

# Migration and Exile



Migration and Exile:  
Charting New Literary  
and Artistic Territories

Edited by

Ada Savin

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By and large, the present collection of essays stems from NEWS' first international seminar, hosted at the University of Versailles, France in November 2010. Entitled "Migrations inter-américaines et trans-atlantiques : Transferts, passages, témoignages", it was the first in a series of events bringing together scholars and graduate students, writers and visual artists whose work deals with the experience and the representation of migration and/or exile. I am grateful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for agreeing to maintain the trilingual format of the conference.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Distance is not a safety zone but a field of tension.*

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

This collection of essays represents somewhat of a breakthrough insofar as it brings together contributions in Anglophone and Hispanic-American studies, two research areas that have traditionally been kept apart, at least within the French academic world. The essays gathered in this volume transgress the boundaries between North-American and South-American studies, actually calling into question the validity of such a rigid separation. The authors believe that the culturally and linguistically diverse areas of research and the interdisciplinary character of their contributions can allow for a more comprehensive vision of the cultural interactions between Europe, North America and South America. Moreover, this approach is apt to convey a more nuanced image of the ways in which various cultures, literatures and languages represent the complex issues of exile and migration.

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“The 20th century is the age of the refugee,” wrote George Steiner in the 1970s, thinking of last century’s huge numbers of exiles, refugees, immigrants and expatriates—victims of wars or dictatorships, of genocides or poverty. Steiner also claimed that a whole genre of twentieth century literature is in fact “extraterritorial” a literature by and about exiles. “It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely...”<sup>1</sup> If exile and migration have undoubtedly been part of mankind’s history since biblical and Homeric times, individual and collective mobility and displacement have reached huge proportions and a heightened visibility in the past decades. Not only is Steiner’s perceptive thesis still valid, it seems to have foreshadowed the amplification of migration movements in the 21st century and hence, the creators’ and the public’s interest in transnational literary and visual representations. Exile, displacement and transnational border-crossing are indeed pervasive themes in today’s literature and visual arts.

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Migration, the movement of people across a specified boundary for the purpose of establishing a new, often temporary residence, is a more encompassing concept than exile. Usually brought about by wars or economic necessity, it involves the displacement of an entire community but it also refers to the seasonal migration of animals, of birds.<sup>2</sup> Exile is more often than not linked to political circumstances. "In its narrow sense a political banishment, exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes used indiscriminately, exile, expatriation, migration and immigration refer to related but distinct phenomena. The difference between the social status of the expatriated writer and the undocumented immigrant, or between the political exile and the migrant or seasonal worker needs to be acknowledged and addressed specifically.<sup>4</sup>

While preparing this volume, I was thrilled by the challenge of revisiting this widely-ploughed domain<sup>5</sup> but also well aware of the pitfalls inherent to the task. Provided the reader is willing to set aside any pretense for completeness, he/she will hopefully connect some of the threads running through and between the various critical essays which address primarily literary and visual primary sources: autobiography, auto-ethnography, fiction, testimonial literature, bilingual or inter-lingual literature and film. The essays gathered in this volume raise questions related to nation, memory, space and language—i.e. the central components of the exiled writers' and artists' existence and creation. How do creators cope with their "insider/outsider" status, both in the host country and in their homeland? To what extent can their "partial and plural perspective" (to use Salman Rushdie's words) re-conceptualize the notions of home and nationhood and challenge rigid assumptions of authenticity? In what way are notions of home and mother tongue affected by the crossing of geopolitical borders (inter-American, trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific)? How do tropes, themes, textual and visual images attempt to reconfigure the tenuous links between the artist and his community of origins? While this collection of articles offers no universal answers to these complex questions, it opens unexplored pathways, even as it brings to the readers' attention less well known literary works and suggests new approaches to exilic writing.

The following pages offer a few comments on the underlying tenets and the final shape of this volume.

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Criticism of exile writing has shown a tendency to analyze these works according to a binary logic, where exile produces either creative freedom or

else traps the writer in a state of restrictive nostalgia. More recently though, exile literature has been perceived as representing the in-between status of the exiled writer who “finds himself or herself on a kind of unstable, rickety bridge between two shores, where the new, unknown territory has to be appropriated and familiarized while the old, known territory becomes the realm of the imaginary.”<sup>6</sup> In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera sees the exile’s condition as “a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood.”<sup>7</sup> For Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat, life in its ceaseless oscillation between island and mainland, is “less a synthesis than a seesaw.”<sup>8</sup> The image of the seesaw conveys graphically the exile’s “contrapuntal awareness,” to borrow Edward Said’s musical phrase.<sup>9</sup> The “irresolvable tension” between these two postures often results in the co-existence of dual impulses within the same literary or visual artwork.

