



Silvia Panicieri*

BRODSKY'S "AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL:" CONTENTS AND OUTCOMES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY PROJECT

1. The Nomination as Poet Laureate

Falling this year the twentieth anniversary of the death of the Russian-born poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky, it becomes particularly significant to remind one of his last commitments, somehow fallen into oblivion amongst the critics: his plan to foster literature in the United States - a project that linked him further to the social and cultural reality of his host country.

Joseph Brodsky, exile in the USA since 1972, was appointed "fifth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," on 10 May 1991.¹ He was the first non-American born writer to receive the highest acknowledgement in the United States. This last important public achievement came after several literary awards - the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987 being the most prestigious one – and proved a final turning point for his work: from 1992 until his death in January 1996, he published exclusively in English.²

This paper aims at analyzing the contents of Brodsky's "Immodest Proposal," first presented during the speech he gave at the inaugural evening at the Library of Congress, as well as investigating the extraordinary results of the project that ensued, in the following years.

In a time when the primacy of the press was not yet surpassed by electronic publications, Brodsky's plan recounts of an extraordinary effort made in the spreading of culture, and of poetry in specific.

Stressing the importance of poetry was for Brodsky a life-long commitment – we remind here his Nobel lecture – but what may sound surprising was his new "democratic" vision to foster it, since he had always been considered a "niche" author, who mainly appealed to a highly educated audience.³

Nevertheless, the relationship between the poet and society had been a frequent theme in Brodsky's writing. Brodsky saw literature as a powerful means to develop the language and the culture of a nation; in particular, he praised the European cultural tradition for having been able to go beyond the catastrophes of Communism, Nazism, and two World Wars. During his term as Poet Laureate, "immodestly" seeing himself as "a sort of a surgeon general," he promoted the idea of bringing the Anglo-American poetic tradition to a broader American audience.

Which convictions moved Brodsky to formulate his proposal? The following excerpt from the Library of Congress *Information Bulletin* (1996) can help us to have a further explanation on this topic:

Joseph had difficulty understanding why poetry did not draw the large audiences in the United States that it did in Russia. He was proud of becoming an American citizen in 1977 (the Soviets having made him stateless upon his expulsion in 1972) and valued the freedoms that life in the United States provided. But he regarded poetry as "language's highest degree of maturity," and wanted everyone to be susceptible to it.

* Silvia Panicieri (silvia.panicieri@univr.it) is a PhD student in Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, at the University of Verona. Holding a degree in Russian and English, she now focuses her research on contemporary "nomadic" authors, who have adopted the English language as their vehicle for their literary works.

¹ The motivation reported by the Librarian of Congress James Billington was based on "his open-ended interest of American life that immigrants have" (Weiner 141).

² Until that time, a divide in his work had been clear: poetry in Russian, prose in English. Writing poetry directly in English proved a way to avoid endless corrections to his Russian poems and translations, as well as a demonstration of having mastered his second language up to the point to fully express his poetic self. The abandoning of Russian was also a form of protest against a country that had exiled him and had always denied his parents the permit to visit him in the United States.

³ In *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1989), we read that Brodsky: "[W]as known for poetry in which he used complex rhythm and meter and extensive word play to address such themes as exile, loss, and death. He also frequently incorporated classical Western mythology and philosophy as well as Judeo-Christian theology into his works" (50:109).



Robert Van Hallberg, in his 1985 anthology *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980*, confirms Brodsky's correct understanding of the scarce poetry audience in the United States. He affirms, "The belief that the most serious, demanding art maintains an adversarial relationship to the culture at large is now so wildly held that poetry is claimed to be permanently and properly off to the side of the nation's thought and expression" (1). Further, "It may be true however, that in America poets command a smaller share of the national literary audience than in other country, such as England" (12).⁴

It is even more remarkable, therefore, to analyze Brodsky's vision to increase poetry audience - his proposal coming from a recently "naturalized" American intellectual.

2. Brodsky and the Essay Form

Before commenting upon the most significant parts of Brodsky's long speech, since it keeps the form of his famous essays, a few reflections must be made on the importance of this genre for an author, who chose the following words to describe himself: "I'm a Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist – and of course, an American citizen."

When did the poet Brodsky start writing essays? Soon after his forced emigration, Brodsky moved to prose writing, composing his first essays in Russian, then switching to English. He was a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Theodore Ziolkovski, in his 1996 volume *The Age of the Essay*, situates Brodsky's literary choice within a wider European cultural context, being the essay form the European intellectuals' "genre par excellence," and "the common ground on which, at century's end, the projects of three prominent European writers – a novelist, a poet, and a scholar-critic – converge" (295).⁵

In an interview with Sven Birkerts, "Joseph Brodsky: the art of poetry No. 28" (1982), Brodsky confirmed his new attitude towards prose writing in English: "I love it, in English. To me it's a challenge. (...) If asked to write prose in Russian, I wouldn't be so keen. But in English it's a tremendous satisfaction."

