

J. L. GORDON'S EARLY STORIES AND THEIR ROLE IN HIS POETIC WORLD*

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The present article investigates the reasons for J. L. Gordon's repeated essays into short prose, which lacked both the brilliance of past works and the impressive spaciousness of the modern novel. What was it that drove Gordon, a champion of poetry and an excellent practitioner thereof, to go back constantly to writing short fiction which was usually greeted with considerable reservation?

In what follows I shall claim that short fiction served Gordon as a field of experiment and practice, something which its formal and thematic freedom enabled, and even encouraged. An examination of the interrelation between his early story "The End of Happiness Is Sadness" and his lengthy poems about the present reveals that the former served as a kind of poetic "exercise," a means of experimenting with important features which would later appear in his mature poetry.

Consequently we may surmise that the supposedly great distance between Gordon's prose and poetry was in fact bridged by artistic principles derived from his experience in writing prose and then applied with great success in his poetry.

Judah Leib Gordon (1830–1892), the foremost poet of the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment movement, also wrote prose fiction with some regularity. In 1868 he published his first story, *שני ימים ולילה אחד בבית מלון* (Two days and a night at an inn).¹ Five years later he published his second story, *אחרית שמחה תוגה* (The end of happiness is sadness),² which shared with its predecessor a common heading: *עולם כמנהגו* (Everything as usual). In the 1880s Gordon wrote another eight short stories, which were published in the journal *המליץ* (Ha-Meliz), and when in 1889 a volume of his complete works in prose was published, it contained yet another four

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¹ First published in J. L. Gordon, *עולם כמנהגו* (Everything as usual; Odessa, 1868). Second published by A. Y. Shapiro (Warsaw, 1874). Third published by Mordechai Katzenelenbogen's Book Shop (Vilnius, 1904), pp. 1–43 (first story). The details are taken from Avner Holtzman's groundbreaking article on Gordon's prose fiction. See: A. Holtzman, "סיפורי י"ל גורדון: מסאטירה להומור" (The stories of J. L. Gordon: From satire to humor), in *פנים בספרות העברית החדשה* (Loves of Zion: Studies in Modern Hebrew literature; Jerusalem: Carmel Press, 2006), pp. 51–76.

² First published in J. L. Gordon, *עולם כמנהגו* (Everything as usual; Vilnius, 1873). Second published by Mordechai Katzenelenbogen's Book Shop (Vilnius, 1904), pp. 1–158 (second story).

previously unpublished stories.³ The efforts which he put into finding a proper abode for his stories, as described by A. Holtzman, are proof of the great value which Gordon attached to them.

Critics and scholars, however, did not share Gordon's view of his own works. His first stories were not very well received by practitioners of the newly emerging field of Hebrew literary criticism. A particularly sharp attack was leveled by A. U. Kovner, who in a review of *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* wrote that this talented poet turned out to be a miserable writer of prose and a crude joker. A few years later P. Smolenskin wrote in the same vein, "כל האנשים אשר יבואו בספור הזה המה חסרי לב ורגש אדם, ורק כקופים יעשו" (all the people which appear in this story do not possess the heart and feelings of human beings, but perform their deeds as mere *apes*).⁴ These reviews were a major factor in the long-standing neglect into which Gordon's stories fell; even after his death, critics remained incapable of a profound evaluation of his prose works, which thus remained unappreciated by even his greatest admirers, including H. N. Bialik, who described Gordon's narrative style as consisting "כולו שלאי על גבי שלאי של גבוב (wholly of a patchwork of accumulated figures of speech... which are completely unnecessary)."⁵

Gordon's repeated assays into the genre of the short and medium length story, a genre which possessed neither the historical prestige and glory of poetry nor the impressively panoramic nature of the modern novel, raise the question of *why he bothered writing in such a modest and unassuming genre, where his efforts were greeted with disdain*. This question is particularly tantalizing in light of Gordon's reputation as a tireless promoter of poetry and as a fearless champion in the struggle to ward off the heavy attacks

³ This volume was published by Ravnitzky and Hornstein in Odessa. See: A. Holtzman, "סיפורי י"ל" (Unpublished writings of Haim Nahman Bialik; Tel-Aviv: Beit Bialik and Dvir Press, 1971), p. 51.

⁴ A. U. Kovner, "הספרות העברית היפה בת-הזמן" (Contemporary Hebrew literature; Translated by I. A.), *אורלוגין: כמה לדברי ספרות* (Orlogin: Quarterly review of literature) 11 (1955 [1873]): 130; P. Smolenskin, "זואת ליהודה" (And this to Judah), *השחר* (Ha-Shachar) 10 (1882): 455–467.

