

# *The Image of the Western Jew in Modern Hebrew Literature*

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Modern Hebrew literature was written almost exclusively by the Jews of Eastern Europe. Initially, Western Jews also participated; in the West at a time when Hebrew was still the living language of a learned class of *Maskilim*, (enlightened intelligentsia). In the eighteenth century, Holland, Italy, some time later also Bohemia, and — due to the influence of Mendelssohn and Wessely — Germany, were centres of a non-sacral Hebrew literature tending towards secularisation. While in Holland the last descendants of the Sephardi literary tradition were still producing *belles-lettres* in Hebrew, Wessely, the Ashkenazi Jew, became imbued with the impulse of the Sephardi tradition and imparted to it in the Ashkenazi world a new concept. He was not aware of its novelty and revolutionary character. In Western Europe these flickerings of a novel Hebrew literature, more mundane in its approach, only lasted for a short time. In the German-speaking countries the law of inverse proportions applied in relation to the realisation of emancipatory hopes on the one hand and the process of generating a Hebrew literature on the other: the progressive advance towards de facto equal rights for the Jews and participation in the cultural life of their Christian surroundings, quenched their inner creative urge for the Hebrew language. The Jewish writers of Germany and Austria became German writers. Only in Eastern Europe, where emancipation was not attained in practice, did secular modern Hebrew literature gather strength and ripen. Only there did it have a reasonable tenure of life. Initially the challenging domain of a sparse, intellectually superior element, herald of new and revolutionary changes in the Jewish way of life, it later became the representative expression of the new urge for culture and for new forms of life which was awakened among the broad Jewish masses in Eastern Europe. At the turn of the century its ideological aims were adopted by Zionism. Thus, so far as its basic tendencies are concerned, modern Hebrew literature is linguistically the creative precursor of modern Jewish nationalist aspirations. It reflects popular Jewish life, but it is derived from the essential Jewish being, of which it is aware above all else. It tells of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe. Yet, with a certain reserve, with an admiring but also mistrustful glance, modern Hebrew literature deals with the forms of Jewish life in Central and Western Europe. The result of this meeting between the poets of modern Hebrew literature and

Western Jewry is a many-sided, contradictory picture, distorted yet authentic at one and the same time. But the ever-renewed attempts at delineating this picture, the perpetual determination to master this "otherness" of Jewish existence linguistically, bear witness to the presence of a powerful, positive tension between these national groups, striving to attain a state of equilibrium. This can be traced from the Haskalah period right up to the most recent Israeli literature.

## II

Our investigation must be based on one fundamental premise which, after everything that has happened in the last thirty years, can only arouse mixed feelings. Modern Hebrew literature, when dealing with the subject of Western Jewry, is primarily concerned with Jews in the German cultural environment. German culture, German poets and thinkers have had the most lasting influence on modern Hebrew literature, though the influence of the Russians, French and English also becomes evident later. Consequently, the assimilated Jew of the German cultural environment appears as the Western Jew *par excellence*. Up to the close of the nineteenth century, in fact practically up to the first World War, German culture and the German-Jewish cultural symbiosis were the most exciting challenge to the modern Hebrew writer. The reaction to this challenge is by no means uniform. In some ways it was determined by the respective expectations, and the disappointments, to which the ideology of emancipation gave rise. The attitude of modern Hebrew literature to the ideal of emancipation is varied. A naively optimistic estimate of the possibilities opened up by emancipation, which dominates modern Hebrew literature until about 1870, leads to a positive evaluation of the Western Jewish way of life. The sceptical writer, Mendele Mocher Sepharim, in his early work "Fathers and Sons" (*Avot uvanim*) pays profound respect to the Western Jew Mendelssohn and his school: The rebirth of the Hebrew language is credited to Western Jewry: "... It came about at the beginning of Jewish enlightenment in the lands of the West; in the hands of Moses ben Menachem it became a rod of God with which he performed his signs in Germany..." (Chap. 4). In his later great work "In the Vale of Tears" (*Be'emek ha-bacha*), the modern and enlightened German Jew appears as an ideal type. Towards the end of this novel, Hirshele, the orphan child, becomes a student in Leipzig. Many years later Hirshele returns as an unknown visitor to his native East European little town which has meantime suffered the ravages of a pogrom. And to his fellow-countrymen in the East, who do not recognise him at first, he now represents the admired Western Jew: "In these sorrowful hours for the inhabitants of Beggars' Town (Kabziel), a carriage drew up at the entrance of the cemetery and an elegantly dressed, middle-aged man descended. The paupers clustering

around the gate, made way for him, holding out their hands, and each received alms. . . . The Jews gazed at him with admiration. They thought, surely he must be a great man, a nobleman perhaps, close to the ruling classes. Their senses were confused and they did not know how to conduct themselves before him. In utter confusion they touched their hats, withdrew and remained standing at a distance . . . from where they bowed down; all sobs and tears were stifled." (Last chapter). It was only when the visitor made an enquiry that his Judaism was revealed, for the stranger asked after the sexton and the whereabouts of the grave of Leiser-Jankel the cantor, who was Hirshele's father. As in other tales Mendele steps in, and the visitor reveals himself to him as the former Hirshele. Now he is known as "Heinrich Kohn, a great, wise and respected man." Heinrich Kohn, alias Hirshele, is now a famous writer. Heinrich Kohn's view on Russian Jews are devastating and Mendele agrees: "For the Russian Jews are completely ignorant, despicable *Schnorrers*, they have neither education nor manners, nor are they familiar with the practices of normal existence. Their only remedy and salvation is to bring them enlightenment." (Last chapter).

Without any doubt "The Vale of Tears" is Mendele's greatest work. Yet how characteristic that he describes the last stage in the existence of his hero, whose life he has traced from the cradle, as that of a Jew who has identified himself with the modern, Western Jewish type! He appears as a stranger amongst his own people, he has overcome the earlier phases in his life, he bears the name of a Western Jew, his views on the ways of life of his former compatriots are scathing. It is clear that Mendele, who is interested in types rather than individuals, here bestows an exemplary character on this Western Jewish type. Admittedly, Heinrich Kohn — Hirshele is himself an Eastern Jew, but he has overcome his East Jewishness. He has found his personality in the image of the Western Jew and only now is he able properly to evaluate his previous existence and with it the way of life of the Eastern Jewish masses persisting in the traditional forms. Salvation only lies in overcoming this existence: this is the gist of all Mendele's stories. The Western Jew is the figure pointing out the path to salvation.

