POETRY *and* POLITICS *in the* CRUCIBLE *of* HISTORY:

Joseph Brodsky, James H. Billington, and the End of the Soviet Union

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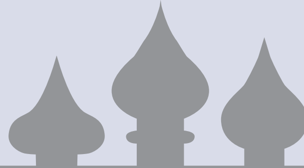

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January 28, 2021 marked the 25th anniversary of the passing of Joseph Brodsky, Russian poet, American essayist and teacher, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and poet laureate of the United States. In 1991, while serving as the poet laureate at the Library of Congress, Brodsky witnessed from afar the collapse of communism and the unexpected breakup of the Soviet Union. Brodsky's interactions in this period with Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, a historian of Russian culture who regarded Brodsky as the embodiment of continuity between pre- and post-communist Russian culture, offer insight into how both men viewed developments during this crucial period. The dialogue between the two about Russia took place against the backdrop of Brodsky's ambitious efforts to make poetry widely known to the American public in order, as he put it, to slow "the spread of our cultural malaise to the next generation."

The published and archival records from this period tell a story of the enduring contributions both men made to the United States and to Russia, but also of unfulfilled hopes: of Billington's for a democratic, westward-oriented Russia that had rediscovered the best in its own cultural and religious traditions, and of Brodsky's for an America enlightened by encounters with its own poetic traditions.

JOSEPH BRODSKY

In the years since his death, Brodsky's writings have attained canonical status in both his adopted and his native countries. In 2012, when the U.S. Postal Service issued its Twentieth-Century Poets series of commemorative stamps, Brodsky was one of just 10 American poets honored, along with Elizabeth Bishop, E. E. Cummings, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. During the 23 years he spent in the U.S., Brodsky's poetry and prose appeared in a staggering array of publications, including *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*; the nation's major daily newspapers; little magazines such as *The Kenyon Review*; and such unusual venues as the *Princeton University Library Chronicle* and the *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*. Most—although by no means all—of these writings were collected in a series of books that appeared between 1973 and 2000, several of which were reissued in 2020 to mark what would have been Brodsky's 80th birthday.

Apart from a few poems that appeared in *samizdat* when he was in his early 20s, Brodsky's writings were not published in Russia until the late 1980s. Individual poems began appearing in Soviet newspapers and magazines in 1987. A book of selected poems was published in 1990. In the post-Soviet period, a seven-volume, *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo,* began publication in 1992, in St. Petersburg, under the auspices of the Pushkin Fund. Russian scholars have produced an extensive scholarly literature on Brodsky, including the landmark literary biography published in 2006 by his friend and fellow poet Lev Loseff.[1] Those of Brodsky's papers that survive from the Soviet era are accessible to scholars in the National Library of Russia, complementing his American papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale. A small museum dedicated to the poet, located in the famous "room and a half" where he lived with his parents in St. Petersburg, opened in early 2021, following efforts going back to the early 2000s to establish such a museum.[2]

In what can only be seen as a backhanded tribute to Brodsky, Russian nationalist authors under the influence of Vladimir Putin's cultural policies have engaged in crude attempts to redefine the poet's legacy. One such author claims, for example, that Brodsky never criticized the Soviet Union while in exile, that his reluctance to visit Russia after 1991 was based purely on personal motives and had no political component, that his parents named him after Joseph Stalin, and that he was secretly a practicing Russian Orthodox believer whose Jewish mother arranged to have him bap-

tized during the siege of Leningrad.[3] During his years in the United States, this author claims, Brodsky hid his religion because his "American surrounding consisted of non-believers who probably convinced him that profound faith is not fashionable and irrelevant."[4] Serious readers presumably do not take such fantastic assertions seriously, but the mere fact that they are made attests to the ongoing struggle in Russia to define Brodsky's legacy.[5]

The particulars of Brodsky's larger-than-life biography are well known, from his own autobiographical essays and the reminiscences of colleagues and friends from around the world. They nonetheless are worth recalling, if only to emphasize the sheer amount of life that he managed to pack into his 55 years, the last several of which were marked by severe health problems.[6]

He was born in Leningrad on May 24, 1940, a little more than a year before the German invasion. He lived through the terrible siege of 1941-44. At one point he and his mother were evacuated from Leningrad and spent a year in the provincial city of Cherepovets. Brodsky's father was in the navy and saw action on the Black Sea front as well as service in China after the war. Brodsky developed an early loathing for communism, one that was at first more aesthetic than moral or political. His antipathy crystallized around the figure of Lenin whom, as Brodsky later recalled, "I began to despise even when I was in the first grade—not so much because of his political philosophy or practice, about which at the age of seven I knew very little, but because of his omnipresent image which plagued almost every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money, and what not, depicting the man at various ages and stages of his life."[7] He was an indifferent student who nonetheless gained from school "a thorough understanding of Russian grammar and syntax" as well as read widely on his own.[8]

One day, at age 15, he simply walked out of the classroom and never returned. He got a job in a factory that produced cannons for the Russian military, in part to help support his family. (His father, a photographer and journalist who was not discharged from the navy and did not return to Leningrad until 1948, worked for two years in the photography lab of the Naval Museum. Dismissed from his job in 1950 for being a Jew, he had trouble finding work owing to the prevailing anti-Semitism of the day.[9]) Brodsky went on to a series of jobs as a laborer, mill operator, mortuary assistant, and crew member on geological expeditions to Siberia and the Russian North. He published his first poems at the age of 18, and quickly came to be regarded as the most talented Russian poet of his generation.

In the 1960s, while still in his early 20s, he became, as Billington expressed it in a posthumous tribute, "the favored protégé of the great lady of St. Petersburg, Anna Akhmatova."[10] Akhmatova in turn introduced Brodsky to Nadezhda Mandelstam, the all-but-forgotten widow of the great poet Osip Mandelstam who had perished in the gulag in 1938. Brodsky met Mandelstam for the first time in the winter of 1962, when he went with friends to see the churches in the city of Pskov, where she was eking out a living as an English teacher in a local pedagogical institute. He went on to write her obituary for *The New York Review of Books* some 18 years later and to pronounce her, on the strength of her memoirs, among the two greatest Russian prose writers of the 20th century.[11]

Brodsky's troubles with the KGB began early. He came under surveillance beginning in the summer of 1960, in connection with an official crackdown on Aleksandr Ginzburg's *samizdat* journal *Sintaksis*. He was arrested for the first time in January 1962 in connection with an investigation of two friends but was released after two days. He was denounced in 1963 by a Leningrad newspaper, which called his poetry "pornographic and anti-Soviet." After twice being put in a mental institution, he was arrested and put on trial in early 1964

for "social parasitism." He was sentenced to five years of exile and hard labor to the village of Norenskaya in the Archangelsk region of northern Russia. He served 18 months before being allowed to return to Leningrad. In 1972, he was expelled from the Soviet Union and rendered stateless. In the U.S., he went first to the University of Michigan, but eventually settled in Brooklyn.

