

Between Jewish Tradition and Western Culture

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If Jewish philosophy resulted from the continual struggle between internal development and outside influences, so Hebrew literature came into its own during the Golden Age in Spain – and before – through constant tension between the inner and outer literary and linguistic traditions. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's work stands at the crossroads. One of his principal commentators has described it as having its source in Hebraic mystic literature, while being influenced externally by the Italian pastoral plays, especially Guarini's.¹ This tension between the ancient Jewish culture and the European, characterizes the new Hebrew literature in general and fiction and drama in particular. Modern Hebrew poetry has a long literary lineage which began with the Bible and continued with the *piyyut* and the Spanish Golden Age, and with the Italian flowering. Hebrew fiction, on the other hand, has a scantier pedigree. The Bible and the talmudic fable, maqamic literature (in rhymed prose) and the various kinds of folk-tale did not produce a clear-cut tradition, and the novel, short story and novelette forms which typify the new Hebrew fiction are outstandingly Western, born in European writing of the Renaissance.

To comprehend this dialectic we will first examine the traditional elements which appear in Hebrew fiction and the roles that they play in the structures of actual works; and, secondly, possible traditional forms which might have re-emerged in the new Hebrew literature by process of secularization.

Hebrew literary traditions show themselves principally as symbolic motifs rather than entire forms or models.

Allegorical commentary on the Song of Songs eventually became

parody, as in *My Mare* by Mendele Mokher-Sephorim. Whole talmudic tales (*aggadot*) reappeared in Chaim Nachman Bialik's fables (for example, *The Legend of the Three and the Four*). Other such motifs – like tales about King Solomon and Ashmedai – appear in Isaac Leib Peretz's story, *Three Weddings*. Many of David Frishman's stories (for instance, *In the Desert*) are based on biblical sources; others on re-interpretations of the legend of the *Maharal* of Prague (*The Golem*). Haim Hazzaz's story *The Blood-bridegroom* is based on biblical material – the birth of Moses' first born; and so are stories by Asher Barash (*Saul and the Asses*) and Yitshak Shenhar (*Gehazi*). Historical traditions (*The Tribe of Judah*) may be found in the book *Light is Sown* by Yaakov Horowitz, and even Moshe Shamir and Nissim Aloni resort to biblical and midrashic material for their short stories and novels (Shamir, *A King of Flesh and Blood, On Horseback on the Sabbath*; Aloni, *Elisha's Ascension*). In large part the traditional element is used only on the surface and only seldom affects the inner structure of the work, an exception being Bialik's fable.²

The situation is different when the traditions deepen subjects, motifs and main characters, and invest them with symbolical significance. This is evidenced in a good number of stories by Micah Yosef Berdichevsky (such as *Red Cow* and *Hidden Thunder*), in which the characters are illuminated by mythology: the town's butchers are pictured as priests of Baal, the rich man is pictured as an Israelite tribal chief, a reincarnation of the Judah who took Tamar, Er's wife, under his protection.³ Ezekiel Hefetz, Brenner's hero (in *Breakdown and Bereavement*), is a kind of modern interpretation of the biblical Job and Ezekiel,⁴ and Agnon's Isaac Kumer is a rebirth of the archetypal Isaac (the sacrificial motif).⁵ Mordecai Ze'ev Feuerberg's creations are full of traditional elements,⁶ and similar themes enrich the output of younger writers such as Yehuda Amichai's *Not of this Time, Not of This Place* and Pinhas Sadeh's *Life as a Parable*. Jewish tradition is seen by these authors as a treasury of implications which enables them to endow the entire structure or character in question with symbolic or archetypal significance.

