

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF A GENRE: GERSHON SHAKED'S HEBREW NARRATIVE FICTION 1880—1970*

by Richard Flantz

Perspectives in literary history may be thought of as arbitrary, for rather obvious reasons, but Professor Gershon Shaked has demonstrated here that an inclusive descriptive-analytical approach focussed primarily on literary characteristics can provide a valid and highly informative vision of the development of a literary genre and of the individual works and writers that have contributed to this development.

To be inclusive the approach requires a complex theoretical apparatus of distinctions and categories. This Professor Shaked has shown that he possesses to an admirable degree. He is aware of previous historiographies of modern Hebrew literature, with their primarily ideological or socio-historical orientations; he points out their limitations and at the same time draws their insights into his own presentation, which might well be called a diachronic view of advancing synchronicities.

An inclusive synchronic view attempts to bring to bear upon its object of study all relevant matters, literary and extra-literary, which are factors in the composition of a literary work at the time of its composition, and to offer us a vision of the entire literary scene (or, in this case, of the "state of the genre") at any given point in time.

Shaked's study begins from a time when modern Hebrew fiction becomes really modern. The decisive date is perhaps 1881, when the pogroms provide an additional source of awakening from the Haskalah (Enlightenment) illusions that cultural reform of Jewish life, within Jewish communities and by means of assimilation of gentile European cultural norms into Jewish thought and literature, could also achieve changed attitudes towards Jews by the gentile nations in whose territories they lived. An additional source, because nothing has a single cause and, with regard to the subject being studied it might well be said that the social ideas, the literary themes and forms of the Enlightenment had been exhausted by then.

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The history of this post-Enlightenment Hebrew literature, and especially of its early phases, is undeniably linked with the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe. This Hebrew literature developed in Russia, Poland and Galicia, in numerous centers, and later moved from there to the Land of Israel, where its major and living center developed, and to the United States, where a smaller branch grew, though it never flourished.

Central events like the pogroms, general conditions of instability, marked with migrations and persecutions, and variegated attempts to evolve cultural and national *modi vivendi*, all provided materials and prototypes for authors while simultaneously affecting the circumstances of their lives, of their literary production and publication, and their relations to their audiences. These socio-historical factors were thus germinal, in many ways. But, Shaked argues, the development of literature in general, and of any genre in particular, is subject to immanent laws, which, while including extra-literary forces, must be finally seen in a literary perspective.

It is a literature of migrants, foreigners, whose language is in an extreme state of *diglossia*: whose spoken language is Yiddish and whose "language of the book" is Hebrew, while around them the languages of the countries in which they live add additional pressures. Nor is there any general acceptance of Hebrew as the written language: for a long time a struggle for literary supremacy is waged between the proponents of Yiddish and Hebrew. Brenner, Shaked notes, called it a literature of "in spite of" — a literature written in spite of the lack of a spoken language whose forms could be presented and transmuted in literature; in spite of the lack of a shared territory, a landscape which would evoke common associations among readers as it would also inspire writers; in spite of the lack of a real audience who would relate to the literature as something which through its language and evocations was intimately related to their lives; in spite, furthermore, of the lack of a publishing establishment which could bridge between writers and audiences, and assure writers of conditions in which they could write. Brenner spoke of this as a "heroic literature", and Shaked takes this attitude too.

Much of what I have noted so far is common knowledge, and Professor Shaked knows it is too. The point is what he does with this knowledge. His focus, let us remember, is on narrative fiction, and not on the whole of Hebrew literature of the period under study. Thus, while all the above affects all literary genres, what happens in other genres is of interest here only to the extent that it affects the development of narrative fiction. Similarly, inter-relations between Hebrew and Yiddish narrative fiction of the period must be

seen in the same light. (There were indeed writers during the period who proposed a program of "two languages — one single literature".) The question then becomes: what do we mean by "relations". And it is here that Professor Shaked's mastery of literary distinctions, together with his extensive erudition in the writing of the period and in secondary materials, criticism and studies of these writings, allows him to produce a work rich in its detailed characterizations of the trends and the most important individual writers and works of the period. These characterizations are based on distinctions made by various movements in contemporary theory of literature, and thus allow for what I have called multi-dimensional perspectives. A work is considered in terms of its narrative structure, point-of-view, language, style, thematics and subject-matter, and, what Shaked sees as a central distinction, its primary orientation: to the "context" (or external social referent) or to the "utterance", a category under which Shaked seems to conflate "affective" and "aesthetic" thrusts.* In all of these, the original contribution of a given writer is described, in relation also to the norms prevailing in all of these categories, and to the degrees and varieties of influences, direct and indirect, of older and contemporary Hebrew, Yiddish, and European literary techniques and projects apparent in his work.

