

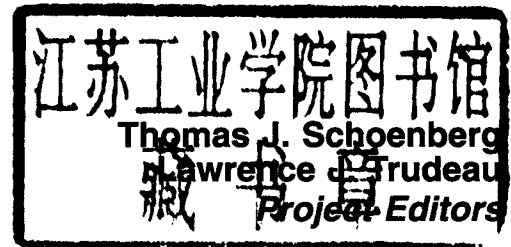
Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 201

Volume 201

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 201

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Chaim Nachman Bialik

1873-1934

(Also transliterated as Hayim and Hayyim; also Nahman and Nahhman; also Byalik) Ukrainian poet, short story writer, essayist, autobiographer, juvenilia writer, and lecturer.

The following entry provides an overview of Bialik's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 25.

INTRODUCTION

Chaim Nachman Bialik is generally considered the most important and influential Hebrew poet of the twentieth century. He is often credited with modernizing the Hebrew language and initiating a renaissance in Hebrew literature. Although he wrote essays, fiction, and children's literature, he is primarily known for his two long poems, "The Dead of the Desert" (1902) and "In the City of Slaughter" (1903), the latter of which was written in response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. Often called the Jewish "national poet," Bialik examined the suffering of the Jewish people and the effects of the Diaspora in his work, championing a unified Jewish identity. He explored universal themes in his poetry, as well, such as the loss of innocence and childhood, and drew from a variety of sources for inspiration, including memory, the Bible, and mythology. Bialik's literary efforts had a profound effect on Jewish culture and thinking in the early twentieth century. Mary Catherine Bateson has described Bialik as "the greatest modern Hebrew poet," who freed his people's language "from the suffocation associated with its traditional use in schoolroom and synagogue."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bialik was born January 9, 1873, in Radi, a village of the Volhynia district in Ukraine. When he was very young his family moved to Zhitomir. Shortly thereafter, in 1880, his father, Yitzhak Yossef Bialik, a scholar and businessman, died, leaving the family impoverished. Bialik's mother, Dinah Priveh Bialik, sent him to live with his paternal grandfather, a wealthy Talmudic scholar. Under his grandfather's supervision, Bialik received traditional instruction in Jewish law and religion until the age of sixteen, when he was enrolled in a Talmudic academy in Lithuania. Bialik excelled in his

studies and composed his popular poem, "To the Bird," while studying at the academy, but he left the school and moved to Odessa in 1891 to study European languages and literature. In Odessa, a center for Eastern European Jewish culture, Bialik became acquainted with several important scholars, including Ahad Ha'am, a prominent Zionist philosopher and writer, and J. H. Ravnitzky, both of whom helped to launch his literary career. Ha'am published several of Bialik's poems in *Ha-Shiloach*, a leading Hebrew-language literary journal. Bialik returned home in 1892 to be with his grandfather and older brother, both of whom were dying. Following their deaths, he married in 1893 and worked for his father-in-law in the timber trade. He was unsuccessful in business, however, and secured a teaching position in Odessa shortly thereafter. Upon his return, with the aid of Ha'am and Ravnitzky, Bialik's poetry began to receive critical attention.

In Odessa, Bialik taught and continued to write, while participating in Zionist activities in the community. Some of his most important work appeared in the early years of the twentieth century. "The Dead of the Desert" was published in *Ha-Shiloach* in 1902, and his famous prose poem, "The Scroll of Fire," first appeared in 1905. In 1903, during Passover, a massacre occurred in the city of Kishinev, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Several hundred Jews were wounded, while nearly fifty others were killed and almost a thousand houses and businesses were destroyed. The Jewish Historical Commission in Odessa sent Bialik to Kishinev to investigate the pogrom and record the details of the attacks. Bialik interviewed both surviving victims and other witnesses of the massacre, collecting their testimonies and recording his own impressions of the events. Shortly thereafter, he wrote a brief lyric poem titled "On the Slaughter," followed by the longer "In the City of Slaughter" several months later. Bialik helped to found *Moriah*, a Hebrew publishing house, in the early 1900s, as well, and translated several European literary masterpieces into Hebrew, including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

From 1911 to his death in 1934 Bialik stopped writing lyric poetry almost entirely. He continued his editorial work and produced a few poems for children during this time but admitted to a friend that he even found letter writing difficult. Under pressure, as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution, Bialik left Ukraine in 1921 and joined other Hebrew writers in Germany. He eventually

settled in Palestine in 1924, where he was immediately received as a celebrated literary figure. Bialik died on July 4, 1934, in Vienna, Austria, after an unsuccessful medical operation.