He became a U.S. citizen in 1977 and held teaching positions at Columbia University and Mount Holyoke College. His health had begun to deteriorate when he was still in his 20s— according to his biographer, during his exile in the Russian North. By the late 1980s he had suffered three heart attacks and had had two heart operations. There was talk of a third operation and a possible heart transplant. He never again saw his parents, as the Soviet authorities turned a deaf ear to requests for permissions for his mother and his father to visit their son, separately or together. After appeals by the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and 40 Congressmen went unanswered, in early 1984 Brodsky issued a public letter signed by 23 leading writers and intellectuals—including Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, John Updike, and Vartan Gregorian—asking that his widowed father be granted a visa, but to no avail.[12] For Brodsky, it was a final reminder of the cruelty and stupidity of the Soviet regime and the apparatchiks who ran it.

BILLINGTON AND BRODSKY

Among Brodsky's many contributions to American life was his service to two federal institutions, the Library of Congress, where he was poet laureate in 1991–92, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, where he was poetry editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* from the winter of 1993 until the autumn of 1994. In the latter capacity, he wrote a series of essays with accompanying selections of poems about six poets—Polish, American, Modern Greek, Latin, German, and Russian—that he believed deserved to be better known to American audiences.[13]

Brodsky's selection as poet laureate was the doing of Billington, who had been appointed Librarian of Congress by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 and who, as a Russian cultural historian, was a lover of Russian (as well as American) poetry. It is unclear when Billington first met Brodsky, but he almost certainly knew *of* the young poet as far back as the mid-1960s. Billington's tutor at Oxford in the early 1950s was Sir Isaiah Berlin, who met Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad in 1946 and to whom she dedicated what Brodsky called the "magnificent cycle of poems" titled *Sweetbriar's Bloom*.[14] Akhmatova and Sir Isaiah met again in Leningrad in 1956 and once more in 1965, when Akhmatova was allowed to travel to Oxford to receive her honorary doctorate. On this last occasion, Akhmatova, after contemptuously dismissing those Soviet poets whose work was being published in the USSR, spoke to Sir Isaiah about the new generation of gifted young poets. "The best among them," Berlin recalled her saying, "was Iosif Brodsky, whom she had, she said, brought up by hand" and whom she characterized as "a noble poet in deep disfavor."[15]

Billington spent the academic year of 1966–67 in Moscow as a visiting scholar, where he frequented the famous kitchen of Nadezhda Mandelstam, who by then had moved from Pskov to the capital. It was there, Billington later wrote, "that I began to sense the beginnings of Russia's renewal. A continuous flow of remarkable people came to participate in evenings presided over by [Mandelstam]" and "Varlam Shalamov, the great writer who had somehow survived the most remote death camp at Kolyma."[16] Billington most likely did not meet Brodsky at these gatherings—the poet had just returned from exile and was living in Leningrad—but the two men shared the memory of those

evenings in Mandelstam's kitchen which, as Brodsky described it, had become "the place of veritable pilgrimages."[17]

Brodsky was an intensely political writer who, as Loseff recalls, was an avid follower of the news.[18] He had no desire, however, to play the role of famous political exile. In this regard he differed from the other great Russian writer living in the United States at that time, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Following his emigration—his "change of empires," as he put it in one of the first poems he wrote on U.S. soil—Brodsky became in many ways very American.[19] He was devoted to writers such as Robert Frost and urged American scholars of Russian poetry to read their own poets. He was fascinated by many aspects of American life, including popular culture. He was cautiously appreciative of the American political system and the stability of its institutions, and wary of the political correctness that already by the 1980s was beginning to wash over American campuses. He avoided commenting on day-to-day political events in either Russia or the United States, going so far as to dodge reporters and television crews who sought his views on the momentous events taking place in Moscow during his term as poet laureate in 1991–92.[20]

Brodsky's relationship with Billington and the Library of Congress was shaped by this odd confluence of Brodsky's sense of himself as an exiled Russian writer and his self-identification as an American citizen, taxpayer, and even (during the year he was employed by the Library) public servant.[21] Billington loved Russian culture and loathed Soviet communism and everything it stood for. In this regard he was very similar to and naturally gravitated toward Brodsky. The great dream of Billington's intellectual life, one that can be detected in his writings going back to the 1950s, was that this culture, which the Bolsheviks had suppressed and deformed but had not managed to destroy, would reemerge and play a leading role in shaping a reformed, post-communist Russia.[22]

Among Russian and émigré intellectuals, Billington's great heroes were Isaiah Berlin and Dmitrii S. Likhachev. Both grew up in St. Petersburg and were old enough (the former was born in 1909, the latter in 1906) to have witnessed first-hand the horrors of the Bolshevik Revolution. Both lived long enough to outlast the regime and to play some role in understanding and (at least in Likhachev's case) shaping a post-Soviet order. Although Brodsky was a full generation younger than Berlin and Likhachev (and 11 years younger than Billington himself), Billington saw him in the same light as Berlin and Likhachev: as one of those living links between the culture of pre-revolutionary Russia, St. Petersburg in particular, and what he hoped would be Russia's future. Brodsky occupied this position by virtue of his own writings as well as his personal relationships with Akhmatova and Mandelstam. As Billington wrote in the *Washington Post* two days after Brodsky's death, "Brodsky was the embodiment of the hopes not only of Akhmatova, the last of the great St. Petersburg poets from the beginning of the century, but also Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of another great martyred poet. Both of them saw Brodsky as part of the guiding light that might someday lead Russia back to her own deep roots." Those roots, he went on, "involved both the rich humanistic tradition of literary St. Petersburg, in which he was born, and the Judeo-Christian heritage that was being rediscovered by artists in the late imperial period."[23]