The history of Hebrew narrative fiction in this period is very much also a history of groupings or "schools". Some of these groups were conscious of themselves as groups, (sometimes centered around a leading figure) and indeed declared themselves as such in mani-

* This is, I think, an unfortunate and somewhat misleading conflation, as the implication is that anything not oriented towards the "social context" is oriented towards the "utterance" (something like Roman Jakobson's notion of 'poetic function'). Thus Shaked will write that the Hebrew neo-romantics are oriented towards the 'utterance' rather than the 'context' — and the same will have to be said of the work of Brenner and his followers. Yet a literary utterance oriented towards the "expressive" pole (Jakobson's "emotive"), is not by virtue of that any less oriented towards "context" than is an utterance with a clear social referent. It is rather oriented towards a different kind of "context" (or "realm" of being) — the "psychological", as Baal-Mahshavot calls it, though I prefer to call it the intra-personal. The same problem arises with works that appear primarily "affective" (Jakobson's "conative"), which seek to affect the readers' emotions, by all sorts of devices. This too cannot be called "orientation towards the utterance". Indeed, while such an orientation can exist in poetry, it is still questionable whether it is dominant in any significant literature. Often where it is found we will find that such an orientation (as say in James Joyce) has a dominant *referential* thrust, be it intra-personal, inter-personal, social, or extra-personal. Reality (we might explain) is far more complex than the "social context"; poetry which turns to other realms of reality and to their numerous kinds of interaction in experience *and* expression is not therefore merely and autotelically "aesthetic".

festoes of poetic creeds or in other critical polemics. Other groupings are recognized in retrospect by critics and scholars. With the categories and distinctions at his disposal, Professor Shaked is able to discuss the degrees of homogeneity of these groups, or, more precisely, to show the nature and degrees of affinity among writers in a given group, while also noticing what is distinctive about each individual writer. In these descriptions, he draws not only upon their fictional works but also upon their own expressions of literary doctrine in articles, letters, and the like; at the same time he turns to the critical polemics in the Hebrew literary press, among opposing groups and sometimes between writers of the same "group", thus giving us what he calls a dual perspective on the writings he is studying: the views — often conflicting — current at the time this literature was being produced, and a view from our own time, this latter being necessarily privileged because not directly or emotionally involved in the extra-literary "messages" some of these writers were trying to transmit to their readers.

This first volume, *In Exile*, contains six parts. The first, an introduction, may well be seen as an introduction to the entire project, in other words to the promised second volume as well, for it sets out the basis of the approach while also presenting the background and the basic characteristics of the writing of the early phases. Thus, when in the second part Shaked begins his discussion of how Mendeli (S.I. Abramovitz, 1835—1917) broke with the norms of Enlightenment literature, to become the "father" of the modern Hebrew narrative fiction being studied here, the reader is already well prepared: the major conventions of the Enlightenment have been placed before him, the historical background and the thesis on the relationship between the socio-historical and the literary have been established, and the categories under which the writer is to be considered have been set out and explained.

