

Review of *Ethnic Modernism* by Werner Sollors

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Ethnic *Modernism* by Werner Sollors is an outstanding historical resource and intriguing interpretive book, originally published (according to the copyright page) in 2002 as volume six of *The Cambridge History of American Literature* and originally titled *Prose Writing: 1910-1950*. (The title switch is quite curious, seeing as how an umbrella term like "Prose Writing" was transformed into something quite specific in "Ethnic Modernism.") Brought back into print as a paperback by Harvard University Press in 2008, *Ethnic Modernism* takes a variety of approaches to the complexity stemming from the fact that the approximate heyday of modernism in the United States was also the heyday of immigration and ethnic assimilation. Sollors asks how and why did new and recent immigrants (and some groups that had been here already) embrace or decline to embrace modernist forms of art and literature in particular.

Sollors sees four basic categories through which writers of all backgrounds related to the changes occurring in the world from 1910-1950. 1) There were writers critical of modernity who critiqued it in non-modern styles. "This was the case for some genteel or nostalgic writing, at times articulated in the name of a mythic homogeneous or small-town past." He associates this with the *Saturday Evening Post*. 2) There were writers who "expressed the themes of modernity yet refrained from employing modernist forms. This was a common mode in ethnic literature (Bok, Yezierska) that described migration, immigration, ethnicity, and modernity in premodernist prose or plotlines." 3) There were writers who critiqued modernity but were on the

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vanguard of literary modernism. "T.S. Eliot is a prime example." 4) Then there were writers who were "both promodern and modernist. This was the case for many ethnic and minority writers, especially those from groups who look back to pasts that offer too little invitation for sustained nostalgia (e.g., slavery, persecution, or severe class oppression)."

Sollors' sweep is vast but his command of detail is intricate in this ostensibly literary history that doubles as a cultural history due to its seamless integration of the story of ethnic modernist literature with film, music, visual art, and politics. The years 1910-1950, writes Sollors, are those in which, "American ethnic minorities moved from the margins toward the center of American literature." Sollors' "ethnic" tent includes American writers from European, Asian, Middle Eastern, Africa, and Hispanic backgrounds. He even manages to include some white Anglo Saxon Protestants! (They are, after all, an ethnic group as well.) Delmore Schwartz, Sollors notes, thought Ernest Hemingway sounded like an ethnic writer because of his self-conscious stylistic precision. "Hemingway Spoken Here" may be Sollors' most provocative and fascinating chapter (though "Gertrude Stein and 'Negro Sunshine'" and "Freud, Marx, Hard-Boiled" are also great). William Faulkner also gets noticed. Sollors argues Faulkner was a central inspiration to ethnic writers and Faulkner himself was "ethnified" by the dominant Yankee culture. (He offers an amusing quote from Hemingway to back up that claim). (This argument about Faulkner may be less far fetched than it sounds at first. For a slightly different tack, see *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality and the Mariategui Tradition* by Hosam M. Aboul-Ela, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

Sollors' employment of his vast knowledge of publication history (a history he visits quite often) highlights the complexities of the times. Sometimes curious contradictions spring up that muddle received notions and cause a re-imagining of the terms that people thought within. Charles Scribner, for instance, published Mussolini's autobiography and Hemingway's anti-fascist novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. (Mussolini's autobiography, meanwhile, was ghostwritten by the WASP Richard Washburn Child.) Ezra Pound tried to sell his book *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* to the publisher of Communist writer Mike Gold, author of *Jews Without Money*. Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on the Road* included ambiguous feelings about Japan in the text while featuring her in an advertisement for war bonds on the back cover. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, so obscure by 1970, was enough of an international success in its early years to be translated into Italian by an anti-fascist writer in 1938.

Interestingly, Sollors claims that American ethnic modernists shied away from writing about World War II. For discussion of World War II, he turns to Yale educated WASP John Hersey and Hersey's ethnic mask-wearing in his novel of the

Warsaw ghetto, *The Wall*, his imaginary Italians in his novel *A Bell for Adano*, and finally his reportage on Japan in "Hiroshima." (Sollors even lists the inappropriate ads that appeared in *The New Yorker* alongside "Hiroshima," which eerily precipitate the tone-deaf robot-generated ads that somehow make money for Google.) In short, for Sollors, "ethnic modernism" (perhaps because it embraced modernity to escape the feudal past) was not up to the challenge of dealing with World War II (which, like World War I, demonstrated that technology was not tied to progress).

Sollors does not note that one of Hersey's closest friends later in life was the master modernist Ralph Ellison. Ellison abandoned a planned novel about an African-American pilot who was to be the only African American and highest ranking officer in a German prison camp. Since he was the highest ranking officer, the Geneva Convention stipulated he must be the spokesman for all of his countrymen – thus, for the white American prisoners. This was to be the fulcrum of the novel. Ellison abandoned it to write the high-modernist masterpiece *Invisible Man*, in which World War II is never mentioned, though there is a strong argument for its taking place in those years.

Sollors' point in dealing with non-modernist/WASP Hersey, who did face up to the war, is that "the time has come to think of modernism not as an inherently redemptive, progressive, or resistant category but merely as a set of stylistic conventions." But who thinks of it like that? Doesn't that sound a little odd considering the many years of loud if poorly considered choruses announcing "modernism = fascism" from the rooftops? (Here it seems appropriate to note the existence of T. J. Clark's monumental study of left-modernism, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, 2001). Sollors also argues that by the 1950s, the Cold War was to insure that modernism was well on its way toward becoming what he calls "capitalist state art," (opposed to Soviet or leftist realism) and illustrated anecdotally by President Eisenhower's enthusiastic embrace of the Museum of Modern Art, to which he sent a tape-recorded message of good wishes on the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1954.

Ethnic Modernism is an engrossing book. It's the sort of book that is dense with fact and thus endlessly skimmable and re-readable. The only sin of *Ethnic Modernism* is a sin of omission. Sollors deals with all sorts of writers, some who were better than others and some who are more or less modernist than others. He found space for the horrible writer Ayn Rand (and found fault with her works, but not enough fault with her absurd propaganda) while failing to mention one of the greatest writers America has produced: Nathaniel West, nee Weinstein.