

We invited four scholars to comment on the challenge of teaching texts in translation as part of our mission to focus on teaching in Jewish studies. We divided the task by the literature and time periods, and by areas most likely to be taught in universities. Our colleagues offer interesting reflections well beyond the pedagogical issues involved. Their insights about the possibilities and impossibilities of translating the subtlety of language and the challenges inherent in teaching about the cultural contexts of texts, whether they are from the seventh



LOST IN TRANSLATION?

century or the twenty-first, are contributions to understanding our enterprise. In addition, each brief essay offers a useful review of the best resources for teaching about these literatures and periods. While our colleagues do not deny that much is lost in translation, they also reflect on the ways that translation is, for our students as well as for ourselves, central to the endeavor of scholarship in Jewish studies.

How to Teach Translated Texts

Above Right: Title page from the *Polyglot Psalter* (Genoa, 1516), printed on paper. Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

TEACHING HEBREW LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

Naomi Sokoloff

There's good news and bad news for those of us who teach modern Hebrew literature in translation. First, the good news: English translations have appeared in abundance in the past few years. Prominent among them are pieces of fiction by contemporary women authors including Ronit Matalon, Orly Castel Bloom, Yehudit Hendel, Savyon Liebrecht, and Alona Kimchi. In addition a number of texts that had a major impact in Israel several decades back are now finally available in English. Appearing since 2003 are such notable titles as Haim Be'er's *Feathers* (*Notsot*, 1979), Yehoshua Kenaz' *Infiltration* (*Hitganvut Yehidim*, 1986), and Aharon Meged's *Foiglmán* (1988). Agnon's magisterial *Temol Shilshom*, from 1945, found its way into English at long last in the year 2000 as *Only Yesterday*. Happily, there is now also a new supply of anthologies and poetry collections. All of these are welcome additions to our bookshelves and syllabi.

Perhaps even more important as a resource for the classroom are books that provide readings and interpretations of Hebrew texts, together with the original pieces and their English translations. One of the best known of these is *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, which was published for the first time in 1965, issued in a revised version in 1989, and updated again in 2003. In it, each Hebrew poem is accompanied by a literal translation, a transliteration, and a commentary. The volume also contains a number of essays on the history of Hebrew poetry, prosody, and pronunciation. This approach makes the literature much more

accessible, for, as the editorial introduction explains, Hebrew texts often need to be not just translated but "discussed into English." Otherwise, too much is lost in translation. The extensive allusions so integral to Hebrew poetry, as well as the way this poetry evokes traditional contexts, are unfamiliar to many readers of English.

We should note, too, that much of the excitement of modern Hebrew literature lies in its unusual evolution and in the dramatic historical contexts which fostered and were shaped by its development. Transformed from an ancient language of prayer and scripture into a contemporary spoken tongue, Hebrew has helped bring about an astonishing cultural rebirth. This remarkable history raises myriad fascinating and ever-emerging questions: How have *belles lettres* contributed to nation building? In what ways have creative writing and film offered life-affirming responses to the Holocaust? What part have women played in the revival of a language that for centuries was considered the realm of men alone? How have popular genres such as detective fiction been written in what was once exclusively a sacred language? As they build toward the future, how do writers compose literature for and about children? In the case of Hebrew literature, even when particular texts are less than masterful, all the forces, the circumstances, and the events that brought them about and that animate this writing make for an endlessly riveting story. And this is precisely what needs to be made explicit for our students, who often find it hard to

relate to Hebrew narrative and verse. When readers lack the background to realize how extraordinary this literature is, it is crucial not just to translate but to discuss Hebrew writing into English.

Fortunately, a number of recent publications address this need. *Reading Hebrew Literature*, edited by Alan Mintz (2003), presents several poems and short prose pieces (both in Hebrew and English), along with discussions of each selection by three different scholars. This innovative format, introducing multiple voices and perspectives, adds a dynamic, interpretive give-and-take that makes the texts come alive. David Jacobson's forthcoming book, *Where are You? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (in press), offers a series of close readings and a number of new translations of poems that deal with faith and the language of prayer. Another study of note is a detailed review essay of *Only Yesterday*, prepared by Avraham Holtz. Meticulously comparing Barbara Harshav's English translation to the novel as Agnon penned it, Holtz unpacks numerous allusions and explains references to eastern European Jewish culture of one hundred years ago. With his erudition and eye for detail he constructs a guide that will be useful even for readers highly skilled in Hebrew.

