

Robert Alter. *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism*.
Seattle: U of Washington P, 1988. 122 pp. \$15.00.

The contemporary study of Hebrew literature, particularly in its modern phases, generally points in two opposite directions: inside and outside. For the “insiders,” the miraculous revival of Hebrew in the last two centuries, both as spoken language and as secularized belles lettres, is a totally indigenous business—a *sui generis* evolution, determined by its own unique laws, that of stylistic and ideological continuities (namely, the consistent reliance on the ancient sources, and the national motivation behind this literary awakening). (As late as 1923, Hebrew poet laureate, H. N. Bialik, admonished a young Hebrew novelist against foreign imports: “One does not draw analogies from one language to another, and certainly not from an Aryan to a Semitic language” [quoted by Alter].) For the “outsiders,” the modernization of Hebrew is a case of comparative literature par excellence: conceived and developed in Europe for more than a century before finding a home in the land of Israel, it absorbed the norms and modes of operation of the cultures surrounding it, thereby becoming an intriguing testing ground for issues of polysystemic changes and literary transfer.

In either case, what is at the center of attention is language itself, “the story of Hebrew.” For the fascinating question is: how was Hebrew transformed from a scriptural idiom to a viable vehicle for the modern experience? And more specifically—in the absence of Hebrew vernacular (a function fulfilled in Europe by Yiddish)—how was the impression of mimetic realism created in Hebrew?

To answer this question *in English* is an almost impossible task, as anyone who has tried to do it can attest. Yet this is precisely what Robert Alter has undertaken in his book, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*. Nor should we be surprised: for who would be better suited for this task than an author who introduced the English reader to *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (and *Biblical Poetry*)? Indeed, this compact exposition demonstrates the same features that made Alter’s studies of biblical art so popular: lucid and accessible prose, even when discussing subject matter most distant from the contemporary (English) reader; a concise historical introduction, both cultural and sociological; a careful selection of “three pivotal moments” in the Europeanization of Hebrew (1886-1930: mainly Mendele, Gnessin, and Fogel); sensitive close readings of hefty passages (deftly translated by the author), in which—and this is crucial—certain key words and structures are highlighted *in the original* (in transliteration, of course); and finally, the delightful use of cultural analogues, culled from the vast repertory of European (and Anglo-American) literatures. The latter are very helpful in “domesticating” this alien phenomenon, making the “anomaly” or otherness of Hebrew somewhat less daunting.

But only somewhat. For linguistically, modern Hebrew presents a greater challenge than the biblical. In fact, it was the very limitations of biblical Hebrew that triggered the reactivation of postbiblical (rabbinic) Hebrew by the moderns. As recent studies (mostly in Hebrew) have demonstrated, it is to the specificity of the latter in diction, syntax, grammar, and tone that Hebrew realism owes its coming into being. Moreover, modern Hebrew in general would be unthinkable without the rich interplay of its historical linguistic layers. Yet English is often at a loss to render these minute diachronic nuances, as Alter repeatedly admits

(this or that stylistic difference is "evident only in Hebrew"). So what is the point of such a detailed exercise in translation?

The point is to demonstrate (and here Alter uses the "uniqueness" of Hebrew as an investigative deautomatization, the way Russian Formalists used Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) that the original question, the one motivating most studies of Hebrew modernism, is no question at all; that the assumption that a vernacular is a necessary condition for the creation of "realism" is a fallacy, based on erroneous "mimetic" expectations. "[T]he illusion of mimesis," he reminds us, "involves more working against the grain of ordinary language than we are willing to admit," and Hebrew modernism is only a(n extreme) case in point.

With this claim Alter leaves behind the historical poetics of Hebrew and willingly enters the contemporary polemics of literary theory, propagating a difficult middle-of-the-road position, the one he would further develop in his 1989 book, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. This is not the place to rehash the problematics of this position ("How ordinary is ordinary language?"). Suffice it to say that in the last pages Alter himself seems to be taken aback by his own emphasis on artifice and literary effects. "At the heart of the linguistic artifice is a paradox drawn from experience, not language," he insists, obviously defending that paradox against the fashionable play of free-floating signifiers and self-referential linguistic codes. The story of Hebrew, he seems relieved to conclude, reveals how language, even at the heights of formality, evokes "the feel and weight and complexity of the real world. . . ." This is an open invitation to any lover of literature, Hebrew or comparative, not only to read with pleasure, but to pick up the challenge.

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OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED

- Butters, Ronald R., John M. Club, and Michael Moon, eds. *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 1990. 313 pp. \$40.00 cloth; pb. \$14.95.
- Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. New York: Norton, 1990. 921 pp. \$24.95.
- Finlay, Mariké. *The Potential of Modern Discourse: Musil, Peirce, and Perturbation*. Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1990. 186 pp. \$27.50.
- Glad, John, ed. *Literature in Exile*. Durham: Duke University P, 1990. 175 pp. \$27.50.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. 244 pp. pb. \$12.50.
- Jukes, Peter. *A Shout in the Street: An Excursion into the Modern City*. New York: Farrar, 1990. 253 pp. \$25.00.
- Marks, Patricia. *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990. 222 pp. \$22.00.