⁵ H. N. Bialik, "יהודה לייב גורדין" (Judah Leib Gordon), in *כחבים גנויים של חיים נחמן ביאליק* (Unpublished writings of Haim Nahman Bialik; Tel-Aviv: Beit Bialik and Dvir Press, 1971), pp. 329–332. See also: N. Slouschz, "יהודה לייב גורדין: המלחמה ברבנות" (Judah Leib Gordon: His war against the rabbis), in *תולדות הספרות העברית החדשה* (History of the New Hebrew literature; Warsaw: Tushia Press, 1906), p. 164; Sh. L. Zitron, "יהודה לייב גורדין" (Judah Leib Gordon), in *יצירי הספרות העברית החדשה: יוצרי הספרות העברית החדשה: סגנונם וערך פעולתם* (The creators of the New Hebrew literature: Their history, works, style and the value of their endeavor), Part 2, (Vilnius: Shrivrak Press, 1922), p. 103; Y. Fichman, "יהודה לייב גורדין" (Judah Leib Gordon), *אנשי בשורה* (Heralds: Seven essays; Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute and Dvir Press, 1938), pp. 260–269; F. Lachover, "י"ל"ג" (YaLaG), *תולדות הספרות העברית החדשה* (History of Modern Hebrew literature), Book 2, (Tel-Aviv: Dvir Press, 1963), p. 285. Lachover dedicated a single short paragraph to Gordon's stories, in a forty-page chapter devoted to his works.

made against it.⁶ Gordon's impressive use of satire in his poetry adds to the enigma of why he chose to continue writing short stories, since by so doing he would seem to have neutralized the influence, significance, and novelty in his stories, which were usually based on the familiar principles of Haskalah satire.

We shall discuss these questions in the context of a single work, Gordon's second story, *The End of Happiness Is Sadness*, first published in 1873.⁷ Our discussion will consist of textual interpretation combined with an attempt to examine on a limited scale the special role which narrative fiction played in Gordon's creative writing. Our choice of story was dictated by a desire to extract some fundamental insights from what it has to tell us at the meta-poetic level; in other words, from the discrepancy between its formal and substantive complexity, and its status as Gordon's most discredited and berated work of prose, even among later critics who had the advantage of chronological perspective.

Gordon boasted of the success of *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* despite the cold reception which the story received from his contemporary peers, as mentioned above. הנה ספורי 'עולם כמנהגו' השני נרפס בשנה הזאת (Here is my second story of *Everything As Usual* printed this year in two-thousand-five-hundred copies, almost all of which have been sold), he wrote to Alexander Zederbaum.⁸ What was the source of Gordon's feeling of satisfaction at the story's success? It is quite likely that the answer lies at least in part in his pride at having implemented some of the principles of realism in the story's plot, at least to a certain extent. Hebrew literary critics of the time proclaimed the need for realism, and this demand brought about a flowering of prose genres and certain changes in the definition of center and periphery in the Hebrew literary system.⁹ The story's "super-title," *Everything As Usual*, certainly testifies to an *a priori* intention to depict Jewish life in the Pale of

⁶ D. Miron, "בין תקדים למקרה: שידחו האפית של י"ל גורדון ומקומו בספרות ההשכלה העברית," (Between incident and precedent: J. L. Gordon's epic poetry and its status in haskalah literature), *מחקרי ירושלים*, 2 (1983): 128–130.

⁷ Actually the story *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* was preceded by a *feuilleton* entitled "פחד בלילה" (Fear at night), published in the "עלה נידף" (Leaf blown in the wind) section of the journal *דמליין* (Ha-Meliz). This story was not included in Gordon's Collected Works. See: *דמליין* 9:46 (1869): 318–320 [signed by D. Bager].

⁸ J. L. Gordon, *אגרות יהודה ליב נאדרדאן* (The letters of Judah Leib Gordon), vol. 1 (ed. I. Y. Weisberg; Warsaw: The Brothers Schuldberg Press, 1894), p. 111; J. L. Gordon, *עולם כמנהגו* (1904), p. 8.

⁹ On the demand for realism and the partial and complex response to it in the literature of the time, see: E. B. Eshel, *כי בא איזה מבויל לעולם: האסכולה הריאליסטית בספרות ההשכלה העברית, מצעה ותכולתה, 1857–1881* (The school of realism in Hebrew haskalah literature, platform and contents [1857–1881]; Ph.D. thesis, Tel-Aviv University, 2005), pp. 205–211.

