

writers is the second issue, particularly since they are generally seen as Authors of Revival, thus presenting a certain contradiction in worldview and style. Moreover, these authors are also classified by critics as romantics or neo-romantics, because they themselves condemn the decadent mood. Bar-Yoseph insists that decadence must be included in an interpretation of these authors, not as a replacement for their main concerns but as an additional dimension heretofore ignored by scholars.

Another claim of this work calls for the reintroduction of the study of context to the mainstream of literary analysis. Indeed, the context provided by Bar-Yoseph, that of the contemporaneous literature of Western Europe, and more so of Russian literature, is quite absent from the prevailing critical readings of the authors in question. This is due not so much to theoretical objections as to technical ones; the knowledge of Russian literature accumulated by Bar-Yoseph seems to be unmatched in current Hebrew studies, and her contribution is, therefore, in and of itself singular. The situation is such as to discourage attempts at a true evaluation of the study under review, leaving the author wanting for the scholarly dialogue that she certainly deserves.

English-reading scholars are advised to refer to the previously published translations of essays by Bar-Yoseph that are included in the book, especially "Romanticism and Decadence in the Literature of Hebrew Revival," published in *Comparative Literature* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1994), "Bialik and the Baudelairean Triangle: *Ennui*, Cats and Spiders' Webs," in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1993/94), and "The Influence of Decadence on the Concept of Femininity in Bialik's Poetry," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, edited by N. B. Sokoloff, A. Lapidus Lerner, and A. Norich (New York, 1992).

Bar-Yoseph does not reject the psychological readings of Bialik, Brenner, and Berdichevski, or the poetics of their inner struggles; rather, she subordinates these readings to the dominance of the spirit of decadence. The tension resulting from the insinuating and unavoidable influence of decadence, she states, should be seen as yet another, and perhaps central, source of anguish. Indeed, her study asserts that it is the literature of decadence that turned the attention of these authors to the neurotic, the depressed, the erotic, and the suppressed aggression, creating an awareness of the psychotic and negotiating with the ideas of predetermination and the impossibility of healing: "These questions are not intended to place in doubt the authenticity of the despair expressed by Bialik in his poetry, or the claim that depression was embedded in his personality, but they point out an additional possibility, according to

Hamutal Bar-Yoseph. *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature*. Bialik, Berdichevski, Brenner. Sede-Boker: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 1997, 416 pp. (Hebrew).

As she sets out to observe trends of decadence in the literature of the three major Hebrew authors at the turn of the century, Hamutal Bar-Yoseph anticipates a number of theoretical and ideological obstacles. Indeed, the approach thorough the lens of decadence should be viewed as a pioneering step. The introduction provides preemptive arguments, confronting at least four possible challenges. The first stems from the somewhat complicated concept of decadence, which is generally associated with social, ethical, and personal degeneration, and is often condemned and judged to be a negative cultural value. Bar-Yoseph offers her own working definition of this fin-de-siècle mood in Western Europe and in Russia, liberating the concept from its common denotation and suggesting that it was a philosophical climate and literary-stylistic trend whose failure or success in literary works should be evaluated on the basis of their artistic authenticity.

The association of the concept of decadence with the modernist Hebrew

which the expression of depression, pessimism, and death wishes befitted the literary taste and the conceptual conventions in Russia at the turn of the century" (p. 113).

Reading Bialik's poetry next to the quoted poems of Fiodor Sologub, Dimitri Merezhkovskii, and the Russian translations of the contemporary poetry of Baudelaire and Verlain, as Bialik must have read them, not to mention the comparisons to Lermontov and Pushkin, is in itself a treat for the non-Russian reader, above and beyond the enlightenment one experiences upon discovering the affinities of metaphors, language, and poetic structures.

By and by, the issues of classification and periodization come to the fore, with the entanglement of definitions of modernism, its precursors and its onset, and the ensuing particularities of Jewish literature between Enlightenment and revivalism, romanticism and realism. This book points to the publication of Y. L. Peretz's collected poems, in 1894, as the initiation of Hebrew literary modernism. While its decadent qualities were noted by several critics early on, Bar-Yoseph marks the appearance of these decadent qualities as the commencement of modernism, a rather controversial option, given the diglossic works of Peretz's predecessors, who had already indicated modernist poetics and worldviews in both their Hebrew and Yiddish writings.

Whereas the theoretical issues presented in the opening chapters invite more critical discussion, the merit of the main chapters of this book lies in the learned and detailed survey, utilizing these specific tools, of some widely studied works by the three authors under concern. The broad scope of the cultural context offered, despite the somewhat single-minded approach, is invaluable for the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of our canonical texts.

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