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| Bluvshtain (Sela), Rachel (1890-1931) |
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| Rachel Bluvshtain was the most salient and recognizable symbol of Labor Zionism in the 20th century and remains one of the most popular Hebrew poets in Israel into the 21st century.  Bluvshtain was born to a Jewish family in Russia. As a young woman, and on her first visit to Palestine, she decided to join a Jewish settlement there, abandoning her plan to study art in Italy. Although her poems came to be associated with Labor Zionism and the Jewish “pioneers” in early 20th century Palestine, her poetic career began only once she left her work collective due to illness, and ended about a decade later with her death at forty.  Her short modernist lyric betrays Russian acmeist and French imagist influence. Many of Bluvshtain’s poems capture and express a momentary thought, feeling or memory. Their vocabulary and syntax are seemingly straightforward, with a few images, articulated concisely. This style and her poems’ explicit celebration of simplicity allowed her to be read initially as a naïve contributor to “women’s poetry.” Late twentieth and early twenty-first century scholarly works have since revised this critical assessment, showing the intertextual play, ambivalent language, and critique of contemporary poetic expectations embedded in her poems. |
| Background, Career Trajectory  Rachel Bluvshtain was born to a large, religious and cultured Jewish family in the Volga region of Russia and grew up there and in the Ukraine. She studied Hebrew as a child but her first poetic efforts were in her native Russian. Known as Rakhel or Rakhel the poet, Bluvshtain was to become the most salient and recognizable symbol of Labor Zionism in the 20th century and among the most popular Hebrew poets in Israel into the 21st century, her collected works re-printed regularly, and her grave in the Galilee a secular pilgrimage site.  Unlike most of her Russian-Jewish peers who came to Palestine during the immigration known as the “second aliya” between 1904 and World War I, this future symbol of Zionism’s own immigration was apparently unplanned. As a girl and young woman, Bluvshtain and intended to become an artist. On her way to Western Europe to continue her study of art, she was traveling in Palestine with her sister when they both decided to remain and join the Jewish settlement. The sisters famously improved their Hebrew as young adults attending a kindergarten in Rehovot.  The trip to Palestine also altered Bluvshtain’s career plans. In 1911 she joined a work collective at the Sea of Galillee, an experience she would often revisit in her poems, and in 1913 she finally made it to Western Europe to study—this time agronomy as well as art—and met the poet and journalist Maria Shkapskaya who was to become a close friend and correspondent. The outbreak of war prevented Bluvshtain’s return home from France, so she remained in Russia under difficult conditions. Upon her return to Palestine in 1919 she joined Kibbutz Degania where she remained until the tuberculosis she likely contracted while in Russia during the war led to her abrupt dismissal.  Bluvshtain’s poetic career was finally to begin. Her poems were first published in the early 1920s and she wrote the bulk of her poems when she was already quite ill and living mostly in Tel Aviv—between 1925 and 1931. Her poems appeared with regularity in *Davar*, and she lived meagerly off those payments and from piecemeal work. Two volumes of her poetry appeared in her lifetime: *Aftergrowth* (safiah) in 1927, and *From Across* (or: *From Afar*; mi-neged) in 1930. Her posthumous *Nebo* (nevo) appeared in 1932.  Poetry  Like other Jews writing in Hebrew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Palestine, Bluvshtain was a Russian Hebrew writer: Russian was her first literary language, its literature the corpus with which she was most familiar as a young woman. Much of the Hebrew and Yiddish poetry she would have read was also written by Jews intimately familiar with Russian literature. In other words, she was writing with and against the poetry of her Hebrew-writing peers and predecessors as well as her Russian poetic peers at one and the same time.  Bluvshtain was a modernist. Her stylistic decisions reflected post-symbolist trends, and her writing was influenced in particular by Russian acmeist principles and poems, as well as by its close relation, French imagism. Technically a peer of Anna Akhmatova, Bluvshtain was younger in poetic years, her first book of poems appearing about 15 years after Akhmatova’s of 1912. Bluvshtain was also a reader of Francis Jammes. She praises the French poet in her well-known essay on “The Sign of the Time” as one who prefers the naked simplicity of the newborn to verbal adornment, and he is the only writer mentioned by name in any of her three published volumes.  I am like this: quiet  as lake water,  loving the calm of the quotidian, babies’ eyes  and the poems of Francis Jammes.  —From “I” [anokhi] in *Safiaḥ* [Aftergrowth] (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1927), 18.  As in Jammes’ own poems, the speaker here calls herself and her poetry simple, using distinct images of the pure, innocent and simple to do so. The poem’s compactness and its seemingly unambiguous images are consistent with acmeist aesthetics. The speaker has undergone a transformation. In the second stanza of this three-stanza poem, she contrasts her present self and state with the dramatic self who, rather than identifying with quiet lakewater, once upon a time wrapped her soul in crimson and was one with the eagles’ cries on mountaintops. Many of Bluvshtain’s poems, like “I,” are concise expressions of cognition, capturing and sharing a momentary thought, feeling, realization, reminiscence or transformation.  