Brodsky had his own connections to Isaiah Berlin, ones that at first ran through Akhmatova but became direct after his move to the West. When Brodsky visited Mandelstam in her tiny communal apartment in 1962, he noted an open paperback copy of Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, a gift from Akhmatova.[24] (In a slightly different account, Brodsky claimed that he personally carried

the book from Akhmatova to Mandelstam.[25]) When Brodsky himself finally met Sir Isaiah in London in 1972, days after his departure from the Soviet Union, the two men talked about Akhmatova. Brodsky recalled (in an otherwise hilarious account of lunch at Berlin's very English club in the heart of London) hearing "my mother tongue, spoken with the most extraordinary clarity and velocity, unparalleled in my experience." Billington had similar reactions to Berlin's pure, pre-Bolshevik Russian, which he had heard on various occasions, notably at the Library of Congress in 1988, where Berlin was in residence as a visiting scholar and Andrei Sakharov had come as part of a Soviet arms control delegation. As Billington later recalled it, "Sakharov was ill and tired when he met Isaiah but was revived and seemed exhilarated by Isaiah's stream of elegant St. Petersburg Russian, which was itself a kind of poetry."[26]

This sense of being part of the stream of Russian—and world—culture was very strong in Brodsky, and it explains how he related to earlier poets and how he saw his own place in history. In his Nobel Lecture to the Swedish Academy in 1987, Brodsky began with tributes to five poets: his friend and intellectual hero W. H. Auden, his beloved Frost, and three Russians—Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Marina Tsvetaeva. While gently chiding the keepers of the prize for failing to award the Nobel to any of these older greats (all except Auden were born between 1874 and 1892), Brodsky went on to offer a passionate defense of his own generation which, he claimed, had given its reply to Theodor Adorno's "no poetry after Auschwitz" by proving itself "capable of writing poetry":

> That generation—the generation born precisely at the time when the Auschwitz crematoria were working full blast, when Stalin was at the zenith of his godlike, absolute power, which seemed sponsored by Mother Nature herself—that generation came into the world, it appears, in order to continue what, theoretically, was supposed to be interrupted in those crematoria and in the anonymous common graves of Stalin's archipelago. The fact that not everything got interrupted, at least in Russia, can be credited in no small degree to my generation, and I am no less proud of belonging to it than I am of standing here today. And the fact that I am standing here is a recognition of the services that generation has rendered to culture….I would add, to world culture.[27]

POET LAUREATE

If Brodsky was fiercely proud of his identity as a Russian poet and what he and his generation had done to break through what Berlin once had called the "silence in Russian culture," he also had become assertively American. Billington had to respect Brodsky's American side.[28] In introducing the new poet laureate to the public, he invariably characterized him as an immigrant American rather than an exiled Russian. (This was another distinction between Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn, who refused to be thought of as an "immigrant" except in a narrowly legal sense.) Adapting a theme that Billington had stressed going back to his Senate confirmation hearings in 1987—that of the Library of Congress's central role as a repository of global knowledge in an increasingly multicultural America—Billington explained that Brodsky "has the open-ended interest of American life that immigrants have. This is a reminder that so much of American creativity is from people not born in America."[29] Brodsky, he added, would bring to the post of poet laureate the "penetrating observations of the outsider while exploring with increasing versatility his own and poetry's Americanness."[30] Brodsky more than delivered on this promise, using his poet laureateship to emphasize what

was distinctive about American poetry and especially how it differed from what Brodsky frequently referred to as the Continental tradition in poetry.

Brodsky's term as U.S. poet laureate has received little scholarly attention. (Loseff, for example, devotes a single sentence to the topic.) It was not immediately obvious why Brodsky even accepted the position. By 1991 he was in declining health and had other writing and teaching obligations. Having already won the Nobel, he hardly needed the honor. Other prominent poets were known to have turned down the position over the years. The stipend was modest: in his final report to the library's poetry office, he noted that the pay had not covered his expenses and recommended that it be increased for future laureates.[31]

It soon became apparent that Brodsky had accepted the post for one reason: to use it as a platform to promote American poetry to the American people. He had formed a rough plan for how to do this before he accepted the position, which he discussed in general terms in an impromptu interview with a reporter from the *New York Times* the evening his appointment was announced. Publishers, he argued, should be encouraged to sell poetry in supermarkets, right next to the tabloids. "People who buy the *National Enquirer* would buy poetry. They should be given a choice. I'm absolutely serious."[32] His task, he later told a news conference in Washington, would be that of alerting "the nation to the tremendous patrimony [poetry] it doesn't use."[33] Or, as he explained to another journalist, "my idea is simply, is very simple, is that the books of poetry should be published in far greater volume and be distributed in far greater volume." He said, "this assumption that the blue collar crowd is not supposed to read it or a farmer in his overalls is not to read poetry seems to be dangerous, if not tragic."[34]

The poet laureate traditionally begins his or her term with a lecture in the fall and concludes it with a reading in the spring. Brodsky delivered his opening lecture on October 2, 1991. It was in some respects an odd presentation, made more so by a difference between the actual text as delivered by Brodsky (the recording of which is preserved in the Library of Congress and accessible in digital form on its website) and the version that he later published with the title "An Immodest Proposal" in his essay collection *On Grief and Reason*.[35]

Perhaps not surprisingly, he made no mention of the momentous events transpiring in his native land: the failed coup against Gorbachev, Yeltsin's rise to unrivalled power, and the outlawing of his old nemeses, the KGB and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. More surprisingly, Brodsky did not talk about and barely mentioned any great poets, even though by that time he was known for his prize-winning criticism of Akhmatova, Eugenio Montale, Osip Mandelstam, Derek Walcott, Auden, and other poets.[36] What Brodsky did do was lay out a plan for distributing inexpensive editions of American poems in drugstores, gas stations, and supermarkets and for placing poetry in hotel rooms alongside the Bible and the telephone directory—all of which was to be paid for by Congressional appropriations and private sources.

For a Washington audience, it was a not especially sophisticated excursion into public policy, but one that was kept lighthearted by a stream of jokes and Brodsky's own self-deprecating humor. (Was he really serious about this?[37]) The most remarkable aspect of the speech, however, and the point at which the recorded version differs from his written text, is where Brodsky interrupts himself and extemporaneously expounds for several minutes on why Americans should care about their poetry:

> Well, I'll take just a little break from the paper. To me American poetry is a sort of non-stop relentless sermon of human autonomy, of resilience. This is a poetry very strong on hardihood and

on escape. It's somewhat—how should I put it—well, I don't really know; I don't really believe I should tell you about what your poetry is like. I think you know that no worse than I do. I tell you just one thing, sort of a perspective, in which I see it.

