

Benjamin Harshav (Hrushovski): A Personal Retrospect

Ziva Ben-Porat

Poetics and Comparative Literature, Tel Aviv

Sometime in 1997 a group of Benjamin Harshav's former students, colleagues, and friends realized that he was about to celebrate his seventieth anniversary. That seemed like a wonderful opportunity to pay homage to a man to whom all of us were indebted in one way or another. Metaphorically speaking, whether we grew up in his school or came to know him through his academic, sometimes groundbreaking work (theoretical and institutional), "all of us came out of the folds of his overcoat." Four projects have sprung from this realization: the publication of his collected works in Hebrew, reedited and occasionally revised by the author (two out of five planned volumes have appeared by September 2000); a Hebrew Festschrift in two volumes, *Aderet Le-Binyamin* (1999, 2001); a conference in his honor; and the special issues of *Poetics Today* (21 [3]–22 [1]). All of the projects have taken much longer and become larger in scope and in sheer magnitude than anticipated. It became evident that in fifty years of activity in the literary field Harshav's multifaceted personality has produced, inspired, and attracted a large and varied body of scholarship.

Having been deeply involved in the first three projects, rereading Harshav's work and reading the papers contributed to his Hebrew Festschrift, I became awestruck and even bewildered by the ground that must be covered by anyone attempting to produce a full portrait of Harshav. Personally, I couldn't take upon myself to be the cultural and literary historian, the art critic, the linguist, the literary theorist, the expert prosodist, the structural-

ist and the semiotician, the expert on Yiddish poetry, the expert on translation, and the literary critic that are needed for a proper presentation and evaluation of Harshav's work. At the same time it also became evident that chronology does not provide a good method for summing up Harshav's achievements. Some of his major work has been produced and published in recent years, and his computer is still clicking. For these reasons I made three methodical decisions: (1) I'll focus on Harshav's impact on Israeli culture (academy included) and on his Hebrew publications, with only sporadic references to his English publications (detailed in the following bibliography and accessible to readers of *Poetics Today*); (2) I'll concentrate on one of his many fields of interest as a paradigmatic example; and (3) I'll present my own subjective picture of Harshav's achievement rather than an objective analysis. The latter is implied in the attached bibliography of his writings and in the comments made by the contributors to the Hebrew and English volumes produced to celebrate his jubilee.

To my mind, Harshav's particular and most varied impact has been on Hebrew poetry: he changed the way of studying and teaching it; he influenced a crucial generation change; he contributed to the revision of the poetic canon; he reinstated the musical aspect of poetry—its prosodic organization—as the distinguishing feature of the poetic text; he translated Hebrew poetry into English and brought many modernist texts from various languages—including Yiddish—into the Israeli poetic system; and he contributed his own poetry.

As with his studies of literature in general, Harshav pulled the study of poetry away from the historical-biographical contexts in which it was imprisoned until the 1950s. Basing it on a systematic and a systemic approach, he centralized the “poeticity” of poetry and of individual poems. In 1953, while still an undergraduate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he devised the first course in Israel on “Meter, Rhyme, and Strophe in the New Hebrew Poetry.” In the following year, he supplemented it by developing a course on “Basic Features of the Hebrew Lyric.” In either instance, it was the first time that a whole course was devoted to detailed analyses of contemporary poems within a systematic theoretical framework. If Israeli students of literature today learn prosody as a matter of course, if the latest matriculation curriculum is criticized for obliging high school students to study prosody (instead of covering more texts), if almost any serious discussion of poetry (even if ideologically oriented) includes a prosodic analysis—it is largely due to the effects of Harshav's revolution.

In 2000 a long overdue historical-critical anthology of the poetry of the Hebrew Revival of 1882–1918 (the anthology included poems published until 1981), which Harshav had edited quite some time ago, was finally pub-

lished. Harshav prefaces the anthology poems with a discussion of meter in relation to language and with a restatement of the three major functions that meter fulfills in poetry: rhythmical, compositional, and institutional. He situates this discussion in its historical-cultural context—the struggle for hegemony between the different Ashkenazi and Sephardic pronunciations of Hebrew, with the ensuing difficulty for poets to make the transition and for contemporary readers to reconstruct the original music of texts that use the Ashkenazi pronunciation. Thus in a short text, addressed to the general public, Harshav exhibits his major scholarly qualities: his expertise in poetic theory (e.g., the questions of “poeticity” and poetic language), his deep understanding of Jewish cultural and literary history, his vision of a scientific study of literature, and his great love of poetry. He concludes the anthology with an annotated list of the meters that can be found in this body of poetry, taking justified pride in composing the “first atlas of the meters of Hebrew poetry.”

