

WHAT IS JEWISH LITERATURE?

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Notes on Hebrew Literature

THE VALUE and significance of a spiritual creation, such as literature, can never be measured solely in terms of the status and socio-political circumstances of the human group out of which it originates. There is no consistent, direct ratio between political power or prestige and the wealth and variety of spiritual creativity; indeed, at times one can definitely establish an inverse ratio between periods of cultural efflorescence and periods of growth and consolidation of political power. There can be little doubt, for example, that nineteenth century Russian literature stands head and shoulders above the Russian literature of the present century, a century in which Russia has achieved a heretofore unknown political eminence. Similarly, there can be no question that the Germany of the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries constituted a ranking spiritual, cultural force despite the fact that from a political viewpoint, it was relatively weak. Yet, the Germany of the end of the nineteenth century up to World War I had clearly lost its former cultural preeminence, despite its tremendous political power.

These are timely reflections with which to launch a survey of Hebrew literature during the first decade of the Jewish state. For the literary historian is constrained to disentangle himself of emotional involvements as well as from any politico-national bias that can only serve to distort his judgment. He must distinguish carefully between the "is" and the "ought" even as he must properly assess spiritual-cultural data and know what may be anticipated under existing conditions. Yet, there are those who, from the very inception of the State of Israel, have not tired of turning to its writers, and especially to the younger generation, with such pathetic demands as "Give us *the* Israeli novel," or "We look forward to *the* heroic epic of the new Israel." Such demands and anticipations lack all meaning. It is possible to plan agricultural production; industrial output can be speeded up. The forces of spiritual creativity cannot be evoked by command.

A sober account, free of sentimental national hyperbole, of the achievements of Hebrew literature during the first decade of statehood must reckon with three fundamental factors. First, such account must carefully distinguish between the three different groups that have determined and still determine the course of Hebrew literature. These groups differ in age and in the spiritual climate they inhabit. We shall return to them in detail in the course of our discussion. Second, we must focus our attention on the heterogeneity of the various cultural communities of Israel. As yet, no dominant cultural center powerful enough to evoke universal mimesis has been established. Presently, we have a mosaic of contradictory elements, some of which may be revealed ultimately as the foundation stones of a great national culture. Third, the enormous exigencies involved in security and absorption of immigration make inordinate demands upon Israel's strength, spiritual as well as physical.

This essay is not concerned with an analysis of the last two factors. Essentially, they are the proper domain of sociologists, demographers, economists, and statesmen. The literary critic's essential concern is the clarification of the first factor—that is, the nature of the three groups that have put their impress on Hebrew literature during the past decade. However, no literary study, such as ours, can ever for a moment lose sight of the conscious link between the first factor—the very essence of our study—and the two that follow. Only thus can the picture drawn hope to reflect the truth.

II

After the enemy had destroyed my home, I took my little daughter into my arms and I fled with her to the city. Panic-stricken, I ran day and night, seized by terror until I arrived, an hour before dark, on the eve of the Day of Atonement at the courtyard of the Great Synagogue. The mountains and the hills that had accompanied us disappeared . . . This Synagogue and these houses of Torah had not left my vision all these past days, and if I forgot them by day, they would move into view in my dreams at night and while awake . . . I turned my thoughts away from all that the enemy had done to us, and I began to reflect on the approaching Day of Atonement. . . Would that they might appoint a worthy Baal Tefillah to stand before the Ark. In these latter generations, the number of leaders in prayer who really know how to pray has dwindled. The cantors who proudly display their voice with their songs and yet dull the heart, only they have grown in number. And I am in need of strengthening, certainly my little daughter, an infant who has been uprooted from her place. (Emphasis added)

—S.Y. Agnon, "Et Knisat Hayom"

The above quotation is from a story that, from several viewpoints, is symbolic and characteristic not alone for S.Y. Agnon's great epic writings.¹

