

Title: The Metaphysics of Punctuation in Joseph Brodsky's Lithuanian Nocturne
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Abstract:

In his poem *Lithuanian Nocturne* (1983), Joseph Brodsky composes a metaphor of punctuation made physical: candle flames become commas and hands become brackets. This metaphor directed my interest toward an untapped vein of Brodsky's poetry. The frequency with which Brodsky draws on and is drawn to the subject of punctuation indicates that, for Brodsky, punctuation is more than a recurrent metaphor. Whenever Brodsky refers to punctuation, he is invoking a set of themes, even a metaphysics.

Leon Burnett and other scholars have scrutinized Brodsky's metaphysics of language, but there is a dearth of study concerning Brodsky's metaphysics of language as it functions beyond language as an abstract category. This is a significant absence considering that Brodsky's poetry frequently lingers on linguistic and grammatical subjects and, I believe, imbues them with metaphysics along with a peculiar physicality. Common in Brodsky's oeuvre are mentions of grammar, including verb tense, the presence/absence of articles, parts of speech, sentences, the black and white physicality of type or a pen's scrawl, vowels and consonants, prefixes and suffixes, shifts in register of language, plus signs and minus signs, blank pages, block letters, handwriting, hieroglyphics, cuneiform and other terms referring to language, often as written language.

Brodsky makes written language concrete. Punctuation in particular acquires dimension as a physical aspect of written and oratory language, as metaphor, and as a linguistic system that gives form to the page and to life. This essay will elaborate the variety of shapes and meanings that punctuation conveys in Brodsky's poetry. That most minute of orthographic markers, punctuation conveys ideas about space; periods assume the significance of stars and are compressed back into pauses in the metaphysical vastness of Brodsky's poetry.