Settlement, in response to Kovner's call to observe "אך עלֵי אדְמוּת" (only what is on the earth).¹⁰ Further support for this claim is provided by the fact that the story in question was written on the basis of Gordon's own personal experience, for in 1850 he had taken a trip to the city of Minsk in White Russia at his father's behest in order to collect a debt.

Gordon's mission was not successful, but it resulted in his staying in the city for a few months during which he became acquainted with the rich Lurie family and with the life of the Jewish community in this provincial capital.¹¹ *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* is indirectly a description of his impressions from this journey; in it he provides quite a reliable picture of the Jewish community's two-way split into the poor and the new social class which arose in the city as a result of the less repressive conditions under Tsar Alexander II.¹² Gordon's plot centers around members of a Hassidic court who come to town to celebrate a wedding of reconciliation between the families of Rabbi Leibeleh and Rabbi Velfeleh. In opposition to them, Gordon placed members of the professional class who had undergone partial acculturation and Russification, acquired an academic education, and built up social and professional ties with the Russian bureaucracy. In the story, the two groups struggle for control of the town of Zarkishk; the description of the struggle is accompanied by a detailed ethnographic depiction of beliefs, garments, table manners, habits of conversation and gender, and social relations.¹³ These are backed by document-like dates and times.¹⁴ In the

¹⁰ A. U. Kovner, *כל כתבי אברהם אורי קובנר* (The complete writings of Abraham Uri Kovner; ed. I. Zmorah; Tel-Aviv: The Literary Notebooks Press, 1947), p. 10.

¹¹ J. Klausner, *היסטוריה של הספרות העברית החדשה* (History of Modern Hebrew literature), vol. 4, (Jerusalem: Achiasaf Press, 1954), p. 314.

¹² I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה ופינסק של מטה: חסידים ומשכילים, מציאות ובריון" (Pinsk in heaven and pinsk on earth: Hasidim and maskilim, history and fiction), in *מחקרים בחולדותיהם ובתרכומם* (Studies in East European Jewish history and culture in honor of Professor Shmuel Werses), ed. D. Assaf, I. Bartal, S. Feiner, Y. Friedlander, A. Holtzman, and C. Turniansky (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2002), pp. 259.

¹³ See M. Gilboa, "מסטיירה לריאליזם: עיון בסיפורי יל"ג" (From satire to realism: An inquiry into J. L. Gordon's stories), in vol. 3 of *מחקרים בספרות עברית* (Sadan: Studies in Hebrew literature; Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1998), p. 232; I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," p. 273.

¹⁴ Gordon usually opens each chapter with the precise date according to the civil and Jewish calendars. Chapter 10, for example, opens with the precise timing of the events related in it. A week after Rabbi Leibeleh came to Zarkishk, on the eve of the Feast of Tabernacles (J. L. Gordon, *כתבי יהודה ליב גרדון*; [The writings of Judah Leib Gordon: Prose; Tel-Aviv: Dvir Press, 1960], p. 37); the opening paragraph of chapter 17 links the civil date, September 29, to the Jewish calendar, in which that day fell on the fourth day of Tabernacles (J. L. Gordon, *כתבי יהודה ליב גרדון*, p. 57); and at the beginning of chapter 23 it is stated that the time was the end of the Jewish holiday season (J. L. Gordon, *כתבי יהודה ליב גרדון*, p. 74). Inside the descriptions of the events, Gordon also puts in concrete time markers. For example, he writes that the rioting by the Hassidim in the wake of their three-day celebration at the Tsaddik's court occurred at midnight on Saturday night (J. L. Gordon, *כתבי יהודה ליב גרדון*, p. 40); that in the course of the wedding preparations "at the ninth hour two wagons came, laden with all kinds of food and drink" (J. L.

story, he also achieved a linguistic breakthrough, in that he was able to imitate the spoken language with considerable skill.¹⁵

Of no less importance is the story's generic framework, with its close ties to the tradition of realism, although *it is not* a novel about contemporary life. Still, the story's relatively broad span naturally leads one to suspect that here Gordon may have indeed attempted to write a novel, a hypothesis which is strengthened by the fact that it was published as a separate volume and that it tells a love story.¹⁶ A further piece of evidence which lends support to this hypothesis is that Gordon began writing prose works only after the full-length novel had become established in Hebrew literature. By the time *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* was published, quite a few Hebrew novels, by Mapu, Abramovich, and Smolenskin, had already appeared; it is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that these had influenced Gordon in his decision to turn to prose.