True, there is no contradiction between this appraisal and Mendele's affirmation of positive Jewishness. He dissociates himself from the complete surrender of Jewish heritage and from the self-effacing assimilation of so many Western Jews. Consideration of Mendele's clear-sighted and penetrating criticism of the naive *Haskalah* ideal, which in many cases virtually develops into the main theme of his tales, e.g. "My Horse" (*Sussati*) as well as other stories, makes one aware of the dialectical tension that is characteristic of the whole of modern Hebrew literature. The old form of Judaism is attacked with the weapons of rationalist criticism and argumentation, and at the same time — quite irrationally — there is a

harking back to an ancient language, whose images and concepts are formed and permeated by religious values. On the one hand this religious world is spurned as out-moded, on the other hand rational methods of observation are seen to have their limitations and to be inadequate in face of national-cultural ways of life.

Perez Smolenskin sees the Western Jew quite differently from Mendele. Although far inferior to Mendele as a story-teller, not even to be compared with him, he finds the Western Jews far more complex than does Mendele. Whether his differentiated outlook was promoted by his long residence in Vienna and other centres of Western European culture, is immaterial. It is a fact that Smolenskin's writings are far removed from a one-sided simplification of the Western-Jewish problem. With penetrating insight Smolenskin regards the Western Jew from the view-point of the national problem. In his novel "The Wanderer through the Paths of Life" (*Ha-to'eh be-darkey ha-chaim*) he presents us with figures from Anglo-Jewry. The hero "Joseph the Wanderer", turns in his distress to a rich Jew in London. He is admitted. But "the Wanderer" has long since abandoned the Jewish religious laws. They mean nothing to him. And so he travels on the Sabbath to his would-be saviour from distress, who is horrified by this sacrilege. "... Asking for help on Sabbath!" ... "I had forgotten the customs of my people, its religious laws had become foreign to me, and I rated this as wisdom." Here the Western Jew is pictured as a rigid believer to whom the religious law, not national ties, appears as the exclusive criterion of Jewishness. The proletarianised, wandering Eastern Jew, on the other hand, although resolutely resisting the blandishments of the missionaries, adjudges only incidental meaning to the religious laws. Nevertheless, the rich Londoner hesitatingly accepts his brother and fortifies him with food and drink. The following day he offers him financial assistance, but would like to bind "the Wanderer" to observance of the religious laws. "... You should know that I am only prepared to help the God-fearing and those who obey His commandments with all their heart." "Joseph the Wanderer" must get the rabbi to certify that he has had nothing to do with missionaries.

The scene that now follows between the hero and the rabbi presents the Western Jewish rabbi as a heartless, bigoted, religious fanatic. The hero has to give an account of himself:

"'Which synagogue do you attend for divine worship?' His question caused me consternation, for I had not once set foot in a synagogue in this city. He noticed my confusion and said: 'Your expression bears witness to the fact that you have not attended even a single service. Now, please tell me, where have you been eating up till now? Is there any restaurant proprietor who could prove that you have only eaten in a Jewish house? ...' He gazed at me and then continued: '... you pretend to be devout although you have abandoned the customs of your fathers? Do you think that I am unacquainted with the ways of your fellow-countrymen or that their doings in this country are concealed from me?'"

What is being enacted here is the clash of two Jewish worlds. The Western Jewish cleric is pictured as an uncomprehending zealot, who in the name of a rigid religion hardens himself against his suffering brother from the East. Rigid legal formalism produces inhuman behaviour. An insurmountable antithesis has developed between the satiated Western Jew and the proletarianised Eastern Jew. The unity of a living people no longer exists. The Western Jew has adopted a heartless position behind the barriers of the religious law. But Smolenskin's rabbi from London is only a Western Jewish variant of his Eastern Jewish colleague, as described by J. L. Gordon in the figure of Rabbi Wolfsi in "Kozo shel Yod" (The dot on the "i").

Smolenskin also deals with the Western Jews in his essays, especially in "The Eternal People" (*Am Olam*). In his thinking he is much influenced by the exponents of the "Science of Judaism", by Krochmal as well as Zunz. What strikes the reader of the essays, is Smolenskin's balanced, critical sense for the proper evaluation of ideas in their historical setting and of historio-philosophical problems. Thus his criticism of the Western Jew is cautious, and balanced. The German reformers interest him, but with unerring instinct he perceives the dangers of a reform that misunderstands, even disavows, the specific national character of Judaism. "I cannot share the opinions of the innovators, even though I do not conceal my view that Israel is in need of a great many reforms." (The Eternal People, p. 116). Then again, a clear rejection of both Orthodoxy and Western Reform: "... those who know no other way but Halachic decisions out of the mouth of the *Chatam Sofer* or those who are prepared to accept Geiger and his followers as the ultimate authorities."

Most remarkable in this context is the simultaneous rejection both of the leading personality in the Orthodox camp, R. Moshe Sofer, and of the leading representative of the "Science of Judaism", Abraham Geiger, the exponent of Reform. In Smolenskin's view the Western Jew Geiger underestimates the specific national peculiarity of Judaism. And how revealing is a further sentence, which brings Smolenskin almost nearer to the *Chatam Sofer* than to the camp of Geiger and Lazarus: "All those who say: Israel stopped being a people from the time it lost its statehood in its own country ... become traitors to their own people."

In epitome it may be said that Smolenskin's image of Western Jewry is determined by his deep appreciation of Judaism as the expression of a will for a national-ethnic life. "The spirit of innovation is not strange to me, but the path of the innovators does not appeal to me." The Western Jewish innovators have practically lost the import of the national character of Judaism. In contrast to Mendele who welcomes the Western Jew as an exemplary reformer, Smolenskin admittedly accepts in principle the innovations of the Western Jews, but weighs the progress of these innovations in a critical balance. If innovations are to be attained at the cost of

losing the substance of Jewish national consciousness, he rejects them. The reforming innovator can sink into becoming a traitor to his people. The rigid decision of the *Chatam Sofer* obviates this danger but it cannot be the choice of a modern Jew who has become conscious of the problems of his own existence.

### III

Modern Hebrew literature only attains its full artistic development when it ceases to be primarily publicistic and becomes aware of its artistic tasks and possibilities. Bialik and Tchernichovsky overcame the tendentious nature of the *Haskala* period. Individual, not typological patterns now determine creative forms. The dialectical motive no longer holds supreme sway over the literary course. Its aesthetic demands have grown, its sense of artistic quality has become refined, its spiritual horizons have been extended, gradually it bursts asunder its provincial fetters and is now more urbane, more open to the world. Yet, now as before, the tension between Eastern and Western Jewry is still apparent. The figure of the Western Jew becomes deeper, more objective, conceived and formed out of its own individuality. And since Hebrew novel-writing reaches its zenith and ultimate virtuosity in the brilliant works of S. J. Agnon, the figure of the Western Jew also attains what is perhaps its most exhaustive, important and objective treatment in Agnon's incomparable epic. It is extraordinarily interesting to compare the treatment of the Western Jewish theme in Agnon with the same theme in the works of his younger contemporary, Chaim Hazaz. Itzhak Shenhar in his tales is also concerned with the figure of the Western Jew. But Shenhar, like Shamir, Yizhar, D. Shachar and Yehuda Amichai later on, see the Western Jew in new and unfamiliar surroundings, in Palestine after the Jewish catastrophe in Europe.

