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Modern Hebrew Literature: Zionist Perspectives and Israeli Realities

1

GATHERINGS OF PEOPLE interested in the Jewish literary situation tend to pressure our thinking in the direction of streamlining, of eliciting from the chaotic reality of that situation some unifying pattern. Both as literary people and as historians we are conditioned in this direction. Indeed, the more chaotic the surface of the object or situation we investigate, the stronger our urge to expose the hidden order beneath. My point, to put it succinctly, is that in investigating the contemporary Jewish literary scene, we should refrain from applying our habitual reductive procedures. We should rather accept it for what it is, a fragmented array of diverse, independent literary developments, which, nevertheless, come into contact in a common artistic commitment to the imaginative probing of the possible significance or significances of the Jewish experience under contemporary circumstances.

There is no such thing as a unified Jewish literature, and there has not been one since the fragmentation of our national culture at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Indeed, one of the inherent and most significant characteristics of Jewish history in modern times is that it produced no one Jewish culture but many variants of possible Jewish cultures or sub-cultures. To the same extent it could not produce one Jewish literature. Rather, it produced two or three or four independent Jewish literatures as well as many Jewishly oriented literary developments, which evolved within the contexts of non-Jewish literatures.

Of course, the so-called new or secular Hebrew literature of the last two hundred years always regarded itself as the true and legitimate custodian of national literary creativity. It appointed itself a *tsafe leveyt*

yisrael ("a watchman unto the House of Israel"), an institution responsible for the moral and cultural well-being of the nation. But its claims were always challenged by its great rival, the literature of the hasidic movement, which regarded it as illegitimate, profane and non-Jewish. Neither were these claims acceded to by Yiddish writers, secularized though they were. And Yiddish literature itself, once it had attained some cultural status by the beginning of the twentieth century was quite ready to declare itself the only legitimate and truly contemporary Jewish literature.

The fragmentation of the Jewish literary expression in modern times indicates the basic difference between each of the so-called "new" Jewish literatures and the "normal" national literatures; a difference, which often makes comparisons difficult and analogies misleading. A decision on the part of a German, a Frenchman or a Spaniard to become a writer and contribute to his national literature need not involve any a priori ideological commitment, beyond a commitment to literature itself. During the last two hundred years, however, a Jew's committing himself to literature was inextricably bound up in an ideology: a secular Hebrew literature, a secular Yiddish literature, hasidic Hebrew-Yiddish literature, a Jewish literary expression in a non-Jewish language, etc. Even the total assimilationist made a similar commitment in a negative fashion. By his very choice of language and context, every Jewish writer expressed loyalty to a certain conception of the national culture and indicated his faith in its further development towards a specific national-cultural goal.

Many writers worked within the framework of more than one Jewish literature. Indeed, bilingualism and even trilingualism were not only common but also "natural" under the specific cultural conditions. Abramovitsh said that for him writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish was like breathing through both his nostrils. For some time, only those with the keenest ideological motivation refrained from such dualities. This bilingualism, however, does not indicate the existence of a single, unified bilingual or multilingual literature, as some theorists (Sh. Nigir and Dov Sadan) claimed. It indicates, instead, a unique cultural situation, which made functioning within more than one literary context possible, and, for many writers, even necessary. No matter how consistent they were, multilingual writers actually adapted their work to different, often contradictory, ideological contexts, which directly influenced the aesthetic and ideational structure of their work. They did that even when writing the *same* work in more than one language, as many of them did. Actually, it is through a comparison of the two versions of such works that we can best detect the characteristics of the different, even contradictory contexts to which the work in question has been adapted.

A Jewish writer, therefore, choosing to become a writer, had also to opt for a certain national ideology, which directed him towards participation in one Jewish literature or another. This does not mean, of course, that ideological struggle was impossible *within* any one of the above-mentioned Jewish literatures. It was, and it often unleashed stormy polemics. These struggles, however, were caused by the friction among rival versions of one overall ideology. Such were the struggles of Labor-Zionist writers against Revisionist-Zionist writers in Erets-Israel during the 1930s, or those of the Communist Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union against the Socialist-Bundist ones in Poland between the two World Wars. Such struggles often surpass in ferocity the campaigns against "external" adversaries.

This led to yet another difference between modern Jewish literatures and "normal" national ones, namely: most "normal" national literatures have but one overall goal—to give literary expression to the national entity as such. Each of our Jewish literatures had a "goal" in a different sense. Evolving within its specific ideological frame of reference, it was meant to be not only an expression of the nation but also its guide. It had to direct it, to point to it the correct cultural path (according to its specific ideological bias) and criticize it for not following it. The ideological element also tended to promote the programmatic and didactic functions of literature over the purely expressive ones.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, this entire cultural complex has been largely eliminated. Israeli literature, for better or worse, has approximated "normalcy," that is to say, it is being created without any a priori ideological commitment except the commitment to literature as such. Non-Zionist, and even anti-Zionist writers contribute to it, as do Arab writers, provided that they live in Israel and write in Hebrew. This, I submit, constitutes the one decisive difference between Israeli literature and all other Jewish literatures in the past and the present. Yet, far from creating a unified Jewish literature, the advent of an Israeli literature has even further complicated the cultural situation. For now, in addition to many contesting Jewish literatures, there is a differentiation to be made between "abnormal" and "normal" ones.

Theories which predicate the existence of a single, all-encompassing Jewish literature are bound to remain ingenious tours de force which fail to carry conviction. The arguments they develop are always more interesting than persuasive, and even where they are substantiated by solid historical evidence, ideological wishful thinking takes precedence over empirical observation. These theories offer us much brilliance, but also a particular kind of obfuscation. The proportions of the past are blurred, subtly but persuasively. Literary figures of peripheral significance are endowed with absorbing interest, while major writers,

unaccounted for by the theoretical scheme, are brushed aside. As for future perspectives, literary reality proves repeatedly how inaccurate predictions made within such theoretical contexts can be and since the literary future is always cited as the final proof of any given theory, it is the future which most fully exposes the theorist's myopia.