However, the claim that this was an attempt by Gordon to write a novel ignores the fact that the story lacks the epic sweep of a characteristic Haskalah novel. It also differs from the novels which preceded it, which were strewn with complex subplots, divided into numerous geographical event nodes, and suffused with scheming and conspiracies. *The End of Happiness Is Sadness*, in contrast, is quite uniform, and its narrative present is limited in time. Furthermore, it would appear that Gordon had begun writing the story some ten years before it was published. If this is in fact the case, as claimed by J. A. Klausner, M. Gilboa, and I. Bartal, it constitutes evidence for the innovative potential of Gordon's prose writing in general.¹⁷ It also opens the possibility that during the years which passed between writing and publication Gordon would have been able to develop relatively

Gordon, *בתחי יודדה ליב גרדון*, p. 47); and that Yokheved left for Mordechai's house "in the middle of the fourth hour after midday" (J. L. Gordon, *בתחי יודדה ליב גרדון*, p. 70).

¹⁵ He wrote terse, businesslike dialogues, used short sentences, had different speakers repeat parts of sentences, and inserted expressions and idioms to create quick-witted banter. See A. Epstein, "ל. גרדון, 'י. ל. גרדון' (J. L. Gordon in Prose), in *מסה ובקרת: סופרים: דברי משה ובקרת* (Authors: Essays and criticism; New York: Ogen Press of the American Jewish Congress, 1934), p. 12; M. Gilboa, "מסעירה לריאלים," p. 243.

¹⁶ Kovner was of the opinion that the love story was imposed on the composition in what could be perceived as an almost artificial attempt by Gordon to maintain the expected standards of a novel (A. U. Kovner, "הספרות העברית," p. 133).

¹⁷ See M. Gilboa, "מסעירה לריאלים," pp. 233–234; I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," pp. 262–264. Judah Arie Klausner, too, mentions the hypothesis that Gordon had written this story before *Two Days and a Night* (J. A. Klausner, *הנובילה בספרות העברית: מראשיתה עד סוף תקופת הושכלה*, [The novelette in Hebrew literature: From its beginnings until the end of the haskalah period; Tel-Aviv: Joshua Chechik Press, 1947], p. 145 n. 48). However, it would appear that the latter story was also written many years before it was first published. See: J. L. Gordon, *בתחי יודדה ליב גרדון*, p. 1; Sh. Breiman, ed., *אגרות מ. ל. ליליינבלום ל. ל. גרדון* (Letters of Moshe Leib Lilienblum to Yeudah Leib Gordon; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1968), p. 86 n. 118.

sophisticated methods of description and evaluation, and these would have enabled him to consciously shape and improve the generic character of this lengthy story with its dozens of pages.

One piece of supportive evidence comes from Gordon's statement that he possessed many more stories which belonged under the same heading of *Everything As Usual*. These were apparently meant to form a cycle of short and medium-length stories with a common thematic core.¹⁸ This testimony tells us that while Gordon was influenced by the growing prestige of the novel and the tendency to foster new prose genres, his outlook on the matter was completely original in the context of Hebrew literature. Had he succeeded in his project, his works would have joined a longstanding European tradition of story and novelette cycles, beginning with Boccaccio and ending, not surprisingly, with the European realism exemplified by Balzac's *la Comédie humaine* or Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*. But Gordon failed to bring his plan to fruition, out of despair at the difficulties he encountered when attempting to publish his first works, and perhaps also because of how they were received after publication.

Nevertheless, even when detached from its original context as one link in a cycle of stories, *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* is a work possessing a unique generic character. An examination of the story's structural features reveals that all the traits which its critics attacked—its undue length, episodic structure, and numerous repetitions—are in fact the generic attributes of the novelette, a genre unknown in Hebrew literature in Gordon's days. This does not mean that Gordon here consciously and purposely constructed the generic framework of the novelette, or that he was fully proficient in the genre. I have no intention of presenting *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* as a model novelette. I do claim, however, that Gordon attempted to take a unique path through the developing field of prose literature, on the borderline between the short story and the novel.

