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Language and Style in Our Young Literature (1931)

IN COMING TO LECTURE on this subject, I must first provide a precise and thorough definition of the essence of these two concepts: language and style, which many people use incorrectly, interchanging one with the other. Only then will I be able to outline, within a general overview, the phenomenon of the new Hebrew artwork.

What is language? Language means: a sum of words, expressions, and formulations, with grammatical and syntactical laws, all of which is stored in the treasury of the nation through writing, or is conveyed orally from generation to generation, from fathers to sons, as a spoken tongue. The interaction of members of a particular group of people depends upon a common language for all, a language that erects bridges between people by establishing means of expression understandable to every member of that group or nation. It is the nature of language, which exists only to serve as a means of expression, to become richer from generation to generation, to expand in reaction to the ever-changing forms that life takes, branching out incessantly into ever-more-colorful hues. The creative power, which is invisible, anonymous, and hidden in the deepest recesses of every nation, works continuously to create new tools of expression to fit the needs of new ways of life. But this process of constant renewal and expansion does not take language beyond its own limits; style is not the name for this. It is not a question of riches and poverty in the treasury of expressions. It is not the quantity that counts, nor does quantity elevate language—whose nature is pragmatic—to the level of style.

Style begins only with the appearance of personality, with the creative individual. The difference between language and style is the difference

between routine and individual form. Our learned forefathers said: "There are no two prophets who prophesy in the same style"—and they spoke well. For where there is no individuality, where there is no new and original vision of the world, which finds its own proper idiom, there is no style. Style is a synonym for originality, individuality, the stamp of the creative personality. The artist who grasps the world in a new and original conception, who discovers in it new facets and hues, which no eye has seen before him, who sheds the special light of his soul, light of his inner world, on the world that is external to him, and who kneads the linguistic material like dough, preparing it to absorb his unique individuality and its expression—an artist like this obviously has a style of his own, an individual style, separate from the styles of his fellow artists, a style impressed by the prominent stamp of his own personality. Style is the color of the artist's soul, his natural expression, his inner truth. Style is the man, his special essence in all its manifestations and hidden folds. This special essence enters the public realm through the work of art, by means of language that has ascended to the level of style through the stamp of individuality. It is all the same to us whether a particular artist commands a rich or poor linguistic treasure, and whether or not his strength lies in lexical innovation. None of this matters. What matters is the interior and not the exterior, the specific color of his soul, the individual form that lends a special hue to his modes of expression.

Every true artwork has its own special style. But I do not intend to say that style, which is the distinguishing mark of every artwork, has to be beautiful. Sometimes style is not beautiful but rather, it can be ugly, annoying, grating on the nerves—this still doesn't prevent it from being style. Just as you can find in the world, in God's doings, all sorts of ugly creatures, mutilated beings with different handicaps, physical and mental, who are, in our common opinion, disgraceful creations of disgraceful style; and despite this, since these creations exist, since they are alive with the breath of God, and they themselves breathe air and survive—they are not excluded from the domain of creation. You find the same thing in human creation, in art, which is a world within the world, a world competing with the world. They say that the style of Dostoevsky is not beautiful, that it isn't polished enough and it isn't brilliant. This fact, in and of itself, is of no consequence. What is of consequence is that this style served as a complete and exhaustive expression of his great and deep world; that is the essence of this exalted genius.

It follows, therefore, that there is no true work of art without individual style, and that amorphous style is a contradiction in terms. Plain language serves as a means for mutual understanding between members of a certain group. The essence of language is purely pragmatic and in that it finds its redemption. Style, which is also pragmatic in a certain way, is meant to render the special shades of the artist's soul, his

specific world view. To the "what" must now be added the "how" of creation and expression. There is not one style but many styles; there are as many styles as there are true artists.

