Review

Literatura na świecie 7–8

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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
EMML Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
OrChr Oriens Christianus, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
PO Patrologia Orientalis, 1903ff.
RRALm Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, Roma, 1892ff.
Sae Scriptores Aethiopici.
Fasil’s book is well worth reading, not only for its portrayal of a leading figure of modern Ethiopian literature, but also as a demonstration of how hard it is to write an ‘objective’ biography.

Magdalena Krzyżanowska, Universität Hamburg


The Polish-language monthly Literatura na świecie (‘Literature in the World’) is considered to be one of the most prestigious literary publications in Poland, presenting the most significant contemporary literary texts from around the world, as well as selections of poetry, critical texts, essays, interviews, and so on. It began publishing in 1971 with the aim of presenting fragments of world literature in high-quality translations, published for the first time in the Polish language. Each issue of the journal chooses a special focus, concentrating, for example, on the literary output of a particular author, in a given language, from a specific country or region, or on a chosen topic. The reviewed issue (no. 7-8/2014) is the first ever devoted to literature from Ethiopia and was edited by Anna Górecka, Jerzy Jarniewicz, Andrzej Kopacki, Michał Lipszyc, Piotr Sommer, Andrzej Sosnowski, Marcin Szuster, Anna Wasilewska, and Nina Gackowska.

The issue begins with a fragment of Sabḥat Gābrā Ḏgzi’aba’ber’s Amharic text Letum aynāgalān (‘I will not see the end of the night’). The excellent translation from Amharic into Polish was undertaken by Magdalena Krzyżanowska (pp. 5–61). The book was first published in French in 2004, translated from the Amharic by Francis Falceto with the participation of the author. A short introduction to Sabḥat’s text written by Falceto has also been included in this issue of the journal (pp. 62–69). What makes Sabḥat’s text interesting is that it was long considered too scandalous to be published in Ethiopia, and the first publication in Amharic only occurred in 2004 (with many fragments omitted), the same year as the publication of the French version (on the basis of the full manuscript), even though Letum aynāgalān had been written some forty years earlier, in the early 1960s. The fragment included in the journal portrays a part of Ethiopian life rarely encountered in Ethiopian literature, openly painting a picture of the nightlife in Addis Abāba, including rather explicit descriptions of various sexual encounters.

* Webpage of the journal: www.literaturanaswiecie.art.pl.
which obviously account for the problems the text had with the Ethiopian censorship. This first introduction for Polish readers to Sobha’t’s writing is supplemented by a translation of a selection of his stories taken from the collection *Ammast, soddast, sâbbat* (‘Five, Six, Seven’), which allows a glimpse at another side of the author’s literary output, more didactic in character and obviously influenced by Ethiopian orature (pp. 70–105).

The next writer to be presented in the issue, Nega Mezlekía, is an Ethiopian author writing in English who has lived in Canada since the 1980s. The fragments of his autobiography *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly*, first published in 2000, have been translated by Michał Lipszyc into Polish (pp. 106–186). Despite its non-fictional character, the text reads like a novel, with its intriguing portrayal of a young boy growing up in Gigiya interspersed by short allegorical stories, clearly taken from the rich resources of Ethiopian oral tradition. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the text is the ease with which the author manages to paint a detailed picture of the town and its various inhabitants, as well as creating intriguing in-depth portraits of both the major and minor characters in the text. The interview conducted with Nega Mezlekía by Therese Eiben is an interesting supplement (pp. 187–195), due—among other things—to Nega’s explication of the differences in the perception of how reality and superstition depend on the culture one grows up with.

