

RECENZJE - REVIEWS

AGNIESZKA SALSKA (RED.):
*HISTORIA LITERATURY
AMERYKAŃSKIEJ XX WIEKU (THE
HISTORY OF 20TH CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE*
2 Vol., ed. by Agnieszka Salska),
Kraków, Universitas, 2003.
T. I-II, S. 667+814

The two volumes' covers and their spines have the allure of statistical ledgers. Lifeless and uninviting, they enclose sixty odd essays on a variety of subjects compartmentalizing that huge and increasingly formless body of writing known by the name of 'twentieth century American literature'. Let us hope the coversùthe publisher's major blunderùshall not scare off potential buyers for it is an important book, fated to serve as a milestone by which the discipline - American literary studies in Poland - will measure its development. Mentioning them for referential reasons alone, in her overly cautious introduction Agnieszka Salska, the editor, refuses to compare her team's collective project with the efforts of her predecessors Andrzej Kopcewicz and Marta Sienicka, whose two-volume *Historia literatury Stanów Zjednoczonych w zarysie* [Outline of the History of Literature in the United States] (Warszawa [Warsaw]: PWN, 1982-1983) had been the only study of this kind in Poland for a long time. But the book of Kopcewicz and Sienicka, though acute in many individual passages and still somewhat useful, has an air of having outlived its time. Owing much to the 'myth-and-symbol school', with many analyses traditionally formalist, the book is alternately engaging and fatiguing. To accuse a 1982 Polish study of American literature as being exclusive or elitist would

be slightly self-congratulatory, but someone unfamiliar with the isolation and deprivation of Poland at that time might be tempted to call the book just that.

The editor of the new history and her crew also confronted impossible odds, if different from those met by their older colleagues. In her introduction Salska herself admits she and her collaborators encountered, as she knew they would, "gigantic methodological difficulties" (I: 10). "All the terms in the project's title itself," she writes, "have been questioned by the twentieth-century theory" (I:9). With the legacy of Hayden White and Jean François Lyotard, for instance, 'history' seems to have lost its claim to truth (though some solid defenses of the discipline, such as that of C. Behan McCullagh in *The Truth of History* [New York: Routledge, 1998], encourage me to think the news of its death has been greatly exaggerated). Neither is the 'literary' as unproblematic as it still might have been when Kopcewicz and Sienicka were writing their book. Today it is no longer limited to imaginative writing alone, accommodating as it does the popular, the oral and the autobiographical - why, even the factual. Salska's team eventually decided they would meet all the postmodernist debunkers of literary histories half way by offering a compromise, if still "on the conservative side" (I:10). The history suggests possibly the most tentative periodization (I:11) and offers a heterogeneity of methodological approaches. Pluralist and polyphonic, the book bristles with the contributors' different intellectual temperaments; various accounts of aesthetic, generational, socio-economic and institutional changes are offered, affirming, complicating, and problematizing one another.

Though perfectly natural, given the book's collective authorship, the pronoun 'we' reverberating throughout the introduction gives the impression the book subconsciously speaks for a whole generation of Polish Americanists, today in academic authority. Not that all important Polish scholars of American Studies have been invited to cooperate; without being all-inclusive the list of contributors is certainly representative. Marek Wilczyński of the University of Poznań has done a series of very useful sketches on postwar experimental prose and American literary theory (including some imported theory which has been shaking American humanities for so long). Joanna and Jerzy Durczak of the University of Lublin have written competently and exhaustively on postwar poetry and factual literature, respectively. Joanna Durczak has dutifully done separate chapters on ethnic poetry, the poetry of African Americans and women, although today's convention to give separate tributes to traditions long subdued seems a mixed blessing. Appropriately boxed with Robert Hayden, Yusef Komunyakaa, for instance, would also like to be associated with such white poets as C. K. Williams or Charles Wright. Ai, classified as a woman poet, would feel no less comfortable in the Native American section. Saddest of all, the chapter entitled "Poetry After 1975" with good and useful sketches on Post-Confessionals, New Formalists, New Narrativists, as well as such prominent poets like Robert Pinsky, A. R. Ammons and James Merrill, still has an air of the canon proper. Jerzy Durczak took it upon himself to fill some of the gaps yawning in older literary histories by scholars who snubbed all works of fiction deemed as 'too close to fact.' He has sections on immigrant literature, muckrakers, Vietnam War writing, gonzo journalism and the more recent waves of

