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Left-Wing Melancholy in Early Hebrew Literature

In 1931, the radical critic Walter Benjamin wrote against the Social-Democratic Erich Kaestner as a representative of “Left Wing Melancholy.” For Benjamin, the popular author served a seemingly critical but actual power-serving status-quo and consensual approach. More recent theoreticians such as Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Rebecca Comay, retrieved this concept coined by Benjamin, in order to criticize a passive left-wing approach to the current democracy. Much like Benjamin, all three theoreticians reclaim the crisis of the German 1920s as a key and a model for the present political crisis.

My article follows this recent theoretical trend while diverting the attention to the Zionist writing of the 1920s-1940s. Much like Kaestner’s Social-Democratic literature, well known voices among the Jewish Yishuv met a political-Zionist pressure for consolidation and homogeneity with a melancholic voice. Melancholy served as a critical and a literary topos that avoided the unwanted attention of politicians. For that reason, early Hebrew writers often depicted protagonists who reflected about the double gap at the heart of melancholy: a growing distance to a lost European past, and a growing awareness of the gap between ideals and reality in Palestine, and in the present. In his “On Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) Freud pointed out that this double temporal gap, or sense of loss, should be considered a pathological one and—unlike mourning--, disable the process of healing.

As a case study, I chose the relationship between Israel Zarchi—a well known author during the 1940s and a reader of Freud—and his compatriots, the “fathers of Hebrew literature” YH Brenner and Sha”i Agnon. While all three demonstrated how a double loss works for their protagonists, only Zarchi depicted those characters that represented a “left-wing melancholy,” and then rebelled against it.