

Dvora Bregman. *The Golden Way: The Hebrew Sonnet during the Renaissance and the Baroque.*

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Hebrew-Italian poetry is one of the least known fields of literary production both within Hebrew literature and within European literature as a whole. And yet, there is no lack of grounds for interest in it. Firstly, there is the vastness of its corpus, which extends from the age of Dante to the unification of Italy, covering six centuries of literary history. Secondly, there is the fact that this poetry is the expression of a cultural minority that possesses ancient traditions and which is constantly balancing the acquisition of elements pertaining to the culture that surrounds it with the fidelity to its own characteristics. Finally, there is the level of excellence which this poetry attained in various cases, which attracts not only the historical curiosity of the scholar, but also the aesthetic appreciation of the reader.

Placing herself within a small circle of highly respected researchers, such as Hayyim Schirmann, Dan Pagis, and a few others, Dvora Bregman brings to fruition an extremely valuable enterprise, both as editor and scholar of the history and the theory of this school of poetry. With this book, which is the updated English translation of the 1995 Hebrew version, Bregman makes this important work available to the Anglophone reader, and provides a useful introduction to this little known literature.

What exactly is meant by “Hebrew-Italian poetry”? This term encompasses poetry written in Hebrew by Jewish-Italian authors, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century. It is both liturgical and secular in nature, and it passes through periods parallel to those of Italian literature (from the *dolce stil novo* to the Renaissance, from the Baroque to classicism), adapting various poetic forms that are essentially Italian, such as the sonnet or the “Dantesque” *terzina*, and also drawing upon the Hebrew poetic tradition, which flourished essentially in the

Arabic-speaking Spain of the tenth to the twelfth centuries. As Bregman demonstrates with precise and subtle analysis, Hebrew-Italian poetry grew out of the synthesis of these two poetic cultures, adopting the metrical, rhythmic, and phonetic constrictions of both traditions. From a formal point of view, the history of this poetry can be understood as a constant oscillation between these two poles. The same goes for genre and theme, which undergo innovations with respect to the Jewish tradition, such as the idea of the *donna angelicata* (“angelic lady”) as a means of spiritual elevation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or the turbid sensibility of bodily decay typical of the Baroque. However, these thematic innovations are always placed within the realm of Jewish culture through a series of linguistic and textual references which “Hebraize” them, making them appear as if they pertained legitimately and “naturally” to Hebrew literature.

In this study, Dvora Bregman concentrates on the sonnet. Actually, in opting for this form, Bregman deals essentially with Hebrew-Italian poetry: in her edition of all the Hebrew sonnets of the medieval and premodern era (*Ts’ror Zehuvim*, “A Bundle of Gold,” Jerusalem and Beer-Sheva [1997]) — which should be read in parallel to this study — the compositions of the Italian school represent practically all of the texts: only a few of them were written by Dutch or North African authors. The success of the sonnet, first in Italian poetry, and subsequently throughout Europe, is well known, and the sonnet occupies a central role in Hebrew poetry, as well. Immanuel of Rome, a contemporary of Dante to whom Bregman devotes the first part of her book, holds the honor of having made Hebrew the second language — after Italian — in which this poetic form was composed. Thanks to her extremely precise and thoroughly innovative analysis of Immanuel’s sonnets, Bregman demonstrates how this poet successfully adapts the Italian hendecasyllable to traditional Hebrew prosody, thus creating a model which would be followed for centuries, with very little modification. An alternative model, put forth by the fifteenth-century poet and philosopher Moses da Rieti, based on a syllabic meter that abandoned the quantitative system of Spanish origin, would not be adopted by Jewish-Italian poets, despite the evident advantage of increased facility, and Bregman attempts to explain the reasons for this choice.

After Immanuel, the sonnet seems to have been abandoned for almost two centuries by Hebrew-Italian poets. Bregman interprets this phenomenon as a reaction against the content of some of Immanuel’s sonnets, the eroticism of which had become unacceptable. Moreover, Immanuel’s *Mahberoth* — compositions in rhymed prose and poetry, in which his sonnets are found — were explicitly banned by the rabbinic authorities on account of the content, which they considered frivolous and occasionally obscene. If the Hebrew sonnet came to be identified with these contents, its prudent revival had to be presented in another light. It is to the analysis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the second part of the book is dedicated.

This section, which is no less rich than the first in acute and innovative interpretations, does not concentrate on just one author. Among the various poets treated here emerge the figures of Leon Modena, Moses Zacuto (whose poetic

opera omnia Bregman is about to publish, providing yet another precious contribution to the field), and the Francés brothers, Ya'aqov and Immanuel. In fact, the Baroque era saw the blossoming in Italy of a great number of excellent poets, who expanded genres and themes, reaching what can be considered the apex of this poetic school.

Also worthy of mention is the quality of the English translation, which renders with clarity discussions of a foreign literature that are sometimes quite complex. The systematic transliteration and translation of original citations are also quite helpful in this regard.

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