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| Bialik, Hayim Nahman (H. N.) (1873-1934) |
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| Hayim Nahman Bialik was one of the most influential and widely-read Hebrew poets of the twentieth century. He revitalized modern Hebrew poetry with his romantic tropes, intense introspection, allusive irony and modernist treatment of language. Together with his peer in the literary revival of the turn of the century, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Bialik re-invented the sound of Hebrew poetry by introducing accentual-syllabic meter to Hebrew.  Bialik was born into a religious and very poor family, and engaged with Jewish textual tradition even after leaving behind, first, his hasidic upbringing, and then the more rationalist and intellectual but ultimatley unsatisfying world of the famous Volozhin yeshiva.  Bialik spent the better part of three very productive decades in Odessa, the capital of the literary revival in which he was received as a young literary talent, then as national poet and one of the foremost Hebrew writers. He wrote lyric poetry, long poems, poems in the form of folk-song lyrics, children’s poetry and essay, and was an important figure in Hebrew publishing, with a particular interest in preserving the “Jewish bookcase” of classic works for secular Hebrew culture. |
| Hayim Nahman Bialik was one of the most influential and widely-read Hebrew poets of the twentieth century. He also wrote poems in Yiddish, essay, novellas, short stories and children’s poetry, was an editor, publisher, and poet par excellence of the early Zionist movement. Bialik spent his early and idyllic childhood in the village Radi near Zhitomir, and his experiences there fed the romanticism of his poetry. Bialik’s father died soon after moving the family in search of financial stability, and Bialik’s mother reluctantly sent her son to live with his paternal grandfather. His stern grandfather provided Bialik with the freedom—and library—to read widely. At fifteen, rejecting the hasidism of his family but interested in his Jewish education, Bialik went to the Volozhin yeshiva where he studied Talmud intensively, read Haskalah writings on his own, and drafted his first poem, “To the Bird” [el ha-tsipor].  The poet left Volozhin for the cosmopolitan Odessa, center of the Hebrew revival, where—punctuated by extended stays in Warsaw, Zhitomir, Moscow—he would live for three decades, teach himself Russian and German literature, and write the works that would make him famous. There Bialik met Ahad Ha-am (Asher Ginsberg)—a mentor whose “spiritual Zionism” influenced the poet—and Yehoshua Hanna Ravnitsky, with whom Bialik developed a close friendship and working relationship. Biaik married Manya Auerbach in 1893, not long after his poems first appeared in print. His poetic maturation and evolution is evident in the poems of the following decade, and he completed the bulk of the relatively small poetic oeuvre for which he is famous in the first fifteen years of his career. His first two books of poetry appeared in 1901 and 1908. During this period he also worked as an editor and publisher, founding the publishing houses Moriah and Devir.  In the hard times following the Bolshevik revolution, Bialik left Odessa for Berlin where he found a lively community of Hebrew writers and publishers. Three years later, in 1924, the poet who had written so often of his yearning for the land of his ancestors, emigrated to Palestine and settled in Tel Aviv, his home until his death.  Poetry and other writings  Bialik wrote deeply individual poetry reflecting on the development of the poet, on the shame of his impoverished upbringing, of disillusionment and of his intellectual and spiritual coming of age including a productive ambivalence towards Judaism. The short lyric poem was his primary genre, and in the early years of the 20th century, he also wrote several long poems, including the two quoted above. Bialik’s collected works were first published in 1923. Along with his peer in the so-called revival (*tehiya*), Shaul Tchernichovsky, Bialik reinvented the sound of Hebrew poetry by introducing the regular rhythm of accentual syllabic meters, and composed in the penultimate stress pattern of Ashkenazic pronunciations. His verse for children, noteworthy within his oeuvre for its terminal stress pattern that would be the standard for Israeli Hebrew, was collected in 1933.  Critics have most often associated Bialik with Romanticism when seeking a literary movement or poetic school through which to read his poetry. There is much to support a Romantic reading of Bialik—nature’s role in forming the poetic persona, the focus on the idiosyncratic individual and on national renewal, the trope of the poet-prophet. Scholars have noted his poems’ resemblance to those of William Wordsworth, although Bialik’s most direct Romantic influences were Russian.  Although Bialik was not prolific, his poems were often intense experiments so that his work evolved visibly, sometimes from one poem to the next. His poet-prophet persona, for example, appears in several poems to varying effect. While in Kishinev to report on the massacre of Jews in 1903, Bialik heard survivors’ testimony that would affect him greatly and inspire his famous “In the City of the Killings” [be-‘ir ha-haregah], a long poem evoking biblical prophecy (e.g., in addressing an interlocutor as “son of Adam”), but in which the addressee is told to flee his people and the carnage: “And now what keeps you here, son of Adam, rise and flee to the wilderness,/ And carry the cup of grief with you,/ And rend your soul to ten tatters.” Bialik rewrites the Russian romantic prophetic paradigm—and his own—to shocking effect, for the speaker is not a poet-prophet but God himself.  