The inner horizons the story reveals to the reader are shared by Agnon and by the generations of writers whose spiritual physiognomy was decisively formed by European *Galut* Jewry. Beyond all individual differences, whether of talent or poetic form, the prose of Agnon, the great poems of Uri Zvi Greenberg, the profound incisive stories of Hazaz, the revelations of personal mysticism and the probings of the self of S. Shalom—all possess common elements. Even the poets closest to Bialik, the great epigones of his poetry, such as Yaakov Cahan, Yaakov Fichman, and Zaiman Shneur continue, in this first decade of Israel's independence, the literary tradition that is characteristic of the "Old School" of Hebrew literature. *Galut Jewry* and *European culture* have put their ineffaceable stamps on this generation of writers. Even a writer like Abraham Shionsky, a revolutionary from the point of view of both literary form and social ideology, belongs to this group. The individual differences among the members of this coterie are negligible when contrasted with the chasm that separates all of them from the members of the "Third Group," S. Yizhar, Moshe Shamir, Aharon Meged, Benjamin Tammuz, A. Amir, S. Tanai, A. Gilboa, and Abraham Huss, most of whom are native-born.

Between these two aforementioned groups, there is an intermediate group, writers who are presently in their forties. In part, they too are European-born and, for some, this fact has been decisive for their spiritual horizons. While they have spent most of their lives in Israel, they have nevertheless not adapted themselves to the paths in literature chosen by the "Israeli Group." The late Yitzhak Shenhar, whose writing drew from the sources of the European tradition, is a typical member of this intermediate grouping. The literary development of some members of this group reveals an almost tragic picture that will claim our especial attention. In some instances, this particular development does not work itself out until the writer has approached fifty. On the other hand, a strong, independent personality from among this group occasionally succeeds in dictating to the new literature the terms of his talent and personal expression and thus overcomes the crisis of his generation. This solution was indicated by two poets who are worlds apart in both ideology and literary approach: Natan Alterman and Yonatan Ratosh. The first has become a kind of semi-official poet laureate of the ruling class responsible for the direction of the new Israel. The second is the aesthetic and ideological firebrand of the opposition movement, and the symptomatic importance of the latter is not to be minimized. Ratosh is the father of the "Canaanite" school, and the mentor of the "Young Hebrews." Actually, their movement is the final, logical consequence to be drawn from secular Zionism. Those who prepared and created the ideological foundations on

which the Young Hebrews have reared their structure now stand aghast and repelled by the work of their own hands.²

Having briefly touched on the variety of the trends and groups that make up Israel's literary activity in this past decade, we turn again to the quotation from Agnon that stands at the head of this section. A close analysis of the quotation in the context of the story as a whole proves rewarding. It discloses that the essential thematic material of Agnon's latter stories is identical with that found in all the poets of the "Old Guard." The theme of the disintegration and the destruction of *galut* Jewry, certainly an integral part of modern Hebrew literature, receives enormous meaning and weight *with the physical destruction of the European Galut*. The most serious literary works of the past decade seek to grapple with an interpretation of the unprecedented national calamity and with the mysterious riddle of the tragic, fateful conjunction of the two major events of Jewish existence: the fearful slaughter of European Jewry and the rise of the State of Israel. For decades now, modern Hebrew literature as expressed in the works of its leading representatives has moved between the poles of destruction and renewal. Now, in the light of the stormy, terrifying situation of a paradoxical present, it is constrained to a new effort to plot the full meaning of the dialectical polarity in the life of the nation.

"The enemy destroyed our house." As in all stories of Agnon, so here, too, *house* carries a wide, inclusive connotation. We ran "in haste and in flight." "Day and night, the flight of terror and panic." "One hour before dark on the eve of the Day of Atonement," a late hour before the great repentance—return of the remnants of the people. There we stood near "the courtyard of the Great Synagogue" of the nation. "Fire had taken hold of the children's coats." Of all the lovely garments with which we sought to cover our nakedness in *galut*, "only a coat remained." It too had caught fire. The fire raged both from within and without. Spiritual and physical destruction. "We fled in panic, it was the flight from destruction. We took nothing with us." Thus we stood naked, "an hour before dark," an hour before the darkness of destruction on that bitter Day of Atonement that was the tragic day of return and repentance. We stood near the courtyard of the Great Synagogue in the land of our fathers. Bereft and empty, we stood together with the remnants of a young generation that had been reared without Torah because of a planned, willful evasion of the values of religion and the tradition. With what shall we now cover ourselves since cruel fire has consumed both our true and our imaginary possessions? With what shall we cover the nakedness of the young generation? "And now that her coat had caught on fire, I had no garment with which to cover my daughter. I turned here and there and looked for some-

thing with which my daughter might cover herself. I looked but found nothing. Whatever place I searched was empty.”

