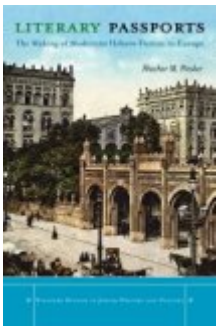
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Shachar Pinsker. *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. xiv + 487 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-7064-4.

Reviewed by Ari Ofengenden

Published on H-Judaic (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Many classical accounts of modern Hebrew literature have used the Zionist narrative as the main explanatory framework for interpreting this body of writing. Thus we were told that modernist Hebrew writing reflects the radical transformation from traditional Jewish life of the Shtetl to an autonomous, modern people, that it laments the lost world of tradition, that it revels and despairs in the vicissitudes of the process of creating the New Jew. Recent post-Zionist accounts of Hebrew literature have only exacerbated the interpretative dependency on nationalism. Using the frameworks of gender studies and postcolonialism, post-Zionist critiques have reinforced the role of Jewish nationalism, this time negating it, instead of valorizing it. Although reading Hebrew literature through a nationalist/post-nationalist perspective is productive, it fails to take into account the very transnational nature of Hebrew writing in the early twentieth century. While Hebrew writers have chosen at times to write on the need for national renewal, of its success and disappointments, mostly they have partaken, while writing in Hebrew, in the inward, reflective turn of much of modernist literature. This inward turn called for minute attention to the erotic problems of the individual, the vagaries of urban experience, and the problems of finding ultimate meaning in a modern disenchanted world. These were Hebrew modernism's central themes as they were the central themes of European modernism around it. This very sensible premise animates Shachar Pisnker's book *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*, which deals sensitively and exhaustively with modernist prose of the years 1900 to 1930. Pinsker has chosen three themes to organize his book: European cities, sexuality and gender, and modern religious experience. The book provides us with an account of Hebrew literature fit for our time, that is, an account which is urbane, creatively Jewish, and obsessed with sex, which is only to say that Hebrew writers of the turn of the century, as befitting a modernist movement, were already ahead of us. With Pinsker's book we indeed go back to the future.

In part 1, "European Cities," Pinsker maps the urban infrastructure of literature and literary networks as well as key literary representations of the cities of Odessa, Warsaw, Vienna, London, Homel, and Lvov. We follow Pinsker to the streets, the cafés, the meeting places, but most importantly to the journals and publishing houses of Hebrew literature in these incredibly vital literary centers. In part 2, entitled "Sexuality and Gender in Modernist Hebrew Fiction," Pinsker describes what he aptly calls the sexual turn in Hebrew literature. This depiction veers away from the simplistic scheme of recent discussions of sexuality and gender in Hebrew literature which posits Hebrew literature as part of an attempt to transform the traditional Jewish male. The traditional Jewish male is seen as effeminate and womanly; Hebrew literature as the cultural arm of Jewish nationalism, attempts to create a new, hyper-masculine Jewish male. In a truly important interpretative move, Pinsker argues against this interpretation. Modernist Hebrew writers did not deal with gender exclusively because they wanted to change the effeminate Jewish male into the new Hebrew masculine male; their motivations were complex and mixed with other broad cultural currents: "[T]hese writers were caught in a web of conflicting, at times irreconcilable, images and conceptions of gender and sexuality in contemporary European and Jewish culture: the crisis of masculine identity characteristic of fin de siecle Europe; the attendant rise of the "New Woman"; the Zionist attempts to transform Jewish sexuality and masculinity and the antisemitic views of the "effeminate Jew"; the obsession with femininity and with the 'dandy' in literature; and the symbolist literary preoccupation with mystical conceptions of sexuality" (p. 158).

Pinsker explicates these "images and conceptions" and their effects on Hebrew literature. This sort of much-needed complexity, and historical contextualization, is typical of the whole book. Usual critical claims about Hebrew literature are placed into a much broader west and east European context, resulting in a much richer, more complex reading of Hebrew modernism. Part 3 of the book, "Tradition, Modernity, and Religious Experience in Modernist Hebrew Fiction," deals with various highly creative projects that sought to reinvent both the Jewish tradition and represent contemporary religious experience. Pinsker describes the monumental ***haggadah/aggadah*** anthologies edited or rewritten by Haim Nahman Bialik and Micah Joseph Berdichevsky, and various projects of collecting and/or rewriting Hasidic tales undertaken by Isaac Leib Peretz, Hillel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber. Of the attraction of the Hasidim to these writers Pinsker succinctly writes, "It was possible to portray Hasidism as a humanistic, philosophical movement that rejoiced in worship of god, and at the same time as a force within Judaism that connected with the mystical and the antinomian" (p. 290). The modernist generation that came after Bialik, Peretz, and Buber did not look to the Jewish tradition as their inspiration; in fact some critics have claimed that there is nothing particularly Jewish about the work of Uri Nissan Gnessin, Gershon Shofman, Yosef Haim Brenner, and David Vogel. Pinsker shows that far from seeing this generation's modernism in wholly secular terms we should look at the complex ways in which religious experience was courted in order to transcend the deadlocks of modern existence. The book shows that the lens through which Hebrew writers became interested in their own tradition originated paradoxically through immersion and participation in the movements around them. Hebrew writers, like Russian and German symbolists and decadents, were intensely interested in mystical experience and felt strong affinities for Hasidism and Kabbalah. Most importantly, their characters experience religious epiphanies and their narratives are poetically structured around important Jewish holidays.

Pinsker's book is thus an important contribution to new modernist studies, a field which looks to expand the scope of the research on modernism beyond the classical German, French, Eng-

lish, and Russian mainstream depictions of this movement. Pinsker succeeds in showing that Hebrew prose is a contemporary of European modernist writing and is an active participant in modernist European movements of decadence and symbolism.

The book reveals the way in which writers approached their subject, tracing new paths along networks of books and people, veering constantly between moving "out" toward participation and influence in Russian and German literary movements around them and "in," looking at tradition and their personal experiences.

With the urban pavement as their earth, Eros in their hearts, and an ineffable God above, modernist Hebrew writers recreated Jewish writing. Pinsker's book is a celebration of their achievements.