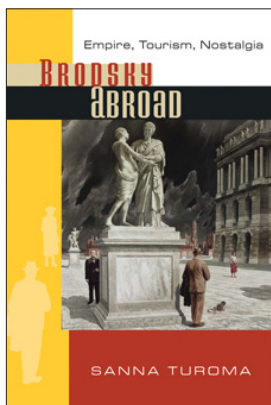


BOOK REVIEWS

TRAVELS OF AN EXILED WRITER



Sanna Turoma. *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia*. Madison, Wis. & London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. 292 pp.

This is a book about the Nobel Prize awarded Russian poet Joseph Brodsky's travels after he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. Brodsky was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1940 and died in New York after a heart attack in 1996. He has retained a prominent status for people who appreciate Russian and classic world literature.

The author, Sanna Turoma, is a senior researcher at the Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki), Academy of Finland, and the book is based on her doctoral dissertation.

Due to his oppositional stance, Brodsky was repressed in the Soviet Union, sentenced, and later on 'strongly advised' to emigrate. After settling down in the USA and pursuing various academic and non-academic jobs, he had the opportunity to travel around the world. These travels were reflected in his poems, and Sanna Turoma has written a book where Brodsky's writings about four locations – Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul and Venice – are scrutinised. As a comparison, Brodsky's pre-emigration period poems and essays about his native Leningrad are analysed in the second chapter.

The focus of the book is defined on the fifth page: "The book aims at setting Brodsky in a dialogue with leading representatives of postcolonial and postmodern theories in order to recontextualize the scholarly investigation of his travel poetry and prose." In short, Turoma looks at how places are contextualised and interpreted depending on their cultural and social meaning for Brodsky. Attention is concentrated on how Brodsky links different locations with culture, religion, or history, and how the description of a visited place depends on how the poet positions himself, his cultural background and origin. The self-positioning of Brodsky was determined by different markers; he carried with him the burden of being an emigrant from the Soviet Union who never really adapted to the West. In his travels outside Europe, Brodsky also encountered cultures that were non-European or non-Christian – factors that also changed his self-positioning. The personality and biography of Brodsky is so intensively reflected in his poems that by reading this book I came to realise that the monograph could be seen as a psychoanalytical treatise through travel writing.

The book certainly reveals much about Brodsky's ideas and attitudes through his poetry. By looking at the travel poetry, one perception of the author is that travel writing as such has its roots in colonialism, in the period when Western nobles travelled outside Europe and described the countries they visited as the Other, from the perspective of Orientalism (p. 56). Brodsky, who grew up in Leningrad, had similar attitudes. His writings from that period reflect his strong nostalgia for the empire combined with the

Soviet ‘kitchen dissidents’, typical of *piterskie* (St. Petersburg) intellectuals (p. 69). This imperial nostalgia was apparently also the reason why Brodsky was always hostile to contemporary art and architecture (p. 58). In his later years Brodsky published several poems and essays idealising Leningrad/St. Petersburg’s ‘magnificent’ past (p. 76), even comparing it to the British Empire. In the last pages of the chapter about Leningrad, Turoma introduces another aspect in Brodsky’s philosophy: constant attempts to define Russian national identity, rooted in the imperial past expressed in the architecture of the ‘old Petersburg’. These few pages help to explain why Russian émigrés often failed to adapt in the West. Notwithstanding their anti-Soviet regime stance, they identified themselves with the culture of a country with a great history and significant influence on the world. Turoma here finds traces of post-colonial nostalgia and self-identification with a great empire that has ceased to exist.

