

**POETICS AND POLITICS:
ISRAELI LITERARY CRITICISM BETWEEN EAST AND WEST**

Yael S. Feldman

Reprinted from
Proceedings of The American Academy for Jewish Research
Vol. LII, 1985

To David --
With best regards,
Cordially,
Yael.

POETICS AND POLITICS:
ISRAELI LITERARY CRITICISM
BETWEEN EAST AND WEST¹

BY YAEL S. FELDMAN

The fact that poetics and politics have been bedfellows of long standing is only too obvious: one needs merely to recall the interaction between poetics and rhetoric during the classical period, as well as the ironic outcome of this interaction — the banishment of the poets from Plato's ideal republic.² No less instructive is the Hebraic analogue: the political presence of the biblical prophets was no doubt exerted via their powerful use of poetic language.³

But there exists, of course, a diametrically opposite view, one that claims for poetry the status of an autonomous, "disinterested"

¹ This paper was originally presented to the annual meeting of the AAJR (New York, November 20, 1983). Later versions of it were read at the AJS annual conference (Boston, December 19, 1983) and at a Columbia University Seminar (New York, March 7, 1984). The responses, questions and discussions at these meetings were greatly helpful in molding the final shape of this essay. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Isaac Barzilay, to the active participants of these meetings, and to several readers who kindly responded to the earliest written version: Professors Robert Alter, Jonathan Culler, Edward Greenstein and Burton Pike. In the faults of this essay they have, of course, no part.

² *The Republic*, Book X, *Great Dialogues of Plato* tr. W.H.D. Rouse (N.Y., Toronto, and London: Mentor Books, 1956), p. 394 and *passim*.

On "the close alliance of rhetoric and poetry" as seen through Plato's eyes, see W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1967), ch. 4, esp. p. 65 and *passim*. For a contemporary perspective on the classical period, see Jane P. Tompkins, "The Reader in History," in her (ed.) *Reader Response Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), pp. 202-206.

³ The rhetorical/political nature of the prophetic expression has been recently investigated by Y. Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion* (Bonn: *Linguistica Biblica*, 1982).

discipline. Following Kant's aesthetics, modern poetics from German and English Romanticism on practiced different degrees of "art for art's sake," which resulted in withdrawal from the world of action and political struggle.⁴ In fact, the rivalry between these two camps has strongly animated the history of literary theory in the last two centuries. The English poet Shelley (1792-1822), for example, in his famous "Defense of Poetry" (1821), described the poet as "a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds," and at the same time he ascribed to the poets the role of the priests of old, "the legislators for all mankind."⁵ About half a century later the growing tension between these rival views found expression in two diametrically opposite literary movements: French Symbolism with its emphasis on the autonomy of art, and Russian Positivism with its demand for art in the service of "life" and society.⁶

However, it is not my intention here to trace the long history of this rivalry. Rather, I intend to discuss the particular shape this issue has taken in some recent developments in present-day Israel.

⁴ See "Art for Art's Sake" in Wimsatt and Brooks, pp. 475-98. Cf. René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale, 1963), esp. pp. 256-81, 316-43. For a concise history and bibliography, see "Objective Theories" (of poetry) and "Aestheticism" in A. Preminger, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 645-47 and 6-8, respectively.

⁵ P.B. Shelley, *Selected Poetry, Prose and Letters*, ed. A.S.B. Glover (London: Nonesuch Press, 1951), pp. 1031, 1055 respectively. Cf. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (London, Oxford, and N.Y., 1953), esp. pp. 26, 99, 331-32.

⁶ An analogous tension characterized the indigenous development of English "Aestheticism" of the time, when Walter Pater stretched John Ruskin's ethical aestheticism to its limits by advocating pleasure as a value for its own sake. This inherent tension was fully dramatized in the work and career of Oscar Wilde, as succinctly summarized by Richard Ellman:

Wilde read with great amusement the attack on aestheticism and particularly on Pater's form of it ... [He] could see that [in 1875] aestheticism was going out as much as it was coming in ("Oscar at Oxford," *The New York Review of Books*, March 29, 1984, p. 25).

On French Symbolism and Russian literary positivism, see Wimsatt and Brooks, chaps. 26 and 21, respectively.

Before doing so, I would like to set the general lines of the contemporary "state of the art" as a backdrop against which the Israeli scene may be better understood. Let me quote, first, the following assessment as it was presented in the early 70's by the late Yale critic and theorist, Paul de Man:

To judge from various recent publications, the spirit of the times is *not* blowing in the direction of formalist and intrinsic criticism. We may no longer be hearing too much about relevance, but we keep hearing a great deal about reference, about the non-verbal 'outside' to which language refers, by which it is conditioned and upon which it acts. The stress falls not so much on the fictional status of literature — a property now, perhaps somewhat too easily, taken for granted — but on the interplay between these fictions and categories that are said to partake of reality, such as the self, man, and society ... With the internal law and order of literature well policed, we can now confidently devote ourselves to the foreign affairs, the external politics of literature. Not only do we feel able to do so, but we owe it to ourselves to take this step: ... behind the assurance that valid interpretation is possible, behind the recent interest in writing and reading as potentially effective public speech acts, stands a highly respectable moral imperative that strives to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public effect.⁷

This summary, with the series of oppositions it so neatly constructs, seems to speak for itself. I have to admit, though, that my citation stops short just before de Man expresses his reservations concerning the new trend he describes. I have also omitted his "as if" qualifier, which signals from the start his own doubts with the "assurance that valid interpretation *is* possible" (emphasis added). My own interest in his statement stems from what I see as his inadvertent "prognosis": today, perhaps more than in 1973, it is clear that the pendulum is moving once more away from the "internal laws of literature" and towards its "foreign affairs." The last decade saw the publication of such studies as Mary Louise

⁷ "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics* 3:3 (Fall 1973), pp. 27-33, reprinted in de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale, 1979), pp. 3-19.

Pratt's *Towards a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Indiana: 1977); Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (Cornell: 1981); and Edward Said's *The Text, The World and The Critic* (Harvard: 1983). All of these point to a certain level of saturation reached as a result of this century's preoccupation with the autonomy of poetics and the self-sufficiency of the literary artifact. In fact, the reversal ostensibly taking place before our very eyes is bringing to its end precisely that process which began about two hundred years ago and which exploded in our century in a variety of "autotelic" literary expressions, be they Objectivism, Formalism, New Criticism or Structuralism.⁸

Turning to modern Hebrew literature, we find quite a different picture. Here, for obvious historical reasons, the bond between the literary medium and the *Sitz im Leben* which gave rise to it has been stronger and of more lasting effect. The rise of Hebrew *belles lettres* in the second half of the 19th century was closely connected with the great issue of national revival. Thus the orientation of the early European phase of this recently secularized literature was basically ideological. At its center stood the question of the options and modes of existence open to the Jewish people. No wonder, then, that at this stage Hebrew literature was greatly influenced by the Russian variety of positivist literary criticism. For example, around the turn of the century, "the question of [the relationship between] literature and life" reverberated throughout the literary enterprise in both the fiction and criticism of Y.H. Brenner (1881-1921). His mentors were the anti-aesthetic literary critics of

⁸ For an overview of the contemporary critical scene, often labeled "Post-Structuralism," see Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1979), especially the editor's introductory essay, "Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," pp. 17-72. Cf. Jonathan → Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1975), esp. chapt. 10 ("'Beyond' Structuralism: Tel Quel"), and *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1982); C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982); G. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature, Derrida, Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1981); and Linda Hutcheon's call for "A Poetics of Postmodernism," *Diacritics* (Winter 1983), pp. 33-42.

