

**THE POET AND THE CAPSULE.****Marginalia to an essay****by Joseph Brodsky ‘The Condition We Call Exile’**

*The paper deals with the interpretation of Joseph Brodsky’s essay “The Condition We Call Exile”. The distinct originality of this essay is due in no small part to the special symbolic image of the poet and language in their inseparable relationship. This symbolic image allows us to rethink the relationship between the poet and language closer to their deep essence and immersed, actually, in the deep symbolic context. In the case of the poet, exile and its attendant circumstances are directly related to the very way of being in the world, to the very nature of the exile in the deepest sense of the word: speaking, thinking, verse-and-life-composition – to the language in the sphere of which the poet directly resides. In the case of the poet, exile and its attendant circumstances are directly related to the very way of being in the world, to the very nature of the exile in the deepest sense of the word – to the language in the sphere of which the poet directly resides. The poet’s consciousness is inevitably directed to language, or rather to the language environment, and mainly to the environment of his native, mother tongue. Being isolated from the usual conditions of life, far away from the empirical homeland and native culture, the poet still remains with the language. Exile in this case works as a sort of trigger, awakening and prompting the poet to realise language in its special status — as a kind of symbolic body: as a capsule, a kind of cocoon or mother’s womb, and not just a womb, but a kind of foetus bubble (amniotic sac or membrane) that serves literally for the surviving, preserving and further forming of the one who is inside it. In other words, language acts as a particular, specifically arranged lifeworld. To the extent that the poet turns to society and to poetry as a form of public consciousness, the further the poet is distanced from Poetry, from Language, i.e., from the lifeworld that preserves and protects him as a poet. To the extent that the poet turns exclusively to the clear, accomplished past or to the dark, unfulfilled future, exclusively to the temporary earthly homeland, to the known audience, or to the visible, somehow reachable community, he also distances himself from his genuine service. Exile does not diminish the poet, but calibrates, tests, reveals, in the end, his own measure in relation to the world and language. The poet’s lifeworld, his native, mother tongue, of which he is a carrier, makes it possible, regardless of time and location, to build a house – to create a poem. And neither exile, nor banishment, nor occupation, nor any kind of social isolation can deprive the poet of the right to such house-building. In the sphere of the poet’s lifeworld, it is possible to distinguish a layer of universal cultural meanings, a certain universal cultural milieu. These cultural meanings are constituted anew in the horizon of this or that existential-language experience. The ontology of a creative person is not only his own spiritual body, his works, his thoughts, his dreams, but also the surrounding world that envelops him, embraces him, gives him spiritual nourishment and support. The soul of the poet, whether in a foreign land or in his*

*native land, should be curled around with the word, with his native, mother tongue, and not be subdued by the flesh.*

**Keywords:** *exile, native land, language environment, mother tongue, poet's language body, poet's lifeworld.*

Throughout the lifetime of European culture, a great deal has been said and written about exile in prose as well as in verse. A great deal has been said by the exiles themselves, who were quite often writers and poets.

*What makes Brodsky's essay interesting, what sets it apart from other works united by the theme of 'exile'?*

The distinct originality of this essay is due in no small part to the special symbolic image of *the poet and language in their inseparable relationship*.

Brodsky himself, although he uses this image as an illuminating metaphor for exile, does not develop it further in a direct way. Apparently, for him, this image seemed self-sufficient and self-evident. It is also possible that this expressive visual-event analogue, which took place in reality, came to his mind by chance, out of the blue (although, to my way of thinking, nothing happens by chance in this world, especially *nothing happens by chance to a true poet*). Anyway, this symbolic image (to me it's a very symbolic image, not just an ordinary metaphor) allows us to rethink the relationship between the poet and language closer to their deep essence and immersed, actually, in the deep symbolic context. I am referring to the fragment which shows that a poet (or a writer) in a situation of exile is an event out of the ordinary:

"Exile brings you overnight where it normally would take a lifetime to go. <...> Perhaps a metaphor will help: to be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man, hurtled into outer space in a capsule (more like a dog, of course, than a man, because they will never bother to retrieve you). And *your capsule is your language*. <...> before long the passenger discovers that the capsule gravitates not earthward but outward in space.