The last contemporary Ethiopian writer to be included in this issue of *Literatura na świecie* is Dinaw Mengestu. Yet again this is an author who writes in English and does not live in Ethiopia, having immigrated to the USA at a young age. The fragment published here is a chapter taken from his latest book published last year as *All Our Names* in the translation into Polish prepared by Michał Lipszyc (pp. 196–220). Despite being very well-written and constituting an interesting portrayal of how two young Africans almost accidentally become revolutionaries in Kampala, the fragment has little to do with Ethiopia directly, thus it was perhaps not the best example of an Ethiopian text to have been chosen for the issue. Dinaw Mengestu is, however, one of the few Ethiopian writers (if not the only one) to have been published in Polish in book form.

It must be remembered that *Literatura na świecie* is aimed at a broader audience, not necessarily well-acquainted with a given country’s history or literature. Therefore, it goes without saying that the issue would not have been complete without the highly informative article on contemporary Ethiopian literature written by Ewa Wolk (pp. 312–336). This short overview of the rise of modern Ethiopian literature brings the various texts included in the first part of the issue together and places them within a wider context.

The next part includes translations of three exceptional sacral texts originally written in Go’az (pp. 221–244). The translations done by Marcin Krawczuk
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include a sermon by Zăr’a Ya‘sqob from Māṣḥafā milad (‘The Book of Birth’) based on the manuscript edited and published by Kurt Wendt, a mä’lko’ about the Virgin Mary and a selection of prayers written by the so-called Betā Ǝsra’el or Falasha and transcribed in the nineteenth century. The texts are accompanied by an informative critical article by Marcin Krawczuk in which he gives an overview of Ethiopian writing in Go’az from its very beginnings until modern times. The translation of Emanuela Trevisan Semì’s text about the experiences of Ethiopian Jews (the Betā Ǝsra’el) in Europe during their attempts to learn about Western Judaism (pp. 351–379) can in some ways be considered a complementary text to Krawczuk’s contribution in that it provides information about the differences between Western Judaism and that of twentieth-century representatives of the Betā Ǝsra’el.

Similarly, the first translation into Polish (from Amharic) of Ḥaylā Ṣallase I’s Appeal to the League of Nations presented in June 1936 in Geneva broadens the scope of the issue by including a text of huge significance in Ethiopian history (pp. 272–289). Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł, the translator of the speech and a historian, provides additional information about Emperor Ḥaylā Ṣallase and Ethiopia during his reign in her article (pp. 290–311). Additional information about the mythology which surrounds Ḥaylā Ṣallase can be found in the translation of David González López’s article, which adds to the multi-faceted and varied portrayal of Ethiopia in the journal, since López provides an explanation of the place and significance held by Ethiopia and Ras Tafari Mäk’ännan (the later Ḥaylā Ṣallase 1) within the Rastafarian movement (pp. 337–350).

This first attempt at introducing Ethiopian literature to the Polish reader is certainly a success. It catches the interest of those used to more racy contemporary texts from around the world while giving a feel for the country for those searching for insight into the ‘Otherness’ of Ethiopia. At the same time it creates a platform both for the more traditional versions of Ethiopian literature and for informative critical articles about Ethiopian culture and history. However, it should perhaps be emphasized once again that the journal is focused on a wider audience and would probably be considered quite basic for most specialists in Ethiopian history and literature. This does not, however, subtract from the issue’s attractiveness as a wonderful introduction to Ethiopian literature for those less knowledgeable about the country and who—thanks to this comprehensive collection of literary and critical texts—will surely be on the lookout for more.
Reference list

(The reference list includes the bibliographical information of the original texts that were translated into Polish in the discussed issue of *Literatura na świecie*).


Miłosława Stepień, Konin


This book tricks potential readers: the spine sports the broadly phrased main title, attractive to many, and only from the cover do we learn that the focus lies on the more narrow case of the Arsi Oromo. Almost shamefaced, the subtitle is printed in tiny type. We all want our books to have a broad appeal, but allow me to ask: what does Abbas H. Gnamo’s work deliver for people who are not specifically interested in the Arsi Oromo, but in ‘conquest and resistance in the Ethiopian Empire’ in general? A lot, as it turns out, as most chapters manage to balance the ethnographic focus and the wider context.