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ENGLISH RHYTHMS IN RUSSIAN VERSE: ON THE EXPERIMENT OF JOSEPH BRODSKY

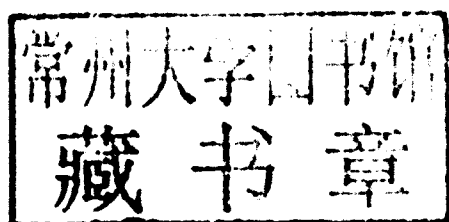
TRENDS IN LINGUISTICS

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English Rhythms in Russian Verse: On the Experiment of Joseph Brodsky

by

Nila Friedberg



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English Rhythms in Russian Verse:
On the Experiment of Joseph Brodsky

To the other Joseph

Acknowledgements

This book focuses on the “English accent” of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky. An anglophile and, eventually, Poet Laureate of the United States, Brodsky was able to import certain English features into his Russian prosody long before becoming fluent in English and leaving the USSR. This subtle poetic foreign accent puzzled me for many years and seemed impossible to understand within the framework of one discipline or one theory. I therefore chose an alternative route, combining in a single study the methods of generative phonology, archival and biographical research, phonetics, statistics, readers’ surveys, and Russian verse theory. I would like to thank the researchers from various fields whose expertise and advice provided guidance along the way. (All errors, of course, are my own.) First and foremost, I am grateful to Elan Dresher, who introduced me to the field of linguistic analysis of poetry. Among the many talents that Elan possesses, one is to suggest to his students an area of research that later evolves into a defining interest, an indispensable part of their lives. I thank Elan for exemplifying how to analyze texts clearly and rigorously, and for conversations that were always inspiring. Thanks to Paul Kiparsky, Emily Klenin, Barry Scherr, and Michael Wachtel, who generously shared their time, expertise, and enthusiasm for metrics; in this regard I am also indebted to Jean Louis Aroui, Nigel Fabb, Kristin Hanson, Bruce Hayes, Donka Minkova, Mikhail Lotman, Kirill Postoutenko, Gerald S. Smith, and Marina Tarlinskaja. I am grateful to Luba Golburt for her critical input on many parts of the book, and most importantly, for sharing her wisdom and intuition on what counts as an “interesting question.” Many thanks to Stephanie Sandler, Catherine Ciepiela, and Michael Wachtel for reassuring me of the importance of linguistic analysis for literary criticism; their encouragement, their comments, and their own example of dedication to poetics were crucial to me as I wrote the book. Yakov Klots provided invaluable help with locating the relevant manuscripts at the Yale University Beinecke Library. Tomas Venclova, Liudmila Shtern, and Lev Losev answered some important questions on Brodsky’s biography. Polina Barskova offered valuable insights on meter – the sort that only a poet could give. I am grateful to all those who read, heard, or commented on parts of this work in writing or at conferences: John Bartle, David Bethea, Zhenya Bershtein, David Birnbaum, Aaron Beaver, Karen Evans-Romaine, Lazar and Ekaterina Fleishman, Michael Gorham, Olga Kagan, Christoph Kueper, Cynthia Martin, Valentina Polukhina, Karen

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Transliterated Russian poem titles, along with their English translations, will be used when poems are mentioned in the main text for the first time. Upon subsequent occurrences in the main text and footnotes, only the English translation of a given title will appear. Poem titles (including titles that consist of the first line) and bibliographic entries will be spelled according to the Library of Congress transliteration system. However, when the text of the poem is quoted or analyzed, a *scholarly* transliteration will be used instead, such that ‘я’ = *ja*, ‘ю’ = *ju*, ‘э’ = *jo*, ‘ч’ = *č*, ‘у’ = *š*, ‘ж’ = *ž*, ‘у’ = *šč*, *u* = *c*, ‘ў’ = *j*. Scholarly transliteration helps to avoid confusion in syllable count, crucial for the metrical analysis presented in this book.