Some Hebrew fiction also uses story forms of the "simplistic" or "pre-artistic" type. At times these are purely superficial, as in the Hassidic tales of Peretz and Yehuda Steinberg, built on the pattern of the Hassidic legend,⁷ or Yehuda Burla's and Bialik's stories, styled to the maqamic pattern.⁸ At other times they go deeper, as in Agnon's stories, which lean upon midrashic tradition, as for example in *Forsaken Wives* and upon Hassidic literature, as in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. Both

Agnon and Hazzaz make use of traditional tractates in their works (*A Guest for a Night* and *Ya'ish*),⁹ to the point where they become an integral part of the structure.¹⁰

All these factors stamp the new literature with the quality of an older tradition and prevent a total cultural assimilation. They are among the components which give it its originality, and the greater the strains between them and the other components, the more interesting and complex this body of literature becomes. When Ahad Ha'am complained about the decline of Hebrew literature and its loss of originality, he was overlooking those strains which had also to a large extent characterized our early literature. His opinion was that "since the beginning of our modern literature and until now, hardly any genuinely original books have appeared, books which we would feel reveal our national spirit in a particular way; everything is either a translation or an imitation, and even this is for the most part badly done: the translations fall far short of the originals, while the imitations are all too close . . ." At that time Ahad Ha'am's comments were somewhat overstated. Tradition flowed in the veins of the new literature, and its creators were contending with it; but the farther we move from the dawn of the century and the nearer we get to the Hebrew literature of modern Israel, the fewer the symbols, the themes and moulds that have their source in tradition. Literature detached itself from a written tradition rooted in past history, and planted itself in the locale. Space supplanted time. Rather than draw upon tradition, literature absorbed impressions from its surroundings. From reflecting his inherited culture, the new man came to represent his native landscape. This is not a complete schism since the language itself is charged with traditional memories and the process resembles the development taking place in it. It has its ups and downs, advances and retreats. One must at any rate examine frankly the direction of this development which is literary and linguistic as much as conceptual, since these phenomena express a change in ideas and this is manifested in artistic effects.

An additional factor which must be taken into account is what L. Kahan called the sanctification process, the transformation wherein many religious motifs and subjects gradually take on secular meanings, while secular values become sanctified.¹²

This process is characteristic of a period of rebirth and the emergence of a national movement. Cultural matrices are transferred from the customary spheres, carrying their emotional content with them. To a certain extent Hebrew fiction is a substitute for the old didactic moral

tales. Dov Sadan even claims that the decline of religion is a condition for the emergence of *belles-lettres*.¹³ The confessions which marked Hebrew fiction at the beginning of the century (for example, Feuerberg's *Whither?* or Brenner's *In Winter*) were those of atheism rather than of belief; but the confessional need and ardour, and the yearning for deliverance which they articulated had deep roots in religious writings. Certain areas saturated with religious content in European literature came to be similarly endowed in Hebrew literature. Thus the phrase "the sacred art" gained acceptance in Hebrew literature; and Labour and Nature were widely sanctified; a god-like man was postulated, whether as hero or as victim and the image was developed of Man as a being tormented by conscience and obsessively introspective. Love also took the place of the religious experience and a commitment to Zionist realization replaced the religious.

These are difficult evolutions to follow, and it is questionable whether the shift was from the sacred Jewish sphere into the secular. It is possible that the altered world-view was drawn directly from the European Christian tradition.¹⁴

And here we arrive at the other pole of the dialectic - namely, Western culture. From the outset, the new Hebrew literature borrowed largely from European literary sources; the setting in which it developed naturally had a decisive influence on it. The Hebrew writers of the Enlightenment in Germany were influenced by German literature (from Schiller to Goethe), just as their predecessors in Italy had been affected by their surroundings.¹⁵ There is no need to trace the developments of the nineteenth century, but towards the end of it there was an awareness of the cultural challenge of the West, and for years the argument raged whether this was beneficial or destructive. Ahad Ha'am was convinced that it endangered any original literary growth. Breinin, Frishman and others, in the wake of the Enlightenment and its writings, spoke out in favour of opening Jewish culture to external trends: "Our scholars and authors need to find an authentic compromise between general human development and that of our nation with its own particular qualities, in such a way that one will not damage the other, but, rather, that the two worlds strengthen and complement one another. Only thus can our literature be fertile and useful to our people."¹⁶ This problem was solved not by pro and con essays, but by a lengthy and complex dialectic. And the trend persisted in Israel up to as late as 1938, when Shlonsky himself

