



Lievens, Bart. Review of *Unshtetling Narratives. Depictions of Jewish Identities in British and American Literature*, by Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, with a foreword by Jules Chametzky, Poetry Salzburg, 2006, 214 pp.

The previous three decades have witnessed a remarkable revival of Jewish fiction in the United States. Since the 1980s, a new and dynamic generation has emerged; a generation that incorporates and discusses specific Jewish themes in its work, and that deals with the complexity of Jewish identity in a post-Holocaust mainstream America. With *Unshtetling Narratives*, Cheryl Malcolm makes an important contribution to the academic discussions on post-immigrant Jewish literature. Although she also deals with a number of writers of the 'older generations' Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, Abraham Cahan, and I.B. Singer the younger writers are certainly not ignored. Moreover, the scope and perspective of the work is broadened to include also British Jewish narratives and contemporary cinema. Malcolm's aim is indeed very ambitious, but she succeeds in maintaining a central focus in her analyses of many different writers and films. Her analyses are firmly grounded in contemporary theories on identity and the broad scale makes for a very interesting comparative perspective. Malcolm starts from a postmodern perspective on identity as a construction and process, and she highlights the processes of (self)identification. Jewish identity is regarded as ambiguous and multifaceted. In the two introductory chapters, "Peninsular Thoughts" and "Fixed States and Forged Identities", Malcolm clarifies her main theoretical objective. She regards Jewish identity as 'a composite identity built from fact and fiction' (18). Furthermore, Malcolm argues that 'any depiction of a Jew is as significant for what is put in as for what is left out' (19). Malcolm regards identities, and especially national identities, as forged and constructed. *Unshtetling Narratives* aims to examine 'how narratives may "incorporate a sociology of ethnic identity as fixed, but also include its potential as a source of adaptability and responsiveness to new challenges, as ethnic practices are not abandoned so much as reconfigured to meet the demands of a new environment" (Hendin, 10)' (20). The book aims to illustrate 'the range of depictions and different cultural treatments of Jewish identity issues from literary and film perspectives' (25). The ways in which Malcolm juxtaposes authors and works is remarkable: Cynthia Ozick next to Anita Brookner; Langston Hughes alongside Bernard Malamud, or Malamud and David Mamet. The matches are uncommon but they result in interesting and enriching comparisons.

In the second part of the book, "Hyphens and Chutzpah", Malcolm draws attention to the image of the hyphen as a symbol of the tension between Jewish faith and American identity. Malcolm sees the hyphen as a symbol of multicultural identities and as a 'useful image in charting a history of literary responses to being both a Jew and an American' (29). In Jewish American literature, this tension has often be represented and described with comic elements. She connects this to the juxtaposition of serious and trivial matters so typical in Jewish humor. For her discussion of these themes, Malcolm includes several sources about Jewish humor, and she constructs a detailed and convincing background. By referring to a number of literary texts, she presents diverse responses to the problem of the tension between Jewish faith and American identity. In the second chapter of this part, Malcolm discusses two stories of Bruce Jay Friedman in the light of what she wrote in the previous chapter. Malcolm illustrates how Friedman's stories have a place within the tradition of Jewish American literature because of the use of 'comedic treatments of spiritual issues' (39). Malcolm reveals the Jewish theme in Friedman's stories and shows how the tension between American identity and Jewish faith is present. Always referring to a multitude of relevant sources, Malcolm establishes a convincing argument.

The third part, "Journeys of Assimilation", deals with the themes of assimilation, integration, of not belonging, of being caught between two worlds in the work of Cynthia Ozick, Harold Pinter and Zina Rohan. All these texts deal with the



cost of assimilation and the losses that come from this. In her discussion of Cynthia Ozick's "Envy; or, Yiddish in America", Malcolm shows how Ozick views assimilation as a continuing process, not, as de Crèvecoeur envisioned it, as a fixed and single condition. The second chapter deals with Harold Pinter's *Family Voices*. Here, Malcolm focuses on the absences in Pinter's text, the things that can be interpreted between the lines, and she claims that Pinter actually includes a lot about his Jewish immigrant background. Like Ozick, Pinter shows the costs that come with assimilation. According to Malcolm, Pinter's play is about Jewish concerns: it deals with 'the disquiet that comes from displacement' (60). By examining the process of naming characters in the play, and by regarding characters and families as symbols for nations and ethnicities, Malcolm illustrates how Pinter's story deals with the notion of home, belonging and not belonging. Furthermore, Malcolm reveals allusions to and elements characteristic of immigrant experiences and demonstrates how the play is built on a discourse of exile. It is this reading between the lines, and excavating what lies beneath the text through careful and thorough close reading, that makes Malcolm's analyses so rich and enriching. In the third part of this chapter, Malcolm discusses Zina Rohan's *The Sandbeetle*. The novel recounts the journey of Jewish refugees in Britain who were shipped on the *Dunera* to Australia. The story is about a German Jewish protagonist in Britain who wants to hide his Jewish identity. In her discussion of the protagonist's relation with his Jewish identity, Malcolm reveals the tactics and techniques of identification and self-identification. She concludes that identity is seen as 'something provisional, amorphous and shifting' (70), something that is often imposed from the outside by others. According to Malcolm, the novel 'indicates that identity is a matter of changeable self-identifications' (71).

In the first chapter of part four, "Surrogate Black and a Shiksa", Malcolm returns to a more classic author when she discusses Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*. For the analysis of this story and the perception of Yekl of himself as an Americanized Jew, Malcolm uses 'late twentieth-century theories of referential identity formulated by contemporary Cultural Studies scholars and feminist critics' (79). With these tools, Malcolm uncovers the complex mechanism of identity politics and of 'othering' in this novel, as she refers to the assumption that 'identities require something beyond themselves to have meaning' (80). Malcolm focuses especially on the episodes in which Yekl's wife, Gitl, comes to America to join him. Malcolm claims that the character of Gitl serves to remind Yekl of his Jewish identity, thereby 'functioning as the non-Jew or one who *others*' (82). In her discussion of Yekl, Malcolm shows how he others the Jews 'around him by his appearance and speech' (87). Because of this, he takes the place of the non-Jew. Yekl distances himself from the other Jews. Through this highly detailed discussion of the processes of 'othering', Malcolm shows that identity is both 'self-perception and other's perception of ourselves' (90). This is also the conclusion that she reaches in her discussion of the Yiddish American Film, *The Cantor's Son*, in the second chapter of this part. According to Malcolm, the film is about 'an image of America which is aligned with whiteness' (91). Malcolm claims that the theme of the journeys in this film, from America to Poland or from Poland to America, function as metaphors 'for journeys of assimilation and the attainment of "whiteness" for its Jewish protagonist' (91-92). The first chapter of part five, "Poets and Other Imposters", presents a unique juxtaposition of two dissimilar authors, Cynthia Ozick and Anita Brookner. Malcolm discusses Brookner's *Providence* and Ozick's "Virility". Malcolm presents the similarities and the differences between these works. As in earlier chapters, assimilation is regarded, not as a static thing, but as fluctuating and precarious. The act of assimilation entails an act of letting go. The protagonists both run away from their former selves; they reject blood relations and actual family, and they turn to new adoptive families. But in the end, in both stories, 'what appears to be proven true is a theory of ancestral determinism over that of the individual' (103). To Malcolm, *Providence* is the 'story of an outsider who remains an outsider' (103). In this light, Malcolm also quotes Horace Kallen's famous quote 'you can't change your grandfather'. The last chapter of this part deals with Langston Hughes's "Passing" and Bernard Malamud's "The Lady of the Lake". Both stories deal with the act of passing, with wanting to forget one's former self. However, this act can also have grave consequences: the freedom attained in this way can also be some sort of trap. And what one needs to forget can become the center of preoccupation. Both these stories have the necessary elements of the passing narrative, which includes motives of silence and risk. With a clear and careful examination of names, and of the differences and similarities between the protagonists, Malcolm shows how the two stories differ: one is a study of fear, the other a lesson in poor judgment.



Part six, "Remembrance and Survival", includes works that have the Holocaust as their main theme. In this part, Malcolm examines different ways to deal with the Holocaust, the fact that Jews are always considered as being outsiders, the importance of remembering, and the equally important task to move on. These are themes that reappear in the different analyses of the works. The first chapter of this part deals with the movies *Chariots of Fire* and *X-Men*. In a very interesting way, Malcolm shows how national identities are dealt with in these films. In *Chariots of Fire*, the Jewish protagonist Harold Abraham is considered as a symbol of England, but this character nevertheless continually confronts the conventions of Englishness. Malcolm demonstrates how this character always stands apart. Contrary to the religious identity of other characters, Abraham's Jewish identity is more elusive. According to Malcolm, Abraham represents British Jews who form a 'suspect entity', not really a part of British society, in spite of the high level of assimilation. Similarly, in the movie *X-Men*, the protagonists some sort of mutants stand outside of mainstream society. Through a scene in which Auschwitz appears and through other symbols, the movie refers to the situation of the Jews in the Nazi period. Malcolm ends her discussion of these two movies by contemplating the depiction of Jews in the cinema. She concludes that they are 'perceived as different by the mainstream' (135). She asserts that 'the Jewish narrative can thus be read as a universal tale of *the other*' (136). The Jew 'has become a symbol of difference' (136). The second chapter of this part deals with Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. More specifically, it centers on the conflict between Rosa's pre-war Polish identity, and her post-war Jewish American identity. Malcolm discusses *The Shawl* as it 'provides a portrait of Polish/Jewish relations from a distinctly pre-war European perspective as opposed to a strictly post-war American one which is often clouded by the Holocaust' (139). Malcolm claims that in *The Shawl*, Ozick depicts the trauma of an assimilated Polish Jew whose love of Poland does not spare her from the same fate as an unassimilated Jew in the Holocaust' (139). The third chapter deals with Anita Brookner's *Latecomers*; a novel about child evacuees. The novel presents us with two mature men who were once child evacuees. The two men react differently to their past: one is preoccupied with it, the other does not want to look back. Malcolm sees *Latecomers* as 'an extremely somber Holocaust piece chronicling the lives of two Jews living in contemporary Britain' (152). She pays particular attention to the characterization of the two main protagonists and their two different ways to deal with the legacy of the Holocaust. Malcolm shows how memories, even if they differ between the two protagonists, even if they are horrible, or banal, are essential to establish a sense of identity and belonging.

In the first chapter of part seven, "Laughing With Caliban", Malcolm delves deeper into the fiction of IB Singer. More specifically, she pays attention to the ways in which, in the story "A Quotation from Klopstock", Nazi stereotypes and Nazi rhetoric are undermined. Malcolm argues that it is specifically Singer's comedy that is part of the subversion. Malcolm also pays attention in this story to elements of sickness and illness, and the way that Singer depicted a pre-war Warsaw: although it is a world that is characterized by sickness, the Holocaust that follows is much worse. In the second chapter, Malcolm discusses David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Malcolm looks at the ways Hwang adopts and adapts Jewish comedic figurations in *M. Butterfly* a fact that has received little attention up to now. Malcolm backs up her analysis with definitions of humor. She illustrates how the character of the *schlemiel* is used in the work. Malcolm shows how through this use of humor, certain similarities between the Jewish American and Asian American communities are highlighted. Malcolm concludes by saying that Hwang 'employs humor in the spirit of post-World War II Jewish comedians and writers who, from Sid Caesar to Roth, "emerged from the cultural closet (Boskin and Dorinson 90) with the message *mir zeinen doh* (we are here)" (180).

In the *Afterword*, Malcolm takes a look at the poetry of Anne Halley. Halley often seems to contrast the happiness of childhood with a chaotic adult life. She also points to the allusion of the Holocaust in the poetry. Somehow, however, this chapter although an interesting look on this poet - seems somewhat lost among the other chapters.

In *Unshtetling Narratives*, Cheryl Alexander Malcolm presents an original combination of literary and cinematic works. Furthermore, she offers very interesting interpretations, founded on skillful and thorough close reading and written



in a very specific and poetic style. Cheryl Malcolm always presents her analyses against an informed and relevant theoretical and historical background. She uses a lot of secondary sources in a critical and enlightening way: Sander Gilman, Emil Fackenheim, Irving Howe, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, and many others. A discourse on identity and identity formation is the central theme in this work and only on a few negligible occasions, the coherence is somewhat lost. Cheryl Malcolm has written a rich and inspired (and inspiring) analytical work, and a great contribution to Jewish studies in general and, more specifically, to the comparative study between both British and American Jewish literature and between Jewish literature and film.

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