Pisarev's circle, for whom literature was an unquestioned tool in the social and ideological struggle.⁹ In principle, this basic orientation has not changed even when the center of Hebrew literature moved to Palestine. On the contrary: despite certain trends toward aestheticism, the dominant critical approach, as practiced, for example, by Y. Klausner (1874-1958), F. Lahover (1883-1947) and, at least in part, even by S. Halkin (b. 1898) was that of the Russian tradition. Later on this was reinforced by the import of German *Geistesgeschichte* (exemplified by the work of Baruch Kurzweil, 1907-1972), which again emphasized such background materials as biography, literary history and ideological conflict. It was only by the late 50's that typically intrinsic issues such as the nature of poetic language, the properties of literary genres or types and the analysis of "the poem itself" began to infiltrate Israeli literary criticism.¹⁰ Still, there was no organ devoted to literary scholarship *per se*. Characteristically, studies in Hebrew literature were published in general scholarly journals alongside essays in other areas of Judaic studies.

It is against this prolonged "contextualism" then that one should view the establishment in 1966 of a new department at Tel-Aviv University, commonly known as "The Department for General Literature," which could be seen as the rough equivalent of "Comparative Literature" in this country. However, the official, full name of the department is really *Hoog LeTorat HaSifrut*, the

⁹ See "The Radical Leaders" in D.S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1958), pp. 224-28. Cf. V.V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, trans. G.I. Kline (New York, 1953), pp. 335-38; René Wellek, "Social and Aesthetic Values in Russian Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism," *Continuity and Change in Russian Thought*, ed. E.J. Simmons (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1955), pp. 381-97.

¹⁰ For a classifying summary of Hebrew literary criticism up to 1960, see Shalom Kremer, "Netivot ba-Bikoret ha-Ivrit: 1920-1960," *Hame'asef* 8, 1967, pp. 348-376. Characteristically, Kremer stops short just before the generation of the 60's, in whose work effects of Anglo-American criticism can be readily traced. (See, for example, the translation of René Wellek's "The Main Trends in Twentieth Century Criticism" (*Yale Review* 51, 1961, pp. 102-18), which appeared in the first issue of *Amot* (1962, pp. 66-77).

department for the “theory” or “science” of general literature, and as such it was and, I believe, still is unique, even when compared to American institutions of this kind. The degree to which the new department differed from the norm became apparent by the spring of 1968 with the publication of its new literary journal. It was entitled simply *HaSifrut*, ‘Literature’ (not “comparative” literature) and subtitled *Riv'on LeMadda HaSifrut*, “a quarterly for the *science* of literature.” Although the English rendition carefully substituted “study” for “science,” the opening page forcibly announced:

HaSifrut does not resemble any other Hebrew periodical. This quarterly will not publish new literary works, will not be devoted to criticism of current literature, will not dedicate itself to polemical and ideological issues. Its task is purely scientific. To the host of scientific journals published in Israel, dedicated to research of the Hebrew language, history of Israel, bibliography, Jewish studies, philosophy, education, economics, classics, archeology and the contemporary Middle East — a new periodical has now been added — a quarterly for literary research.¹¹

The programmatic tone of the above manifesto could not be mistaken: the repeated use of the terms “scientific” and “research” is meant to underline the operational modus of what the editors label “a new stage in the study of literature in Israel.” This new stage is conceived of as a *science*, the equivalent of the German term *Literaturwissenschaft*, which, the founder explained,

... is the systematic attempt to understand literature with all its varieties, forms and appearances; to develop a body of knowledge of this area; and to devise a system of methods to describe these phenomena in ways that are amenable to examination, verification and refutation.¹²

¹¹ *HaSifrut* 1, 1968: “*Riv'on leMadda' HaSifrut*” (editorial). All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

¹² B(enjamin) H(rushovsky), “*Al Tehumei Madda' HaSifrut*,” *ibid.*, p. 1. For a more elaborate and modified English version, see “Poetics, Criticism, Science: Remarks on the Fields and Responsibilities of the Study of Literature,” *PTL* 1:1 (Jan. 1976), pp. III-XXXIV. [A Hebrew translation of the later version was published in *Siman Kri'a* 6 (May, 1976), pp. 313-30.]

It is this last stipulation that may cause some eyebrows to be raised: verifiable methodology for the study of what is commonly considered the most subjective of disciplines, the *art* of literature? Can artistic creativity be measured, quantified, verified or refuted? Wouldn't this attempt spoil our immediate pleasure, wouldn't it tear the rose apart petal by petal, as the saying goes? Well, not exactly. There are three different levels of relating to literature, the first editorial of *HaSifrut* claims: the aesthetic experience of the individual reader; the mediating activity of the critic; and the scientific impulse to understand and describe

systematically, accurately, exhaustively and intellectually this wondrous phenomenon called literature. This is part and parcel of the great human effort: to understand.¹³

This last quote is one of my favorites. I see in it an early illustration of that uneasy balance, indeed the struggle, between the genuine admiration for the mystery of artistic creativity and the no less genuine need to rationalize this very mystery. Indeed, as clarified by the tripartite approach outlined above, the various modes of relating to literature are not deemed mutually exclusive, nor are they exchangeable. The functions of the reader, the critic, and the scholar (or "scientist") may be carried out by different subjects or by the same subject in different capacities. What unwittingly emerges as categorically differentiated is the *object* of each activity. The object of *research* is neither the aesthetic experience of the reader, nor the critic's interpretation and/or evaluation of a given work of art. It is rather the phenomenon of literature as a whole, its inherent modes of existence and its principles of operation, that are placed at the center of attention. Although the first two objects are not altogether excluded from the scope of literary studies, it is clear that for this journal, as for the department it represents, interpretation, criticism and evaluation are relegated to a secondary status, unless they in some way support or illuminate the knowledge of literature qua literature. Furthermore, the argument continues,

