Nathan Alterman (1910-1970)

Born in Warsaw, Poland, Nathan Alterman immigrated to Palestine in 1925 at the age of fifteen. One of the most prominent Hebrew poets of his time, he was among those who helped spawn modernist trends in Hebrew poetry. In addition to his work as a poet, he was an influential publicist held as a kind of cultural hero representing the Zionist ethos. His poetry is characterized by symbolism and rich figurative language. Like other modernist poets, he was interested in urbanity and its rhetoric. This led to frequent comparisons with Baudelaire. However, Alterman's focus on the urbane space is accompanied dialectically by his desire for “nature” and “the countryside road.” Scholars characterize his poetry as enigmatic, and as one that requires decoding. The wide spectrum of Alterman’s poetics – from popular songs with sometimes publicist nature to lyrical poems – may have helped to establish his status as a leading figure in Israeli culture.

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Alterman’s first book of poetry, Kokhavim ba-hutz (“Stars Outside”), is often seen as marking a new trend in modern Hebrew poetry. In this book, Alterman introduced one of the most significant icons of his poetry: a symbol of the “passer-by,” who in contrast to the modernist alienated traveler is characterized by his simplicity and connection to nature. Alterman depicted in a symmetric meter and rhymed verse the encounter of the passer-by with the world. His next works, Simhat aniyim (“The Joy of the Poor”) and Shirei makot mitsrayim (“Poems of the Plagues of Egypt”), referred indirectly, yet enigmatically, to the Holocaust.

At the beginning of the 1930s he started to write publicist articles, first in various local venues and later on in the national newspapers, Davar and Haaretz. For twenty-four years, Alterman wrote a satirical political poetry section in Davar, titled “Ha-tur ha-shevei” (The Seventh Column). He came to be one of the most influential publicists of his generation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, with the publication of Ir ha-yona (“The City of the Dove”) and Hagigat kaitz (“Summer Celebration”), Alterman's focus shifts to national issues, such as questions about the nature and collective values ​​of the young state. Summer Celebration, his latest book, is considered by some scholars to be the first manifestation of postmodernism in Hebrew poetry.

Alterman was part of the “Yahdav” (“Together”) movement, which rebelled against the literary establishment, represented mostly by Chaim Nahman Bialik. Two decades later, Alterman himself became a representative of the poetic establishment, and a target for the young poet Natan Zach. The dialogue between Alterman and Zach turned out to be one of the most vociferous debates known in Hebrew poetry. In an article published in 1959, “Hirhurim al shirat Alterman” (“Reflections on Alterman's Poetry”), Zach attacked Alterman's “frozen” style. Zach advocated more liberated poetic style, free of rhyme and meter.

Alterman was also a translator, a playwright, and an author of popular songs, including children’s songs. Alterman’s symbolism, which deals both with distanced realities and with the familiar and the contemporary, has helped him emerge as a hero of the local culture, and as one of the most recognized and influential leaders of modernism in Hebrew poetry.

 Poetry

Kohvaim ba-hutz (Stats Outside) (1938). Tel Aviv: Yahdav

Simchat aniyim (The Joy of the Poor) (1941). Tel Aviv, Mahbarot lesifrut.

Shirei Makot Mizrayim (Poems of the Plagues of Egypt) (1944). Tel Aviv, Mahbarot lesifrut.

Ir HaYona (The City of the Dove) (1957). Tel Aviv, Mahbarot lesifrut.

Shir Asara Achim (Song of Ten Brothers) (1961). Tel Aviv, Mahbarot lesifrut.

Hagigat Kaitz (Summer Celebration) (1965) . Tel Aviv, Mahbarot lesifrut.

Reg'aim (Moments) (1974). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad.

Plays

Kinneret, kinneret (1962). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad.

Pundak ha-ruchot (The Spirits Hostel) (1962). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad.

Mishpat pitagoras (Pythagoras Law) (1965). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad.

Esther ha-malka (Queen Esther). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad.

Yemei ha-or ha-a’haronim” (The Last Light Days) (1990). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad.

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