The style of his prose is full of poetic energy, his accurate lexicon and the peculiar use of syntax allow him to express powerful and witty statements, so to increase "(...) the depth of the ethical drama played out within his work" (Polukhina 1997, 240).⁶

The lecture we are going to analyze belongs to Brodsky's late prose production: the author has now perfected his writing style, defined by Solomon Volkov in these terms: "(...) ultimately, he did develop his highly idiosyncratic, effective and memorable English prose style, of which he was rather proud. Ironically, Brodsky was less confident – or maybe more demanding and self-critical – of his prose skills in Russian" (1998, xiii).

3. The Poet's Commitment

The text of his speech was first fully reported in the 11 November 1991 issue of *The New Republic*. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to this edition.⁷

Brodsky starts his long monologue with a factual statement, in an attempt to give more credibility to the assumptions he would soon make, as if "he tried to control his arguments with the discipline of logic" (Polukhina 1997, 241). He aims at surprising his audience, and defiantly mocks Swift's pamphlet, from which he has taken its title. Through conveying the idea of emptiness, Brodsky seems to create a "blank space" to grant himself

⁴ On the historical reasons for this, Van Hallberg reports: "In 'The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry', Christopher Clausen argues that the influence of Eliot and modernism has brought about a disaster: 'the decline in the American poetic audience that seems to have been most rapid between the 1920's and 1950's has signaled 'the disappearing of poetry as a major cultural force'"(10-1).

⁵ Ziolkovski referred to Kundera, Brodsky, and Eco, and their choice was made because "(...) only the essay can accommodate the furiously shifting kaleidoscope of modern life" (304).

⁶ Brodsky's prose style has been associated to his late poetry, as by the critic Valentina Polukhina, who affirms: "A subtle relationship exists between the style of his essays and his poetry. In his essays Brodsky employs free association, internal rhyme, convoluted syntax, and poetic composition" (1997, 241).

⁷ The text of the lecture was later collected in the volume *On Grief and Reason*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

An online version, slightly different, is also available at www.mrbauld.com/brodsky.html. Last Visited August 10, 2016. For brevity, I have chosen to comment the main points of his proposal following the newspaper's article "Brodsky Urges Publishers to Distribute Poetry to the Masses," first published in *The Gazette*, on 11 October 1991.



carte blanche, and prepare his audience to his inventive proposals about poetry. As usual to him, he starts from philosophical considerations, but he is soon ready to change the tone of his words, switching into a more colloquial one.

About an hour ago, the stage where I stand now, as well as your seats, were quite empty. An hour hence, they will be empty again. For most of the day, I imagine, this place stays empty; emptiness is its natural state. Had it been endowed with consciousness, it would regard our presence as a nuisance. (Brodsky 1991, 31)⁸

Brodsky then continues, reporting an approximate and ironically “bitterly” optimistic estimate: “(...) throughout what we call recorded history, the audience for poetry does not appear to have exceeded 1 percent of the entire population. The basis for this estimate is not any particular research, but the mental climate of the world that we live in” (Brodsky 1991, 31-2).⁹

To investigate further on this topic, I referred to the detailed report *Poetry in America. Review of the findings*, where some estimates indicate that poetry readers and listeners in the United States, in 2002 – so ten years after Brodsky’s speech – amounted to fourteen percent of the entire population (Schwartz).

Brodsky’s evaluation was then rather pessimistic, but, with no doubt, it was not far from reality, if Van Hallberg in 1985 had asserted: “There is now a stable poetry audience, still minuscule but not so small as it was a half-century ago. It is a national audience, though it is not spread evenly across the country” (15).