Indeed, our young literature is blessed with a large number of writers, but masters of style are very few because individual artists are few. We have masters of language whose expression may be rich or poor; we have innovators of language who write with linguistic talent or lack of talent, with taste or lack of taste. Our literature is abundant with masters of the *nusah* who have filled their pails from what already exists in our linguistic treasure, biblical, midrashic, and mishnaic formulations—but masters of individual style are few. Why do we stand in awe of Aḥad Ha'am's style? Because Aḥad Ha'am, in his own individual style, gave expression to new and original thoughts, because he communicated clear ideas through means of a clear style that he himself created for this purpose. We have a lot to learn from Aḥad Ha'am. Not that we should, God forbid, imitate his style as it is. Imitation will never be creation. But we must learn the method, the principle that guided his creative work, the aspiration for a perfect rapport between style and content of thought, the full and precise expression of a well-conceived idea. Bialik himself knew there was much to learn from Aḥad Ha'am and referred to him as his mentor.

And Shofman? Is it possible to distinguish between his terse, precise style combining lyrical and descriptive elements, and the composition of his individual soul? Shofman, who stripped his style of all excess, of all traces of blabbering chatter, of all bland rhetoric, of all linguistic exaggeration, opened for us an aperture to his honest, ardent soul, whose cause is nothing but the truth of creation alone. Through his own special lens, Shofman looks at the world and at the spectacle of life, conveying to us what he sees, the colors, the relationships, the afflictions of man, the cycles of nature, in a special stylistic garb unique to him, in which strangers have no part. His individuality is so conspicuous that if we were to read one phrase of his, even without his signature, we would immediately recognize the author.

The same holds true for Gnessin. He, too, is revealed to us in the style of his unique soul, which was more complex, more colorful, and possibly more troubled than Shofman's. It is a style that twists and turns; that zigzags digressively into hidden paths; that strains to illuminate the dark corners of the soul, the microscopic folds impenetrable to the naked, conscious eye; and that pursues with an expressive net the slightest momentary shades of emotion and sensation at the moment of their dynamic flow, just as they are being forged. It is in this style that Gnessin revealed to us his tortured, perpetually agitated soul. His was a soul plagued by compulsive self-searching, bringing itself ceaselessly under the whip of its own wit, devoid of any shred of self-satisfaction, the same

self-satisfaction that is the lot of sated fools and narrow-minded idiots. His full and varied style, which sometimes weighs on us like a burden, displaces our perspective from the outside to the inside, from the revealed to the hidden. Indeed, more than being a prose writer, Gnessin was a poet in prose. Gnessin's prose is comparable to the prose of the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke.

Brenner's style is completely different. It is the style of a poor person who suffices on bread and onions, of a person surrendering to human fate, of someone with head bowed in acceptance of his lot. His style is simple and humble without any glitter and without embellishment, allowing itself a certain carelessness out of complete indifference to any external polish.

I must not overlook a true artist like Devorah Baron, whose humility of expression reflects the nobility of her pure soul. The stories of this author are pearls in our literature, which is so poor in prose-fiction worthy of that name. The delicate sadness her stories pour into the heart of the reader flows from that same fountain of sorrow from which all the great artists of every generation draw.

For reasons of brevity, I cannot enumerate here, like a peddler, all the masters of style among our poets and writers whose individuality is their style. A folk saying goes: Everyone notices a good thing. But now I must turn my attention to the impostors who in recent years have become so numerous in our literature, to the masters of language, masters of prattle devoid of any creative content and of any trace of individuality. Certain writers have arisen among us whose language is their craft, who completely lack any experience of the world, any creative pangs, who shell us with linguistic bombs that do not explode at all, and when by chance they do explode—they just make a loud noise and do not ignite from lack of explosive material. These are counterfeiters of style, artistic frauds, counterfeiters even of individuality, and when you look at them closely, you find only prattle, without any inner necessity, without any element of truth from the soul. These alleged writers are an obstacle for our literature. They corrupt the taste of the naïve reader, and set our literature back about fifty years. Unfortunately, still preserved among us, even among the best of us, is a fraction of that attraction to the holy tongue whose origins lie in the days of the Haskalah; and this attraction unconsciously distorts our judgment when we come to discuss a piece of Hebrew writing. Although our language has since then turned into a spoken language for thousands of Jews, and is already used in secular expression for vital everyday needs, we still treat Hebrew as a holy thing; hence, the carelessness and leniency that are connected to the belittling of our literature's stature. Our special attachment to the Assyrian script is the root of this trouble. We tend to judge leniently everything written in Hebrew, especially a work written in the ornate holy tongue that is full of