¹³ *Ibid.*

none of these secondary activities can have any meaning unless it is performed against a norm. This norm is to be supplied through the body of knowledge accumulated by the new science. But how is this norm to be defined and agreed upon? By advancing concurrently on two diverging but mutually supportive fronts: one, the theoretical investigation of the totality of literature — which is claimed to be deductive in its procedures; and two, the inductive work of descriptive research, where the grand theoretical claims are confirmed or rejected. Ideally, these two directions should meet in some kind of a synthesis, fusing the theoretical and descriptive, the universal and the particular, the diachronic and the synchronic, the abstract and the concrete. Unfortunately, this ideal is more often attempted than fully achieved. Many of the major contributions of the Tel-Aviv devotees fall into one of the following categories: the detailed, sometimes hair-splitting analyses of the artistic properties of a specific work, where a single poem or one biblical chapter is pulled apart to the extent of 30 to 50 printed pages¹⁴; or the highly formulized and reductive theoretical models, often reminiscent more of an exercise in logic or mathematics than of a belletristic essay, in which an exhaustive mapping out of such constructs as “the literary text,” “the literary polysystem,” “the literary science,” and in due time, “the semiotic object” is attempted.¹⁵

¹⁴ Examples are abundant. Some random illustrations may be provided by “*Simhat Mo'adim: Te'ur ve-'Interpretasya shel Shir me'et Alterman*” by Harai Golomb and Na'omi Tamir (*HaSifrut* 2:1, Sept. 1969, pp. 109–139) and “*Hamelech be-Mabat 'Ironi: 'al Tahbulotav shell ha-Mesapper be-Sippur David u-Bat-Sheva u-Shtey Haflagot la-Te'oria shel ha-Proza*” by Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg (*HaSifrut* 1:2, Summer 1968, pp. 263–292).

¹⁵ Ironically Hrushovsky's major theoretical interest, “the literary text,” was never presented in Hebrew, although it was the subject of his seminars since the early 60's and was presented internationally in numerous papers, e.g.: “Principles of a Unified Theory of the Literary Text,” Symposium on Narrative Structure, Urbino, Italy, 1969; a lecture given at Columbia University, 1979; a series of three lectures at Berkeley, California, 1972, entitled “The Literary Text and the Process of Semantic Integration.” Some aspects of this theory were summarized in his *Segmentation and Motivation in the Text Continuum of Literary Prose: The First Episode of War and Peace*, The Israeli Institute for

This by no means detracts from the significance of the pioneering breakthrough achieved by many of these studies. I believe that in many respects our past naive readings of biblical narrative, for instance, or our understanding of the meaning of rhythm and sound, the illusion of realism in fiction, or the fundamental relationships between convention and perception — have been lost forever. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the conclusions of these studies, one has either to come to terms with them or to challenge them.

In parentheses let me remark that these are not the only types of essays published in *HaSifrut*. To give the editors their due, I should emphasize that their doors have always been open to other scholarly orientations. In fact, there was hardly any Israeli scholar of literature, young or old, whose work was not represented in the early volumes of *HaSifrut*. The same holds true for the variety of sub-disciplines treated there — traditional historical and textual approaches, comparative literature, folk literature, Hebrew and Yiddish, biblical and medieval, etc. But it is not my purpose here to give an exhaustive description of the journal. Rather, I wish to use *HaSifrut* as an indicator of the initial impulse and early development of the activity of the Tel-Aviv Department for General Literature. I have therefore limited my discussion to the work explicitly identified with the founders of the department and their disciples.

It is this work or orientation that has attracted as much criticism as attention and which stands at the center of an ongoing debate

Poetics and Semiotics, Tel-Aviv University, 1967, 39 pp. (Papers on Poetics and Semiotics, 5.) Cf. his later formulation, "The Structure of Semiotic Objects: A Three-Dimensional Model," *Poetics Today* 1:1-2 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 363-76. See also note 12.

Similar abstractions may be found in the work of any of Hrushovsky's disciples, e.g.: Itamar Even-Zohar, "Roshei Perakim le-Teorya shel ha-Text ha-Sifrutit," *HaSifrut* 3:3-4 (1972), pp. 427-446; "Ha-Yahas bein Ma'arachot Rishoniyot u-Mishnuyot be-Rav-ha-Ma'arechet ha-Sifrutit," *HaSifrut* 17 (September, 1974), pp. 45-49. Cf. his comprehensive English presentation, "Polysystem Theory," *Poetics Today* 1:1-2 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 287-362.

even among some of the journal's contributors. In order to understand the implications of this controversy we have to realize that *HaSifrut* and the department it stands for participate in two distinct, although not unrelated, contexts: the indigenous study of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures on the one hand, and the international study of the theory of literature on the other. The exact positions which the Tel-Aviv department occupies in each of these systems are quite different. While *HaSifrut* has totally revolutionized the study of literature in Israel and may still be considered there (in some quarters, at least) as "*le dernier cri*," on the international scene, the theories advanced by this department are only one variety among many contending for hegemony. Naturally, it is the first of these aspects that is more relevant to the framework of this paper. However, it is impossible to understand the one without some grasp of the other.

It would be rather impudent on my part to attempt an outline of 20th-century literary criticism and theory; nor do I feel sufficiently confident to undertake it. Instead, may I take the liberty of referring the interested reader to a long list of studies, from Wellek and Warren's classic, *The Theory of Literature* (Yale, 1949), to a recent arrival, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (Minnesota, 1983). In between one finds such titles as V. Erlich's *Russian Formalism* (1955), Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon* (1958), A.J. Greimas' *Sémantique structurale* (1966) and *Du Sens* (1978), J. Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), J. Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977), and M. Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) and *Text Production* (1979, 1983). I have chosen these titles — and there are many more like them — to demonstrate the preoccupation of current literary studies with form, structure and the *process* of signification, with the question of "*how* sense is produced." These titles also make apparent the absence of older issues traditionally associated with literary studies — history, meaning, truth and value.¹⁶

¹⁶ However, these terms have not disappeared; they are diligently pursued by a rival school, that of hermeneutics. For a recent, brief description, see Terry

In view of the above emphases, and not without taking the risk of a crude simplification, one can say, then, that the Copernican revolution in 20th-century literary thought was the substitution of *semiosis* for *mimesis*. The Platonic/Aristotelian traditions of art as imitation or representation of the world out there (divergences between them notwithstanding), was replaced by a new metaphor: art as an independent system of *signs*. This system is believed to generate meaning not by virtue of the world it represents, but by the internal relationships and hierarchies obtaining among its members; or, in a different formulation, by the inherent *code* regulating it. The underlying model of this concept is, of course, language itself. Again, not the age-old notion of language as a causally motivated "expression," but rather language as an *arbitrary* and conventional arrangement of signs. This semiotic model is almost as old as its counterpart: the actual initiation of the theory-of-signs is attributed to the Epicureans and the Stoics.¹⁷ It was also, we may recall, the view of language propagated by Cratylus' opponent, Hermogenes, and at least partially defended by Socrates in that dialogue. But it was Cratylus who won the day. "Cratylism," suggested Roland Barthes, is "that great secular myth which wants language to imitate ideas and, contrary to the precisions of linguistic science, wants signs to be motivated."¹⁸ Indeed, history may attest to people's deep psychological need to believe in the extrinsic value of their communicative systems, as well as to their profound fear to acknowledge the "semiotic void" — the claim that language is not inherently "meaningful" but rather becomes so by virtue of

Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1983), pp. 54–80. Cf. E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967); George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1977); English translation by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1982).

