

Nativity Poems

By Joseph Brodsky

Translated by Melissa Green, Seamus Heaney, Anthony Hecht, George L. Kline, Glyn Maxwell, Paul Muldoon, Alan Myers, Derek Walcott, Daniel Weissbordt, Richard Wilbur, and the Author
(Bilingual Edition)

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

This holiday season, take a look at Joseph Brodsky's *Nativity Poems*. ("Nativity" and "Christmas" are the same word in Russian, an editorial note at the end informs us.) True, all of these poems are also in the 1987 Nobel Prize winner's *Collected Poems in English* (FSG, 2000) but in this handsome 113 page reasonably priced volume we also have a ten page interview with Brodsky specifically about these poems, and a half dozen stunning black and white photographs of the Russian winter by Mikhail Lemkhin. (Also, this is a bilingual edition.)

Beginning in 1962, Brodsky (1940-1996) tried to write a poem every Christmas for every Christmas. Some years he forgot or didn't get around to it, and some years circumstances didn't permit it. (Brodsky fled his native Russia in the early 70's, and eventually ended up here, teaching poetry at Columbia University and even was Poet Laureate of the U.S. for 1991 and 92.) Here we have eighteen poems. The shortest, *Flight into Egypt* (1) (1988), being just a few lines, the longest being the dithyrambic forty-stanza *Speech Over Spilled Milk* (1967), which begins (in Glyn Maxwell's translation):

I arrive at Christmas without a kopeck.
The publisher's dragging on with my epic.
The Moscow calendar's going Islamic.
I'm not going anywhere.
Not to the bawling kids of my buddy,
The family bosom, or a certain lady-
friend I know. They all cost money.
I shake with ill will in my chair.

Speech Over Spilled Milk, as you might have guessed from that stanza, is quite a ride, but it does not reflect the overall tone of the collection. One thing I've noticed (I read this collection around Christmas last year [2002] and just picked it up again recently [November 2003]) is that the earlier poems are less specifically about Christmas per se, but are autobiographical with Christmas as the background time period. The later poems seem to be more specifically about Christmas, and become self-consciously metaphysical and often very beautiful.

I find Brodsky's meditations on the star over Bethlehem in the later poems particularly interesting. Here is one from *Nativity* (1990) in Brodsky's translation:

The campfire flared on its very last ember.
They were all asleep now. The star would resemble
no other, because of its knack, at its nadir,
for taking an alien for its neighbor.

Another star-themed stanza is this, from *Flight into Egypt* (2) (1995) in Seamus Heaney's translation:

The star looked in across the threshold.
The only one of them who could
know the meaning of that look
was the infant. But He did not speak.

Some other poignant and thought provoking stanzas and verses I enjoyed are these: the first is the fifth stanza from *Lagoon* (about his Christmas in Venice, Italy, 1973, dedicated to Brooke and Stobe Talbot, by the way) in Anthony Hecht's translation; the next are a few lines from Derek Walcott's translation of "With riverbanks of frozen chocolate, a city" (1985); and finally a few lines from *Flight into Egypt* (1) in Melissa Green's translation.

So this is how we cope, putting out the heat of
 grappa with nightstand water, carving the meat
 of flounder instead of Christmas roast
 so that Thy earliest backboned ancestor
 might feed and nourish us, O Savior,
 this winter night on a damp coast.
 through the wall I hear
 a piano woken by one finger
 like someone learning the alphabet all over
 or rather, astronomy, peering into the font
 of the constellations for our names where we are not
 and where the whole amount depends
 on our subtraction into nought.
 Their affinity made the heaven's slate
 the desert for a miracle. There, they chose to light
 a fire and camp in the vortex of snow.
 Not divining his role, the infant drowsed
 in a halo of curls that would become
 accustomed to radiance.

I think this is great stuff, and the diversity of the subject matter (all about Christmas in some way, but autobiographical, philosophical, historical, etc.) makes this unpredictable and always fresh reading. In other words, I think it can be read in a variety of moods with profit each time. In the interview at the end, Brodsky discusses the differences between Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity, the differences between the emphasis on Christmas (more in the West) and Easter (the major holiday in the East) and his own religious and ethical views and opinions. He also discusses the precursor for this type of poetry in Russian, Pasternak. The interview is interesting, but it's really just an academic tag to this collection which I feel is better left unanalyzed – at least during the holiday season, where it should help set a tone of mind and give points of departure for reflection, at this time of year when "we're all of us magi".