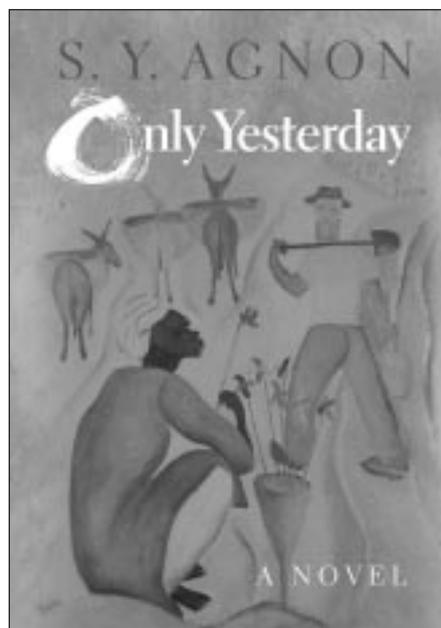
The pedagogical resources I've mentioned, which speak to a variety of students, will prove especially useful for those relatively few who have learned some Hebrew and are ready to taste a bit of the literature in the original. These tools can also be helpful in reaching another, much larger group with far less previous knowledge of Hebrew, Israel, or Judaism. Such students are now more likely than ever to come our way. At North American universities, modern Hebrew literature is often housed in departments of Near Eastern studies, and, in the post-9/11 world, students eagerly sign up for courses on

contemporary Middle Eastern politics, culture, and society. There are several big obstacles to designing effective reading lists for this audience. No books at this time adequately fill the need for a survey of Israeli literature. Much of the English language literary criticism in the field is geared toward specialists, not toward undergraduates. A pressing problem is a lack of sufficient biographies and monographs on individual writers. This is the bad news accompanying my initial announcement of good news. Without more secondary sources, especially ones designed with undergraduates in mind, all of these new translations of literary works will have limited impact.

Keep in mind, too, that the task of equipping the field of modern Hebrew literature with effective teaching aids has a special urgency. As people often say, Israel reinvents itself every few years. Israeli culture changes so rapidly; the political developments are so intense and sudden, the transformations in attitudes, outlooks, and literary expression so routinely surprising, that it is difficult to keep up, much less to explain these kaleidoscopic shifts to others. (One statistic, from the realm of books, helps illustrate this point: Israel has one of the highest per capita publishing rates in the world, and more than seven hundred novels are published in that country each year.) Consequently, canon formation has become an exceptionally daunting task. At the same time, it is difficult to convey to students what Israel was like ten, fifteen, thirty, or fifty years ago—especially when students' impressions of the Middle East are formed primarily through CNN headlines.

The challenges intensify due to the fact that many books quickly go out of print. Syllabi thus tend to be weighted toward more recent material. The resulting emphasis on new material helps students share in the excitement and enthusiasms of the moment, but

it also can foster a peculiarly skewed introduction to Israel for those students without much background. For example, the 1980s and 1990s produced a tremendous creative boom in Hebrew writing, and far more titles from this period have found their way into translation than have earlier writings. The recent literature is known, however, for its intensely self-critical, post-Zionist stances, its deconstruction of national myths, and



Only Yesterday by S. Y. Agnon, trans. Barbara Harshav. Princeton University Press, 2000.

challenges to founding ideologies. We find ourselves in a delicate situation when students encounter a culture first, or predominantly, through texts which show it in the deepest throes of self-doubt.

The fact that English-speaking students are often exposed to Hebrew literature in the context of comparative Middle Eastern studies prompts me to offer another word of caution as well. Courses on a variety of college campuses examine Israeli literature in tandem with Arabic literature and, especially, with writing by Palestinians. The intent is to offer equal time for opposing views on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the result can be to create asymmetries rather than parallels. Choosing a representative Hebrew text usually means dealing

with literature composed since 1948—hence, dealing with texts that explore discrepancies between the Zionist dream and the realities, disappointments, and moral dilemmas of statehood. Representative Palestinian writing of the same period will more likely be filled with nationalistic yearnings and aspirations for an idealized statehood not yet achieved. Accordingly, a comparison of the two literatures should be approached only with a clear awareness of this unevenness and the kind of cross-cultural examination it stands to yield.

Altogether, in order for students to understand the Zionist project, its ideologies, and its histories (including post-Zionism and other forms of dissent) we need more translations of literature from earlier eras. We also need to promote cultural studies approaches by including in our class materials such things as folksongs, folkdance, pop music, jokes, monuments, political speeches, children's literature, and more. If we are to encourage students to attain nuanced understandings, it is imperative to paint a vivid picture of Israeli culture and the culture of the Yishuv at many particular moments in their history. And, of course, it is imperative to consider the complex, multifaceted relationships between those developments and the development of modern Hebrew literature, which has been so much a part of Israeli history but which has also had its own an extensive history in Europe and America as well.

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