Zionist expectations for the development of modern Hebrew literature offer a telling instance of the inadequacy of theory. I will offer two sets of historical examples, the first drawn from the formative years of Zionism as well as of modern Hebrew literature in the 1890s and the second, from the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the founding of Israel led to the search for a new Hebrew Erets-Israeli literature. In both cases, literary thinkers of the first order presented highly interesting theories predicting the future of our literature. Examining the shortcomings of these theories and predictions, we can perhaps chasten our own urge to offer encompassing explanations of the contemporary literary situation.

2

To invoke old Ahad Ha'am as the first illustration may raise a few eyebrows. Ahad Ha'am's severe limitations as a philosopher of Judaism, ideologue of Spiritual Zionism, and literary mentor of his age have long since become painfully obvious and today only his direct style and graceful essayistic exposition are still valued. Indeed, even as he reached the zenith of his career, with the foundation of the literary monthly *Hashiloah* (1896), a group of young writers, led by M. Y. Berdyczewski, vigorously challenged his conception of Hebrew literature as a vehicle for Judaic self-knowledge. Subsequently, Ahad Ha'am was often charged with insensitivity to the aesthetic-emotive impact of belles-lettres. Dov Sadan went so far as to identify him as one of the three culprits responsible for Bialik's failure to realize his full poetic potential.¹

Yet, Ahad Ha'am did contribute the first carefully thought-out Zionist 'theory' of Jewish literature. Among the founding fathers of Zionist thought, he alone seriously pondered the problematic situation of Jewish literature in his own day as well as in the foreseeable future. His starting point was a devastating critique of Jewish literature in modern times. Since the emergence of the Jewish Enlightenment toward the end of the eighteenth century, he maintained, all first-rate Jewish literary talents found their way to non-Jewish literatures. Writing in foreign languages for foreign audiences, they strove to incorporate their work into traditions and values unrelated to their national heritage. What Jewish traces or characteristics survived only added spice to a dish meant for non-Jewish consumption. Those writers who wrote for Jewish audiences in foreign languages maneuvered themselves into a spiritual ghetto. Since they knew they would be read only during the two or

three decades their readers needed to integrate their interests with those of the surrounding culture,² such writers accepted in advance an extremely short literary life expectancy. The task of establishing a national literature was left to other writers, usually the least talented or poorest equipped intellectually, who dedicated themselves to writing in their national language, Hebrew, for readers who have already developed some rudiments of a secular, humanistic *Weltanschauung*. Determined further to humanize these readers by revitalizing their atrophied aesthetic sensibility, these writers too were doomed to failure. Their outpouring of lyrical poems, didactic epics, allegorical dramas and eventually also sentimental novels failed to develop a genuinely poetic idiom in Hebrew. Their supposedly elevated, highly ornamental imitation of biblical Hebrew was devoid of aesthetic or intellectual impact. This failure stemmed, not from lack of talent and literary culture or from their adherence to a misguided poetics, but the linguistic situation *per se*.³

Ahad Ha'am's analysis of this situation was thoroughly up-to-date and, in the context of contemporary Hebrew criticism, he was certainly an innovator. As early as 1893, he formulated his idea of poetic language:

To the extent that there exists an inherent difference (as far as literary usage is concerned, D. M.) between a language which lives in speech and one which lives in books—it bears only upon emotion (i.e., upon emotive expression); because emotions are activated not only by the plain concepts indicated by the literal meanings of the words of the language, but also by the abundant subtle images which are associated with every spoken word through its constant use, and which coexist with it in the depths of the soul, where the speaker cannot sufficiently analyze and clarify them even to himself. This subtlety of feeling cannot, therefore, be sustained in a language which is not spoken. However, when it comes to clarity of thought it is the written word rather than the spoken one which counts. Every civilized nation actually possesses a special written language for the purposes of spelling out its thoughts and cogitations, and this is often very different from the language used in speech.⁴

Here, to use somewhat anachronistic terminology, Ahad Ha'am postulates a truly connotative language as the only soil out of which an emotive literary idiom could grow. Words influence us poetically only when they activate secondary and associative shades of meaning derived from personal and immediate usage, i.e. from speech. This assumption eliminated the very possibility of a contemporary poetic expression in Hebrew. Under the existing linguistic circumstances, Ahad Ha'am believed, Hebrew could sustain only a literature rooted in denotative language, a literature of concepts rather than emotions, aiming at clarity of thought rather than the aesthetic activation of the readers' feelings. Rather than devaluing belles-lettres, as the critics of his editorial policy charged, Ahad Ha'am's theory shows that he was motivated by despair

rather than by disdain. Even the sentence which so infuriated Berdyczewski and his followers (in Ahad Ha'am's programmatic introduction to the first issue of *Hashiloah*), that "as for sheer poesy, the outpouring of the emotions over the beauty of nature, the sweetness of love, etc.— whoever cares for it will find it in languages of other nations to his heart's content"—although unhappily phrased, conveyed a feeling of "sour grapes" rather than lighthearted dismissal.⁵ Ahad Ha'am kept reminding his opponents that he too craved for "sheer poesy" in Hebrew, but that he could not disregard the difference between the desirable and the possible.⁶ The nation had realized its full poetic potential only in the Bible, which was composed in Erets-Israel by native Hebrew speakers, who enjoyed political and cultural independence.⁷ To regain the emotive-aesthetic dimension, Hebrew would have to be written once more under the same conditions and therefore the emergence of a truly poetic Hebrew literature depended on the slow evolutionary realization of the Zionist ideal. For the time being, he argued, the nation would have to do without such a literature.

For those who proposed Yiddish as a national language, Ahad Ha'am had nothing but contempt. Yiddish, like all other ancillary Jewish "jargons," was to him a passing peripheral phenomenon. With chilling accuracy and total lack of empathy, he prophesized its eventual decline. Although the language seemed at the time to seethe with the connotative richness necessary for nourishing genuine poetic expression, it still lacked for him the real intimacy, which only a direct connection with the national childhood could produce. A national literature, he argued, like a single poet's work, could not be written in a language acquired late in life and severed from the earliest communal memories. As Yiddish had no "real" past, it could look forward to no real future. If it was not to be lost to the nation, everything of value written in Yiddish would have to be translated into Hebrew.⁸

3

Deducing the chances of a national Jewish literature from basic Zionist social and political principles, Ahad Ha'am produced the only logically sustained Zionist literary ideology. But, of course, he was wrong: literary reality refuted his theory even as it was being propagated and debated. For a time, in the late 1880s and early 1890s, his analysis could seem correct at least to those readers who, in their violent ideological and aesthetic disapproval of the literature of the Haskala, grossly underestimated its intellectual, artistic and linguistic achievements. A whole century of vain literary efforts seemed to lie before them. Contemporary Zionist literature, with its vague, sentimental and hyperbolic avowals of love for old mother Zion and her miserable children, the Jewish people, seemed even worse than the critical-satirical literature of

the maskilim. For a Europeanized reader with a taste for neatness and order, like Ahad Ha'am himself, Hebrew literature had little to offer and its prospects seemed dim.