It seems to me extraordinary and of the highest significance that the artistic productions of two important authors from Russia, namely Y. Ch. Brenner and U. N. Gnessin, anticipate certain developments among the most recent Jewish and also Christian authors writing in the German language. The prose of Berdichevsky is also entirely fashioned by the world of Western Jewry and Western man in general. The Western Jew's way of life is deeply impressed on the poems of the greatest Hebrew poet of the present day, Uri Zvi Greenberg.

First of all let us turn our attention to the amazing accomplishments of Agnon. The surprising aspect is not the Western Jewish influence upon his work. This influence is, after all, a matter of course in modern Hebrew literature. Thus it is merely symptomatic when the Russian Jew M. L. Lilienblum inscribes verses of Schiller at the beginning of the second part of his great confessions: "Sins of Youth" (*Chatot Neurim II*, 309), which he completed in 1873. For him the German poet expressed the quintessence of his personal problem, the collapse of his faith:

„Er ist dahin, der süsse Glaube,  
 Ein Wesen, das mein Traum gebar.  
 Der rauhen Wirklichkeit zum Raube,  
 Was einst so schön, so göttlich war.“

As said above, these influences are to be presumed. In the case of Agnon it is this world of the Western Jew, fashioned completely free from affectation and with deep understanding from an epic distance, that fascinates us. In his works it reveals itself to us in all its richness and from all its many aspects; it gives the lie to the over-simplified and therefore inadequate scheme of presenting "the Western Jew". For just as the average Western Jew has succumbed to a distorted and over-simplified picture of "the Eastern Jew", so the Eastern Jew has been inclined to lend ear to a negative myth of the Western Jew. Even in "The Days of Ziklag" (*Yemey Ziklag*) by S. Yizhar, the most comprehensive epic work of this Israeli generation, this somewhat primitive myth of the Western Jew emerges, when the author describes the pedantic, puppet-like figure of an Israeli gunner of German origin. The "Sabra" (Israel-born Jew), too, perhaps even more radically than the Eastern Jew from the Diaspora, reacts extremely emotionally to the "challenge" that he meets in the Western Jew. The twenty-second chapter of the first volume of "The Days of Ziklag" is the best proof of the ambivalent, tensional forces experienced in the encounter between the Sabra and the Western Jew.

Mention has been made of Yizhar, the most important representative of modern Hebrew literature, to demonstrate how in the work of a highly gifted Israeli author of the fifties the later stage of shaping the problem, far from progress and mature recognition, amounts to a kind of regressive answer to the challenge and its inherent tension.

There is nothing of this in the work of Agnon. He is equally averse to temptations of the "negative myth" as to an idealised presentation of the Western Jew. He introduces us to the most varied social and intellectual elements of Western Jewish existence. The overbred, languid, Jewish upper-class of Vienna is treated with the same somewhat remote affection as the ingenuous, simple, observant, *petit bourgeois* Jews of Bavaria. It seems idle to ask which picture is more "truthful", that of the family of Gotthold Ehrlich, the consul and big businessman in "The Oath of Loyalty" (*Shvuat Imunim*) or the idyllic group-life, with its grotesque-tragic outlines, of Lower Franconian Jews from Katzenau-Bad and Katzenau-Stadt in "Between Two Cities" (*Ben Shtey Arim*).<sup>1</sup> Consul Ehrlich's home, with its restrained way of life, almost formalised into a sacred rite, hostile to all pathos, with its cold rules drawn up as if to last for ever, calls to mind the town houses in Stifter's *Nachsommer* (Late Summer). The specific Jewish

<sup>1</sup>A full appreciation of this story is to be found in the important essay by Benjamin de Fries in "Haaretz", 21.2.1952.



*By courtesy of Schocken  
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SHMUEL JOSEPH AGNON  
(b. 1888)





element is, as it were, absorbed by the surrounding culture; the marked over-emphasis on the surrounding culture that has been adopted, is perhaps in an indirect way the ultimate expression of a suppressed Jewish consciousness. It is an assimilated, philanthropic Jewishness, with restrained sentimental reminiscences, which are released by a trip to Eretz Israel: "For a whole year the consul and his daughter have been travelling around the world and now, as they are returning via Egypt, they also want to see the Holy Land and Jerusalem, the Holy City."

Agnon evinces respectful but slightly ironical admiration for the upper-class world of the Western European Jew. His hero, the young scholar Jacob Rechnitz, adopts an obsequious attitude to Consul Ehrlich. Rechnitz is the man from a humble background. Consul Ehrlich, a man of the world, is accepted as an authority, but at the same time Agnon hints at the dubiousness of this authority. On his travels Consul Ehrlich resides in a hotel in Jaffa. The world-famous botanist, Dr. Rechnitz, waits upon his former benefactor. The two men meet on neutral ground in the hotel. But Dr. Rechnitz behaves towards the consul as if he were still the student, the son of poor parents, who in trepidation entered the consul's elegant Viennese villa. "Once again Rechnitz sat at the consul's table and, although it was not the consul's house and Madame Gertrude was not seated at the head of the table, Rechnitz behaved as he had always behaved in the past when invited to eat with the consul's family. He sat there with respectful demeanour and dared not precipitate conversational openings before he was directly addressed."

The impressive superiority of Consul Ehrlich is obvious, but at the same time it is disturbed by a delicate ironic twist. Mr. Ehrlich remarks: "Well, how goes your research work, what sort of use can be made of it?" Rechnitz replies by saying: "Here there is time for every sort of thing, even for things that are not really essential, my research work for instance." Mr. Ehrlich was pleased with this reply which implied that the man with whom he was conversing appreciated that the world was not in need of the things which he supplied. Nevertheless, he devotes himself to them, since they might conceivably be of some little use in some way, and it is gratifying to know that there is somebody who concerns himself with such things.

With Agnon, the world of the Western Jewish upper class here is a mixture of self-assurance and patronizing condescension to the spheres of non-commercial endeavour. It is a world of a culture based on wealth. Things of the spirit are allocated a decorative function only. Rich Mr. Gebhard Goldental reacts similarly to the results of the researches of the scholar Adiel Amsa in the story "For Ever" (*Ad Olam*).<sup>2</sup> Here the scholar does not even manage to meet his Maecenas. We are not concerned at this stage to trace the events in that story, but one sentence is significant

<sup>2</sup>"Ad Olam", *Haaretz*, 16.4.1954.

in our present context: "What a pity that this fine gentleman (G. Goldental) did not set eyes on him (the scholar). If he had seen him, he would have realised that a face provides a far more pleasing sight than gold or silver."

