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

Ken Frieden
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/rel

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/rel/52

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

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 essentially 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.

Kronfeld presents her topic in broad theoretical terms, eschewing the explicit that she has in mind. Warsaw's writers, in the late 1800s, tell another tale. Kronfeld, on the other hand, was 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 Abramovitch'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 Abramovitch 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 Abramovitch 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.

Syracuse University  
KEN FRIEDEN