¹⁷ See Thomas A. Sebeok, "Toldot ha-Munah 'Semyotika' u-Shkhenav," *HaSifrut* 3:3–4 (1972), pp. 386–92; translated by Gideon Toury from the English original, "Semiotics and Its Congeners."

¹⁸ "Proust et les Noms," *To Honor Roman Jakobson* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 158.

the meanings with which the thinking and speaking subject endows it. No wonder, then, that the semiotic model did not attract much attention throughout history. We owe its modern revival to the linguists C.S. Peirce (1839–1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whose work stands as a watershed between 19th-century historical and comparative philology and 20th-century universal grammars and synchronic linguistics.¹⁹ Their rediscovery of the sign-system as the basic model for human communication (preceded, no doubt, by Freud's systemic study of the language of dreams and the unconscious), was soon bolstered by similar new "intellectual paradigms," as T.S. Kuhn labeled them, the "field" metaphor of modern physics and the "gestalt" model of the psychology-of-perception.²⁰ What all these new paradigms have in common is the notion that phenomena are organized in some relational composition, be it called "field," "set," "series," "system," "gestalt" or "*struktura*."²¹

Whether this organization actually resides in the object perceived or in the subject perceiving it, is an old/new epistemological problem which we will have to bracket off for a while. For in the early stages of contemporary literary "structuralism" the systemic paradigm was enthusiastically adopted without much philosophical deliberation. The first to develop their literary ideas around this new paradigm were, surprisingly enough, the Russian Formalists, who constituted part of that last generation of 'modernists' that

¹⁹ For a comprehensive introduction in Hebrew, see Roman Jakobson, "*Ha-Balshanut be-Yahasa le-Madda'im 'Aherim*" (trans. from manuscript by Gideon Toury), *HaSifrut* 4:16 (1973), pp. 579–611, esp. 583–86. Cf. Ze'ev Levi, *Structuralism bein Metod u-Temunat 'Olam* (Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1976), pp. 16–46. In English, see Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton, 1972), pp. 3–42; George Steiner, "Language and Gnosis," *After Babel* (N.Y. and London, Oxford, 1975), esp. pp. 78–109; Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), pp. 3–31; Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1977), pp. 19–31.

²⁰ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 17–18. Cf. Jakobson, "HaBalshanut" (1973), pp. 579–582; Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (New Haven: Yale, 1955, 3rd ed. 1969), pp. 158–60.

²¹ See Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World* (N.Y.: Braziller, 1972).

Russia was to produce (the Futurists, Acmeists and Imagenists who were active in the second and third decades of this century).²² Reacting, no doubt, to their predecessors' heavily contextualized treatment of literature, they focused on what they called *literaturnost* ('literariness'), the specific properties of the literary text and its artistic devices. At that stage most considerations of historical- and socio-biographical circumstances were excluded. Political or ideological import was obviously also taboo.

This description of early Russian Formalism may sound familiar to anyone acquainted with Anglo-American New Criticism. However, divergence between the two groups is more significant than convergence. While the New Critics never moved beyond their preoccupation with "the poem itself," the Formalists had begun their crucial move beyond this narrow position shortly before they were suppressed by the Soviets.²³ As Victor Erlich pointed out, it was probably not only the Marxist pressure, but also their encounter with the then recently discovered notion of *sistema* or *struktura* that helped them modify their initial positions. Thus, they made the transition from their preoccupation with "Art as Technique" and with literary "devices" to the larger issues of historical poetics and the contacts between the different "series" or "sets" of cultural activities. In fact, the expansion of the Russian Formalists' theories took the form of concentric circles, moving from the single text and the question of its composition (namely, *how* it is *made*) to the whole range of literary activity, past and present, as well as to its dynamic interaction with adjoining cultural systems. Finally, the idea of culture as a "system of systems," elaborated in 1928 by Jury Tynyanov and Roman Jakobson, brings us back full circle to the similar theoretical models constructed by the members of the Tel-Aviv department in the last two decades.²⁴

²² Erlich, esp. pp. 90-96, 198-200, 227.

²³ Erlich, p. 253. Cf. Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (1963), p. 310.

²⁴ Erlich, pp. 134-135, 251-60. Cf. D.W. Fokkema, "Continuity and Change in Russian Formalism, Czech Structuralism and Soviet Semiotics," *PTL* 1:1 (1976), pp. 153-196, esp. pp. 163-69; Yuri Streidter "The Russian Formalist Theory of Literary Evolution." *PTL* 3:1 (1978), pp. 1-23. For an English

collective to
M2~

This is not a chance resemblance. The scholarly interests of the founders of the Tel-Aviv department of literary theory are an offshoot of this *later* stage of Russian Formalism. Obviously, not a direct one, since Formalism was stamped out by the Soviets around 1930. It took about thirty years for a revival to take place, although under a different name. By 1960, probably due to the cultural relaxation in Soviet politics, a center for the study of Semiotics and Information Theory was established in Tartu, Estonia. Under the leadership of Jury Lotman, research was expanded to include literary theory.²⁵ Concurrently, interest in this Russian enterprise was aroused in the West. This interest was encouraged by the immigration to Paris of young scholars from the Soviet countries, the best-known among them being A.J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva. Under the leadership of Todorov, translations of Formalist and Semiotic studies were made available in French by the middle of the 60's, and these were soon followed by similar collections in English.²⁶

The picture of this cultural transfer from East to West would not be complete without mentioning a crucial third party, one that had anticipated the Western interest in later Russian Formalism. It was in the Prague Linguistic Circle that "Formalism" was "officially" transformed into "Czech Structuralism." It was there, as early as the 30's, that "Formalism" had shed its pejorative connotations of a-

translation of Tynyanov and Jakobson's seminal essay, see "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language," *Readings in Russian Poetics*, eds., Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1971), pp. 79-81. On the ties between these studies and the contemporary theorizing at the Tel-Aviv department, see also "The Theoretical Perspective: Literature as a Polysystem" in my forthcoming *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1985).

²⁵ See Fokkema, *ibid.* esp. pp. 180-91.