Within less than a decade, however, and not without Ahad Ha'am's active help, Hebrew literature and particularly its belles-lettres flourished in a way no one could have predicted. The appearance within a few years of Bialik, Ahad Ha'am's spiritual disciple, changed the poetic structure and aesthetic level of Hebrew verse. Prose fiction, under the influence of such figures as Abramovitsh and Berdyczewski, suddenly matured to the extent that it could join the most advanced European literatures in experimenting with the modernist techniques of Impressionism, Symbolism, and Stream of Consciousness. Sometimes, such experiments even preceded their equivalents in Russian, French and English. The Hebrew essay, in no small part through Ahad Ha'am's efforts, acquired a grace, sophistication and sense of innate culture that put it on a level with its European models. Just how these sweeping changes were possible is not our present concern. What matters is that they did occur, and in so doing, refuted Ahad Ha'am's predictions.

Zionism equated cultural freedom with political independence, and therefore prescribed linguistic "normalcy" as the only base for a full-fledged artistic literature. The great Hebrew masters of the first quarter of the twentieth century, some of whom were ardent Zionists, demonstrated that such "normalcy" was not an artistic *sine qua non*. Abramovitsh, Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Berdyczewski, Gnessin, Agnon, Yaakov Shteynberg and many others, wrote poems and stories, in which aesthetic-emotive impact was achieved without reference to a connotative spoken language. Instead, they developed a connotative idiom by returning to the ancient literary sources, with which all contemporary Hebrew readers were, to some extent, familiar: Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc. While most of their predecessors in the Haskala attempted to reproduce a pseudobiblical language by amassing quotation and allusion, these new writers drew upon the whole continuum of postbiblical sources as well, and constructed their own intricate system of allusion and counter-allusion, quotation and misquotation, imitation and parody. Thus, their language could resonate with a near infinity of associations and nuances. Connotative language and multi-level text structures had never before been so prevalent in Hebrew literature. Indeed, this language appears to have been too rich and dense for such sensitive writers as the short-story master, G. Shofman, the poet, David Fogel, or even Y. H. Brenner. However, they too, in a way, refuted Ahad Ha'am's notions: when they relied, in part, on a semblance of spoken Hebrew, they strove not for additional connotative richness, but for a leaner, more direct and stark style.

With Yiddish as well, Ahad Ha'am's predictions proved totally mis-

guided. No matter what the future held, at the time, Yiddish literature swarmed with talent and energy. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz and their younger followers produced great prose fiction, while Yiddish poetry groomed itself for the leap into modernist brilliance. Without the direct linguistic continuity Ahad Ha'am judged indispensable for a national literature, Yiddish writers managed to evoke, stylistically and thematically, the sense of historical depth.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Berdyczewski, Ahad Ha'am's old opponent, formulated his own explanation for these developments. In schematic form, his argument runs as follows: (a) Emotive expression in literature can be achieved in an unspoken language provided that the existing literary lexicon is constantly put to use in new ways, emerging from an ongoing, ever-growing emotional awareness. Emotive states engender fresh and effective expression, and not vice versa: "A cistern from which you draw water, be it as pure and good as it may, will not become a well before you further sink and dig it."⁹ (b) Modern Hebrew developed naturally (i.e., out of authentic emotional needs) in writing and artificially in speech (à-la Ben-Yehuda), and, therefore, authentic literary expression in Hebrew can be achieved only within the framework of the unspoken, literary idiom: "As long as we are the people of the book, and only the people of the book, it is enough—and that too is a miracle—that we possess the language of the book."¹⁰ (c) In contemporary Hebrew literature, the painful sense of national deficiency and deprivation produces the strongest and richest works. Hebrew literature functions best as "a negative poetry" which does not depend in any way upon a "normal" full life experience. Only the poets of the *Kera' shebalev* (a rent in the heart), who deeply feel and express the abnormality of the Jewish situation, including the abnormalities and deficiencies of its linguistic circumstances, can create our national literature.¹¹ (d) A literature which expresses a deficient life experience need not be inferior to one which emerges from a sense of full possession of oneself and one's environment, as long as the deficiencies are experienced and recognized. Such recognition actually gives the "poetry of distress" an edge over the "poetry of comfort."¹² (e) Jewish national literature can and must be written in more than one language, but the differences between the various languages must not be blurred. Poetic work can exist in only one, unique linguistic matrix. Therefore, the writing of the same work in more than one language (a widespread phenomenon in Jewish literature at the time) is anti-aesthetic and educationally harmful.¹³

Berdyczewski's assertions contradict Ahad Ha'am's literary rationale at every point. Where Ahad Ha'am regarded a national literature as a future possibility, Berdyczewski saw it as a reality. The former believed that only the Zionist solution could resolve the Jewish cultural quandary,

while the latter believed that the direct and deeply felt expression of the same quandary formed the basis for Jewish literary creativity. The spiritual Zionist envisaged a national literature flourishing within the framework of the Hebrew-speaking *merkaz ruhani* (spiritual center) in Erets-Israel, while Berdyczewski, whose Zionism was terrestrial and political, actually created it, while living in Germany, far away from Hebrew readers (let alone speakers) and dividing his cultural interests between the Jewish literary tradition and German philosophy and poetry.

Berdyczewski's literary thinking differs fundamentally from that of Ahad Ha'am not only in his cultural realism, his acceptance of the actual, but also in his understanding of authentic literature as an expression of an emotional need. Consequently, he refused to accept Ahad Ha'am's seemingly logical differentiation between the desirable and the possible with regard to literary achievement. The need to express a sense of the beauty of nature or the sweetness of love would produce the linguistic tools necessary for the task. Knowing only his *need* for nature and love, the poet might not say much about them *per se*. His would be a "negative poetry," a "poetry of distress," the only authentic poetry possible under the circumstances.