For one in our profession, *the condition we call exile is, first of all, a linguistic event: an exiled writer is thrust, or retreats, into his mother tongue. From being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule. What started as a private intimate affair with the language, in exile becomes fate — even before it becomes an obsession or a duty*" (italics mine. — E. S.) [Brodsky 1988].

However, one significant reservation is necessary in anticipation of the way forward. In this case, exile should not be understood solely in its literal, unambiguous meaning. Exile is not always the expatriation from one's homeland to a foreign country. It is precisely the spiritual, existential condition that man can fall into. Exile can also be 'inner', i.e., conscious withdrawal into oneself, detachment (or expulsion) from the community of similar individuals without any 'voluntary-forced' resettlement in a foreign land. It can be either occupation or a change of state system, when the poets are deprived of 'secret freedom' — the right to a free creative life in their mother culture and language. In such inner exile, but nevertheless in their native land, many and many poets, both in the former USSR

and beyond, found themselves in their time. Nothing has changed in the world since then – the exile of poets continues to this day.

“First of all” in the above fragment of Brodsky is not just an introductory phrase, but a statement of the very essence of the matter. In the case of the poet, exile and its attendant circumstances are directly related to the very way of being in the world, to the very nature of the exile in the deepest sense of the word: speaking, thinking, verse-and-life-composition – in short, to the language in the sphere of which the poet directly resides. The poet’s consciousness is inevitably directed to language, or rather to the language environment, and mainly to the environment of his native, mother tongue, which he, for one reason or another, is forced to leave behind. Now this language environment seems to be absent, and at the same time, the poet is unexpectedly convinced of its indestructible, immediate nearby presence. Being isolated from the usual conditions of life, far away from the empirical homeland and native culture, the poet still remains with the language, and there is no one and nothing in between them.

Exile in this case works as a sort of trigger, awakening and prompting the poet to realise language in its special status – as a kind of *symbolic body*: as a *capsule*, a kind of *cocoon* or *mother’s womb*, and not just a womb, but a kind of *fetus bubble* (*amniotic sac* or *membrane*) that serves literally for the surviving, preserving and further forming of the one who is inside it. In other words, language acts as a particular, specifically arranged *lifeworld*.

The concept of *the poet’s lifeworld* by no means crosses out or diminishes the importance of the concept of *the lifeworld*, which is revealed in the field of phenomenology as a sphere of the immediate-obvious conditions of everyday life (German: *Lebenswelt*). The former concretises the latter for a special kind of people and for clarifying the essential nature of poetic creativity. At the same time, the poet’s life world is not the literary life (or the literary “*byt*”) and not the totality of worldly conditions, it is not the worldview and psychology of the author, it is, finally, not *the poetic world*, which is subsequently built by researchers as if on top of the available works. *The poetic world* is formed on the basis of *the poet’s lifeworld*, is deeply rooted in the latter.

However, approaching this lifeworld and awareness of its fundamental importance even for the poet does not happen overnight, especially since the exile, as a rule, is striving hard to get out of exile. In this case, though, *the point is not how to get out of exile, but how to actually get into it, how to immerse oneself into it and how to live in it, how to get grounded*, or, more precisely, *how to root oneself in groundlessness* and to feel oneself, an exile, albeit on foreign ground, but still on one’s native land, in one’s own lifeworld, which, despite any displacements, nowhere and never disappears. Exile provides a much-needed feeling of loneliness, abandonment, lostness in the universe; it contributes to a fundamental shift in life perspective – from the nearest horizontal of everyday reality to the other, vertical, maximally distant system of coordinates. Exile deprives us of our empirical roots, social, cultural, linguistic, familial, household, finally, and thus forces us to clarify our proper human destiny in the world. And what is it?

