

ONLINE BOOK REVIEWS

The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints. By Philip Kaisary. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014. xii + 237 pp. Paperback \$29.50.

Much of the attention Haiti has received in the last decade from English-language scholars has focused on the impact of the Haitian Revolution and its immediate aftermath on the cultures of the Atlantic world. Fewer have explored the influence of the event on Atlantic culture and politics in the twentieth century. Philip Kaisary's book is one such contribution to a fuller assessment of the place Haiti occupies in Western culture at large. In his study of the use of the Haitian Revolution in works by an international cast of twentieth-century artists—most of them writers, but also two visual artists—Kaisary is interested in the ways in which “artists and intellectuals have metamorphosed and appropriated this spectacular corner of black revolutionary history” (3).

The book's subtitle announces its organizing logic: in Part One, Kaisary discusses works of “radical restoration of Haitian history . . . in which black agency and universal intent were central,” namely Martinican Aimé Césaire's poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and play *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, Trinidadian C. L. R. James's history book *The Black Jacobins*, American Langston Hughes's play *Emperor of Haiti* and opera *Troubled Island*, and Haitian René Depestre's *Un arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident*. Part One ends with a study of African American artist Jacob Lawrence's Haiti-inspired paintings as well as British painter Kimathi Donkor's, which he contrasts with a line of Caribbean, African, and European stamps representing (or failing to represent) Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture. In Part Two, Kaisary focuses on “conservative retrievals . . . [that] convey visions of obscurity, tragic circularity, senseless violence, and history as eroticized fantasmics” (2), such as Martinican Edouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint*, Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*, Saint Lucian Derek

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Walcott's *Haitian Trilogy*, and American Madison Smartt Bell's own trilogy of Haitian Revolution novels, *All Souls' Rising*, *Master of the Crossroads*, and *The Stone that the Builder Refused* (although Kaisary does not directly discuss the third novel).

Kaisary aims to show how pervasive the memory of the Haitian Revolution remained in the twentieth century among artists of the Atlantic world. He does so in clear, concise, and agreeable prose, often with great insight. Yet in the process he reveals tensions inherent within his organizational conceit. Writings on the Haitian Revolution are often divided broadly between those that celebrate the endeavor and those that lament it. Within those two groups infinite variations can be found, depending on the events and people discussed, and the influence of the authors' historical, political, and cultural extractions and goals. Kaisary proposes to split overall celebratory accounts further between radical and conservative assessments of the Revolution.

The radical readings of the revolution that he supports "conceive revolution dynamically, valorize its link to progress, and share a determination to perceive in the Haitian Revolution lessons for the possibilities of the liberation of the colonized subject" (3). As Kaisary suggests, they therefore stand in contrast to texts steeped in the skepticism expressed by David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity*, his reassessment of *The Black Jacobins*. For Scott, James himself suggests in his book that presenting and understanding *Louverture* as a doubting, skeptic hero in the tragedy of Enlightenment is more useful to the postcolonial era than understanding him as a romantic avenging agent of progress. Kaisary's stance owes something to a certain critique of postmodern thought that sees its skepticism about grand narratives as a factor of political passivity. This is of course a valid concern—notably expressed by Chris Bongie about Glissant's writings in terms very similar to Kaisary's.

Kaisary is mostly concerned with literature, yet his inclusion of the historical writings of James and visual arts in the works he analyzes here suggests that his sense of the literary imagination is rather broad. This opens up a conversation that appears central to Kaisary's project. His point of view is not far from what historian Herbert Butterfield once dubbed the "whig interpretation of history," a tendency to read and justify historical events backwards in the light of current notions of progress, creating in the process teleologies often truer to ideology than to events. Butterfield argues that skepticism and disillusion are the technique and mission of the historian, who must strive to render the utter complexity in the confluence of contexts, intents, and actions, systemic and individual, that make up historical events. According to Kaisary, radical texts emphasize those aspects of the revolution