The lustre and beauty of the man of spirit is denied for ever to the upper-class Goldental. And it is spiritual possession that eternally draws the scholar away from the world. Amsa abandons the world and immures himself with his books in a leper-house. The rich, upper-class, West European never divines the scorching glow of spiritual beauty. The great world and exalted spirituality fail to meet, *ad olam*, forever.

But the man of the upper classes is only one aspect of Western Jewish existence in the rich and colourful mosaic of Agnon's art. In "Between Two Cities",<sup>3</sup> to which reference has already been made, Agnon reveals to his Hebrew reader an unknown world of a conservative, naive, undemanding and devout, Western Jewish *petite bourgeoisie*. These people "maintain their homes in a decent way, they keep the commandments as they have received them from their fathers, they do not question the reasons for the commandments, for the paramount importance of the commandments lies in the fact that Man's greatest merit is contained in carrying them out. Of them and of those like them it has been said that man was born to toil, the toil of earning his bread and the toil of complying with the commandments."

They are an unpretentious, upright, understanding and decent kind of people, whose petty joys and great sorrows Agnon describes in a masterly way. Things familiar from time immemorial determine the life-rhythm of these Jews of Lower Franconia. They are not learned, but they hold in reverence the law and its teachers. With devotion and love they look up to anyone who appears to have a claim to familiarity with the divine teaching. They respect the rabbis. "Sometimes an aged paterfamilias bends low" over the hand of a rabbi who has come to take the cure "and he kisses the latter's hand, full of amazement at the soft and supple hand that is vouchsafed to those exercising the rabbinical profession."

The unbroken, deep-rooted essence of the simple Western Jews, steadfast in their faith, provides the great epic writer Agnon with an opportunity of demonstrating that the usual contrast between Eastern and Western Jews is of trivial importance. He discovers the common element in the Jewish lives of his Jews, be they small or ever so great, be it a Menasseh-Chaim, Yitzhak Kummer in Galicia, in Buczac, a Mr. Gundesheimer or Niedermaier in Katzenau.

A different evaluation is given to the grotesque figure of the elementary school teacher, Mr. Isidore Schaltjahr, from Frankfurt-on-Main. Here Agnon, *Talmid-Haham* and poet, portrays the pretentious little man from the great Jewish community of Frankfurt. It is a satire on the foolishness

<sup>3</sup>"Ben shtey Arim", Vol. 6, 78—91.

of narrow-minded small-town Jews, and the interchange of spheres is highly amusing.

The little scholar from the big community, who is usually merely concerned with the instruction of little children, is thrust by chance before the grown-up members of a small community and adopts an air of authority. But as a true Jew of the Frankfurt *Kehilla*, he imitates the rabbi of the Separatists, and everywhere smells out sin and rebellion against the religious law. "Mr. Isidore Schaltjahr taught little children in one of the schools of his town, but his soul yearned for great deeds. Yet, others had already carried out the great deeds and left nothing new for Mr. Schaltjahr to discover." Agnon hints at the Halachic incompetence of Mr. Schaltjahr, which nevertheless does not deter him in his claim for Halachic authority. In the text it says that "the others" had already robbed Mr. Schaltjahr of the possibility *lechadesh shum chidush* (to bring out anything new). A *Chidush* is a subtle point, an intellectual novelty, in the course of Halachic discussion. This is denied the little teacher from the big community. Thus, since hunger is a great problem in war-time (the story takes place during the first World War), he is concerned with himself: "Of necessity he turned away from great matters and concerned himself with his own puny and weakened body." And so the little scholar from the big community strengthens his little weakened body in the little community. The grotesque element increases as, through the good-heartedness of Mr. Gundersheimer of Katzenau, the small, wizened body of the teacher of little children fills out, becomes stronger and larger in size. The result of this is that Isidore Schaltjahr also, so to speak, imagines himself to have grown in intellect. For he now has sufficient to eat and drink. Not only the hotelier Mr. Gundersheimer lets Mr. Schaltjahr "grow" and become larger, but also his neighbour, the Jewish baker Mr. Dingsfelder and then all of Jewish Katzenau; they stuff the little teacher and also supply his family with ample provender. So the little community supplies the material needs of the big community and now obtains its reward. For the abundant supply of food increases the teacher's urge to perform deeds. "Yet every important thought had already occurred to someone else and he was merely left with his taste for eating and drinking. All that was left for Mr. Schaltjahr was to accomplish with his feet what his brain was incapable of doing." Yes, he counts the number of paces he covers during his post-prandial stroll. Then "he becomes weary of counting his footsteps and counts the telegraph poles. When he is wearied of counting the telegraph poles, he starts counting his footsteps once again. Finally he starts calculating how many ells they add up to." And now comes the great, "novel" and "creative" inspiration: "it is actually more than two thousand ells from Katzenau-Stadt to Katzenau-Bad!" The consequences are clear. It is, therefore, forbidden to the Jews to do on the Sabbath what they have always been in the habit of doing, namely to take a stroll from one village to the other! And any one who continues to do so, is desecrating the Sabbath and endangering his spiritual well-being. The little people of Katzenau thank Mr. Schaltjahr for his "innovation" and submit to it. And thus the little teacher has performed a great deed. The sons of the little community have overwhelmed the little son of the big community with corporeal benefits, "with butter, cheese, eggs and fruit . . . but he repays them by ensuring their reward in the world to come." At the same time the son of the Jewish baker makes his laborious way home from the war: "both his legs had been frost-bitten in the trenches. Thus did he return. Decorated with a medal for bravery, but without his legs." With this sentence Agnon concludes the episode of Mr. Schaltjahr. The Fatherland has bestowed on the baker a satisfaction similar to that which Mr. Schaltjahr has vouchsafed the community on Sabbaths. The baker's son is crippled for life, but in return his heroism has been acknowledged. Mr. Schaltjahr has crippled the free movement of the Jews between Katzenau-Bad and Katzenau-Stadt, but thus he has assured them of a heavenly reward.

It is abundantly clear what evaluation Agnon's parody gives to the excesses of orthodox rigidity of the Frankfurt type. It is apt to cripple the people in the name of God.

## IV

But Agnon's experience of Western Jewry leads him to explore it in all its manifestations. He marshals before us a jumble of curious figures on the periphery of Jewish existence, as in the significant, restrained and dramatic short story "Fernheim",<sup>4</sup> or the wonderful and mysterious novel "Eido and Einam".<sup>5</sup> The figure of the Western Jew is the central feature in the fragmentary novel "Shirah".<sup>6</sup> "Until Now" (*Ad Hena*), the great story whose title is borne by the seventh volume of the complete edition, is also concerned in a special way with the figure of the Western Jew. What are the main characteristics that Agnon brings to the fore in these tales? We have already observed the extent to which Agnon applies his skill in revealing the multifarious facets of Western Jewish life. It has also been shown how the unifying element common to them and to Eastern Jews is not overlooked, despite the full consideration that he gives in his stories to the particular individuality of Western Jews.

