

## POET LAUREATE

# Brodsky Urges Publishers to Distribute Poetry to the Masses

By EDWARD OHNEMUS

The new poet laureate opened the 1991-92 literary season at the Library with a stinging attack on the token publishing of poetry and the tepid response of literate people to it.

To a standing-room-only house in the Mumford Room, Oct. 2., the new poet laureate consultant in poetry Joseph Brodsky said, "Throughout what we call recorded history, the audience for poetry indeed does not appear to have exceeded one percent of the entire population. The basis for this estimate is . . . the mental climate of the world we live in. In fact . . . the quoted figure seems to be a bit too generous."

Brodsky, winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize for Literature and the 1986 National Book Award, was appointed May 10 by Dr. Billington and officially began his term as poet laureate Sept. 1. A former Soviet citizen, Brodsky was sentenced to hard labor in an Arctic gulag for "social parasitism" and "decadent poetry" by his government. The authorities released him from the gulag and, in 1972, exiled him from the Soviet Union. He then immigrated to the U.S. where he became a citizen in 1977. He teaches at both New York University and at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where he has been an Andrew Mellon professor of literature since 1986.

In his talk, Brodsky deplored the lack of popular access to poetry. He said society has overcome two obstacles to poetry: absence of press and limited literacy, only now to face an apathetic literate population and a poor system for widespread distribution of poets' work.

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"Poetry must be available to the public in a far greater volume than it is. It should be as ubiquitous as the nature that surrounds you. . . . This is, after all, a country of mass production, and I don't see why what's been done for cars can't be done

for books of poetry which can take you quite a bit farther," he said.

Brodsky then outlined his ideas for getting poetry into the hands of literate Americans "age 15 and up." In a country like the United States, especially with new, low-cost technology that makes it easier for small presses to publish, Brodsky said, "There is now an opportunity to turn the nation into an enlightened democracy . . . before literacy gets replaced with videocy."

He argued that poets have been doing their jobs for centuries, enduring poverty, hunger, continually picking up the thread of poetic voice left by past generations, but society has let them down. He said, "It is society's job to meet him half way, i.e., to open his [the poet's] book and read it."

"Now, poetry is the supreme form of locution in any culture. By failing to read or listen to poets, society dooms itself to inferior modes of articulation, those of the politician, or the salesman, or the charlatan. . . . In other words, it forfeits its own evolutionary potential, for what distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom is precisely the gift of speech," he said.

"As a tool of cognition, poetry beats any existing form of analysis because it pares down our reality to its linguistic essentials, whose interplay, be it clash or fusion, yields that epiphany or that revelation, and because it exploits rhythmic and euphonic properties of the language that in themselves are revelatory," he continued.

Brodsky said he "took this job in the spirit of public service. . . . Maybe I fancied myself as a sort of surgeon general and just wanted to slap a label onto the current packaging of poetry—something like 'This Way of Doing Business Is Dangerous to the National Health.'"

Brodsky went on to praise the English language. "No other language accumulates so much as does English. To be born into it or to arrive in it is the best boon a human can come across. To prevent its keepers from full access to it is an anthropological crime, and that's what the present system of distribution of poetry boils down to. I don't know what's worse, burning books or not reading them. I think that token publishing falls somewhere in between."

Brodsky warned that America is on the verge of a tremendous cultural backslide. He said, "And it's not the culture I am worried about, nor the fate of the great or not-

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so-great poets' works. What concerns me is that, unable to articulate, to express himself adequately, man reverts to action. Since the vocabulary of action is limited . . . he is bound to act violently, extending his vocabulary with a weapon where there should have been an adjective."

Concluding his lecture, Brodsky told a story of seeing his first Robert Frost poems translated into "stunning Russian poems," and seeking out the man who had translated them. The translator, who became a close friend of Brodsky's, showed Brodsky his dog-eared, English-language copy of Frost's book, which fell open to "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length." A huge soldier-bootprint fell across the poem, and inside the book's cover was the stamp, "Stalag # 3B"—a World War II concentration camp for Allied prisoners of war somewhere in France. That's a case, ladies and gentlemen, of a book of poems finding its reader," he said.

During the enthusiastic applause, Brodsky remounted the stage and said, "I hope you liked the lecture, but I am also resolved to have fun tonight." He then delivered two poems from memory. During the lecture he quoted frequently from Robert Frost and for his first encore in singing, melodic tones, he recited, "Provide Provide," which begins, "The witch that came (the withered hag)/To wash the steps with pail and rag,/Was once the beauty Abishag." He followed the Frost poem with Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain (Lines on the loss of the 'Titanic') which begins, "In a solitude of the sea/Deep from human vanity." Brodsky then stayed for a reception in the sixth floor foyer, where he greeted guests and signed copies of his books.