Many years ago, many moons ago, somewhere, I suppose it was somewhere in the '60s, early '60s, I brought to the great Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova, I showed her a collection of poems by Robert Frost, it was I believe the *North of Boston*. And I showed her several poems there.

Next day I returned and asked her, what did she think. And she said, well, in mock indignation, she said what kind of poet is this; he talks all the time about what he can buy and what he can sell. I presume she was referring to "The Star-Splitter" poem or some such thing. Well, and after a pause she added, "what a terrifying poet."… Frost is indeed a terrifying poet, not in the Continental sense of a tragic poet. Tragedy is already *fait accompli*, it already has to do with something that has occurred, which you, as it were, have outlived. Whereas terror has to do with anticipation—with the sort of projection of your negative potential into the future—of your own negative potential.

Well, it's that sort of thing. At any rate, this is what to me distinguishes considerably American poetry, that sort of a realization of a human being's negative potential—that's what you are, I think. Well, that's what we all are. At any rate, I'm not going to ad lib here. I'd rather return to the paper. [Laughter] It's basically the general characteristic of American poetry—that apprehension. Well, it keeps its eyes wide open, but not so much in wonderment, in expecting a revelation, but in apprehension. It exacts the full look at the worst and it doesn't blink. It's that sort of sense. You don't find anything comparable, anything parallel, I think, on the Continent. And this is your unique thing.

This excursus does not appear in the published version of the lecture, where Brodsky's thoughts on the uniqueness of American poetry are reduced to a single paragraph. The phrase "American poetry is a relentless nonstop sermon on human autonomy" does appear. The anecdote about Akhmatova is missing.[38] The explicit contrast with the Continental tradition is gone, although Brodsky does remark in the published version that American poetry is "short on consolation (the diversion of so much European poetry, especially Russian); rich and extremely lucid in detail; free of nostalgia for some Golden Age…." Brodsky never fully developed these ideas in his essays, although he came closest in "On Grief and Reason," the extended analysis of two of Frost's poems that appeared as the title essay in his volume of 1995.

In the four and a half years of life that remained to him, Brodsky went on to launch, true to his word, the American Poetry & Literacy Project, a nonprofit organization devoted to making poetry a more central part of American culture. With the assistance of Andrew Carroll, a Columbia University student who had read accounts of Brodsky's speech and was inspired by his proposal, the project resulted, among other things, in the publication of *101 Great American Poems*, which after Brodsky's death Carroll distributed throughout the country.[39] Brodsky's example also set a pattern for future U.S. poets laureate, all of whom now undertake during their term some kind of project aimed at promoting literacy and awareness of poetry, often targeting underserved or marginalized communities.[40]

Brodsky's term as poet laureate ended on May 14, 1992, with a traditional reading by him of his own poems—mostly in English with a few examples of the original Russian—and a few poems by Frost thrown in for fun.[41] Brodsky's final day as laureate was marked by a strange coincidence that reflected the frenetic pace of events in those early post-Soviet months. Mikhail Gorbachev, who had resigned the presidency of the disappearing Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991, was then on his first trip to the United States, to raise funds for the Gorbachev Foundation and, in a magnanimous gesture to his successor, to lobby for Western aid to Russia. On the afternoon of Brodsky's reading, Gorbachev addressed members of Congress in Statuary Hall of the Capitol. Following the speech, he and his wife Raisa were escorted to the Madison Building of the library by Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey (whom Billington had known as a history major and All-American basketball player at Princeton), where the Congressional Research Service had organized a colloquium of leading experts to discuss the future of Russia and the other ex-Soviet republics. As the Gorbachevs entered the building, library staff lined the second-floor balcony overlooking the lobby and gave the former president a prolonged ovation.[42] Gorbachev then spoke to the experts assembled upstairs, in remarks that were recorded and are preserved in the collections of the library.[43]

Brodsky, who had arrived early for his evening reading, was brought to Gorbachev and the two men were introduced to each other. In contrast to Raisa, Gorbachev had never shown much interest in culture and it is not clear that he even knew who Brodsky was. Most likely he had some idea, as in 1987 the Politburo had had to formulate a response to Brodsky's being awarded the Nobel Prize. What the two men said to each other is not recorded. Billington had met and conversed with Gorbachev on several previous occasions—at the Reagan-Gorbachev summits in Washington in 1987 and in Moscow in 1988—but he never had much good to say about the Soviet leader; Gorbachev was a communist who Billington believed could never overcome his origins in the *nomenklatura*. Once Gorbachev's fate was sealed, however, Billington became much more generous, telling reporters that the Soviet leader would assume an important place in history and be remembered for "four great things:" *glasnost*, bringing representative institutions to the Soviet Union, his decision not to use the Red Army to suppress dissent in East Germany, and his refusal to legitimize the junta that attempted to overthrow him in 1991.[44]

Brodsky also had been unimpressed with Gorbachev, for many of the same reasons, but he, too, softened when he finally met the deposed leader. According to Loseff, he thought him "a babbler, a talker who had no idea of the forces he had unleashed." But, as Loseff went on to observe, when Brodsky "saw the man in person, he was unexpectedly moved."[45]

> It's a huge hall, or rather a room, twenty people sitting in it asking him questions about why he did this or that, and he says nothing. Either he won't answer, or he can't. Probably he can't. And at some point it seemed to me that Clio had just walked into the room—all we can see are her feet and the hem of her robe. And somehow on the level of her soles are all these people. Me included.[46]

It was in large part thanks to this Gorbachev/Clio that during the eight-month academic year in which he had served at poet laureate, the Soviet Union had disappeared. For a time, Brodsky talked about visiting Russia but, as Billington observed in his posthumous tribute, he remained "troubled and ambivalent" about his native land and never returned.

