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The Unlimited Gaze
Essays in Honour of Professor
Natalia Baschmakoff

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Contents

I Rhythms of Culture

RICHARD STITES
Historical and Social Rhythms in Russian Culture in
the 19th and 20th Centuries 9

ЛЕА СИИЛИН
Русская церковная живопись в творчестве Н.С. Лескова 31

ELINA KAHLA
Mary Magdalene in Russia: From Myrrh-Bearer to Metaphor
of Burning Love 53

ЕКАТЕРИНА ЕВТУХОВА
Быт русской провинции XIX в.: священник
Борисовский о семеновском ложкарстве 85

II Approaches to Modernism

KIRSTEN LODGE
"An Onslaught of Savages": From Decadence to Futurism 109

TOMI HUTTUNEN
Word and Image in Russian Imaginism 143

KIRSTI EKONEN
Julia Kristeva's Theory on the Creative Subject and
Early Russian Modernism 155

PEKKA PESONEN
Reality as Story and Story as Reality: Some Problems of
Fact and Fiction in the 20th Century Russian Prose 171

THE UNLIMITED GAZE

ГЕННАДИЙ ОБАТНИН К вопросу о так называемой женской поэзии	179
DONNA TUSSING ORWIN Why Does Levin Read Tyndall?	203
SANNA TUROMA Venice, Authenticity, and Literary Tourism	213
<i>III National and Imperial Dimensions</i>	
SEYMOUR BECKER Nation, Nationalism, Nation-State, Popular Sovereignty	227
CHARLOTTE HENZE Epidemics and Empire: Cholera in Russia, 1892	251
DAVID MOON Nature Protection and Nature Reserves in Imperial, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia	273
ALLA ZEIDE Second Encounter: The Imperial Identity of a Russian Jew	287
MARJA LEINONEN From Georgia to the Polar Circle: The Exalted Exile	303
BEN HELLMAN "He had a special liking for our country..." Vasilii Vereshchagin and Finland	323
APPENDIX	343

moral order remains fully operational in his mind: "He felt that in the depth of his soul something was settling down, taking measures, and adjusting itself [Он чувствовал, что в глубине его души что-то устлавливалось, умерялось и укладывалось]. These words describe the process of moral reasoning by which human beings, when they are listening to it, live and manage "forces" that at other times overwhelm them.

Heat as a Form of Motion – the only book about hard science that we know for sure Tolstoy read – would also have impressed him because Tyndall embraced transcendental beliefs which Tolstoy shared. Having learned about the new science of thermodynamics in 1872 from Tyndall's book, Tolstoy makes it a metaphor in *Anna Karenina* for the force of passions that may destroy human beings. With our large brains that are also, as illustrated by the actions of Levin's mind, gateways to a higher moral reality, we alone among the animals are given the means to control our own "heat." When we give up those means, we are less human for having done so. On the other hand, without passion, life could not flourish either in individuals or in the human species. In the metaphorical system of *Anna Karenina*, thermodynamics represent an equivalent to the relations of passion and moral law in the human soul, or, as Tolstoy might have put it, to moral instinct.

Sanna Turoma

Venice, Authenticity, and Literary Tourism¹

Venice is the quintessential tourist city in Europe. At the same time, the city's representations in Western canonized literature are linked with narratives and identities traditionally seen as antithetical to the collective experience suggested by tourism. In the literary high art formations Venice is the city of artistic displacements and literary exiles, with Lord Byron as the Romantic prototype. Byron's itinerary in Europe, used as the inspiration for the poetic geography of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, came to define British travelers' Continental tour in the decades after its publication. This coincided with the gradual democratization of the European travel scene in the post-Napoleonic years. Travel books and guides were a vital part of the mid-nineteenth-century thriving tourist industry. The English authors of these travel books appropriated Byron's travel verse and revised it by omitting the political content to foreground the emotive and aesthetic aspects. By 1855 an Englishman standing on the Bridge of Sighs and citing the opening lines of *Childe Harold's* Canto IV had become an object of popular satire.² Venice had become a major tourist city, and Byron one of its major tourist attractions. This was reflected also in Russian satirical literature. I.P. Miatlev's celebrated travel parody in verse *Sensations and observation of Mrs Kurdiukova abroad, dan l'etranzhe (Sensatsii i zamechaniia gospozhi Kurdiukovoi za granitseiu, dan l'etranzhe)* was based on the author's trips to Europe in 1836–38. In the passage on Venice Miatlev has the diarist-narrator, Mrs. Kurdiukova, Miatlev's caricature of a Russian provincial gentlewoman, reflecting on Byron and *Childe Harold*:

1 The first steps toward the research this article draws on, were taken under the auspices of the research project "Modernism and Postmodernism in Russian Literature and Culture." Professor Baschmakoff was one of the project's principal leaders.

2 See in James Buzard "The Uses of Romanticism: Byron and the Victorian Continental Tour," *Victorian Studies* 35/1, 1991, 29–30.

Мусье Байрон, ле поэт,
тут трагедии сюжет
Отыскал, любовь прибавил,
И событие прославил,
И приплел тут свой роман.³

[*Monsieur Byron, le poet, / here the plot of a tragedy / found, added some love, / praised the events, / and plaited in his romance.*]

Staying in Venice in 1853, Prince Vyazemskii, too, followed Byron's footsteps and visited the Armenian Convent on San Lazzaro. A large Egyptian mummy and some rare manuscripts, which Vyazemskii mentions as worthy of a visitor's attention, are followed by an attraction of a different kind: "The table at which Byron learned the Armenian language. With Father Aucher, who is now very old and defeated by paralysis." After recording the brief conversation he had with Father Aucher, Vyazemskii concludes his tour of the Convent by remarking on the price of the book he purchased partly as a souvenir: "The typography is well organized. I bought there an Armenian-Russian grammar... Quite expensive: the grammar costs 10 francs, and the multilingual edition 15."⁴ Vyazemskii's dispassionate account of his visit to one of the Byronic shrines in Venice displays no particular excitement over the opportunity, even if belated, to see the convent or to meet Byron's famous tutor. On the contrary, Vyazemskii—once a leading propagator of Russian *baironizm*, ends his notes by recording laconically the mundane details of what he bought and how much it cost. His hastily jotted observations and their matter-of-fact tone reveal the aging Vyazemskii's detachment from his past: "We all looked up to Napoleons and Byrons and many of us pretended to be them quite successfully" (21), as he writes ironically later in the same journal.

On the topography of contemporary global mass tourism, Venice is associated with Euro-American cultural travel and the material means related to it. Literary and artistic models play an important role in the high-cultural touristic discourses. Joseph Brodsky's works and their reception

3 I.P. Miatlev, *Stikhotvoreniia. Sensatsii i zamechania gospozhi Kuriukovoi*. Leningrad, Sovetskii pisatel', 1969, 465.

4 P.A. Viazemskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii kniazia P.A. Viazemskogo*. Vol 10. St. Petersburg: Tipografia M.M. Stasiulevitsa, 1886, 6.

in Russia show how the Byronic myth associated with Venice continues to shape certain cultural practices. While Brodsky's Venice has become a Russian tourist attraction, Brodsky's own writings on Venice exhibit anxieties related to the tourist experience.

Authenticity

Visiting, observing, and seeing a tourist site is always a socially and culturally construed activity. In Brodsky's travel writing the camera functions as a signifier of the "tourist gaze," producing a dual hierarchy of what is being gazed upon and who is gazing.⁵ For Brodsky the Botanical Garden in Rio de Janeiro is not desacralized by the tourist gaze, whereas for the ancient temple of Sounion in Greece the tourist gaze is destructive:

As practically everywhere else in Europe, here, too, Byron incised his name on the base of one of the columns. In his footsteps, the bus brings tourists; later it takes them away. The erosion that is clearly affecting the surface of the columns has nothing to do with weathering. It is a pox of stares, lenses, flashes.⁶

Judging by how long Brodsky recalls himself lingering at the site—"Then twilight descends, and it gets darker," he did not consider his own stare destructive. This hierarchy of the tourist gaze relates to the phenomenon the critic John Frow has termed as "touristic shame." Tourism implies a paradox, as Frow argues, in that it at once constructs and destroys the authenticity of the tourist object. This causes the "fantasized dissociation" from the practices of tourism we all experience as tourists:

The structure of the tourist experience involves a paradoxical relation at once to the cultural or ontological Other and to others of the same (touristic) culture. It is tourism itself that destroys (in the very process by which it constructs) the authenticity of the tourist object; and every tourist thus at some level denies belonging to the class of tourists. Hence a certain fantasized dissociation from

5 The term "tourist gaze" is from John Urry's study *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London, Sage, 1990, 1-15.