The situation on the eve of the Day of Atonement differs radically from the hour of return and repentance of the lonely wayfarer in *Oreach Natchah Lalun*. Now, the fire and the destruction are almost total in nature. The penitent wayfarer does not travel slowly in the “old-fashioned train that goes to my city.” This is no nostalgic return to the Garden of Eden of childhood that has vanished. For all its tragic quality, such return at least affords the joy of painful lingering in the midst of the vanished world of childhood. “From Jerusalem, the wheels of the coaches rolled between mountains and hills, valleys and ravines. At each station the train stopped and waited. . . .”³

Here, in the collection of short stories *Ad Heynah*, the way to the Great Synagogue is marked only by “a flight of panic and terror, day and night.” The vistas that once accompanied us, they too left us. “The mountains and hills that accompanied us departed and went their way.”⁴

The Jew, the remnant of the survivors, has been deprived even of the vistas of his childhood that betrayed him. Just before dark, he discovers that he stands naked. The fire has consumed everything. He has neither clothes nor books. Even the corner in the Synagogue into which worn-out books are thrust can provide nothing to save him from the shame of emptiness. “I thought that I would go to the corner where torn books are stored away ... I found nothing there to cover my little girl.” Not even torn books are to be found in the *geniza*. The young generation *lacks clothes because it thought it could be a generation without books*. It was trained to disregard the holy books it did not read. Now, like the little daughter of the poet, it has nothing wherewith to cover itself. “When books were read, they would be torn. But now that books are not read, they are not torn. Where shall we flee and where shall we hide? Our house has been destroyed and the enemy covers the roads. If by some miracle we escaped, shall we then count on miracles?” This short story of Agnon’s penetrates to the depths of the problems of Jewish existence as they are depicted by the writers of the first group.⁵ The motif of departure and return receives here an extraordinarily rich symbolic meaning.

Another significant epic work, executed on a large canvas, Hayim Hazaz’s tetralogy, *Yaish*—one of the truly outstanding literary works of this decade—opens with the motif of departure.⁶ To be sure, in this rich, many-hued epic, the motif of renunciation takes on a special color, one essentially different from those in Agnon’s stories. But with Hazaz too the problem of renunciation of *Galut* is treated in its full acuteness. It is no accident that Hazaz deliberately sought to lay bare the *Galut* life of a community whose forms of life recall the situation of the Middle Ages. Hazaz

is the only Hebrew European epic-writer who has discovered for our literature the inner life of Yemenite Jewry. In his book *Hayoshevet Baga-nim*⁷ Hazaz astounded the Hebrew reader by his perceptive revelation of ways of thinking and feeling that were heretofore unknown to us. This work was but his first step in what became his sustained effort to present to us the life and vital forces of a community still steeped in a primitive mode of life. Hazaz is attracted by the play of elemental forces. He is possessed by a passion for crystallizing into literary form the powerful dynamic instincts that have as yet been untouched in any effective way by an abstract spirituality. Hazaz's purpose is to trace with all the precision of a worker in a laboratory what seems to him the *sickness of galut Jewry*.

In *Yaish*, the novelist-researcher dispenses with the elements likely to "disturb" his research. European culture is totally absent. Since there is no enlightenment, one can peer directly into the "sickness of galut Jewry" and its conflict with a social organism healthy to the core. This pre-enlightened community of Yemenite Jewry of seventy-five years ago offers the possibility of a new appraisal of the full worth of galut Jewry. We may be certain that in its native setting we will discover all the stigmata of "a peculiar psychology, fantastically inverted, what one might call night-like, different from that of any people or human creatures anywhere." Its distinguishing characteristics are "Galut, Kiddush Hashem, the Messiah ... a three-fold cord. The Galut is our pyramid whose base is Kiddush Hashem and whose apex is the Messiah . . . and the Talmud is our *Book of the Dead*."⁸