²⁶ See the collection edited by Ladislav and Pomorska (1971); cf. L.T. Lemon and M.J. Reis, trans. and eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln, Nebraska: U. of Nebraska, 1965). The French antecedent is T. Todorov, ed. and trans., *Théorie de la littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 1965); see his "L'héritage méthodologique du formalisme" (1965) reprinted in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971). Concurrently, similar collections in German appeared, e.g., Yuri Streidter, ed., *Texte der russischen Formalisten*, I (München: Fink, 1969).

historicity, and had restored to its views of systemic organization and evolution aspects of diachronic dynamism. It was here that Roman Jakobson continued the modification of his work, begun in Russia in the late twenties, and that René Wellek began his "structural interpretation" of literary history. And it was due, of course, to the long cross-continental career of these two Czech scholars that these developments infiltrated Western thought, inspiring the newly created disciplines not only of structural linguistics and poetics, but of structural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss) and psychoanalysis (Lacan) as well.²⁷

It is in the context of this transplantation that I would place the Tel-Aviv department of literary theory. Indeed, alongside original contributions, *HaSifrut* features many substantial translations and reviews of works by Russian Formalists, Czech Structuralists and their contemporary "Semiotic" descendants.²⁸ What is blatantly missing, however, in the works of the Tel-Aviv scholars is a proportionate representation of the work done by contemporary French structuralists. Looking at this lacuna from an American perspective, one cannot but wonder. For in this country, literary structuralism is strongly identified with its French varieties. Here it would be difficult to imagine a structuralist/linguistic study of literature without the names of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Greimas, Todo-

2

²⁷ See, for instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXVIII (270), pp. 428-444, 1955; Jacques Lacan, *Speech & Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968).

²⁸ In addition to translations of Roman Jakobson and Thomas Sebeok mentioned above (notes 17, 19), one could cite Jakobson's seminal essays "*Al ha-Re'alism ba-'Omanut*" ["On Realism in Art"] and "*Balshanut u-Poetika*" ["Linguistics and Poetics"], *HaSifrut* 2:2 (Jan. 1970) pp. 269-85 (translators not mentioned); Krystina Pomorska's "*Li-Be'ayat ha-Tikbolet ba-Proza shel Gogol*" ["The Problem of Analogues in Gogol's Prose"], *HaSifrut* 28 (April 1979), pp. 1-5 (trans. I. Even-Zohar); Cezare Segre, "*Ha-Strukturalism be-Italya: Skira*" ["Structuralism in Italy: A Survey"], *HaSifrut* 24 (Jan. 1977), pp. 25-34; T.A. Sebeok, "*Ha-Masechet ha-Semiotit*" ["The Semiotic System"], *ibid.*, pp. 35-62 (trans. G. Toury); Victor Shklovsky, "*Ha-Roman ha-Parodi: Tristram Shendi shel Stern*" ["The Parodic Novel: Stern's *Tristram Shandy*"], *ibid.*, pp. 11-27 (trans. B. Hrushovsky).

rov, Genette and Kristeva.²⁹ Yet hardly any of these scholars have been featured in *HaSifrut*.

How are we to explain this omission? The search for an explanation naturally leads us back to the opening editorials of the journal. But there we notice yet another omission: of all the terminology associated with the new literary science, one term is totally bypassed — Structuralism. Although the methodological underpinnings of many of the studies published in *HaSifrut* are clearly structural, the term itself is rarely used. Moreover, with all the “new paradigms” so prevalent in contemporary criticism, the new science propagated by the Tel-Aviv scholars is labeled by the age-honored Aristotelian term ‘poetics’, the one used earlier by the Russian Formalists. That this is not accidental can be learned from the subsequent development of the department. The official English title of the department is “Poetics and Comparative Literature”; in 1973 *HaSifrut* modified its English title to read: *Literature: Theory – Poetics – Hebrew and Comparative Literature*. By 1975 the department was reinforced by a research institute devoted to “Poetics and Semiotics.” The official platform of the institute explained that “poetics,” namely, the science of language-related arts, was impossible without the tools of linguistics and semiotics; that the organization of artistic meaning relies upon other systems that operate in the natural languages (myth, psychology, sociology, etc.), and that the interaction among these systems is the domain of semiotic research.³⁰ Similar arguments were elaborated upon in the editorial of a new journal published by the institute. This was an international journal for *Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* (PTL) that drew upon a broad circle of scholars and whose language was English.³¹ After four volumes, PTL changed its publisher and editorial board, and since 1979 *Poetics*

²⁹ The English renditions of the work done by these French scholars are too numerous to be listed here. Consult any of the collections, introductions and readers cited above.

³⁰ See I. Even-Zohar, “*Ha-Machon ha-Israeli le-Poetika ve-Semiotika*,” *HaSifrut* 24 (Jan. 1977), pp. 144–146.

³¹ B. Hrushovsky, “Poetics, Criticism, Science” (note 11). See a review by I. Even-Zohar in *HaSifrut* 24 (Jan. 1977), pp. 154–57.

Today is the international representative of the "Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics" (at Tel-Aviv University).

Skimming through the issues of these international counterparts of *HaSifrut* one begins to sense why the term "poetics" is adhered to throughout, and why "structuralism" is avoided. Among the many technical and analytic contributions, we find some polemical essays not to be found in the Hebrew journal. In such essays as "The Objective Fallacy" (by Earl Miner), "The Structure of Understanding" (by Elmar Holenstein) and "Semiotics and Deconstruction" (by J. Culler), the philosophical underpinnings of structuralism, what its detractors call "naive neo-positivism," are under attack.³² It was perhaps the very zeal of the French use of "structuralism" that stripped the method of its pragmatic achievements and exposed its conceptual weaknesses. It was through French Structuralism that the linguistic model was overused and whole systems of literary grammars were devised. Thus, for example, Todorov's *Grammaire de Decameron* (1969)³³ and Brook-Rose's *The Grammar of Metaphor* (1965)³⁴ both attempted to reconstruct the semiotic code that regulates the structure of a composite narrative work or the varieties of a figure of speech, each treating its research subject as an autonomous system. Similar ventures into the realm of literary semantics and the syntax of plot were undertaken by Greimas and Genette.³⁵

³² Earl Miner, "The Objective Fallacy and the Real Existence of Literature," *PTL* 1:1 (Jan. 1976), pp. 11-31. Elmar Holenstein, "The Structure of Understanding: Structuralism vs. Hermeneutics," *PTL* 1:2 (April 1976), pp. 223-38. Culler's brief juxtaposition appeared in the first issue of *Poetics Today* 1:1-2 (Autumn 1979), pp. 137-141. Echoes of the internal strife in the camp of "poetics" are clearly captured in Hrushovsky's "Epilogue" at the close of *PTL* 4 (1980), pp. 407-409.

³³ The Hague: Mouton (Approaches to Semiotics 3).

³⁴ London: Secker and Warburg.