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Introduction

*The biography of a poet is in his vowels and sibilants,
in his meters, rhymes and metaphors.*

Joseph Brodsky (1986: 164)

Poetry is composed of patterns – artistic arrangements of sound, syntax, and stress. Yet linguists and verse theoreticians are often asked, especially by poststructuralist literary critics, why patterns matter. A typical response to this question may recall the suggestion of Russian poet and mathematician Andrei Bely that discovering verse patterns might render aesthetics an exact science (Belyi¹ 1910: 231–285), i.e., explain why we feel that one poem “flows” while another does not, or why we sense that one poet sounds different from another. Unfortunately, such an argument is rarely satisfactory to contemporary literary or cultural critics: formal analysis, they might counter, merely recapitulates the intuitions we already have, offering few surprising insights. In reality, however, pattern analysis involves much more than a formulation of what we already sense. It often reveals facts about poets and poetry that *are* unexpected.² For example, Gasparov (1995) demonstrates that phonologically, the rhyming patterns of the Russian poets Vladimir Mayakovsky and Joseph Brodsky are strikingly close, despite the former’s status as extroverted, masses-oriented revolutionary, whom Brodsky, the introverted author of “quiet poems” (Brodskii 2001, 3: 136), would seem highly unlikely to echo (Gasparov 1995: 91–92).

A formal investigation of patterns is important for many reasons. Apart from revealing poetic similarities (or differences) unexplained by intuition alone, pattern analysis also contributes to the discussion of disputed authorship, often clarifying whether a piece was written by a particular individual (Tarlinskaja 1987; Vickers 2002). Patterns can help to describe various literary genres, because each genre may display a formal regularity all its own (Hanson 2006). Patterns can be linked with specific semantic associations, thus illustrating that the study of form is highly relevant to literary interpretation (Taranovskii 1963; Wachtel

-
1. Common spellings of Russian surnames will be used in this text (thus Brodsky instead of the Library of Congress [LoC] transliteration Brodskii), with the exception of bibliographic references, in which authors will be cited as spelled according to LoC convention in the works in question.
 2. See Wachtel (2004) for an illuminating discussion of pattern and poetry.

1998; Freeman 1981).³ Patterns can also shed light on numerous other questions crucial to understanding literature: What does it mean to be an artistic reformer? What does it mean to be influenced by a foreign poetic style? If a poet seems to have been influenced by several sources at once, which is likely to have had the most significant impact? What renders a poet's style unique rather than reminiscent of predecessors? These issues are impossible to discuss in depth without understanding the formal structure of a given poet's work; moreover, if one aims to explore the cultural or literary significance of poetic innovation, it is necessary to first understand what, exactly, innovation *is*.

The broad goal of this book is to underscore the relevance of linguistics to literary studies. Although several researchers have successfully linked these disciplines,⁴ in Western scholarship a gap between formal and literary analysis is at present still the norm, and may even be widening. The prevalence of this linguistics/literature gap is especially clear from special conferences or edited volumes aimed at closing it (Fabb, Attridge, Durant and MacCabe 1987; Kiparsky and Youmans 1989; Drescher and Friedberg 2006). As the organizers of such attempts themselves admit, these gatherings and volumes typically represent the views of "opposing camps" (Youmans 1989a: xii) or a "montage" of approaches (Fabb and Durant 1987: 4), or they strive for "greater public awareness" of distinct theories (Drescher and Friedberg 2006: 1). But works presented at such venues or published in such volumes still rarely synthesize linguistic and literary analysis into a single study. As Klenin (2009: 282) notes, only four of the fourteen papers included in the Drescher and Friedberg (2006) volume fulfill the "editors' stated goal of building a bridge between strictly literary and linguistic approaches to meter."