MAJOR WORKS

Based on midrashic legendary material, Bialik's long poem, "The Dead of the Desert," focuses on the story of heroic Hebrew warriors, who had been exiled to the desert for trying to enter the promised land without God's permission. Bialik's poem highlights the themes of exile, punishment, and redemption. Sentenced to sleep for eternity in the desert, the giant warriors in the poem are periodically attacked by various animals, including an eagle, a snake, and a lion, but remain unharmed. Despite the harsh conditions of their environment, especially the sun and wind, they sleep on, unchanged. Occasionally, they awake and attempt to defy God's punishment and enter the promised land, but their efforts are futile, and they sink back into sleep. Many scholars have praised the formal structure of "The Dead of the Desert." Rather than producing a linear retelling of the myth, Bialik presents the story in the form of a circular narrative, situating the warriors in an eternal moment of time, through which the cycle of exile and punishment repeats and perpetuates itself. Readers and critics of Bialik's time assumed that "The Dead of the Desert" was an allegorical treatment of the history of the Jewish people that leads to a Zionist revolution. Many later critics, however, have argued that a Zionist allegorical interpretation ignores the thematic and structural complexity of the poem, and have instead emphasized its mythic elements. Gershon Shaked has described the poem as "a major comment on the *condition humaine* of contemporary Jewry" in which Bialik "seeks to achieve an overall poetic conception of his people's historical essence." Shaked maintains that the poem "presents the ambivalent position of the Jews in history, their agony, rebellion, and surrender," as well as "a mythical vision of the Jewish people in our time: the Eternal Jew facing his life-death experience in an age of national resurrections."

Bialik employs motifs gleaned from Biblical sources, as well as Talmudic legend and the Kabbalah, in his prose poem "The Scroll of Fire." The poem, which is divided into several sections, begins with God on a throne surrounded by flames. The Holy Temple is on fire, but God appears calm, his slightest movement causing destruction. In the following sections, the Temple is pictured in ruins, and only a remnant of the Holy Fire remains. An angel carries this remnant to an island and hides it high in the mountains. Captives from Jerusalem are exiled on the same island, but they are eventually destroyed, with the exception of one "tender youth."

The young survivor tells his story in the sixth section of the poem, after which he discovers the Holy Fire. Upon reaching the flame at the mountain top, he is tempted by the beautiful image of the land below and dives toward it. The Holy Fire is extinguished as he dives, and the Morning Star disappears from the sky. In the final sections of the poem, the youth is shown wandering in a foreign land, searching for the Morning Star, with the Holy Fire present only in his heart. Bialik explores the familiar themes of exile, punishment, and redemption in "The Scroll of Fire," but he also examines matters related to the youth's personal struggle with temptation and longing. Many critics have also noted an autobiographical element in the poem, particularly in the sixth section, where the "tender youth" describes his childhood as an orphan taken in by a religious old man. Some scholars have noted the relationship between the youth and his lost mother in the sixth section. Moshe Moskowitz has argued that "in the final analysis, Bialik's 'Scroll of Fire' is, to borrow Freud's term, one of the 'grandest of cultural achievements' not only because in it the perpetuation of the Sacred Flame represents a personal atonement, or the endurance of a poetic passion, but because it signifies the ongoing expression of the higher strivings of Hebrew literature, from the Bible until our time."

One of Bialik's best-known long poems, "In the City of Slaughter," consists of two hundred and seventy-two lines of loosely rhymed couplets, written from the perspective of a narrator-witness, who observes the aftermath of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 while traveling through the city. On this journey the narrator encounters martyrs, who speak of horrors they experienced, as well as a weary God. Many of the details featured in the poem are drawn from Bialik's interviews with actual survivors, although, as some critics have noted, there are significant factual differences between the notes from the poet's investigation and the poem itself. While the poem includes graphic details of the brutality victims faced at the hands of their attackers, as they were injured, murdered, raped, and robbed, Bialik's factual account is primarily concerned with the perceived submission and passivity of the victims during the massacre. Although some critics had expected Bialik to memorialize the dead in "In the City of Slaughter," or to demand justice or vengeance, the poet instead highlighted the humiliation and needless suffering of the victims, and criticized them for not organizing a self-defense. Scholars have also observed that in addition to highlighting these themes, Bialik's poem criticizes the victims' reliance on God and tradition, which led to their passive response to the attack. In some lines of the poem, God is portrayed as angry with the victims for being unable or unwilling to defend themselves, while in other passages God speaks of His own loss of power. Bialik was a staunch supporter of the Zionist movement, and most have regarded the poem as a reflection

of these political views, meant to confront the Jewish community with the reality of their fragmented existence and invoke a process of self-evaluation. Bialik's hope, enacted in the poem, was that such self-reflection would eventually lead to action, a positive change, and a revival of the Jewish identity.