“This binary mapping of exilic space is a convenient simplification of a more complex network that involves and connects other cultures, languages and spaces,” notes Monica Manolescu in her article “Joseph Brodsky’s *Watermark*: from Leningrad to Venice via New York.” Indeed, migration, like exile, has ceased to be a necessarily one-way trajectory—from the homeland to the host country. Once the place of origin, with its familiar geography is left behind, writers and artists often continue to change locations, their restlessness an indication of the quasi impossible task to resettle for good, of the difficulty to find the vantage point that will allow them to create anew. A case in point is that of Jewish Polish-born Eva Hoffman, author of *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989), who emigrated with her parents to Canada in the 1950s, then moved to the United States, to finally (?) settle in London, “halfway between Manhattan and Cracow,” as she puts it. Hoffman acknowledges the need “for sites that are more than temporary shelters,” “some move of creating homing structures for ourselves...”<sup>10</sup>

In *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym distinguishes two ways of giving shape and meaning to longing, which she calls restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.”<sup>11</sup> Even though couched in binary terms, Boym’s tentative typology is flexible, allowing for the gray

areas on the outskirts of the artists' imaginary homelands. In today's post-ideological, post-modern, transnational world, writers and artists' exilic works show a marked inclination toward reflective nostalgia.

If the birthplace remains the alpha and omega of exiled authors, alternative, provisional "homes," apt to refract the memory of the lost homeland, find their way into their writings. Writers from Eastern Europe like Marcus Ravage or Joseph Brodsky explore the complex relationship between exile, location and self writing at different moments in history. For Brodsky, the poet and political exile, forever longing for his hometown, St. Petersburg, sameness and otherness converge in Venice, while Marcus Ravage's narrative of his "life on the seesaw"—between Romania and the United States—as analysed in Alina Sufaru's article, seems to reach its balance in...France, closer to the writer's place and culture of origin.

The writer's actual or imaginary experience of *nostos*, a key trope of exilic writings often refers to mythological characters like Aeneas and Ulysses. Aeneas never returned to Troy while Ulysses who did return to Ithaca is said to have longed for the adventurous times of his voyage. *Mutatis mutandis*, present-day writers are confronted with similar choices. Célia Doussin's article on two Cuban-American writers, Pablo Medina and Gisele Requena, addresses their predicament. The return to the homeland is often fraught with disillusion: a strange feeling of *déjà vu* overcomes the writer, faced with familiar people and places that have become eerily unfamiliar. During her visit to Poland, Eva Hoffman realizes that "every immigrant has a second, spectral autobiography," i.e. a revised story of one's life had one never left the country of origin.<sup>12</sup> More often than not the return to the homeland is deferred if not written off altogether. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, for one, sees his hypothetical *nostos* to Cuba as another exile. When political circumstances make it impossible for the writer to return, nostalgia and longing are displaced or translated ("borne across") onto a place that no longer exists on any map except that of the writer's imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Political changes in the homeland or, conversely, the very absence of change can either increase the feeling of estrangement from one's origins or deepen feelings of longing or nostalgia.<sup>14</sup> José Mora Guarnido, a Spanish intellectual exiled in Montevideo, alleviated his homesickness through epistolary exchanges (between 1923 and 1964) with his friends who had remained in the homeland. Fatiha Idmhand traces the various stages of this long correspondence while Nicole Lapierre's article retraces the intertwined destinies of a Black-Jewish family surviving in and struggling against turbulent changes as represented in Russian African-American social activist Lily Golden's *My Long Journey Home* (2002).

Migration has also become a rich source of inspiration for filmmakers. Theodora Patrona's essay is devoted to Pantelis Voulgaris' *Brides* (2004), one of several recent films to focus on migration; one also thinks of Emanuele Crialese's *Nuovomondo* (*The Golden Door*, 2006) which traces the sea voyage of Sicilian immigrants to America at the turn of the 20th century and of *Terraferma* (2011), Crialese's latest film, concerned with the burning issue of African boat people attempting to reach the island of Lampedusa. The voyage on board the ship, a crucial topos of 20th century migration literature and film, opens onto an "other" space—a heterotopia—which cancels out the norms prevailing on land. To use Michel Foucault's words, "the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place."<sup>15</sup>

Fictional representations of internal or external exile abound in contemporary literature. The essays chosen for this volume, with the exception of Ineke Bockting's article on Nabokov's *Lolita*, make forays into less explored literary works. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Gardens in the Dunes* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Lacuna*, revisit the American past (late 19th century and early 20th century, respectively) by foregrounding inter-American and trans-Atlantic cultural contacts. In both novels, the narrated space is dual—utopic and dystopic. Writing from a liminal position, Silko, "a stranger in her own land," an internal exile, imagines a utopian space in which Native-American and Western cultures, allegedly mutually exclusive spaces (or cultural heterotopias) coalesce thanks to the meditational role of the garden which acts as a connecting thread between cultures. In her article, Sophie Croisy claims that Silko's use of the garden as cultural unifier is rather felicitous. According to Michel Foucault, "the garden is perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."<sup>16</sup>

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Lacuna* revolves around the figure of a loner, a "permanent foreigner" straddling the border between the United States and Mexico, a stranger in each country. As Elisabeth Lamothe argues in her article, *The Lacuna* (a word with many meanings—an absence, a gap, a missing manuscript, a tunnel through time or substance) is an attempt to excavate the invisible part of the past, to tell the unwritten story. The experiences of a fictional loner merge with those of larger-than-life figures—Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Trotsky. It is this uncanny intersection that propels the novel into the realm of exile, of the unknown. "The most important part of the story is the piece of it you don't know"—the sentence runs like a leitmotiv through the entire text.

