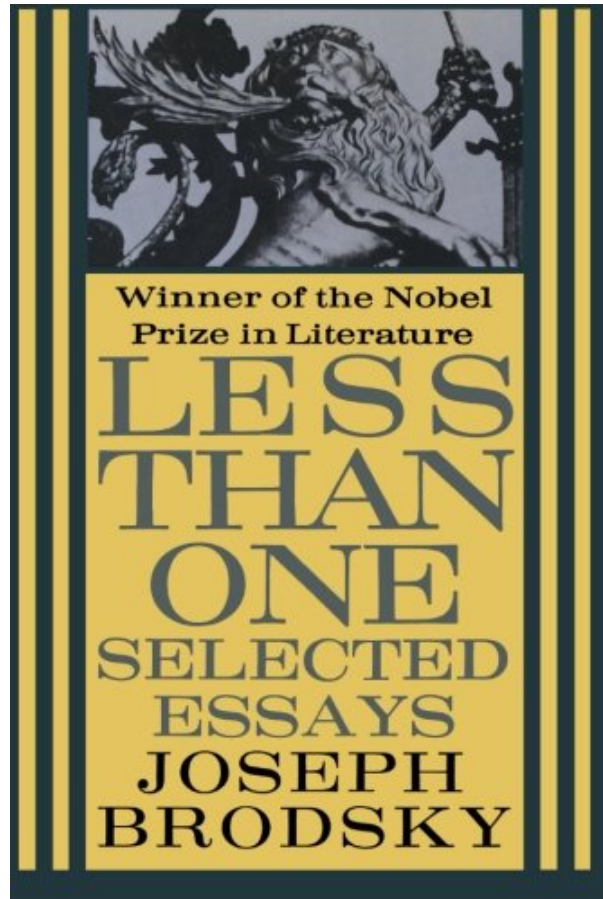
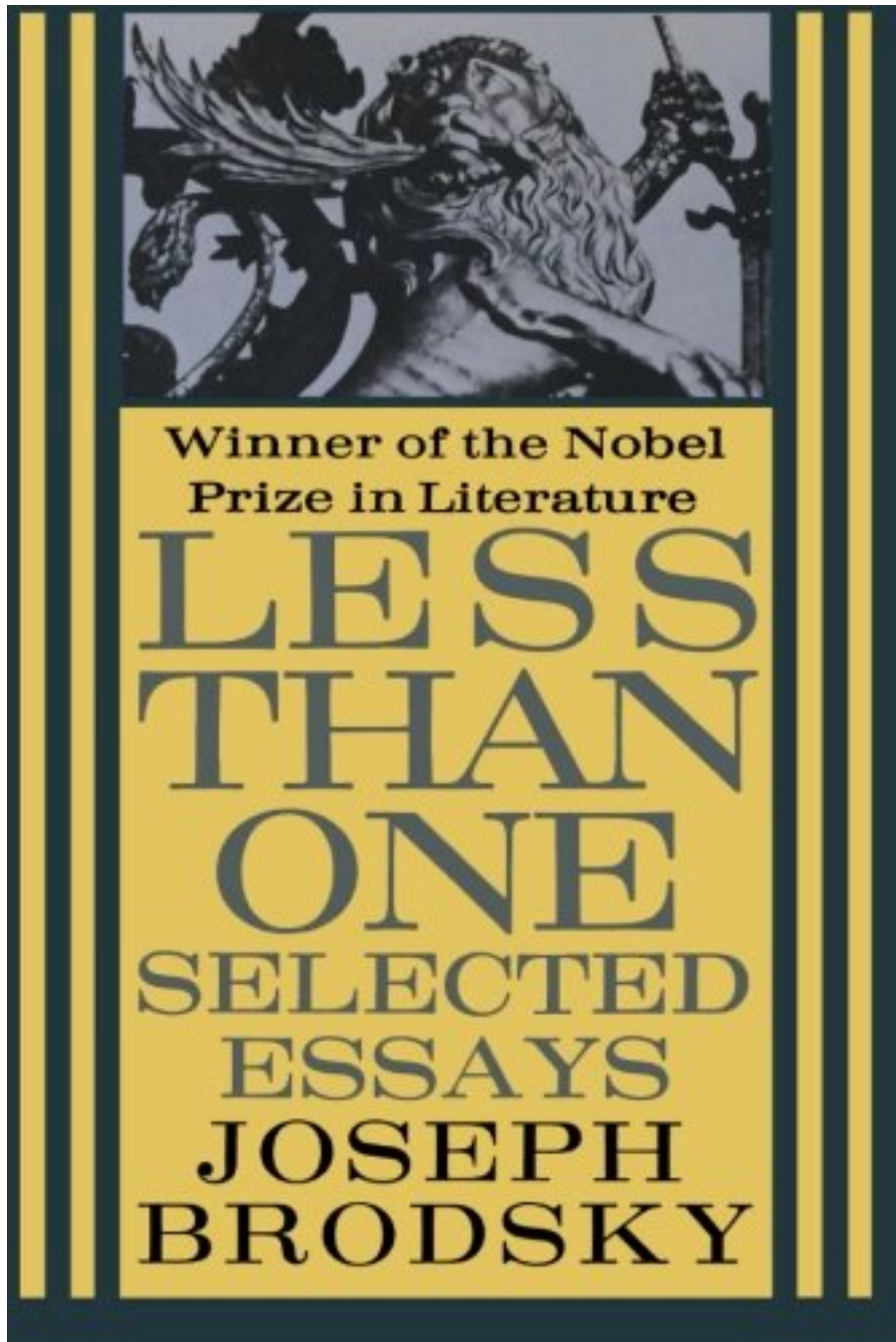


