

# LITERARY HISTORY VIA READERS' EXPECTATIONS — VOLUME FIVE OF AVRAHAM SHAANAN'S CURRENTS IN MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE\*

by Chaim Shoham

Anyone who thinks of literary history as a study of forgotten or outdated authors will soon change his mind if he reads the fifth volume of Avraham Shaanan's *Currents in Modern Hebrew Literature*, for the discussions here of writers like Agnon, Hazaz, Dvora Baron, Yehuda Burla and Yitzhak Shami, and especially the first three, have little to do with "history" in such a sense. Half of the volume is devoted to Agnon and Hazaz, writers whose works are still appearing (though posthumously) and making their mark on our literature as if they were our contemporaries.

Already in his previous volume, "Literature of Struggle — Destiny and Revolt", Shaanan took up the problem of methodology in literary research. A combination of the opening chapters of these two volumes will give us Shaanan's answer to a major question: how are literary research and criticism possible? In the earlier book he dealt critically with the structuralist approach to literature; the first chapter of the present volume questions the nature and possibility of literary history. The beginnings of this discussion appear in the first volume of Shaanan's *Currents*, but during the fifteen years between the appearances of Volume I and Volume V there have been developments in the theory of literary study, and the question of literary historiography has arisen again, with a vengeance, especially after it had appeared that the new approaches to literary study had made it a thing of the past.

Believing that the history of literature follows laws different to those of other historical processes — social, political, economical — Shaanan's introductory chapter expounds the positions of two leading figures of the new historiographical school: Hans Robert Jauss, in his book *The History of Literature as a Provocation to the Sciences of Literature* (Frankfurt 1970), and Robert Weimann in *Literary History and Mythology* (East Germany, 1974). Jauss argues that both the Marxist and the Formalist positions have failed, "because the one denied literature the dimension due to its aesthetic nature, and the other denied its social function . . . Both allow only a very limited role to the reader, the hearer, the spectator." Jauss

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Vol. 5: The Formula and the Myth of the Quest. Sifriat Davar, 1977.

calls for a historiography based on an “aesthetics of reception”, which recognizes the role of readers’ expectations in the creation and the evaluation of works of literature. This requires the development of categories of reception and influence, in which literary history is seen in terms of a dialog between the work and the reader, a relationship which, in Shaanan’s words “takes the form of a dialog and a process, of question and answer, problem and solution”. Now it becomes difficult to speak of objectivity in literary research (a position Shaanan had taken in his earlier volume too). We need to take account of the meanings constituted by the interplay of work and reader — and these meanings cannot be said to be “given” or “there” in the work, waiting to be received in the same way by different readers in different periods. On the contrary: the work invites confrontations which give birth to changing meanings in different periods and readers.

Hence, “in contrast to a political event, a literary event can leave an impression only if future generations respond to it, establish an attitude to it, or rediscover it.”

Such an approach to literary history avoids the danger of reductionism to psychology or history of ideas by the fact of its recognition of what is unique in the aesthetic process: the co-presence of author-work-reader. It further avoids psychologization when it describes the reception and the influences of a work on the background of the objective “horizon of expectations” available to readers at the time of the work’s appearance. This “expectations-horizon” (*Erwartungshorizont*) is the totality of literary consciousness and erudition and aesthetic taste at a given moment in history, which can be reconstructed on the basis of the literary works current in the period in question. It is something like the aesthetic disposition of the readers at the time, early signs of a dominant direction in taste, or: the sum of the reader’s literary experience. It is thus a kind of frame of reference which provides the conditions of possible reception — and reception and understanding are not passive phenomena, but active processes. Of course the expectations-horizon changes from period to period; or — more correctly — a change in the expectations-horizon marks the opening of a new literary period. Thus, one of the functions of the literary historian is to describe the horizon of expectations through its changes, with the reasons for the changes being understood as constituting the historical process itself. “The way a work is first received by a reader,” writes Shaanan, “is already a test of its aesthetic value in comparison to works he has read before it. The historical consequence of this fact is that the first reader’s evaluation will be continued and enriched by further “receptions” in future genera-

tions. In this way the work's historical significance and aesthetic value will be determined and revealed."