Vietnamese-American writer Lê Thi Diem Thúy's first novel, treated by Janna Odabas, encapsulates emblematic questions related to exile, refugees and the migrant condition. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, is the story of a family of refugees from the Vietnam War, torn between nations, countries, and homelands. The novel focuses on spectrality, on the haunting presence of the narrator's brother's ghost, among other apparitions. In Odabas' words, "these ghostly presences point to repressed, traumatic histories, to a lost homeland, to a potential new home, to aspects of (un) belonging, to questions of identity and cultural transmission."

Exiled writers are invariably confronted with the crucial question of language. Chilean expatriate writer José Donoso considers that "the homeland of a writer is not really a place, but a language."<sup>17</sup> He also notes the phenomenon of native language erosion; for those who have been away for a long time, "the return voyage to Ithaca is an effort to regain one's vernacular, which the intervening silence of years and space has rendered powerless, and plug into it again..."<sup>18</sup> For Czesław Miłosz, the exiled Polish poet who continued to write in his mother tongue to the end of his life, "language is the only homeland."<sup>19</sup> Conversely, Eva Hoffman, his compatriot, who wrote all her books in English, has accepted the impossibility of ever being at home elsewhere but in English, the "new language" she has painstakingly made her own. Encapsulated in these cases is the exiled writer's quintessential dilemma: can he or she continue to write in the mother tongue or is it possible to adopt another language and be adopted by it? Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett proved it was possible; Thomas Mann, Miłosz, Cortazar and many others continued to write in their native language.

For post-colonial writers like Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje or Shirley Lim, whose autobiographical narrative *Among White Moon Faces* is treated in Nicoleta Alexoe's article, language choice is determined or at the very least influenced by the colonial past and the present political circumstances. Writing in English signifies the conquest of the master's tongue, the capacity to "strike back" at the empire. The exiled writer's "double vision" translates into texts written *between* languages as the mother tongue inevitably pierces through the surface of the English text. Even if they are oscillating between their two languages, as if the ground beneath their feet was not yet firm enough, Hispanic writers in the United States write predominantly in English. Gustavo Pérez Firmat's "Dedication" is a painful confession of the "unhoused" writer's linguistic and cultural predicament:

The fact that I  
 am writing to you  
 in English  
 already falsifies what I  
 wanted to tell you.  
 My subject:  
 how to explain to you that I  
 don't belong to English  
 though I belong nowhere else.<sup>20</sup>

Exile can also be experienced as an existential condition that prompts, even unleashes creativity. Julia Kristeva, once an exile herself, believes writing is impossible without the experience of some kind of exile. For Roberto Bolaño, the path-breaking Chilean writer who spent most of his life outside his homeland, exile is “an attitude toward life” which implies a rejection of all types of dictatorship. Hence, his lack of sympathy for the endless lamentations of exiles: “Can one feel nostalgia for the land where one nearly died? Can one feel nostalgia for poverty, intolerance, arrogance, injustice? *Books are the only homeland of the true writer, books that may sit on shelves or in the memory.*”<sup>21</sup>

Driven into exile by fascism, Adorno expressed profound skepticism toward the possibility of dwelling in the proper sense. “The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge...The house is past.”<sup>22</sup> Adorno’s categorical statement closes the door to a long chapter in modern history and ushers in the post-modern era which calls into question past certainties or else dismisses them altogether. In one of his most graphic aphorisms, “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass,” Adorno points to the painful yet visionary nature of the exile artist’s condition.

Post-national horizons, deterritorialization and dissemination characterize most particularly Latin American writers from the latter part of the 20th century who were exiled during a historical moment of increasing globalization, transnational economics and theoretical shifts in postmodern studies. Historical and geo-political reasons account for Latin American writers’ tendency to look beyond the borders of their country, to opt for voluntary exile.<sup>23</sup> Already a century ago, Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro proclaimed half-jokingly:

The four cardinal points  
 Are three:  
 South and North.<sup>24</sup>

The articles in the last section of this volume illustrate this idiosyncrasy. Carina Blixen retraces Uruguayan writer Carlos Liscano's exilic trajectory from Montevideo to Stockholm, then to Barcelona, and back home to an Uruguay that had changed in the meantime as had the author of *El camino a Ítaca* (1994). The idea of a necessary link between home, birthplace, mother tongue and identity has lost much of its relevance for writers like Saer, Borges or Bolaño. In Saer's writings the most meaningful side of exile is the writer's internal voyage, as Oscar Brando's article tends to demonstrate.

Chilean self-exiled writer José Donoso rightfully claims that exile has become a shared, collective experience from which the greater part of Latin American fiction derives its strength.<sup>25</sup> A few prestigious names immediately come to mind among many others: Julio Cortázar, García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Roa Bastos, Vargas Llosa. More recently, globalization seems to have spurred the creative imagination of many Latin American writers, inciting them to attack literary nationalism and to produce deterritorialized narrative fictions. Writers like Pedro Angel Palou, Mario Bellatin or Roberto Bolaño are discussed in Gustavo Guerrero's essay which concludes this volume.