This great, epic writer is challenged by the marginal cases amongst the opportunities for Jewish existence, cases of the sort that only Western Jewry could produce. Thus the novel "Fernheim" does not deal in the conventional sense with figures of completely assimilated Western Jews. No particular or definite type is mirrored and discussed. On the contrary, through the sparing and restrained construction of situations, a frightening vision is created of the total loss of Jewish values and substance amongst wide circles of Western Jewry. Even the hero's name "Fernheim" expresses the unity of incompatibles. On his return Mr. Fernheim "finds his home shut up." But it is no ordinary return. It occurs after four years of war. After a lot of ringing the house-keeper appears and in short sentences anticipates the tale: "Ah yes, of course, it's Mr. Fernheim. So Mr. Fernheim has returned home. Why then was it understood that he wasn't coming home? . . . He's had a lot of trouble for nothing, the flat is empty, nobody there to open up for him; for Mrs. Fernheim has left the house, locked it up, took the keys with her, and never a thought that anybody might need the keys, like now, when Mr. Fernheim has come home and wants to get into his house . . ." The housekeeper adds: "after the child died, her sister Mrs. Steiner came with Mr. Steiner and took Mrs. Fernheim away . . ."

Mr. Fernheim returns home to absolutely nothing. All his bonds have been severed. The behaviour of his brother-in-law and wife in connection with his return only reveals with tragic conciseness what was perhaps always latently present, even before the war: emptiness of values, the impermanence of all bonds, in fact the antithesis of any kind of religion. Only from the mouth of the housekeeper, as from a far distance, does there

<sup>4</sup>"Fernheim", Vol. 7, 321—335.

<sup>5</sup>"Eido v'Einam", Vol. 7, 342—395.

<sup>6</sup>"Shirah", Haaretz Almanack 1952—1953, 1953—1954, 1954—1955.

sound the faint echo of a lost Jewish existence. The Steiners stay in the country "over the High Holidays of the Israelite gentlemen..." It is the Christian woman, and she alone, who identifies the Jewishness of these uprooted people who have lost both their meaning in life and their values. They are subjected to a different cycle of the calendar, but it is no longer binding upon them. Nothing is obligatory any more. The Jewish cemetery is the only live reality. Fernheim "visits his son's grave in the cemetery." This apart, nothing else is left. The conversation between man and wife is made up of stilted silences. Mrs. Fernheim is now the wife of Mr. Neu, an old man, for he was Inge's first sweetheart, believed to be dead but returned to life when Mr. Fernheim, Inge's real husband, was declared dead. Now he has returned, everything is new. The past is past, it is disturbing and is pushed aside, just as years before the war Fernheim excluded Mr. Neu as being no longer among the living. The short conversations are cruel and hard. Now there is nakedly revealed what was formerly concealed. Fernheim was a defrauder, "had besmirched the name of his firm". But this is brought up now when in a special sense the union of incompatibles becomes apparent in the existence of a Fernheim.

It reminds one of "The Crooked becomes straight" (*Wehaya he-akov lemishor*) by Agnon, or "Colonel Chabert" by Balzac. But in those stories there were values and meaning, here they never existed. The Fernheim existence is the typical marginal example of Western Jewish alienation. War shows up in all its nakedness what was present before. Jewishness on the brink of nothingness. Fernheim's guilt and Fernheim's tragedy are only isolated cases of a comprehensive Jewish process, the self-extinguishment of Jewish existence.

In the great story "Until Now" (*Ad Hena*), which describes Germany and life in the cities of Berlin and Leipzig during the World War, Agnon is still concerned with the Western Jews' character, even if they do not fill the principal roles in the story. The tale, told in the first person, describes the fate of scholars, assimilationists. In his various aspects the West European intellectual is a constant theme not only here, but also in the fragmentary novel "Shirah", in the tale "The Doctor and his divorced Wife" (*Harophe wegrushato*), as well as in "Eido and Einam". In the last-named story the house of Gerhardt Greifenbach is the focal point of spectral and mysterious plots. It is characteristic, however, that the story opens with Greifenbach's departure, his leaving the house. The story ends with the return of the Greifenbach couple. In the meantime dramatic and mysterious events occur in the abandoned house. Here, as in other stories, the Western Jew is related to a world of insecurity which is provisional, without roots. When the story is placed in Jerusalem, as in "Eido and Einam" or "Shirah", Agnon lets there be felt the unnatural state, the seclusion, even alienation of these German intellectuals, as, for instance, of Dr. Herbst in "Shirah". But even the relationship to the

mysteriously archaic, as in "Eido and Einam", is not derived from a real linkage with wonder-producing mysteries, but is a Jewish substitute- and peripheral existence, the nervous fumbblings and pursuit of uprooted beings, whose desire it is to be settled in a world that is basically foreign to them.

Agnon's epic description strives for artistic mastery of Western Jewish man in his totality.

## V

How differently Chaim Hazaz sees the Western Jew! He deals at great length with the figure of the German Jew in two stories "Chavit Achura" (The Muddy Barrel), and "Harat Olam" (The World's Pregnant Hour), in his volume "Avanim Rotshot" (Glowing Stones).<sup>7</sup> The theme also appears in his fragment "Hadrasha", (The Sermon). But how much closer than Agnon is Hazaz to the over-simplified "negative myth" of the Western Jew! Max Hirschfeld, his wife and son Hans, who to their sorrow now live in Jerusalem and not in Berlin, are described with brilliant wit, but they are the incarnation of the German Jew, not as he really is, but as the Eastern Jews have always imagined him to be. The conversation between Max Hirschfeld and the officials of the *Keren Hayesod*, who are demanding a subscription from him, is comical, but essentially the points made are not novel. Since the *Keren Hayesod* "did nothing for me when I immigrated", it is "out of the question" that he, Max Hirschfeld, should be inclined to do anything for them. When it is gently explained that, after all, the *Keren Hayesod* is "the financial source for the upbuilding of the country", Hirschfeld replies indignantly: "Is that so... why then doesn't it do something about repairing the streets so that I don't have to stumble across boulders and through rubble?" The contrast between Eastern and Western Jew is demonstrated with considerable humour in a historio-philosophical discussion between Hirschfeld and Moroshka. Hazaz introduces a very amusing piece of cross-talk. How typical that Hirschfeld's house is carefully shielded against the hot Jerusalem air! With the words: "let there be light!" Moroshka flings open the shutters to transform the make-believe Diaspora house into an Israeli dwelling. Moroshka defines these German Jews and their enforced residence in Israel as the personified re-introduction of the prayers that the Reform movement had struck out of the prayer-book. "All the prayers that promulgated the belief in the coming of the Messiah, the return to Zion and the in-gathering of the Diaspora — you are now making good what they spoiled — and just as you once altered your characteristics so as to be like the Gentiles, now you will re-alter yourselves to be like the rest of Israel." It is understandable that the assimilationist Hirschfeld should now say promptly in pure German: "I didn't understand a single word" and to his wife: "That is quite beyond us, it is like the

<sup>7</sup>Ch. Hazaz: "Avanim rotshot", Tel Aviv, 1945.