As part of this attempt, Gordon built the plot of *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* around a single well-developed theme, which he surrounded with additional secondary issues which he left as unrealized hints. Such a double purpose, says novelette expert J. Leibowitz, is a principle born of this genre's position midway between the short story and the novel. Its plot, just like that of a short story, revolves around one central theme; but whereas the short story focuses only on the development of this single theme, the novel-

¹⁸ See: J. L. Gordon, *עולם כמנהגו* (1904), p. 4; J. A. Klausner, *הנוכחיה בספרות העברית*, p. 142 n. 32; J. Klausner, *היסטוריה של הספרות*, p. 352 n. 327.

ette forms a complex array of secondary themes which are related to the central theme, derived from it and explain, *without* however actually developing them, as is done in the novel.¹⁹

The privileged thematic core in the story under consideration here is the struggle of the Haskalah against the Hassidic movement, and especially against the latter's indifference to human lives. The story's twenty-three chapters are integrated into a single whole by means of various rhetorical devices, all dedicated to the construction of two homogeneous adversaries struggling against each other. One major stratagem is to repeat the set behavioral patterns of each of the hostile camps. Let us take as an example the descriptions of Hassidim leaving their homes in order to meet the Tsaddiq in chapter 2: Beinush, the teacher who lives west of Zarkishk, abandons his dying wife and takes their youngest son with him so that he may be blessed by the holy man; Aizel the merchant comes from south of the city with the proceeds of two months which he intends to give the Tsaddiq as a present; the young apprentices Baruch and Khaikel from Krampun to the east of the city, steal some valuables and leave in order to meet the Tsaddiq; finally, Nehamah, the barren wife of Zechariah the rich man from Radishk to the north, makes the journey in order to obtain the blessing of the holy man so that she may give birth to a child.²⁰ The uniform behavioral pattern of the characters, differing in social status, gender, age, and the purpose of their journey, as well as their uniform life philosophy, are strongly emphasized, at the expense of their individual traits. The all-knowing narrator dominates the entire geographical area in question, and his gaze erases the individuality of his subjects and makes them indistinguishable from each other.

The homogeneous nature of the Haskalah side is emphasized as well, by descriptions which show what its members have in common. Gordon's three "enlightened" heroes, Albert, Sarah, and Yokheved, belong to the new class of professionals who partake of the emerging modern economy. Albert is a physician, Sara is a young widow and the daughter of a rich merchant from Odessa, and Yokheved is the wine tax-collector. Their stereotypical representation is supported especially by the metonymical "bourgeois salon," which serves as the counterpart to the Hassidic court on the other side, and

¹⁹ See J. Leibowitz, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella* (Series Minor; Paris & The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 20–50. On the history of research on the novelette and the theory of the modern novelette see: E. B. Eshel, *בין המשעל לדרך המלך: לפריחתה של העובלה העברית בראשית המאה העשרים* (Between the pathway and the highway: The flourishing of the novella in the beginning of the twentieth century; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001), pp. 1–39.

²⁰ J. L. Gordon, *כתבי יהודה לייב גרדון*, pp. 18–19.

to the public behavior of the Hassidim.²¹ As Tova Cohen points out, the descriptions of the Hassidic barricade possess the character of satire, whereas the descriptions of the Maskilim operate on the principles of the romance. Therefore the Maskilim, as a consequence of their struggle against Hassidic corruption, find themselves in an emotional and familial quandary, whose solution depends on their victory.²²

Here, too, this privileged thematic focus is surrounded by other topics which expand the tale's boundaries and take it beyond the limited framework of a short story, although they are not developed significantly as they would have been in a novel. One example of such a secondary theme is the conduct of the Hassidic leadership which refuses to cooperate with the Russian authorities and insists on retaining its economic and halakhic autonomy.²³ Social issues such as early marriage and the status of women in Jewish society are also mentioned in the story but with no in-depth ethical or political treatment. These topics surround the core of the composition and enrich it; but they are not discussed at length as they would be in a social novel.

The fact that Gordon arranged *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* in accordance with the principles of the novelette testifies to his desire to forge an independent path in Hebrew prose, one which would bear the stamp of his own personality. In this respect, we cannot claim that he succeeded in creating a stable, influential generic model. After all, he chose this medium-length genre after a single attempt at writing a short story and another one-time attempt at writing a *feuilleton*. Furthermore, *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* remained Gordon's only novelette. These facts make it difficult to come to an authoritative assessment as to Gordon's expectations from his

²¹ I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," pp. 272–273.