6 Joseph Brodsky *Less Than One*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986, 442.

others, from the rituals of tourism, is built into almost every discourse and almost every practice of tourism. This is the phenomenon of touristic shame, a "rhetoric of moral superiority" [MacCannel], which accompanies both the most snobbish and the most politically radical critiques of tourism.⁷

There is a striking moment of "touristic shame" in Brodsky's encounter with Venice:

... I would never come here [Venice] in summer, not even at gunpoint. I take heat very poorly; the unmitigated emissions of hydrocarbons and armpits still worse. The short-clad herds, especially those neighing in German, also get on my nerves, because of the inferiority of theirs — anyone's — anatomy against that of the columns, pilasters, and statues; because of what their mobility — and all that fuels it — projects versus marble stasis.⁸

Recalling a gondola ride he once took, Brodsky first ascribes to the common perception of it being something that "the locals never do" but that "only foreign tourists, and well-off ones at that, can afford... The sight of these decrepit Romeos and their rickety Juliets is invariably sad and embarrassing, not to say ghastly" (126). However, even "the locals," he maintains, would find it difficult to resist an "offer of a ride at nighttime, to which I once succumbed" (127). In other words, he dissociates himself from the other tourists—a position expressed in *Watermark* also through the author's reoccurring self-identification as the "traveler"—while the genuineness of his own experience is verified by it being compared to what the "locals" do. Brodsky's writing reveals the reasoning we all practice as tourists: the more "native," the less "touristy" and thus more authentic. Brodsky's phenomenology of Venetian tourism uncovers the impact of the modernist perception of travel on contemporary literary tourism. The modernist moment brought forth the two features essential to travel writing since then: the identification of the author as the traveler in opposition to the tourist, and the quest for the *authentic* "backgrounds" and "by-ways" in opposition to the beaten tracks of the mainstream.⁹

7 John Frow "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia", *October* 57, 1991, 146.

8 Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992, 24.

9 Helen Carr "Modernism and Travel (1880-1940)" in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 79.

The tension between authenticity and inauthenticity is the seminal paradox underlying the tourist experience. Tourism is associated with inauthenticity, while the search for authenticity is recognized as an inseparable part of tourist experience. Drawing from Dean MacCannel, Jonathan Culler argues that the tourist quest is primarily a quest for the authentic. The tourist gaze seeks the unusual, the extraordinary, the *genius loci*; it seeks what is simultaneously out of the ordinary and yet typical. As tourists, we are "interested in everything as a sign of itself, an instance of a cultural practice: a Frenchman is an example of a Frenchman, a restaurant on the Left Bank is an example of a Left-Bank-Restaurant: it signifies 'Left-Bank-Restaurantness.'"¹⁰ In the search for the authentic we wish to discover what is behind the scenes; the tourist gaze seeks to disclose the hidden, the other. The search structures the semiotic space of a tourist experience, dividing it into two parts, which MacCannel calls the "front and back regions." In this respect, Venice is a paradigmatic tourist city; it offers itself for the semiotically construed tourist gaze and responds readily to the tourist desire for authenticity. Venice is itself a sign of the extraordinary and unusual, and its extraordinariness and unusualness can easily be recognized. Moreover, Venetian space is naturally divided into the front regions and back regions, the dialectics between which, as MacCannel asserts, informs the experience of authenticity. The "authentic" Venice is the Venice of the back canals, narrow laneways, and small islands of the lagoon, its back regions, while the "inauthentic" Venice is found in the front regions of San Marco, Canal Grande, and the Doge's Palace. This dialectics underscores, for instance, Pavel Muratov's quest for the *drugaia Venetsia* (the other Venice) juxtaposed with San Marco in *Images of Italy*:

On a bridge over a narrow canal, on Ponte del Paradiso, for instance, one can forget about everything, listen spellbound, get lost in one's own thoughts and stare into the green lap of faintly swaying reflections. In such moments one can discover the other Venice, which is unknown to many visitors to the Florian, and whose existence one cannot guess in the light and childlike idleness of St. Mark's Square.¹¹

10 Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics of Tourism," *American Journal of Tourism* 1/1-2, 1981, 127.

