

Jerusalem Post July 11, 1997

READING FROM RIGHT TO LEFT By Jeff Green

Academic literary criticism can be as specialized and technical as any other academic writing, and it is often written dreadfully, which is doubly a shame. For, as a matter of principle, everyone should try to write decently, especially people writing about important literary works. However, Hamutal Bar-Yosef, a professor of literature at Ben-Gurion University, addresses a theme of general interest, and she is also a poet, so her academic prose remains readable and graceful. In *Maga'im shel Dekadans* ("Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature: Bialik, Berdychevski, Brenner"), published by the Ben-Gurion University Press, she proposes an unconventional rereading of the three most important Hebrew authors from the late 19th century until World War I.

Bar-Yosef has long been a serious student of the decadent writers of late 19th-century Europe, even mastering Russian so she could study the poets of that school read by Hebrew writers who were their contemporaries. She explains that the term "decadent" is descriptive, not pejorative, referring to a prevalent mood expressed by poets, novelists, painters, musicians, and thinkers — the feeling that the West was collapsing into sordid inanition. For an example of decadent imagery in English poetry, look at "Adam's Curse," the 1903 poem by William Butler Yeats, where he speaks of "a moon, worn as if it had been a shell/ Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell," and concludes, "we'd grown/ As weary-hearted as that hollow moon."

Although the pessimistic resignation of decadence was widespread in European literature, nothing could be further removed, it would seem, than the spirit of national revival that animated the Hebrew poetry of Haim Nahman Bialik, Micha Yosef Berdychevski's Nietzschean rebellion against the rabbinic tradition, and Yosef Haim Brenner's pioneering Zionism. Bar-Yosef asserts that, contrary to accepted opinion, these Hebrew writers were deeply affected by the spirit of decadence (that

they fought against it is seen as a manifestation of the influence). Moreover, she argues that it is an error to view them as exclusively Jewish figures, writing in isolation from trends in the vernacular literatures around them. On the contrary, they were sophisticated readers and aware of contemporary developments in European literature, especially Russian and German.

After a general introduction on "the decadent context of Hebrew literature at the end of the 19th century" (an English version of which was published in *Comparative Literature*), Bar-Yosef presents a 200-page study of Bialik's poetry, followed by shorter sections on the other two writers. She first surveys critical opinion of these writers and then presents her own case, being careful never to overstate it and recognizing that many influences are always at work in the poetry of complex and interesting authors. Implied in her reevaluation of these central figures in modern Hebrew literature is a reevaluation of the influence of European literature on the consciousness of Zionism.

