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REVIEW

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Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets. By Irena Grudzinska Gross. Foreword, Tomas Venclova. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xxi, 362 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$40.00, hard bound.

The subtitle invites the reader to an encounter with someone who knows poets and their special fellowship and will pass that knowledge on to others. I approached the willing teacher with pleasant anticipation. Like the book's author, I knew Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky and spent many hours talking about sundry things with Miłosz in particular.

The book turns out to be a loose collection of reminiscences, summaries, and textual explications related to two remarkable representatives of Polish and Russian literature, but one devoid of any organizing principle. In that, it is postmodern. More attention is paid to Miłosz: he was more approachable, whereas Brodsky was more of an introvert and often kept to himself. The two poets included each other's verses in their university courses, "performed together on panels or at readings" (99), and corresponded on occasion. There was also the obvious element of belonging to the exclusive club of Nobel Prize winners that makes people who otherwise would not give one another a second look into friends. In spite of this and contrary to the author's declared intention, the book does not demonstrate that there was much fellowship between the two—for reasons, I conjecture, both existential and psychological: Miłosz and Brodsky lived in different localities, held dissimilar views, and were temperamentally poles apart. Miłosz was an extraordinarily talented man who eagerly sought opportunities to win recognition. His contempt for tradition and for the notion of nationhood is well known. Brodsky despised communism consistently and unwaveringly, but he was, notwithstanding his magnificent poem "Predstavlenie," a Russian patriot.

Many of the book's pages seem to have been added to increase its length. The descriptions of women the two poets associated with, their funerals, and the laudations they received have nothing to do with their relationship. A large part of the narrative concerns the period when Miłosz was already a celebrity. Winning the Nobel Prize changed him considerably and made him react differently to at least some of his former friends. This striking metamorphosis is not discussed in the book.

Somewhat like the Soviet Russian editors who removed certain names and photographs from encyclopedias, the author omits issues that are inconveniently complicated. The aspects of Miłosz's career that Zbigniew Herbert touched on in his poem "Chodasiewicz" are dismissed in a misleading sentence that states that Herbert "attacked" Miłosz (85). The ease with which the author drops such Soviet-style accusations makes the book's authority fundamentally suspect. And what is "a Catholic vision of woman: for him she was Eve—a temptation but also fulfillment" (100)? The author's secularist straightjacket does not allow a mention of the Virgin Mary, who is, for Catholics, the fulfillment of femininity, and so she slaps a double label on Eve. Such tabloid-style interpretations of philosophical issues are standard in this text.

But the most unbearable aspect of the book is the Soviet tourist guide's tone and the accumulation of banalities such as "in the Soviet Union everything was nationalized" (38); "in poems not only words but also sound, rhythm, and rhyme are bearers of meaning" (37); "this award [the Nobel] is decided upon in Sweden, but its reach is truly global" (80); "Pushkin worshipped friendship . . . the same has to be said about Adam Mickiewicz" (51); "Brodsky was not a typical representative of Russia" (174); Yacutia [*sic*] is a part of eastern Siberia" (180). And what are the "automatic literary impulses that governed Polish poetry" (253)? Why tell us that both poets were more attached to their mothers than to their fathers? On and on these trivialities go, and one gets the impression that one is reading a script for the Soviet museum guides who led worshipful westerners through the Great Russian writers' quarters—and *here is Lev Tolstoy's bed, and to the left his chamber pot*. The reverence-soaked tone makes the book boringly predictable, as personalities and their surroundings are replaced by a recitation of irrevocable truths. This book genuflects before the acknowledged authority in a simplistic way, thus becoming a weird echo of "the one and only" interpretation of reality once enforced in Soviet-occupied eastern Europe.