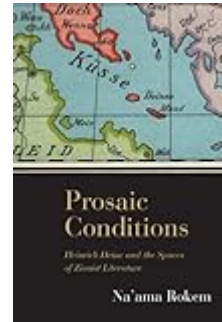




**Na'ama Rokem.** *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013. xxi + 221 pp. \$50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2867-5.



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## Hegel, Heine, and Hebrew

The rise of Hebrew prose fiction in the late nineteenth century paved the way for the success of the Zionist movement. Hebrew writers not only crafted a new modern Hebrew idiom to represent everyday Jewish life, but also sought to address new audiences and call into being new forms of national community. In her original study of the relationship between Hebrew and German prose, Na'ama Rokem moves beyond the narrative of linguistic revival to ask how Jewish writers of the early Zionist movement understood the capacities of prose to imagine alternative Jewish futures. Rokem's book traces these concerns back to nineteenth-century Germany, focusing on two seminal figures: Hegel and Heine. She then follows the legacy of these two thinkers and their reflections on prose for modern Jewish writing.

Heine and his later reception serve as a key focal point of the book. Rokem shows how the reception of Heine's work shaped the literary projects of early Zionist writers, including H. N. Bialik and Theodor Herzl. In addition, she offers an account of Heine's changing reception among Jewish and later Israeli writers. In ef-

fect Heine's reception is a bellwether of the social and political conditions in which Jewish writers find themselves, whether located in diaspora or writing from a national home. Moving deftly between German and Hebrew, Rokem's book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the monolingual and nationalist model of Hebrew literary history.

Rokem's study of prose begins with Hegel's compelling theory of the relationship between prose and the world, what he terms the "current prosaic conditions," which she describes as "the pragmatic conditions that constrain art" (p. 4). A pragmatic approach to language focuses on how meaning is produced through particular social contexts, for example, through pronominal references or deixis (references to time and place, i.e., through words like "now"). Contrasting prose to performance, Rokem illuminates how prose, in contradistinction to a performance in which the performer communicates directly to an audience, comes to the reader without any fixed context. Prose writers must create the contextual world in which their narrative can be understood; they

must concern themselves with pragmatics. Yet the diasporic Jewish writer, who lacks a fixed home and fixed social coordinates, a writer such as Heine, cannot rely on any fixed context. Rokem deftly shows how the writers grappled with these pragmatic literary concerns, linking questions of linguistic reference to the larger social and political contexts of their historical moment. For example, she offers a sharp reading of pronominal reference in Heine's *Travel Pictures* (1826) to illuminate how Heine emptied pronouns of their referential meaning to draw attention to the ambiguities of pronoun reference in prose. She links Heine's use of pronouns to his own ambiguous place in the German literary canon.

Rokem's pragmatic readings offer another way to conceive of the relationship between nationalism and the novel, not as Benedict Anderson understood it in relationship to the novel's ability to represent events taking place simultaneously across a nation, but rather looking at the audience that the novel addresses and the worlds it imagines and creates. Rokem's important book raises questions about prose fiction and its relationship to nationalism. If prose relies on referential ambiguities then why does it become the genre so closely aligned with the nation?

Examining the shared history of German Jewish and eastern European writing, the book explores the entanglement of Hebrew and German in Heine's writing. Rokem narrates the changing approaches to the translation of Heine in Hebrew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, looking at the ways various Hebrew writers sought to redeem Heine through Hebrew translation. These acts of translation also continued the dialogue between German and Hebrew, as well as Yiddish. The book traces, for example, how Bialik's Yiddish *Yam lider* (Songs of the Sea, 1908) hovers between Yehuda Halevi's Hebrew sea poems and Heine's own German poetic dialogue with Halevi, to produce a Yiddish poetic medium suspended in Hebrew and German. In addition, the book shows how David Frischman's Hebrew translation of Heine's *North Sea Cycle* returns Heine to Hebrew through translating Heine's shared references to Ha-Levi and to the Hebrew Bible. These translation

projects illuminate a literary history that oscillates between languages, Hebrew and German, continually producing diasporic works that reflect on the locatability of Jewish writing.

In chapter 3, Rokem pairs two unlikely texts, Herzl's *Altneuland* (1902) and Bialik's *City of Slaughter* (1904). Both Zionist works, written in Europe, must negotiate the gap between the context in which they are written and the pragmatic conditions in which they originate and the ideal space of national fulfillment that they envision in the future (p. 119). In her reading of Bialik's poem, she considers how he transformed his interview transcripts of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom victims into his longer poem. Rather than focusing on the historical accuracy of the poem itself, she asks how the prose account that Bialik ultimately chose not to write haunts his poem. She traces how Bialik intentionally blurred the voices of the poet, god, and the pogrom victims, exploiting the ambiguity of pronoun reference native to prose. In effect, the narrative poem is shaped by the pragmatic concerns posed by the prose account that Bialik never wrote. What makes this reading so powerful is the way she links the poem to Bialik's larger aesthetic project, which he articulated in his famous essays on writing as he grappled with the meaning of writing Hebrew in diaspora.

The book concludes by looking at the legacy of this literary history in works by two contemporary Israeli writers with deep connections to Germany: Yoel Hoffman and Haim Beer. At the end of the book, Rokem shows how even after the creation of the state these prosaic concerns continue to haunt Israeli literature, leaving the trace of diaspora in the supposedly new national literature. She offers a close reading of Hoffman's *Bernhard* (1998), a novel that, she convincingly argues, is about displacement and the limits of prose.

Rokem's book offers a powerful reassessment of both the legacy of Heine in Hebrew literature and the aesthetic challenges that Zionist authors faced in producing a national prose fiction from, ultimately, the pragmatic conditions of diaspora. At times the two arguments appear to run parallel to each other, but Rokem brings them into direct conversation in the conclusion.

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