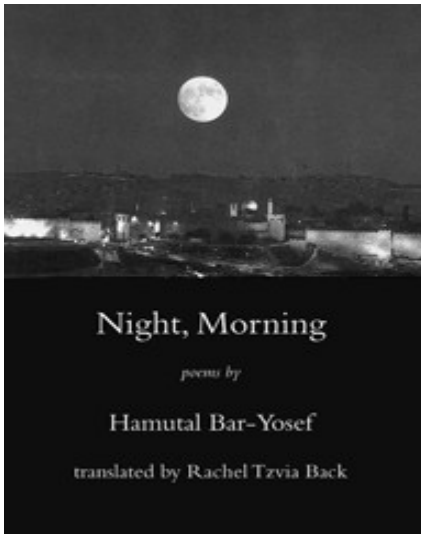


Poetry As Purification



Bar-Yosef, who the winner of the President of Israel Prize for Poetry and the Jerusalem Prize for Poetry, read in New York last month as part of her first American poetry tour.

by Sandee Brawarsky
Jewish Week Book Critic

When Hamutal Bar-Yosef was a child in Israel in the days before statehood, she learned to read and write by copying the first chapter of Psalms many times over. She filled pages with Hebrew letters at the urging of her non-religious father, who taught Bible, history and Jewish studies at a high school. At the age of 8, she began writing poetry, and she has now published nine collections of poetry and is at work on the 10th. The psalms and their rhythms still echo in her work.

The Israeli poet was in New York last month, as the first English translation of her work was published in a bilingual edition, “Night, Morning” (Sheep Meadow Press), with translation by Israeli poet Rachel Tzvia Back and an introduction by American poet David Shapiro. The winner of the President of Israel Prize for Poetry, the Jerusalem Prize for Poetry and the Brenner Prize, Bar-Yosef read at the 92nd Street Y and other venues around the country, in her first American poetry tour.

In an interview over tea, she shares the details of her biography: She was born on a kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee in 1940 to parents who immigrated from Ukraine; they left the kibbutz after her brother was killed in the 1948 War of Independence, and lived in many places around Israel. The only place she feels attached to is Jerusalem, where she has lived for the last 30 years and enjoys moving in social circles that are pluralistic. As she speaks, she also points out that biography can be misleading, that certain facts can be misunderstood as keys to an artist’s work while they are only external facts.

She’s interested when people from backgrounds that are altogether different, who don’t share

biographical details, can find connections to their own lives in her poems. "If this is achieved," she says, "you've done it."

The loss of her only brother in 1948, and the suicide of her youngest son at the age of 16 are both reflected in her poems, as she often writes of loss, trauma and bereavement, inner strength and the passage of time. She says that her earliest poems were a way for her to speak to her dead brother.

"Hundreds of owls with black glasses on their eyes/shrieked like a train without any lights/on no tracks in a forest of cries/crashing into screams and I/scream too. If I call to my brother/who will hear me who," she writes in the last lines of "My Brother's Funeral."

For Bar-Yosef, poetry is not a confession, but she wants to "convey to the reader a secret truth which I have suddenly revealed."

"Writing poetry is neither insistence nor resistance," she says, "It's purifying, it rebuilds inner equilibrium."

She likes classical forms, and her imagery is concrete, as she writes of the body, foods and smells. Her poetry is filled with images of dry crickets, black goats, yellow and red spices, a "heavy kitchen table,/more old than new" and a time "back when grandfathers and grandmothers/were pictures in books/and uncles were all refugees." Her deep knowledge of Hebrew prayer, ritual, the cycle of holidays and the Bible is evident. The poems capture moments; some convey short stories, others tell of troubled love.

In a poem from the title collection, "Here is it morning, it has arrived," she describes the arrival of the morning light, the sun "more generous than rain on boulders,/more generous than the rich merchant's son/who gives away his entire inheritance in secret."

Among the influences on her poetry, she cites first the Bible, then the Israeli poets Hayim Nahman Bialik and Leah Goldberg. She says that Israeli literature is "a very brilliant and to my mind the most reliable achievement of Zionism."

"I am a non-religious Israeli, but in Israel you cannot avoid Jewish tradition and ancient Jewish texts. They are in the air that you breathe, they fix the time, they are in the names of the streets," she says.

She's very pleased that this first English publication of her work is actually a bilingual edition, with English and the original Hebrew on facing pages.

"Whoever reads even a bit of Hebrew can experience the music and playfulness of the language," she says, noting that she always wants to have some sort of music in a poem, "even if it is anti-music."

Bar-Yosef, who has translated the poetry of others from English, French and Russian into Hebrew, notes, "Some say that poetry is what gets lost in translation. If everything gets lost in translation, then something is wrong with the poem or the story." She questions the achievements of those writers whose work is based solely on language and style.

She has been a professor of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University, and has been a visiting professor in Paris, Moscow and New York. Her poems have been translated into English, French, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Arabic and Yiddish. In addition to poetry, she has

published six works of literary research, a number of short stories and a children's book. Her scholarship includes work on the Russian context of Jewish literature and mysticism in Modern Hebrew.

“Time is the key for the possibility of creating poetry,” she says. “Poems are more likely to come to me when I have time to reflect.” In walking around New York City, she's been thinking about how it's possible to come to know and understand a new place over time, and that may be the basis of a new poem.