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More than ever before, today's exilic writers and artists are calling into question the very concept of "at-homeness," of a territorialized national identity. Doreen Massey aptly noted that "the link between place and culture is being ruptured, [it] is vanishing due to globalization."<sup>26</sup> "The space in which we live is a heterogeneous space. In other words, we live in a network of relationships that are irreconcilable with each other and absolutely impossible to superimpose."<sup>27</sup> Film director, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu unwittingly takes on Foucault's statement in his fascinating cinematographic attempt (involving the spectator) to detect minute yet significant links between apparently disconnected events in a world that is "out of joint." *Babel* (2006) juxtaposes disparate events set alternately on three continents and in four countries (Mexico, Japan, Morocco and the United States). *Babel* presents a splintered world, a world devoid of center, of an overriding ideology, where a single isolated act sends ripples thousands of miles away that can lead to unforeseen, tragic consequences.

If for so many of us there is no way back home, no center to hold on to, maybe we should heed exiled Chinese writer Ha Jin's advice: "Since most of us cannot go home again, we have to look for our own Ithacas and try to find ways to get there."<sup>28</sup>



## Notes

1. George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language of Revolution*. New York: Atheneum, 1976, 11.
2. Mexican-American poet Lorna Dee Cervantes, who comes from a long line of migrant people, sees her migration to the North as the counterpart of birds migrating to the South: "as pain sends seabirds south from the cold/I come north to gather my feathers for quills." "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington", *Emplumada*, University of Pittsburg Press, 1981.
3. Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *Exile and Creativity, Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, Introduction, 2. Suleiman's concise yet encompassing definition of the exile experience captures well the thematic range of this volume.
4. Cf. Karen Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. Duke University Press, 1996, Chapter 3.
5. Here are a few other notable critical works and anthologies on exile: Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile: A Semantic and Historical Study*. London: Harrap, 1972; Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; Marc Robinson, ed., *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994; Julia Kristeva, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2002; James Whitlark, Wendell Aycock, eds. *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*. Texas Tech University Press, 1992.
6. Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*, 4.
7. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Harper and Row, 1984, 75.
8. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America*. New York: Doubleday, 1995, 274.
9. "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal." Edward Said, "The Mind of Winter: Reflection on Life in Exile". *Harper's*, September 1984, 55.
10. Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads", *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*. André Aciman, ed., New York Public Library, 1999, 62; 63.
11. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, 49-50.
12. Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey through the New Eastern Europe*. Penguin, 1993, 36.
13. One thinks of Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place*. Vintage Books, 2000.
14. See the significant nuances of the word in several European languages. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, 12-13.

15. Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces. Diacritics*, spring 1986.  
<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>
16. Idem.
17. José Donoso, "Ithaca: The Impossible Return" in James Whitlark, Wendell Aycock, eds., *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*. Texas Tech University Press, 1992, 33.
18. Idem.
19. Poetry Reading at the M.L.A. Convention, 1998.
20. <http://poetictumblr.snarkattack.net.au/post/180494709/dedication-by-gustavo-perez-firmat>
21. Roberto Bolaño, "Literature and Exile", January 12, 2011; (the italics are mine).  
<http://www.thenation.com/print/article/157695/literature-and-exile>
22. Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951]. London: Verso, 2000, 38-39.
23. In his last interview, Bolaño referred to himself as Latin American, adding that "my only country is my two children and wife and perhaps, though in second place, some moments, streets, faces or books that are in me....": <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/bolano/interview.htm>
24. Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948, Santiago de Chile).
25. José Donoso, "Ithaca: The Impossible Return" in James Whitlark, Wendell Aycock, eds. *The Literature of Emigration and Exile*, 35. Donoso uses the term "exile" but the more adequate term would be "expatriate writers".
26. Doreen Massey, "A Place called Home", *New Formations*, Issue 17: summer 1992. <http://www.newformations.co.uk/abstracts/nf17abstracts.html>
27. Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces. Diacritics*, spring 1986. <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>
28. Ha Jin refers to Cavafy's poem "Ithaca" in which Ithaca symbolizes arrival, not return. Cf. "The Writer as Migrant", 2006 Campbell Lecture Series.  
<http://campbell.rice.edu/CampbellContent.aspx?id=54>

# PART I

## ROOTS AND ROUTES



# JOSEPH BRODSKY'S *WATERMARK*: FROM LENINGRAD TO VENICE VIA NEW YORK

MONICA MANOLESCU

## Venice on the map of exile

Is there such a thing as a happy literary migration or a successful artistic exile? The question is certainly not a new one and the answer is necessarily ambivalent, as certain theorists of exile show.<sup>1</sup> When one examines the cases of celebrated authors such as Joseph Brodsky or Vladimir Nabokov, who earned international recognition and wrote with (supposedly) equal mastery in two (or even three) languages, their fame proves that success and literary exile are not incompatible, that migrations across borders and languages may produce fulfilled authors, who act as “figures of connections” between cultures according to Michael Seidel’s well-known formula.<sup>2</sup> However, there is always a tinge of melancholy and an overtone of loss in the literary texts and personal statements of such writers, as if the geographical and linguistic territory left behind never ceased to haunt them and to throw its shadow across their achievements. Joseph Brodsky’s sad eulogy of his home city, Leningrad, in his autobiographical essays, especially “A Guide to a Renamed City”, is a variation on the theme of nostalgia. Lev Losev’s question about Joseph Brodsky’s paradoxical unhappiness in exile suggests that, against all odds, the promise of a smooth change of air and culture was not fulfilled: “Why is the Westernizer Brodsky not happy in the West?”<sup>3</sup> As far as Vladimir Nabokov is concerned, his afterword to *Lolita* contains a poignant lament of the loss of his “docile” Russian tongue that he had to abandon for what he considered to be “a second-rate brand of English.”<sup>4</sup>