Talmud... pure Cabbala." Then the historio-philosophical lecture is continued, mention is made of Hitler and the racial laws, and Moroshka demonstrates the lack of originality in the Nazi ideology, which copied everything from us, the Jews, from the laws of Ezra. Hirschfeld asks whether Ezra was "also a sort of rabbi", confusing him with Ibn Ezra who is "known to him" through his friend Dr. Adler, since the latter lives in Ibn Ezra Street. Yes, yes, Hirschfeld understands in his fashion: "Jews are always the worst antisemites." In short, this Western Jew is made to degenerate into a comic figure who shows up somewhat exotically in Jerusalem. Moroshka lectures almost incessantly, proving that from the time of Philo onwards only the Jews were the sole true Europeans. Hirschfeld admires the Eastern Jews although he understands nothing. "I'm absolutely amazed; I thought that in your schools you only learn Talmud and suchlike. But everything you have just told us, about Plato and all the rest, of that we had not the slightest idea!" And Hazaz summarizes the disconcertment of the Western Jew in the sentence with which the story is concluded: "Not even in the top class did we learn that."

It is a perfect example of talking at cross-purposes. The Western Jew knows nothing of Judaism, but under-estimates the Eastern Jew, who is himself a comic figure, a fact of which the poet is aware but not Max Hirschfeld.

The next story extends and varies the incompatibility of the two worlds. Now Hirschfeld is lecturing Hans, his son who "has tumbled into history like a hen into the pot." To the youth both the country and city are strange. History was, as it were, thrust upon Hans. But in the figure of the young Western Jew, Hazaz also provides a clear insight into the non-historical attitude of the young Sabra. "To hell with all his Judaism!" That is what Hans thinks, but in this he is no different from Joram, Nimrod or Adi whose parents grew up in Eastern Europe. Hazaz's analysis leads to a review of the historical concept of Judaism in general. That is the underlying theme of all Hazaz's stories, and produced in a condensed form in "Hadrasha" (The Sermon). Here it is Judka who puts Jewish history on trial. Zionism and Judaism are antitheses. In one place the speaker Judka is interrupted by an interjection which is intended to have a disparaging effect on the Western Jews: "Brit-shalom (the Buber-Magnes-Simon group), the university professors and all the other *Daitschlach*." (241).

For Hazaz the Western Jew, whether assimilationist or intellectual, is of inferior substance. But in so far as his feeling is presented as cut off from history, he — paradoxically — comes nearer to the new Israeli type and eases the radical process of escape from the bonds of a Judaeo-centric conception of history.



## VI

A real understanding of the peculiar position of Western Jews in Eretz Israel is to be found in certain stories of Itzhak Shenhar. Shenhar views with sympathy and respect those German Jews who make a real effort to establish a new life in Eretz Israel. He has a keen perception for the problems of a disintegrating, once stable world. His fine sense for cultural nuances and for the tragedy of a society hesitatingly groping towards something that is not yet fully formed, enables him to do justice and to describe sympathetically the position of the Western Jew. A kind of elective affinity, with some reservations, also plays a positive part in Shenhar's attempt to understand the fate of German Jews in Eretz Israel.

Mostly they are people whose world has been irretrievably lost. They grieve over it and at the same time are honestly concerned to establish a foothold in the old-new world. Yet an irremediable cleavage in their lives is revealed. They realise that basically they belong to a departed world. This is most clearly expressed in the novel "*Chatser Azuva*" (The Abandoned Farm).<sup>8</sup> It is an immigrants' camp, whose types Shenhar describes, such as the famous poetess Erna Plessner, for whom Else Lasker-Schüler probably acted as model. A touchingly hopeless element of the grotesque is apparent in her fate. She loves a poetic, dreamlike Jerusalem, sublime and far removed from reality. She looks in vain for a Jerusalem of universal love which does not exist; thus she is consumed by a yearning for the woodlands of Europe.

Or the medical man, Doctor Seidner. He knows that after the experiences of Nazi Germany, there is only one goal for a proud Jew: Eretz Israel. He recognises "that he has lost something irrevocable". With enormous industry he joins together with lads each evening for the study of Hebrew. Then again the girl Lotte. Nothing appeals to her in Eretz Israel. "I don't feel any of this, it conveys nothing to me. I hear these things, but they awaken no echo in my ears . . . What right did I have to come here and save my life? I am consumed with a longing for my parents . . . I don't know what to do." The fate of the lad Gustave Brand is just as tragic. His father was an Aryan, his mother a Jewess. The seventeen-year-old youth feels himself a Jew. Gustave develops a mania for orderliness in the camp. Finally, Victor Schulmann, who here in Eretz Israel begins to feel doubts about the specific character of the Jewish people. It seems impossible to him that the Jews will ever free themselves from the Galuth.

German-Jewish types also re-appear in the stories "One among Thousands"<sup>9</sup> and "Prazon".<sup>10</sup> They are always people who are fully determined to give a new sense to their lives in the land of their fathers. It is the

<sup>8</sup>*Chatser Azuva*, Vol. 2, Collected works, Mosad Bialik, 185—197.

<sup>9</sup>"*Echad mee'ef*", Vol. 3, Complete Works, Mosad Bialik, 264—334.

<sup>10</sup>"*Prazon*", Vol. 2, Complete Works, Mosad Bialik, 81—115.



ITZHAK SHENHAR (SHENBERG)  
(1907–1957)



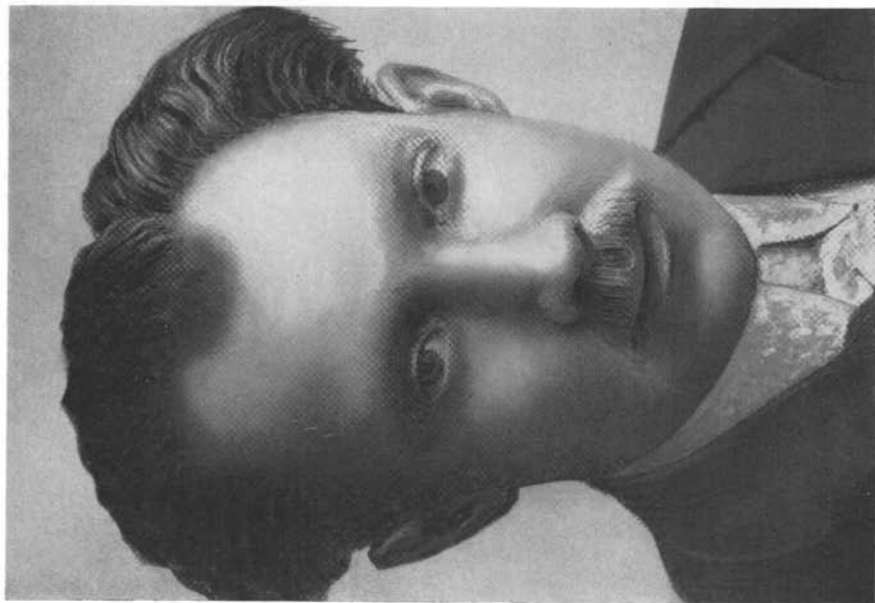
CHAIM HAZAZ  
(b. 1897)



