Babel and Brodsky: Celestial Navigators of Russian-Jewish Identity

Travelers and nomads possess a special connection with the celestial sphere. The stars can serve as both a tool to locate the wanderer on earth and an occasion to meditate on space and distance, for the great paradox of the stars is that they are simultaneously familiar and unknowable to the human mind. They are instantly recognizable anywhere on earth and lend to a sensation of spatial unity between the viewer’s present experience and all past glimpses of the night sky. Yet the stars also baffle the mind’s concept of distance and reduce the observer to the point where he or she feels insignificant in comparison to the vastness of the sky. The feeling of being both at home and disoriented reflects the very experience of travel.

It comes as no surprise that both Joseph Brodsky and Isaac Babel frequently referred to the stars in their writing for they shared the experience of wanderers making their way through foreign lands. Babel’s *Red Cavalry* stories are narrated by Lyutov, a Russian-Jewish journalist who travels along the Polish front surrounded by Cossack soldiers. Brodsky, from 1972 until his death, wrote poetry as an exiled Russian living in the unfamiliar land of America. As a multifaceted symbol (a star could possibly reference the Jewish star and the third star marking the end of Shabbat, the Christian star of Bethlehem, the red star of socialism and the stars of the American flag) it has the ability to speak to many different identities simultaneously. Brodsky and Babel both find themselves caught between overlapping systems of symbols and their writings present two divergent models of identity for Jews living in the multicultural 20th century. For Babel, different identities are unable to coexist in a calm state. Lyutov’s Soviet and Jewish worldviews comprise two incompatible systems that are constantly fighting to
dominate his language. Babel is unable to fully synthesize them. Brodsky’s poetry does not give evidence of this struggle. He shows no desire to uphold an absolute Jewish identity or an absolute Christian identity; rather he forges his own hybrid identity using elements of each. The multitude of meanings creates a constellation of identities, within which these multi-cultural wanderers are always trying to locate themselves.

In *Red Cavalry*, the journalist Lyutov is a Jewish intellectual raised in Orthodox Russia who strives to transform himself into the ruthless fighter idealized by his fellow Cossack soldiers. His sense of self constantly drifts between Judaism, Christianity and Socialism. The image of the star is recurrent throughout the novel and what it symbolizes for Lyutov at any given point varies based on the identity which he is performing at that moment.

The symbol of the star first appears in conjunction with Lyutov’s self-identification as a Jew. In *Gedali*, the narrator wanders “through Zhitomir looking for the timid star” (227) that marks the start of Shabbat. This is the first time Lyutov speaks openly about his Jewish background. In a Polish shtetl, separated from his Russian companions, Lyutov is “tormented by the dense sorrow of memory” (227) and remembers how his grandparents celebrated the Sabbath. The star connects Lyutov with a part of himself he had been forced to hide from the Cossacks and fixes his identity in that moment as a Jew. Like a sailor in the night, Lyutov tries to locate his own Jewishness by looking for the familiar ‘timid star’ and thus affirms his place and role within the world.

This moment of self-identification is profoundly transitory and in the following scene Lyutov again begins to question his beliefs when the old Jewish storeowner Gedali
asks him whether accepting the Revolution means denying Judaism. It becomes apparent to Lyutov that his two identities contradict too deeply to coexist peacefully inside one person and he must choose between them. “We shall rip open those closed eyes,” (228) he answers Gedali, speaking to him now as a socialist. “The Sabbath is beginning,” Gedali says when the first star finally appears. “Jews must go to the synagogue” (229). This represents a moment of rupture for Lyutov as he symbolically abandons his Jewish identity. By ignoring the ‘timid star’ he initiates a refusal to locate himself in terms of Judaism. Within their conversation Gedali and Lyutov explore a middle ground of dialogue between two ways of being, yet the incompatibilities overwhelm them and in the end they separate as each man returns to his respective beliefs.

While Lyutov is not a Christian, the mainstream Orthodox Christian traditions of Russia pervade his thinking and also influence his identity. As a socialist revolutionary, Lyutov is called upon to embrace atheism and destroy the religious roots of society. His depictions of the treacherous monk Romuald and the blasphemous icons of painter Pan Apolek convey a typical Soviet mistrust of religion and clergy (Polish Catholicism in particular), yet the chapters on Sashka Christ reveal that there are some Christian values which remain firmly implanted in his consciousness.

In the biography of Sashka Christ, Lyutov uses the image of a nativity star to convey Sashka’s Christ-like gentleness. On the night that he leaves home to become a wanderer there is a “star shining through the window” (249) and he dreams of a cradle hanging from the sky. Sashka’s gentleness contradicts the ruthless identity of the Red Cavalry, yet Lyutov is still attracted to him. While interacting with Sashka, the traces of Lyutov’s Christian identity are stirred and he begins to interpret stars for their Christian
symbolism. Sashka remains attached to the image of nativity throughout the novel and later saves Lyutov from attacking his landlady with a song about the “star of the field over my native land” (329). Grace and forgiveness are linked to the nativity star and Lyutov momentarily aligns himself with Christian identity.