Between the starting point, in which his ideas materialized as university courses, and the temporary end-stop, where Harshav reintroduces into the contemporary scene the first hundred years of new Hebrew poetry, there are many major studies. Each of them contributes to our understanding of and ability to deal with poetry in general as well as with individual poems. Harshav’s works “On Free Rhythms in Modern Yiddish Poetry” (1954), “On Free Rhythms in Modern Poetry” (1964), on “The Creation of Accentual Iambes in European Poetry, and their First Employment in a Yiddish Romance in Italy (1508–09)” (1964), on Hebrew prosody (1972), and on “The Meaning of Sound Patterns in Poetry” (1980) are well-known examples of his contribution to the field of prosody both as a historian and as a theoretician. Roads that he constructed became the highways of Israeli literary studies, and those that came after him pursued these ways each in her or his own style. Beyond prosody, his work on “Poetic Metaphor and Frames of Reference” (1984) situates his interest in poetry and poetic language within the general framework of his theory of integrational semantics, well known from its English versions (1982) as well as from discussions of related issues in “The Structure of Semiotic Objects” (1979, 1981) or “Fictionality and Fields of Reference” (1984c).

Nor is this surprising. Throughout his academic career, starting with the scholarly anthologies that he edited, continuing with the broad and bold mappings of the literary field, and culminating in his “Integrational Semantics,” Harshav has worked toward a general theory of meaning—one that describes and explains how meaning is produced in literature and other texts and how it is processed and formulated by its recipients. In all its articulations, Harshav’s constructivist poetics is indeed integrative and inter-

active. It touches upon all the phenomena that comprise the literary system (with special emphasis on language, text, representation, context, culture, and reader) and grounds itself in their interactions. This work springs from two contradictory impulses. One is his ideal of systematic and regulated study. The other is his loyalty to and respect for his research object—the literary text that is by definition too complex to be exhausted by any single methodology. Hence the combination of attention to minute details and their contribution to a specific whole, on the one hand, and sweeping generalizations on the other. Let me illustrate Harshav's typical work by dwelling on a major contribution that appeared only in Hebrew, *The Theory and Practice of Rhythm in the Expressionist Poetry of U. Z. Grinberg* (1968; Harshav's English Summary was published as an abstract in *Ha-Sifrut* 1 [1]: xiv).

As its title suggests, this seminal paper characteristically combines the analysis of individual poems and their wide theoretical contextualizing. It also typifies his ability to effect a change in the canon. By disclosing Grinberg's poetic stature, Harshav initiated the revaluation and the restoration to the center of the national poetic canon of a great poet who had been marginalized on ideological and sheer political grounds. The article begins with an analysis of Grinberg's use of rhythm as a metonymy for the nature of poetry. It shows how Grinberg's "plea for a revolution in the field of rhythm, for freedom from 'classical' forms, has been construed by subsequent criticism as a sign that his poetry is free from form" (ibid., English abstract). The subsequent discussion of this mistaken view includes in a nutshell a theory of the form of free verse. Claiming that "although one receives the impression of complete freedom in Grinberg's overlong verses"—note the appeal to the recipient and the structuring of various formal elements construed by recipients into a single effect—Harshav goes on to demonstrate that this poetry "was written in strict meters, in the Ashkenazi pronunciation, which was predominant in the Hebrew poetry of the period." On the basis of a detailed analysis of the extremely long verses (as many as eighty syllables) of one typical poem, "Tur Malka," Harshav develops a theory of the two-level organization of rhythm in some free verse poems. In such long verses, the basic unit is not the metrical foot, but a group of feet, and freedom is allowed in the combination of these composite units into verses. "Additional internal groupings are achieved by syntactical and rhythmical means. The impression of freedom, achieved by the numerical flexibility on the higher level of rhythmical organization, is enhanced by the extraordinary freedom in syntax." This naturally calls for a discussion of Grinberg's expressionistic style as well as for a comparison of his two-level rhythm with the long-line free verse poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Walt Whitman. Since the basic combination of "Tur Malka" consists of four trochees, a history of the

trochaic tetrameter is traced from folksongs, through legendary stories in verse, to the expressionistic rhythms of Grinberg.

This influential study appeared in the first volume (1968) of *Ha-Sifrut*, the first Hebrew journal devoted to literary theory and systematic studies of literature. Although the new approach elicited some hostile criticisms (alleging, for example, that it reduced the study of literature to the mere counting of commas and full stops), *Ha-Sifrut* is still (fifteen years after its last issue was published) considered the most important literary critical journal in Israel. This innovative quarterly, which Harshav founded and edited for years, complemented the institutional revolution of the academic study and teaching of literature achieved when Harshav founded the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University in 1967. The revolutionary turn was completed with the founding of The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics and its first English journal, *PTL*, a few years later.

