

Sherwin, Richard E., Seymour Mayne, and Ruth Amossi, eds. *At the Edge: Canadian Literature and Culture at Century's End*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995. viii+148pp.

Long before English literature critics were trying to characterize Canadian literature, Jewish literature was undergoing its *rite de passage* in academic circles. Bible, rabbinic material, philosophy, mysticism and medieval poetry were all treated to a tart, crisp, slap in the face. In the end, nothing was "Jewish" any more. The Bible, according to many critics, was a de-mythologized Ugaritic or Akkadian document; Talmud was only a dumbing down of Graeco-Roman law and lore, or a polemic against all other traditions; Maimonides was no longer original compared to his Arabic contemporaries. And so it went.

But Jewish literature has undergone a rehabilitation programme. No longer are scholars only looking for the similarities with other literatures, but they are now searching for the equally significant differences. Commonalities have become recognized as a given; but we also are obligated to notice when a culture removes itself, if only in one stanza, or in one approach, from its host society and contributes something original.

*At the Edge*, a collection which grew out of a conference on Canadian literature in Jerusalem in 1992, also aims to define both Canadian literature and Jewish-Canadian literature. The essays in this collection are generally very helpful. They introduce the reader to some literature that is not normally included in collections of Canadians. For instance, native voices, in the form of autobiography, are discussed by Joanne Neff. Québécois theatre, which is compared to Israeli drama also sheds light on the fascinating similarities between plays authored by David Fannario ("Balconville") and Hanoch Levin's ("The Suitcase Packers"). In Paul Warren's essay on Québécois film, one is treated to a fascinating study of the marked differences between French and Hollywood film. Some essays, however, feel worn, simply reviewing much of the well-known aspects of the literature. For instance, the first selection on Atwood (Neil Besner) does little to contribute to the field.

Also, Richard Sherwin's article on the "Jewishness" of poets should be an illuminating piece in the collection, but does not always answer all of the questions it so boldly sets out. However, Sherwin's piece still introduces the reader to ways of reading some Jewish-Canadian literature.

Rare in collections of this sort does one find a theme that literally distinguishes each and every article. But *By the Edge* demonstrates that Canadian literature, in all varieties, is simply *marginal*. Atwood, Gallant, Faludy, Québécois, Jewish—it all fits. Take Atwood. She writes consistently about the landscape and our ambiguous position in it. Gallant writes from abroad, but writes to be heard by Canadians. Faludy (as discussed in the article written by Marta Dvorak), a Hungarian by birth, who has just returned to his native country recently, writes of solitude in the British Columbian rainforest. He is alienated, not only from the forest, but also from himself. Québécois film also differs from Hollywood as suggested in Paul Warren's paper. At the day's end, one poses the question: Are we all really that alienated? And from what? Ourselves? the landscape? American culture? European traditions? Is this why we are suffering? Does the root of our malaise stem from the fact that we are not integrated into any cultural form, or are we rather observers? To me, this is what the book 'celebrates.' To be estranged, is, well, positive. It allows us, if we assume the cynical position, to be victims, as Atwood has already expressed many years ago. Not paralyzed varieties, but those who still want to be heard—an ambiguous position that allows one a satisfied discomfort. Gallant has also already addressed this in her fiction (cited here, pp. 107-8, 111-112). We like to describe our own death. To Atwood, this is like the battle cry of freedom. One example in "The Circle Game":

(The photograph was taken  
The day after I drowned.)  
I am in the lake, in the centre  
of the picture, just under the surface...  
but if you look long enough,

eventually, you will be able to see me.

Death is also found in her “Dream 1: The Bush Garden”:

In the dream I said  
I should have known  
anything planted her  
would come up blood.

Miriam Waddington is alienated from what she assumes her role to be:

These days I step out  
from the frame of my wind—  
battered house into Toronto  
city; somewhere I still  
celebrate sunlight, touch  
The rose on the grave of  
Eugene Debs...; I am  
not really this middle aged professor  
but someone from  
Winnipeg whose bones ache  
with the broken revolutions  
of Europe.

(“The Nineteen Thirties are over”)

Immigrants see it all the time: George Faludy can’t fit into the urban or rural setting. He is uncomfortable with people or even with “the splash of a frog in the pond [who] takes on haiku-like significance” (39).

If non-Jewish Canadians feel estranged, where does that put Jews? In other words, what type of rhetoric should Jewish writing assume—should it use typical Jewish imagery, and address Jewish topics? Or can they be considered “Jewish writers” if their work is free of those characteristics? So Richard Sherwin, in a very brave article, I might add, sets to discover. He creates a series of three criteria (community, calendar, commandments, pp. 119-120), to determine the Jewishness of a writer. His analysis is primarily correct, but his criteria seem artificial. Without admitting it, he aims to find “positive”

expressions of attachment to Judaism in the authors he treats. A.M. Klein, for one, is easily defined as a Jewish poet, but his work, to my ear, is frequently critical of his upbringing. Take, for instance, verses in “Psalm XXXVI: A Psalm Touching Genealogy” (cited on p. 128), such as ancestors who “eavesdrop at my ear” and who “all day pull/the latches of my heart”—these are hardly romantic visions of the past—they aim to suggest the sort of ambiguity that Klein feels towards his past. The unease with which many immigrants, first or second generation, feel towards their home country (or culture) and new community are always tense. How much to give up? Who decides? Such are the tensions that pulsate through Jewish minds today and forty years ago.