³⁵ A.J. Greimas. *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966) and *Du Sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). His major contributions to the issue discussed here are concisely presented in "Elements of a Narrative Grammar," trans. Catherine Porter, *Diacritics* (Spring 1977), pp. 23-40. Cf. Gerard Genette *Figures* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), *Figures II* (1969) and *Figures III* (1972). For an English translation of the latter, see *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1980).

answer: French structuralism is ideological whereas
Tel Aviv eschews ideology

In a sense, French Structuralism has learned only a partial lesson from later Russian Formalism: here systems were viewed in isolation, and synchronism was identified with a-historicity. On the other hand, it was also in France that this paradoxical label "Marxist literary structuralism" was invented. We should recall that the 1960's were the heydays of political activity in France and that the structuralist fervor was fermenting among the left-wing and neo-Marxist groups typical of Paris intellectuals then as now. The multifaceted work of Roland Barthes, for example, which had actually begun already in the 1950's, can be viewed as a challenge to what he considered bourgeois "mythologies": the world of fashion, commercials, table manners and the like.³⁶ Despite the methodological changes that his work has undergone, it amounts to an "attack on the illusions of individualism that ultimately has a political and economic base."³⁷ A good example of this demythologizing is his enormously long study of an obscure novella by Balzac, *Sarrasine* (1843). This study, enigmatically called *S/Z* (1970),³⁸ is an over 200-page-long essay on a story half its length. It convincingly demonstrates, however, that this arch-realist Balzac was no 'realist' at all; that his "narrative affords no transparent 'innocent' window onto a 'reality' that lies beyond the text";³⁹ and that, finally, Aristotle's mirror is in fact a *stained-glass window*, at which, not *through* which, we look.

One can safely say, then, that in Barthes' hands literary revisionism was turned into an ideological weapon, in obvious contradiction to the original scientific dicta of the Russian Formalists. From here there was only a short step to the total antinomianism launched by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In the tradition of Nietzschean critique of Western philosophy, Derrida now challenges the very presuppositions on which Structuralism is based. The epistemological problems which we have bracketed off a few pages ago, in

³⁶ *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957). English translation by Annette Lavers (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1983).

³⁷ T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, p. 119.

³⁸ *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). English translation by Richard Miller (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1974).

³⁹ Hawkes, *ibid.*

imitation of the Russian Formalists, have come back full force, opening a hornet's nest of skepticism. As Josué Harari so aptly put it, "Derridean discourse mobilizes a profound 'semiological' knowledge in order to go beyond the central concept of structuralism (the sign) and to upset the epistemological foundation — the impossibility of separating the order of the signified from the order of the signifier in the functioning of the sign — which supported classical structuralism."⁴⁰ With such revolutionary targets, no wonder Barthes could talk about *semioclasm*, and would claim: "It is Western discourse as such, in its foundation, its elementary forms, that one must today attempt to split."⁴¹

In the meantime, the energy released by this French mental splitting infiltrated the American camp, though in a characteristically pragmatic way. Here, it is the ontological status of the aesthetic object itself that has become unstable. In contrast to the New Critics' offensive against the "intentional fallacy," the "new new critics" aim their critique at what is now labeled "the objective fallacy". While for the New Critics and the Formalists alike the author's role as a generator of meaning was suspect, and it was finally replaced by the "objective" authority of the text itself, the latest move is to question the very existence of the text as "an artifact". The text is not credited anymore with the production of meaning. In an ironic reversal, the latter is transferred from the text to the reader, as exemplified by the work of Stanley Fish, whose recent controversial book is enticingly entitled: *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Harvard, 1980).⁴²

To most of these world-shaking issues there is hardly any echo in

⁴⁰ Harari, *Textual Strategies*, p. 29. On Derrida's ambivalent ties with structuralism, see also Gerald Bruns, "Structuralism, Deconstruction and Hermeneutics," *Diacritics* (Spring 1984), pp. 12-23, esp. 18-19.

⁴¹ Barthes' interview with Raymond Bellour in *Le Livre des autres* (Paris: L'Herne, 1971), p. 271. Quoted in Harari, *Textual Strategies*, p. 30.

⁴² Fish represents the most extreme position in the theoretical camp entitled "reception theory" or "reader-response criticism" (see Jane Tompkins, note 1). For a recent critique, see J. Culler, "Readers on Reading," *On Deconstruction*, pp. 31-84. It should be noted, however, that some of the pioneering work of the Tel-Aviv semioticians was, paradoxically, reader-oriented (see below, pp. 24-25), and has become one of the dominant theoretical issues in their current research.

HaSifrut itself. Indeed, there is something of the ironic in the fact that the great Israeli endeavor to establish a rational and objective science of poetics took place in 1967: this is exactly the year that formally marks the acknowledged beginning of the *post-structuralist* offensive — the publication of Derrida's two studies *De la grammatologie* and *L'Écriture et la différence*.⁴³ More significantly, it was also the year of the Six Day War, in the shadow of which we, in a sense, still live, and under the impact of which the anti-ideological ideology of the Tel-Aviv Scholars has developed.

I don't know if the Tel-Aviv Structuralists were consciously defending themselves against Derrida's attack by avoiding the term "structuralism" and by aspiring to the more inclusive and certainly more venerable term "poetics." What is clear is that by insisting on scientific rationality and objectivity they in fact fended off the potentialities of relativism and irrationality lurking in the French variety of Structuralism. By the same token, they also rejected the enjoining of politics and poetics underlying the work of Roland Barthes, for example. Characteristically, of all the writings of Barthes, only *S/Z*, his analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, is reviewed in *HaSifrut*, without paying any attention to its ideological implications.⁴⁴

It would seem, then, that by adopting the general terms "poetics" and "semiotics," the Israeli literary theorists made two distinct statements: 1) they removed themselves from the current philosophical encounter between Structuralism and Post-Structuralism; 2) they took a position on the issue of poetics and politics, namely, divorced ideological struggle from the study of literature.

That this was indeed the case can be learned from the exception to the rule: the first publication of the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics was an English pamphlet, authored by B. Hrushovsky and Z. Ben-Porat and entitled — what a surprise — *Structuralist Poetics in Israel* (1974). This was meant to be part of a volume,

⁴³ By Minuit: Paris, and Seuil: Paris, respectively. Cf. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974); *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago Univ., 1978).

⁴⁴ Shlomit Rimon, "'Al S/Z le-Rolan Bart,'" *HaSifrut* 4:3 (July, 1973), pp. 549–57.