Reflecting the contained, measured emotive arc of her poems—and sometimes seen as a sign of conservative poetics—the syntactic unit of poetic cognition is most often the quatrain, devoid of enjambment. Three quatrains is the most frequent arrangement in her poetic volumes; poems of 2 quatrains are also common. Occasionally even longer stanzas are, prosodically speaking, two quatrains arranged on the page as one. For example, in poem #2 of “In the Hospital” [bi-veit-ha-holim; in *Aftergrowth*], the strong stop at the end of the fourth line, marked by a semi-colon, of each 8-line stanza, as well as the rhyme scheme of ababcdcd, efefghgh, indicate that the quatrain lurks here too. (See also her “Coming” [be-vo] with its abccbdee rhyme scheme, “Fate” [goral], abcbcdeffd, and, by contrast “Gift” [shai]—all three in *From Afar*.) The ballad stanza (abcb) predominates, sometimes with two rhymes (abab; quatrains of abba are less common)—though other stanzaic forms and rhyme schemes appear as well—and the vocabulary is usually quite simple, with a few, clearly evoked images. Such is the case with “Night Milking” [halivat lailah] in which the mysterious threads are counterbalanced by the tactile images of the large, warm, cow (perhaps inspired by her time at the collectives), the moon—and the contrast between them:  Night Milking  In the courtyard—moonkicks,  Its cool flames and a still calm;  Woe, quick, to shelter, to the cowshed  To a cow breathing and warm.  And my hand silently caresses The radiant, large head—  My life is stitched to hers  With thousands of mysterious threads.  (Night Milking, *Nebo*)  In keeping with their habit of tracing possibilities, cognitive transitions or realizations and with their colloquial brevity, many of her poems contain a question. Some are even structured through questions—whether by repetition, a series of questions, or by a simple closing question that opens up the poem to the silence that follows. Questions provide “In one of my incarnations” additional poetic structure. The first half of each of the three Petrarchan quatrains ends with a question mark, moving from an outright question in the first two lines of the poem (“Was I once a beast of the beasts of the field/ in faraway days, in one of my lives?”) to a proper question, but without the distinct interrogative syntax in the second stanza (“The grayness of the feather and absence of shield/ Soul of the bird fluttered within me?”), to an otherwise declarative, wondering sentence in the third stanza:  And perhaps in the ancient faraway life I was a greenish blade of grass?  And therefore I cling to my mother-land  My resting places in her brown bosom.  Reception  Bluvshtain started writing Hebrew poetry at a time when there was a growing demand for poems in Hebrew by women, and her reception was shaped by the contemporary critical expectations and perceptions of women’s roles both in poetry and in the Jewish labor settlements in Palestine. Her first poem was published in *ha-Shiloah*, but once the influential labor newspaper *Davar* began publication in 1925 under editor and labor leader Berl Katznelson—also a former resident of Degania—Bluvshtain became associated with this well-respected organ of “Unified Labor,” and her poems appeared there frequently for the duration of her short career.  Several other poems written by women were first appearing in the 1920s in Hebrew newspapers and journals published in Palestine and in Europe, and Bluvshtain’s work was received as part of the phenomenon of “women’s poetry” in Hebrew. According to one positive early review of *Aftergrowth* which tellingly used the metaphor of labor to discuss the poet’s sexist reception, critics were receiving Bluvshtain’s first book condescendingly as an effort of the “women’s” section of the field.  Her popularity grew as, after her early death of tuberculosis, she came to be seen as a symbol and a “sacrifice” of the Labor Zionist movement and more generally of the Jewish struggle for physical, spiritual and political survival in the land of Israel.  Some sixty years after her death, a scholarly re-assessment of her poetry began with publication in Israel and the United States of books and articles devoted in part or whole to her poetry, her place in the Hebrew canon as well as the history of her reception.  Music  At the beginning of the 21st century her poems remained among the most recognized by Israelis and—in an era when poems are rarely memorized—it is not unusual for Israelis to know some of them by heart, especially ones that have been set to music. Among her many poems put to music—including “I,” “Kineret,” “To My Land,” “Locked Garden”, “My Book of Poems,” “Jonathan,” “Gift,” “I only know to tell of myself,” “In my garden I have planted you,” “My Dead—a number have been set to music more than once, and there are as many as four and five unique melodies for select poems (e.g., “I only know to tell of myself” and “Barren,” respectively). There are well over 100 musical compositions for her poems.  In 2002, her poem “Sabbath” was set to music as “Jordan Shores,” and in 2009 an album of new musical arrangements for several of her poems was issued.  Selected Works and Biography  *Safiah* [Aftergrowth]. 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