Pronouncements that insist on the liminal nature of exilic writers are all too familiar to readers and critics interested in exile and its fundamental in-betweenness. The discourse about the cultural ambivalence of exile and exiled artists (hesitating between rupture and connection, completion and incompleteness) tends to insist exclusively on the two terms of the exilic equation: homeland and land of exile, homeland and “the other land.” Indeed, the act of charting the space of exile inevitably leads one to consider origins and final destinations, a point of departure and a point of no return—the most obvious stations and categories in a writer’s exilic

trajectory. However, this binary mapping of exilic space sometimes proves unsatisfactory, a convenient simplification of a more complex network that involves and connects other cultures, languages and spaces lying in between the two shores. It is perhaps this space and quality of “in-betweenness” that needs to be reconsidered: whereas it is generally taken to mean that the exile finds himself between two cultures and languages, it may also signify the possibility of opening up another space lying between them, neither the origin nor the end. This article offers an angle of approach going beyond the familiar duality of exile and chooses the perspective given by a third space of migration,<sup>5</sup> illustrated by Venice—the Venice imagined and desired by Joseph Brodsky in *Watermark*. The latter constitutes a personal and aesthetic statement on migration and flux, a celebration of the power of water to reflect and deflect reality, to inspire the individual and to set him thinking about history and the crossing of borders, both physical and linguistic.

Joseph Brodsky was born in Leningrad in 1940 into a Jewish family. He started writing poetry and translating poetry (English, American, Polish) into Russian as a young man, offering the “dubious” image of a “parasite” to Soviet authorities. He was sentenced to five years of forced labor on charges on parasitic behaviour, but was released after one year only and was expelled from Russia in 1972, when he was thirty-two. Welcomed as a dissident hero in the United States, he embarked upon a successful and fertile literary career, writing poetry in English and Russian, and essays in English. In 1987 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and was appointed Poet Laureate of the United States in 1991 and 1992. He never returned to Leningrad and his parents were never given visas to visit him in the United States. Separated from his home city and from his family, he kept returning to Venice winter after winter, spending one month there at the beginning of every year in a gray, cold and foggy atmosphere that reminded him of Leningrad. *Watermark* is the record of Brodsky’s love affair with Venice, a city where he was to be buried, on the Island of San Michele. Written in English and published in 1992, it is a disparate collection of thoughts and reminiscences devoid of narrative fluidity in the traditional sense. *Watermark* is the hybrid product of exile and exilic perception, in the sense that it is an essay about a city that reminds the author of his birthplace, Leningrad, but it is also an essay written in English, the language of exile and of a new artistic identity.

Venice represents a station midway in the author’s transatlantic itinerary and a powerful catalyst of discourses on migration, both political and aesthetic in nature. Located somewhere between the lost homeland and the

land of exile, the Italian city allows Brodsky to contemplate his origins and exilic transformations from afar, with the enriched perception warranted by Venice as a revisited literary and artistic topos. Instead of returning to Ithaca, Brodsky-Odysseus<sup>6</sup> goes to Venice, knowing that Ithaca is lost forever and that Venice is different from a surrogate home although it does conjure up memories of home. Brodsky's discourse on Venice replays a certain number of topoi recurrent in the vast literature on Venice explored by Tony Tanner in *Venice Desired*, but it is also the autobiography of a poet reflecting on aesthetics and his own poetic art. Venice thus acts as a personal and philosophical detour in Brodsky's discourse on uprooting, a figure of obliqueness bridging distant mental and spatial continents, Russia and America, the poet's personal history and the formulation of an artistic credo fostered by the contemplation of Italian art. Sameness and otherness are united in Brodsky's exploration of Venice, with the eye and the mind digressing from the familiar topic of exile to broader artistic concerns. In his speech at the Nobel prize banquet, Brodsky mentions the meandering quality of his own itineraries and questions the straight line as a model of movement and connectivity: "Of course, it's one hell of a way to get from Petersburg to Stockholm; but then for a man of my occupation the notion of a straight line being the shortest distance between two points has lost its attraction a long time ago."<sup>7</sup>

This primacy of the loop or the broken line is also present in other major 20th century works exploring possible worlds, alternative narrative models or the representation of the urban imaginary. Borges' "Garden of Forking Paths" is the supreme example of such proliferating reflexive and spatial cartographies, together with Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, where Esmeralda, "city of water," is precisely a network of zigzags and a system of complex bifurcating options:

To go from one place to another you have always the choice between land and boat: and since the shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zig-zag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes, the ways that open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further for those who alternate a stretch by boat with one on dry land.<sup>8</sup>

*Watermark* is the perfect illustration of this idiosyncratic understanding of space, movement and thought as curvature. Indeed, since the straight line between New York and Leningrad is a political impossibility in the context of the Cold War, a circumventing trip to Venice allows Brodsky to connect the two in a meandering way.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Brodsky's Venice becomes a vital

destination giving meaning and coherence to a whole physical and mental universe, a center branching out towards other points in space and time.