Lyutov’s sense of self is informed by all three of these traditions and at moments when the symbol of the star speaks to several of his identities at the same time, we see the conflict between them burst through the linguistic fabric of the novel. In “After the Battle,” Babel links the image of the “first star” with Lyutov’s desire to transform from a Jewish intellectual into a socialist warrior with “the ability to kill a man” (327). The appearance of the first star recalls his conversation with Gedali and the history of victimization in Lyutov’s Jewish roots. It suggests the degree of cultural separation between the journalist and the Cossacks around him. At the same time, it could also remind him of the Soviet red star – the cause for which he is trying to transform himself and the promise of a new identity. With the sudden “flashing” (327) of the first star, Babel evokes both of these interpretations simultaneously and conveys Lyutov’s inner conflict between Jewish and Soviet identity.

For Babel a moment of self-identification is never completely binding and in “The Rabbi’s Son” Lyutov effectively revises the story of “Gedali” by revealing that he and the shopkeeper had not parted as he suggested earlier but rather gone together to pray with Rabbi Bratslavsky. He remembers how the “young Sabbath crept along the sunset crushing the stars with the heel of her red slipper” (331) in an enigmatic image of confused and mismatched symbols. The image of the lady Sabbath is mixed with the color of the Red Cavalry and Soviet power. The use of the verb ‘crush’ recalls the brutal
Soviet propaganda Babel wrote to encourage the Cossacks against the Poles and subverts our normal association of Shabbat with a time of rest and peace. There is a kind of violent madness within Babel’s symbolism that conveys the sense of incompatible identities at war inside Lyutov’s perceptions. The appearance of Bratslavsky’s son on the Polit-otdel train continues the succession of disparate imagery: “Crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse huddled in the margins of Communist pamphlets. Pages of The Song of Songs and revolver cartridges” (322). The ‘timid star’ and Jewish beliefs that he formerly turned his back on return to him in the form of memory, casting Lyutov back into the struggle between identities. The book finishes with Lyutov speeding across Poland in a train car, the incompatibilities of his Jewish origins and Soviet beliefs once again unresolved.

The symbol of the star acts as a navigational tool that allows the reader to locate Lyutov at various points of his journey, not in the context of geography but identity. Babel rarely allows us direct access to Lyutov’s interior states yet his identity is constantly reflected by his intuitions of the world around him. Symbols hold multiple meanings in different situations and we can read his emotions through all of the different ways in which landscapes and characters are interpreted. Babel’s peculiar style, his combination of purple prose and blunt fragments, complements his multi-faceted symbolism. Divergent identities are constantly fighting for control of his interpretations, overpowering and interrupting each other through dizzying metaphors and sudden tonal shifts.

The symbol of the star is even more prevalent in Joseph Brodsky’s Nativity Poems, yet it performs an entirely different function here that it did for Babel. Brodsky
transforms the star into an object of consistency and stability. It is a stable symbol in the sense that it regularly functions to suggest the Christian Nativity and the Jewish nomadic traveler. Spiritually Brodsky considers himself a Christian; culturally he draws on the identity of the Jewish outsider. Brodsky uses the star in almost all of his eighteen Christmas poems and the repeated motion of inward focus on that single point (what Peter Vail refers to as the “centripetal force” [108] of Brodsky’s poetry) becomes a structural motif of his work. The star is something reliable and each time it appears it serves to unify the entire cycle. Because of this, our sense of the narrator in Brodsky’s poetry is much more fixed than our sense of Lyutov. For Brodsky, the world around him is in a state of transformation yet his core identity – a spiritually Christian, culturally Jewish perspective with which he views objects such as the star – maintains the same essential elements. The mixture of incompatible interpretations and the wild unpredictability of Lyutov’s language is nowhere to be found here. In Brodsky, Judaism and Christianity are not at war with each other, but exist in a tranquil arrangement and his poetry suggests the common experience between them. Like the celestial sphere, his identity is a fixed and reliable entity that he can count on even as the earthly world around him is in turmoil.

Brodsky was exiled from Russia in 1972 and much of his poetry written from this point on depicts the emotions and thoughts of a wanderer separated from his home. “Lagoon” (written in 1973) describes Christmas in the unfamiliar, ephemeral world of movement where “a nameless lodger… bereaved of memory, homeland, son” (61) finds that “the only tense that is is present” (63). The poem evokes a feeling of lost identity due to disconnection, where Brodsky is unable to depend on the ideas of the past and
future that guided him in his previous everyday life. Brodsky faces a moment of questioning whether he actually possesses any identity at all now that he has been cut off from all of his personal routines, history and expectations. Struggling to grasp onto anything permanent, Brodsky finds that even during a “Christmas without snow, tinsel or tree” he is never abandoned by the “sea star’s guiding beam” (61). The guiding force of the star recalls God directing the three wise men to Bethlehem and delivers a small amount of hope for Brodsky. By recognizing the miracle of the star in his own predicament, he affirms his own Christian identity through an act of belief.

