanian Nocturne" more than two-thirds of the nouns are not repeated). The effect of repetition is further intensified by the fact that Brodsky uses many synonyms: взгляд – взор (look-gaze); тело – плоть (body – flesh); шум – гул (noise – rumble); промолвил – сказал (uttered – said), etc. The most frequently used word in "Nunc Dimittis" is **Maria** (6 instances): it is she, not Simeon, Anna, or even the infant Jesus, who turns out to be at the heart of the poem. It is curious that the name Maria is also located at the geometric center of the poem: at the border between the ninth and tenth stanzas (lines 36-37): "И старец сказал, повернувшись к Марии: / "В лежащем сейчас на раменах твоих..." ("He added, while turning directly to Mary: / "Behold, in this child, now close to thy breast..."). In these two lines Brodsky mentions the three main dramatis personae of Candlemas, and

what's particularly noteworthy is the fact that the old man and the infant are situated on both sides of Mary, as in a painting.

The majority of words in this poem easily fall into several distinct semantic categories. Among the nouns one can distinguish above all the following categories: God, the dramatis personae (Maria, the infant Jesus, Simeon, Anna), space (the temple and its parts), time, light, sound, body, soul. As for the verbs, verbs of motion, speech, and knowledge dominate. All of this, within the context of the devices we have already described, creates the biblical style of the poem. One may notice that there are relatively few archaisms and Church Slavonicisms (ведать – to know; воспринять – to take; око – eye; рамена – shoulders; чело – forehead; человеки – people, etc.) that are easily comprehensible to any reader familiar with classical Russian poetry. Only the word “твердь” (line 64) constitutes somewhat of a special case: in contemporary Russian it means “firmament,” but Brodsky resurrects its ancient meaning, explained by Vladimir Dal’: “any firm foundation or support on which one is able to stand, put something, or lean against.” I remember that this unusual usage provoked arguments among the first readers of “Nunc Dimittis.” It is also interesting that the semantic field of color is reduced only to black and white in the poem: “к белевшему смутно дверному проему” (line 52, “toward the whitening blur of the doorway”); “как некий светильник, в ту черную тьму” (line 69, “like a torch, pressing back the black shadows”). The colors black and white are not the most characteristic of icons.

Finally, one should note another peculiar lexical device in “Nunc Dimittis”, namely the presence of repetitions, which may be called redundant. Such redundant repetitions occur from the very beginning (lines 1-3): “Когда она в церковь впервые внесла / дитя, **находились** внутри из числа / людей, **находившихся** там постоянно...” (“When she first brought to the church / the child, inside **were found**, of the number / of people who **were found** there always”); cf. also lines 17-19: “А было поведано старцу сему / о том, что **увидит** он смертную тьму / не прежде, чем сына **увидит** Господня” (“It had been revealed to this old man / that he would not **see** the darkness of death / before **seeing** the son of God”). Brodsky explained these repetitions in a 1973 interview with George Kline: he considered them an element of the absurd creeping into traditionalism – much in the way that some verses of the New Testament

provide a somewhat “absurdist” refrain to the Old Testament³². From the point of view of Christian theology, one could add that the whole New Testament can be considered as somewhat of an enormous “refrain” to the Old Testament, a fulfillment of its prophecies (which transpires in the phenomenon of parallel episodes in the Bible).

In terms of composition, “Nunc Dimittis” is a calm narrative without any chronological or logical complications. It more or less follows the Gospel text, though there are some noteworthy differences. The place of the action (Jerusalem) is not specified, and neither is the name of Jesus; what we get, however, is the time of day (morning), something omitted by the Gospel writer. Brodsky also cuts out some specific details: he says nothing about the sacrifice required by Jewish law; he also does not characterize Simeon and Anna (instead, he briefly sketches their physical portraits – “крепкие руки” (“the strong hands”) and “твердую поступь” (“firm gait”) of the old man, “согбенность” (“stoop”) of the propheticess. Unlike Anna, Simeon was not always present at the temple: according to Luke, “he came by the spirit into the temple” (“пришел он по вдохновению в храм”). Brodsky doesn’t mention at all St. Joseph – in the same interview with George Kline, he said that he couldn’t write a poem where one of the characters would be his namesake³³. One may interpret Joseph’s absence as an example of Acmeist tact³⁴; others have pointed out that St. Joseph is implicitly present as an observer, whose point of view determines the narrative³⁵. Actually, this argument applies only to the first half of the poem. Toward the end the author shifts the point of view to that of the two women and, finally, to Simeon’s “internal” perspective. It is precisely the detailed description of Simeon’s death presented “from the inside” that is Brodsky’s main original contribution to the Gospel text: Luke doesn’t at all describe this death and only allows an implicit assumption of it.