²² T. Cohen, *האחת אהובה והאחת שנאה: בין מציאות לכדיון בחיבורי האישה בספרות ההשכלה*, (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2002), pp. 311–312. Here I would like to make two comments on Tova Cohen's important distinction. First of all, it must be stressed that the presence of romantic, satirical, or realistic characteristics in a work of literature does not mean that it cannot be defined as a novelette, for the latter serves as a framework which organizes the work's materials but does not determine what materials are chosen or how they are presented. Secondly, I find it difficult to agree with Cohen's statement that in addition to the clash between Hassidism and the Maskilim the work in question also contains a clash between satire and romance, a clash in which romance emerges victorious. In my estimation, satire and romance operate here together, in a synergic manner. The realization of the love story and the story's happy ending constitute a suggestive ploy in the service of satire, which wants to encourage its readers to support it and its aims.

²³ I. Bartal points to the analogy created by Gordon between the Hassidic rabbis and their courts and the Polish nobility. This hints at the expected decline of the Hassidic leadership, for the Polish nobles' unrestrained rule over the White Russians came to an end following the failure of the Polish uprising of 1863 (I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," pp. 268–271).

own prose composition, as well as to determine a stable course of evolution in his early prose which underwent, as mentioned above, many structural modifications.

Perhaps these issues can be settled by observing the interrelations between Gordon's early stories and his poetry. We then become aware that Gordon at no period in his life devoted his efforts exclusively to writing prose; to the contrary, he only wrote stories occasionally, every few years, as sporadic attempts set into a career of continuous poetic output. Interestingly enough, some of the poetic and conceptual characteristics in Gordon's poems of the present, including "אשקא דריספק" (Through the shaft of a litter) and "ושמחה בחגך" (You shall rejoice on your festivals), both published in the 1870s,²⁴ had *previously* characterized his first story, *Two Days and a Night*, which were written and published before them. Among these characteristics, we may count Gordon's focus on vulgar, wretched characters, his use of a limited narrative time which begins only shortly before the story's dramatic climax, and his criticism of the misdeeds of the religious establishment.²⁵ These characteristics are absent from his שירי יהודה (The songs of Judah), published in the same year as his first short story. A reasonable conclusion would be that this story served as a kind of poetic experimental exercise in preparation for Gordon's short poems of the present, which were to be published two years later.

A similar conclusion would seem to be justified with respect to *The End of Happiness Is Sadness*, which stands out in its epic proportions from both its predecessor and all of Gordon's later stories as well. The novelette's considerable length and its long digressions from the main plot are features which it has in common with Gordon's later epic poems such as "קוצו של יוד" (The tip of the [Hebrew letter] yud) and "שני יוסף בן שמועון" (Two Josephs Son of Simeon).²⁶ The main characters in these lengthy poems, representing the average man at his best, possess features which are quite

²⁴ Both poems were initially published in the journal *השחר* (Ha-Shachar) 2 (1870–1871): 164–168, 197–202. They were written a few years before they were published, but in any case after Gordon wrote the stories of *Everything As Usual* (see also note 17 above).

²⁵ U. Shavit, "חומא, אפקט, צורה וז'אנר בשירי העלילה של י.ל. גורדון" (Theme, effect, form and genre in J. L. Gordon's Epic Poetry), in *שירה ואידאולוגיה: לתולדות השירה העברית והתפתחותה במאה ה-18 ובמאה ה-19* (Poetry and ideology: A contribution to the evolution of Hebrew poetry in the 18th and 19th century; Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad Publishing House, 1987), pp. 126–128.

²⁶ Gordon began to contemplate writing the poem "The Tip of the Yud" in 1870. See J. Klausner, *דיסטוריה*, *השחר* (Ha-Shachar) 7:10 (1876): 565–573; *השחר* 7:11, pp. 635–645; *השחר* 7:12, pp. 713–719. The first three chapters of the poem "Two Josephs Son of Simeon" were published *השחר* 10 (1880–1882): 27–37. It was published in its entirety in the fiftieth anniversary collection of Gordon's poems, vol. 4, Saint-Petersburg, 1884, pp. 69–130.

similar to those of the novelette which preceded them. In fact, I. Bartal has proposed treating Sara and Bat-Shua as twin sisters.²⁷ U. Shavit has observed that Gordon's epic poems can be classified according to two parameters: thematically, into works devoted to the past and others dealing with the present; and generically, into long and short poems. In light of this distinction, we can conclude that in *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* Gordon created the unique combination, which in poetry he postponed until the late 1870s: a theme of the present combined with epic length.²⁸

It is thus quite plausible to suppose that the (supposedly) great gap between Gordon's prose and poetry is in fact closed by artistic principles which he derived from his experience in writing narrative fiction but applied most successfully in his poetic endeavors. We can thus say that just as *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* so also "the end of prose is poetry." Furthermore, I would like to point out that interrelations and positions common to both genres can also be identified in the conceptual domain, in contrast to the claim that Gordon's prose recycled an outdated struggle against Hassidism while his poetry reflected complex views on society and Jewish culture.