that confirm its universalist character. This imperative appears at times to lead to contradictory assessments, not least when the topic of historical accuracy is discussed. Kaisary justifies the liberties Langston Hughes takes with the historical record in *Emperor of Haiti* because they contribute to the rehabilitation of Jean-Jacques Dessalines; thus, although “the play fails to convey the complex conflicts present in revolutionary Saint Domingue and Haiti,” “Hughes’s play and libretto should be considered remarkable for the creation of a Dessalines who is really an amalgam of Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe, a figure of uncompromised black national identity and his literary elevation as a tragic protagonist” (45; 51). Yet he also judges negatively Derek Walcott’s play *Henri Christophe* because “for all its talk of ‘History,’ the real, confusing, messy and tragic-historical context in which Dessalines and Christophe had to govern is almost entirely absent. In its place, the aesthetic reconstruction of Dessalines and Christophe as tragic heroes dominates” (145). A few pages earlier, discussing Glissant’s *Monsieur Toussaint*, he judges it “very demanding of its readers and theatergoers, both in terms of the play’s form and level of historical knowledge with which the play assumes the audience is familiar” (112). Although such romantic devices as “heroic uniqueness” have long been common in rabidly negative texts about the Haitian Revolution, Kaisary excuses them when they are used to “vindicate the actuality of black agency in colonial history” (10). Yet he deems skepticism toward the romanticization of the Revolution necessarily conservative.

In his introduction, Kaisary asks judiciously if one could “contend that for the northern nations to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution and its implications would require the dismantling of an entire canon of conservative mythologization on the history of Atlantic slavery . . .” (12). The author implies that Scott’s brand of skepticism is best deployed against those historical events already constituted as Western grand narratives. Should one look at the Haitian Revolution—whose overall international reputation remains ambiguous to this day—with the same critical tools one would use to study the French Revolution, which has long been part of the Western myth of progress? As the book demonstrates, this question has occupied a central and complex position in the writings of those twentieth-century authors already knowledgeable about Haitian history. Your own answer to this question will likely dictate how you judge Kaisary’s provocative book.

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Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation. By Alexandra Berlina. Foreword by Robert Chandler. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. xiii + 217 pp. \$98.99.

Joseph Brodsky's self-translations have until recently attracted astonishingly little scholarly attention, even though Brodsky, as the winner of the Nobel Prize and Poet Laureate of the United States, was the most highly decorated of all Russian-American literary immigrants. While his English essays have reaped universal praise, Brodsky's English-language poetry and self-translated poems have suffered from a rather mixed reputation. Partially, this is a consequence of Brodsky's insistence on preserving meter and rhyme in translation. While common in Russia, this practice went very consciously against the grain of the ubiquitous American norm of free verse. Many critics dismissed Brodsky's approach as a throwback to outdated and "un-American" translation methods. The fact that Brodsky learned English only as an adult and spoke it with a heavy Russian accent created additional suspicion. How could such a person presume to lecture Americans about the correct translation of poetry? Even friends such as Georges Kline and Daniel Weissbort reacted with a certain pique to the multiple corrections and alterations that Brodsky insisted on inflicting on their translation drafts. Brodsky's frustration with the American translations of his poetry eventually led him to become his own translator, resulting in a few dozen self-translated poems.

Alexandra Berlina's monograph provides a close parallel reading of the Russian and English versions of a number of Brodsky's poems, starting with "December in Florence," the first self-translation that Brodsky accomplished on his own in 1980. The book also discusses three of Brodsky's nativity poems, two "poèmes à clef" dedicated to his former lover Marina Basmanova, several elegies, and the cycles "Centaur" and "Quintet" (which grows to a "Sextet" in English). Each poem is cited in the Russian original, in a literal English translation, and in Brodsky's own English rendition. Berlina claims that she wants to sidestep the polarized polemics surrounding Brodsky's translational endeavor and instead concentrate on the evidence at hand. Rather than evaluating Brodsky's translations in terms of success or failure, her stated goal is "to search the two texts for differences and attempt to explain their causes and effects." Nevertheless, she adds that "while trying to be descriptive, I have still been unable, however, to avoid congratulating Brodsky on many of his solutions" (3). Berlina's motivation, in part, is to rehabilitate Brodsky's self-translations and to put him on the map as a serious English-language poet. Her rejoinder to the frequently uttered opinion that Brodsky's English sounds "unnatural" is to point out that native speakers, too, can use

unidiomatic turns of phrase, and that sounding unnatural is not necessarily a bad thing in poetry anyway (7). Lawrence Venuti's concept of foreignization might have supplied additional theoretical ammunition in favor of "unnaturalness," but Berlina is a self-proclaimed agnostic when it comes to theory. As she explains: "Theory seems to dominate over practice in translation studies. It is not my intention to jump on this train; the near-absence of translation theory (or, rather, 'Theory') in this book is a matter of design, not an oversight" (5). Depending on one's own preference, the reader might find such a stance either annoying or refreshing.