Summary

Structuralism Around the World, to be edited by the American Semiotician Thomas Sebeok. (This volume just appeared; however, without the Israeli section.) The pamphlet is long out of print, but its existence is recorded in *HaSifrut* (1977), accompanied by the following reservations:

It should be perhaps emphasized here that the authors of the pamphlet conceive of Structuralism as it has been fashioned in modern linguistics and in the work of the Russian Formalists and the Czech Structuralists. However, they have nothing in common, except for the name itself, with what is today called (French) Structuralism with its bias towards a-historicity, meta-physics and ideology.⁴⁵

Still, this is not the whole picture. It is not just that in a place like Israel it is hardly possible to retain ideological non-involvement. The people in question are known to us, as are their political positions. Just like the Parisian intellectuals, most of the Israeli Structuralists and Semioticians do *not* identify with the current establishment. Many of them were not particularly happy with the former political constellation either. However, since this personal information can hardly be considered as scholarly evidence, we can further bolster our argument by the existence of a second literary journal, *Siman Kri'a*, which has been published since 1972, edited by disciples and members of the Tel Aviv department of Poetics. In *Siman Kri'a* we find all the types of publications which are officially banished from *HaSifrut*: new literary works, criticism of current literature, and ideological polemics, both literary and political. They have even published, though not without reservations, some essays on Barthes (1978) and Derrida (1980).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ I. Even-Zohar, "Avodot be-Poetika u-be-Semiotika," *HaSifrut* 24 (Jan. 1977), p. 156. The publication itself, despite some drawbacks, is a valuable summary of the work published in *HaSifrut* up to 1974. I would like to express here my gratitude to the co-author, Ziva Ben-Porat, who graciously xeroxed her personal copy for me and sent it across the ocean. It was very helpful in corroborating my own conclusions, as they had been presented on several earlier occasions.

⁴⁶ Moshe Ron, "Rolan Bart — Shihrur ha-Mesamen" *Siman Kri'a* 8 (April, 1978), pp. 233-252; "Mavo' le-Gramatologia le-lo-filosofim: 'al Jak Derida," *Siman Kri'a* 10 (January 1980), pp. 438-445.

So the separation of poetics from politics is not complete, after all. The interaction between them is obviously more subtle than in the French camp, but it is unmistakably there. The question is, how are we to read the ostensible division of labor, so to speak, between the two journals: does this separation hold even when subjected to close scrutiny?⁴⁷ Is *HaSifrut* indeed so scientifically objective as it pretends to be? And if not — what is the pretense for?

A partial answer is to be found, first of all, in the well-known “inferiority complex” of the “human sciences” vis-à-vis the exact sciences. In Israel, however, an additional factor may have been at work: the feeling of claustrophobia. In the literary domain it is the comparatist perspective that helps escape the parochialism of one’s own national literary system. *Theoretical* literary abstractions may contribute even more substantially to this goal: only on a high level of abstraction can the narrow particularity of national literature be overcome. As the history of *HaSifrut* → *PTL* → *Poetics Today* may attest, the Tel-Aviv department of Poetics epitomizes this urge to reach out and put Israel’s name on the international map. As the opening manifesto of *HaSifrut* put it:

Relatively small countries such as Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Poland and Czechoslovakia, excel in the high standards of their research in literary theory, while relying on a selective synthesis of the best achievements in the major languages. Their high standard is reflected in the journals they publish both in their national languages and in international languages. Ours is a relatively small country, but there is no reason that our perspective should be any less multifaceted.⁴⁸

The challenging factors speak clearly: “small” vs. “major”, “national” vs. “international”, and the scale of priorities is just as obvious. Yet as far as the Israeli scene is concerned, there may still

⁴⁷ For a somewhat different approach to this literary-journalistic co-existence, see Warren Bargad, “Exclamations, Manifestoes, and Other Literary Peripheries,” *Judaism* 23:2 (Spring 1974), pp. 202–211.

⁴⁸ “*Riv'on le-Mada' ha-Sifrut*,” p. 1. For a discussion of this urge in the context of its “Jewish” message, see Alan Mintz, “The Tel-Aviv School of Poetics” in *Prooftexts* 4:3 (1984): 215–235.

be another explanation for this pressing need: despite its objective guise, this “new stage” in Israeli literary studies is part and parcel of what was labeled “*gal hadash*” (a “new wave”) in the Hebrew literature of the 1960’s.⁴⁹ The revolt of this young “State” generation found its extreme articulation in Natan Zach’s famous offensive against Natan Alterman, the mouthpiece of the pre-State generation. Although couched in purely literary terminology, *Zeman ve-Ritmus ’etzel Bergson u-ba-Shira ha-Modernit* (1966)⁵⁰ signaled a rejection not only of Alterman’s literary form, but also of the content of that body of poetry. Considering the central position Alterman had held in the cultural constellation of his generation, Zach’s step amounted to a total rejection of the *ethos* of the founding fathers. The ideological impulse of his venture cannot be missed, particularly when one takes into account Zach’s subsequent ideological development and his recent pronouncements.⁵¹

Now, though such overt revisionism would be unacceptable as a scholarly proposition, a similar impulse informs many structural studies published in *HaSifrut*. Characteristically, this journal for poetics and comparative literature features more essays on Hebrew and Yiddish literature than on any other literatures. This means that the scholarly approach is often used as a semiotic lever for re-reading, namely, re-interpreting the Hebrew classics, including even biblical narrative: for example, after a lengthy analysis of chapter 11 in the

⁴⁹ Gershon Shaked, *Gal Hadash ba-Sipporet ha-’Ivrit* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1970).

⁵⁰ (*Time and Rhythm in Bergson and in Modern Poetry*), Tel Aviv: Aleph, 1966.

⁵¹ Zach is one of the most “engaged” poets of contemporary Israel. His ideological position, or rather “opposition,” is well known. It informs not only his straightforward political announcements, but also his verse and prose publications. See his indirect critique of “Israeli Romanticism” (the fascination with death, attributed to Natan Alterman and others, which he calls “forbidden games”) in his recent collection of essays *Kavei ’Avir* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1983), esp. pp. 40–60. Cf. Amos Oz’s similar analysis of Moshe Dayan’s “romance” with death and with Alterman’s poetry, in his “*Hirhurim ’al ha-Safa ha-’Ivrit*,” *Be-’Or ha-Techelet ha-’Aza* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1979), pp. 28–29.

second book of Samuel,⁵² the biblical narrator emerges as a fun-loving, self-conscious trickster, one who would play with the reader's expectations with an eye for tantalizing ambiguities and ironies that are a perfect match for the enigmatic narrator of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*; a far cry from Erich Auerbach's impressionistic evaluation of the terseness of biblical narrative, and a sacrilegious reading for any traditional student of textual or historical biblical criticism.⁵³ In a similar fashion Mendele is removed from his "realistic" throne and is shown to have imposed on his worldly materials a meticulously planned set of analogies and oppositions.⁵⁴ Bialik, for years the apotheosis of the national poet, is revealed in all his inner doubts and anti-ideological sarcasm. This is made possible by the discovery of his central compositional device, the *inverted* poem, which consistently disavows what it seems to be saying to the uninitiated.⁵⁵ Finally, the whole range of the literary system is expanded and stretched to include not only different sub-genres such as popular literature, children's literature, translated literature and the like, but also, and much more significantly, the crucial relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish literatures — a topic which has been "taboo" for the classical historians of Hebrew literature throughout the first half of this century.⁵⁶

The ideological implications of this re-ordering of the literary canon are never verbalized, but they are unmistakably present. Characteristically, it is often not the contemporary writer who is the target of semiotic exploration. Rather, it is mostly the authoritative voice

⁵² Perry and Sternberg, "*Ha-Melech be-Mabat 'Ironi*" (see note 14).