If we compare, for example, the ending of *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* with the endings of Gordon's epic poems, we see that the latter (whether dealing with history or the present, whether short and long) are shockingly tragic while the novelette has a happy ending: Rabbi Leibeleh is driven out of town and his large home is acquired by Albert and Sarah, who marry about ten days after he leaves. Yokheved establishes a modern hospital and it appears as if the proponents of the Haskalah are in firm control of the city. Literary critics attacked the story with its expected and arrogant ending, seen as simplistic when compared with the impressive corpus of epic poetry published by Gordon before 1873:

אין המחבר רוצה לשער כנפשו כי גם בעיירה השניה חיים יהודים אומללים,
המנוצלים ללא-רחם על-ידי הצדיקים, וכי שר-העיר הוא גורם מבוטל מכדי
שיוכל להדביר מחלה כזו.

²⁷ I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," p. 281. Tova Cohen, too, points to similarities in the character of Sara and Bat-Shua, fashioned on the romantic model, and to a biographical similarity as well, namely an unfortunate forced arranged marriage. The similarity stops, of course, with Sara's happy marriage to Albert, while Bat-Shua leaves Fabi against her will and is fated to live a life of loneliness and terrible poverty. See: T. Cohen *האחת ארובה*, pp. 312–313.

²⁸ U. Shavit, "חימא, אפקט," pp. 128, 131.

The author refuses to consider that in the next town, too, there are miserable Jews who are mercilessly exploited by the "holy men," and that the mayor is too insignificant to be able to overcome such a malady.²⁹

This interpretation, however, ignores the composition's generic structure in which a single privileged theme of the Haskalah is combined, as mentioned above, with a number of marginal secondary themes which reinforce the main theme but also undermine it. Thus, for example, the territorial dispersion of the Hassidim is a theme which is not dealt with in depth, but may well affect the victory of the proponents of the Haskalah in Zarkishk, which could turn out to have been accidental.

Kovner is thus both right and wrong. He is right because the victory of the Haskalah in Zarkishk was indeed too little and too late; but he is also wrong in accusing Gordon of arrogance and oversimplification, as if he did not purposely structure the story's thematic array, whose margins undermine the dominant position of his main theme.³⁰

Proof of Gordon's conscious structuring can be found in some of the story's closing sentences which appear obscure at first glance. This was noted first by I. Bartal, who compared the story's plot, images, and supposed ideology with the historical reality which Gordon knew and experienced. Gordon was well-aware of the fact that despite the defeat of the Tsaddiq at the end of the composition, the bourgeois-Haskalah model remained available only to the few, and that large parts of the Jewish population remained under control of the Hassidim, entrenched in their faith and in their poverty. He granted his ideal Zarkishk a literary victory although he realized full well that the real Zarkishk was the historical victor and that the Hassidic movement continued to rule the masses of the Jewish people.³¹ Gordon was well-aware of the gap between his vision and reality, and in fact admitted as much when at the end of the story he pointed out that while Rabbi Leibeleh left town, in fact it has: נשארה לו לנחלה לצמיחות לאחיות עולם על פי שרחק

²⁹ A. U. Kovner, "הספרות העברית," p. 130.

³⁰ Gordon thus wrote something more complex, tense, and sober than his critics gave him credit for. Here we should mention Michael Stanislawski's sharp criticism of the story, which he attacked for its supposedly numerous artistic failings. He was of the opinion that in it Gordon revealed his philosophical positions in an obvious and unsophisticated manner. See M. Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Studies in Jewish History; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 84.

³¹ I. Bartal, "פינסק של מעלה," pp. 281–282.