4

We shall turn now to our second example, Hebrew Israeli literature of the late 1940s and 1950s. Founded at the beginning of the century, the literary center in Erets-Israel came into its own in the 1920s and 1930s. By that time, the modernized and growing Jewish community there included a substantial contingent of native Hebrew speakers and early in the next decade a generation of native Hebrew-speaking writers began to appear. By that time, the repression of Hebrew and Zionism in the Soviet Union and the invasion of Poland by the Nazis had put a tragic end to the long history of Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe. After a short period of growth and expansion in the 1920s and 1930s, the small American center of Hebraists was already on the wane and soon most of its active members would either immigrate to Israel or disappear as writers. Thus, Hebrew literature was being written almost solely in Erets-Israel, and soon, in the independent state of Israel, by a young generation of Erets-Israeli-born, native Hebrew speakers who had fought and won the war. At last, Hebrew literature seemed to enjoy the conditions of normalcy and independence that Ahad Ha'am had identified as the prerequisites for true creativity.

And yet, literary thinkers were not comfortable with the situation. The destruction of European Jewry and the founding of the state of Israel prodded them into hectic literary theorizing. Such great turn-of-the-century writers as Abramovitsh, Frishman, Tchernichovsky and Brenner were banished for their acerbic and supposedly unempathic

criticism of traditional Jewish mores.¹⁴ Others, particularly Agnon, were elevated as positive models. Most readers and critics, particularly of the older generation, found the present generation disappointing. The literature produced by the young sabras struck these readers as flat, and provincial, lacking in the resonance provided by European and Jewish cultural resources. Their writing was assumed to be limited to their immediate experience, which did not reach even to the various aspects of the Yishuv. In short, this *dor rishon lig'ulah*, the first generation to be fully delivered from the crippling circumstances of the exilic situation, left much too much to be desired. Even favorably inclined critics urged the young writers to equip themselves intellectually, lest they squander their only asset—the vivid, first-hand experience of the war—and be left to face their barrenness or resort to stop-gap mannerisms.¹⁵

Thrown into turmoil, literary thinkers asked the basic questions once again: What was the guiding principle of Hebrew literature? What were its future prospects? What if any would be the links between ongoing Israeli literature and the literary tradition? Would this literature remain in any sense a *tsofeh leveyt yisra'el*, i.e. would it concern itself in any significant way with the large, worldwide Jewish ambience and with the lessons of Jewish history? Beneath this ferment, the foreboding remained—in Dov Sadan's words, a "gnawing dread, which our heart did not reveal to our mouth"—lest the entire Zionist literary experiment arrive at a cultural dead-end.¹⁶

Of the welter of theoretical schemes that emerged, I will outline three. The poet Yonatan Ratosh, the founder and ideologue of the "Movement of Young Hebrews," dubbed the "Canaanites" by its adversaries, formulated his thoughts over a long period of time, starting in the late 1930s. During the War of Independence his theory of a new Hebrew literature severed from its past, or from what he called "Jewish literature in the Hebrew language," reached its final crystalline form.¹⁷ In the early 1940s, the critic Baruch Kurzweil shifted focus from German and other European literatures to the works of Agnon and the ongoing denunciation of the early works of the sabra writers. By the 1950s, he, too, was ready with an encompassing theoretical formula.¹⁸ Through two decades of literary criticism and scholarship, Dov Sadan slowly evolved the grandest theory of all. Emerging in 1950 in the form of a compact little book with the title *'Al sifrutenu—masat mavo* (*On our literature—An introductory essay*), his theory subsumed everything written by Jews for Jewish reading publics during the preceding two hundred years.¹⁹

Ratosh believed that Jewish literature had always been multilingual and therefore could never be differentiated linguistically. Hebrew, as

the language of prayer and inter-Jewish communication, functioned for many generations as its linguistic core, but Jewish literature was written as well, not only in other Jewish languages (such as Yiddish or Judezmo), but also in Arabic, German, Russian, English, etc. A concern for the fate of Jewish correligionists and with the religious Jewish tradition provided the common thread. Since the three determining characteristics of nationalism—a national territory, a shared political national history, and a national language—were lacking, a true national literature was impossible. Rather, modern secular Jewish literature continued the old religious literature, decoding in various languages the experiences of those Jews who, although they had lost their faith, had not yet lost their sense of separateness. In recent generations, it had become—in America, Erets-Israel, and other places—what Ratosh calls “an immigrants’ literature,” focused on the alienation and pain of acculturation of the Jew outside his habitual historical context. Place was entirely secondary: the immigrant mentality vitiated its significance even for Jewish writers working in Hebrew in Erets-Israel. Thus, for instance, Natan Alterman’s cycle of poems purporting to describe the Israeli summer only revealed his immigrant experience of unbearable heat and dryness. Alterman had not the slightest inkling of the “real” Israeli summer.²⁰

Hebrew literature must be differentiated from Jewish literature, even from those parts written in the Hebrew language. Thus, Bialik, Agnon, Uri Zvi Greenberg and Alterman could not be regarded Hebrew writers. Hebrew literature constituted the literary expression of the Hebrew nation and therefore must be written by Hebrews rather than by Jews. Although the new Hebrew nation was in the early stages of formation, the characteristics of nationalism and therefore of a national literature were already present: common territory—the land of Canaan, one national language, and a shared political history. This literature exhibited a natural flair for the landscape and cultures of the so-called “Semitic space,” the fertile crescent of the Middle East, and for this area’s ancient cultures. The formation of the new nation and its struggle for survival provided its central core. Although its historic thinness was not necessarily harmful, the young Hebrew writer could strive for linguistic and cultural depth by exploring the rites and myths of cultures of the land. Ideological servitude to the Jewish-Zionist past was the chief threat to this literature. Ratosh detected a residue of such a servitude even in the works of S. Yizhar, the most talented and essentially “Hebrew” among the young Israeli-born writers.²¹ In a public lecture delivered before the 1948 war had subsided, Ratosh identified the dangers posed by contact with the values and literature of an “obsolete” Jewish culture:

Culturally, the problem is whether at the center of the new Hebrew culture looms the Jew, the immigrant and the *oleh* with his problems of acculturation,

while the native-born Israelis, as far as this culture is concerned, are merely sons of immigrants, already acculturated *olim*, or whether at the center there are the natives, the Hebrews, the children of the land of the Hebrews. If the second is the case then those who arrive in the country are merely immigrants, whose problem is not one of acculturation but rather one of assimilation, and who, generally speaking, will not succeed in fully assimilating. Only their sons, themselves children of the land of the Hebrews, will be Hebrews. This perspective stands, of course, in total opposition to that of the immigrant literature—and the major cultural task it postulates is that of the liberation of the Hebrews, the children of the homeland, from the value-system of the Jewish generation of immigrants. This war, the Hebrew war of independence, is as much a struggle over the past as it is a struggle over the formation of the present and the vision of the future.²²

Ratosh, however, was confident that the birth of the new Hebrew nation was decreed by history and that full delivery from the old Jewish matrix was a mere question of time, and of a short time at that. Jewish literature in the Hebrew language was at an end, while Hebrew literature was writing its opening paragraphs. There was no need for Hebrew readers and writers to treat the great Jewish-Hebrew masterpieces of the past with disrespect. Ratosh, himself, admired the poetry of Bialik and contributed much to the understanding of the poet's most complex work *Megilat ha'esh* ("The Scroll of Fire").²³ But these masterpieces must not be read as part of the new national literature. For better or worse, this literature would deal with national experiences totally unassociated with any past Jewish experience.

Baruch Kurzweil interpreted the history Jewish culture and literature in terms of a myth of a lost paradise. Paradise was the continuum of the traditional-religious Jewish way of life. This metahistorical continuum had consisted of two complementary factors: the regulatory system of the religious law based on the revelation at Sinai and the basic preliminary *Erlebnis* of the individual Jew whenever and wherever he was, that is, "the primal certainty that life with all its phenomena loomed against a hovering backdrop of sanctity, by which it was measured and evaluated."²⁴ While demanding a strict control over natural instincts and human passions, this experience had also been tremendously comforting. It had integrated a personal, omniscient and omnipotent God into daily life.

Kurzweil valiantly defended this harmonious vision of tradition against any intrusion by jarring historical fact. Thus, for Kurzweil, Scholem's analysis of the tradition as a dialectic system full of contradictions and antinomies was anathema, a mere deamonization of Judaism.²⁵ Similarly, he brushed aside as peripheral all symptoms of secularism in

premodern Jewish history and rejected the notion (accepted by Bialik, Lakhover, Scholem, Schapira, and others) that modern, secularized Jewish culture and literature might have evolved not only under foreign influences but also out of sources indigenous to the tradition itself. The breach with the *Jüdische Einheitskultur*, an expression Kurzweil quoted from Max Wiener, was a totally novel and revolutionary phenomenon.²⁶ Changing economic and social conditions in eighteenth-century Europe had opened the garden gates and let in the snake of Enlightenment. Since then, Jewish culture as such—for there was only one legitimate Jewish tradition, however it adapted to changing circumstances, as for example, by Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of the so-called Frankfurt orthodoxy—was engaged in a losing battle. The history of modern, secular Jewish culture is the story of the battle, and ironically, the closer the new, secular culture drew to victory, the closer it approached its own demise. As long as Jewish culture concerned itself with the authentic religious tradition, even by rejecting and fighting its influence, it could still possess some of its energies or be illuminated by its lingering afterglow. As soon as it managed to banish the haunting presence of the tradition, Jewish culture itself fell apart, for nothing except the presence of the Jewish faith could hold together that spiritual or cultural system.

Nowhere was this better illustrated than in the so-called “new” Hebrew literature. From its inception in the second half of the eighteenth century, this literature was, according to Kurzweil, nothing more than the continuous expression of “a spiritual world, which was stripped of primal certainty” of the Divine presence. While its early phases were marked either by a naive belief in the feasibility of some reconciliation between tradition and secular culture or by a gleeful, all-out war waged against tradition, mature artists such as Bialik, Feilerberg, Berdyczewski and Brenner recognized the hideous sight of the absurd which emerged from beneath their facile Zionist hopes and aspirations.²⁷ Agnon was the last and perhaps the greatest of these tragic masters and, therefore, Kurzweil systematically read his works as expressions of doubt, despair and impending chaos rather than as complex aesthetic reactions to the modern Jewish condition, in which faith and doubt, hope and despair balanced one another.²⁸ Over the more recent literary scene loomed the figure of Uri Zvi Greenberg, who rejected the absurd and committed himself to a vision of a renewed Jewish-religious continuity. But Greenberg was an isolated phenomenon, and, moreover, the political implications of his vision of a renewed Sinai illustrated the grave moral and intellectual dangers of any attempt to recover the tradition.²⁹

The cultural impasse resulting from the development of modern Hebrew literature was manifest in the new Israeli writers. Their Zionism and socialism provided no criteria for evaluating reality, so they were reduced to “a literalization of life,” a reportage-like flatness. Their raw,

non-selective naturalism was, however, preferable to intellectual pretensions which would inevitably expose them as overblown nullities, "zeros as big as a wagon's wheel." Kurzweil also preferred their work to the faddish symbolic games played by second generation Israeli writers such as A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz and Aharon Appelfeld. Those few Israeli writers—Mordecai Tabib, David Shahar and one or two others—who produced worthwhile work owed their success to their uncharacteristic biographies which had exposed them, as boys, to some authentic religious experience.³⁰ Without a major infusion of spiritual energy, Jewish culture and literature could not survive. As no source for such energies was imaginable, Kurzweil foresaw only further degeneration of the Jewish literary situation.

Dov Sadan, too, regarded modern, secular Jewish culture as a historical experiment which had already or would soon use up its resources. With its greatest creation—the State of Israel—complete, this secular culture should give way to a new Jewish culture capable of putting to spiritual-cultural use this mighty political vehicle. Adopting the best achievements accumulated through the two-century long secular detour, this new culture would realign Jewish life with the old religious tradition.