Toward the aim of bridging this gap, I focus on Joseph Brodsky, the Russian poet and 1987 Nobel Prize laureate who emigrated to the United States in 1972, and whose stylistic innovations seem particularly intriguing to literary critics and scholars of meter alike. It is well known that in 1964–65, exiled by the Soviet authorities to the north Russian village of Norenskaia for "social parasitism,"⁵ Brodsky read and translated texts of

3. See also Taranovskii 1966; Gasparov 1999; Traugott 1989.

4. See Taranovskii 1963, 1966; Wachtel 1998; Gasparov 1999; Tarlinskaja 1987; Traugott 1989; Freeman 1981.

5. The "social parasitism" law (Article 209) penalized "individuals avoiding socially useful labor and leading an anti-social and parasitic way of life" (cited Gordin 2000: 185). In reality, this meant anyone not officially employed for longer than four months; under this rubric the authorities particularly

John Donne, among other English-language poets (Brodsky 1986: 361; Brodsky 1995: 469).⁶ Although by his own estimation the poet's knowledge of English at the time was limited⁷, he seems to have incorporated into his own work certain features of English verse rhythm, developing an "English accent" in his Russian poetry long before becoming fluent in English (Smith 1999b; Friedberg 2002b).⁸

For scholars of meter, the very fact of such borrowing is interesting in and of itself. How similar was Brodsky to his English source reading, John Donne, given Donne's own status as one of the most eccentric versifiers in the English tradition (Coffin 1952: xix)? What exactly was Brodsky able to hear and borrow from Donne's prosody? Did he reproduce Donne's eccentricity in Russian, and if not, why? Brodsky's English-flavored experiment has significance for Slavic literary critics as well, because it raises questions regarding the poet's relationship with his *Russian* as well as foreign sources. As careful examination of the history of Russian versification reveals, the ostensibly "English" rhythms of Brodsky appear also in the verse of such Russian predecessors as Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Slutsky, and Vladislav Khodasevich, all of whom Brodsky read and valued, and all of whom employed this unusual form in a manner suggesting no foreign associations whatsoever (see Taranovskii 1966; Smith 1976;

targeted dissidents, poets, and other intellectuals. The punishment for "social parasitism" was forced labor and exile to remote regions of the USSR for a period of five years, which in Brodsky's case was later shortened to a year and a half (Polukhina and Losev 2006: 340).

6. Brodsky also devoted poems to Donne ("Bol'shaia elegiia Dzhonu Donnu" [Grand elegy for John Donne], 1963) and Frost ("Na smert' Roberta Frosta" [On the death of Robert Frost], 1963) even before his exile, and translated the poetry of Donne, W. H. Auden, Andrew Marvell, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, and Hyam Plutzik after it. In addition to the poems listed in Appendix V, Brodsky also translated Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Brodski 1992).
7. Brodsky's knowledge of English was passive not only in the mid-1960s, but also later, at the time of his expulsion from the USSR in 1972. When, upon emigrating, he met Auden in Vienna, Brodsky recalls, "the only English phrase I knew I wasn't making a mistake in was 'Mr. Auden, what do you think about. . .'" (Brodsky 1986: 376).
8. Brodsky's poetic "Englishness" has been thoroughly researched by literary scholars. See, among others, Ivask 1966; Kreps 1984; Ivanov 1988a; Polukhina 1989; Loseff 1992; MacFadyen 1998; Kulle 2001; Shaitanov 1998; Smith 1999b; Stepanov 1999; Losev 2006; and Klots 2008.

Lotman 1999; Volkov 1998; Losev 2006). What did this rhythm mean for Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, and Slutsky, and what did it really mean for Brodsky? How did Brodsky transform the semantics and structure of his Russian predecessors' experiment, and why did he succeed? What is unique about Brodsky's form, and which source, the English or the Russian, is its true origin? One would expect that a difficult and esoteric foreign-language text such as Donne's would have a far smaller influence on the poet than familiar texts in his native tradition; but must this necessarily be the case?