While the initial response to "In the City of Slaughter" was favorable, many scholars have since emphasized Bialik's political bias in the poem and consequently have regarded it as an unreliable testimony, especially to the extent that it avoids references to the acts of self-defense or heroism that took place within the Jewish community. Iris Milner has described the poem as an "emotional and political manifesto," which is "considerably removed from the actual events of the Kishinev pogrom." Other critics have similarly suggested that Bialik never intended "In the City of Slaughter" to be an accurate account. Lilach Lachman has insisted that the poem "is not a historical document on the pogrom" but offers instead "a mediated perspective on reality." Lachman concludes that Bialik's project is "no less than the radicalization of his readers' perception of history, of community and of selfhood, both in relation to the identity of the individual and to his or her place within history."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bialik's early poetry was linked to the new secular Jewish nationalist movement, which strove to redefine Jewish identity by combining universal humanistic qualities associated with European culture with the spiritual essence of Jewish life. Beginning in the 1890s his poems were praised for perfectly blending the personal concerns of the individual with the collective historical sufferings of the Jewish people. Bialik's status in Hebrew literature continued to grow after his death in 1934. Scholar Elias Schulman has asserted that "Bialik was the central figure in the rebirth of the Hebrew language and the creation of modern Hebrew literature. Bialik is a national poet who expressed through his poems the tragedy of the Jewish people, mourned its misfortunes, and simultaneously encouraged every attempt at rebuilding the Jewish state." Because of Bialik's political views, many readers and critics have approached his work from a Zionist perspective. S. Daniel Breslauer has argued that "Bialik's goal was to use Hebrew as a vehicle for conveying the natural spirit of the Jewish people," claiming that "he wanted to 'naturalize' the European tradition by recreating it in Hebrew. He presented this naturalization not as an artificial creation of a new literature but as an uncovering of the native power of the Hebrew language." Breslauer concludes that "Bialik believed that returning to the land of Israel would return the Jewish people to the natural rhythms

of life. He saw Hebrew as the path to that return because it was the one unadulterated product that Jews carried with them out of the land. He hoped that as the land gave Israel its literature, so that literature could again give Israel its land." Some critics, however, have suggested that personal, rather than political, concerns are the driving force behind much of Bialik's poetry. Citing themes associated with childhood and sorrow, these commentators have maintained that the poet's loss of his father at a young age, and his subsequent separation from his mother, provide the most important thematic material for his poetry.

Although some scholars have continued to investigate the political and personal themes in Bialik's poems, sometimes uncovering useful information about the context of some of his best-known work, many others have focused on the poet's formal and stylistic decisions in his writings. Robert Alter has addressed Bialik's unique place within the modernist movement, asserting that "the poetry of Haim Nahman Bialik is a fascinating object lesson in how a writer's work can remain untouched by the formal innovations of modernism and yet participate in the modernist spiritual project of a radical interrogation of values." Dan Miron has declared that in the early 1900s, Bialik "composed a series of the best short lyrical poems ever written in the Hebrew language. What he achieved here was primarily the perfect unity of a personal music with the projection of a unique, idiosyncratic sense of being." Citing the meter, rhythm, use of rhyme and syntax, and the "hidden feelings, half-conscious truths, elusive ambivalences and unacknowledged inner dichotomies" subtly revealed in Bialik's poetry, Miron argues that "the 'true' Bialik, shedding the official public persona of 'national poet,' made his appearance, revolutionizing Hebrew poetry and culture to the extent that they could never revert to their pre-Bialikean state of alienating rationalism or blurry emotionalism. The Bialikean revolution, romantic in its essence, changed forever the scope and depth of Hebrew poetic expression."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Poems from the Hebrew* (poetry) 1924
- Law and Legend or Halakah and Aggadah* (essay) 1925
- Selected Poems* (poetry) 1926
- And It Came to Pass: Legends and Stories about King David and King Solomon* (legends and short stories) 1938
- Aftergrowth, and Other Stories* (autobiography and short stories) 1939
- Far over the Sea* (poetry) 1939
- Knight of Onions and Knight of Garlic* (legend) 1939