Mendeli had written in Hebrew during the Enlightenment period; had abandoned Hebrew for Yiddish, and in the 1880s returned to Hebrew. This return, writes Shaked, "opened a new period in Hebrew literature". Mendeli rejected both the Enlightenment stance — of attempting to reform Jewish life culturally and morally — and its style, of ornate phrases, witty darts, unambiguous satirical design. He blended in his new Hebrew work the traditions of two generations of Jewish writing and the achievements of European literature, of East and West, absorbing also the atmosphere of the realists and the romantics, his Hebrew contemporaries (whom Shaked has mentioned in his introductory part, and will discuss in detail in further chapters), but influencing them even more. Bialik called Mendeli "creator of the formula" by which is to be understood something

like a stylistic model for retention of a tight and concise syntactic sentence structure (a major attribute of classical Hebrew) while incorporating the modern linguistic expressions necessary for relating to contemporary Jewish life; Brenner saw in Mendeli the person who more than anyone else established the criteria for a proper criticism of Jewish life (in the Arnoldian sense, I think). Shaked notes these contemporary assessments of Mendeli's style and content, and discusses Mendeli's poetics in the light of these. The structure of Mendeli's stories is much like that in Fielding and Gogol: what Edwin Muir calls a novel of character, which focuses more on a personage's movements in space than on his development in time — or more like what Northrop Frye calls a Novel (as distinct from Romance) — revealing externals — personality masks, social environment, rather than inner experience. Mendeli's stories are anti-heroic, even anti-plot. Where he writes a sentimental novel, what generally saves it as literature (for its plot is often unconvincing) is the tension between the plot sequences and the narrator's digressions. Mendeli continued the satirical thrust he had brought from the Enlightenment, but with clear expressionistic tendencies which warped the represented reality: In the Emancipation novel *à thèse*, each character represented a social type; conflicts between characters represented social conflicts, and the melodrama served the ideas (in contrast to the Yiddish sentimental novels of the time, where the melodrama is generally most important). Mendeli was concerned less with specific social faults or vices than with the mental deformation of the everyday Jew in his diaspora existence. This is thus more than satire: Mendeli's narrator mocks the pseudo-romances of the Enlightenment, with their pastoral visions, and scorns the tales of action and adventure in the European romance, directing readers (and writers) to the dull reality of Jewish town life, of the human being living in the grip of his economic needs, which corrupt and destroy his humanity. His characters are more types than individuals (literary types as well as social types), and they are often treacherous and disgusting, but it is their human wretchedness that comes through, arousing pity. His style too is far from naturalistic or realistic in the European sense. The conscious artistry which employs Gogolian grotesque and disrupted plot-structure also develops literary substitutes for the (non-existent) spoken language. Of great interest in this context are his translations of his own Yiddish stories into Hebrew. Comparing a series of texts, Shaked notes that while the selected Yiddish expressions are mostly of non-literary origin, folk expressions often marked by sharp wit and original metaphorical power, the Hebrew versions draw on elevated sources, place high phrases in lowly contexts, thus achieving an additional satiric tension.

Thus Shaked can conclude, convincingly, that in his search for a proper (expressionistic) expression in literary language, Mendeli was indeed a precursor of Brenner and his generation, while in his effort to stylize a given reality through non-realistic linguistic means, he showed the way to the stylists from Bialik to Agnon.

Shaked devotes one of the five descriptive sections of the book to Mendeli: he entitles this section "The Creator of the Formula". All the other parts of the book are devoted to groups rather than individuals, and also have poetic or thematic titles, indicating the dominant features which characterize the groups. Thus the next section deals with Mendeli's "dialectical heirs", the "romantic" writers David Frishman (1859-1922), Y.L. Peretz (1852-1915), M.Y. Berdichevsky (1865-1921) and M.Z. Feierberg (1874-1899). These shared with Mendeli a common thematic concern and a common subject-matter: Jewish village life. They also drew on those Enlightenment writers who had written, sometimes militantly, against the religious institutions, positing a thematic opposition of "religion vs. life". But they followed Mendeli with revolutionary innovations in style, structure and attitudes to subject-matter, thus being not so much continuers of the Enlightenment as the first generation of the new literary revolution.

The 1880s were a period of national awakening for the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. The pogroms were for many a sharp realization of the illusion of assimilationist hopes. And national awakening, here as in many places in Europe, was linked with Romanticism.