“remained his permanent possession, for ever, although he removed himself to a distance of fifty miles from it).³²

This ending shows that Gordon was not at all certain that the Haskalah would emerge victorious from the struggle and feared, lest despite his constant striving towards a new modern spirit, his life's work would be in vain. For this reason, the narrator ends the story with the following significant reservation: “ואולם אם אבוא בשלום על מקומי גם אני—כותב הדברים ומגלה” (But whether I—the writer of these things and the revealer of these secrets—shall arrive in peace at my destination, only God knows and Israel shall know; see note 32). In light of this interpretation, the novelette's name can be seen to possess a deeper and more complex meaning than would appear at first glance. Certainly the heading *Everything As Usual*, so naively realistic, may well reflect the author's bitterness at the rigid standards of the world he describes.³³ Consequently Gordon's arsenal, here used within an innovative generic framework, turns out to be not just a mechanism for attack and criticism but also a means for defense, constructed painstakingly out of fear for what the future holds.

Our renewed inquiry into the covert meaning of the ending of *The End of Happiness Is Sadness* has revealed here an unripe conceptual position which reached sophisticated maturity only in Gordon's later poems about the present. These poems, in particular “The Tip of the Yud” and “Two Josephs Son of Simeon,” also represented both the hopes of the Haskalah and fear lest these hopes be dashed. These are the hopes which Brenner described as looking as if they had been “נוצרו במצב-רוח של איש-הצבא מן המחנה השרודר” (created in the mood of a soldier from the losing camp).³⁴

Z. Shamir, in a paper on “The Tip of the Yud,” examines this duality in greater depth and refutes the commonly accepted opinion that this is a radical militant poem. What Shamir sees in it is weakness and hesitancy, the

³² J. L. Gordon, *בתי יהודה ליב גרדון*, p. 76. Gordon was familiar with the affair of Rabbi Aaron of Karlin near Pinsk, who was expelled from that town; some have posited that Rabbi Leibeleh represents him.

³³ The sages of the Talmud coined the phrase “עולם כמנהגו נוהג וששים שקלקלו עתידים ליתן את הדין” (The world goes on and the fools who spoiled it will eventually be held to account), in answer to a purposely annoying question they were asked in Rome: Why does God not make idolatry, which he hates, disappear? The sages answered: Idolatry is devotion to objects like the sun, the moon, and the stars, all of which are good and useful; there is no reason to make them disappear, only to punish those who make improper use of them (ב, עבודה זרה, נ”ד, ב) (*Avodah Zarah* 54b). Gordon the Haskalah writer here uses the phrase ironically, in keeping with his modern view that it is those who supposedly adhere to the commands of the sages who are the real fools.

³⁴ J. Ch. Brenner, “אזכרה ליל”ג” (In commemoration of J. L. Gordon), in vol. 3 of *כתבים* (Writings; Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad and Sifriyat Po'alim, 1985), p. 938.

traits of "שעה לאה ועצובה, שאחרוני הלוחמים מפתחים בה את החגור ופורקים את הכלים והתחמושת" (a tired and sad hour, when the last fighters loosen their belts and unload their weapons and ammunition).³⁵ Shamir explains the poem's spirit of despair and defeat as reflecting the feeling of many proponents of the Haskalah movement that this was a time of twilight, due to the culture war in Germany, to which we may also add the legislative regression in Russia concerning the rights of Jews as well as other difficulties such as the spread of false Haskalah (enlightenment). It is important to be aware of this complexity, precisely because both critics and students of Gordon's works tend to conceive his later poems as reflecting personal prosperity and strength.³⁶

To complement Shamir's analysis, we should like to point out that the seeds of this complexity can be traced back to the novelette *The End of Happiness Is Sadness*, which critics perceived as reflecting a conventional, simplistic Haskalah viewpoint. Although these seeds were there, in the novelette they were hidden by a commonplace theme structure, which in the 1870s was considered mundane and familiar. Only the genre he chose for it betrays the creative energy and originality which Gordon invested in it, and thus invites us to reexamine its complexity. It is my conclusion, therefore, that Gordon's narrative fiction was a poetic domain in which he hesitatingly and carefully developed poetic principles and elements of philosophy which reached their full profundity and maturity in the neighboring domain, that of poetry. Gordon's attachment to his own stories stemmed from the fact that they served as instruments of experimentation, precisely because they lacked a burdensome and binding structural tradition. It is these very same causes which account also for the relative marginality of these stories in the context of his output as a whole.

³⁵ Z. Shamir, "האפוס הפרודי הראשון בספרות העברית" (A shout or a whisper: "The Tip of the Yud"—First mock heroic in Hebrew literature), vol. 3 of *מחקרים בספרות עברית* (Sadan: Studies in Hebrew literature; Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1998), p. 46.

³⁶ M. Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?*, pp. 129–130.