

Writing stirs 'sense of guilt' in Brodsky

By JILL ZAVIDOWSKY
Of the Emerald

It's morning, the fog is rolling in, and I've come like 60 other intent but slightly dazed onlookers to catch a look at a genius — a young man said to be one of Russia's greatest living poets.

Joseph Brodsky, at 36, certainly fits the role. Dressed in a black velvet blazer, pale orange shirt and wrinkled tan pants, he seems a bit surprised to be the object of so much interest.

Lines cross his forehead and brow and his rust-red hair is thinning at the back. His face is sharp and angular; he has the penetrating gaze of an owl.

He keeps his hands deep inside his jacket pockets as he recites his poetry in Russian in a deep, melodic, chant-like song and darts anxious, almost shy looks around the room. Meanwhile James Rice, a University Russian professor, reads the poems in their English translations.

Although accused of being a "social parasite" and exiled from Russia in June 1972, Brodsky has received enormous praise from Russian, European and American writers and critics. Before his exile, Brodsky was involved in a long series of crossfire with the authorities, including confinement and observation in a mental institution in 1964, and an 18-month stay in a Russian prison camp in 1964-65.

While virtually none of his poetry has been published in Russia (a few poems were printed in the Evening Leningrad newspaper as evidence of his so-called anti-Soviet leanings), his work has been available to Russians through the underground tradition of memorizing the work and circulating manuscripts.

Acclaimed by one of Russia's best known poets, Anna Akhmatova, as "one of the most gifted lyric poets of the new generation," and called "an excellent craftsman, a poet of the first order," by poet-translator W.H. Auden, Brodsky seems to be becoming a kind of cause celebre in Russia and the West.

He has received equal applause for his translations of Yugoslav, Polish, Spanish and English poets, and has published articles in the New York Review of Books and other periodicals.

His own poetry has been translated into English, French, Italian, Czech, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Hebrew, Norwegian, Spanish and Greek.

Although his poetry translations have appeared in a variety of American newspapers and magazines, his "Selected Poems," published in 1972 in paperback by Penguin Press, offers the most current collection of

his work. He also has edited a critical anthology, "Russian Poets on Modern Poetry." A new edition of his Russian poetry, "Chasti rechi" ("Parts of Speech") will be published in the next few weeks by Ardis Press, Ann Arbor, Mich., followed by another book next summer.

Brodsky is currently a poet-in-residence and lecturer at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He plans to spend next year teaching at Cambridge University in England.

The following comments are from his Saturday morning talk at the Amazon Community Center in Eugene and an interview which followed.

HIS STAY IN A RUSSIAN PRISON CAMP: "Mostly you just sit. I lived the country life, chopping wood and shoveling manure. The worst part is a lack of space counterbalanced with an abundance of time. I was not allowed paper and pencil, but I wrote, in my mind. My five-year sentence was shortened because of the enormity of appeals on my behalf both inside and outside Russia."

HIS EXILE FROM RUSSIA: "I was told to leave in 10 days, and it was suggested that, being Jewish, I might go to Israel. I went to Vienna instead, where I met my friend Carl Proffer, a University of Michigan professor. Of course I would like to return to Russia, to see my parents and my son, but there is no chance of this. I have no friends of influence either in the Russian or American administrations to plead my case. No letters are permitted between my family and myself, although I have had some telephone communication."

AWAY FROM HOME: "Any city, any spot you are in, is just a continuation of space. Life is a continuation of time. Sometimes it's better to be far away from the things you love and cherish. They remain fixed in your mind, instead of getting fossilized. They stay in ideal forms and provide a good yardstick. Spiritually man is rooted upwards: you only have your memory in absentia. Being far away stirs more inner mechanics and makes your soul work more frequently."

WRITING IN AMERICA: "When I came to this country I got a letter from the greatest man of letters living in the U.S., Polish writer Czeslas Milosz. He said, 'If you can work only within your layer, your familiar environment, it marks your value.' Living abroad, outside of my realm and continuing to write, is to do something good. It is the closest approximation to the absolute kind of human condition. You don't look for somebody to lean on; you're own your own. It's a real challenge."

SONNET

The month of January has flown past
the prison windows; I have heard the singing
of convicts in their labyrinth of cells:
'One of our brothers has regained his freedom.'
You still can hear the prisoners' low song,
the echoing of footsteps of the wordless wardens.
And you yourself still sing, sing silently:
'Farewell, o January.'
Facing the window's light,
you swallow the warm air in giant gulps.
But I roam once again, sunk deep in thought,
down hallways, from the last interrogation
to the next one — toward that distant land
where there is neither March nor February.

Joseph Brodsky
1962

WRITING AS A PROFESSION: "Being a writer requires a constant justification for doing this and not doing something else. It stirs your sense of guilt, which is a good thing. The more you judge yourself, the more guilty you feel, you put yourself on trial. Writing is a personal, private experience. A writer doesn't share. Stravinsky said about creating, 'I do it for myself and for the probable alter ego.'"

POETRY IN RUSSIA: "The Russian tradition stems from the romantic poetry that was written by intellectuals, the small educated community that was absorbed by the State. Everything was centralized around the Russian court. This made the poet think of himself as part of the

hierarchy. He thought he spoke for the nation. People forget that 'the nation' is only a possible audience. To set a goal, 'to speak for the nation,' is a kindergarten thought. In Russian we are trained to memorize poems and recite them with expression. This method comes from the church, from the practice of reading psalms. Russian literature is relatively young, only 200 years old. We still cling to our traditions."

INTEREST IN POETRY: "Throughout human history, only one to two per cent of the human population has been interested in poetry. Today poetry is confined to schools and certain intellectual circles. Being widely read is a delusion, you never are, regardless of who you are. In America, the

number of people who read poetry is greater. Public discussions of poetry are rare in Russia, except for big, well-known writers who speak in concert halls.

POETRY AND LANGUAGE: "Language is a tool of assimilation. Human beings use language as they use clothing and houses to protect themselves from outer challenges. Poets use language, they try to beat it through its own linguistic means. Words have their own rules, their own sense. A poem is like a box, you try to work in the box without crushing anything."

POETRY AND MATURITY: "It gets harder as one gets older to write. A change occurs from the time you first begins. The better job you did yesterday, the less chance you have of doing better tomorrow. You wonder if there are any tricks left."

Brodsky's schedule

Brodsky's Oregon speaking schedule will include:

Monday — Poetry reading and a discussion from 7:30 to 10 p.m. in the Gerlinger Alumni Lounge on campus.

Tuesday — Brodsky will read with Edward Raggiozino, performing arts department chair at Lane Community College, in the EMU Ballroom from 7:30 to 10 p.m.

Both readings are free and open to the public.

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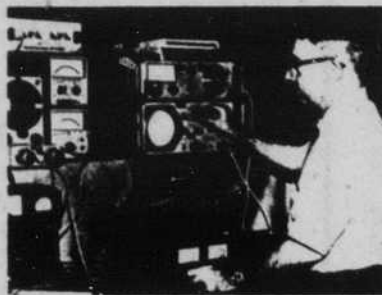
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**Monday, Nov. 22,
12-7:00 p.m.**

**Tuesday, Nov. 23,
12-6:00 p.m.**

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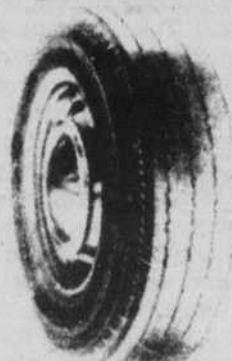
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