URI ZVI GREENBERG  
(b. 1894)



S. YIZHAR (SMILANSKY)  
(b. 1918)



URI NISSAN GNESSIN  
(1882–1913)



By courtesy of S.Fischer Verlag  
HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL  
(1874–1959)

tension between then and now, here and there, for which they have to find a tolerable balance. In this, however, the Western Jews in the works of Shenhar are but particular variants of all his heroes, whose fate it is to be figures of transition, in passage from a dying and vanishing reality to an experimental, not yet fully established new reality. This indicates that, compared with their common attributes, Shenhar adjudges only incidental importance to the significant differences between Eastern and Western Jews.

As already mentioned, the new generation of Israeli writers betrays no very deep understanding for the *condition humaine* of the Western Jew in Israel. But this is the result of an a-historical method of thought, even more, it is evidence of the a-historical approach to life that is characteristic of the Israeli. Owing to lack of personal experience, the Israeli author is unaware of things that had been self-evident to the Diaspora author. The Israeli has not experienced a cultural symbiosis. To the Jew of the Dispersion, whether from the East or West, foreign culture, be it German or Russian, was a natural feature of his life, in which he himself was embedded; indeed "strange shores" became his homeland. The Israeli author reads English and American books but he is not organically associated with Anglo-Saxon culture and is merely a passive recipient. He does not realise what cultural symbiosis can mean. He also adopts a non-historical attitude to Hebrew culture. Even an extremely nationalistic author from the dispersion, like the great visionary Uri Zvi Greenberg, absorbed German culture deeply into his personal experience. And even if he scourges the Western "money-Jews", as for instance in his poem "Jewish Bankers",<sup>11</sup> what a profound understanding he has for German and European culture. The Berlin of the twenties comes to life in the Hebrew language in the poems of the modern Hebrew "Anacreon" ("And the name of the City is Berlin").<sup>12</sup> Paris or Prague live similarly in the poems of Schlonsky: "Stones of Chaos" (*Avney Bohu*).

Thus the Israeli author does not attain more than an external grasp of the features of Western Jewish life. Negatively ironic in S. Yizhar's "The Days of Ziklag", almost malicious in David Shachar, positively admiring in Moshe Shamir's "For you are naked" (*Ki erom attā*).

"Please make the acquaintance of the gunner!... and by the manner in which he suppressed his laughter, one could assume that this time he had brought rare birds along — and not only that — one of the two gentlemen reached forward and began to shake Gidi's hand, yes, he even said: How do you do? muffled in a genteel smile... And now the matter instantly resolves itself, for these two chaps are, you'll pardon me, nothing but two Yekkes, one of them approaching his forties, even wearing sun-glasses and a topee... and behind him, continuously bowing and clicking his heels respectfully and decorously, there appeared a second Yekke, younger than the one in front, far more solemn than

<sup>11</sup>U.Z. Greenberg: "Kelev bayit (The House Dog).

<sup>12</sup>U.Z. Greenberg: "Anacreon al Keter ha'itzabon." (Anacreon at the point of sadness).

the former, as if English soldiers had put in an appearance, or God knows who, fully equipped with field-glasses, maps and revolver."<sup>13</sup>

This may all be accurate observation, but it is the mere recording of external characteristics which make the Western Jew appear stiff, solemn, formal and pedantic, in short a comical sort of bird among the Palmach gang. Even Yizhar is not able to penetrate any further. Shamir, on the other hand, describes the intelligent and thorough "Hashomer Hatzair" leader in the novel previously mentioned and displays his awe at the comprehensive learning of the faithful Party educationalist. But to him, too, the real essence of the Western Jew is inaccessible.

A notable exception is the poet Yehuda Amichai in his poems "Now and in Other Days"<sup>14</sup> and with less success in his short stories "Beruach Hanoraa" (In a terrible Wind). One has, however, to take into account the fact that Amichai was himself born in Germany and comes from an orthodox background. He lovingly depicts his ancestral world, actually the world of his deceased father, to which he has an ambivalent attitude. The figure of his father, this upright, deeply devout and good-hearted Franconian Jew, is portrayed with love and reverence. German Judaism has become foreign to him, religious Judaism is turned aside, partly in sorrow, partly with a touch of cynicism.

## VII

At the beginning of the third chapter of this essay reference was made to a highly important manifestation in modern Hebrew literature, namely to certain artistic elements in the prose of Gnessin and Brenner. A careful investigation of elements particularly of the works of Gnessin leads us to the conclusion that, so far as the fundamental problems of the epoch are concerned, the unity between East and West is greater than one would imagine. The figure of the Western Jew may only be of trivial importance in the works of Brenner, but West European thinking, Nietzsche for instance, has had a considerable influence upon him. His residence in London also forced Brenner to come to terms with Western Judaism. Admittedly, what he sees there, as well as in his description of American Jews in "Mikaan umikaan" (From Here and From There), is the mass of Eastern Jewish immigrants, Eastern Jewish types, their physical and moral misery. But he is concerned with Western Jewry and its West European way of life. Nietzsche's philosophy leaves deep furrows in his stories. In the seventeenth chapter of his autobiographical novel "Bachoref" (In Winter), "Friedrich Nietzsche's poetry and philosophy" is discussed. In a highly symptomatic dream of the hero Feuermann (Brenner), a vision of the

<sup>13</sup>S. Itzhar; *The Days of Ziklag*, p. 363. (*Yekke* is a mocking nickname for the German Jew, indicating a combination of pedantic correctness and foolishness.)

<sup>14</sup>Y. Amichai: "Achshav uvyamim acherim".

German philosopher appears as an idealised figure with which the hero identifies himself. At the same time, the figure of Nietzsche, and that of Bursif, our hero's self-assured and successful rival, melt into each other. This hankering dream bears Feuermann to Germany. "In this country, in Germany, whither I travel with her, lives Friedrich Nietzsche, he has a heavy moustache, Bursif also has a heavy moustache." How revealing is this dream! It is the ideal fulfilment of all frustrated, unattainable desires. The hero liberates himself from his hated father, travels with "her", a girl whom he loves but who in actuality does not return his love, to the West, thither, where a new and forceful philosophy of life is being propounded. The heavy moustache of his rival Bursif, who is successful both with the girl and in life generally, is identical with that of Nietzsche.