Romanticism appears late in Hebrew literature — long after it has been superseded in Europe by neo-romanticism, symbolism, and other modern movements. The Hebrew Romantics, if so we can call the writers related to the group Shaked discusses here, incorporated the more modern literary trends as well. Frishman's translations and articles instantiate this: He translated and wrote about George Eliot, Pushkin, Byron, Hans Christian Andersen, Tagore, Nietzsche, Stefan Zweig. The poetic practice of this group was in many ways close to that of the English romantics: a lyrical and picturesque style, suffused with symbols and myths, a focus on the poet as bearer of the world's woes, subjectivism, folkloric motifs, a thematics which stresses the national uniqueness of the represented group, and an orientation (though here I would dispute both the distinction and the conclusion) to the utterance rather than to the context. Thus Berdichevsky prefers the greatness of an event or the Promethean force of a hero to any moralistic intent. All of them romanticized "the great sinner", who breaks with the observances and mores of his society, in the context of what may be

seen as a birth of a "secular" national Jewish culture. But by "secular" we must not understand something which rejects those mysteries usually associated with religion. For these writers, hassidic materials often filled the role played by myth, legend, and medieval subjects in the works of European Romantics. And in them, as in other writers who used such materials in various ways, there is one common thrust: from the world of appearances to the unseen, from the rational to the irrational, from the superficial to the primal. Since they drew their symbols and materials for this thrust from their own national literature, it too became one of the grounds of their national identification.

This group was discussed by Shaked under the title "The Abyss of Abysses", because all of them attempted, in contrast to Mendeli, to penetrate into the soul of the Jewish individual and the Jewish collective, and to express the depths of the world of the imagination.

Contemporary with them were the "realist" writers whom Shaked discusses under the title "The Harbingers". Ideologically these writers were even more opposed to the Enlightenment literature than were those of the previous group, but in a sense they formed its last link, for the changes they wrought were more external than internal. Their realism sought to be a real contribution to education. They published much of their work in "Penny Books", a series of books published between the years 1891-1894, under the management of the leading figure of the group, A.L. Ben-Avigdor (1866-1921), with the express purpose of making Hebrew literature available cheaply to the Jewish masses. Their writing sought a simplicity of style and narrative form, and in their polemic writings (for they were attacked by both conservatives and romantics) they argued for simple realistic presentations of life now — not for a nostalgia for the past of myth and legend, nor for a subjectivism. They attacked "phoney romanticism" and "forgeries" in language, such as "ornate Biblism". Their publications expanded the circle of readers of Hebrew, and conquered territories from Yiddish. Brenner wrote later of the excitement with which in his youth, the "Penny Books" were bought and read. Shaked says that theirs was a literature whose general or collective contribution was much more important than that of any individual author or work. The highest achievements of this movement were the works of Yehuda Steinberg (1863-1908) and Yeshayahu Barshadski (1871-1908). Shaked writes that they constitute the "threshold, beyond which a new period begins. Upon the early stages of this period Bialik would leave his mark, as editor, as overt and covert critic, and as touchstone; its continuation would be conducted by the baton of Brenner."

At the turn of the century, all the previously discussed tendencies

still co-existed. Mendeli's "formula" was both a program and a norm — both when it was followed or when it was deliberately violated. The writers of the group whom Shaked discusses under the title "In the Tangles of Existence" did both: Bialik, Ben-Zion, Weinberg and Berkovitz continued and developed the "formula" approach, while not continuing Mendeli's satire and his grotesque, which both militate against a reflection of reality; Tschernikhovskiy, Kabak, Barash and others sought representations of the complexities of actual existence in non-esoteric language.

One significant feature linking all the members of this group is the fact that they all began writing in Eastern Europe, where they were born, and later all, in various ways and at various times, migrated to Israel. This is not merely an extra-literary fact, for the factors which made them choose such a course in life are also reflected in their thematic concerns and subject-matter, which deal often with the problems of a time when in Eastern Europe the disintegrating forces were stronger than the unitive: the discrediting of religion, migrations, urbanization, assimilation become central subjects in the writings of this group who, like the realists discussed earlier, show a dominant orientation to the represented social context, but go beyond them in visionary concept and in poetic stylization. Bialik, who was very much the "leader" of this group, wrote fiction too, though this was only one (and not the best) of his literary activities. Analysing his stories as he does those of the other writers, Shaked points out the multi-dimensionality of Bialik's characters, the symbolic depths of the objects he presents, and the distinctive blending of realism and expressionism in his writing.