autobiographical and travel books. The chapters on American theatre by Andrzej Ceynowa of the University of Gdańsk frequently go beyond the usual concerns of literary scholars and many drama critics. A rector of Gdańsk University, he is remarkably sensitive to institutional arrangements in the field-actors guilds and theatre syndicates. While Jadwiga Maszewska is particularly interested in marginal and marginalized literary formations, like ethnic or the-turn-of-the-century women writers, her husband Zbigniew Maszewski has done long and rhapsodic essays on Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. Constituting the backbone of the first volume, the modernists still seem beyond the reach of decanonization. Agnieszka Salska, too, is generous with the space she left herself in her lucid accounts of the careers of the High Modernists, but she is also uncompromising giving recognition to poets who may be easily overlooked like Kenneth Fearing or John Peale Bishop. She remembers about American objectivists, however obscure they are and little known in Poland, and does not neglect to write at a considerable length about the American years of Auden.

Finally, the youngest of the team, Paweł Frelik has done informative essays on postwar science fiction, fantasy, horror, popular fiction, even cyberpunk. Professor Ceynowa had it easier in a sense, taking on the task to pay tribute to older popular authors such as Margaret Mitchell, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and H. P. Lovecraft. Once scorned or snubbed by academic eggheads, they have already earned the patina of age (today the fiction of popular writers like Walter Mosley and Chester Himes is dissected and appraised in established scholarly journals with Chandler's as a template, whereas Lovecraft's sublime excites the exegetes of Kant and Edmund Burke). It is Frelik's

chapters that may be the book's 'cutting edge' as he opens up the Polish canon of American belles-lettres for such levitans of popular fiction as Danielle Steel, Robert Ludlum, Stephen King, Tom Clancy, John Grisham or Michael Crichton. To appreciate fully the significance of these sketches one should realize that none of these literary populists made it to Sacvan Bercovitch's monumental and programmatically all-inclusive *Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 7: *Prose Writing 1940-1990* (Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Salska's crew as a whole seeks to steer clear of two alternatives which will always haunt projects of this kind. It is neither sacrificing comprehensiveness for the authors' personal tastes, nor overly encyclopedic, though both poles are courted by, respectively, Krzysztof Andrzejczak and Kazimierz Braun. Andrzejczak's otherwise interesting essay on self-referential elements in the post-war fiction is more narrowly conceived than his other sections and seems to be inviting charges of personal bias; Braun's exhaustive and dispassionate survey of American drama since the 1960s tests the readers' patience and their respect for scholarly solidity. Such writing cries out for a few subjective flourishes, though eventually the chapters may prove invaluable, given that the information he offers is probably not to be found anywhere else, at least in Poland.

Now, Salska certainly knows that all that throat clearing in her guarded intro will not satisfy the staunchest opponents of literary histories. She is certainly right saying that "by questioning the legitimacy of efforts at a systematic knowledge about 20th century American literature we deny the validity of our vocation and profession", yet this will accomplish little beyond infuriating her

antagonists. Rather than being an argument, they will say, is it not an escape mechanism, a poor excuse by scholars who seem to have forgotten their profession is embedded in a highly ideological discourse, patriarchal, occidental and whatnot, which has long since taken on the flesh of institutional reality? But if the hard-core distrusters of metanarratives won't listen to reason, why not alienate them more? She ignores, as she must, non-English literary productions written on the territory of the US (notoriously given recognition by Marc Shell and Werner Sollors in their outrageous *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* [New York University Press, 2000]). Isn't it time, however, to be still more selective, subjective and propositional again? True, comprehensiveness is what Polish readers might want, but I have a feeling that the book, not just mindful of its target audience's special needs, responds to and reflects the prevailing culture in American academia exactly at a moment when young American writers may feel the need for projects in the tradition of, say, Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day* (1926).