After a long digression on poetry audience in history, Brodsky feels compelled to explain his “mission:”

Since I am paid this year by the Library of Congress, I take this job in the spirit of a public servant, not in any other. So it is the audience for poetry in this country that is my concern; and it is the public servant in me who finds the existing ratio of 1 percent appalling and scandalous, not to say tragic. (Brodsky 1991, 32)

His disapproval of the scant regard for literature in the United States is reinforced by the fact that it originates from an “outsider,” an intellectual coming from an Eastern European country, with a different cultural background. Solomon Volkov’s words help us contextualize Brodsky’s statements:

Brodsky’s vantage point as a Russian émigré living in New York gave him the impetus for pronouncements that combined a heartfelt Russian sensibility with the cosmopolitan outlook of a seasoned philosophe. Brodsky liked to compare his position with that of an observer sitting on the top of a mountain, seeing both slopes. (8)

Brodsky had been educated in a country where culture was promoted between the masses – even though within the ideological constraints of the communist regime – and where the role and position of the intellectual in society were clear. The exile of Brodsky himself had in fact, although paradoxically, demonstrated to the world his authority as an intellectual capable of influencing public opinion.¹⁰

⁸ The topics chosen for his *incipit* - the room soon to become empty and the incidence of human presence - had already been used in his “Banquet Speech,” at the Nobel Banquet, on 10 December 1987: “And as far as this room is concerned, I think it was empty just a couple of hours ago, and it will be empty again a couple of hours hence. Our presence in it, mine especially, is quite incidental from its walls’ point of view” (Brodsky 1987).

⁹ The assertion of the alleged percentage of one-percent poetry reading public is, again, not a new topic. In the aforementioned “Banquet Speech,” he had said, “As long as I am on the subject of prudence, I should like to add that through recorded history, the audience for poetry seldom amounted to more than 1% of the entire population” (Brodsky 1987).

¹⁰ Nadezhda Mandelstam in her *Hope Abandoned*, wrote about the role of poetry in Russian culture: “People can be killed for poetry here [in Russia] - a sign of unparalleled respect – because they are still capable of living by it” (Bethea, 252).



As Julia Stachnevič asserts: “Brought up in the Russian tradition of seeing the writer as the conduit of national conscience, he refused to become an exotic rarity, fascinating but incomprehensible for the English-language readership, and thus ultimately marginal in his significance” (19).

4. The Praise of American Poetry

We come now to the famous section of Brodsky’s speech, where we find one of his most quoted statement: “Poetry must be available to the public in far greater volume than it is” (Brodsky 1991, 32).

To support this almost lapidary statement, Brodsky resumes the feasibility of his project, following American marketing rules:

It should be as ubiquitous as the nature that surrounds us, and from which poetry derives many of its similes; or as ubiquitous as gas stations, if not as cars themselves. Bookstores should be located not only on campuses or main drags but at the assembly plant’s gates also. Paperbacks of those we deem classics should be cheap and sold at supermarkets. (Brodsky 1991, 32)

His speech, sounding in many parts as a sermon, proceeds apace, leading us through the typical American landscape: gas stations, main streets, assembly plants, campuses and supermarkets. It is interesting to notice how Brodsky, after twenty years in America, has made this new geography his own. In the already-mentioned interview to Birkerts, when asked to comment on the following “(...) you dealt with exile by becoming an American poet, you were beginning to deal with American landscapes (...)” he had replied, “Certainly one becomes the land one lives in, especially at the end. In that sense I am quite American.”¹¹

This proves to be in contradiction to what he had affirmed in his famous letter to Brezhnev, the day of his departure from the Soviet Union: “(...) I belong to the Russian culture. I feel part of it, its component, and no change of place can influence the final consequence of this. A language is a much more ancient and inevitable thing than a state. I belong to the Russian language.”¹²

Brodsky concludes the first part of his heartfelt appeal, by identifying the problem with an insufficient book distribution, for which he offers an apparently simplistic solution:

This is, after all, a country of mass production, and I don’t see why what’s done for cars can’t be done for books of poetry, which take you quite a bit further. Because you don’t want to go a bit further? Perhaps; but if this is so, it’s because you are deprived of the means of transportation, not because the distances and the destinations that I have in mind don’t exist (Brodsky 1991, 32).

Russians have been traditionally considered great poetry readers, and poetry has often been associated in literature to the term “Russian soul” that incompletely translates the word *dushá* - which defines a person’s identity, behavior, and cultural understanding. The writings of Gogol, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy offer indelible examples of literary characters who analyze life and its events through a peculiar, deep spirituality and with a religious-philosophical perspective. It is relevant, therefore, to note that Brodsky does not point at any difference in the characters of the two peoples, and, instead, considers the Americans as good (potential) poetry readers as the Russians.

Brodsky’s passionate speech continues, producing even commercial data to support his idea on how to increase poetry printing.

Being an expert lecturer who knew how to hold his audience’s attention, Brodsky does not omit humorous shifts of tone: “(...) The main loser, of course, would be the Brazilian rain forest. But I believe that a tree facing the choice between becoming a book of poems or a bunch of memos may well opt for the former” (Brodsky 1991, 32).