In opposition to previous groups, the writers linked with Brenner rejected both the stylistic fetters imposed on Hebrew prose by Mendeli and Bialik, and at the same time opposed the orientation which put the primary focus on the social context. Shaked discusses them under the title "From the Underground", and this Dostoievskian term was indeed one those writers adopted as apt for their condition. In the grim reality of Jewish life around them, in the cultural vacuum, and the void in which Hebrew literature was operating, they found themselves stalemated "between despair and hope". While Bialik praised the literature of the time as contributing to a "renaissance", to the rise of "a new Israeli poet", the "singer of national redemption", the small group of self-conscious writers around Brenner saw their task as expressing their experience of despair and isolation in all its anguish and intensity. If they had affinities to the romantics such as Berdichevsky, they objected to the visionary tone these writers took. One might say that their vision was Sisyphean rather than Promethean: in Shaked's detailed an-

alyses we find, for example, that they presented a protagonist who is "the Jewish individual with a creative soul", who seeks seclusion "in the cellar ["the underground"]" because he cannot find a place for himself among his own people. These protagonists are all alienated, introverted, unique, outsiders, suffering not so much the world's woes, but their own in the context of the world. Outcasts, they think about society, but are not active in it; the structures and techniques of their narratives, where characterization progresses through internal monologs, confessions, projections of self onto nature, all drive towards intense expression of the innermost experiences of man's nature. A contemporary writer, Baal Mahshavot, who had once objected violently to this movement but later reassessed their work, saw in their work a shift of emphasis from the social to the psychological conditions of existence; Shaked seems to endorse this view, and sees it as also explaining their use of "small" forms — most of them wrote very short stories, while Brenner and Gnessin extended their scope to short novels or long novellas.

Among the major influences these writers reveal or admit are Chehov, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Mactertlinck and Scandinavian writers like Hamsun. We find in them very original and personal absorptions of these influences. The most important influences, however, were still from Hebrew fiction — the neoromantic and the realist. All of them looked up to Berdichevsky.

Brenner, who inspired the writers around him, saw Jewish life in exile as parasitism, and the problem as not one of the nature of Judaism but of the life of Jews:

What's to be done with us, the Jews? How are we to live? How are we to stop being parasite in every sense? How are we to acquire conditions in which to create a decent life? How are we to stop being ghetto-dwellers?

His focus too is on the present. This is no time, he believed, for a historic poem about the past, as it is also not time for poetry for poetry's sake. Brenner seeks an authentic realism, with no prettifications; he draws the materials for his writing from his own life and experience — first as a Jew in the diaspora, then as a pioneer in Israel. And all the while he struggles to achieve a new and valid literary form for this authenticity — to the extent of using rhetorical devices in order to convince the reader that his writing is not for literary purposes. Brenner writes his fiction from a limited point of view, mixes narration with digression, with a vague plot-line, and strives for a style which is as close as possible to a living language — in the absence of which he creates a fictive living language, absorbing and Hebraizing words from other European

languages, incorporating literal translations from the Yiddish, and studding his dialogs with the ejaculations and rhythms of speech.

In this review I have concentrated on some of the important general conclusions Professor Shaked arrives at in his study. More important, however, are the detailed analyses which lead to these conclusions. In each section, Professor Shaked begins by discussing the common characteristics of the group, in comparison and contrast to the distinctive features of other groups — and then devotes a series of chapters to each of the major writers of the group — and at times also to the lesser known writers, so that the synchronic picture can be as full as possible. Each author is discussed under subheadings based on the various categories already mentioned. This is thus not simply a book to read with interest: it is indeed a course of study, a guide to the reading of ninety years of Hebrew fiction — and, with its detailed apparatus of notes, bibliography of secondary sources, and index, a valuable compendium and reference book. At the same time, it remains fascinating reading, which for all its technicalities, brings before the imaginative reader a saga in which not only the techniques but also the characters of the authors engaged in writing and arguing about this fiction, this “heroic literature”, come alive.