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| Shlonsky, Abraham (1900-1973) |
| Shlonsky, Avraham |
| Abraham Shlonsky can be regarded as the main architect of modern Hebrew poetry. He was born in 1900 to a socialist revolutionary mother and a Chassidic father in Kryukovo (East Ukraine) and immigrated to Palestine in 1922. Shlonsky first worked in agriculture as a pioneer at the kibbutz Ein Harod. He later moved to Tel Aviv to become a journalist, editor and translator. Early on Shlonsky rebelled against the romantic nationalism of Hayim Nahman Bialik and created a modernist symbolist style of poetry that was hegemonic in Israel from the 1930s until the early 1960s. More than any other poet, he is responsible for the transition from romantic to modernist poetry. |
| Abraham Shlonsky can be regarded as the main architect of modern Hebrew poetry. He was born in 1900 to a socialist revolutionary mother and a Chassidic father in Kryukovo (East Ukraine) and immigrated to Palestine in 1922. Shlonsky first worked in agriculture as a pioneer at the kibbutz Ein Harod. He later moved to Tel Aviv to become a journalist, editor and translator. Early on Shlonsky rebelled against the romantic nationalism of Hayim Nahman Bialik and created a modernist symbolist style of poetry that was hegemonic in Israel from the 1930s until the early 1960s. Though Shlonsky was an eclectic modernist all of his life, his poetry can be divided into distinct phases. The first phase, which lasted up until the 1930s, uses the modernist styles of Russian Cubo-Futurism and German Expressionism. These styles proved a suitable poetic vehicle to render his own dramatic experiences of immigration and pioneering. At this stage Shlonsky identified with modernism in general, and did not identify with any of its specific currents. In his article ‘Ale’i teref’ [‘Predatory leaves’], he outlines his lack of willingness to adopt a specific modernist current, an ‘ism’. This attitude was inspired by the Old Testament, which extensively combines various genres. Shlonsky ironically provides an example of how the Old Testament uses all modernist styles:  Tell me now: which of the ‘isms’ hasn’t been turned into a song in our Jewish Bible? And which of its expressions hasn’t come before the audience of the Lord? From ‘mountains will skip like rams’ and ‘the rivers will clap their hands’ (true imaginism!) and through every passage from the books of the prophets (total expressionism!) and ‘A ruin! A ruin! A ruin!’ Ezekiel’s Dadaist cry, upon being driven mad. (‘Ale’i Teref’, Ktuvim, Ed. 9, October 6, 1926.)  Paradoxically his eclecticism is also inspired by the rejection of the Shulḥan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law); he rejected any sets of rules, including modernist manifestos that express themselves in forms of ‘thou shalt not’ and ‘thou shalt’. Shlonsky’s identification with modernism as a whole, a type of ‘classical modernism,’ could be seen as a creative consequence of his writing in a minor tradition. Shlonsky worked in the context of a small readership where most readers experienced literature according to the expectations set by the realistic novel of the nineteenth century and romantic poetry. In such a literary field Shlonsky did not find room to assume a specific position in the internal strife between various modernist styles. Shlonsky sought to create an audience for modern poetry as a whole before advancing one or another current. Evidence of this lack of readiness for significant internal conflicts in the modernist camp of that period can be seen by the late date (1959) of its first controversy – between Natan Zach and Natan Alterman, Shlonsky’s brilliant protégé.  Shlonsky’s third major collection of poetry, *Lekh Lekha*, marks a change both in his biography and in his style. This transition signals disaffection with the pioneer’s agricultural-socialist world, and the aspiration for a metropolitan experience resting on artificiality, sophistication and urban alienation. This corresponds with the adoption of a symbolist style that would be associated with Shlonsky for the next twenty years.  The collection *Avne’i Bohu* (1934) is Shlonsky’s most influential collection and is wholly devoted to the description of the modern Hebrew poet’s pilgrimage to Paris. It describes an archetypical modern person’s spiritual confusion, the commercialism which flattens and makes all human values negotiable, the solitude, estrangement and ultimately, the dismantling of the self through madness. These experiences are paradoxically represented in a polished and precise symbolist style, using prodigious metaphors, depicting them as enticing. Shlonsky’s next collection continues to represent the urban experience in *Shire’I* *Hamapolet v’Hapi’us* [Poems of Collapse and Reconciliation, 1938], which also has European cities as its focus. This time the emphasis is on Prague. Sensing the tense political atmosphere of the late 1930s, the speaker depicts the fear of a totalitarian rationalization of life and of weapons of mass destruction. These fears receive symbolic expression in the Golem of Prague, a symbol of technology turning against its creators.  The collection *Avne’i Gvil* (1968) marks another dramatic change. Shlonsky adopts free verse and experiments with the style and themes made influential by Natan Zach. His poetry presents the quotidian real self who experiences ambivalent sentiments toward aging, confusion about the aims and audience of his poetry, and boredom with his way of life. These poems express an ironic account of his sense of a diminished self accompanying old age, but also a sense of mystical reconciliation with the world. The collection *Sefer Hasulamot* (1973) simultaneously represents the speaker as a charismatic-mystical being, merging with all creation, and as a speaker who subverts this idealization and presents himself as someone who ‘was kicked’ ‘by an indifferent foot’ of time. The collection also expresses Shlonsky’s new love for the poet Tsila Shamir which compensates for his diminished self. Shlonsky died in 1973, still a pivotal figure in Hebrew culture.  Shlonsky’s poetry has had a decisive impact on Hebrew literature; more than any other poet, he is responsible for the transition from romantic to modernist poetry. The unique style that he developed became the main road that Hebrew poetry took from the 1930s until the early 1960s. More recently (2005), this style has experienced a renaissance via an influential group of young poets which grouped around the literary magazine *Ho*. |
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