11 Pavel Muratov, *Obrazy Italii*, ed. V.N. Grashchenkov. Moscow, Galart, 1993, 20.

Venice appears to resist the search for the "other Venice," as many commentators on Venice have observed. Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Venise de ma fenêtre" captures the futility of the search and unfolds into a phenomenology of the tourist experience in general:

Wherever you may be, the true Venice, you will find, is always elsewhere ... Usually, I tend to content myself with what I have, but in Venice I am a prey of a kind of mad jealousy; if I didn't restrain myself, I would be on bridges and in gondolas the whole time, desperately looking for the secret Venice of the other side. Of course, as soon as I get there, everything fades; I come back: the tranquil mystery has re-formed itself on the other side... Venice is just exactly the place where I am not.¹²

Brodsky's recollections of his regular visits to Venice in *Watermark* speak of a continuous search for an authentic Venice. Venice reveals its "Veniceness" for him in wintertime when it is supposedly free of other tourists. Aware of the fact that Venice is always, as Virginia Richter describes, "already framed with the tourist gaze, already reproduced by the tourist industry," the author attempts to regain the authenticity of the travel experience by both a "heightened reflexivity about the intertextuality" of Venice, and a "conscious distancing from its referentiality"; these are the two main devices contemporary writers have in their repertoire to transform Venice back into a "literary generative location" from a "banal tourist haunt."¹³ Meanwhile, however, the repetitious mentioning of the "autonomous eye" in *Watermark* and its search for "beauty" foregrounds the tourist gaze and its search for the exceptional, unusual, and extraordinary. The journey to the core of authenticity and the disappointment that unavoidably follows is captured metaphorically in the description of the author's "unique" visit to a Venetian palazzo in one of the central passages in *Watermark*. Walking through the rooms and the floors of the palazzo evolves into a metaphor of searching for the "inside" of the city; passing each room is transgressing into yet another back region, get-

12 This translation is from Tony Tanner *Venice Desired*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, 361. For the original, see Jean-Paul Sartre *Situations, IV*. Paris, Gallimard, 1964, 447-448.

13 Virginia Richter "Tourist Lost in Venice Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*" in *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, edited by Manfred Pfister and Barbara Schaff. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999, 181.

ting closer to the real Venice. The outcome is a disappointment: the journey ends in a bedroom where the author discovers a television and encounters his host in bed with his male companions: "Oddly enough, I felt no repulsion. On the contrary, I felt that from time's point of view such entertainment here could only seem appropriate, as it generated nothing." (57-58) The discovery of the sign of mundane contemporaneity (the television) and the imagining of the corporal act is represented as an anticlimax, which, in turn, reflects the structural disappointment due to the ideality that the search for the authentic always implies.¹⁴

Nostalgia

The disappointment caused by this perpetually evading authenticity produces a longing for the ideality of the object of desire. In Brodsky's writing this touristic nostalgia is transformed into the elegiac self-irony and the erotic double-entendre underscoring *Watermark*. One such instance is the recollection of his first visit to Venice opening the essay. After recalling a meeting with his female Venetian acquaintance at the railway station, and her taking him to his hotel and leaving him there by himself, Brodsky concludes: "If that night portended anything at all, it was that I'd never possess this city; but then I never had any such aspirations" (16).