Man is, first of all, an exile and a wanderer on the earth. Even before being exiled somewhere within the earth, we are already exiled, thrown into this earth itself, into being-to-death, into the fallen sinful world of time, burdened with original sin, doomed to earn our bread in the sweat of our brow. It is a punishment and at the same time it is a gift, the sacred gift of exile. We are thrown into death and doomed to take root in the mortal, decay-prone reality, and at the same time we are endowed with the opportunity through our mortal nature to take root and germinate in the spiritual reality, which is not prone to decay. And the faster we distance ourselves from empirical values, from the dilapidated dwellings of any social institutions – the more rapidly we approach the goal.

To the extent that the poet turns to society and to poetry as a form of public consciousness, the further the poet is distanced from Poetry, from Language, i.e., from the lifeworld that preserves and protects him as a poet. To the extent that the poet turns exclusively to the clear, accomplished past or to the dark, unfulfilled future, exclusively to the temporary earthly homeland, to the known audience, or to the visible, somehow reachable community, he also distances himself from his genuine service, from the here-and-now in its relation to infinity, or to the endless flow of the *great time of culture-life*. The past and the future are peculiar traps of consciousness. Of course, nobody cancels the homeland as a certain space-time continuum, and the yearning for it, especially for the poet, is inevitable and inexhaustible, and the more obvious it is, the more the poet is tempted and risks to become completely numb in this limited small time.

Exile does not diminish the poet, but *calibrates, tests, reveals, in the end, his own measure in relation to the world and language*. Here we can designate *two perspectives*: the furthest perspective – *the poet in his relation to the universal, absolute beginning, to the world and God*, and the nearest perspective – *the poet in his relation to the native, closely embracing him lifeworld*, the basis of which is his native, mother tongue. And these two seemingly completely different perspectives are mysteriously intertwined.

The poet is withdrawn from language as a sign system established in society, as an instrument of representation of things and as a means of communication with its certainty and specific direction, he is deprived of the living brew of the common people's native language and is forced to move into an alien cultural space. In a way, the poet is deprived of the world/context of words, if not foreign, then still alien to him (alien insofar as words are attached to commonly accepted things and commonly accepted meanings). But the poet can never be withdrawn from his mother tongue as an instrument of thinking and realisation of thought, as an instrument of manifestation of those internal forces which operate within him: *from word to thought and from thought to word*. Once you get into your native, mother tongue, it is impossible to get out of it.

It is your poet's shell/capsule, a kind of organ projection (organoproekciya) and at the same time an instrument of groping/feeling the world and naming it, and now – through the swoon of exile – your newfound, recognised, native, unified body, your way of being in the world. This language body, on the one hand, like a reliable armour (or shell), protects you from infinite expanses, while on the other

hand, it determines your connection to the world and the very possibility of your existence in the infinite. And it is already truly your language, your element of life, domesticated by your own poetic experience, neither foreign nor alien. Having left your homeland, which is limited by space and time, you, nevertheless, as a poet, are always immersed in the element of your native language and you are always the spiritual carrier and representative of that homeland, which is concentrated in the word and which is not bound, not limited by space and time. Thus, the movement *away from homeland, from home*, is eventually recognised as the movement *towards homeland, towards home*, but already on an entirely different level, in an entirely different order of things.

Let's heed the word of Arseniy Tarkovsky:

Живите в доме – и не рухнет дом.  
Я вызову любое из столетий,  
Войду в него и дом построю в нем.  
Вот почему со мною ваши дети  
И жены ваши за одним столом, –  
А стол один и прадеду и внуку:  
Грядущее свершается сейчас,  
И если я приподымаю руку,  
Все пять лучей останутся у вас.