To Sadan, the crisis of secularism was not as tragically final as it was to Kurzweil. The confrontation between Jewish tradition and the European secular Enlightenment gave birth not only to Zionism and Jewish Socialism, but also to two massive Jewish cultural movements that offered religious answers to the dilemmas of modern times: the Hasidim and their rabbinical adversaries, the Mitnagdim. Out of this crisis emerged, then, not one but three, and perhaps more, Jewish literatures: the literature of the Enlightenment, which eventually split into the so-called modern or "new" Hebrew and Yiddish secular literatures; the literature of the Hasidim, written both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, and the halkhic literature of the Mitnagdim. In addition, Jews created literary works for half-secularized Jewish reading publics in various European languages. All these constituted parts of one modern Jewish literature and, though bewilderingly various, this fragmentation need not be permanent. The vital parts of this literature—those written in Jewish languages (for the foreign ones were bound to peter out)—could reunite as soon as a synthesizing principle was found.³¹

Versed in psychoanalysis, Sadan understood the fragmentation of Jewish literature as a reflection of a schizoid personality. While the secular literary movements occupied the upper, rationally regulated layers of the national consciousness, the spiritual movements took root in deeper layers, closer to the nation's emotional loyalties as well as to

its subconscious. For the national personality to redeem itself, the various sequestered parts must be reunified. Such a cure was possible because that personality was not as sick as it seemed. Many of the divided selves were vital and each, at its best, included some parts of the others. To prove this point, Sadan brilliantly analyzed the works of the great Hebrew and Yiddish masters of the last two hundred years discovering in all of them, even in the poetry of the "pagan" Tchernichovsky, the deep roots of the Jewish religious experience. The works of Bialik and Agnon seemed to him to approximate most illuminatingly a Jewish *kuliyut* (wholeness), and, so investigating them, became the center of his life's work. Unlike Kurzweil, Sadan emphasized both the modern and traditional aspects of these writers' works.³²

An ardent Zionist, Sadan regarded the present as a time of both crowning achievement and grave crisis. Without the fragmentation of national consciousness, Jewish spiritual tradition would not have allowed the creation of the political tools necessary for the survival of the Jewish people. But now that the state had been created, there was a danger that it would not be informed by the Jewish spiritual tenor: hence his "gnawing dread, which our heart had not revealed to our mouth." However, there was no reason to lose heart. Ongoing dialectical development would lead from thesis to antithesis, and, eventually to synthesis.

For years, Sadan refrained from commenting on the literary activity of the sabra writers. Only in 1954, with the publication of Moshe Shamir's historical novel, *Melekh basar vadam* (*King of Flesh and Blood*), did he break his silence. This novel, he argued, was the long-awaited breakthrough, the opening of *Derekh merhav* (a path leading to a wide and open place, the title of his article on Shamir's novel).³³ In his novel, Shamir deals with the confrontation pitting the mundane *raison d'état* of the Hasmonean king, Alexander Yanai, against the values of the Torah as represented by the Pharisees. The author, then in his Marxist-Stalinist phase, interpreted the collision as expressing class-struggle and as foreshadowing impending social revolution (which he dramatized in his sequel to the novel, the play *Milhemet beney or* (*The War of the Enlightened*). To Sadan, this political interpretation was rationalization, reflecting the author's need for ideological consistency. What counted was Shamir's ability to reach into the depths of Jewish history and his readiness to interpret this history from the vantage point of the official religious tradition of the early rabbis. From Y. L. Gordon on, almost all modern Jewish writers identified their cause with the biblical kings rather than the prophets, or with the freedom fighters of the last days of the second temple rather than their opponents, the custodians of the Law. Reenacting on a grand scale the confrontation between the mundane and the spiritual contenders in Jewish history, Shamir chose to identify with the

latter. This choice could and should be a new beginning, opening the way for other Israeli writers to realign themselves with tradition.

5

These three theories point in utterly different directions. Ratosh envisaged a flourishing literature, sustained by strong neo-Hebrew identity and by its closeness to the ancient soil of Canaan. Kurzweil maintained that literature would become progressively hollowed of the last remnants of authentic cultural significance, shallow, levantine, aping undigested foreign fashions. Sadan foresaw a neo-Judaic renaissance, produced by writers who miraculously bridged the chasm separating present from past, Israel from the diaspora, the mundane from the sacrosanct, Hebrew from other Jewish languages, the active conscious self from its subconscious underpinning. And yet, these mutually exclusive theories emerged from one crisis, which all three critics interpreted as the crisis of a new culture negotiating the terms of its existence vis-à-vis its traditions. That Ratosh included among these traditions the so-called "new" Hebrew literature, while Kurzweil identified the emergence of this culture in the second half of the eighteenth century, and Sadan identified a continuous existence of the past alongside and within the new literature, should not blind us to the similarity, indeed, the parallelism of their theoretical constructs.

This parallelism reveals the common seriousness and integrity of these three brilliant intellectuals as they fathomed the depth of a major cultural crisis and courageously carried their convictions through to their logical conclusions. Where popular propaganda culture predicted the glorious continuation of triumphant Zionism, they saw grave dangers and the need for sweeping cultural change. However, the parallelism also indicates their common rigidity and the limits of their powers of observation. From our vantage point thirty years later, these three responses can be likened to the faces of Oedipus in Sophocles' play. One, drawing the most primitive conclusions from his quandary, sets out to kill his father and live ever after with the motherland, the old-new Canaan. He is the Oedipus who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, the young king at the opening of the play. The second is the king who has already advanced to the point where the death of the father has to be avenged by the castration of the son. The third and wisest of them all—an Oedipus in Colonnus—has visions of reconciliation with his father, who, he says, will come back from the dead. And all three shared the characteristic Oedipal insensitivity to reality.

The streak of unreality in Ratosh's rigid intellectualism is easily detected. Buttressed within the citadel of his logic, Ratosh seems never to have bothered to observe what was really going on outside. His theory was posed on an extremely narrow base of empirical observation.