### **“Ever more inward”: Venice as origin**

Brodsky's yearly journeys to Venice in wintertime provide him with the uncanny feeling of having simultaneously reached a foreign, remote province and his own birthplace—but not the Venice consecrated by numberless literary texts and art works. Brodsky's Venice embraces self and other, the faraway and the nearby, unrecognizable as Venice in the darkness of the winter night: “It all felt like arriving in the provinces, in some unknown, insignificant spot—possibly one's own birthplace – after years of absence” (8). The obscure urban landscape engulfs an anonymous individual having just arrived from America: “In no small degree did this sensation owe to my anonymity, to the incongruity of a lone figure on the steps of the *stazione*: an easy target for oblivion” (8). The fragment of urban scenery that he contemplates from the steps of the railway station is un-Venetian and utterly banal, although the sign indicating the name of the city is shining just behind him: “Had I simply turned around, I'd have seen the *stazione* in all its rectangular splendor of neon and urbanity, seen block letters saying VENEZIA. Yet I didn't” (8). In a strange case of cultural and urban disorientation, the sign itself is the only marker of Venice, of “Veniceness” so to say, that is Venice as cultural essence solidified by centuries of representation. By not turning around and by preserving the illusion of an anonymous city, Brodsky endows it with a typical blankness, presenting it as a “degree zero” of space, open to metamorphosis through personal projections and impressions.

In this womb-like setting that replays the primal scene, the smell of frozen seaweed functions as an olfactory homecoming by instantly reminding Brodsky of the Neva. More subtly, he is also led to ponder on his personal affinity with water: “It was a windy night, and before my retina registered anything, I was smitten by a feeling of utter happiness: my nostrils were hit by what to me has always been its synonym, the smell of freezing seaweed. [...] One recognizes oneself in certain elements” (5). A trip to Venice becomes an encounter with oneself, a self-discovery: “I felt I'd stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air” (7). Finding oneself soon becomes synonymous with losing oneself because what one recognizes above all is one's own insignificance: “For here yourself is the last thing you care to see” (22). And yet, a process of constant self-projection is at work. Brodsky projects himself especially in the monsters and gargoyles that



decorate Venetian churches, stating that being a writer implies a familiarity with the ink's "octopal infinity" (83), the written word's curlicues and tentacles infinitely spreading from the dark ink at the tip of one's pen. The fluid substance of writing is an aesthetic medium that duplicates the flux of the city itself, the aesthetic mirror of the flowing sea and the urban labyrinth. The monstrous, disseminating nature of ink, advancing in all directions in an uncontrolled way creates a web of traces and signs that reproduces the organizing principle of the city itself, and less its content. The "octopal" ink of the writing reflects the "octopal" nature of Venice, monstrous and familiar at the same time. This ambivalence of the urban experience (finding oneself is losing oneself, disorientation as a condition of creativity) is at the heart of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of modernity's sense of place. In the writings that crystallize the figure of the flâneur and in his autobiographical texts, Benjamin insists on the profound implications of the act of losing one's bearings, which becomes the premise of a whole "art of straying":

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance, nothing else. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for a quite different schooling. Then, signboards and street-names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books.<sup>10</sup>

"The art of straying" (which occupies pride of place in the artistic practices of the surrealists and the situationists) produces its most spectacular effects in cities with rich mythologies, like Paris or Venice, in which the burden of cultural iconicity is overwhelming. Paris perceived as a forest and Venice construed as a dark landscape of pre-Genesis are experiences of nature that seem to dismiss the constructed nature of the city and to open up a dimension of secrecy and novelty akin to the mapping of a *terra incognita*.

Brodsky elaborates the trope of Venice as *terra incognita* that becomes a home on several levels: source of inspiration, fountainhead of European culture and a site of symbolic homecoming for the wandering self. If postmodern critical discourse has accustomed us to the notion of a weakening center and to the emergence of the margin(s) as powerful agents in the shaping of meaning, Brodsky's *Watermark* is a celebration of the centrality of Venice in one's personal history and on the map of one's migrations.

Brodsky introduces the idea of Venice as center through a reference to a poem by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale entitled “The Eel” (“L’Anguilla”, published in 1956). Brodsky was a great lover of Italian poetry and considered the translations of his Russian poetry into Italian to be outstanding. Montale’s eel allows Brodsky’s to compare his personal journey from Russia to the West and Venice with the migration of eels across the seas to Italian rivers, where they seek to reproduce themselves. Brodsky projects himself in this poetic portrayal of migrating eels by humorously pointing out that “you had indeed to be an eel to escape” the Baltic (6), a reference to the limitations of movement imposed to Soviet citizens. His dreams of evasion when still in the Soviet Union were filled with Venice and tainted with decadent phantasms of suicide inspired by the “death in Venice” syndrome:

I vowed to myself that should I get out of my empire, should this eel ever escape the Baltic, the first thing I would do would be to come to Venice, rent a room on the ground floor of some palazzo so that the waves raised by passing boats would splash against my window, write a couple of elegies while extinguishing my cigarettes on the damp stony floor, cough and drink, and, when the money got short, instead of boarding a train, buy myself a little Browning and blow my brains out on the spot, unable to die in Venice of natural causes. (40)