Yet Bialik’s poetry ought also to be read as modernist. Several of his poems contain markers of Baudelairean ennui, but according to Hamutal Bar-Yosef the overall impact is closer to Russian Decadence which condemns even as it plays with themes such as ennui, decay, hopelessness, despair. Greta Slobin shows that Bialik was well received by Russian symbolists—and for good reason. His poems’ style, themes and weltaunschauung show Lermontov’s influence: a symbolic world and language drawn from the poet’s psyche, personal experience and unconscious; the near-mystical power of language; the purity and power of romantic love. Bialik’s essays elaborate modernist conceptions of language and of culture, sometimes adapting terms and concepts of Jewish mysticism for that purpose. “The Pool” [ha-bereikhah] among Bialik’s most praised poems, has been read as the height of his symbolist poetics; the poem creates a rich symbolic world providing coded insight into the speaker’s psyche. The speaker tells of a pond in the midst of a wood, that dreams of a world in reverse, “and no one knows her heart.” Perhaps, as Ziva Shamir claims, there is no sharp romantic-modernist divide in his oeuvre. Rather, in presenting a series of images that are both natural events and erotic-mytical ones, the poems exemplifies Bialik’s romantic-modernist mélange.  Reception  From the start of his career Bialik met with critical and popular success. His poetic persona struck a chord with Hebrew readers at the turn of the century, and he was crowned national poet after the appearance of his first book of poems. His focus on the individual and on his alienation has been received as sharply departing from the explicitly ideological poems of the Haskala concerned with the Jewish people at the expense of focus on the individual.  By the 1920s, Bialik was a legend against whom younger poets, including those developing Hebrew modernism under Russian and Western European influence, defined their own work. Bialik wrote less frequently at this point, remaining a revered figure of Hebrew letters, involved in publishing, and in promoting the Jewish “bookcase” of classic works. His anthology (co-edited with Ravnitsky) of tales and folklore culled from rabbinic literature, was published in 1908-1911, when his poetic production had already begun to wane, and remains a medium for popular Israeli reception of rabbinic writings in Hebrew.  In his later years, the national poet was called upon to speak at official occasions in Jewish Palestine, his movements around Tel Aviv reported in the local press. His death was marked by modern rituals of national mourning, and 100,000 people filled the streets when his casket came to Tel Aviv as part of the funeral procession.  Bialik remains a popular figure whose work continues to receive much scholarly attention as well, with monographs on his poetry, and volumes of collected essays on single poems such as “The Pool,” “In the City of the Killings,” and “The Dead of the Desert.”  Selected Works  *Devarim she-be-‘al peh*. Tel Aviv: Devir, c.1935 (2 vols.)  *Shirim 650-658* [vol. 1]; *Shirim 659-694* [vol. 2]; *Shirim be- Yidish, shire yeladim, shire hakdashah* [vol. 3]. Tel Aviv: Mekhon Kats University of Tel Aviv and Devir, 1983-2000. (Critical edition of Hebrew, Yiddish, children’s and occasional poetry)  *Shirim*. Warsaw, Hotsa’at Tushiyah, 1901.  *Shirim u-fizmonit li-yladim*. Tel Aviv: Devir, c1933. (Children’s poetry)  *Igrot Hayyim Nahman Biyalik*. (5 vols., correspondence) Tel Aviv: Devir 1937-1939)  *Sefer ha-aggadah: mivkar ha-agadot she-ba-talmud u-va-midrashim*. Ed. H.N. Biailk and Y. H. Ravnitsky. Cracow 1907-1909. Y. Fisher (publisher) / Devir 1956. (Collection of excerpts from rabbinic literature.)  In Translation  *Selected Poems* (bilingual), tr. Ruth Nevo. Tel Aviv: Devir, 1981.  *Random Harvest: The Novellas of C. N. Bialik*. Tr. David Patterson, Ezra Spicehandler. Westview Press, 1999.  *Revealment and Concealment: Five Essays*. Tr. Zali Gurevitch. Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000.  *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik*. Tr. Atar Hadari. Syracuse University Press, 2000.  *C.N. Bialik: Selected Poems*. Tr. David Aberbach. Overlook Press, 2005 |
| Further reading:  Judith Bar-El, “The National Poet: The Emergence of a Concept in Hebrew Literary Criticism (1885-1905).” *Prooftexts*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 1996), pp. 205-220  Hamutal Bar-Yosef, Recreating Jewish Identity in Bialik’s poems: The Russian Context, in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe.* Eds. Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008  Hamutal Bar-Yosef, Romanticism and Decadence in the Literature of the Hebrew Revival. *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 146-181  Sara Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms and Blood: H. N. Bialik in His Time: A Literary Biography*. University Press of America, 2005  Dan Miron, H*. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*. Syracuse University Press, 2000  Miryam Segal, “The Conundrum of the National Poet” in *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent*. Indiana University Press, 2010  Greta Slobin, “Heroic poetry and revolutionary prophecy: Russian symbolists translate the Hebrew poets, *Judaism* 51: 4 (2002), pp. 408-418.  Eric Zakim, “Belated Romanticism” in *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006 |