It is immaterial that all this, including the life of his hero Nietzsche, was in reality quite different from the hero's dream-world. The importance lies in the fact that Western Europe gives rise to this ideal dream picture as a substitute solution.

In many of my works I have pointed out and brought exhaustive evidence to show that the subject-matter of Brenner's tales approaches very closely to that of Franz Kafka.<sup>15</sup> Here I cannot do more than draw attention to this fact. However, in essence it may be said that Brenner's tales use themes and metaphors that seem to be derived from the world of Kafka. The basic tone and pitch, the existentialist hopelessness of finding a way out, are the same with Brenner as with Kafka. Thus the self-portrayals of the Eastern Jew Brenner and the Western Jew Kafka frequently coincide, they indicate an identical pattern of shattered Jewish existence.

And now, finally, a few remarks about the work of Gnessin, his "mimesis" of Jewish existence that strikes one as thoroughly modern and Western. Much of what in the West today is pretentiously proclaimed as "the artistic shaping of new values", already appears in the unassuming prose of Gnessin, who died so young: Internal monologue, decay of classical reality, alienation, despair over language, and bold creation out of this maddening frustration.

In the story "Beterem" (Before) the hero Uriel returns to his aged parents. And now an example of reflective inner monologue:

"... There he is... father. Is that father? Father... And this is mother. This tiny, wizened woman who speaks with signs of frailty and wheezes as she laughs — so that is mother. How strange it all is... well, well — and there it is written: *Parerga and Paralipomena*, by Arthur Schopenhauer. All well.

And in fact. You recall it, too. Father — long may he live — never drinks milk, only in tea, and that only in the morning.

All quite well. But what is strange there? Strange only this, that he is always pondering

<sup>15</sup>See B. Kurzweil: "Sifrutenu hachadasha — Hemshech o mahapecha?" (Our new Literature — Continuation or Revolution?), Schocken 1959, pp. 251—259, and "Jewish Existence in the Works of Kafka", *Haaretz*, 31.3.1961.

over these books. Suddenly he has abandoned them. Why did he abandon them? ... The reason which seemed so very important to him at the time, has vanished. Yet its disappearance no longer seems as important as it was. So what is important? Ah! What a lot of tomfoolery is contained in that question! What is important? Amazing — how hackneyed these words are. What is important? Ah! Word-carcasses. Absolutely. Worthy and fitting to these books so craftily wise — so, taking it all in all. What now is important? Yes, that is it, this dry, choking stench of foul, putrifying camels of the Orient, the fading stink of this feeling of death, this unbearable decay coming from a steady decline of generation after generation, these crawling creatures, scattered from numerous graves before the burning sun ... that shoot upwards and grow in the dry glowing heat like toadstools after the rain ... so what is important?"<sup>16</sup>

This then is the return home! The words "father - mother" release the inner monologue. The words are deprived of their meaning. The things and people they describe are unreal, shrivelled up, distorted: His father's books, all those things that were "important". "Important" (*chasuv*) is the operative word. In its lifelessness it demonstrates the collapse of all valuation, of all values, the loss of all meaning. The word changes into a carcass (*Pigrey Milim*). This term sets loose associations with putrefying disintegration. A fever-hot, stinking, dragging on, mushroomlike upsurge and decay. The monologue, architectonically balanced, ends with the words: "what is important", the question that thrusts forward to a summary account of the home-coming. Yes, that is how it is: this Jewish ancestral world, like everything else, has no values. The word drives to desperation. It bears witness to its own failure, it does not survive the collapse of things which it denotes and which once had values of their own. Things degenerate into ghostlike distortions. What reveals itself is yawning nothingness or the abyss of insanity.

This story was written in the early years of the twentieth century and was published in Warsaw in 1909. It expresses an attitude to life that had been presumed to be typical only of Kafka or the young Hofmannsthal. The subject-structure of modern Western Jewish, and also of European Christian, literature is anticipated by Gnessin. A comparison between this passage from "Beterem" and "The Letter of Lord Chandos" by Hofmannsthal, makes it clear how modern and "Western" Hebrew literature had already become in the case of Gnessin at the beginning of the twentieth century.

"... At first it became increasingly impossible for me to discuss a more elevated or general subject and thus to pronounce those words which people commonly use without hesitation. I felt an inexplicable distaste for even uttering the words 'spirit', 'soul' or 'body'. I found it inwardly impossible to express any opinion about the affairs of the Court ... or on any other subject for that matter ... whereas abstract words ... fell apart in my mouth like mouldy mushrooms ... Also in casual and humdrum conversation any kind of opinion became ... so doubtful that I had to stop taking part in such conversations. An inexplicable wrath ... filled me

<sup>16</sup>U. N. Gnessin, Works, Vol. I, 195—196.

when I heard such remarks as: This matter went well or badly for one person or the other; Sheriff N. is a bad man, Preacher T. a good man... All this seemed to me as undemonstrable, mendacious and hollow as could be... To my mind, everything fell to pieces, the pieces shattered into further pieces and nothing could be encompassed in a single concept... Individual words swirled around me... becoming whirlpools... through which one enters vacuity."<sup>17</sup>

It is evident that contemporaneously with the Jewish scion of the West and without being aware of Hofmannsthal's existence, the Eastern Jew Gnessin captures in words the same attitude to life and expresses the same despair over words.

Thus, as demonstrated here by sundry examples, Hebrew literature over the course of more than a century follows the same natural law as European literature as a whole. It measures itself against the challenge presented to it by the figure of the Western Jew; it is concerned with the diagnosis of a different being in order to rediscover from a distance its main subject, the Eastern Jew. The surprising result is, therefore, that fundamentally the common element far outweighs all external differences, once the world of religious faith has vanished on the one side as well as on the other. In the great historical process of the secularisation of Judaism, precipitous in the West, gradual in the East, matures a deep recognition of a common Jewish fate, before whose demands the contrasts fade away.

Yet Israeli literature, because its consciousness is non-historical, overlooks the profundities, and measures the Western Jew by external attributes. Thus, up to the present day, it is still far from having a true grasp of the historical position of its own figures. Consequently it is justifiable to conclude that Israeli literature in its presentation of the Jew, whether Eastern, Western, or Israeli, is far more backward and chained to the past than was the great modern Hebrew literature of the Galuth between 1870 and 1945.

The modernism of Israeli literature is not the product of a cultural symbiosis. It is a borrowed modernism. As yet it has not even acknowledged the meaning of the inner Jewish inter-group challenge. Only through a newly awakened consciousness of history can it grow and find both itself and the world.

<sup>17</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Letter of Lord Chandos.



