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Allison Schachter. *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 198 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-981263-9.

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At Home in the Diaspora

The literary representations of the diasporic condition provide the subject for Allison Schachter's slim, elegant, stylish new book *Diasporic Modernisms*. In five brief, meticulously researched, compellingly written chapters, this book presents a useful introductory review of current theories on diaspora, followed by compressed studies of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's autobiographical novel *Shloyme reb Chaim's* (in Yiddish; *Ba-yamim ha-hem* [Of bygone days] in its simulcast Hebrew version, published between 1894 and 1912); Yosef Chaim Brenner's *Shekhol ve-khishalon* (Breakdown and bereavement, 1920); the "Berlin stories" of the Yiddish author Dovid Bergelson; Leah Goldberg's 1946 novel *Ve-hu ha-'or* (And that is the light); and an ostensibly comparative chapter on the Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky and the Hebrew and Yiddish (mostly Hebrew) poet Gabriel Preil. Although one might take issue with the cover copy claim that this is the *first* comparative history of Hebrew and Yiddish modernism–one wonders what Schachter's mentor Chana Kronfeld, among other predecessors, might make of this assertion–the scope and erudition of Schachter's achievement is uncontestable, and it is to her credit as well as a critique of her work to say that these topics could have provided material for a lengthier study.

In equal measure of praise and reservation one can affirm that the best chapters of this book are Schachter's studies of Brenner and Goldberg, both of which are models of scholarly research, theoretical sophistication, and critical insight. As laudable as these achievements are, however, they underscore an impression that Schachter is more invested in Hebrew literature than Yiddish; her readings of Abramovitsh, Bergelson, and Molodowsky lack the linguistic and structural insights on display in her consideration of Brenner, Goldberg, or Preil. This imbalance–all the more acute for being inadvertent–exerts an impact on even her best work. For example, when discussing Brenner's strategy of structuring his novel as the translated redaction of a "found journal," Schachter might have noted that this is a device that Brenner inherited from Abramovitsh. Indeed, though she schematizes these authors in two separate temporalities, the "protomodernist" and "the modernist," they share far more with one another than her distinctions suggest (pp. 25, 60).

Despite Abramovitsh's foundational role in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, Schachter's discussion of *Shloyme reb Chaim's* is strangely cursory. It focuses almost exclusively on the opening prologue, where the narrating persona Mendele the Bookseller visits the Odessa-based author Shloyme. This is the most interesting section of what in any event is not Abramovitsh's most interesting narrative. Had Schachter considered subsequent chapters, together with its original publication history, she might have seen the narrative as Abramovitsh's belated rapprochement with Zionism: it is as much a confrontation with the next generation of Jewish modernity as a reflection on "bygone days." Thus, much of the narrative first appeared in the periodical *Der Yid*, the leading Yiddish-language Zionist publication of its era. This perhaps explains the story's focus on nature, the significance of nineteenth-century Jewish agricultural settlements in the Crimea, the valorization of the Jewish craftsman, and the romance of a "new Jewish peasant" not as exercises in nostalgia, but Abramovitsh's effort to conceive the shtetl along implicitly Zionistic lines. In this light, the work is not a sentimental coda to Mendele's mockery of the shtetl, but an inversion of his earlier satire in favor of a reconstituted image of Jewish peoplehood (and Jewish masculinity). Abramovitsh in *Shloyme reb Chaim's* superimposes the emerging Zionist ideal of Jews engaging harmoniously with nature and "productive" labor onto the classic image of the shtetl.

It is Brenner's critique of these ideals–his superimposition of shtetl language, social customs, and psychic dys-

function onto the *Yishuv*–that provides a sense of commonality between these two narratives, which meet one another coming and going in multiple itineraries, temporalities, and languages. Rather than exploring these affinities in greater detail, Schachter states in a footnote to the following chapter, "Bergelson's story [*Der Bariton*, The baritone, 1929] can be read as a sequel to Abramovitsh's novels" (p. 95n31). Although this is as true of Bergelson's fiction as it is of any Yiddish literature about the shtetl, one wonders why so provocative a pronouncement goes unelaborated, and why the same cannot be said of Brenner's Hebrew fiction? In fact, the high point in her reading of Bergelson's writing is the historical discussion of Yiddish polemics during the 1920s regarding literary centers, and particularly her recognition that Bergelson offers a poetic image of the Soviet Union as a Yiddish utopia at the heart of his polemic *Dray Tsentern* (Three centers, 1926). The sensitivity toward belletristic techniques in Bergelson's manifesto offers ample evidence of Schachter's skill as a close reader, but for the most part her reading of Bergelson's actual fiction focuses on metonymies that illustrate her own theory of diaspora rather than animating the narrative logic of the story itself; while Schachter underscores and amplifies the belletristic nuances of Bergelson's essay, she dwells primarily on the polemical uses of his fiction.