The nostalgia for authenticity imbedded in the tourist gaze often discloses nostalgia for a historical authenticity. In Brodsky's travel writing the nostalgia for historical authenticity is expressed as soon as he articulates his opinions about contemporary society and the postmodern condition. In "A Place as Good as Any" the description of a tourist experience grows into a critique of contemporary culture and society. The nightmare of the tourist experience culminates in the realization that the image of the city is not an image of the city itself but of its reproduction: "We know these vertical things [well-known tourist attractions] before we've seen them. What's

14 John Frow writes about the semiotic structure of the tourist experience: "A place, a gesture, a use of language are understood not as given bits of the real but as suffused with ideality, giving on the *type* of the beautiful, the extraordinary, or the culturally authentic. Their reality is figural rather than literal. Hence the structural role of disappointment in the tourist experience, since access to the type can always be frustrated." John Frow "Tourism and the Semeiotics of Nostalgia", *October* 57, 1991, 125.

more, after having seen them, we retain not their three-dimensional image but their printed version. Strictly speaking, we remember not a place but our postcard of it."¹⁵ In other words, the countless reproductions of tourist sights, or *markers* as Dean MacCannel calls them — that is, postcards, posters, miniatures, and other tourist memorabilia, have engulfed the original sight. The hybrid images our unconscious mind produces, Brodsky seems to be saying, are images of reproductions, signs of signs with a fleeting referent. Brodsky's vision of the de-hierarchization of the original and the copy — the "reduction or swapping" (37), is not, however, the celebration of the blurring of the difference it first appears to be. This becomes apparent when Brodsky expands his critique to concern contemporaneity as a whole, and when read against the conception of history the text produces, Brodsky's position resembles Jean Baudrillard's Platonic lament over the loss of the referent, the historically legitimate and ethically superior original: "Small wonder, too, that a traveler reveres ancient ruins many times over the modern ones left in the center of your city by its fathers for didactic purposes: a traveler, by definition, is a product of hierarchic thinking." (39)¹⁶ The hierarchy between the past and the present, that is, between the "ancient" ruin and the "modern" ruin, is based not on an aesthetic but an ethical choice; the historical designates the original and the authentic, the modern and contemporary the unoriginal and the inauthentic. Hence Brodsky's open hostility to contemporary art and architecture, ubiquitous in his travel writing. The pace at which we experience reality is accelerated by technological innovation, which, according to Brodsky, obscures our perception of historical details; observed from a speeding car, a statue of a "great local eighteenth-century military or civic genius" is demoted to "some skin-clad William Tell or other" (39-40). To sum up his lament, Brodsky reverts to one of his favorite binary oppositions, the one between history and geography: "history long since exited your city, yielding the stage to the more elementary forces of geography and commerce" (*ibid.*).

For a Brodskian type of Eurocentric sensibility, there is one genuine ruin left, however, and that is Venice. Venice is a fulfillment of the "museal desire," exhibited in much of Brodsky's writing; it is the ultimate ruin, which narrates the history of the West, as Judith Seaboyer sums it up:

15 Joseph Brodsky *On Grief and Reason*. New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1995, 37.

16 For a concise discussion of the Platonic idea of a copy in relation to Baudrillard and Deleuze, see Frow 1991, 126-127.

The material traces of the order of meaning by which the West has constructed itself are preserved here in a kind of a time warp, and as edge cities and malls seem to sprawl out of control, flattening before them both history and landscape which once defined the boundary between city and country, Venice, its feminized body exposed to the world's gaze, promises a meaningful story of the past.¹⁷

This is, as Seaboyer asserts, "only one view," but it seems to poignantly elaborate on Brodsky's fascination with Venice. The Venetian lagoon creates a "semiotic cut," to quote the French media critic and philosopher Régis Debray's essay on Venice, and by transgressing this semiotic border we submit ourselves to:

the essentially intransitive experience: trans-shipment, change of vehicle and tempo, obligatory slowing down of vital rhythms. Here we are, somewhere else, a dismounted pedestrian or a cork on water; no doubt about it: we have indeed passed over to the other side of the mirror.¹⁸

Here Debray comes to answer his own provocative question, "Why does Venice turn the head of the French academician?" The answer extends its relevance beyond the scope of the question, pointing to Debray's own fascination with the city, as well as to the fact that Venice is a paradigmatic tourist city. For a sensibility that regrets the loss of the referent, the historicity of Venice offers itself to be read as the haven of the original. With its idiosyncratic semiotic order, Venice negates the Baudrillardian apocalyptic semiosis of the hyper-real, the third order of simulacra, where "the question of signs, of their rational destination, their real or imaginary, their repression, their deviation, the illusion they create or that which they conceal, or their parallel meanings — all of this erased."¹⁹ The Venetian semiosis with its mirrorings, reflections, masks, doubles, and duplicates presents an endless play of the sign, with the referent never escaping but always in sight. The transgression of the semiotic border

17 Judith Seaboyer "Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*. An Anatomy of a Talking Book" in *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, edited by Manfred Pfister and Barbara Schaff. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999, 239.