BRODSKY, BILLINGTON, AND THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA

While Brodsky had had little to say in public about developments in the Soviet Union during its final year, he had been following events closely, with the eyes and ears of a poet and exile rather than of a trained historian or social scientist. Among the many interesting items in the Brodsky Papers at Yale is the poet's marked-up copy of Billington's paper, "The Search for a Modern Russian Identity," which Billington presented to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston on May 8, 1991 and in slightly revised form to a Soviet audience some two weeks later at Spaso House, the residence of the U.S. ambassador in Moscow.[47] A prominent Soviet democrat who was present arranged to have the paper published in the reform-minded Moscow journal *Nezavisimaia gazeta*.[48] Appearing on June 4, a little more than a week before the elections for the president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), it occasioned an official protest from the Soviet government. The pro-Yeltsin forces, in contrast, welcomed the paper, and Billington was invited to present a version of it later that summer to the Congress of Compatriots, a meeting of Russians and émigrés being organized by the new Russian government.[49]

Billington had sent the paper to Brodsky in early May, at the time of the Boston presentation. In it, he had outlined a hopeful vision for the future of Russia. Gorbachev had taken a sharp turn to the right at the end of 1990, prompting the resignation of Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who warned that "a dictatorship is approaching." Gorbachev was implicated in the dispatch in early 1991 of paratroop units to seven Soviet republics. The ensuing violence resulted in the deaths of 14 protestors in Vilnius, Lithuania. During the first months of 1991, Gorbachev was locked in a bitter political struggle with his rival Boris Yeltsin, chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR. Gorbachev was attempting to hold together the Soviet Union, chiefly by means of a referendum in which Soviet voters were asked to approve a vaguely worded proposal calling for preservation of a union of republics. Yeltsin was asserting the sovereignty of the Russian republic and had staged a referendum of his own, in which Russian voters were asked to approve the first direct election of a Russian president. Following approval by the voters, the election was scheduled for June 12, and Yeltsin was heavily favored to win.

Billington's paper expanded upon themes he had developed in a two-part article about Russian identity written for the *Washington Post* the previous year. He foresaw the possible emergence of a post-communist Russia that would draw upon its pre-communist literature, art, religion, and folkways to find a democratic but distinctly Russian path in the world.[50] He envisioned an optimistic scenario characterized by "a Russian people in movement both forward to democratization and back to religion."[51] This, he argued, would unite the Russians with other peoples, notably the Poles, who had undergone precisely such a movement, and even, he ventured, the Americans. Was this dual movement not, he asked, "in essence, what America produced in a very different way many years ago, when democracy arose historically out of our own religious base, which underpinned it rhetorically and preceded it historically?"[52] This was in a sense a double projection: an optimistic image of Russia's past onto its future, and a further projection of that future onto a certain idealized image of the United States. Combining Western liberal democracy with Russia's own "conservative spiritual heritage" held out the promise, he believed, of overcoming the "irreconcilable Slavophile-Westernizer polarity" that had characterized much of Russian history and that still underlay many analyses of developments in the late Soviet period.[53]

Billington admitted that his vision was speculative, but he proffered evidence for it from what he observed on his many trips to the region, read about in Soviet and Western

sources, and discussed with visiting Russians from all walks of life. He cited the new vitality of the Soviet press, the apparent determination of younger Russians to build from below "political and economic structures that are more participatory and accountable," the rediscovery of local and regional traditions, the burgeoning environmental and historic preservation movements, the revitalization of the countryside and of village life, the opening of new churches, and the revival, as he saw it, of a purified Orthodoxy.[54] As he later summarized the main argument, Russia now had a chance "to create a new Russian identity that looked outward to liberal Western institutions yet also inward to conservative cultural values. Everything depended on whether the coming catharsis would be a nationalistic one based on purges, external enemies, and internal scapegoats or a deeper, moral catharsis within individuals involving the rebirth of conscience and the transcending of violence."[55]

Brodsky replied with a detailed, three-page letter in which he called the paper "awfully good," but he went on to question some of its central contentions, including those related to the role that religion would play in shaping Russia's future, to the dynamics of the Russian rural-urban divide, and to the relevance of the recent violence in Romania for the Soviet endgame.[56] Brodsky did not believe that religion would play a positive role in the Soviet Union, which would remain for the next decade or more a "lumpen state" that would "embrace (or allow itself to be embraced by) no creed or philosophy." He was equally negative on the virtues of rural Russia and the part it might play in reviving the country. The Bolshevik Revolution had been an affair of what he called "city boys" and this would not change: "the whole argument about the future of the Soviet Union, within it and in the West, still remains largely urban…. Modern society doesn't give a damn about peasants...the arguers are still city boys." On Romania, he took the cynical view that the violent overthrow of Ceausescu somehow was undertaken at Moscow's initiative.

Billington had neither the time nor the inclination to extensively revise the paper before he presented it in Moscow, either at Spaso House or subsequently at the Congress of Compatriots. The latter event opened on August 19, the same day as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) began its annual conference, which was slated for Moscow that year. The two events presented the spectacle of dueling cultural realities, the IFLA conference, representing the last gasp of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy and library establishment; and the Congress of Compatriots, reflecting the emergence of a new, democratic, and nationalist Russia led by the forces of reform.

August 19 was also the day the failed coup against Gorbachev began. Billington was in Moscow for the duration of the coup, along with a large delegation of Library of Congress staff which had come for the IFLA conference. He later wrote a book about his experiences and observations.[57] The August events, while they had their surprises, seemed to him to confirm his hopeful predictions about the Russian future. To the question of whether the coming catharsis would be a nationalistic one based on purges and violence, or "a deeper, moral catharsis within individuals involving the rebirth of conscience," he judged the answer to be the latter. Yeltsin had set the tone, issuing what Billington characterized as his "unforgettable apology" to the parents of the three boys killed in the coup. "Forgive me," Yeltsin had said, "your President, that I was not able to defend and save your sons."[58] Asking forgiveness of each other, Billington observed, was a prominent element in Orthodox religious practice. "A new moral dimension," he noted, "was asserting itself in the leadership: Someone who was not responsible was accepting responsibility in a society where traditionally no one in power had accepted blame for much of anything."[59]

Brodsky was not sorry to see communism go (although he was pained, for cultural reasons, at the split between Russia and Ukraine), but he took a more sober, and in the long run more realistic, view of these developments.[60] He wrote little about the events in Moscow, although he must have discussed them with Billington and many others at the time. His two major poems of this period, "Transatlantic" and "The View from the Hill" (i.e., Capitol Hill and the office of the poet laureate in the beautiful attic of the Thomas Jefferson Building), are full of foreboding and references to death.[61] "Transatlantic" begins with an observation both sweeping and startling—"The last twenty years were good for practically everybody/save the dead"—and ends with a rare reference to current events: "pregnant submarines returning/to their native pen after a worldwide journey/without destroying life on earth, without/even a proper flag to hoist," an allusion to the dispute between Russia and Ukraine in 1992 over the disposition of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet (and Western nervousness about the security of Soviet nuclear weapons).