The poem can be divided into three parts: exposition (stanzas 1-4), Simeon’s prophecy (stanzas 5-11), Simeon’s departure from the temple and from life (stanzas 12-18). The reader is introduced to the event in medias res – in this Brodsky follows the example of the older poet: according to Brodsky, Akhmatova always begins poems

³² Большая книга интервью, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ Верхейл, 19-20.

“from the very beginning. There’s no ‘machinery.’”³⁶ All the *dramatis personae* appear already in the very first stanza (with the exception of Joseph, as already mentioned): the infant Jesus is set apart by means of an enjambement (“Когда она в церковь впервые внесла / дитя” – “When she first brought into the church / the child...”). Maria is not identified by name yet but comes forth merely as a “she.” What takes shape is a visual scene: the gaze moves up along a vertical line – first we see three persons surrounding the infant, afterwards the columns and vaults of the temple (they are presented metaphorically – the temple is described as a forest with spreading treetops; as David Bethea has pointed out, this is a quotation of Mandelstam’s poem “Notre Dame”³⁷). The space of the temple is pierced by a vertical ray of light, which touches the top of the infant’s head. Brodsky called this configuration a “Rembrandtian move.”³⁸ And, in general, the poet’s gaze here is the equivalent of a painter’s gaze. The scene is enclosed within a triple frame – first, there is the “shifting frame” of the three figures; second, there is the frame of architecture, which hides the event “from the eyes of the people and the gaze of the heavens” (this is emphasized by the rhyme **рама – храма**, “frame – temple” in English); and, finally, there is the frame-like structure of the first four quatrains, each of which constitutes a syntactically complete single phrase ending in a period. The solemn sound pattern, resting primarily on sonorous consonants (**в то утро, затеряны в сумраке храма**), is particularly remarkable because it also incorporates the name of Akhmatova: the word “**Анна**” concludes the first quatrain, while the word “**Ахматова**” comes through as an anagram within the space of the same quatrain (**людей, находившихся там постоянно**). The poem’s addressee – “the all-praiseworthy widow” and great poet, “who departed not from the temple,” is present in the poem starting with the very first lines.

It is interesting that the temple is immediately called “a church” – which seems to shift the location of the event from Jerusalem to Russia. The opposition between Judaism and Orthodoxy, between the Old and the New Testament is thus cancelled out. It is possible to see this Russification of the point of view as a reference to Pasternak’s

³⁵ See, e. g., Алексей Лосев, «Ниоткуда с любовью...: Заметки о стихах Иосифа Бродского», *Континент*, 1977, 14, 321.

³⁶ Volkov, 253.

³⁷ David M. Bethea, *op. cit.*, 172.

“Christmas Star,” where the nativity takes place against a Russian landscape and is related in common Russian parlance. Brodsky’s Maria, like Pasternak’s, speaks the language of a simple Russian woman (“Слова-то какие...” – “Such words...”). Another echo of “Christmas Star” can be seen in the description of the infant: both poets emphasize **сияние, свет** (the radiance or light) (in Pasternak: “Он спал, весь сияющий, в яслях из дуба, / Как месяца луч в углубленье дупла” – “He slept, all radiant, in an oak manger, / Like a moon ray in the depth of a tree hollow”; in Brodsky: “И образ Младенца с сияньем вокруг / пушистого темени смертной тропюю / душа Симеона несла пред собою / как некий светильник...” – “and the image of the child with radiance all around / its feathery crown, along a death-bound path, / Simeon’s soul carried in front / like a torch.”)