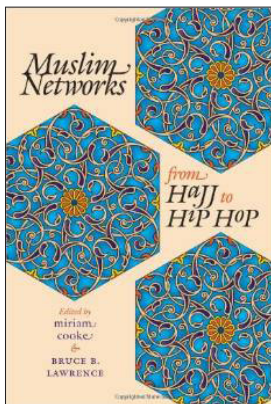
Turoma views Brodsky’s interpretation of other countries through the eyes of the *piterskii* intellectual who never felt comfortable in, and never fully accepted, other cultures. “From Brodsky’s metropolitan Soviet viewpoint” (p. 86) Mexico resembles the Soviet Central Asian republics with its exotica, underdeveloped economy, poverty, and inheritance from a long destroyed native empire. In his poetry, Brodsky takes a strong anti-colonial position condemning the Spanish and American colonialism that destroyed the natives’ dignity, languages and traditions. Turoma draws on other Russian Soviet poets like Mayakovsky and Blok in order to demonstrate how the discourse of “Euro-imperial” and “Russian imperial knowledge” (p. 92) has changed over time. Brodsky’s position is definitely more critical of contemporary Western politics. What makes Brodsky’s ‘Mexican cycle’ different from writing about other places is that he obviously studied the history of the country and the biographies of its rulers. There is a difference in the poet’s position on Brazil, described by Turoma as “the Metropolitan man in the Third World”. The Brazilian writing is even described by Turoma as an “anti-travelogue” (p. 108). Brodsky is disappointed by the “amnesia” (p. 108) he encounters: the past has been wiped clean and the country is trying to modernise itself by building European style cities, roads and large-scale blocks of flats. For Brodsky, Rio de Janeiro appears as a model for future European decay: boring, monotonous, promiscuous, a “jungle” dominated by poverty (pp. 110–111). The Third World perspective is prevalent here: Rio wants to be Europe but fails, it is too backward. However, Istanbul receives a different treatment. Turoma finds in Brodsky’s writings his love of the city’s classical Orientalism: a former capital of the Ottoman Empire, architecture that resembles past victories and once led the world culture. Simultaneously, Istanbul embodies the “Eastern savagery” (p. 139), being erratic, violent, and dirty. Brodsky places Turkey in the Russian imperial framework, seeing it as Caucasian (*kavkazskii*) or Eastern (*vostochnyi*). This discourse seems to be more comfortable and understandable for the poet. Istanbul reflects the uneasy relationship that Russian intellectuals have with Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian republics, in which admiration for impressive cultural and historical inheritance is fused with the arrogance of the culturally and technically superior Christian conqueror. In the travelogue about Turkey, Brodsky slightly gets personal and biographical, comparing Istanbul/Constantinople with St. Petersburg/Leningrad. The chapter about Brodsky’s writings on Venice starts with a brilliant overview about the ambivalent place this city occupies in the 19th and 20th century Russian travelogues. Venice is simultaneously the home of classic European culture and a symbol of European decay with dilapidating palaces and monuments. This chapter is worth reading due to the polemic about Brod-

sky's place in Western literature where he remained "marginal" but not a "marginalised" writer (p. 159). The chapter about Venice also contains more biographical information about Brodsky. In short, this section of the book helps to localise the Russian émigré's disillusionment with the West, where he gained quite a prominent position as a public figure.

Sanna Turoma's book is theoretically well founded and brilliantly analytical. It is not only about Brodsky; it also skilfully reflects his status in the Soviet Russian poetry tradition, with references to other Soviet Russian poets like Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Mandelstam and Blok. Turoma shows the inner confusion of Russian poets about the era where they were unable to find a clear position between the oppositional stance, euphoria about the Soviet might and progress, and nostalgia for the Tsarist empire with its high culture. Currently, when the national soul-seeking of Russian poets and writers has become prominent in Russian mainstream newspapers, the book gives a glimpse into the way of thinking by which such people seem to be influenced. The book is also a great contribution to existing literature about postcolonial writing by showing another angle: the Eastern European emigrant perspective on the Western cultural and economic dominance they wish to deny. Turoma's monograph, however, would have needed more biographical information about Joseph Brodsky at the beginning of the book. Many crucial facts of the poet's life are mentioned throughout the book but, unless the reader already knows who Brodsky was, they can find other sources for a more coherent biography of the poet.

Aimar Ventsel

ISLAMIC CIVILISATION AND MUSLIM NETWORKS



***Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop.* Edited by miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 344 pp.**

I wanted to review this book for one particular purpose: I know very little about Islam, and the title of the book suggested it could be a good place to begin. Therefore, this review should be seen from that perspective. In general, I have to admit that I was not disappointed.

The main argument of this edited volume is that networks are crucial for understanding Islam. As it appears, Muslim networks enforce a sense of community and help to create common identity on a group level, and in a larger perspective, expanding over continents and supporting the movement of ideas or people. This collection of articles focuses

on the networks that are related mainly to various facets of identity, centred around the common perception of being Muslim. These identities are related to a common