Brodsky did not live to see the rise of Putin—a classic "city boy" whose characteristics he would have recognized from his own youth in Leningrad—but he saw the corruption of the Yeltsin era and the war in Chechnya (which, like the wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia, he denounced). Brodsky found it difficult to celebrate the defeat of communism and the triumph of former dissidents such as Václav Havel, as he could never trust the human capacity for self-delusion and self-congratulation that could lurk behind all such celebrations and the abstract words on which they relied. As he wrote in his "Letter to a President" in reply to a speech Havel had given, "what you call 'Communism' was a breakdown of humanity and not a political problem. It was a human problem, a problem of our species, and thus of a lingering nature. Neither as a writer nor, moreover, as a leader of a nation should you use terminology that obscures the reality of human evil—terminology, I should add, invented by evil to obscure its own reality."[62] Elsewhere in the letter Brodsky refers to "human negative potential," that force he had mentioned not once but three times in his extemporaneous excursus on American poetry at the Library of Congress in 1991. Havel, he argued, was failing to recognize that this potential was not something external, located within "Communism," but rather internal to the human being, "the reflection of ourselves."

Billington was of course disappointed by many developments in the Russia of the 1990s, but he continued to believe that things could turn out for the best. In an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* on June 16, 1996, the day of the first round of voting in the Russian presidential elections that resulted in the eventual reelection of Yeltsin, he argued that the most powerful ideological development in the country since the overthrow of communism "has not been a growing belief in free markets and representative government, but a resurgence of Russian nationalism."[63] He saw Yeltsin's chief opponent, the neo-communist Vladimir Zyuganov, as benefiting from the upsurge in nationalism, which Zyuganov had identified with *russkost'* (Russian-ness), *gosudarstvennost'* (governmentalism), and *derzhavniki* (men of power).

But Billington remained cautiously hopeful that Russia would remain on a path toward the West and to an internal system based on market reform and democratic pluralism. His optimism was based on his belief in the possibility of a *different* kind of nationalism from the one that Zyuganov was propounding—a "healthy Russian nationalism compatible with, and conducive to democracy." Signs of this "positive nationalism," of which the 89-year old Likhachev was still the greatest living proponent, he argued, could be seen in the persistence of many of the same developments he had observed five years earlier: the revival

of religious life (mainly but not exclusively Orthodox) at the parish and individual level; the development of *sobornost'* ("togetherness"), under which Russians were working together to revive local communities through the efforts of volunteers and local governments; and the writings of young historians who were discovering regional history and rediscovering the republican traditions of Novgorod and other early Russian cities. He went on to reprise his earlier thoughts about the United States as a potential model for Russia, noting that despite the "radically different nature of American and Russian societies, Russia may well be approximating the broad outlines of the American formula for making democracy viable on a continental scale for a multi-ethnic people: a common language, religious faith as the moral underpinning for society, and the ability to tackle problems locally on an unforgiving natural frontier." However desirable from the perspective of U.S. interests or indeed the interests of the Russian people, this was a hopelessly optimistic prediction, and one that Brodsky presumably would not have shared.

In the end, however, there was much that Brodsky and Billington did share and that made it possible for them to work together. Brodsky was a deeply spiritual and philosophical poet. Although he was not, as recent Russian nationalists have claimed, a Russian Orthodox believer (or for that matter a practicing Jew), he had a profoundly religious sensibility, rooted in a preoccupation with language, the Word (in the Christian sense of the term), the afterlife, and, above all, time and its intersection with the timeless. "All my poems," he once wrote, "are more or less about the same thing—about Time. About what time does to Man." As his friend and biographer Loseff observed, Brodsky was "the poet who brought metaphysics back into Russian poetic discourse. He sometimes prided himself on restoring the word 'soul' to the Russian poetic lexicon, and indeed, 'soul' is one of the words he uses most often: 204 times."[64]

But Brodsky was also, in his own way, a person of action. As much as he admired the great German poet, he was no Rainer Maria Rilke writing elegies from a castle at Duino. If nothing else, the modest circumstances of his early life dictated otherwise. He was an extraordinarily hard worker, and he could make tough decisions, beginning, perhaps, with his walking out of school at age 15. He had done hard physical labor. He was also a teacher, critic, friend, and mentor to many other poets, and in his own way a public servant—as he once put it, a kind of surgeon general concerned about the mental and spiritual health of the American people and convinced that a people without poetry was in danger of losing its capacity for culture and enlightened self-government.[65]

Billington was an academic who, apart from a few years in the U.S. Army, spent his entire adult life in educational and cultural institutions. He had studied, written about, and valued great works of art, philosophy, and theology. Indeed, it was precisely this deeper and more spiritual side of Brodsky that he focused on in the appreciation he wrote immediately after the poet's death, singling out for praise "Nunc Dimitis" about the prophetess Anna and recalling Brodsky's early work with John Donne and the English Metaphysical poets. But Billington was also quintessentially a person of action—someone who wanted to use his position as Librarian of Congress to do things to benefit the American people, and, as it happened, the Russians and many others as well. It was in this latter capacity that he launched so many national and international programs and projects, including several that he believed would help move Russia toward the bright future that he saw as possible for it.

It was at this intersection of action and contemplation, of doing and of thinking, that he and Brodsky came together and worked for a time. Each was an idealist in his own

way, but the hopes of neither were borne out: not Billington's for Russia or Brodsky's for America. Billington outlived Brodsky by more than 22 years, during which time his vision of a democratic Russia grounded in religious traditions and reconciled to the West became an ever more distant possibility. As for Brodsky, his vision of an America that was more unified, democratic, and enlightened as a result of a widening encounter with its own poetic tradition seems little more than a fading mirage.

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Endnotes

1 Lev Loseff, *Iosif Brodskii: Opyt literaturnoi biografii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardia, 2006), translated as Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Aaron Hodgson, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Iosif Brodskii and the Twentieth-Century Poetic Canon in the Post-Soviet Period," in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon*, ed. Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 43–62; and Stephanie Sandler, "Creating the Canon of the Present," also in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry*, 393–423.

2 Yulia Savikovskaya, "Joseph Brodsky's 'Room and a Half' Now a Museum," *Moscow Times*, February 8, 2021; and Lawrence Van Gelder, "Arts Briefing—Russia: Poet's Corner," *New York Times*, April 17, 2003. For the Brodsky Museum, see https://brodsky.online/.