Montale’s poem follows the journey of the eel from the cold Baltic Sea to sun-scorched Italy, where the eel produces life (in a magic although natural way) in the middle of an arid landscape of burnt stone.<sup>11</sup> In the desolation of “dessicated Pyrenean brooks,” the eel finds an “Eden of generation” and thus becomes an emblem of renewal and rebirth, a “green spirit seeking life.” The cartographies drawn by Montale’s poem from the Baltic Sea to Italy are certainly meaningful for Brodsky’s own biography, but the poem also invites an archetypal reading of the eel going beyond identifiable spaces, individuals and historical contexts and pointing to a general theory of human migration as an irresistible quest for life, as the possibility of returning to a spatial and mental source where life is perpetuated and where the desert becomes fertile. The call of migration is then inscribed in our genetic heritage, inescapable in its appeal to move “ever more inward.” Montale’s poem ends with the eel as the “sister” of man, a natural image of mankind’s own power of regeneration, the spark that transfigures the mire. The poem may seem too optimistic in its celebration of successful migrations despite opposing currents, but what looks like reckless optimism is just the lucid assertion of a fundamental power to survive and to renew

oneself in unfriendly contexts, by reaching a space of (re)generation deep within. Brodsky's spiraling descent "ever more inward" takes him precisely to Venice, a city synonymous with renewal.

*Watermark* suggests that Venice is a vital origin not only because of the intertext of Montale's "Eel", but also because a whole complex of references to Genesis is developed around Venice as the city of water: "There is something primordial about traveling on water, even for short distances" (14). The night shadows, the water and the seaweed smell form an urban vocabulary and an elementary landscape close to the origins of the world: "The city came into focus. 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,' to quote an author who visited here before. Then there was the next morning. It was Sunday, and all the bells were chiming" (42). Thoughts about the divine spirit, time and beauty are spurred by the pervasive presence of water—the element of life. Brodsky associates the biblical line about the spirit of God floating above water with thoughts on the memory of water. Water captures images, and so, he concludes, the spirit of God in its initial gesture of creation is somehow preserved, invisibly and mysteriously, in the ripples of Venetian waters: "I always thought that if the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water, the water was bound to reflect it. Hence my sentiment for water, for its folds, wrinkles, and ripples, and—as I am a Northerner—for its grayness" (42). Brodsky associates water with new beginnings, hence his desire to spend every New Year's Eve by the sea and witness the emergence of "a new cupful of time from it" (43). Venice is both interpreted and experienced as the original site of divine creation, transforming Brodsky's migration into a regressive journey back to the origins of life.

Several sections in *Watermark* can be read as miniature theological essays whose apparent solemnity is undermined by unexpected humorous comments, for instance on prices in Venice:

Perhaps the best proof of the Almighty's existence is that we never know when we are to die. In other words, had life been a solely human affair, one would be issued at birth with a term, or a sentence, stating precisely the duration of one's presence here: the way it is done in prison camps. That this doesn't happen suggests that the affair is not entirely human; that something we've got no idea or control interferes. That there is an agency which is not subject to our chronology or, for that matter, our sense of virtue. Hence all these attempts to foretell or figure out one's future, hence one's reliance on physicians and gypsies, which intensifies once we are ill or in trouble, and which is but an attempt at domesticating—or demonizing—the divine.

The same applies to our sentiment for beauty, natural and man-made alike, since the infinite can be appreciated only by the finite. Except for grace, the reasons for reciprocity would be unfathomable—unless one truly seeks a benevolent explanation of why they charge you so much for everything in this city. (34)

Paradoxically, Brodsky's religious meditations are combined with an acknowledgement of the atavistic instincts and urges awakened by the sensual experience of water, notably by its smell. Such contradictions do not bother the traveler, since Venice is traditionally a city of the coexistence of opposites.<sup>12</sup> The smell of water awakens evolutionary memories buried deep within, "beyond the confines of biography, beyond one's genetic makeup" (6), confirming yet again the status of Venice as city of inwardness. Brodsky thus describes human origins in both divine and evolutionary terms, referring repeatedly to the fish in him and in us. *Watermark* is in many ways an essay about perception and especially perception in Venice or the perception of Venice. Arguably, Brodsky's equivalent of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* would be called *Perception in Venice* or *The Eye in Venice*. Brodsky declares Venice to be "the city of the eye," which condemns the body to become merely "the eye's carrier" (44). Such statements remind one of American transcendentalism and of Emerson's celebration of the "transparent eyeball" in Nature. The human eye contemplating Venice becomes an autonomous organ likened to a floating fish: "this is a real triumph of the chordate, because the eye, our only raw, fishlike internal organ, indeed swims here: it darts, flaps, oscillates, dives, rolls up. Its exposed jelly dwells with atavistic joy on reflected palazzi, spiky heels, gondolas..." (28). Venice thus speaks to Brodsky the Northerner, dreaming of the Neva, to Brodsky the man, who feels the fish in him awakening, and to Brodsky the artist contemplating Italian art and architecture. While *Watermark* seems to invent for Venice a language of pure naturalness, dwelling on atavism, instincts, evolution and the olfactory qualities of water, such a reading of Venice as the epitome of naturalness is misleading: if the eye swims in this city and vision gains supremacy it is because Venice is the city of art, artistic beauty and enchanting artifice.