Berlina's decision to focus on difference rather than sameness in the relation between original and translation is certainly commendable. Any poetic translation entails a creative rewriting, and in that respect, self-translation is no different from "ordinary" translation. However, the identity of author and translator subverts traditional notions of fidelity—it is generally assumed that as the "owner" of the text, the self-translator is in a better position to recapture the original's intention, but at the same time can allow himself bold alterations from the source text without incurring the risk of being accused of excessive liberties. How does this work in practice? To take a concrete example, let's look at Brodsky's poem "Star of the Nativity," which ends with the words "И ЭТО БЫЛ ВЗГЛЯД ОТЦА" ("And that was the gaze of the Father"). In Brodsky's English self-translation this becomes "And this was the Father's stare." The word "stare," which rhymes with the word "star" in the preceding line, seems a startling choice, turning the tender nativity scene into something rather more ominous. The necessity for a rhyme does not provide a sufficient explanation. As Berlina observes, "Brodsky could have rhymed 'gaze' with stellar 'rays' or the clouds' 'haze,' but the opportunity of placing 'star' in the final position and its striking similarity to 'stare' [. . .] were too fruitful to be rejected" (53). To argue whether this is a "good" translation or not is probably beside the point—rather, Brodsky seems to be creating a parallel text that takes advantage of the specific opportunities offered by the target language. The English version does reflect back on the Russian original, though. As Berlina notes, the Russian poem is perhaps not as idyllic either as initially assumed, given that "the Son realizes, when looking into [his] Father eyes, that he is doomed to death." In that sense, Berlina argues, the translation "activates a shade of meaning potentially present in the original" (52). Regardless of the merits of this particular interpretation, Berlina raises a valid larger point: the English self-translation can provide us with clues about potential meanings of the Russian original. Slavic scholars would certainly be well advised to take Brodsky's English self-translations into account when analyzing his Russian poems, but few of them do.

The usual approach to poetry translation is to frame it in terms of “loss,” echoing Robert Frost’s (in)famous definition of poetry as “what is lost in translation.” Self-translation is apt to challenge this notion. Perhaps the most compelling cases in Berlina’s discussion are those where the translation seems to result not in a loss, but in a gain. She shows, for example, that Brodsky’s English version of the poem “Centaur I” is richer in sound play and puns than its Russian counterpart, and the internal logic of the cycle appears more coherent in the English arrangement. While a “normal” translator is not really supposed to improve the original, this does not seem to apply to a self-translator. As Berlina puts it: “Though Brodsky would probably have denied this, changes in translation apparently can be prompted by discontent with the original” (148). “Gain” also occurs in another way: in several instances, Brodsky’s self-translations led to the creation of new English poems that are propelled by the same creative impulse. For example, the poem “Epitaph for a Centaur” belongs clearly to the “Centaur” cycle, but exists only in English, while, as already mentioned, the Russian “Quintet” acquires in English an additional poem and turns into a “Sextet” (which, given that the poems of the cycle all have six lines, actually seems to make sense, with the macrostructure now mirroring the microstructure). Surely, such alterations, if done by an external translator rather than Brodsky himself, would not have passed muster as a permissible translation.

What, then, are Berlina’s conclusions? Somewhat coyly, she announces that “coming up with a conclusion for this book is tricky” since she considers “the parallel close readings to be its main concern” (185). As if to illustrate this impasse, her conclusion launches into a discussion of “Wet dreams” and “Hurtful horizons” which, while interesting, opens up new tangents rather than arriving at a summary argument. The final pages of the book do offer some concluding thoughts. Berlina lists a few general tendencies in Brodsky’s self-translations, including the creation or intensifying of an atmosphere of unreality, increased references to bodily physiology, more word and sound play, compound rhymes, and enjambment. As she observes, many of these tendencies also occur in Brodsky’s “monolingual self-editing and/or in the development of his poetry over time: after all, it is always an older Brodsky who translates the work of a younger Brodsky. In short, Brodsky in English becomes more Brodskian” (202). For those who view any translation of a poem as a loss, and Brodsky’s English poetry as automatically inferior to the one written in his native language, this may come as a rather surprising insight. Throughout the book, Berlina’s close readings of Brodsky’s self-translations are interspersed with similar seemingly counter-intuitive observations. For example, noting that a hyperbolic passage in the English

