

Meir Sternberg - Critique of
The Story of the Modern Yiddish Story

Dear David,

Here is the promised report on your paper for the Yiddish special issue. I thought the paper interesting at the time, and still regard it as one promising a genuine and distinctive contribution to this special issue. To realize the promise, though, it needs to be revised at various points, specified in the running commentary below. This commentary focuses on the opening section (pp. 1-7), where the larger problems with the argument are concentrated and illustrative, so that the rest of the text can also be revised in the light of the queries and suggestions about them.

I speak of "the larger problems" because the commentary abounds in miscellaneous and usually local remarks, which are significant but not generalizable. Let me quickly generalize the larger variety:

(1) Ambiguity of key terms, which begins as early as the title:

(a) "story" (see, for example, comments on p.1, title, p.1a, first paragraph, p.2, first paragraph [several times] and second paragraph)

(b) relation of "Yiddish" to "Jewish" (e.g., p.1, Abstract [several times], p.3, first paragraph, p.4, second paragraph, p.5, third paragraph, p.7, first paragraph).

(2) Missing links and transitions, to the detriment of the argument's continuity and followability (e.g., p.1, Abstract [several times], p.1a, second paragraph, p.3, first and second paragraphs, p.5, third paragraph, p.6, first and second paragraphs).

(3) Missing references (e.g., p.1a, second paragraph, p.2, first paragraph, p.3, first paragraph, p.5, third paragraph, p.6, first paragraph).

Now for the running commentary, in page order:

Opening page: to avoid confusion, (re)number it as 1, and the next page as 1a.

P.1, title, "Modern Story": ambiguous between generic and subgeneric meaning. (See comment on the first paragraph.)

P.1, top: add academic affiliation to name, department included.

P.1, Abstract, first sentence, "Jewish storytelling": how related to "Yiddish"? As a synonym or as a more inclusive term (covering, say, Hebrew as well)? See also comment on "Yiddish" below.

Then, "a potential for self-transformation": where (if anywhere) is this taken up in the sequel to this sentence? An omission – or at best lack of explicitness – to be repaired below.

Then, "on our subject": on this subject?

Then, "tracks the trajectory change": not clear. Better rephrase, and in plainer language (as befits an abstract).

Then, "Yiddish story": unlike the ambiguous opening sentence, here this term is obviously different from "Jewish," or else the statement wouldn't make sense. Right?

Then, "Whether exploiting fiction": how is this sentence related to the previous one(s)? Link and/or transition needed.

Also, this sentence is too packed and its overall ordering is best reversed. I suggest that you begin with "Professional Yiddish writers fiction" and then proceed to an adjusted form of "Whether exploit." (E.g., "This whether they exploited or expanded or played on")

Also in need of adjustment here are a few more specific points:

"thus making it transportable"? thus? how does it follow from "orality"? And "transportable" in what sense and to what or where?

Much the same questions arise in regard to "importable" and "export," equally demanding clarification.

Then, "transactional trade": meaning?

Then, and where do "fact and fiction" spring from? They don't seem to relate to -- much less to derive from -- what has gone before. Nor is it clear why they suddenly emerge here, and with them the issue of ontology at large. (Note how the problem of continuity, or followability, recurs in this Abstract.

Then, "becoming unmoved and uprooted": when? why?

Then, insert the first section number and heading (cf. p.7, top).

P.1a, first paragraph, first sentence, "Stories": meaning what? (E.g., used as a generic term for narrative -- including novels, for example -- as a term for a specific kind of narrative? This ambiguity in usage starts from the title, recurs below, and also needs resolution accordingly.

Then, "moveable guide": mobile?

Then, "from the Book": this sentence being so long and complex, begin a new sentence here.

Then, "from Reb to Peretz": what kind of range does this constitute? Better gloss it, especially for general reader's benefit.

P.1a, second paragraph, first sentence, "such continuities": what continuities? Where mentioned above, if anywhere?

Then, "stories entered": but there follow (in this paragraph) not just stories but anthologies or collections of stories. And why have they been singled out here?

Then, "the essential Jewish *Volksgeist*": the secular one, you mean?