Simultaneously, his focus on exile connects him with Jewish diasporal cultural identity through the archetype of the nomadic traveler. As he “looks past all boundaries and all predicates” (65) he begins to uneasily embrace a new rootless existence.

Brodsky’s sense of the involvement necessary between human belief and miracles, the active role that we must play through affirming our identity and faith, is one of the essential themes of his work. Many of the Nativity poems are set in the world of the pedestrian and profane. The clay storefront Nativity scene in “Presepio,” the crowded grocery store in “December 24, 1971,” the city apartment complexes of the untitled 1985 Nativity poem – these locations are seemingly incompatible with miracles or faith.

However, Brodsky shows that the individual is capable of creating sacredness even when they are surrounded by the profane world. In “Presepio,” Brodsky compares the experience of staring at clay figures through a storefront window to “peer[ing] from the cosmos at this little show” (83). His gaze actually takes the role of the star of Bethlehem and through this gesture he manages to include himself as an essential part of the miracle. By acting as the star he becomes the symbol confirming the sacredness of the Nativity. It
also shows that Brodsky is a nomadic figure for he is separated – by the glass window, the metaphorical distance from the cosmos to the earth and the passage of time – from this event which is so important to his own belief and identity. The scene serves as a perfect metaphorical act of self-identification for Brodsky who, seeing that the “centuries require that [the Gospel] diminishes by degrees” (83) and how distant that miracle has become to his present world, is still able to reach out and connect with it. The motion of reaching and touching is mentioned twice within the poem (the infant reaching for the star and for his mother) and emphasizes the experience of connection and longing to bridge distance.

These moments of recognition, of the bond formed between the viewer and the star, are self-initiated acts that serve to affirm Brodsky’s identity. His sacred moments (the lyrical peaks of his poetry) all take place within his own thoughts; they are about epiphany and self-recognition. The sacred does not descend on the narrator from the world around him but he must instead identify and grasp a point of sacredness within the profane world. This is why the gesture of focusing in on a single star is so central to the movement of his poems.

“Herod reigns, but the stronger he is, the more sure, the more certain the wonder. In the constancy of this relation is the basic mechanics of Christmas” (55), Brodsky writes reflecting on the monotony and profanity of Christmas Eve at a grocery store in Leningrad. Here Brodsky summarizes his entire view on Christian identity. It should not rely on the sacredness of the outside world but rather exists inside of a person in spite of the world around them. He even suggests that the dissonance between personal religious identity and the profane world around us should be viewed as a source of ‘wonder.’
Brodsky conveys the strongest sense of unity between Jewish and Christian identity through his untitled 1994 Nativity poem where he links the experience of “Christ who was also in flight… [and] died, so they say, far from home” (97) to his own fate as a Jewish nomad. In this stanza Brodsky’s religious feelings for Christ and cultural Jewish identity exist harmoniously. He depicts Christ as a wanderer and societal outsider, an image not commonly focused on in traditional church dogma, in order to create a religious figure that speaks more directly to Brodsky’s own Jewish/Christian identity. Brodsky the exile finds solace in the idea of Christ as a heavenly figure who nurtured his holy ideas while navigating the profanity of earthly existence. The mixture of Christian and Jewish imagery continues as Brodsky proposes to “commemorate with wine and bread, a life with just the sky’s roof overhead,” dedicating the traditional symbols of Christmas Eve to the nomadic experience. With the final image of the open sky, Brodsky unifies the nativity star of Christmas and the celestial body under which wandering Jews traveled in order to form a hybrid symbol.

Nomadic culture and the experience of displacement have been defining realities of Jewish existence since the advent of Diaspora. Even for Russian Jews who were born and died in the same Shtetl or farmed a single plot of land for their entire lives, there remained an acute awareness through prayers and traditions that they were outsiders living far away from their native land. The very nature of Jewish holidays, suggestive of a harvest cycle and climate that are completely alien to Eastern Europe, evokes the sensation of displacement. Babel and Brodsky were by no means the first Jews to navigate between multiple identities or to view one symbol through several systems of meaning. The nature of identity has occupied Russian-Jewish writers for centuries.
From the development of spiritual and anti-intellectual Hasidic Judaism, pro-assimilation Haskalah and early Zionism, the history of Russian Jewish literature can be read as the history of Jewish identity attempting to establish itself in a non-Jewish world. The stargazing protagonist – looking upwards to fix his own position, his own sense of self in a dark and unfamiliar land – is an archetype of the Russian-Jewish experience.
Works Cited:
