
An enormous amount of ink has been spilt on the oeuvre of the Bohemian-Jewish writer Franz Kafka and his problematic relationship with his natal city of Prague. It is by now a familiar story of modernist alienation, Jewish deracination, and the familial antagonism between a bourgeois, mercantile father and a hypersensitive, artistic son. Scott Spector's *Prague Territories* broadens this well-known narrative by extending the fluidity between personality and politics evident in Kafka's writings to his Prague Jewish contemporaries such as Max Brod, Egon Erwin Kisch, Franz Werfel, and Paul Kornfeld, linking these writers less as a coherent "school" with a shared set of goals and beliefs and more as a loosely related circle of artists and intellectuals who faced similar problems of identity. Thus Spector's book marks an important departure from established Kafka criticism, most notably J. P. Stern's assertion that Kafka's achievement "owes little to the ambience of the German-speaking and largely Jewish writers of Prague" (*The Heart of Europe: Essays on Literature and Ideology* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992], p. 5).

Spector reads the belles-lettres, journalism, political theory, and translation of the Prague Jewish writers within a specific temporal, geographic, and cultural context that he defines through his title as "Prague territories." As the "sons" of a generation of German-speaking liberals, whose hopes were dashed by the devastations of the Great War, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the formation of new nation states, Kafka's Prague Jewish contemporaries were effectively deprived of the cultural and political certainties vouchsafed to their "fathers." This is, of course, not an original narrative in itself. The value of Spector's book lies rather in its refusal to subscribe to a traditional "negative theology" of the fortunes of this liminal and disenfranchised generation. Rather than viewing them as tragic and doomed, Spector shows how the postliberal generation dealt with their ideological crisis by means of a dazzling cultural innovation. Here he traces three areas of inventiveness: an expressionist assault on and revolt against national and cultural boundaries; a spiritual espousal of Zionism that was paradoxically at variance to the pragmatic establishment of a Jewish state; and the exploration of a cultural "no-man's land" in which translation and mediation displaced received notions of national and ethnic belonging. This resistance to a monolithic political and cultural identity — whether understood as territorial Zionism, German or Czech nationalism — underlies the plural formulation ("territories") in the title of Spector's book. The German-Jewish circle he examines is redefined as occupying an interstitial space not only between German and Czech identities, but more universally between "East and West, antiquity and future . . . ideality and materiality" (p. 238). The creative work of the Prague circle ceases to constitute a definable geographical entity but becomes an archipelago of "islands in the rift of a modern crisis" or "bridges intended intended to span a declining world and a new one, which never materialized" (p. 240).
I am thoroughly persuaded by Spector's thesis and deeply impressed by the prodigious reading he brings to bear to make his claim. The limitation of the book lies in the way it contrasts the innovativeness of the Jewish circle of Prague writers with the Czech nationalism of their German and Czech counterparts as if the non-Jewish German and Czech writers of Prague automatically and invariably aligned themselves with nineteenth-century nationalism. The truth is far more complicated. Czech writers had ceased to identify with a monolithic model of nationalism by the second half of the nineteenth century culminating in an end-of-the-century Decadent movement that made Czech culture more cosmopolitan than it had been since the late fourteenth century. The same is true of the non-Jewish writer Rainer Maria Rilke who left Prague as a young man precisely because he felt suffocated by the parochialism inherent both in Czech and German nationalist ideologies. The blame here is not to be ascribed to Spector's book per se but instead to a tradition of secondary criticism (both German and Czech) that has tended to perpetuate rather than analyze many of the monolithic assumptions of late nineteenth-century nationalism.

In other words, Spector's claims for the specificity of the Prague circle could be equally well applied to Prague writers beyond the German-speaking Jews he makes his focus. What the Prague generation between 1900 and 1938 seemed to share was a common sense of non-belonging and a quest for a pluralist identity that would circumvent the monistic limitations of nineteenth-century liberalism and nationalism (here the writings of the great Czech critic F. X. Šalda and the philosopher-president T. G. Masaryk inevitably come to mind). Although the claim could be made that the formation of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918 (under the aegis of Masaryk) caused Czech writers to be less alienated than their Jewish and/or German-speaking compatriots, their emergence as truly cosmopolitan writers – especially during and after the Decadence – ironically rendered avant-garde Czech writers as vulnerable to the uncertainties andvicissitudes of modernism as their German-Jewish confrères. For example, Paul Kornfeld's expressionist desire to find a kinship with mankind regardless of differences in ethnicity, language, and nationality finds an intriguing parallel in the early verse of the Czech poets Josef Hora and Jiří Wolker, whose confessed love of humanity was influenced by the idealism of the French vitalists Charles Vildrac and Georges Duhamel, both of whom visited Prague in 1920. Here the cultural map of Prague becomes even more complicated and protean in encompassing not only a German-Czech-Jewish connection but also a Franco-central European axis. It is no coincidence that Kafka's writings became so influential in interwar France and were instrumental in shaping the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Although Kafka's work was little known in Czechophone circles between the wars, it nonetheless shared many of the proto-existentialist anxieties of Czech as well as French writers. For example, Kafka's excruciatingly painful exploration of the contours of his own troubled sexuality in stories like "The Description of a Struggle" (the fiction in which Prague is most explicitly invoked as a territorial space), "In the Penal Colony," and "Letter to his Father" recalls the early introspective and neurasthenic stories of the Czech-Jewish (and homosexual) writer Richard Weiner who left Bohemia as a young man and settled in Paris. And the persistent tension between humanis-