version of “Centaur III” (but not in Russian) sounds almost like Mayakovski, she states: “This is typical. Brodsky’s affinities with Anglo-American poets are more pronounced in Russian, while the influence of several Russian poets becomes clearer in English—perhaps because the fear of epigonism lessens in a foreign language” (138).

Self-translation is never easy. In Berlina’s opinion, what ultimately prompted Brodsky to engage in this endeavor was not really, or not primarily, the wish to make his Russian poems accessible to an American audience, or to somehow transform his Russian self into an American self. It was simply “the fact that translation gave Brodsky a chance to rework his poems, albeit in a different language. [. . .] He largely agreed that the business of interpretation is handed over to readers once a text is finished. But when is it finished? Translation—and the creation of hybrid texts that go beyond the original final period—was his way of reclaiming published poems, of resurrecting himself from the death of the author” (203).

Written in a lively style and replete with astute observations and provocative insights, Berlina’s book is a joy to read. It is highly recommended not only for Brodsky specialists, but for anyone interested in the problem of self-translation, or the intricacies of poetic translation in general.

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Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures. By Anupama Mohan. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. vii + 234 pp. \$84.64.

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka: the sovereign nation-states of present-day South Asia encompass huge diversities, but one of the key elements they have in common is the fact that the majority of the population of this region lives in villages even today. Anupama Mohan has written a lively book with a focus on the utopian imaginative mode and the representation of the village in South Asian literatures, which she selects from two countries, India and Sri Lanka. With the exception of M. K. Gandhi’s polemical treatise *Hind Swaraj*, Mohan’s texts of choice are novels. These novels are written in English, as well as in some *bhasha* or vernacular languages (that she reads in translation) of the region, notably Malayalam and Sinhalese. Focusing on literary texts published between 1909 and 2005, Mohan’s monograph opens up exciting terrain.

Theoretically, the monograph grounds itself in Michel Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopia. Mohan makes good use of this term, which was explicated in Foucault's 1967 essay "Des Espaces Autres." Mohan sees Foucauldian heterotopia as spaces where "social ambivalences can thrive and diversity and difference can be negotiated—an impulse that utopia too can share. Foucault's heterotopia subsists in the intersection between difference (other-space) and alterity (another-space) in much the same way that utopia occurs between no-place and good-place." (15). Foucault evolved the term heterotopia, clearly, at least partly as a critique of the term utopia, which he sees as nostalgic and homogenizing. There is much to critique, in turn, as regards Foucault's ironing out of the irony inherent in the term "utopia" as coined by Thomas More in 1516—but Mohan does do justice to that irony. She uses yet another term, "homotopia," to signal "those visions of unified collectivity where an aggressively homogenizing impulse operates and where unity is a form of collective gathering of one or two co-ordinates (race/language/religion) and the deliberate repudiation and exclusion of others" (8–9). This is in contrast to utopia, seen by Mohan as a space for shared transformation and amelioration. Mohan's taxonomies around utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia are flexible and supple.

M.K. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, first published in Gujarati in 1909, and then translated into English by Gandhi, is analyzed deftly by Mohan. Gandhi's normative view of the Indian village as utopian community is a frontal challenge to British colonial structures of governmentality and metropolitan power. The *ashram*, a kernel in this rurality, is a utopian locus for collectivity. Mohan here makes skillful use of the work of Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, concurring with their argument that the Gandhian ashram helped to forge a civil society and a public sphere that were an alternative to British colonial collectivity. Emphasizing the value and practice of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, the Gandhian ashram and village enshrined concrete quotidian practices such as the spinning of *khadi* cotton, and need to be seen as a culmination of a number of reformist movements that had swept different parts of South Asia since the mid-nineteenth century, led by nonelite reformers such as the Dalit or lower caste activist Jyotiba Phule in western India, and Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala, another leader of the lower castes who came from the Ezhava community.