Complete Poetic Works (poetry) 1948
The Hebrew Book (essay) 1951
Selected Poems (poetry) 1965
Bialik Speaks: Words from the Poet's Lips, Clues to the Man (conversations) 1969
Random Harvest (novellas) 1999
Revelment and Concealment (essays) 2000
Songs from Bialik (poetry) 2000

CRITICISM

Mary Catherine Bateson (essay date summer 1966)

SOURCE: Bateson, Mary Catherine. "'A Riddle of Two Worlds': An Interpretation of the Poetry of H. N. Bialik." *Daedalus* 95, no. 3 (summer 1966): 740-62.

[In the following essay, Bateson describes Bialik as "the greatest modern Hebrew poet" and asserts that his "reappraisal of the symbolic inventory" of the Hebrew tradition has significantly contributed to the revival of Jewish literary culture.]

From time to time a poet or writer may be credited with having "created" a language or a literary tradition, but in most cases this is a statement about the symbolic inventory of the culture rather than about the language as such. There seem to be writers who take up the materials of their language and culture and use them so that forever after they seem more deeply related to the lives of the people than they ever were before, although they were always used in the nursery, the field, the schoolroom, and the place of prayer. Haim Nahman Bialik, the greatest modern Hebrew poet, was one of a generation of intellectuals who prepared the way for a new use of Hebrew in all these places. Hebrew had to be freed from the suffocation associated with its traditional use in schoolroom and synagogue, and Bialik was able to do this by tracing through Hebrew the paths of the open fields of his childhood and the way back to his own nursery and the unresolved conflicts that lay there. He found a language wonderfully rich, which had been shaped by the Hebrew prophets and by the many poets who called themselves David or Solomon, using great names or going nameless, but had since long been impoverished by feeble indoor use. Bialik found the way to use a symbolism uniquely Judaic to express the nostalgia of every Jew for the days before he confronted his heritage and for some escape from it—the longing for some light and fresh air: "At my restoring the destroyed temple of the LORD—I will spread its canopies

and cleave in it my window." To save his own soul he had to form a new understanding of his religion, his culture, and his art.

Bialik was born in 1873 in the village of Radi, Volhynia Province, in Southern Russia. When he was six, the family moved to Zhitomir, and a year later his father died, leaving his mother destitute. They went to live with his grandfather, a Talmudic scholar, and from his household Bialik entered the various stages of Jewish education, first the Heder and then the Yeshiva, where he stayed until his early twenties, so that his entire education consisted of the study of Jewish law and tradition. Later, he began to write both poetry and prose and worked with a group of young, nationalistic Jewish intellectuals who were publishing in the city of Odessa. After World War I, Bialik became increasingly involved in political activity and eventually went to Palestine. He gave up writing because he said he felt that the time had come for action and that poetry would be only a distraction. He may have resolved the problems from which his need for poetry had sprung or he may have been discouraged by the adoption in the Zionist settlements of the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew in place of the Ashkenazic (Eastern European) pronunciation on which he had based his meter. Bialik died in 1934.

A great portion of Bialik's writing is autobiographical. In attempting to present his poetry, with its many unfamiliar strands of imagery, I have taken his life as a loom, reweaving the diverse threads of his work within the frame of his life, treating his poetry as "case material"—as evidence of his psychological make-up—although an understanding of that make-up, in turn, may be valuable only as it leads to a new appreciation of his work. Bialik made a conscious effort to speak for the Jewish people as a "national" poet and the fact that he wrote in Hebrew tended to enhance the cultural content of his poetry. Hebrew was a second, a ritual language for him, so that the best worn phrases are not homely scraps of conversation but fragments of prayers; thus, Bialik's command of Hebrew does not reflect the everyday conversation of parents and siblings but the discussions of long-dead rabbis in the schools of Asia Minor. Bialik's symbols, too, are secondary: instead of verbalizing what he has seen and touched, he tends to use previously formulated symbols which draw their dynamic from the printed page and are then associated with the real world. In this way, continually conscious that he speaks as a Jew—or as The Jew—he is able to bridge the gap between two spheres of experience.