lexical and expressive innovation. Unconsciously we use a double standard: on the one hand, we have a full scale for a foreign literature, and on the other, we have a lesser scale for Hebrew literature. If we were more strict, more scrutinizing as to the quality of the artwork and its truthfulness, and if we were not prejudiced by the fact that this is the literature of a holy tongue, we would make our literature purer, we would uproot all the thorn bushes that impede its growth and development. For these impostors do not sit in a remote corner and do what they do. They rush right in, like all ignoramuses, professing to be guides of the literature, purveyors of taste, and revivers and innovators, as it were. They establish weekly magazines and spread their counterfeit notes to the public, wagging their tongues from morning until night, flooding us with their verses that are empty of any emotional content and with their prose works that have no purpose other than to trick the naïve reader through a linguistic sleight of hand. And indeed, many mistake them for true artists with a special style all their own; and furthermore, even among certified critics, there are those who sing the praises of these loudmouths and point to them as exemplary artists. I would rather defame these critics by denying their interpretive abilities than to be untrue to myself and place blabberers like these in the same category as real artists. The fact is, during the past ten years complete anarchy has reigned in our literature, with neither justice nor judge, and any young man who puts pen to paper, wanting fame, can come and take it; and no one protests. We are witnessing this sad phenomenon, that the people of Israel, who have given the sharpest and most penetrating critics to the literatures of the world, have no one left for their own literature. If we had learned and sophisticated critics, would it have been possible for a literary clown like Shlonsky to raise his head? And would not the disgrace of [Eliezer] Steinman's fraudulent writing and style have been publicly exposed? Could the shallow midrashic chaos of that writer what's his name, who is renowned as a true artist, have become accepted in our literature? I mention these writers because they are typical of masters of language and linguistic ability, lacking the virtues of style and individual creation, and because they are hindrances to both readers and critics. Besides these there are many such masters of language—their number is legion. Whoever, like me, reads their verses and stories and, like me, does not understand the sense of these things, would concur fully with my opinion that we are dealing with work and not with creation here, that before us are people who aspire with all their might to be considered artists, original artists, performing all sorts of language tricks in order to deceive. Writers of this type forget one small detail, namely, that originality is not achieved by will or by design; it is not a craft that can be learned. Rather, originality is a quality impressed from birth in the nature of those chosen few, sometimes without their awareness. Every true artist is by definition

original, new. To create means only something new, and not something already created and in existence. To the extent that the artwork includes innovation, a unique worldview, to this extent the name artwork is deserving, and to this extent the artwork appears in a new, individual style. Therefore, there is no style other than what is in the artwork, and artwork means innovation, originality, the individuality of the artist's soul. Language, by which the artwork is realized, is raised to the level of style by the new tone, by the special color, and is ennobled by the individual soul of the artist. On the other hand, the language of these fake writers, since it is based in a lie, since it does not utter anything needing to be expressed, loses its purpose and descends to the level of idle chatter. And the empty *melitsah*, the regurgitation of ready-made verses, which every empty and talentless Maskil used at one time to adorn himself, this *melitsah*, whose tomb we already sealed once, has risen up again before our eyes, even if in a slightly different form, a more modern form as befits the times.

Translated from the Hebrew by YAEL MEROZ and ERIC ZAKIM