### Venice in history

Venice however is not confined to the register of original perception, in some ideal, immutable and pure region beyond history, biography and change. Although Brodsky insists on the fact that the individual becomes

anonymous in this city and is stripped bare of his characteristics, the notions of personal identity and personal history are not absent from the ways in which Venice is filtered and inscribed in Brodsky's discourse. Similarly, the image of Venice as a city of initial blankness and obscurity beyond history or prior to history, gives way to a city existing in time. This new layer of meaning enables us to pass from a primordial reading of Venice as origin to a radically different point of view showing that it becomes a place of globalized concerns, a microcosm representative of the history and geography of World War II, the Cold War and expatriation.

First of all, Brodsky places Venice in the context of the representations of the city circulating in the Soviet Union. Henry James begins one of his essays from *Italian Hours* by formulating the axiom that the traveler's knowledge of the city pre-exists the actual encounter: "Of all the cities of the world Venice is the easiest to visit without going there."<sup>13</sup> In Soviet Russia such a pronouncement would have sounded like a soothing compensation. Inaccessible yet visually recognizable, the city is reconstructed through fragments coming from various sources: magazines smuggled from beyond the Iron Curtain, literary translations and the tourist industry of other communist countries (notably China), producers of their own copies of Venice memorabilia. Joseph Brodsky's "romance" with the city (36) begins in the tattered pages of a series of three novels by Henri de Régnier translated into Russian by a Russian poet, Mikhail Kuzmin. This particular source of Brodsky's first impressions of Venice is placed under the sign of uncertainty and evanescence: the book (which is no longer in Brodsky's possession) was already falling into pieces when he first read it, the plots are "quite vague" in his mind and he is no longer sure of the titles of the novels. Emerging as it does in such a hazy territory, Kuzmin's Venice is endowed with a twilight "topography aggravated with mirrors" (37), which reminds Brodsky of "Petersburg's extension into a better history, not to mention latitude" (38). Mysteriously disintegrating and disorienting, Venice invites Brodsky from the very beginning into another, Gothic, dimension, while also promising to be a better reflection of his home city.

Other cultural representations of Venice have reached Leningrad from the United States: "a disheveled issue of *Life* magazine with a stunning photo of San Marco covered with snow" (38), foreshadowing the displaced theme of "Venice in wintertime" that dominates *Watermark*. A certain number of foreign cultural products come to Leningrad in illegal, roundabout ways, which inevitably tamper with the material qualities of the product itself: thus, a smuggled copy of Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* is in black and white, having lost its colors in the process of underground reproduction, on

the long way from Italy to the Soviet Union. This adulteration of cultural objects illegally copied and translated/transposed from West to East is the direct result of Cold War politics and interdictions, but it also signals a symbolic distortion of the meaning of cultural artifacts in their historical circulation and transmission. Venice is thus an example of how artifacts manage to travel, but are strangely modified in a context of impossible or difficult migrations (of people, ideas, texts and films). The tampering with colors exemplified by Visconti's *Death in Venice* in black and white is actually a generalized effect in *Watermark*: given the poet's wintery contact with the city, grayness dominates the chromatic universe of Brodsky's Venice, but the light is still praised for its clarity and purity. It is as if the initial encounter with a Venice in black and white had perpetuated itself in Brodsky's life and journeys, as well as in the textual universe of *Watermark*.

Brodsky's patchwork of first encounters with Venice in Leningrad is further developed: tourist souvenirs also come into play, as one would have expected in the case of such an eminently touristic city, except that here they are fundamentally characterized by indirectness: one of Brodsky's girlfriends offers him "a birthday present of an accordion set of sepia postcards her grandmother had brought from a pre-revolutionary honeymoon in Venice" (39). The anachronistic postcards that have survived a marriage and a revolution are supplemented by the most representative marker of Venice, "a little copper gondola brought by my father from his tour of duty in China, which my parents kept on their dressing table, filling it with loose buttons, needles, postage stamps, and—increasingly—pills and ampoules" (39). Interestingly, the Chinese gondola is a distorted sign of Italianness, falsified in the process of recollecting how exactly Brodsky's image of Venice was shaped in Leningrad: instead of a mere tourist memento reminding one of China and, indirectly, of Venice, it becomes a reminder of illness and death, a cheap but poignant *memento mori* carrying not only bits and pieces of domestic life (needles and buttons), but also the parents' medicine. Venice is thus constructed as a cultural artifact that is intertwined with Brodsky's personal history, with his family and parents' declining health. The gondola becomes a carrier of personal memories and of reified instances of bodily affliction, pain and ultimately death, an image of Charon's funeral boat more than of a tourist's holiday evasion.

Even when Brodsky has finally reached Venice from the other shore, America, and Leningrad is, physically at least, far away, Cold War memories and stereotypes still haunt the urban landscape and Brodsky's own experience. While he feels lost and anonymous at the railway station, in the darkness of an amniotic night that has blotted out the city, Brodsky is