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Chana Kronfeld. On the Margins of Moderism: Decentering Literary Dynamics

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REVIEW

CHANA KRONFELD. *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1996.

ON THE MARGINS OF MODERNISM: DECENTERING LITERARY DYNAMICS analyzes twentieth-century Hebrew modernism as well as pertinent literary theories, and its strengths and shortcomings derive from the ambitious nature of this dual project. Chana Kronfeld's greatest contribution is her clear overview of contemporary theorists in Israel, whose work has reached only a limited audience in North America. Hebrew and Yiddish critics such as the late Dov Sadan and Dan Pagis, or the alive and well Ziva Ben-Porat and Hannan Hever, have remained relatively unknown here, although their work has figured prominently in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Kronfeld remedies this neglect, which may be attributable to the language barrier and geographic isolation, by surveying some prominent Israeli critics' essays and by showing how their theories may deepen our understanding of Hebrew modernism.

Chana Kronfeld has contributed immeasurably to the study of Judaic literature. In addition to carrying out her original research as associate professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, she has trained a dozen of the most competent and interesting younger scholars of Hebrew and Yiddish writing. Her intellectual roots are planted in Ramat Aviv, at Tel Aviv University, where she studied with leading proponents of Israeli literary theory. Having moved permanently to the United States, however, she has guided the coming generation of Hebrew critics into academia as an avant-garde whose articles and books counterbalance an earlier brand of thematic scholarship. Kronfeld's own long-awaited book helps set the agenda for contemporary critics of twentieth-century Hebrew poetry.

On the Margins of Modernism begins with several chapters that define European modernism and situate Hebrew modernism at the margins of that territory. Two theoretical chapters then give literary examples, while sketching nuances of a theoretical framework that places Hebrew modernism in its international context. In the final chapters, Kronfeld interprets poems by Yehuda Amichai, David Fogel, Moyshe Leyb Halpern, and a number of other Hebrew and Yiddish writers.

Kronfeld presents her topic in broad theoretical terms, eschewing the narrowness of some Hebrew-only studies. She offers an erudite discussion of modernism. Moreover, she dips into theoretical issues surrounding the relationship between literary periods and literary genres. Hence her subsequent interpreta-

tion of specific poems illustrate principles that have general significance for literary theory.

Kronfeld's heavily theoretical approach to modernism also has disadvantages, for it deemphasizes empirical literary history. She occasionally works deductively from abstract rules, without reexamining specific texts that might necessitate a reframing of the historical tradition. Kronfeld thus repeats certain clichés that have outlived their usefulness. For example, she relies on the outlook of H. N. Bialik, who asserted in 1911 that S. Y. Abramovitsh created the dominant literary style or formula (*nusach* or *shablon*) in the revitalized Hebrew language. Though there is some truth in this formulation, Kronfeld's reliance on Bialik and his disciples results in an oversimplified rendering of modernist trends—interpreted as those that were initially marginal because they turned against Abramovitsh's and Bialik's *nusach*.

This dialectical history of Hebrew writing in the orbit of Abramovitsh could also take into account other forces that impinged upon twentieth-century literary styles in Hebrew and Yiddish. A direct line of literary development from Polish intellectual life, rather than a rebellion against Odessa's precepts, was embodied in I. L. Peretz—a master in Hebrew and Yiddish who had already tapped the sources of European modernism by 1890. As a poet he was less original, but Peretz initiated a radical approach to Hebrew and Yiddish fiction. His terse and colloquial tone, in contrast with Abramovitsh's baroque descriptions, anticipates some of the modernistic trends Kronfeld interprets. In his prose, Peretz drew from Polish and Russian authors and from other European writers in translation, which enabled him to create a distinctive style without making Abramovitsh the standard from which he diverged. In geographical terms, Peretz's Warsaw participated in a system of European writing that owed little to the dominant trends of Yiddish and Hebrew writing in the Odessa of Abramovitsh and Bialik. Yet Peretz was one of the most influential models for a generation of Jewish writers at the start of the twentieth century.

Kronfeld's literary history reflects her essentially ahistorical theoretical approach. Her Tel Aviv training leads her to focus on the synchronic literary system even when she recounts the diachronic history of modernism. The excellent close readings that follow her theoretical reflection are, therefore, less grounded in historical context than they are illustrative of guiding principles. Nonetheless, *On the Margins of Modernism* signals the maturation of an important post-structuralist phase in Judaic literary criticism. Kronfeld brings advanced literary theories to bear on a century of Hebrew poetry and shows that, in the margins, Hebrew and Yiddish authors expressed their unique position in this history. But though she refers to: "decentering literary dynamics," Kronfeld never makes explicit that Odessa is the center she has in mind. Warsaw's writers, in the far-off circle of I. L. Peretz, tell another tale.