

## Dan Miron: From Continuity to Contiguity

The idea that Jewish particularity has something of substance to teach the world at large I find most compelling. Convincing your Israeli academic readers is another matter. I fear that you may not have gone about it in the best possible way.

The three-part rhetorical strategy that has served you so well in the past is very cumbersome in the present context. (1) First comes the exposition of the problem as others before you have presented it. (2) Subjected to minute scrutiny, these formulations are found to be self-contradictory and dead-ended. (3) Finally, based on the selfsame texts and data, you offer a definitive counter-reading. Thus, Part I of the present essay exposes an almost total lack of interest in the theory of Jewish literature, which points, in turn, to a profound misreading of the contemporary Jewish situation. The middle section rescues the scattered remains of various critical schools and past debates, spanning more than a century, which are shown to cancel each other out, both within and between each rival camp. Nothing in Jewish literature, you demonstrate in conclusion, whether ancient, medieval or modern, is well served by any of the existing models; yet out of this very mishmash you fashion a counter-model.

As I read it, you have written a cultural manifesto, addressed to Israeli academic readers still young enough to be influenced. If you believe that this readership is educable, that you can inspire it to dust off its copy of Ramhal, or prevail upon it to take seriously the achievements of Yiddish literature, or at the very least, provoke it into ploughing through the Baroque and impenetrable style of Dov Sadan, then you need as many allies as you can muster. The strategy of Dan Miron single-handedly taking on the world simply doesn't work.

For example, (1) you do a superb job demolishing the notion of a totally self-sufficient and self-confident Israeli literature, and in general, parody the achievements of the Tel Aviv School of Poetics in its heyday. But Even-Zohar's theory of defective polysystems comes uncannily close to your own conclusion, that each subethnic "Jewish" literature strove to achieve self-sufficiency, not a *hey mish* internal bilingualism. His model goes much further than Sadan's in demonstrating the dynamic interplay of Hebrew-Yiddish-Russian. (2) The only attempt to do what you have done is Ruth's *The Modern Jewish Canon*, which merits but a disparaging sentence on p. 38. Yet at least two aspects of her book are apposite to your thesis: that language is fate, and each linguistic branch of Jewish literature shared a profoundly different fate; and that some host cultures are more hospitable to Jewish self-expression than others. While I personally do not share her Anglocentrism, it seems worth the effort to interrogate whether, in fact, the world's first democracy has created new conditions for Jews to compete in the open market. Is that not precisely what you want them to do? Failing that, your Israeli readers deserve to know that Cynthia Ozick's is but one voice in a choir. (3) The life's work of Gershon Shaked, the most widely-read literary critic in Israel (if you will forgive me), has absolutely no bearing on your vast subject. Is this because he has never written an all-encompassing history of "all" of Jewish literature or Hebrew literature, choosing instead to focus on the history of specific genres? Is not historical poetics a necessary building

block for a global theory of Jewish literature? Why are you willing to credit the work of Kronfeld and Harshav and not of the major critics who have toiled in your vineyard?

The whole middle section is needlessly long, and goes over ground you have gone over before. Where you present new evidence, it lacks your usual rigor. On pages 6 and 17, for example, you refer briefly to Soviet Yiddish scholarship. In the last decade, however, Krutikov and others have revised the picture completely. The Vieviorka-Viner Debate was but a tiny subset of the struggle between Minsk and Kiev, Belorus, with no cultural past, and Ukraine, steeped in history, between *Shtern* and *Eygnis*, between the radical proletarian school and the more conservative. Minsk took up the cause of American-Yiddish proletarian poetry. Kiev championed Mendele and Sholem Aleichem. In each center the major Yiddish critics were also major players in Soviet literary politics, writing concurrently in Russian and Belorussian. Let's not forget that Yiddish at that time was an official language of each republic. Court cases could be argued in Yiddish. Then the whole Minsk School was purged, in 1936-37. What replaced it during the next decade was a neoclassicism, a canonical imperative, linked to Western European models, in all parts of the Soviet empire. Dobrushin and Viner were now the chief players and Moscow was the sole surviving center. In short, there was no Yiddish scholarship independent of the larger Soviet context. What was achieved in the Soviet Union was the opposite of what you are advocating: a theory of Jewish literature mirroring and supporting a multinational, supposedly universal literary-historical realpolitik. (In this regard, it is worth recalling Hofstein's and Shames's handbook of poetics (1928), a quasi-Formalist project in which all the examples were drawn from Yiddish literature. Shames, like Bakhtin, survived the purges by exiling himself to the farthest reaches of the empire.)

If this is to be more than more than a *kol kore ba-midbar*, you might consider coopting your allies: Avner Holtzman, studying Hebrew literature and modern painting; your loyal student, explicating the art of creative betrayal (and rejecting as you do the binary opposition between tradition and modernity); Hanan Hever, arguing for the inclusion of Yiddish, Arabic, and Palestinian writers into the Israeli canon; Rachel Albeck-Gidron, rediscovering the magic of Ashkenazi Hebrew; the spate of American-trained scholars who are alive to Rabbinic intertextuality in the most overtly "secular" Hebrew writers; Alan Mintz, if he ever writes his history of American Hebrew literature.

Where does popular culture fit into your scheme, from Goldfaden and Mikhl Gordon to Kishon and Woody Allen? How does your theory square with the current European vogue for klezmer music, identified as a transnational, pan-Diasporic culture? How does your theory explain the bilingualism of I. B. Singer, half of whose oeuvre Even-Zohar proclaimed to lie outside of Jewish literature altogether?

In the end, I am not convinced that Dov Sadan is your great inspiration. I suspect you have built him up mainly for heuristic reasons. Your mind and his could not be more dissimilar. The way you have revised your own thinking over the past thirty years is the reverse of what happened to Sadan. Rather, I see you doing for Jewish literature what the Weinreichs tried to do for Jewish languages: to present the Jewish case in all its structural

complexity (languages in contact; Jewish interlinguistics) as a model for the Jews to live by and for the Goyim to study. Maybe you will succeed where they failed.

I am honored and deeply touched that you have allowed me to comment on this pathbreaking essay.