What we have here, then, is a historical perspectivism which rejects the notion that the work is an unchangeable quantity which will and should always, in all periods, be interpreted in the same way.

For Shaanan, this clarification of approach was essential, especially in this volume of his history, where he confronts a problem the like of which he had not had to face in any of the previous volumes. For here he is considering authors who, all except one, Yitzhak Shami, constitute a very special category for us. "We are considering the works of authors who require a diachronic approach, since for us they are of the past, but also a synchronic approach, since for us they are also our present."

Thus, when Shaanan opens his discussion of Agnon and Hazaz by pointing out that it is commonplace among critics and readers to speak of this period of Hebrew literature as "the period of Agnon and Hazaz", it is evident that he is not happy with such a characterization. The historian of literature, he argues, should ask himself whether the writers he is studying have changed the horizon of expectations, have broken aesthetic forms and norms, whether they have been responsible for the creation of that aesthetic distance which Jauss says is the outcome of the tension between the expectations-horizon and the new work. An answer to historical questions of this kind, Shaanan believes, will be less simple than the answers we have become accustomed to. He writes: "Although Gnessin and Brenner broke the normative dominance of the 'formula'\*, its savor was continued in Agnon, and later on in Hazaz". The debt of both to Mendeli, each in his own fashion, was a great one. This is a view different from the commonplace, and becomes a criterion for evaluation, because it puts those works of Agnon's which are very far from Mendeli's 'formula' — and this is not the case for most of his works — in a very problematic light. It is Shaanan's historical perspectivism which allows him to ask "whether one can rightly speak of 'the period of Agnon and Hazaz'". The "revolutionary" rejection by Brenner and Gnessin (and Berdichevsky) of Mendeli's 'formula' is much clearer and much more deliberate. "The literary historian may not ignore the debt Agnon — and like him Hazaz — owes to Mendeli and others," writes Shaanan. "Any attempt to deny this continuity, in order to elevate Agnon, is an arbitrary disregard of the revolution wrought by Mendeli as an artist who

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\* "Ha-nusah". See my characterization in the review of Shaked's book, on pp. 6-7 of this issue. R.F.

began a new period in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, both of which influenced Agnon."

If Hazaz, as Shaanan puts it, generally wrote in the novelistic tradition of the nineteenth century, with a predominantly Balzacian element, Agnon was a "bi-structural" writer: on the one hand, tales of God-fearing men in an innocent world of faith, and on the other — a bewildered narrator who betrays discomfort and loss of direction, in the tone of European narrative fiction at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This is indeed a combination likely to surprise the reader "accustomed to identify the language of faith with a different world" than the one he discovers in Agnon's stories. And many critics have failed to grasp this ambivalence, of love and irony towards the Jewish tradition. There is no direct attack here, for didactic purposes, on the old Jewish world, as there is in Mendeli — rather indirect evocations of its problematics in such a way as to produce enigmas for the reader.

On the one hand — a closeness to Mendeli; on the other — a distance from him. And it may be that for many years readers did not notice this peculiar ambivalent relationship to Mendeli, and saw Agnon simply as an epic storyteller of Jewish life in eastern Europe. Shaanan's reluctance to call the period "the period of Agnon and Hazaz" — which would imply their having changed the expectations-horizon of readers — now becomes clearer. It is in fact a rejection of a number of prevalent views about these two authors.

During the period under discussion there was a change in the way life in the Land of Israel was described in literature. For Shaanan, the "meeting with the soil as revelation of the ideal" marks a third stage in processes of the European-Jewish imagination, "an ideal drawn from books and from the sense for the exotic, operating in spite of the confrontation with the reality of the actual place, with all the misery and triviality involved in the meeting of one born in the Ukraine with the wilderness of the East. This was a naive attempt to go on living a dream completely unrelated to reality." But even writers like Burla and Shami, who had no European-born "picture of the East", and thus had the choice of either changing or satisfying the reader's horizon of expectations, wrote their Eastern stories in what was a continuation of the European-Jewish spirit.

