Uri Tzvi Greenberg (1896-1981)

The Hebrew and Yiddish poet Uri Tzvi Greenberg was born in 1896 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in a *shtetl*, or village, called Biały Kamień in eastern Galicia and raised in the city of Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine). In many ways, he embodied the crisis of modernity, caught between the demands of language, culture, and ideology. Greenberg began his career as a young man with romantic poetry, but soon began to experiment with modernist techniques. He was one of the originators of Yiddish Expressionism, which found voice in his avant-garde journal of the 1920s, *Albatros*. After a move to Palestine in 1924, Greenberg began to write largely in Hebrew, forging new poetic forms and challenging the traditional norms of modern Hebrew poetry.

Greenberg published his first Hebrew and Yiddish poems in 1912, lyrical and romantic verse that largely referenced personal concerns. But in 1915, after the outbreak of the first World War, Greenberg was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army. His first book of Yiddish poetry, *Ergets af felder* (Somewhere in the Fields), was published during the war. In these poems Greenberg made a turn toward modernist verse, abandoning the regular rhymes and rhythm of his early poetry for less formal structures and stanzas. He continued this pattern in his next book of Yiddish verse, *In tsaytns roysh* (In the Rush of Time), in which he also began to turn to the social and national concerns that would preoccupy him for the rest of his career.

In 1921, Greenberg reached a turning point in his poetry and in his literary relationship to modernism. That year, he published his epic poem *Mephisto*, in which he explored the physical and spiritual ruins of Europe after the destruction of the war. *Mephisto* represented Greenberg’s first experiments with Expressionism, using deliberately unpoetic language, dissonant rhymes and sounds, and illogical word combinations. The poem also expresses the nihilism and despair of the post-war period, positing Mephisto, the devil, as the replacement for a God who seems to have disappeared from the world.

In the 1920s, along with the Yiddish writers Melekh Ravitsh and Perets Markish, Greenberg formed the avant-garde literary circle known as *Di Khalyastre* (The Gang). In the same period, Greenberg and his colleagues began to self-consciously develop a particularly Jewish form of European Expressionism in his Yiddish journal *Albatros*. In the first issue, Greenberg himself published a manifesto, “Proklamirung” (Proclamation), in which he declared some of the principles of the new Yiddish Expressionism: “Down with the hackneyed - and especially - with limitations in the creative process. Introspective conception. Greater depth” (111). He decried what he called “pseudoexpressionism,” works of modernism without theory and thought behind them, and advocated instead for what he called, “the free, bare, blood-seething human expression” (112). This “naked” poetry is what Greenberg produced in his *Albatros* period: subjective, ecstatic, anti-poetic in its rhythm and sound, full of neologisms and wordplay, and preoccupied with messianic and visionary figures, in particular Jesus.

Toward the end of the *Albatros* period, Greenberg began to turn away from Europe, and from Yiddish, as he became more ardently Zionist and planned his own move to mandate Palestine, where he landed in early 1924. In that year he also published his first book of poetry in Hebrew, *Eima gedolah veyareach* (Great Terror and the Moon), in which he maintained the Expressionist style he had developed in Yiddish. In a preface to the book, he rails against his critics, who he claims lack understanding of his expressionist style and the values of the new poetry he represents, calling for a “changing of the guard in Hebrew poetry” (Greenberg 1924: 3). Greenberg’s modernist poetics was not accessible or understandable to critics used to the formulaic style codified by the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik.

In the same period, Greenberg started his own journal, *Sadan* (Anvil), in which he continued to formulate his ideas of Hebrew literary modernism. In a book-length essay entitled *Klapei tishim veteisha* (Against the Ninety-Nine), a manifesto outlining a particularly Jewish type of Hebrew modernism, Greenberg decried what he called “the style of yesterday,” declaring it “totally foreign to the style of the pioneers of today and tomorrow” (Greenberg 1990, vol. 17: 200). He also suggested that Hebrew literature should not embrace traditional Western forms like the idyll and sonnet because they do not properly represent the Jewish collective experience. This essay, like his Yiddish manifestoes, reflected Greenberg’s desire to create a modernist style that was both influenced by the norms of international modernism and yet still particularly Jewish.

Greenberg continued to publish in both Hebrew and Yiddish throughout the 1920s and 1930s, although Hebrew became his primary language of literary composition after he moved to Palestine. Beginning in the 1930s, Greenberg’s Zionism became radicalized, and he joined the right-wing Revisionist movement, a period of political activism that would extend for most of the rest of his life. During this period he published *Sefer hakitrug vehaemunah*, a book of political poems that attacked the approach of the mainstream Labor Zionist movement. While seen by some critics as a great poetic achievement and the further development of Greenberg’s poetic-prophetic voice, the political nature of the poems further marginalized him in the world of Hebrew letters.

After the Second World War, Greenberg underwent a long period of literary silence, after which he produced one of his most famous and well-regarded books of poetry, *Rehovot hanahar* (Streets of the River), which appeared in 1951. This book-length cycle of poems is an extended meditation on the destruction of European Jewry and the Holocaust, in which Greenberg characteristically draws on particularly Jewish stylistic elements, such as the lament, as well as elements of his expressionist brand of literary modernism. By the end of his life, Greenberg, who was once described by the poet and critic Meir Wieseltier as the “exiled king” of Hebrew poetry, had become a decorated and widely-read fixture of Israeli literary culture.

References and Further Reading

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