Harshav's impact on Israeli culture, however, is not limited to institutional and scholarly revolutions. He played a leading role in the shift that took place in Israeli Hebrew poetry in the early 1950s. After World War I, Hebrew poetry, written mostly by poets with a European linguistic and cultural background, was under the influence of various modernist poetics, most notably Russian and French symbolism and postsymbolism. After 1950, Israeli-born poets emerged and, together with poets who came to Eretz-Israel as children or in their early youth, changed the poetics of Hebrew poetry. They combined Anglo-American models, in particular the free verse of T. S. Eliot, with spoken Hebrew. The pathos inherited from Russian poetry was curbed and the individual experience of quotidian things, rather than national events or philosophical issues, became a central theme.

In a Foreword to the anthology published in 2000, titled *Hebrew Renaissance Poetry*, Harshav describes his role in this poetic shift in a humorous nostalgic tone:

After the War of Independence, everybody was tired of “Zionism”—that ideological preaching of Zionist and socialist ideas in which, however, we still believed. Many came to study literature at the Hebrew University. . . . My uncle sent me from New York small cans of a new invention, Swiss “instant coffee,” and a tiny Hebrew typewriter: Baby Hermes. A number of young poets congregated in my attic—Moshe Dor, Arieh Sivan, then Natan Zeitelbach (Zach), and later on still others. In 1951 the first issue of LIKRAT [TOWARDS, the organ of the new poetics] appeared. I chose the material, edited and typed it on my Baby Hermes on waxed stencils. Haim Hagiti, a sensitive and intentionally minor poet, who worked at the Youth Department of the Jewish Agency, made 40 Xerox copies. We then sent copies to all the editorial boards of Israeli news-

papers, everybody attacked us (where is the “social realism?”), and LIKRAT became a fact in the history of Hebrew poetry.

Harshav’s emphasis of his practical contributions (coffee, typewriter, a room of his own) must not obscure his real function as editor and senior member of this group. He was the midwife at the birth of the leading poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, providing the younger poets with a vast repertoire of poetic models and much needed editorial guidance.

His own poetry came into its own thirty years later with the invention of Gabi Daniel. This heteronym, pseudonym, or alter-ego produced poetry that completed a full circle in both a biographical and poetic sense. The persona is that of an Israeli painter who lives in Europe, who began to write poetry as a light-hearted adventure—a language game—but who allowed the historical anxiety of his generation to invade his poems. Harshav, who claims to have been introduced to Daniel by another fictive character, notes that in the poetry of Daniel he found echoes or traces of his own life stories. It is as if Daniel “has appropriated someone else’s biography.” Daniel sought to become a poetic and linguistic juggler. But the biographical traces and historical anxiety generated a poetry that returns to big subjects, that addresses historical events and national problems, that speaks in the first person plural, that tells a group’s biography, that proves that the personal can be—as it once was—the collective. In its more serious parts (for example, the sequence “Pages from the Jewish Comedy”), Harshav’s poetry is the first full-scale attempt to look at the Israeli experience from the outside, from an exile’s point of view. The person who nursed the transition of Israeli poetry in the 1950s from collective to individual experience becomes the spokesman for Holocaust survivors, for those who in their wish to be accepted denied their own history, European background, and cosmopolitan identity.

When the poems of Gabi Daniel were published in 1990, Harshav had already retired from Tel Aviv University and taken a position at Yale. Geographical distance did not, however, diminish his impact on and involvement in Israeli culture. For example, in 1990 he published an annotated anthology of modern poetry which included translations into Hebrew from English, French, Russian, German, and Yiddish works. For this anthology he wrote in Hebrew an introduction that is a major treatment of European modernism. He also translated a selection from the poetry of the Yiddish poet Glatstein, including an enlightening introduction. And, in the opposite direction, a volume of Yehuda Amichai’s poetry appeared in New York, translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav. All this in only one year. . . .

For all his contributions, in June 2000 he received the prestigious Uri

Zvi Grinberg Prize for Poetry and Poetry Research, given by the city of Jerusalem. I'll conclude this brief homage with a translation of the final paragraph of the jury's statement:

Professor Benjamin Harshav's contribution to the study of Hebrew poetry, and to the study of Hebrew Literature and Culture in general, is much more than the sum of particular contributions mentioned above, or even including those that have not been mentioned. Beyond his specific achievements as a scholar and an academic leader, there is his contribution as a person. As a true Man of Letters, as a teacher, as a man who sows ideas wherever he goes, as the initiator of many and varied projects, he has been and continues to be a source of inspiration. This is true of all his former students and colleagues, whether they see themselves as his followers, even disciples, or whether they chose other directions.

On behalf of all of them, I thank you, Binyamin.