What appeared as an innovation in the works of Burla and Shami was no more than a realistic Eastern coloring — an imitation of the customs and language of the East — but not a new literary language. Under the Eastern façade we discover the European spirit. Now if we are speaking of "East", we cannot overlook Hazaz's *Ya'ish* and *Ha-yoshevet be-ganim*, where Hazaz also uses "local color",

“blending these Eastern frescoes in his panorama of Jewish history”, which is a kind of fixed quality in all his work. But while for Hazaz this is a European point of view in his “Yemenite novels”, in Burla and Shami Shaanan finds an attempt to “reconstruct the shtetel in the characters and lifestyle of Sephardic Jews”.

Burla and Shami were received with acclaim; their world is different to what was commonly known in Hebrew literature. Unlike other authors, who were spellbound by eastern exoticism, and whose main problem was to adapt themselves to the eastern “climate”, Burla and Shami had an “inside view”. This is what readers and critics felt, and Shaanan comments: “But the East-European critics, it would appear, ignored one central fact: literature and art are not created from a direct absorption of elements from ‘life’.” Without detracting from the authentic “Eastern” quality of Burla and Shami, the fact is that they found their aesthetic structures ready to hand — and these structures were Western, and already well known in Hebrew literature. Furthermore, the Eastern in their works does not, in most cases, create the characters and the “world of the fiction”. The Eastern is the coloring, while the narrative is such as could have arisen in other environments or periods. These writers thus did not change their readers’ expectation-horizon; rather — they responded to it and fulfilled it. The historical perspective which can point this out can also note it as a missed opportunity in our literature of that period — if, that is, one may validly speak of missed opportunities in literature.

Shaanan allots a special place in this period to Dvora Baron, whom he sees as a “classic” writer. The notion “classic” he uses according to Hans-Georg to Gadamer, for whom it is a dynamic concept: a “classic” work is one which constantly adapts itself to each new present (in contrast to the older view which saw it as possessing an atemporal meaning waiting to be discovered by readers in different periods. In Gadamer’s view, when the process of adaptation or bridging between past and present is no longer possible, the work ceases to be “classic”).

Dvora Baron deals with “a similar thematic sphere to that in writers like Agnon and Hazaz, but she is different from them in her vision and her responses. This is not a matter of her feminine subtlety, but rather of her daring to make a distinctly classicist fusion of what is specifically of a given time and place with what is universal and archetypal mythical”. It is this classicism which gives

*(continued on page 44)*

Dvora Baron her unique place in the history of modern Hebrew literature. Behind the concrete, unique, presentations of character, setting, and plot in her stories there is "a constant essence", and this constant is more important to the author and the work than what is historically relative. Dvora Baron's source for the absolute in relative human situations is generally the Bible. Biblical situations appear in her fictional world and illuminate the narrative present, revealing it as universal.

It is in the chapters devoted to Burla, Shami, and Dvora Baron that Shaanan's distinctive brand of historiography appears at its best. In the chapters on Agnon and Hazaz, Shaanan is trammelled by the mountains of critical theories, norms, evaluations, and interpretations already extant on these writers; he confronts these and has to pave a way for himself among them. In the other chapters he can move without these weights to his feet — and the lucidity here shows that his historiography is clearly and firmly based in criticism, evaluation, and aesthetic judgment. The criteria he uses for judging whether a work is good or bad are those he developed in his volume "Literature of Struggle", now supplemented more clearly by the comparative-historical dimension. Shaanan's book does not give us a catalog of authors and works of the period considered, but an estimate of their value and importance. The comprehensive historical view, which attempts to embrace large overall movements, does not interfere with his study and judgment of individual works.

This book of Shaanan's will, I believe, provide a lot of work for teachers, pupils, students and researchers (and for Shaanan himself), who will have to develop the assumptions and the guidelines so generously scattered here. And for the non-academic reader, it will be an interesting guide to the literature of our past-and-present, and an exciting literary historiography, the results of interpreting which will amply repay the effort spent on reading it.