

Katya Hokanson, *Writing at Russia's Border* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), x + 301 pp.

With this monograph, Katya Hokanson revisits the territory so comprehensively explored by Susan Layton in her 1994 study *Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*: the Caucasus and Transcaucasia in the Russian literary imagination. Acknowledging her debt to the considerable literature on Russian Orientalism, Hokanson is careful in her Introduction to stake out her own area of critical focus: the importance of her imperial expansion in the formation of Russia's national identity, or (in other terms) the proposition that the empire's peripheral areas were 'actually very central to Russia's history, identity [...] and cultural production in the early nineteenth century' (20). Her argument is developed through readings of key literary texts by Pushkin, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, Lermontov and Tolstoy in the five chapters which follow.

First she examines Pushkin's *Captive of the Caucasus*, designated an 'undisputed turning point' (23) in the poet's career and in the history of Russian literature. This claim is justified in a far-ranging discussion of the 'multiple strands of domestic and world politics and literary and cultural associations' (26) the work brings together; these include the contemporary impact of Karamzin's *History*, the emergence of discourses of *narodnost'* and imperialism, sympathy for the 'noble' Circassian insurgents, enthusiasm for the 'sublime' Caucasian landscape and echoes of Byronism and Romanticism. This leads on to an analysis of the poem itself (a workmanlike prose translation is supplied in an appendix) which draws comparisons with *Childe Harold* and 'The Giaour' and sees in the story not so much the clash of East and West as a Western writer's attempt to create 'a familiar incarnation of the unfamiliar' (71–2). Attention in the next chapter turns to 'the poetry of empire' in two other 'Byronic' works of Pushkin's southern period, 'The Fountain of Bakhchisarai' and 'The Gypsies'. In the earlier work, Hokanson is struck most by Pushkin's attempt to construct a 'poetic alignment' with the Persian poet Sa'di and a 'geographic alignment' of the protagonists as representing Europe (Maria) the Crimea (Khan Girei, Zarema) and Russia (the traveller-narrator); although her conclusions ('Russians are worthy enough poets to take on the mantle of Sa'di, and [...] are the rightful military successors to the khans' – 103) are perhaps more problematic. The much briefer discussion of

'The Gypsies' centres on another 'poetic alignment' – that between Ovid in exile in the north and Pushkin in exile in the south.

Chapter 3, by far the longest, examines aspects of the centre/periphery dichotomy in *Eugene Onegin*, 'Onegin's Journey' and 'A Journey to Arzrum'. As it stands, of course, the first makes little reference to Russia's southern frontier, so that the notion of 'periphery' must be broadened to include the rural and the provincial (as opposed to St Petersburg as 'metropole'). More convincing, perhaps, is the explication of the motif of exile used by the poet to establish links, not only with Ovid, but Horace as well. With 'Onegin's Journey' we return to the more literal periphery of the Caucasus as a 'highly privileged poetic and political space' (145) constructed from the convergence of literature and biography, Onegin and Pushkin. This is the space revisited in 'Journey to Arzrum', in which the relationship between self-representation and place is complicated by the shifting perspectives wrought by the passage of time, changing political circumstances, territorial expansion and unstable perceptions the self and the Other.

In the remaining two chapters the focus shifts away from Pushkin onto Russia's other notable 'Caucasian' writers. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's Verkhovskii (*Ammalat-Bek*) and Lermontov's Maksim Maksimych (*A Hero of Our Time*) are presented as variants of the 'ordinary' Russian on the periphery: the first a spokesman for the 'civilizing mission' of imperial power, the second a benign *kavkazets*, each naively infatuated with an idealized notion of the Caucasian native (Ammalat and Bela). In Tolstoy's *The Cossacks*, the relationship between the centre (the Westernized aristocrat Olenin) and the periphery (the 'Oriental' Chechens) is complicated by presence of the Cossacks, the non-Westernized Russian peasants constituting another unknown frontier the hero must negotiate in his pursuit of his identity.

Hokanson's (hardly contentious) case for the defining role of the Caucasian theme in the construction of Russia's cultural identity rests on both close textual analysis and a theoretical apparatus derived from current critical discourses relating to colonialism, imperialism, the relationship of Self and Other, the Sublime, language and inter-cultural communication, perceptions of gender and sexual identity and so on. Views will vary regarding her success in resolving the issues of balance and focus that inevitably arise. Undoubtedly a work of mature scholarship, *Writing at Russia's Borders* reads at times like a doctoral thesis, and might have benefitted from some stylistic revision. A sharper editorial eye might also

have detected a number of superfluous, misplaced or ‘dangling’ inverted commas and brackets, and should certainly have corrected the confusion of Elbe with Elba (13) – a piquant toponymical solecism in a work so centrally concerned with the relationship between writing and place.

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Jeff Love, *Tolstoy: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 178 pp.

To the extent that it might seem to promise some kind of ‘plain person’s guide’ to its subject, the title of Jeff Love’s book is misleading. In fact, it is one in a series which (to quote its publishers) aims to introduce students and readers to thinkers, writers and subjects they may find ‘especially challenging’ by ‘concentrating specifically on what it is that makes the subject difficult to grasp’. While it might seem perverse to imply that Tolstoy, a writer who aspired above all else to simplicity and lucidity, presents the same kind of challenges as Deleuze, Derrida, Existentialism or even Samuel Beckett (the subjects of other guides in the series), most readers would agree that he can be perplexing in ways that Love sums up in his final paragraphs:

Tolstoy is plurality, change and movement ... a questing, religious personality who combines authentic humility with an arrogance that mocks any notion of piety ... a supreme rationalist whom reason disappoints ... (151–2).

What makes Tolstoy difficult to grasp, as Love would have it, is the paradox at the heart of his life and work: the contradiction between his endless pursuit of truth and ‘his profound grasp of the power of the infinite to disrupt that pursuit’ (3).

The inconsistencies which defy attempts to place Tolstoy ‘safely in the wax museum of received ideas’ (1) are addressed in the most general terms in the Introduction (‘What is Truth?’): the craving for authority over the world and the rejection of it, the pursuit of truth and the perception that there is none, the struggle to overcome death and the apprehension that there is nothing else. The first chapter frames an equally fundamental question, Who am I?, assembling from