Brodsky’s appeal urges for action “(...) before literacy is replaced with videocy” (Brodsky 1991, 32). The neologism “videocy” recalls the term “idiocy,” which in its turn brings further speculations on the habit of Brodsky’s fellow citizens to spend long hours in front of the screen.

¹¹ The interviewer refers to the landscape in his poem “Lullaby of Cape Cod,” published in 1975.

¹² Excerpt from Brodsky’s letter, quoted, among others, by Ludmila Shtern, in her volume *Brodsky: A Personal Memoir* (170).



His inventive wit is once more confirmed, as we continue reading, when we find new humorous notes in the project description:

At the very list, an anthology of American poetry should be found in the drawer in every room in every motel in the land, next to the Bible, which will surely not object to this proximity, since it does not object to the proximity of the phone book. (Brodsky 1991, 32-3)

In the previous years, Brodsky had expressed his admiration for American poetry on many occasions, and, in the following excerpt, he provides historical reasons to support his appraisal:

For, apart from anything else, American poetry is this country's greatest patrimony. It takes a stranger to see some things clearly. This is one of them, and I am that stranger. The quantity of verse that has been penned on these shores in the last century and a half dwarfs the similar enterprise of any literature, and for that matter, both our jazz and our cinema, rightly adored throughout the world. (Brodsky 1991, 33)

Jazz music, films and literature: in many essays and interviews, as well as in his poems, Brodsky described his youth years in Soviet Leningrad, listening to American tunes on the radio his father had brought home, or watching the few films the regime had allowed. In a word - fancying the freedom of the West.

As he recalled, “[These films] held us in greater sway and thrall than all the subsequent output of the neorealists or the nouvelle vague. The *Tarzan* series alone, I daresay, did more for the de-Stalinization than all Khrushchev’s speeches at the 20th party congress and after” (Zubok 173).

To that time, Brodsky traced back his fascination for the English language.

Brodsky’s speech had a positive “side effect” upon the three cultural spheres he mentioned – precisely film, music, and poetry - as summarized by William Wadsworth, at the time executive director of the Academy of Poetry:

One of the remarkable statements Joseph made in the course of his speech was that the three greatest contributions that America has made to world culture are its jazz music, its cinema and its modern poetry. For the Academy, and for poets all over the U.S., this was a heaven-sent validation of the importance of American poetry. Joseph had taken an obscure appointment and turned it suddenly into a highly visible public post: he had made poetry “news.” (Polukhina 2010, 466)

The role of the poet described in the words that are going to follow, leads us to remember the trial he went through in Leningrad in 1964, when he was provocatively asked who had given him the title of poet. We are further reminded of the time Brodsky spent in a mental hospital in Leningrad, although sane. Writing poetry saved him from real insanity. “His [the poet’s] only duty is to his language, that is, to write well. By writing, especially by writing well, in the language of his society, a poet takes a large step toward it. It is society's job to meet him halfway, that is, to open his book and to read it” (Brodsky 1991, 34).

On many occasions, Brodsky had declared “having a love affair” with the English language. Here as well, we find his new appraisal of English: “No other language accumulates so much of this as does English. To be born into it or to arrive in it is the best boon that can befall a man. (...) I don't rightly know what's worse, burning books or not reading them (Brodsky 1991, 34).

His definite adoption of the English language furtherly confirms this.

5. A Utopian Solution to Prevent Uncontrolled Weapons Usage?

The words we are going to read contain a profound truth and make us reflect on the risks a society runs, when higher culture is not distributed among the masses - even in an industrialized country, where the majority of the population holds a high school diploma. The lack of an “effective education” and of an accuracy of language



in the masses are not new subjects for Brodsky, having been touched in former official occasions. Brodsky's desire to be considered a public promoter of culture is, once more, here demonstrated.¹³

And it's not the culture I am worried about, nor the fate of the great or not-so-great poets' work. What concerns me is that man, unable to articulate, to express himself, adequately, reverts to action. Since the vocabulary of action is limited, as it were, to its body, he is bound to act violently, extending his vocabulary with a weapon where there should have been an adjective. (Brodsky 1991, 34)

The ability to express properly, to define emotions and situations, is seen by Brodsky as a real means against violence and crime. His fears prove actual, unavoidably leading us to the frequent tragic news reports of mass murdering by armed citizens in the United States.

The author then tries to design a plan to implement his proposal, and, in the last part of this excerpt, it is amusing to read how Brodsky – an academic himself – mildly criticized the academic world. Van Hallberg, in his quoted anthology, asserts that “The audience for contemporary poetry can be identified to a considerable extent with one particular set of institutions: colleges and universities (22).