The second part of “Nunc Dimittis” follows exactly the Gospel text: Simeon’s prophecies, as already mentioned, are set off by means of rhythm-syntactic devices, and, in contrast to Maria’s words, they are also stylized to resemble archaic, Church Slavonic utterances. In contrast to the first part, the stanzas here do not constitute disparate and complete syntactic units: here the quatrains flow into each other, as if symbolically representing the connection between high and low, words and silence, life and death, as well as Old and New Testament. Instead of a visual scene, here we have an acoustic one, which is absent from the Gospel account: the echo of Simeon’s words brushes against the beams of the building – again, this is more of a Russian church than a Jerusalem temple – and circles above like a bird. As one would expect, the whole scene is based on **high** stressed vowels “i” and “e” (... как некая птица, / что в силах взлететь, но не в силах спуститься). In his interview with George Kline, Brodsky explained this comparison by saying that Simeon’s words became the words of a prayer, and from that moment on they went only upward, in the direction of God³⁹.

The third and crucial part, which has no correspondent in the Gospel account, depicts the first Christian death – the prototype of the Christian death experienced by the poem’s addressee. As in the second part, the stanzas here are not syntactically complete, but the poet returns to the visual structure of the scene (even though he also preserves the

³⁸ Большая книга интервью, 628.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

acoustic element – “шум жизни за стенами храма” (“the noise of life beyond the temple walls”), “уличный гул” (“the rumble of the street”), and most importantly, the sound the prophetess’ voice in the temple). This, however, is already a different kind of visual structure: the vertical line is replaced by a horizontal one, the static quality by dynamic (A. G. Stepanov relates this change to the difference between the hierarchical chronotope of the Old Testament and the linear chronotope of the New Testament⁴⁰; this is not totally convincing since linearity of the time is a characteristic of the entire Biblical worldview). Instead of the shifting contours of the first part, here we have a stark opposition of darkness and light (which also emerges on the level of sound as an opposition of low vowels, such as “u” and “o,” to higher ones, such as “i” and “a,” as well as an opposition of hissing to sonorous consonants).

Simeon moves in the direction of the doorway, his figure grows smaller, the exit of the temple gets transformed into death. “Гул” (the rumble) metamorphoses into the “глухонемые” (deaf-and-dumb) territories of non-being. Time and space disappear: as a matter of fact, both these words (“пространство” and “время”) appear as anagrams in the lines describing the old man’s departure from the temple (“к белевшему смутно дверному проему; И поступь была стариковски тверда; он дверь отворивши руками, шагнул”). The only thing that remains is the radiant image of the infant, which fills up Simeon’s soul. As a matter of fact, the “child” (дитя) and “infant” (младенец) of the first part is transformed here into the Infant – after Simeon’s prophecy, it is no longer a human child, but a God-Man. The radiance emanating from him signifies the triumph over non-being.

Considered against the background of Brodsky’s other poems dealing with death, “Nunc dimittis” is one of the few, if not the only, work in which death is not depicted in terms of void and terror, but as a solution, liberation, light. The widening path Simeon follows to the other world is similar to the road from Akhmatova’s “Приморский сонет” (“Seaside Sonnet”):

И кажется такой нетрудной,
Белея в чаше изумрудной,

⁴⁰ А. Г. Степанов, *op. cit.*, 141-142.

Дорога не скажу куда...
 Там средь стволов еще светлее...
 (And it seems so clear,
 Growing white in the emerald underbrush,
 The road to – I won't say where...
 There among the tree trunks it's brighter still...
 Trans. by Judith Hemschemeyer)

Brodsky loved this poem of Akhmatova's more than many of her other works. Not long before his death, on June 22, 1993, in the Polish town of Katowice, in response to a request from the audience, Brodsky recited poems by Pushkin, Mandelstam, Pasternak that he knew by heart. From Akhmatova he chose precisely "Seaside Sonnet," which comes through as a distant echo in "Nunc Dimittis" – the most Christian and Akhmatovian of Brodsky's poems. At the same time, "Nunc Dimittis," in a sense, widens Akhmatova's pathway: instead of a poem dealing with profoundly private relationship to death, which leads the author into the habitual landscape next to the pond in Tsarskoe Selo, we read a metaphysically charged poem. It speaks about the new understanding of death proposed by Christianity for all people.

(Translated from Russian by Mina Brenneman)