But Bialik could not be fully representative of Jewish culture. After all, only a few members of most cultures become poets, and that only by some inner distantiation.

In the midst of my childhood I was set apart
And panted all my days for secret places and silence—
From the body of the world to its light I yearned,
Something I knew not clamored in me, like wine,
And I sought out coverts. There I gazed silent
As if peering out at the eye of the world . . .

"Splendor"

If fantasy represents an area of refuge from the narrowing realities imposed by the society in which one lives, then the very manipulation of fantasy in the arts is in some sense an escape from cultural limitations and an appeal for validation to the most personal and, as it were, the precivilized elements of the psyche. Thus, though a poet must work with the tools and materials which his culture affords, he does so obliquely, aiming for a freedom not completely sanctioned by that culture. The paths of reference by which Bialik frees himself present a striking similarity to those which Sigmund Freud described in the precivilized elements of the psyche, and part of this similarity rests on the fact that Freud was himself a Jew, tracing his theories through the same mythology and the same history that Bialik inhabited. Poetry, then, was the only way Bialik could survive the culture to which he was so closely tied; but he escaped only in order to come back, reshaping his own understanding of Jewish traditions and eventually deeply influencing their interpretation by all Jews who adopted Hebrew as a spoken language.

Bialik's life may be seen as a complex variation of a familiar pattern. Born in a sunny village where his childhood was relatively free, he garnered a few years in paradise to carry with him through life, a remembered, day-to-day paradise which was merged not only with the lost paradise of his people but also with that of every child; for every child must lose the unlimited right to his mother's body and presence and learn that he will never possess her but must turn toward the competitive world of the father. In this way, the memory of a lost paradise is for Bialik truly "overdetermined" and he carries within himself a manifold nostalgia for previous happiness: the "milk and honey" of his mother's breasts, of the village of Radi, and of Eden and the Land of Israel. His father's death a year after the move from Radi to Zhitomir, instead of restoring paradise, plunged Bialik into complete dependence on the masculine world of his grandfather, where not even Bialik's mother had the right of intercession, for she was tolerated as a poor relative who had to be taken in. And then the boy was locked in the Hebrew school, where the hours of study were lengthened from year to year until his whole adolescence was worked out—to the extent that it was worked out—in the dark room of the Yeshiva at his grandfather's command.

This pattern corresponds to both the myth and the history of the Jewish people and to Freudian theory; it is present in a culturally very specific form in the indi-

vidual lives of Eastern European Jews, where the image of the mother as warm and sheltering is very highly developed until suddenly the boys are shut up in a rigorous, academic discipline which, for the talented ones, continues into or through manhood. Not only is this study oppressive; it is also fiercely competitive, for it is the only area of distinction, the only area in which a Jew could hope to manipulate reality or even be a good Jew.

In this house, between these walls,
Not a day—but six years have passed on his soul;
Here his childhood bore its first fruits, and his youth
ripened,
And here his eyes were quenched and his features
paled.

All day and half the night, he does not move from his
place,
There he eats his black crust in hunger—
For who are you, adamant, who are you, flint,
To a Hebrew boy occupied with the Torah?

"The Constant Student"

Bialik built on his relation to the cultural prototype in his effort to tread a line between the two paths taken by his contemporaries. On the one hand, he would not join those Jews who repudiated their religion and most of the culture of the Diaspora and became violently nationalistic and aggressive, because he was aware that a Jew can justify the demand for special consideration for his people only by sharing with them a precious culture or a divine designation: when these are denied, the nationalists are involved in nothing but a banal contest for power.

So say: Enough for me of satiating hate
And shame and abasement in place of my love.
Do I still not see the lifted hand of falsehood?
Whom have I there? What have I there? I'll return to
my rest.
I'll not soil the true God's wonder in the dust,
I will not sell my birthright for a mess of pottage,
My voice won't mingle in the trumpet-blast of falsehood,
Rather than a whelp among lions' whelps I will perish
with sheep.
I was not endowed with claws and fangs—
All my strength is God's, and God—life!

I saw the lions' whelps with golden curls
Who fell as carrion on grazing ranges of deer.
All flesh is grass, its strength withers,
For the spirit of the LORD blows through it—and it is
gone.

"On the Threshold of the House of Study"

Bialik could not accept the substitution of the extrinsic values of nationalism for the intrinsic values of Judaism, that is, the substitution of self-definition by aggressive confrontation with the outside world for the unique