There should be a nationwide distribution of poetry, classic and contemporary. It should be handled privately, I suppose, but supported by the state. The age group it should be aiming at is 15 and up. The emphasis should be on the American classics; and as to who or what should be printed, that should be decided by a body of two or three people in the know, that is, by the poets. The academics, with their ideological bickering, should be kept out of it, for nobody has the authority to prescribe in this field on any grounds other than taste. Beauty and its attendant truth are not to be subordinated to any philosophical, political or even ethical doctrine, since aesthetics is the mother of ethics and not the other way around. (Brodsky 1991, 34-5)

In the last words Brodsky spends to present his project, we recognize the Russian intellectual refugee, exiled for not complying with the dictates of the regime. Closing his intense discourse, Brodsky reinforces the concept of making poetry available to the masses: “It certainly cannot reduce poverty, but it can do something for ignorance. Also, it is the only insurance available against the vulgarity of the human heart. Therefore it should be available to everyone in this country and at a low cost” (Brodsky 1991, 35).

In this lecture - as in all his essays - we find his famous power of observation and sharp wit, enhanced by a unique intellectual education: through strong statements, he is able to persuade his audience, offering new answers to old questions.

6. The Birth of the Project and Its Development

After having presented his proposal, Brodsky concluded his speech by recalling a poet who translated Robert Frost into Russian and who had shown him a book of poetry found in a Nazi concentration camp: “a case of a book of poems finding its reader (Brodsky 1991, 36). Required by his audience, he recited two poems by heart – one by Robert Frost's, “Provide, Provide,” and one by Thomas Hardy's “The convergence of the Twain”

¹³ In his “Nobel Lecture,” given on 8 December 1987, Brodsky had spoken extensively about the importance of what he defined an “education of speech:” “I am speaking not of education, but of the education in speech, the slightest imprecision in which may trigger the intrusion of false choice into one's life.” (Brodsky 1987). The choice of the word “trigger” is not casual: it conveys the image of a weapon - term that explicitly appears in the text of “An Immodest Proposal.”

In his speech “Some tips by Joseph Brodsky,” also known as “Speech at the Stadium,” held in Michigan on 18 December 1988, he had said, “Now and in the time to be, I think it will pay for you to zero in on being precise with your language. Try to build and treat your vocabulary the way you are to treat your checking account. Pay every attention to it and try to increase your earnings. The purpose here is not to boost your bedroom eloquence or your professional success – although those, too, can be consequences – nor is it to turn you into parlor sophisticated. The purpose is to enable you to articulate yourselves as fully and precisely as possible; in a word, the purpose is your balance” (Brodsky 1988).



(Lines on the Loss of the Titanic) – receiving, as we read in the article, an “enthusiastic applause.” The soiree finished with a beautiful reception.

Brodsky’s warning could have passed unheeded, but his words struck a young university student, Andrew Carroll, who decided he had to meet the famous poet and help him develop a project. Since the beginning, Carroll demonstrated a great enthusiasm and devoted himself to the cause for about ten years. In the previously quoted Library of Congress *Information Bulletin* (1996) article, we read in this regard:

Shortly after his term ended, Brodsky collaborated with Andrew Carroll to form “The American Poetry & Literacy Project”, whose mission is to increase American’s access to poetry by distributing books in public places. One of the project’s first efforts was to distribute free copies of *Six American Poets*, edited by Joel Conarroe and featuring works by Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams to hotels, hospitals, and homeless shelters throughout the United States.

Six great American poets, the “classics,” were then chosen for a first free distribution of volumes, following Brodsky’s proposal.

To investigate on the outcomes of the project, I have carried my research mainly based on a series of articles, mainly published in the *New York Times* between 1993 and 2000, and here submitted chronologically. The excerpts show the development of Brodsky’s project, and give us a glimpse of everyday American life of the time, including amusing details as well. In this first article, written by Bob Morris and published in the *New York Times* on October 3, 1993, we read:

Within months, after talking the Book-of-the-Month Club into donating thousands of copies of the anthology “Six American Poets,” he [Carroll] mailed out letters signed by Mr. Brodsky asking hotel chains, airlines, hospitals and homeless shelters to make the anthology available.

By last spring, Doubletree Hotels and Guest Quarter Suite Hotels signed on, as did the Sheraton Tara near Boston, USAir, some Club Meds in Florida and a slew of homeless shelters and hospitals.