It is clear that Hazaz's attitude to galut is utterly negative. His great novel *Yaish* serves him as a persuasive literary illustration of the need for *renunciation* for the sake of *return* to *normal* life. Hence, the motif of return bears no religious-metaphysical meaning in Hazaz's writing. The return completes the act of renunciation of spiritual existence. In the atmosphere of this night psychology, the purpose of the return is an absolute secularization. Obviously, Hazaz's concept of renunciation-return is diametrically opposed to the same pair of concepts as treated by Agnon. In Hazaz's writings, these concepts bear a distinct anti-religious character. In this regard, Hazaz continues the anti-traditional line of modern Hebrew literature. Hazaz thus gives to the motif of return a meaning directly opposite to that found in the poems of Bialik, Greenberg, or Lamdan, or in the prose of Feilerberg and Agnon. It is well known that Tchernichowsky confesses to his *return* to the world of Apollo-Dionysus, to the goddess Tamuz, to the false prophets, and to the gods of fertility. Clearly, this *inverted return* is tantamount to a *renunciation of Judaism*. This interesting thematic material of modern Hebrew literature carries important implications in its links, both hidden and overt, for the realities of the new State of Israel.

The renunciation and return of the heroes of Agnon, for all the variety of their situation, always lead to the threshold of the Synagogue and the actualization of the Day of Atonement—that is, to an increase of metaphysical and religious tension. In Hazaz, the theme marks a conclusive abandonment of transcendentalism. Hence, the ecstatic mystic Yaish, once having left Yemen and come to Jerusalem, becomes convinced that here, in the ancestral homeland, the link between earth and heaven has been irreparably broken. There, in Yemen, he was vouchsafed mystical visions when the heavens were opened and he held converse with angels. With his first step toward an earthly, normalized life in the land of Israel, everything has come to an end:

Two weeks had gone by from the time they had entered Jerusalem and Yaish had not succeeded in ascending on high as he was wont. What was this? ... He felt depressed. A baffling mystery. “Instead of the merit of the sacredness of the Holy Land aiding me to soar aloft, height above height, to eminences of God not yet attained, that I might gaze at the cover of the celestial chariot or that I might enter into the palace of the Messiah . . . From heaven, I have been informed: ‘Be good enough and stay at home.’ What is this? . . . Have I sinned against God? Have they erred in heaven or has this been caused by the land of Israel?”⁹

For Yaish, there are only two possible resolutions of the enigma. Both of them are bound to work an inevitable revolution in his way of seeing the world, Judaism, and its values. The fact that in the land of the patriarchs, in Jerusalem, the link with Heaven has been broken, can be explained by one of two assumptions—first, that “Heaven has erred.” But if “Heaven has erred,” then all the divine revelations have not only lost their validity as absolute truth but, being rooted in error, they must inevitably be misleading. Second, if the “land of Israel is the source” of the breach with the heavenly sphere, then there can be no question that *all that the Jewish tradition has taught about the religious, transcendental character of the land of Israel is an exploded legend*. Either assumption leads to the identical conclusion: The religious mythos, and with it the basis of Judaism, has been destroyed. Yaish, however, still waits expectantly. But his final disillusionment is not long in coming: “However, he received no answer, neither in word, deed, vision, nor dream. All his efforts yielded nothing. *The heavens were closed to him and were not opened for him again for the rest of his days.*”¹⁰ Here, Hazaz seems to say that the renunciation of the *galut* for the sake of the return is the ultimate liquidation of the position of traditional Judaism. This return is the end of the dominion of the transcendental and the crowning achievement of the process of “here and now,” of the absolute secularization of Judaism. The theme is common

to both Agnon and Hazaz but in the latter it receives a development diametrically opposed to that of Agnon. All the heroes of Agnon in their panicky flight, whether from external enemies or from the “enemy” within (the loss of inner certainty), possess one common characteristic.

In each of them there abides the consciousness that “this Synagogue and these houses of Torah-study did not depart from before my eyes for a moment. And if I forgot them by day, they would manage to come to me at night in a dream or while awake.” This is the destiny of those who leave and return, whether their return succeeds, as did that of Yudel in *Hachnasat Kalah*, or whether it ends in tragedy as it did for Menassah Hayim in *The Crooked Shall be Straight*, or whether it be the ill-starred return of Yizhuk Kummer in *T’mol Shilshom*. The narrator in *Oreach Natah Lalun* reveals the same rhythm of flight and return that culminates in renunciation—flight return. The demonic events in the stories of *Sefer Hamaasim* are cast in the same pattern of the ineffaceable inner presence of houses of prayer and Torah within the souls of the strange heroes. The various poetic actualizations of the confusion of the modern Jew in situations that lack unequivocal resolution, all the strange metamorphoses of renunciation and return, every attempt at desertion and panicky flight—all of them still leave open the possibility of finding a refuge place, albeit a dubious one, in the shadow of the Synagogue and house of Torah in anticipation of a cleansing, purifying Day of Atonement. Not so in Hazaz. In his stories, the movement of renunciation/return drives toward the exclusive spiritual horizons of the younger writers—an absolute secularism that has ceased to concern itself seriously with the Jewish tradition of the *galut*. Though the stock of ideas in the work of Hazaz, like those in the poetry of Tchernichowsky and Shneour, include almost all of the characteristic spiritual elements to be found in the writings of the “Third Group” (the “Canaanites”), there is a vast difference here. Hazaz, a product of Russian Jewry, knows intimately the *thesis* against which he launches his *anti-thesis* in *Yaish*. He knows from first-hand experience the life of the Jews of Europe, formed as it was in the likeness of the Jewish religious tradition. This Judaism obtrudes only at the very limits of the conscious horizon of the young Israeli writers. For them, it is a matter of remote, tedious history, hardly more than a spiritual fossil; at best, it is an archeological exhibit.

