

Weiss, Michaela. *Tradice a Experiment: Americká židovská próza v období modernismu.* [*Tradition and Experiment: American Jewish Prose in the Period of Modernism.*] 1. vyd. Opava: Slezská univerzita v Opavě, 2020. ISBN 978-80-7510-437-3. 102pp.

When discussing the position of Jewish writing within the context of contemporary America, it can be stated without a shadow of a doubt that it is now considered an integral part of American literature. Writers such as Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and Art Spiegelman or more contemporary authors such as Gary Shteyngart, Nicole Krauss, Nathan Englander and Joshua Cohen enjoy a central presence in American literature. Nonetheless, as Michaela Weiss shows us in her recent study, this was not always the case and it in fact took quite some time for Jewish American writers to become an accepted part of the American literary canon.

American Jewish literature is a field of study to which Michaela Weiss has devoted her entire academic career to date, starting initially with a study of the works of Bernard Malamud (*Jewishness as Humanism in the Works of Bernard Malamud*, 2010. Olomouc) and continued with the exploration of Jewish identity in Horace M. Kallen and American cultural identity (ed. Josef Jařab, 2011). However, as Weiss adds “there have been other authors who have dealt with Jewish American writers in the Czech context such as Stanislav Kolář and Hana Ulmanová” (5). In her latest contribution to the topic she focuses on the tension between tradition and experimentation in American Jewish literature during the period of modernism, more specifically in the interwar years. Weiss takes a diversion from dealing with the more popular Jewish American authors of the period and finds a hitherto largely unexplored niche in the historiography of less well known American Jewish writers such as Ludwig Lewinsohn, Samuel Ornitz, Charles Reznikoff, Michael Gold, Waldo Frank or Fanny Hurst.

The twelve extensive chapters are divided chronologically into the periods during which the respective authors published their most distinctive works. The chronological arrangement of the authors and their works maps the development of American Jewish literature from its early realistic depictions of immigration from Europe to more linguistically and thematically complex works of the later period. Weiss explains that this development is natural since the earliest Jewish American authors who wrote in English were not writing in their mother tongue, and thus their works can sometimes appear old-fashioned or somewhat artificial. Moreover, Weiss places a greater focus on works which offered an innovative contribution to American Jewish literature in terms of new themes, characters or narrative modes. This facet of her study is particularly innovative, since experimentation either in narrative modes or genre is highly

unusual in earlier Jewish American literature. Weiss outlines some of the broader reasons for the lack of experimentation prior to the 1960s, the period in which we encounter the first works about the Holocaust which often employed more experimental forms.

In the first chapter Weiss pays careful attention to defining the differences between the language of modernism and modernity and leans on Sacvan Bercovitch's four approaches to modernism. In other words, Weiss makes a point by saying that "not all writers who wrote during the period of modernity were necessarily modernists" (6). She notes firstly that the majority of American Jewish writers wrote about the emerging modern world without necessarily employing modernist language and explains the reasons for such an approach using her exhaustive knowledge of Jewish American history and culture of the first half of the 20th century. She demonstrates the use of autobiography as an innovative genre in Jewish literature on works by Abraham Cahan, George Steiner or Mary Antin. A particularly detailed extensive chapter entitled "Ethnicity and Modernism" is dedicated to the work of Gertrude Stein, an author who has a unique position both in modernism and also in the works of the lost generation. Stein's search for a more innovative style bore fruit in several works such as *Three Lives* or *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Weiss clearly delineates Stein's contributions both to the modernist movement as a whole but also to the Jewish American literary presence in the interwar years.

The third chapter of Weiss's study focuses on the "unromantic" woman's novel *Fanny* by Edna Ferber, offering an analysis of the way in which this seemingly sentimental book can be read as an ironic and multi-layered novel employing an innovative narrative mode if it is placed in the wider context of the Jewish American experience. As Weiss notes "the narrator clearly states to the reader that it is her who decides which character speaks" (31). Generational and inter-generational conflict are the key themes in the fiction of Anzia Yeziarska, the subject of Weiss's fourth chapter, while chapter five offers an analysis of the family sagas of Ludwig Levinsohn. Modernist fictional autobiographies of the 1920s and 1930s are well researched in successive chapters on Samuel Ornitz, Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank and Charles Reznikoff (Chapters 6, 7 & 8).

An added benefit of the study is Weiss's remarkably detailed knowledge of Jewish American literature in translation into Czech or, in many cases, the lack of such translations. Weiss herself translates large sections of texts that have not previously been translated into Czech and thereby points out missing areas in her discussion of how Jewish American writers have been perceived in the Czechoslovak context. Authors such as Michael Gold were active defenders of socialism and while his works found little popularity when first published in America, they were nonetheless translated into Czech. Weiss's examination of protest novels not only highlights the diversity of Jewish American writing but also serves as an excellent example of the author's diligent research into the connections between European and American perceptions of Jewish literature.

The final chapters of the study deal with the aspect of ethnicity in the novels of Henry Roth, works which are considered highly modernistic in terms of their experimentation, and the dystopian satires which appear in the writings of Nath-

aniel West. The analytical section of the study closes with an analysis of the ethnic aspects found in the fiction of Fanny Hurst. Weiss thereby accomplishes her initial aim in the study, highlighting the tension between tradition and experiment in Jewish American literature between the two world wars with an emphasis on the narrative mode or innovative themes.

The study showcases Weiss's ability to comprehend the deep connections between European and American historiographies, links which are often neglected in other analyses of Jewish American literature. Weiss successfully adds another piece of the puzzle of the American Jewish literary presence and contributes to a fuller understanding of the origins and also the diversity of American Jewish literature. Furthermore, her study also allows us to understand Jewish literature within the wider context of American literature as such.

References

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