The project is then quoted in an article by Janny Scott published on 15 March 1994, in the *New York Times*. The tone shows a certain amazement, with the use of verbs as “turn up,” “show up,” and adjectives as “improbable,” due to its novelty on the American cultural scene. The first places where the anthologies were distributed, as we have read in the previous article, were again hotels, motels, and hospitals. The distribution ranged from exclusive resorts – as the Club Med – to shelters for homeless, making no difference of social class: poetry must be available to all. The article gives us also an idea about the success it enjoyed, from the very beginning of its implementation.

Over the last year thousands of anthologies have turned up, like mints on the pillow, in hotels and motels around the country as part of an attempt to do for American poetry what the Gideons have done for the Bible.

(...) As of last week Mr. Carroll and Mr. Brodsky’s American Poetry and Literacy Project had passed out some 12,500 books, including anthologies of children’s poetry, collections by black poets and anthologies from a “thrifty edition” that normally sell for one dollar a book.

On Valentine’s Day, patients at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center in Manhattan received collections of classic love poems. Books have shown up in a shelter for the homeless in San Diego, in a Club Med resort in Florida, in community colleges, in airport waiting rooms and in dozens of hotels.

While in the middle of his great project, Brodsky died of a heart attack in his Manhattan apartment, on 28 January 1996. Far from being discouraged, Andrew Carroll continued his mission, with an even greater commitment. An article published by Sarah Jay, in the *New York Times* on 4 November 1996, lets us into the reality of every day American life - a life of commuters and great displacements.



(...) Andrew Carroll, the executive director of the American Poetry and Literacy Project, (...) was riding a train in late 1994 when he was struck by the notion that poetry books and trains might be a match.

It seemed a logical extension to a project already under way -- placing poetry books beside the Bible in hotel rooms -- on which he was collaborating with Joseph Brodsky, the 1987 Nobel Prize winner in literature, who died in January.

(...) Fifteen hundred of the books, which normally sell for \$1 each, were donated by the poetry project, which bought them at half price from Dover Publishing in Mineola, L.I.

A later article by Lisa Foderaro was published on 12 February 1997, again in the *New York Times*, and it is in line with the previous one, as it supplies the list of the places where the volumes had been distributed. Furthermore, it highlights a subsequent – and unexpected – development of the project: the possibility to turn it into a good marketing strategy for its supporters, as it was for the cosmetics company Lancôme.

Passengers on Amtrak today will find a freebie: paperback copies of "Great Love Poems" (Dover Publications, 1992), a compendium of amorous verse by such masters as Andrew Marvell and Edna St. Vincent Millay. On Friday, Valentine's Day, copies will be waiting for jurors at the state's criminal courts in lower Manhattan, and for shoppers at the Lancôme counter at Macy's in Herald Square.

In all, 15,000 books will be given away, most of them on Amtrak's East Coast lines, but thousands more at places as varied as the Division of Motor Vehicles in Washington, the subway in Boston and a homeless shelter in San Diego.

The poetry give-away is the work of a young man on a mission to bring poetry to the people and a cosmetics company that knows a good marketing campaign when it sees one.

We observe that the project was associated to expensive French cosmetics, as well as to the shelters for the homeless people (and we may notice that the homeless shelter in San Diego recurs in the three articles here quoted). The articles, following later in this paper, further confirm the heterogeneous thrust of the project. The "American Poetry and Literacy Project" continued its relentless pursuit of results. The article "Poetry, and a Little Madness in Spring", published on 1 April 1998, by Lawrence Van Gelder, in the *New York Times*, gives us a further glimpse of the outcomes, reporting the percentages of a remarkable increase in the sales of poetry books:

As thousands of schools, libraries, bookstores and cultural institutions take part, the Academy of American Poets, the country's biggest poetry organization and the coordinator of the observance, says sales of poetry increased 30 percent in 1996 and another 25 percent last year; and teachers report increased interest in poetry among children and adults.

This other article, by Sue Halpern, "With Poet as Muse, Man Gives Out Books of Verse," published on 19 April 1998 in the *New York Times*, beyond witnessing once more the extraordinary commitment shown by Carroll, testifies the project mission to bring poetry to remote places in the United States. Culture is a matter of distribution - Brodsky said - and the majority of the American citizens live far from the cultural stimuli offered by the large cities.

This month, Andrew Carroll, the executive director of the American Poetry and Literacy Project, founded in 1993 with the Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky, plans to drive across the country, from New York to San Francisco. En route, he will distribute free copies of "101 Great American Poems," "African-American Poetry" and other books in supermarkets, hotels, jury waiting rooms, schools, libraries and literacy centers, at highway rest stops, on Amtrak trains and in other public places. (...) The trip, which began on April 1 in New York City, where Mr. Carroll gave away books at the United Nations and at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, will cover about 6,000 miles and will take Mr. Carroll to some spots that might be considered unlikely places for poetry.