did *Boys*, Gnessin tackled *The Marsh, Talent* and *A Woman Tells Tales in the Spring*, and Shoffman did *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull*. The books of Berkowitz and Shoffman show plainly that they did not stray from the conventions of the Chekhovian story, and some of Berkowitz's tales are discernibly derivative.²³ Gnessin is different - at the beginning of his literary career (*The Shadows of Life*) he wrote realistic stories patterned on Chekhov's,²⁴ but in time he paved his own way. His style, methods of characterization and the relationship between inner and outer structures strayed from those of his model. He committed a "creative betrayal" of the Chekhovian rules. He elaborated what were secondary factors in the original (an explicit stream-of-consciousness exposition of the mental state; detailed descriptions of landscape), and turned them into the principal feature of the "derivative" creation. In any case a new organism came into being which was no longer dependent on its antecedents.

Gnessin, however, is not an outstanding example of the dialectic relationship between the internal and external traditions through which an original Hebrew literature came into being. He could also have been a part of the evolution of Russian literature. He altered the contemporary Russian tradition, but did not juxtapose it with another. Transplanting this tradition, with its convention, into Hebrew - whose spirit hardly fits the Russian syntax imposed upon it - and into the Jewish social background has a certain novelty; but it is of less importance than Gnessin's original modification of the conventions of the Russian long-short story.

Where Jewish and Western traditions actually merged was at certain high points in Hebrew fiction. The tension between the two gave these works their originality and artistic power; I am referring to writers like Mendele Mokher-Sephorim and Agnon. (Bialik's poetry too, of course, but it does not belong in the present context.)

Mendele's *The Wanderings of Benjamin the Third* was based on Jewish travel tales and enriched by midrashic traditions, but it kept close to the conventions of European travel literature and the "Don-Quixotiads."²⁵ In *The Book of Beggars* the Jewish tradition is represented by aggadic themes and suggestions, but it is undoubtedly also related to the European tradition of the sentimental and satirical novel.²⁶ Both works belong to the literary tradition of the Enlightenment and its aftermath.

Agnon's *The Canopy* is a novel packed with motifs taken from the

Jewish tradition.²⁷ Moreover the story-line itself is based on a popular folk-custom. Its structure is contrived partly from the travel novel and partly from the "banquet" novel, as its framework. Again, the protagonists are close to the Don Quixote tradition.²⁸ The combination of all these factors is what stamps the work. In his *Yesteryear*, the author unites the "chronicles" style so popular in European literature with the sacrificed-son theme which holds the book together. The precise styling, based on the written tradition, imbues all the writings of Agnon and Hazzaz with their uniquely Jewish quality. The strength of both authors is evinced in their creation of an appropriate medium which united Western models with their own particular style. The problem of adapting the Western literary tradition is one of the basic problems of this fiction. Agnon again serves as an outstanding example of both problem and solution: the story *Tishre* was first published in *Hapoel Hatzair* ("The Young Worker") in 1911. At that time, Agnon was a disciple of the Scandinavian impressionists. His hero wishes to translate Jacobsen's *Nils Lyne* - and Agnon himself translated Bjornsen's story *Dust* during the years 1912-1913. There is also evidence that he was influenced by Knut Hamsun.²⁹ At any rate, there is a perceptible parallel between Hamsun's *Pan* (which was translated into German in 1895) and *Tishre*. Hamsun's outcast stranger is a hunter who lives in the heart of Nature; Agnon's hero is a poet. In Hamsun's story pathos overcomes irony and this is also true with respect to the first version of Agnon's story, which was imperfectly styled. Both *Tishre* and *Pan* comprise a story-within-a-story. In a later version entitled *Givat Hahol* ("The Hill of Sand") Agnon changed everything: he consolidated his style, broadened the pictures and heightened the irony. The elements which constituted his personal style reduced the imitative quality to the level of influence. He cut the umbilical cord between his work and the original. This severance does not at first appear to stem from the Jewish-Western dialectic; but further examination establishes that Agnon's renewed meeting with the Jewish cultural past in Germany contributed richly to the evolution of his style. The origins of his propensity to do away with paragraphing, to unify sentences and balance them which is so conspicuous in the final version, lie in that tradition. The result of its adoption significantly altered the story: what had been a sentimental impressionistic story becomes, in the diction of the Sages, an ironic social tale.³⁰