Grumbling about omissions is the reviewer's duty. Someone noticed the absence of Charles Bukowski, but can we take to task projects of such a scope for not satisfying our idiosyncratic interests? Can we do so, having joined, as we habitually do, the complacent majority who regard efforts at comprehensiveness with mild amusement? I myself have already forgiven and forgotten that Professor Joanna Durczak has ignored Adrian C. Louis, my recent interest in his poems being one of my eccentricities. Privately, however, I imagine she herself must have been exasperated realizing she was not allowed enough space to mention such

important L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets as Susan Howe and Michael Palmer, or William Stafford who many think is a major poet, or Mary Oliver for that matter awarded as she was in the late eighties and nineties the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Such omissions may be manyùinevitably for a history brought up to date. I'll stop at that and let other reviewers take shots at other contributors whom I had to spare, knowing relatively less about their fields.

Though not as well indexed as one may wish, the book, organized chronologically, with key names emboldened and all the page headings, is easy to use and consult. The photo sections are arresting hodgepodes of tiny images, frontispieces and covers of first editions, even old post stamps and record coversùthings either scooped up from the Web public domain or borrowed from the private collections of the authors' sympathetic friends. Black and white, if sometimes poorly printed, they are somewhat melancholy and charming.

Salska's project will satisfy many. Comprehensive, thorough, varied and informative, it will be useful for long years to come. Fortunately so, because actually it may have to serve longer than its authors had planned. With only four years into the new millenium, another time ripe for historical recapitulations may be more distant than ever. And younger Americanists seem to show less of the 'conservative streak' which Salska herself admits is necessary to undertake projects of this nature.

Grzegorz Kość

JIŘÍ TRÁVNÍČEK:

*PRÍBĚH JE MRTEV? SCHIZMATA
A DILEMATA MODERNÍ PRÓZY,*
Host, Brno 2003, s. 300

Książka Jiřího Trávnička wyszła jako siódmy tom serii Biblioteka Teoretyczna (Teoretická knihovna), którą nawiązując do piętnastu tomów Biblioteki Strukturalistycznej (Strukturalistická knihovna), wydaje Host, czołowe czeskie wydawnictwo z siedzibą w Brnie. Obie te serie redaguje i plany ich ustala rada redakcyjna, do której obok profesora Miroslava Červenki i redaktora naczelnego wydawnictwa, Miroslava Balaštika, należy właśnie docent Wydziału Filozoficznego brneńskiego, a obecnie również praskiego uniwersytetu, Jiří Trávniček.

Biblioteka Strukturalistyczna, a po niej również Biblioteka Teoretyczna systematycznie zapełniają wielkie luki, które w czeskiej nauce o literaturze pozostawiły dwie „normalizacyjne” dekady rządów neostalinizmu w latach siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych, kiedy przerwano nie tylko wewnętrzną ciągłość rozwoju teorii literatury, ale również możliwości kontaktów i konfrontacji ze współczesnymi koncepcjami w świecie zachodnim. (Niektóre ze znaczących postaci, jak na przykład Lubomír Doležel i Květoslav Chvatík wyjechały w tym okresie na emigrację, innych, jak Olega Susa, Milana Jankoviča i wspomnianego wyżej Miroslava Červenkę usunięto z uniwersytetów czy instytutów naukowych i objęto zakazem druku, mogli oni publikować jedynie w samizdacie lub za granicą.) Między innymi z tego powodu obie serie obejmują szeroki obszar. W Bibliotece Strukturalistycznej pojawiają się zarówno prace „klasycznych” przedstawicieli praskiej szkoły strukturalistycznej (Jan Mukařovský, *Studie I i Studie II* [Studia I, Studia II], Jiří Veltruský, *Drama jako básnické dílo* [Dramat jako dzieło poe-