To address questions regarding the English flavor of Brodsky's poetry, this book offers an in-depth exploration of one aspect of his versification – iambic meter, more specifically, the various rhythmic realizations of this meter.⁹ There is good reason to focus on iambic meter – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most frequently used (Gasparov 1984). It might be thought that after two hundred years of usage, little experimentation with this meter would be possible, but the work of Brodsky shows that even commonly-used classical forms provide various and unexpected possibilities for innovation (Friedberg 2009a).

In discussing Brodsky's experiment, I employ evidence from a wide variety of disciplines and theories rarely combined in a single study. The first two of these theories are the generative (Halle and Keyser 1971; Kiparsky 1975, 1977; Hayes 1989; Hanson 1992) and the Russian statistical approaches to verse (Belyi 1910; Taranovski 1953; Tarlinskaja 1976; Gasparov 1984). Representatives of the generative approach to meter describe poets' styles in terms of explicit rules (Halle and Keyser 1971; Kiparsky 1975) or, more recently, of well-formedness constraints (Hayes and MacEachern 1998; Golston and Riad 1999; Kiparsky 2006). For its part, the Russian school analyzes poets' styles in terms of rhythmical constants, i.e., conditions that poets do not violate, and rhythmical tendencies, i.e., statistical frequencies of certain forms (Jakobson 1979e), with most attention paid to tendencies (Tarlinskaja 1976; Gasparov 1984). Some representatives of the Russian school criticize the generative tradition and find counterexamples to generative rules (Tarlinskaja 2006: 57–58), believing that generative linguists expect these rules to be inviolable (i.e., to be constants) and “predictive” of how poets will write. Closer examination, however, shows the Russian and generative approaches

9. Similarities with English versification have also been noted in Brodsky's rhymes (Gasparov 1995), enjambment patterns (Scherr 1990; Smith 1999b), and stanza structure (Stepanov 1999).

to have much in common. First, both are linked to the works of the Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson and are based on the fundamental assumption that structural patterns matter. Second, generative metrics rules were not meant to be taken prescriptively; rather, they pinpoint the reasons that certain rare lines in poetry sound non-canonical (Attridge 1989: 185). Since Russian scholars have formulated conditions contributing to such non-canonical lines as well (Belyi 1910; Taranovskii 1953; Jakobson [1955] 1979b; Jakobson [1973] 1979c), the two approaches are in this respect quite comparable (Youmans 1989b: 9). Third, recent formulations of generative metrics acknowledge the importance of statistical tendencies in verse (Hayes and MacEachern 1998; Hall 2006; Kiparsky 2006), i.e., the philosophical divide between the Russian and generative schools with regard to statistical variability has similarly diminished.

Of course, the two approaches do have important distinctions in the formal machinery they employ; but most relevant for our purposes is the difference in the degree of crossover with literary interpretation or textual source criticism. Numerous representatives of the Russian school were linguists and, at the same time, prolific literary critics; it is therefore not surprising that they sought to render their formal findings relevant for literary interpretation or the pinpointing of influence sources (e.g., Taranovskii 1963, 1966; Zhirmunskii 1966; Gasparov 1995). Generative metrics scholars, in contrast, evince a different orientation, often situating their poetry research in the context of contemporary phonology and natural language theory (Kiparsky 1975; Hayes 1983, 2008). But nothing in principle excludes generative theories from literary applications.¹⁰ Indeed, this study will illustrate that the Russian approach and generative theory are equally relevant for literary criticism, since violations of both statistical norms and generative rules of verse can interact with a poem's meaning or hint at its author's possible textual influences.

The generative and Russian schools of metrics are not the only rarely-combined research methods used in this study. As is common in literary analyses, but unusual in generative ones, this book discusses Brodsky's specific source readings, as well as biographical and archival data on the poet, all of which help to establish the context in which experimental rules emerged. And as is customary in linguistic analyses (Hayes and MacEachern 1998; Cole and Miyashita 2006) but rare in literary studies, I conduct fieldwork on readers' intuitions regarding poetic rhythm, and analyze

10. For an example of the effective use of generative theory to address literary issues, see Hanson 2006.