

Brodsky's credo. Aesthetics is the mother of ethics

Bengt Jangfeldt
Språket är Gud
Anteckningar om
Joseph Brodsky

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TO THOSE WHO CANNOT speak Russian, the works of Joseph Brodsky may to some extent remain foreign. Brodsky agreed with the sentiment expressed in the title of Bengt Jangfeldt's knowledgeable, empathetic, and sympathetic book: *Language is God*. And this mainly applied to poetry, the pinnacle of the human use of language. Jangfeldt, an associate professor in Russian literature, says: "Poetry was the breath of life for Iosif Brodskij, it occupied his being more than anything else; an obsession. He proclaimed that poetry was older than and would also outlive politics – a higher form of human activity, higher, to be sure, than political language, but also more perfect than prose. A friend who shared a taxi with him on the way to the Leningrad airport the day he was deported from the Soviet Union remembers that the conversation was mainly about poetry and not, as might have been expected, about politics and the impending exile."

Add Brodsky's strongly traditional view of poetry: he considered its most important characteristics to be meter and rhyme. Through the power of his innovative command of these elements he became one of the most significant poets of the Russian language. The central theme of Brodsky's poetry is time and the ability of the poem to conquer it. The form both perpetuates culture – with links to past works – and provides structure. Meter and rhyme overcome the limitations of the present by referring both backwards and forwards within the text, keeping both memory and expectation alive.

SUCH TIES ARE of course difficult to convey in another language; consequently, some of the beauty and perfection of Brodsky's verse is lost. But the consequences are even more serious. They diminish the reader's ability to understand the great demands that Brodsky makes as a thinker and linguistic philosopher. His view of language was highly controversial. Jangfeldt summarizes it: "Time is greater than space, but language is greater than time." Therefore language is God.

Of course this ahistorical interpretation of language is inconsistent with linguistic teachings and Brodsky received considerable criticism for this view even during his lifetime. Meanwhile, for him personally it led to a perception of

aesthetics as the mother of ethics. He believed that a person who developed good artistic taste would become immune to moral and political evil. He proposed that classic literature should fill the pages of newspapers in the post-communist countries rather than current events – yet another point for which Brodsky received no understanding.

JANGFELDT MENTIONS BRODSKY'S "combination of intuition-driven energy and inadequate logic" as a thinker and explains this by the fact that he was self-taught. The authority on which he rested was, as one might imagine, his mastery as a poet. And therefore the consequences are so extensive that the majority of the world's poetry readers will never be able to fully appreciate the greatness of the poems – and why Brodsky is undeniably enigmatic. Even as an essayist – where he sometimes wrote in English – he leaves a mixed impression. When Brodsky departs from his own field, the brilliant poetry analyses, a strange condescending and nonchalant tone often encroaches – as in the unusually unpleasant controversy with Milan Kundera about Dostoyevsky's ideology, where Brodsky manages to marginalize the ancient Russian tyranny of its neighboring countries, blaming the Western world for Soviet communism (because Marx was German ...) and implying that he himself, because of his high moral and ethical qualifications, resisted the totalitarian power more successfully than Kundera. As would appear to be natural, Brodsky was largely a product of both his own experiences of Soviet oppression and of the spiritual climate of ancient Russian totalitarianism. When he expressed himself on conditions in the Western world he could appear to be insightful, but also somewhat bizarre, in essence distanced from the problems of equality and democracy.

Bengt Jangfeldt's book provides an excellent explanation for the contradictions that typify Brodsky. As a Slavist, an expert on the Russian tradition of poetry, and as Brodsky's translator, Jangfeldt has both personal and professional credentials. But most importantly: he was Brodsky's friend and is both sympathetic to, and deeply understanding of, the poet – which does not prevent him from occasionally resorting to mild irony. Unpretentiously, he subtitled his book *Anteckningar om Joseph Brodsky* [Notes on Joseph Brodsky], but his very candor and soft-spoken approach to the equations that may not always fully compute open the way for an understanding of the man and his works. Jangfeldt wrote his book in three parts. The first, a biographical essay about Iosef Brodskij, the young Jewish poet from Leningrad, presents his background, his first steps as a poet, the contacts with Anna Ahmatova, persecution by the authorities, exile to Siberia, and finally deportation at the age of 32, when Brodskij amazingly quickly transformed himself into Joseph Brodsky, cosmopolitan American poet and university professor.

THE SECOND ESSAY FOCUSES on Brodsky's language, poetry, and ethics. The third, entitled "Fragments", occupies almost half of the book. Its short texts deal

with a variety of subjects – from stories and anecdotes about traits and idiosyncrasies of the poet to political and aesthetic discussions. Jangfeldt writes about Brodsky's enthusiasm for Sweden and about his many sojourns there, as well as his relationship with American traffic police, in the poet's eye government authorities no better than KGB agents. These fragments all build on Bengt Jangfeldt's personal memories of Brodsky, making them not only authoritative, but also alive and captivating.

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