18 Régis Debray *Against Venice*. Berkeley, North Atlantic Books, 1999, 10.

19 Jean Baudrillard *Simulations*. New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, 104.

with the change of the tempo allows the transgressor to indulge in this play and to transgress the semiotic border in the winter — Brodsky's season to visit Venice—minimizes the chance of encountering other transgressors, whose presence cancels out the authenticity of the experience.

Despite Brodsky's critique of the tourist industry, the souvenir plays an important role in his Venetian imaginings, in which it produces multilayered meanings of nostalgia. The postcards Brodsky nostalgically recalls receiving from a female friend in Leningrad in the 1960s in "Spoils of War" reappear in *Watermark*, together with a photograph in *Life* and other memorabilia of Venice:

Then one day another friend, who is still alive, brought me a disheveled issue of *Life* magazine with a stunning color photo of San Marco covered with snow. Then a bit later a girl whom I was courting at the time made me a birthday present of an accordion set of sepia postcards her grandmother had brought from a pre-revolutionary honeymoon in Venice, and I pored over it with my magnifying glass. Then my mother produced from God knows where a small square piece of cheap tapestry, a rag really, depicting the Palazzo Ducale, and it covered the bolster on my Turkish sofa—thus contracting the history of the republic under my frame. And throw into the bargain a little copper gondola brought by my father from his tour of duty in China, which my parents kept in their dressing tables, filling it with loose buttons, needles, postage stamps, and—increasingly—pills and ampoules. (39)

The significance of the souvenir for its owner is always nostalgic. "The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing," as Susan Stewart writes, "for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia."²⁰ The set of Venetian postcards in Brodsky's writing present a specific case of the souvenir, in that the nostalgia they signify does not arise from a personal connection with their signified: Brodsky had them in his possession before he had ever been to Venice. But despite that, or perhaps because of that, the nostalgic meanings Brodsky invests in the postcards function simultaneously on two temporal axes and refer to

²⁰ Susan Stewart *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collector*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, 135.

multiple objects—his youth in Leningrad, his home there, his parents, friends, and, above all, to the nostalgia experienced toward Western culture in Leningrad as a young man. The object of this cultural nostalgia, the West, represented for him the authentic origin of culture, the opposite of the "Kafkaesque cosmos" of the Soviet reality. As Susan Stewart asserts:

The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its reference. This referent is authenticity... The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic. (139–140)

Brodsky's *Watermark* is a showcase of how the "location of authenticity" signified by the souvenir may alter. Viewed from the Soviet Union, authenticity was located in the West, which Venice emblematically signified for the owner of the set of postcards, while at the time of writing *Watermark* authenticity was located in 1960s Leningrad, which turns into the place of the author's original and now lost innocence. In the realm of Brodsky's reversed nostalgia, the Venetian postcards do not signify Venice but Leningrad.

The longing for authenticity, the search for it and the experiencing of it, always implies a utopia. Authenticity, as Stewart writes, is "placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated" (133). The referent of Brodsky's initial longing was, then, the utopia of the West and Europe, while longing for Europe, in Brodsky's youth, also signaled a longing for a Petersburg past as perceived through the cultural and literary heritage associated with it. The signification of the souvenir in Brodsky's *Watermark* points, then, to a culturally conditioned longing, which transforms the Acmeist formula of *longing for world culture* into a *longing for Leningrad culture*. The self-reflective reaching from the peripheral Russia to the centers of Western culture, made a full circle and turned into a longing, from the popularized, decanonized, and deconstructed West, for an ideal Russia of (Western) canons, hierarchies and

