



Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile (Princeton Legacy Library)

By David M. Bethea

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David M. Bethea

Joseph Brodsky, one of the most prominent contemporary American poets, is also among the finest living poets in the Russian language. Nevertheless, his poetry and the crucial bilingual dimension of his poetic world are still insufficiently understood by Western audiences. How did the Russian-born Brodsky arrive at his present status as an international man of letters and American poet laureate? Has he been created by his bilingual experience, or has he fashioned the bilingual self as a necessary precondition for writing poetry in the first place? Here David Bethea suggests that the key to Brodsky, perhaps the last of the great Russian poets in the "bardic" mode, is in his relation to others, or the Other.

Brodsky's master trope turns out to be "triangular vision," the tendency to mediate a prior model (Dante) with a closer model (Mandelstam) in the creation of a palimpsest-like text in which the poet is implicated as a triangulated hybrid of these earlier incarnations. In pursuing this theme, Bethea compares and contrasts Brodsky to the poet's favorite models--Donne, Auden, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva--and analyzes his fundamental differences with Nabokov, the only Russian exile of Brodsky's stature to rival him as a bilingual phenomenon. Various critical paradigms are used throughout the study as foils to Brodsky's thinking.

Originally published in 1994.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This study argues that, as the last great Russian poet in the bardic tradition--that is, the last to be taken so seriously by the state as to be put in mortal peril by it--Brodsky created his own state of poetic exile. He allowed the effect on him of such Russian poets as Boris Slutsky, Evgeny Rein, and Alexander Kushner to combine with the impact of outsiders like Donne and Auden to produce "a kind of spontaneous combustion." Bethea (Slavic languages, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison) presents his study as a monograph, though it is in large part a compilation of essays that have appeared elsewhere and are connected only by their focus on Brodsky. The effect is a little like exploring a complex landscape using partial maps and shrewd guesses; one comes away with knowledge of and even a certain affection for the subject, if not a comprehensive understanding. For academic collections.

- *David Kirby, Florida State Univ., Tallahassee*

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Review

Winner of the 1996 Literary Scholarship Award, American Association of Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages

"A sympathetic, inward account of its subject, showing the grandeur, yet modesty, of Brodsky's stance, and finishing with a suggestive afterword on the future for a bardic view of poetry and an unpoetic world . . . [Bethea] does justice to a phenomenally gifted writer who is one of the voices most worth listening to as our millennium slips away."--*Times Literary Supplement*

From the Back Cover

"Bethea's book is nothing less than brilliant. It is dazzling in its insights, scope, and methods. In the process of contextualizing Brodsky, and not at all as an afterthought, Bethea also addresses major issues of literary biography, literary history, and literary theory."--**Vladimir E. Alexandrov, Yale University**

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