Mohan argues that though the Gandhian utopia of the village and the ashram was Hindu in overtone, it was also ecumenical, culturally accommodating, and socially empowering. However, she argues convincingly, in Raja Rao's English novel *Kanthapura* (1938), the Gandhian village is a homotopic site, affirming the hegemony of Hindu, upper-caste power, and either

excluding or appropriating lower castes and other religious communities, notably Muslims. For Sri Lanka, Mohan sees Martin Wickramasinghe's *Gamperaliya* ("Uprooted," published in 1944) affirming another homotopia, based on Sinhalese Buddhist homogeneity. Contrasted to this is Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), which sees the village in critical terms, anatomizing the unequal relationships of class and gender in the village of Beddagama. A novel in Malayalam from India titled *The Legends of Khasak* (1969), by O.V. Vijayan, meanwhile, like Woolf's novel, offers a far more discordant, nonhomogenizing view of the village of Khasak, which is represented as a site of contestations around traditions and modernities, offering a critique of the trope of the timeless village. In Khasak, equally, Islam and contestations round it play a large role. For the present reviewer, the analysis of *The Legends of Khasak* was one of the freshest and most insightful in Mohan's monograph.

Two recent novels in English, *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh (2005) show us, argues Mohan, that writers can think beyond the binary categories of the South Asian village as idealized pastoral or as dystopian counter-pastoral. Ghosh's work, set among the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans in Bengal, plays in powerful ways with themes such as locally grounded civic activism, the constant prospect of environmental disaster, and the conflicts between internationally articulated demands to protect tigers in the area versus the survival of a highly poverty-stricken local human population. Offering hopes for a rural cosmopolitanism, Ghosh's fiction has as a protagonist an empathetic diasporic "outsider," Piya, who comes from the United States to the Sundarbans, just as Ondaatje's novel has the character of Anil, a diasporic Sri Lankan who comes back to her country of birth as a United Nations human rights investigator. Ondaatje's novel takes no ideological sides in the conflict between Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms that it portrays and that was raging until recently: rather, it shows up the brutality and senseless violence of both these nationalisms. Ondaatje, like Ghosh, affirms ultimately an ethical multicultural cosmopolitanism.

Mohan's monograph has necessarily had to carve out small case studies from the vast field of South Asian creative literature written about the village. Much has been excluded, and some exclusions detract from the convincingness of the argument. This reviewer, for example, was unsatisfied by the lack of comparison between Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Tagore, a Nobel laureate who built up a local, rural utopia and a set of cooperative and educational institutions in the early twentieth century in Santiniketan (which means the Abode of Peace) in Bengal in India, was both a friend

of Gandhi and a critic of Gandhi's views on many things. Both believed in rural reconstruction as the heart of social transformation. Since Tagore, a poet, painter, and writer, saw aesthetics and creativity as central to his vision of social transformation, he would have been enormously generative for Mohan's research. Equally, when reading Mohan's analysis of *Kanthapura* as a faux-Gandhian homotopia, the reviewer found it a shame that Satinath Bhaduri's classic novel in Bengali *Dhorai Charitmanas* (1949–1951) was not mentioned, let alone analyzed. Bhaduri's protagonist Dhorai, a member of the Tatma or Tattama marginalized lower caste, inhabits a village in the eastern province of Bihar in India, and slowly awakens to political consciousness, becoming a Gandhian activist. The title of the novel alludes to *Ramcharitmanas*, the sixteenth-century version in Awadhi of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*: subversively, Bhaduri's novel makes the lower-caste, poor male Dhorai (not the powerful, privileged king Ram of the *Ramayana*) its hero, as Dhorai sees patterns of inequality, exploitation, and possibilities of resistance around him. Bhaduri's novel plays with legend and myth on the one hand, and historical consciousness on the other, and is an illuminating contrast to the Sanskritized, homogeneously Hindu and upper-caste world of *Kanthapura*.

Mohan's book is thus a promising beginning: it is an entrée to a potentially highly fertile field, and whets one's appetite for more work, for more academic conversations and collaborations between scholars working on utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia in South Asian literatures. The book affirms one's optimism about comparative critical academic writing bridging area studies and world literature. It is also a considerable achievement.

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