The dialectic between the Jewish and Western cultures runs like a thread through the Hebrew fiction of the Revival period. At first, the

Jewish tradition was explicit and the Western implied. It looked as if the authors were not writing novels and short stories after the Western fashion, but rather discussing problems of Jews and Judaism, in response to Ahad Ha'am's demand in the *Shiloah* Manifest. Later these elements began to mingle. Berdichevsky's Gothic story is rich in Jewish motifs, and Brenner's confessions employ traditional archetypes. Sometimes the literary-cultural tradition takes second place to the exigencies of life, and sometimes it is stronger. In time, this literature became more obviously Western, while the Jewish element became more and more implicit (notably in the works of Gnessin and Shoffman, Steinman and Vogel). Even stories by first-generation Israelis are not entirely westernized. Although their religious roots were severed, the traditions and conventions of an ancient culture still animate these works. The dialectical tension which Sadan presented as the interaction between anthologizing the Jewish heritage and translating Western tradition, and which can also be described as the tug-of-war between a distant historical culture and a nearby one (or between historical particularity and assimilation), is still one of the fundamental elements in Hebrew fiction. Its relations to these themes is among the most consequential factors in its evolution.

- A. Holtz, I. D. Berkowitz, Cornell, 1973, pp. 50, 55, 67—68, 70. 23
ועיין להלן, פרק ה, "בעבותות הוי", עמ' 328.
24 ועיין להלן, פרק ו, "מן המרתף", עמ' 405.
25 ועיין בספרו של מ. ווינער, *צו דער געשיכטע פון דער יידישער ליטעראטור אין 19-טן יארהונדערט*, ניו-יורק, 1946; II, עמ' 209—214, עמ' 222—234. ווינער עומד על קירבתו של החומר לסיפורי מסעות יהודיים.
26 ג. שקד, מעשיות וגלגוליהן, בין שחוק לדמע, שם, עמ' 102—103. ועיין גם להלן, פרק ב, "יוצר הנוסח", עמ' 74—76, 92.
27 ש. ורסס, דברים בשם אומרם ב"הכנסת כלה", סיפור ושורשו, עמ' 183—200.
28 ועיין להלן, כרך ב, פרק ח, "הצומת".
29 ועיין להלן, שם, שם.
30 ג. שקד, בן המלך הנרדם, אמונת הסיפור של ענגנון, ת"א, 1973, עמ' 151—153.
י. צוויק, תקופת גרמניה (1914—1924) ביצירתו של ענגנון (חיבור לשם קבלת תואר דוקטור בהדרכת ד. סדן), ירושלים, 1968, עמ' 26—27, עמ' 34—36, עמ' 44—45.