III

In 1951 a book of poetry appeared that may be described unqualifiedly as the mightiest lyrical expression of the tragic destiny of our people. No other literary work proclaims with such moving power the awesome

polarity of *destruction and rebirth* as does Uri Zvi Greenberg's *Rechovot hanahar*.¹¹ By the searing quality of his visions, by the prophetic pathos of his castigation, and the noble, lyric tenderness of his words of encouragement and consolation, Greenberg has become the most important poetic interpreter of our people's fate during these past two decades. The poems of *Rechovot hanahar* served a liberating function. They aroused and bestirred the people out of the state of dazed shock that followed the destruction of European Jewry. Moreover, the work is the supreme poetic expression of the Jewish historic consciousness of Jewish destiny. The past and the present, the remote and the near-at-hand, the life of the founders of the people, the periods of the First and Second Commonwealth, the wanderings of the exile, the exaltation and degradation of the people—all is fused into the single, meaningful, synoptic vision of the poet. For all its lacerating quality or rather, precisely because of the depths of sorrow out of which it speaks, it opens vistas to a bright proud future for the Jewish people. Greenberg proclaims a vision of Israel's preeminence, of its religious mission among the nations that demands the renewal and establishment of the *Kingdom of Israel*. The present can be understood only out of an absorption in the past, and its presence in the recesses of our soul is the sole guarantee of our future.

What will come again has ever been;
 What has not, never will.
 I trust in the morrow
 For I face the image of the past:
 This is my vision and song.
Selah, Hallelujah, Amen.¹²

From the point of view of form and structure, *Rechovot hanahar* carries forward the possibilities inherent in expressionism and surrealism. Greenberg's use of figurative expressions abandons all the accepted poetic devices of the type of poetry known as "realistic." The visionary character of his poetry, from its very beginnings, calls for means of expression quite different from those ordinarily employed by modern Hebrew poetry before his appearance. Something of the long, infinite breath of a mighty storm at sea vibrates in the powerful rhythm of these poems. From the melodies of Jewish fate, the abysmal woe of the elegies, the exultant hope and outburst of joy at the great future of the people whom God has raised to the heights of eternity, an intoxicating music arises. Greenberg is about the only poet of our time whose poetry remains unvitiated when it becomes the trumpet of actuality. For the great poet can live the life of gray actuality from a perspective of poetic transformation.

Notes

1. S.Y. Agnon, "Im Knisat Hayom," in *Ad Heynah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952). ⇐
2. See Baruch Kurzweil, "The New 'Canaanites' in Israel," *Judaism*, 2 (January 1953): 3–15. ⇐
3. *Oreach Natal Lalun*, 7. ⇐
4. Agnon, "Im Knisat Hayom," 171. ⇐
5. *Ibid.*, 171–77. ⇐
6. Hayim Hazaz, *Yaish*, 4 vols. (Am Oved: Tel Aviv 1947–52). ⇐
7. Translated into English by Ben Halpern under the title *Mon Sa'id* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1956). ⇐
8. Hayim Hazaz, *Avanim Rotshot* (Am Oved, 1950), 233, 235. ⇐
9. Hazaz, *Yaish*, 4:244. ⇐
10. *Ibid.* ⇐
11. U.Z. Greenberg, *Rehovot Hanahar* (Jerusalem/Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1951). ⇐
12. *Ibid.*, 37. ⇐