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This collection of essays thrusts Brodsky--heretofore known more for his poetry and translations--into the forefront of the "Third Wave" of Russian emigre writers. His insights into the works of Dostoyevsky, Mandelstam, Platonov, as well as non-Russian poets Auden, Cavafy and Montale are brilliant. While the Western popularity of many other Third Wavers has been stunted by their inability to write in English, Brodsky consumed the language to attain a "closer proximity" to poets such as Auden. The book, which won a National Book Critics Circle Award, opens and closes with revealing autobiographical essays.

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Less Than One: Selected Essays

By Jacqueline Marcus

When Joseph Brodsky emigrated to the United States in 1972 as an involuntary exile from the Soviet Union, he probably believed that he'd see his parents again, that political circumstances would inevitably change. Moreover, it is only natural to believe that a forced "political" separation from one's parents could not last for long. His parents spent their final years hoping against hope that they'd see their beloved son one more time—a death wish before dying. But that faithful dream never materialized. "I know," writes Brodsky, "that one shouldn't equate the state with language but it was in Russian that two old people, shuffling through numerous state chancelleries and ministries in the hope of obtaining a permit to go abroad for a visit to see their only son before they died, were told repeatedly, for twelve years in a row, that the state considers such a visit 'unpurposeful'..." Letters were mostly forbidden, but Brodsky was allowed to call his parents every week. Phone calls were monitored. Brodsky tells us that they learned how to speak "euphemistically."

"In a Room and a Half" is Brodsky's last attempt to join his parents. Brodsky's father was a professional photographer and journalist. Something of the art of photography must have been passed on to his son. This beautiful narrative was as close as Brodsky could come to presenting a family album of photographic "takes" or "frames" which emerge in the poet's memory from his childhood days. There are forty-five photos that make up "In a Room and a Half."

You cannot possibly stand outside of this memoir as a "detached witness" once you begin to read it. It is as if you were sitting late into the night with Brodsky—the last log is burning out and he begins to tell you about something that is, under ordinary circumstances, a private and solitary affair of the heart. In this sense, we feel privileged, and we want him to go on—to keep turning the pages of his lost youth, to share whatever sacred memories he has left to share about his life with his parents. It is indeed an act of defiance that is anything but sentimental. And yet, who can read this eulogy without feeling their heart drop to the floor?

We listen, and, through Brodsky's genius, enter into these forty-five narrative photographs. We can see and touch the China that his mother saved for his wedding. We hear the sounds of a faucet, the odors from the kitchen. We see the quiet, grey light of this tiny space where father, mother and son lived out their daily activities. We walk around the room with Brodsky as he tells us about the story of his parents' cherished bed. We see a feeble table with a white, luminous tablecloth under the care of his mother's hands. We see the deep blue of his father's uniform and we reach out to touch those bright yellow buttons that remind the boy of an illuminated avenue. It is all so vividly real.

Joseph Brodsky is dead now—and there is nothing that can ever separate this family again.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Worth a Detour

By A Customer

A fascinating view of the literary world as seen by a leading Russian emigre poet. Some of the essays (like the long dissection of an elegy by Marina Tsvetaeva) are so dense as to be almost unreadable. The equally long dissection of "September 1, 1939" by Auden, though, is like auditing a brilliant university lecture on contemporary British poetry. The paeans to Leningrad and to Brodsky's parents give a gritty feel of life in Soviet Russia. The book gives unexpected rewards, and is worth persevering

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

The prose of a poet has poetry in it

By Shalom Freedman

This collection of essays is by one of the great Russian poets of this century. In it he writes of his life and poetry, and of those poets who have meant much to him. His memoir of his separation from his parents, their twelve-year effort to reunite while being refused by the Soviet Authorities is a tale of sadness, and pain.

I have just read the essay on Nadezhda Mandelstamm and through it received an insight into her life and literature. At the age of sixty- five never really having written at length before she wrote the two great memoirs of her husband's life that Brodsky considers the true cultural history of Russia in this century.

He writes of the poems of her husband and life together which she remembered., " And gradually those things grew on her. If there is any substitute for love , it'smemory. To memorize , then, is to restore intimacy.Gradually the lines of those poets became her mentality, became her identity. They supplied her not only with the plane of regard or angle of vision; more importantly, they became her linguistic norm.So when she out to write her books, she was bound to gauge-by that time already unwittingly, instinctively- her sentences against theirs. The clarity and remorselessness of her pages, while reflecting the character of her mind, are also inevitable stylistic consequences of the poetry that had shaped that mind.In both their content and style , her books are but a postcript to the supreme version of language which poetry essentially is and which became her flesh through learning her husband's lines by heart."

One of the most striking parts of this essay is Brodsky's description of the great Akhmatova's devotion to Nadezhda Mandelshtamm. Through poverty, destitution, persecution two great friends, one one of the greatest Russian poets of the century , the other the widow of another of the greatest of Russian poets stood by each other.

The humane voice of a great poet is in these essays. And they inspire and remind of the Literature that is not merely words, but rather the 'truth of life.'

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