The enduring echo from her chapter on Bergelson is her insistent use of the term "allegory" (p. 96). Allegory, of course, is a common term in both poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, yet its use here introduces two unaddressed risks: it minimizes the question of authorial agency by attributing narrative decisions to the function of the allegory–that is, something outside the text itself–and it reduces the rhetorical transaction to a single frame of reference. If, as Schachter claims, Bergelson allegorized aesthetic practices by clothing them in religious reference, in what ways does this equation change not only the hidden reference to modernist aesthetics but also the manifest discourse of religious revelation? Rather than creating a secularized allegory through the language of tradition, can't it be said that Bergelson puts religious reference to modern uses precisely to place these temporalities in suspension, because by employing religious discourse in modernist fiction his writing cannot be completely traditional or secular? In this regard, one might contend that his writing is actually a refutation of allegory, because it depends on the historical specificity of his language and its context–a specificity that allegory as an interpretive strategy renders moot?

These questions resound in Schachter's brief discussion of the story *Tsvishn Emigrantn* (1923) (Among emigrants in her rendering, *Among Refugees* [2005] in the published English translation), the most significant of Bergelson's Berlin narratives. At the end of the story, the protagonist describes to its narrator the plot of a novel he wishes to write, then offers an explicitly allegorical interpretation of its significance; as Schachter writes, "this story within a story illuminates the complex force of allegory" (p. 118). As I understand it, however, this digression is Bergelson's explicit reaction against allegorical hermeneutics: the protagonist, a paranoid and pitiful figure, is not a writer–his novel will never be written–and his assertions about his personal history and perceptions are demonstrably unreliable. For the reader to accept at face value an allegorical interpretation of any aspect of the narrative risks overlooking the carefully constructed sense of corrosive irony that animates this story, along with the best of Bergelson's writing generally. As Schachter asserts, "Bergelson reverses and personalizes the process of allegoresis" (p. 118). Indeed–and therefore one might question why she places such stress on the concept of allegory in her consideration of his work to begin with.

Though "allegory" is so significant and contestable a term that one wishes for a clearer justification of its usage here, an even more fundamental term for the study similarly eludes explicit elucidation: "modernism." Instead, one encounters a series of strawmen set up for the purpose of establishing what modernism is not, or how Schachter's usage of the term differs from its ostensibly established consensus. The putative authority figure who comes in for the most frequent chastisement is the late Gershon Shaked, who referred to Brenner's *Shekhol v'khishalon* as a work of "social realism and existential reflection" rather than a modernist novel (p. 59). Her insistence on challenging this anodyne distinction prompts the question: in what sense does Schachter's discussion of "modernism" illuminate Brenner's writing any better than Shaked's description? What is modernism, for Schachter, and how does it cancel out realism or existentialism? Distinctions among these terms exist, of course, but rather than walking the reader through her sense of critical difference, Schachter seems merely to assert a taxonomical designation of Brenner's "modernism" in contrast to Shaked. This does not correct Shaked's methodology, it only reiterates his error using different terms.

Schachter's polemic against Shaked sets a pattern for subsequent confrontations with brighter stars in the critical firmament: she takes Raymond Williams to task, for example, for having stated that modernism came into being when peripheral writers entered the culture of

the metropolis. "Not all modernist writers abandoned their native languages," she counters (p. 88). One wonders, though, if Williams, a Welsh nationalist whose own "native language" had been suppressed by an occupying power several centuries before his birth, would really have required this lesson. Turning her sights on the theorist Pascale Casanova, Schachter similarly notes, "Casanova, like [Gilles] Deleuze and [Félix] Guattari, views modernism as the purview of major-language modernist writers, and is thus only able to see Yiddish as an object of modernist fascination, rather than as a language of modernist creation" (pp. 104-105). Once again Schachter–following Kronfeld–makes a strawman of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Casanova, for not knowing anything about Yiddish. The accusation is correct, but why would anyone ascribe even a putative authority to them on that subject?

Instead of exerting the effort to "correct" these authors' errors–a strategy that both misuses their work and misreads it–Schachter might have attempted to define "modernism" on its own terms, using her own terms. To see modernism not just as an aesthetic taxonomy, but the reaction to a historical process manifesting itself in structural and rhetorical terms, would have strengthened the case for seeing Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms as more than just addendums to a canon of modernist writing already established in the metropolitan languages; it would have required a reconceptualization of what modernism is and how it functions. Ironically, this is exactly the task that Williams, Deleuze and Guattari, and Casanova set for themselves, and Schachter would have benefited from their example had she appreciated it in its proper measure.

These misgivings notwithstanding, there remains much of value in Schachter's study, particularly her focus on Hebrew literature. One can only hope that she will continue to think about these writers and continue to write about them. As much, therefore, as one might have wished for a more theoretically focused and a more expansive study, one can look forward to the books that will follow. Diasporic journeys, after all, are typically long, so Schachter's readers have much to learn as she continues her explorations.

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