The chronicle of the newspapers articles stops for a while, and I now refer to the introduction to the volume *101 Great American Poems*, published in 1998, by Andrew Carroll. We soon notice that the project was implemented on a regular basis, in its last years. The use of the present tense and the time expression “each year” confirm this assumption. The contract signed between the Yellow Pages publishers and the APL Project promoters further proves this ultimate, extraordinary attainment: Brodsky’ wish to see poetry books in proximity of the Yellow Pages – even “printed in the Yellow Pages” – has been fulfilled.

Founded by Brodsky, and a small cadre of volunteers in 1993, the APL Project now distributes tens of thousands of free poetry books each year through Amtrak trains, hotels, supermarkets, literacy programs, jury waiting rooms, airports, subways, day-care centers, hospitals, schools, nursing homes, car inspection stations, libraries, and other public places. The APL Project also collaborates with phone book publishers throughout the country to feature poetry in the Yellow Pages. Literary, tens of millions of phone directories are now circulating in America, provided by the APL Project, displayed in their pages.

In an article written by Margaret Foster “When Andy Carroll Brings Poetry to the Masses, He Uses a Truck,” dated 16 April 1999, published in the *Washington City Paper*, we get to know more about Carroll’s travels around the United States to distribute volumes in “schools, prisons, supermarkets and car inspections stations.” He “scattered poetry in nightstands of Double tree hotel rooms, and this April, to celebrate National Poetry Month, in the glove compartment of every brand new 1999 Volkswagen.” The following is the last newspaper article I have found on the “American Poetry and Literacy Project” “Marketing Departments Are Turning to Poets to Help Inspire Their Companies’ Clientele,” written by Meredith Robin, and published in the *New York Times*, on 21 March 2000. After being distributed on new cars, on trains and subways, poetry now literally “reaches the sky.”

American Airlines is the latest company to jump on the poetry bandwagon. In April, National Poetry Month, flight attendants on select international flights will hand out 100,000 copies of a poetry anthology along with the peanuts.

The anthology given away by American Airlines, “Songs of the Open Road: Poems of Travel & Adventure,” was provided by the American Poetry and Literacy Project, a nonprofit organization based in Washington. It includes the works of well-known poets like Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson and E.E. Cummings.

The exact numbers of the books supplied by the car manufacturer Volkswagen are published on Andrew Carroll’s webpage, where, in addition to the volumes distributed by the American second-largest discount retailer Target Corporation, we find also the last record of volumes distributed by the “American Poetry and Literacy Project,” in an unexpected place: the Winter Olympics!

Volkswagen later paid APLP to put 40,000 poetry books in the glove boxes of its cars in April 1999, and Target Corporation paid APLP for 300,000 books to give away to their customers. Another 100,000 copies of poetry books were distributed at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (Early Life and Poetry Initiative).

To have a final, comprehensive idea of the volumes distributed, we may refer to the data available on the webpage of the Chapman University, where Andrew Carroll is currently Faculty Director. “The APL Project handed out more than 1,000,000 books in schools, hospitals, train stations, airports, hotels, jury waiting rooms, and other public places.”¹⁴

Brodsky could have felt satisfied by the results of his ambitious project, which would not have been achieved without the extraordinary dedication of Andrew Carroll.

¹⁴ From the same webpage, we learn that Carroll started a new project, in 1998: “The Legacy Project,” “an all-volunteer initiative that honors veterans and active-duty troops by preserving their wartime correspondence.” www.liquisearch.com/andrew_carroll/early_life_and_poetry_initiative. Last Visited August 22, 2016.



In the following section, we will see what Brodsky's perception on the performance of his ongoing program was.

7. Brodsky and His Project

In an interview with Blair Ewin, dated 1993, Brodsky expresses his concern about the economic support he had – or better, had not – received by his publishers.

BE: How is your crusade on behalf of poetry coming? I've heard of great victories recently...

JB: Well, there are a lot of victories, and lots of good press, and lots of positive sentiment floating around, but it doesn't somehow translate into what is required for the success of that project – namely, the cash. The project is being carried forward out of pocket, in minuscule amounts.

BE: I thought I read that 100,000 copies of the anthology you put together had been bought by the Book of the Month club, to be distributed in hotels...

JB: I think the figure is an exaggeration. I was in Washington recently, a week ago, I think, and saw Andrew Carroll. He is more informed about the day-to-day transactions with the hotels. One chain has, I know for a fact, signed up. Because they get letters from their customers, etc....