⁵³ Indeed, the barrage of responses did not lag behind. To the credit of the editors, ample space was given to these antagonistic views, thus underlining the journal's openness to a scholarly exchange on a highly professional level.

⁵⁴ Menakhem Perry, "*Ha'Analogyia u-Mekoma ke-'Ikaron Mivni ba-Romanim shel Mendele Mocher Sfarim,*" *HaSifrut* 1 (1968), pp. 65-100.

⁵⁵ Menakhem Perry, "*Ha-Shir ha-Mithapech: 'Al 'Ikaron Merkazi ba-Kompozitzya ha-Semantit be-Shirei Bialik,*" *HaSifrut* 1 (1968), pp. 607-631.

⁵⁶ On this issue, central to the contemporary re-writing of the literary map, see my forthcoming study *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1985).

of the past (of both writer and literary historians or explicators) that is contradicted, devalued and even suppressed. While insisting on the so-called objectivity of semiotic organization, the scientific investigation into the nature of literary systems inadvertently robs the authorial voice of its original authority. It is now left to the contemporary reader-critic-scholar to read the literary tradition from the vantage point of his own time and place. And the latter has changed dramatically, particularly since 1967. Vis-à-vis popular exuberance over recent national victories, there has grown a deep concern within the Israeli literary community (among others). Rooted in the mainstream poetry of the 1950's (Amichai, Zach and Avidan) and fiction of the 1960's (Yehoshua, Oz and Kahana-Karmon), this concern stems from a critique of past ideologies and their present consequences. It naturally entails a reversal of old hierarchies: individualism is preferred to nationalism, aesthetics to ideology, form and structure to value and message. Ultimately, the very perception of what constituted "center" and "periphery" in the literary past has undergone a change, one which is similar (and not at all unrelated) to the transformation of the "English literary tradition" brought about by T.S. Eliot half a century earlier. As the politico-cultural rift in present-day Israel may bear witness, this ostensibly purely literary subversion was the beginning of a subtle power struggle, the nature of which was doubly sharpened since the change in government in 1977. To this struggle, the "new" literary research of the 1960's and 70's undoubtedly added a scholarly dimension. Although commonly presented and accepted as just another expression of twentieth century's substitution of scientism for (19th century's) aestheticism, it would be erroneous to read it as merely a rejection of ideology *per se*. When "situated" in its historico-cultural context, this step may be read as a challenge to the particular ideology of the preceding generation, and hence as a hidden political agenda. So why, then, is the objection so vehement to the "Western" (namely French) brand of literary criticism "with its bias toward a-historicity, metaphysics and ideology"?⁵⁷ Furthermore, why is the "Eastern" scientific para-



⁵⁷ Even-Zohar, 1977 (note 45).

digm so tenaciously adhered to by the Tel-Aviv practitioners of literary studies?

The answer, I believe, is to be sought in the specificity of the political situation of present-day Israel. I would imagine that it is the *fear* of the overpowering presence of political issues, palpable as they are in the Israeli experience, that endows the scientific metaphor with such alluring power. The delusion of rationality and objectivity is, no doubt, a greatly needed defense against the turbulent reality of Israeli life. Hence the bracketing off of the threatening philosophical dilemmas inherent in the sciences of language — there is hardly room for such questioning in the protective edifice systematically erected under the title of “poetics.” This protective function of “scientific research” was painfully evoked by the words of its founder, B. Hrushovsky, when mourning the death of one of his disciples turned colleague, Dr. Yosef Haephrafi (who fell in the Golan Heights in 1974 while on reserve service):

Our weaknesses are many. Our squabbles are petty. The circumstances of our lives are difficult. And our existential anxiety does not let us forget its very existence. We cannot run away into a camp of merely defensive cossacks. In the exact sciences, as well as in the humanistic sciences, we have to aspire — daringly, realistically and uncompromisingly — to create via the highest standards available today in the world [...]

Of course, we have to be ‘engaged,’ but we must not give everything up for such engagement.

And I believe that this was Yossi’s will. Yossi was engaged in politics, he knew what our [political] situation was, but nevertheless he was building a research institute with the illusion that when we are in the house we do research. If our existence goes on, we need this research with all its strictures, without concessions.⁵⁸

This anguished cry for disciplined research was delivered in 1974, barely a year after de Man’s statement which was quoted at the opening of this paper. The gulf between the two views is edifying.

⁵⁸ “*Devarim ‘al Trumato shel Yosef Ha’efrafi le-Heker ha’Sifrut,*” *HaSifrut* 17 (September 1974), p. XI.

In contradistinction to both the French deconstructionist playfulness and the dialectical pull towards returning the text to the world, the scientific metaphor was crucial for these Israeli scholars as the only psychological and ethical defense against less controllable circumstances.

Postscript:

In the months that passed since this paper was completed, two developments took place in the Israeli literary community. After a long period of inactivity the publication of *HaSifrut* has resumed.⁵⁹ Although edited again by the original editor (B. Hrushovsky), the journal's new style and format attest to an attempt to move away from the rigidly scientific model and to reach a wider range of readers. Shortly after the appearance of this new series of *HaSifrut*, and following the inconclusive results of the recent elections in Israel, Natan Zach openly admitted to a clean break in his perception of the relationship of "art and life."⁶⁰ Aligning himself with the great tradition of "engaged" Hebrew writers (Yalag, Brenner, Bialik, Greenberg) and with the European analogues (mainly German and French!), he no longer endorses the poetics of non-involvement practiced by the Tel-Aviv semioticians and which he himself had inherited from the Anglo-American New-Critics. He now calls for the poet's fine sense of language to become involved again by "writing on the mirror [of art] what may later appear on the wall of reality." It is clear, then, that for the creative writer in Israel the pendulum has swung back again from the semiotic to the mimetic function of literature. Whether the Israeli scholar and critic will follow suit is still an open question.

⁵⁹ Since the beginning of this decade the publication of *HaSifrut* slowed down considerably and since 1982 it seemed to be at a dead end. Its renewal involved a reappraisal of the whole enterprise, a change in the editorial board and policy. See issue 34 (no. 1 of the new series), Summer 1984.

⁶⁰ In a radio interview published in *Yediot-Aharonot* (August 24, 1984), p. 20: "Anti-Mehikon: Ha-Ketovet shebare'i" [*Hard to Remember: The Writing on the Mirror*] (Hadassa Volman, interviewer.).

