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On Grief and Reason: Essays

By Joseph Brodsky



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Joseph Brodsky was a great contrarian and believed, against the received wisdom of our day, that good writing could survive translation. He was right, I think, though you had to wonder when you saw how badly his own work fared in English. But then perhaps the Russians hadn't expelled a great poet so much as exposed us to one of their virulent personality cults. Yet Brodsky's essays are interesting. Composed in a rather heroically determined English, clumsily phrased and idiomatically challenged, they are still inventive and alive. There are suggestive analyses of favorite poems by Hardy, Rilke, and Frost in this book, and a moving meditation on the figure of Marcus Aurelius. Though too often Brodsky goes on at self-indulgent length, he usually recaptures our attention with a characteristic aside: "The fact that we are living does not mean we are not sick."



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Art, especially literature, is "a form of moral insurance" that, if widely disseminated, could counteract the worst impulses of societies and governments, declares Brodsky in his eloquent 1987 Nobel lecture. In another essay, "An Immodest Proposal," the eminent poet and essayist suggests ways to make poetry much more available to the public. In an open letter to Czech president Vaclav Havel, Brodsky (who emigrated from Russia to the U.S. in 1972 after spending two years in prison as a dissident) looks squarely at the moral and economic anarchy of post-communist eastern Europe. This miscellany of reprinted essays and speeches reveals an elegant writer and incisive thinker. "Collector's Item" segues from spy novels, to a psychological profile of Cambridge spy Kim Philby, secret agent for Moscow, to an analysis of how espionage becomes a mutually destructive game. Elsewhere Brodsky champions Thomas Hardy as a modern poet of existential truths and follows Rainer Maria Rilke's poetic journey to the netherworld of Orpheus. Other pieces deal with nostalgia, lessons of history, a trip to Rio de Janeiro, Robert Frost's poetry and Roman emperor/poet Marcus Aurelius's Stoic Meditations.

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From Library Journal

It is unfortunate that Brodsky (former poet laureate of the United States) would release a literary work with so much potential and so much disappointment. True, this collection represents some of Brodsky's most engaging insights. Pieces like the title essay represents his supreme talents as a writer; "On Grief and Reason" reveals the sagacity of Brodsky's mind by offering the reader a new way of looking at the poetry of Robert Frost through two of Frost's poems, "Come In" and "Burial." Brodsky puts Frost alongside the Virgil of the Eclogues and the Georgics. But most of the other essays fail to demonstrate the richness one expects of Brodsky's writing, e.g., his 1987 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which lacks literary merit. Ultimately, Brodsky stretches himself too thin. Not a priority purchase. —Tim Gavin, Episcopal Acad., Merion, Pa.

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From [Booklist](#)

Brodsky has the reputation of being one of the best essayists in the English language, and it doesn't take many pages of reading this new collection to realize why. Whether he's stepping back into his own history, as he does in "Spoils of War" ("If anybody profited from the war, it was us: its children. Apart from having survived it, we were richly provided with stuff to romanticize"), or giving a commencement address, as in "In Praise of Boredom," a metaphysical litany of warning and assurance to a graduating class ("Everything that displays a pattern is pregnant with boredom"), Brodsky shows an extraordinary flair for language. His keen and passionate poet's mind often homes in on unexpected details, as in "Alter Ego," a short dissertation on the poet and the subject of love. Brodsky's spectrum on life and art at the end of the century is as wide and varied as his talent for writing. To read these masterful essays is to experience the English language at its finest. *Raul Nino*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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