

The Hebrew Professor

Things were peaceful last century;
the place so backward,
even a bad rumour couldn't get here —
there was no transport, you see.
No one talked of the chosen people
arrayed against the Canaanites
and the Philistines.
The Masada ruins were just ruins;
not ringed with the rhetoric of the day.
In the sea-floor silt,
the gifted could still glimpse
the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah;
though you need the "seer-eye" to see through
the thick translucence of the Dead Sea.

But the observers did us in:
pilgrim and explorer.
If you look at a place long enough
its contours wobble,
serenity itself can turn fretful.
Consulates came up and dragomans
and package tours. Kaiser Wilhelm
walked through Jerusalem in 1898.
The ravages of progress were here to stay.
How can one not believe in
the oneness of the observer and the observed ?

The diggers tinkered around,
hoping to unearth some
hidden Herodian palace under the
sands.
The locals who confused
archaeology with necromancy,
thought the fellows
had come to poison their wells!
So we too slipped into a stereotype:
the present has always been
a historian of the shabby.
Me? You are interested in me, are you,
and not in what I say?
We moved in here during the war,
from the fringe of pogroms
to the outskirts of Jaffa,
In '48 my teacher said to me,
"If you don't belong to a city,
a country, an age,
you must surely belong to a language!"
And so I took to Hebrew

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