3 Vladimir Bondarenko, *Brodskii: russkii poet* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2015), 55–85. Bondarenko's book is part of Molodaia Gvardia's "The Lives of Remarkable People" (*Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei*) series. Bondarenko is the author of numerous popular works on literature and culture, including a biography of the ultra-nationalist writer Aleksandr Prokhanov published in 1992. David Remnick recalls meeting Prokhanov and his deputy Bondarenko in Moscow that year and being told by Bondarenko that he had just returned from a trip to the U.S. sponsored in part by David Duke, the Louisiana Ku Klux Klansman. Bondarenko characterized Duke's views as perhaps "a bit extreme" and compared his own views more to those of "your Patrick Buchanan." Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993), 525.

4 Bondarenko, interviewed by Sergei Vinogradov in "The Baptism of Joseph Brodsky," n.d., https://russkiymir.ru/en/magazines/article/149221/

5 The struggle to define Brodsky's legacy in Russia began almost immediately after his death. See David MacFadyen, "24 May 1996 in St. Petersburg, Russia: The Perceived Significance of Joseph Brodsky's Legacy," *World Literature Today* 71, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 81–86.

6 For biographical details, see Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*. Keith Gessen, "The Gift: Joseph Brodsky and the Fortunes of Misfortune," *The New Yorker,* May 23, 2011 is both a (positive) review of Loseff's book and an extended essay that offers a somewhat skeptical look at aspects of Brodsky's biography (although not his poetry). Also useful are several excellent obituaries, especially Robert D. McFadden, "Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55," *New York Times*, January 29, 1996; and Lachlan Mackinnon, "Joseph Brodsky," *The Independent*, January 30, 1996. See also Peter Filkins, "Words Preserved Against a Day of Fear: Remembering Joseph Brodsky," *The American Scholar*, June 2, 2020, https://theamericanscholar.org/words-preserved-against-a-day-of-fear/#.X30fa1KSlPZ for the reminiscences of a former student.

7 Joseph Brodsky, "Less Than One," in Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 5.

8 Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 17.

9 See Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 9–11; and Brodsky, "In a Room and a Half," *Less Than One*, 469–471.

10 James H. Billington, "The Poet Who Proved the Power of Words," *Washington Post*, January 30, 1996.

11 Brodsky did not have a high opinion of 20th-century Russian prose, which he argued had fallen off markedly from the heights of the previous century. He considered Andrei Platonov the century's greatest Russian writer for his novels *The Foundation Pit* and *Chevengur*. "A great writer," Brodsky observed, "is one who elongates the perspective of human sensibility, who shows a man at the end of his wits an opening, a pattern to follow. After Platonov, the closest that Russian prose came to producing such a writer were Nadezhda Mandelstam with her memoirs and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Alexander Solzhenitsyn with his novels and documentary prose." Joseph Brodsky, "Catastrophes in the Air," *Less Than One*, 299.

12 "Soviet Exile Seeks a Visa for Father," *New York Times*, February 7, 1984.

13 Joseph Brodsky, "Poetry: Zbigniew Herbert," *The Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 112–117; "Poetry: Weldon Kees," *Wilson*, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 92–98; "Poetry: C.P. Cavafy," Wilson, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 96–103; "Poetry: Sextus Propertius," *Wilson*, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 86–89; "Poetry: Peter Huchel," Wilson 18, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 100–107; and "Poetry: Evgeny Rein," *Wilson*, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 100–105.

14 Joseph Brodsky, "Isaiah Berlin at Eighty," *New York Review of Books*, August 17, 1989.

15 Isaiah Berlin, "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956," in Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Viking, 1991), 203.

16 James H. Billington, *The Face of Russia: Anguish, Aspiration, and Achievement in Russian Culture* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2008 [originally published, 1998]), 249.

17 Brodsky, "Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899–1980): An Obituary," 148.

18 Keith Gessen argues that Brodsky was "notably apolitical or, put another way, art was his politics." See his "Pen and Sickle," *The New Yorker*, May 4, 2008. Gessen seems to take too literally Brodsky's claim that ethics followed aesthetics, which he preached but did not always practice. Also at issue here is the definition of political. Gessen's charge against Brodsky and his whole generation rests on a somewhat narrow view that they did not do more to fight tyranny in post-Soviet Russia, including its reemergence "under the banner of a mutant neo-nationalist liberalism." It is unclear what Brodsky could or should have done to thwart this trend in 1992–1995. Brodsky also pronounced on a much broader set of topics that can be considered political (although not necessarily politically correct): the population explosion and his neo-Malthusian fear of the world's having too many people, his view that human life was less valued in "the East" (including the Orthodox world that grew out of Byzantium) than in the West, and his skepticism about the moral courage of the Czechs and the limitations of the continental European worldview. See Brodsky's "Flight from Byzantium," in *Less Than One*, 393–446; his withering dismissal of the Czechs in "Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong About Dostoyevsky," *New York Times*, February 17, 1985; and his remarkable 1984 commencement address at Williams College about evil, in *Less Than One*, 384–392.

19 Joseph Brodsky, "Lullaby of Cape Cod," *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Ann Kjellberg (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 116–129.

20 Karen de Witt, "Washington at Work; Poet Laureate on Mission to Supermarket's Masses," *New York Times,* December 10, 1991.

21 In the interview cited in the previous note, Brodsky stated that he had taken on his position as poet laureate "in the spirit of public service."

22 For an early expression of this view, which Billington shared with Berlin (and George F. Kennan), see his "The Renaissance of the Russian Intelligentsia," *Foreign Affairs* 35, no. 3 (1957): 525–530.

23 Billington, "The Poet Who Proved the Power of Words," *Washington Post*, January 30, 1996.

24 Brodsky, "Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899–1980): An Obituary," 146.

25 In "Isaiah Berlin at Eighty," Brodsky refers to the "paperback edition of *The Hedgehog and the Fox* that Akhmatova had once given me to pass on to Nadezhda Mandelstam."

26 James H. Billington et al., "Sir Isaiah Berlin, 6 June 1909–5 November 1997," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 150, no. 4 (2006): 666. Billington made these remarks at the memorial service for Berlin held at the British embassy in Washington in January 1998.

27 "Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture," in Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 55.

28 Isaiah Berlin, "The Silence in Russian Culture," *Foreign Affairs* (October 1957), reprinted in *Fifty Years of Foreign Affairs*, ed. Hamilton Fish Armstrong (New York: Praeger for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1972), 277–300.