Live in a house — and the house will not fall.  
I shall summon any one of the centuries,  
I shall enter it and build my house in it.  
That is why your children will sit with me  
And your wives at one table, —  
There's one table for both forbears and grandsons;  
The future is coming to pass right now,  
And if I raise my hand a little,  
All five rays will remain with you. [Tarkovsky1988: 30–31]

The poet's lifeworld, his native, mother tongue, of which he is a carrier, makes it possible, regardless of time and location, to build a house – to create a poem where the departed and the not yet born are in the same family circle. This event is realised not in the horizontal profane reality, but in the spiritual, vertical dimension: *the future is coming to pass right here and now* – “the hour is coming, and is now here” [John 4:23]. And neither exile, nor banishment, nor occupation, nor any kind of social isolation can deprive the poet of the right to such house-building. Especially since the poet needs neither canvas, nor brush, nor marble, nor any musical instruments; he has all the necessary tools with him, right in his own body.

In the sphere of the poet's lifeworld, it is possible to distinguish a layer of universal cultural meanings, a certain universal cultural milieu in which the poet's pre-poetic ‘I’ resides, however, not as in the sphere of ready-made, once and for all established meanings and forms of the past. These cultural meanings are constituted anew in the horizon of this or that existential-language experience.

Homer, Plato, Ovid, Dante are living here anew, and through them great cultures and cultural-historical types are also coming to life. It turns out that the poet is also firmly rooted in this cultural milieu through language, and he carries it with him as native and immediately inherent to him wherever he moves. This world of cultural meanings becomes the sphere of the poet's permanent existence, it forms the poet's language body at the deep level and thus penetrates into this body itself, expands its capabilities.

The ontology of a creative person is not only his own spiritual body, his works, his thoughts, his dreams, but also the surrounding world that envelops him, embraces him, gives him spiritual nourishment and support. The creative man transcends himself, opens towards another being, reveals and recognises himself in another modus of being. Exile provides growth for the soul, does not allow the soul to swell up with the flesh. And Joseph Brodsky is quite right when he claims that *exile teaches us humility* and even that it is "the ultimate lesson in that virtue" [Brodsky, 1988].

In exile, the poet is primarily nourished by language, by word, and vice versa: language as a living organism is nourished by the poet. In the condition of exile, it is not so much that the poet tests and cognises language, but rather vice versa: the poet is tested by language, by word, he lives and acts in the light of these eternal values – in the sight of language, in the sight of the word. The soul of the poet, whether in a foreign land or in his native land, *should be curled around with the word, with his native, mother tongue*, and not be subdued by the flesh.

For, as we remember, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." [John 1:1].

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### ПОЕТ І КАПСУЛА.

#### Маргіналії до есе Йосипа Бродського «Стан, який ми називаємо вигнанням»

У статті інтерпретується есе Йосипа Бродського «Стан, який ми називаємо вигнанням». Своєрідність цього есе чималою мірою зумовлена особливим символічним образом поета і мови в їхній нероздільній пов'язаності. У випадку поета вигнання і супутні йому обставини безпосередньо пов'язані із самим способом існування у світі, із самою природою вигнання в найглибшому сенсі цього слова – з мовою, у царині якої поет безпосередньо перебуває. Вигнання в цьому випадку діє як свого роду

*тригер, який пробуджує і спонукає поета усвідомити мову в її особливому статусі – як символічне тіло: як капсулу, своєрідний кокон чи материнське лоно. Іншими словами, мова виступає як особливий, специфічним чином облаштований життєвий світ. Вигнання не применює поета, але випробовує, перевіряє, виявляє, зрештою, його власну міру щодо світу і мови. Життєвий світ поета, його рідна мова, носієм якої він є, дає змогу, незалежно від часу й місця, збудувати дім – створити віри. Онтологія творчої людини – це не тільки її власне духовне тіло, її твори, її думки, її мрії, а й оточуючий її світ культурних смислів, що дає їй духовну поживу і підтримку.*

**Ключові слова:** *вигнання, вітчизна, мовне середовище, рідна мова, мовне тіло поета, життєвий світ поета.*

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