Ratosh did see through the official Zionist vision. In fact, he pinpointed a significant unrecognized component in the psychological and cultural make-up of the Erets-Israeli born generation who reached maturity around the outbreak of World War II: torn away from the world by the war, tired of the Zionist jargon of their parents, disgusted with European Jewry, who supposedly let itself be slaughtered in cowardly passivity, and totally absorbed in the difficult task which history meted out to them, they withdrew into themselves. Ratosh identified this withdrawal, with its inherent self-pity camouflaged as *macho* toughness, this pathetic camaraderie of boys and girls who knew that many of them would have to die very young, as the formative experience of a new "nation" of heroic "Hebrews." He could not have been more wrong. He misinterpreted his own discovery by isolating it from its historical and psychological contexts. Thus, when the generation on which he pinned his hopes made its great sacrifice and won the 1948 war, the results immediately and utterly destroyed the poet's vision. The state of Israel, once created, asserted its historical significance by opening its gates to Jews from all over the world. Within a few years, the immigrant population outnumbered the old established population. Problems of acculturation became an integral part of Israeli life. The traumatic experiences of Nazi concentration camps or of the ghettos of Arab towns seeped into the national consciousness, formed it, prescribing the national behavior in war and peace.

Accordingly, almost nothing vital and authentic in Israeli literature of the last twenty-five years resembles, even in a superficial way, the new "Hebrew" literature Ratosh envisaged in the early 1950s. S. Yizhar's *Yemey Tsiklag* (*Days of Zilag*, 1958), the last great monument to the mood of Erets-Israeli isolationism Ratosh had defined as the essence of the new Hebraism, was already imbued with the author's sense of an ending. The ordeal of the ending of a shared adolescent experience, which proved to be the only experience Yizhar knew well and could convey effectively, was presented for the last time with all its details fully analyzed and anatomized—for posterity. But even before the publication of *Yemey Tsiklag*, significant, innovative works were published which marked a literary watershed. The great poetic shift which occurred in the late 1950s, and which, I think, is still the most prominent Israeli development in the history of Hebrew literature, was initiated mainly by poets without even the slightest residual "Canaanism." Some of the most prominent among them, such as Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, and Dan Pagis, were immigrants, who, although they had arrived in the country as boys, could not and would not suppress their non-sabra mentality. Indeed, they unabashedly put it to poetic use. Preferring cogitation to description, they underplayed the local landscape important to their predecessors. Instead, they strove for wide significance and in some

cases (most prominently that of Amichai) examined human experiences and interactions against a backdrop of Jewish models and Jewish history. The Israeli novel, not only as written by the immigrant, A. Appelfeld, but also by such sabras as A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Yaakov Shabtay, likewise developed a broad frame of reference, in which there was no place for the notion of Hebrew nationalism in Ratosh's sense. Yehoshua's anti-diaspora Zionism and insistence on national "normalcy" brings him closer than others to neo-Canaanism. Nevertheless, his version is quite remote from Ratosh's original conception. His sharp, intuitive understanding of the Israeli condition does not allow for any conceptual formulation that does not account for the problematic wider Jewish ambience. In his recent novel, *Gerushim me'uharim* (*Belated Divorce*, 1982), Yehoshua as much as tells us that the specific Israeli "psychosis" can be understood only against this wider backdrop.

Kurzweil's theoretical scheme strengthened his grasp of a particular set of phenomena in Hebrew literature: the doubt or despair about the continuity of Jewish experience manifested in the turn-of-the-century masters and their followers. He contributed much to our understanding of the darker side of Bialik, Agnon, Brenner and many others. However, the same scheme severely limited his understanding of the direction and values of Israeli literature. This limitation was not due, as has often been suggested, to his negativism and his pugilistic manner; his "cannibalistic" articles and revues dealing with Israeli writers were often among his best. Equipped with innate detectors of *Kitsch*, pretentiousness and sham depth, he accurately identified moot, suspicious spots, of which Israeli fiction had more than its fair share. His critical writing during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s actually helped the generally better Israeli fiction of the 1960s find an appreciative audience (although he, himself, had no use for it). At the same time, some of his infrequent, positive recommendations and sudden laudatory outbursts, particularly in reference to poetry, embarrassed his readers as all too obvious indications of gross misjudgment, disorientation and sheer bad taste. Although his theoretical formulations could not numb his sensitivity to what was really bad and worthless, they left him with no criteria for sifting value and achievement out of the chaff of contemporary literature. His worldview, which left no room for a significant Jewish culture after the tradition, was like a strainer, which let out all pure liquids but kept the dregs. Thus he had almost nothing to say about the dramatic developments in Hebrew poetry of the late 1950s. He failed to sense the quality of the early fiction of Appelfeld and detected mostly the weak spots in the works of Oz and Yehoshua. More generally, he could not see that Israeli literature, despite its limitations and all too frequent slips, was maturing and gathering strength, both in its artistic quality and its subtlety as an expression and critique of the Israeli condition.

Sadan has been by far the most creative Hebrew critic in our time. His contributions to the understanding of our literary heritage were as numerous as they were valuable. Nevertheless, his historical scheme resulted in an even deeper insensitivity to the real values and the real difficulties of Israeli literature. Quite simply, no *derekh merhav*, in his sense, was found or sought by the best Israeli writers. Because the reconciliation of tradition and modernity, as Sadan defined it, was not their problem, they find him irrelevant even as they pay respect to his achievement and unique personality. His extravagant praise for Shamir's historical novel is a case in point. The novel, a considerable achievement in its day, was by no means a new beginning in Hebrew literature and by now has become an episode of secondary importance in the development of Israeli literature. Shamir broke no new paths as far as the art or the ideological commitment of Israeli literature were concerned, and his attempt at a realistic recreation of Jewish history in the days of the Mishnah, found no followers of any significance. Indeed, Shamir said nothing in his novel about the Israeli political and cultural situation that he had not already said in a more direct and less contrived way in his earlier novels *Hu halakh basadot* (*He Walked in the Fields*), *Tahat hashemesh* (*Under the sun*), and *Bemo yadav* (*With his Own Hands*), which Sadan had not regarded as of particular importance.