Then, "Bialik Berdichevsky": some reference(s) needed to work on these anthologies and the relations between them.

Then, "Two generations": how related to the foregoing sentence? Transition or linkage needed here.

Then, "later": later than what?

Then, "which also launched": how?

Also, provide references to scholarship on this Treasury and to its effect on Singer's career.

P.1a, third paragraph, "old stories": sic, not, say, "old or existing stories"?

P.2, first paragraph, "newness newness": sic, not "novelty"?

Then, "could mobilize a cultural revolution": as well as follow the established tradition?

Then, "so-called *Gal* ": who calls or called it so, why, etc.? In short, reference(s) needed again – conspicuously absent in these pages.

Then, "came in story form": again "story" as opposed to -- or distinct from -- what "form"? (This question already arose in the article's very title, then the first sentence -- and has recurred since -- but it evidently sharpens here: with the overt yet ambiguous reference to "story form.")

Then, "hapore": haporeh?

Then, "postwar": but actually starting as late as "1958"?

Also, are these also "stories," in the particular sense used above?

Then, "women's fiction": i.e., "stories," whatever this term may mean? (And compare also the original Hebrew title.)

Then, "First Aliyah": gloss the term – dates included – perhaps in a note.

Then, "space reclaimed": not clear. And why "re-"? (Likewise with "reclaiming" in the next, last sentence.)

Then, "The ghost-editor": meaning?

P.2, second paragraph, first sentence, "on our subject": indeed, given the ambiguity of "story," what exactly is this subject?

Then, "that utopian": this overoptimistically assumes the reader's knowledge. Either gloss the elliptical expression -- why "utopian"? -- or delete it.

P.3, first paragraph, "gave pride of place": gave by itself, regardless of both earlier and later corpora? Hardly. And the immediate sequel – "one shelf below -- only underlines the oddity.

Then, "Judaic Bookcase": why not "Jewish"?

Then, "Dan's literary conquest": no need to exaggerate (and even less so in view of the critical response of some experts). Better tone down.

Then, "of the Jewish Middle Ages": but that is only the title of Dan's first book (in p.2, second paragraph). So "conquest" of what?

Then, "grist for the narrative mill": odd use of the idiomatic expression here. So rephrase.

As to the following specification – references needed.

Then, "which cemented": you probably mean "which cemented the link of *sipur/siporet* to *sifrut*."

Then, there are two problems with the clause "If ambiguity": (a) not clear to what in the above corpus it refers.

clause follow from it (if it does)?

Then, last sentence, what are these "old habits"? And what the "new guises"?

In short, this paragraph demands careful revision.

(b) how does the main

P.3, second paragraph, first sentence, "in tandem with": parallel to?

Then, "the narratological school": the? what school? Where mentioned above, if at all?

Then, "within a lived cultural setting": when? Or since when? (Note the mention of printing in the next sentence.)

Then, "folklorization": meaning? And how accomplished?

Then, "Stories in medieval": (a) how does this sentence relate to the previous one, with its emphasis on printing?

(b) as is, this elliptic sentence would be opaque to all readers, except for a handful of experts. So please flesh it out,

preferably adding some example of this

"bridging."

P.3, second paragraph: what counts as "a professional class of storytellers"? (E.g., a preacher wouldn't be one?)

P.4, first paragraph, "bracketed": meaning? (E.g., controlled?)

Then, "when it was worth": why?

P.4, second paragraph, "Source criticism": Approaches based on source criticism?

Then, weren't both approaches applied to poetry as well?

Then, "innate conservatism": presented here as if known or mentioned before, yet neither is the case. So, what conservatism? And why "innate," which sounds unlikely or overstated?

Then, "The New Critical": to judge from the examples, it was only applied to Hebrew, rather than Yiddish storytelling. If this is the case, it needs to be stated. If it isn't, then add appropriate examples of Yiddish literature.

P.4, third paragraph, first sentence, "was punctuated": marked? framed?

Then, "hahadash": "hahadash": why the definite article *ha* -? Inversely, why not add it to the noun as well? As is, the English translation of the phrase, with its indefinite article "a," also appears dubious.

Then, "a 'New Wave'": and in Hebrew?