- 1 פ. לחובר, תולדות הספרות העברית החדשה א, ת"א, תש"ד, עמ' 19—29. הנ"ל, בשער המגדל, משל המגדל, על גבול הישן החדש, ת"א, 1951, עמ' 29—84.
2 הבעיה הוצגה בצורה מבריקה במסתו של א. שטינגמן, מחשבות בזמנו, על סף האכזבה, "קולות" שנה ב' (י), תרפ"ד: "תרבות עברית היא חטיבה עצמאית, מיוגה של מזרח ומערב, כלומר, עולמית, ובעיקרה דתית. ומפני כך לא הכתה התרבות העברית בצורתה המחודשת, החילונית, שרשים במעמקי המונותינז".
3 להלן, פרק ג, "תהום התהומות", עמ' 180; 199—200.
4 והשווה: ג. שקד, מסכת הכשלוניות, ללא מוצא, ת"א, 1973, עמ' 103—104.
5 להלן, כרך ב, פרק ת, "הצומת".
6 להלן, פרק ג, "תהום התהומות", עמ' 211—212. ועיין גם במחקרו של ש. ורסס, האגדה ביצירת פייארברג, סיפור ושורשו, עמ' 88—103.
7 ועיין להלן, פרק ג, "תהום התהומות", עמ' 153—154; פרק ד, "רצים מבשרים", עמ' 260.
8 הכוונה לת. נ. ביאליק, אלוף בצלות ואלוף שום, וי. בורלא, שאול ולינדה הקראית, וכן הנ"ל, פרקים מתוך ואלה מסעי רבי יהודה הלוי.
9 להלן, כרך ב, פרק ח, "הצומת".
10 להלן, כרך ב, פרק י, "עד משבר".
11 אחד-העם, תחיית הרוח, כל כתבי, עמ' קפ (נדפס ב"השלוח", ו, הוב' ה—ו, תרס"ג).
12 L. W. Kahn, *Literatur und Glaubenskrisse*, Stuttgart, 1964.
13 ד. סדן, באמילת הסתירה, בין דין להשכון, ת"א, 1963, עמ' 3.
14 זיקה לתמונת העולם האירופית-נוצרית מצא י. רטוש במיתוס החילוני, שנשאב ממקורות דתיים והגיע ל"מגילת האש" של ביאליק. ועיין בענין זה: י. רטוש, שירת האהבה הזרה אצל ביאליק, ביאליק, יצירתו לסוגיה כראי המקורת (ערך ג. שקד), ירושלים, 1974, עמ' 261—265. (נדפס תחילה ב"אלף", 1951).
15 ועבודה השוואתית חשובה נעשתה, למשל, בידי פ. לחובר, גיתה בספרות העברית, על גבול הישן והחדש, שם, עמ' 123—136.
16 ר. בריינין, עמנו וספרותנו, "ממזרח למערב", ג. תרנ"ו, עמ' 9. המאמר כולו שם: עמ' 1—11. ויכוח זה נמשך והולך, כשבמרכזו הפולמוס בין אחד-העם וברדיצ'בסקי על "תעודת השלוח". אחד מן המאמרים המעניינים, המאוחרים יותר, בנידון זה הוא מאת י. א. לובצקי, אל הסופרים העבריים, "הדור", II (29), 1904. לובצקי מכריז: "הגיעה העת להסופרים העברים לעזוב את "חדר" אירופה ולעמוד ברשות עצמם. לא כל דבר המתהווה בשוקי-אירופה הוא קדוש ונעלה, והרבה דברים נשארו, אשר אנחנו הסופרים העברים יכולים להתגדר בהם." (דברים כדרבנות באכסניה שדוד פרישמון, אביר "המתרגמים" ופותח השערים לאירופה, מופקד עליה!).
17 א. שלונסקי, מקור ותרגום, ילקוט אשל, שם, עמ' 143—145. ביחוד עמ' 143. (נדפס תחילה ב"הארץ", 1938.15.6).
18 על חוסר הסינכרוניות בין אסכולות אירופיות והספרות העברית כבר עמד י. ל. פרץ במאמר ב"החץ", וארשה, תרנ"ד. וניסח את הבעיה ש. הלקין, מבוא לסיפורת העברית, שם, עמ' 442.
19 ועיין להלן, פרק יא, "מן הים".
20 ד. סדן, בסוגיית התרגום, אבני ברק, שם, עמ' 109—116.
21 א. שלונסקי פיתח מעין "תורת תרגום" משלו ("יוצר יש מיש מול בורא יש מאין"), המישחק ששמו תרגום, ילקוט אשל, שם, עמ' 148—150. (נדפס תחילה ב"על המשמר", 1956.10.19).
22 ש. הלקין, מבוא לסיפורת העברית, שם, עמ' 436—439.