When a work such as Pinchas Sade's *Hahayyim kemashal* (*Life as a Parable*), which appeared two years after *King of Flesh and Blood*, actually effected a new start in Israeli fiction, Sadan did not seem to have noticed. With the first collection of poems by Amichai, Zach, Avidan, et al., which appeared during the second half of the 1950s, the Israeli literary scene was fundamentally changed. Whereas Shamir produced a heavy stylistic replica of the Hebrew of the Mishnah for purposes of historical verisimilitude, these poets discovered new rhythms and inflections in spoken Hebrew in the effort to express the Israeli condition. Yet Sadan preferred Shamir's glorified plaster statue to these living literary forms simply because Shamir pointed in the direction Sadan thought Israeli literature should develop. Conversely, Sadan ignored most of the innovations in the Israeli fiction of the 1960s and 1970s because they did not advance Israeli literature in the recommended direction. Current Israeli literature exposes his vision of reconciliation with the tradition as so much wishful thinking. Never before have its vital and creative parts been so far from the synthesis Sadan preached. Facing the neo-Judaic upsurge, which inevitably nowadays goes hand-in-hand with extreme right-wing politics, most Israeli writers see, not a resurrected father, but a frightening hybrid—an enemy whose cultural victory would be the downfall of everything for which they stand.

Against the backdrop of theoretical failures identified in this paper, it would be folly to predict possible future directions of Israeli literature.

At the present moment, however, this literature, at its best, is evolving as an anguished expression of Israeli dilemmas and a sharp critique of Israeli mentality. It is written with the understanding that the Israeli condition is not only one variant of the human condition, but also expresses one nuance, albeit a special and, perhaps, central one, of the Jewish experience under present day circumstances. Developing according to its own inner logic and under the impact of specific Israeli conditions, Israeli literature still tells us something significant about Jewish existence today. So do non-Israeli writers from their various vantage points and within the contexts of five or six non-Jewish literatures: American, French, English, Russian, Latin American-Spanish. There is no indication that this fragmented literary conglomerate will ever amount to a unified Jewish national literature. There are, however, good reasons for the various independent entities which form this conglomerate to establish better contacts with each other, to learn from each other's experience, to recognize the difference within the similarity and the similarity beyond the difference.

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NOTES

1. Dov Sadan, "In the Light of Synthesis" [Hebrew], *Beyn din leheshebon* [Between Account and Reckoning] (Tel Aviv, 1963), p. 9.
2. Ahad Ha'am, "Resurrection of the Spirit" [Hebrew], in *Kol ketavav* (Tel Aviv-Jerusalem, 5th ed., 1956), pp. 173-86.
3. See his early article "Language and its Literature" (1893), *ibid.*, pp. 93-97.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
5. In his article "The Purpose of Hashiloah," *ibid.*, p. 128.
6. See his answer to Berdyczewski et al. in "Need and Capability," *ibid.*, pp. 128-32.
7. Ahad Ha'am, "Language and its Literature."
8. *Idem*, "Resurrection of the Spirit."
9. M. Y. Bin-Gurion (Berdyczewski), "On the Matter of Language" [Hebrew], in *Kol ma'amarav* [Complete Essays] (Tel Aviv, 1952), p. 179.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Berdyczewski, "In Our Poetry," *ibid.*, pp. 174-75.
12. *Idem*, "The Aesthetic in Poetry," *ibid.*, p. 173.
13. *Idem*, "Language and Booklore," "Duality," and "A Blurring of Borderlines," *ibid.*, pp. 181-92.
14. See Avraham Kariv's series of reassessments in his *'Atarah leyoshnah* [The Crown Restituted] (Tel Aviv, 1956) and *Mishilshom 'ad hena* [From Yesteryear Till Now] (Tel Aviv, 1973).
15. See, for instance, David Kena'ani's early survey (1949) of Israeli prose fiction, "Learn Well" [Hebrew], in *Beynam leveyn zemanam* [Authors Vis-à-Vis their Time] (Merhavia, 1956), pp. 137-49. See also Simon Halkin's pioneering overview of 1952 of Israeli poetry,

"Recent Poetry Collections by the Young" [Hebrew], in his *Derakhim vetsidey derakhim basifrut* [Paths and Byways in Literature], vol. I (Jerusalem, 1969), pp. 101-137.

16. Dov Sadan, "A Path Leading to an Open Space" [Hebrew], *Beyn din le'hashbon*, p. 283.

17. See his public lectures "Jewish Literature in the Hebrew Language" and "Israeli vs. All-Jewish Literature" [Hebrew], in Yonatan Ratosh, *Sifrut yehudit balashon ha'ivrit* [Jewish Literature in the Hebrew Language] (Tel Aviv, 1982), pp. 37-50.

18. Baruch Kurzweil, "The Fundamental Problematics of Our New Literature" [Hebrew], in *Sifrutenu ha'hadashah: hemshekh o mahapekhah?* [Our New Literature: Continuity or Revolt?] (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 11-146.

19. The essay was republished in Sadan's *Avney bedek* (Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 9-66.

20. See Ratosh's article "The Land from Afar" in *Sifrut yehudit balashon ha'ivrit*, pp. 73-82.

21. Ratosh, "Flight to Reality," *ibid.*, pp. 53-58.

22. *Idem*, "Jewish Literature in the Hebrew Language," *ibid.*, p. 41.

23. See Ratosh's articles on Bialik, *ibid.*, pp. 111-70.

24. Kurzweil, *Sifrutenu ha'hadashah*, p. 16.

25. See his articles attacking Scholem in *Bema'avak 'al 'erkhey hayahadut* [In the Struggle for the Values of Judaism] (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 99-240.

26. Kurzweil, *Sifrutenu ha'hadashah*, p. 17.

27. *Idem*, "The Fundamental Problematics of Our New Literature."

28. See Kurzweil's essays on Agnon in *Masot 'al sipurey Shay Agnon* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1963).

29. See Kurzweil's essays on Greenberg's poetry in *Beyn hazon leveyn ha'absurdi* [Between Vision and the Absurd] (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1966), pp. 3-99.

30. Kurzweil's articles and reviews dealing with Israeli writers were collected posthumously in *Hifus hasifrut hayisre'elit* [In Search of Israeli Literature] (Ramat Gan, 1982).

31. See Sadan's "Introductory Essay" (note 19) and his "Concluding Essay" in *Orhot ushv'lim* [Paths and Ways], vol. I (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 173-84.

32. See Sadan's essays on Agnon in *'Al Shay Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 2nd rev. ed., 1978).

33. Sadan, *Beyn din le'hashbon*, pp. 283-300.