BE: They do? That's great!

JB: Yes, but on the large scale, we are still courting foundations to support it. And the publishers – we find that their resistance – is something of a paradox, to put it mildly, because the publishers are the ones who stand to gain from it. But they move no finger...

BE: Not even your publisher?

JB: No, not even my publisher. It's all rather piecemeal, but it grows.

BE: This seems to be a major, long-term commitment on your part...

JB: Yes, it is – well, I don't really know, as long as I exist. Perhaps that's not so terribly long. (165)

Brodsky's words proved to be unfortunately prophetic. In an interview given to Elizabeth Elam Roth, approximately ten weeks before his death, and published posthumously, Brodsky once more emphasizes the link between education and poetry audience. His words try to belie the journalist, who shares Van Hallberg's opinion about poetry readers:

Q: It seems, from my perspective, that the only people who read poetry are in academia, and I wanted to know where you stood on this.

A: That's not true, because, as I said to you, had that been the case, were my readership only in academia, I would have to do something else than what I'm doing. I would have to supplement my living in some other fashion. It is not that I'm getting by on my royalties, but I live by my academic salary, so to speak. [And he has that job because he is a successful poet read by a comparatively large audience]. But in a sense I could get by on my royalties if I were single. I am more successful than most – the Nobel prize and so forth. I count among my readers, in my twenty-three years in this country, people of various walks of life. I haven't seen a farmer...but I know doctors ...okay, they are the educated class, but they are not academia. And they read poetry for consolation, or distraction, or for all the reasons poetry has been read all along. (8)

William Wadsworth joins in recollecting the last communication he had with Brodsky, whose main concerns seem again to focus on book distribution. This excerpt confirms Brodsky's involvement in the ongoing project and leave us with a further memory of his unique personality. He was not afraid to make strong statements, although always veiled in irony, as in this case.

We spoke on the phone three days before he died. I was still at the Academy, and we were continuing to work with Joseph on the project of distributing poetry anthologies around the country. Joseph called me at the Academy, and said, 'Bill, do you know what American poetry is all about?' – 'No, Joseph, I don't. Please tell me.' – He said, 'American poetry is all about *wheels*, it's all about the Open Road.' – I said, 'OK'. – He said, 'So, you know what you have to do?' – 'No, Joseph, what do I have to do?' – 'You have to call up the Teamsters. We have to get poetry on



the trucks. So when milk is delivered in the morning to the grocery stores, they deliver poetry with the milk'. - Now the Teamsters' Union is the most notoriously corrupt union in the U.S. I said, 'Joseph, are you telling me that The Academy of American Poets should collaborate with organized crime?' – There was a pause. Then Joseph said, 'Bill, one thing about organized crime. It's organized'. This was the last thing he said to me. (Polukhina 2010, 478)

8. Conclusions

Brodsky's commitment as a Poet Laureate, and his proposal to foster culture in the United States, proved a way of rewarding a country that since the beginning of his exile had been able to acknowledge his talent and promote his work. It may be seen also as the ambition of a foreign intellectual to be fully accepted as an active member of the American cultural environment. Julia Stakhnevich well summarizes this aspect:

Writing critically in English on literature, culture, history, and politics, helped Brodsky ground himself in the English-speaking literary discourse. It allowed him to share with his English-speaking audience a qualitatively new outlook on important topics that connected two cultural traditions. Through such discourse in English Brodsky applied agency to claim a legitimate membership in his new community of English-speaking literary scholars. (21)

Brodsky's works in Russian and English, his ultimate legacy of "The American Poetry and Literacy Project," and the foundation of an Academy in Rome to support young emerging poets¹⁵, represent his cultural embrace of both East and West. All his endeavors contributed to assign him an undiscussed position in contemporary world culture. Brodsky's major commitment in life was poetry, and, in his opinion - as he pointed out during his Nobel Prize banquet - poetry had a high educational view, which it was responsibility of culture and politics to make it available as a tool for resistance against oppression:

I am grateful to you for those whom your decisions make and will make read poetry, today and tomorrow. I am not so sure that man will prevail, as the great man and my fellow American once said standing, I believe, in this very room; but I am quite positive that a man who reads poetry is harder to prevail upon than upon one who doesn't. (Brodsky 1987)¹⁶

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¹⁵ See Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund. www.josephbrodsky.org/about.html. Last Visited August 10, 2016.

¹⁶ Brodsky is referring to William Faulkner's "Banquet Speech" for his Nobel Prize, given on 10 December 1950.



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