The collection also suffers from the failure to introduce a theological reading of some of the material. For instance, Shimon Levy’s article on the plays of Quebec and Israel establish the “marginality” common to both pieces. The characters are always on the balconies, waiting to go somewhere, anywhere, out of touch with real issues. But there is more. A dominant aspect of Hanoch Levin’s play is the suitcase—waiting not only for a plane ticket to New York, but one to the messianic age. Such an image, well-known to the popular imagination is documented in the seventeenth century memoir of the Jewish businesswoman of Holland, Glukel of Hameln. She notes that her uncle always had a suitcase packed by his bed in readiness for the messianic voyage to Palestine. Such an image is not to be underestimated in this play. In my view, a critique could also be valuable for the Québécois play—one can not simply neglect the rich popular images that inform the everyday life of the “masses,” and in turn, Israeli or Catholic playwrights.

Jewish culture and its role in the landscape is a topic that is still relevant to writers. For instance, *God in Paris*, a monologue/play by Michael Wex (author of *Shlepping the Exile*, Mosaic, 1993), introduces a fictional Yiddish writer of seventy years ago, Kalman Franzoys, who constantly interrupts his life story with the every-burning question: “Why write in Yiddish”?

The question can be enlarged to “why write about Jewish topics.” Wex, in his typical fast pace, tells the listener nothing. The question is never resolved. “Why write in Yiddish” pierces the piece five times, but all the author can do is keep on talking, and fast—about his bitter life in pogroms, the brutal fashion in which his wife was raped and killed, and his later re-fashioned life as a writer of erotic songs for whore houses. Even when Wex comes out with the “response”: “So what do I NEED with Yiddish? That and my circumcision was all I had left.” (p. 9), we are offered few concrete statements. Is he only claiming that language is identity? It can’t be that simple. Wex closes with a folk-tale—one that demonstrates the strength of the Jews and their viability and fortitude. It is this folk-tale which says to the listener that speaking, in symbolic tales, no less, is the answer: language which is a code in itself, reveals another set of hidden meanings: language, and in this case, Yiddish, allows the vitality of the Jew, rich with a thick library of texts, to maintain balance.

Why write in Yiddish? Why write anything? These are questions, that many, like Wex, poses at the outset of the creative endeavour. But in the end, one is forced to discard the theoretical parameters of one’s mind, and to write, to speak one’s voice about hardships, humour, love, and how one culture is ever mixed with another—what that strange piquant form of merging does to the ‘immigrant’ and one’s ‘host.’ Perhaps we are finished with the ugly outcry of letters addressed to the editor of the *Globe and Mail* about six years ago when Mordecai Richler’s sophisticated novel, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* was criticized as not being “Canadian” when it was nominated for the Governor General’s Award. Richler is, of course, identified with the urban milieu. Why is nature more Canadian than reinforced concrete? Why do our numismatic and postal images consistently portray Canada in its natural setting—it is time to emerge from the hibernating intoxication of snow and emerge to the drama of multiculturalism, in all of its vicissitudes. To this end, *At the Edge* addresses the topic well. Although I would have welcomed more essays on lesser known writers, the col-

lection is still valuable. It suggests that marginality breeds space and time to reflect on why things are, and how we can harmonize with ourselves, our neighbours and even our natural landscape.

Reena Zeidman  
Queen's University

Sirluck, Ernest. *First Generation: An Autobiography*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. 409pp.

Though not nearly so close to the chest as, say, Alfred Bader's painstakingly innocuous *Adventures of a Chemist*, this is a self-portrait almost in spite of itself. If this autobiography has a mind-your-own-business quality to it, it is in part because Ernest Sirluck is an administrator by heart and by habit, a semi-public figure sharing only semi-private thoughts. By turns proud and reticent, he was never much of a public relations man. But, as is made amply evident in this book, he was always very good with details, and this ability, together with his highly tuned sense of duty, allowed him to shoulder increasingly heavy burdens. From his undergraduate years (1935-40) at the University of Manitoba to his accession to its presidency (one of his several "Jewish firsts") three decades later, Sirluck demonstrated a propensity for extracurricular responsibility that ultimately cut short his career as a Milton scholar.

The intervening years saw him take up graduate work in English at the University of Toronto, where he fell in love with campus and city, and with his wife-to-be Lesley McNaught, the sister of historian Kenneth McNaught. He followed the political developments in Germany with growing concern, and, when war broke out, served for three years as a Canadian Army intelligence officer. In 1946 he took up a teaching post at the University of Chicago; still ABD at the time, the latter institution's superior resources allowed him to complete his dissertation and earn a tenured position. Eventually he returned to the