29 Quoted in Robert D. McFadden, "Joseph Brodsky, Exiled Poet Who Won Nobel, Dies at 55," *New York Times*, January 29, 1996. On Billington's views on immigration and American society, see United

States Congress, Senate, Committee on Rules and Administration, *Nomination of James H. Billington to Be Librarian of Congress. Hearing before the Committee on Rules and Administration, United States Senate*, 100th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: US GPO, 1988); and "Remarks of James H. Billington at the Swearing-in Ceremony," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* [hereinafter LCIB] 46, no. 38 (September 21, 1987): 406–408.

30 Nancy Galbraith, "Brodsky Named New Poet Laureate," *LCIB* 50, no. 1 (June 3, 1991): 212.

31 Memorandum, Joseph Brodsky to Prosser Gifford, October 5, 1992, Box 8, Folder 232, Joseph Brodsky Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

32 Irvin Molotsky, "Joseph Brodsky Goes from Gulag to U.S. Poet Laureate," *New York Times*, May 11, 1991.

33 John J. Wayne, "New Poet Laureate Meets the Press," *LCIB* 50, no. 2 (June 17, 1991): 225.

34 Karen de Witt, "Washington at Work; Poet Laureate on Mission to Supermarket's Masses," *New York Times*, December 10, 1991.

35 https://www.loc.gov/item/92758604. Billington was not present on this occasion, and Brodsky was introduced by Prosser Gifford, director of the library's Poetry and Literature Center.

36 For an assessment of Brodsky as critic, see Jeffrey Meyers, "Joseph Brodsky's Constellation of Poets," *The Sewanee Review* 122, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 123–135.

37 Caryl Emerson, professor emeritus of Slavic languages and literatures at Princeton University, had this recent recollection of her reactions at the time: "I recall with astonishment how Brodsky, upon becoming the Poet-Laureate in 1991, earnestly pursued his American Poetry and Literacy Project. The USA is a prosaic and pragmatic country, I said to myself. Poems are associated with commercial advertisement jingles or popular song lyrics; they are not vehicles for beauty or wisdom, and they do not slow us down or raise us up. Brodsky's idea that 'poets talk back to language itself' at a gloriously high and refined level that reflects the 'genetic goal' of the human species could only seem to most Americans to be a hopelessly Russian fantasy." "Remembering Joseph Brodsky: A Poet Who 'Talked Back to Language Itself'," *Moscow Times*, May 25, 2020.

38 Brodsky presumably discussed Frost with Akhmatova, but he may have misremembered the details of their conversation. It was Lionel Trilling who, in a famous lecture in 1958, had called Frost a "terrifying poet." It seems unlikely that Akhmatova would have come up with the exact same descriptive phrase for Frost.

39 Sue Halpern, "With Poet as Muse, Man Gives Out Books of Verse," *New York Times*, April 19, 1998.

40 See Amy Paeth, "State Versus Culture: American Poets Laureate, 1945–2015" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania Department of English, 2015).

41 "The Final Stanza: Brodsky's Term as Poet Laureate Draws to a Close," *LCIB* 51, no. 12 (June 15, 1992): 251. See also Anne Holmes, "Literary Treasures: Joseph Brodsky Reads His Poetry at the Library of Congress, 1992," *From the Catbird Seat* (blog), Library of Congress Poetry and Literature Center, July 16, 2019. See https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2019/07/literary-treasures-joseph-brodsky-reads-his-poetry-at-the-library-of-congress-1992/, which provides a link to a recording of the reading, which is also at https://www.loc.gov/item/92764734

42 Guy Lamolinara, "The Gorbachevs Pay a Visit: LC Hosts Conference on Developments in Former Soviet Union" *LCIB* 51, no. 11 (June 1, 1992): 228.

43 Remarks made by Mikhail Gorbachev at the Library of Congress, May 14, 1992 (sound recording), https://lccn.loc.gov/97700150

44 Felicity Barringer, "Voices of Soviet Experts: What Outlook for Kremlin's Defunct Empire?" *New York Times*, December 16, 1991.

45 Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 246.

46 Quoted in Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky.* Elsewhere Brodsky uses Clio as the personification of history, as in "Profile of Clio," *On Grief and Reason*, 114–137.

47 “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston, Massachusetts, May 8, 1991, Box 2, Folder 59, Joseph Brodsky Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University. This folder contains a rough handwritten draft by Brodsky, a version that Brodsky himself must have typed and then edited, and a final version typed by an assistant and mailed. A revised version of this paper later was published as James H. Billington, “Russia’s Fever Break,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1991): 58–65; and Billington, “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 45, no. 4 (1992): 31–44. Brodsky’s marked up typescript is dated “5/9/91.”

48 “Rossiia v poiskakh sebia,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 4, 1991.

49 On the controversy surrounding the paper, see the editorial note to “Russia’s Fever Break,” 58.

50 James H. Billington, “The Soviet Drama, Part 1: Russia’s Quest for Identity,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 1990; and “The Soviet Drama, Part 2: Looking to the Past,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 1990.

51 Billington, “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” 15.

52 Billington, “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” 15.

53 Billington, “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” 15.

54 Billington, “The Search for a Modern Russian Identity,” 9–11.

55 James H. Billington, *Russia Transformed: Breakthrough to Hope, August 1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 16.

56 Brodsky to Billington, May 21, 1991, Box 2, Folder 59, Joseph Brodsky Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

57 Billington, *Russia Transformed*.

58 Billington, *Russia Transformed,* 132.

59 Billington continued to see the events of August 1991 (like the triumph of Solidarity in Poland) in religious terms, writing some years later that “the most important historic event of the late twentieth century—the collapse of Soviet Communism and the end of the Cold War—not only can be, but needs to be, described in distinctively Christian terms if we are properly to understand, let alone creatively respond to it.” James H. Billington, “Christianity and the Russian Transformation,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 64, no. 1 (1995): 4.

60 Brodsky’s views on Ukrainian independence have been the subject of controversy, owing to his poem “On Ukrainian Independence” (1992), which he later regretted and did not publish. See Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 242–244; and Keith Gessen, “A Note on Brodsky and Ukraine,” *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2011. This particular poem, not surprisingly, has been singled out and reproduced on at least one Russian nationalist/patriotic website. See https://russianuniverse.org/2017/02/27/joseph-brodsky-on-ukrainian-independence/

61 Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 394–396.

62 Joseph Brodsky, “Letter to a President,” *On Grief and Reason*, 217.

63 James H. Billington, “Let Russia Be Russian,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1996.

64 Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 158.

65 Paeth, *State Versus Culture*, 147–149.

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