Also, in both cases, who called them so, for example?

Then, "two distinct cohorts": i.e.? Name and briefly characterize them.

Then, "this cohort": these cohorts, you mean?

P.5, first paragraph: who, for example, wrote "in both Hebrew and Yiddish"?

Then, "organized" how? And into what "curriculum"? (If this refers back to the two languages, the reference isn't clear, and you'd better add "therefore" to "they could")

P.5, second paragraph, "a potential for self-transformation": why? What "self-transformation"? Where mentioned before?

Then, "parallel tracks": i.e., the two "cohorts" of p.4?

Then, "to follow": to trace?

Then, preceding "cartographers": i.e.? Name them in a note, even if mentioned before here.

Then, "it may be necessary": "may be"? not "is"?

Then, "redrawing the map": this is the place to outline this redrawn map in brief, thus anticipating the following detailed discussion for the reader's benefit.

Also, it would help to start a new section (with an appropriate subheading) here.

P.5, third paragraph, "Why Yiddish?": the question (with its point) isn't clear. Nor is its relation to the supposed answer. So rephrase both, especially considering their joint significance.

In any case, whose is this answer ("Because") and what follows it ("Echoing" and so forth)? If it's yours, better say so here -- with occasional reminders in the ensuing pages -- and indicate what/whose opinion this or that statement runs against.

No less important, are you abandoning Hebrew literature at (or from) this point?

Then, "our received wisdom": what *is* this wisdom? where is it found in scholarship? And why does the "Yiddish story both confirm and contradict it?"

The omission of these vital intermediate links makes the actual sequel ("Echoing") abrupt and almost unintelligible.

Then, indeed, how would one guess -- let alone know -- to what "Echoing Benjamin" refers?

Then, "preserves its bonds": "preserve" implies some earlier "bond(s)" between the two. So what is it?

Then, "through the *bobe-mayse*": again, a bewildering elliptic style. How does this preserve the bond to "Medieval [medieval] Ashkenaz"?

Then, "traditional settings": for example? And how are these settings revived in the subsequent written literature?

Then, "innate conservatism": again, why innate? And could you also provide some scholarly reference(s) to it?

Likewise with a reference to "Benjamin's celebration"

Then, "and all those who or who": for example?

Then, "Jewish culture": how does this sentence (with its criticism of "dualistic" scheme) follow the preceding one? Transition missing.

Then, "whether it fits": who does such "fitting"?

Then, "neat, prefabricated chronology": why "prefabricated"? And if not prefabricated, then what?

Then, "can describe": can by itself describe?

Then, "messy simultaneity": an example or two would help, and not only here. The reference to specific material is perceptibly missing, or at least meager, thus far. And if some extra space is needed for the purpose -- as for other specification -- then you are welcome to it.

P.6, first paragraph, "And where": Likewise, where?

Then, "crossed with impunity": why? And in contrast to what or whom?

Then, "It is enough to recall": why is such recall relevant to the storytelling?

Then, "a dialect": references to it and to the fact of its use in the stories?

Then, how does this (sentence or paragraph) lead to the next? (Observe the frequency of missing links and transitions here.)

P.6, second paragraph, "frenetic energy": overstated? Better tone down.

"the licit": as opposed to what world?

Then, "Jewish self-understanding": as whose? and where? Some examples are necessary here.

Then, "this world": which one? (E.g., the literary world?)

Then, at the end of this paragraph, add a transition to the terms (and the sections) introduced next.

Then, "import": why does this term serve "to examine"? It doesn't seem very appropriate for the purpose – so add some elucidation.

Also, "my heading to examine" isn't quite grammatical; so rephrase.

Then, "times of unprecedented upheaval": such as?

Then, "Export reveals": The discussion of Export reveals?

Then, "with impunity": what punishment is threatened, or escaped, here?

Then, "whether traveling": what does this metaphor mean?

P.7, first paragraph, "Classical triad": again, Hebrew literature out?

The above commentary is especially detailed, so as to guide the revision of both the opening pages and, in their light, the sequel. I hope you can send me the revised version within a month. I look forward to seeing it, and thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Best wishes,
Meir Sternberg
Editor, Poetics Today