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# **THE BRENNER SCHOOL AND THE AGNON SCHOOL IN HEBREW LITERATURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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The centrality of Brenner and Agnon in the formation of the Hebrew literature of the twentieth century from its beginning, can be termed here in short: The debate between the “Brenner School” and the “Agnon School.” The Brenner School casts doubt on the social values of Judaism and of Zionism, which sprang up in response to Judaism’s modern needs. The Brenner School uses contemporary revolutionary concepts to conduct a debate about the Jewish, secular, Zionist person. It does not hesitate to express its conclusions, even if that involves a lack of confidence in the human potential, especially in the Jewish human potential, and also in secular-Zionist moves. The Agnon School entails staying within the boundaries of methodical doubt. It assumes that early Judaism exists and is strong, and will eventually win out in establishing the identity of the Jew, both within and without, both in the debate conducted in Agnon’s time, as well as in future debates. These two schools are not populated equally. The Brenner School won an uncontested victory in twentieth-century Hebrew literature. The Agnon School remained largely an empty school—a symbol and not a place of action. The attitude toward these two schools in twentieth-century Hebrew literature involves, before all else, taking a stand on the basic question of the right or obligation of Judaism to continue to exist as a national and collective identity.

This paper presents the outlines of a charged and complex discussion. After defining in detail the notion of the “school,” the relations between the two artists will be presented in brief. Then their works will be presented, their literary positions and what they symbolize in Israeli Hebrew literature in the 1960s, the first generation of the State of Israel.

## **1. PROLOGUE—“SCHOOLS” IN THE HEBREW LITERATURE OF THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

The status of Hebrew literature within the Hebrew-speaking cultural milieu at the beginning of the twentieth century is very different from its status at the century’s end. At the beginning of the century, Hebrew literature had helped define the character of this cultural milieu and its various debates. This includes the debates surrounding the then emerging Zionist identity, which was only one possibility facing the Hebrew-speaking cultural communities in the Western world. This character defining status of literature is central, as literature was the stage for cultural debates, from the most personal aspects to the most clearly political, and because literature was seen simultaneously as a personal, lyrical medium, and as a propagandist tool.

At the century's start, the literature within the Hebrew-speaking milieu was very powerful for a number of reasons: First, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew literature grew closer to the perception of what constituted great European literatures than it had at any time during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hebrew literature then reflected the superior Western literature. Second, the literature was the product of a people for whom being the "People of the Book" was an important part of its self-image. When this people shifted from a milieu dominated by the "Book of Books" to a secular milieu, its cultural leaders needed to mend the crack in its image as the "People of the Book." A third reason is the growth of political streams—among them the Zionist movement—from the literature, in the absence of other public forums in the nineteenth century available to Jewish, national secular philosophers. The Hebrew, Zionist, literature of Eretz-Israel became the only Hebrew literature for historical reasons—the Holocaust that decimated European Jewry and its culture, the establishment of the State of Israel, and American Jewry's lack of a need for a Hebrew identity to continue its existence. When Modern Hebrew literature established itself, its foundations and heritage took on a mythic character, and within that myth a place of symbolic honor is reserved for the Eretz-Israel literature of the beginning of the twentieth century.

In this way, the central internal debate of Hebrew literature at the start of the century also bears the character of a cultural myth. This is so even though it is not in part, even in large part, an open or direct debate, but one that derives from positions taken up in the literary work. Because of the centrality of Brenner and of Agnon in the formation of the Hebrew literature of the twentieth century from its beginning, this debate can be termed in short the debate between the "Brenner School" and the "Agnon School." These two—Joseph Haim Brenner and Shmuel Joseph Agnon—together with Micha Joseph Berdichevski and Uri Nissan Genesin, determined the character of Hebrew prose in the twentieth century. I will demonstrate that both historically and retrospectively, Brenner and Agnon set the boundaries of Hebrew literature in the twentieth century. I include Genesin in the Brenner School and Berdichevski in the Agnon School.

These two literary approaches that are here called schools emerged under different circumstances. Brenner was murdered in 1921 while he was still a relatively young writer, while Agnon—winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature—died two generations later at a ripe old age. Agnon is considered, at least symbolically, the representative of twentieth-century Hebrew literature both within Israel and outside it. Brenner was from the outset an active figure

socially. He was always involved in social life; he wrote literary and cultural criticism and even political criticism. Agnon confined himself to the literary arena, and consistently refused to express any cultural views, not to speak of political views, that had no relation to the literary work. The literary ethos that Brenner created was social, political, current, direct, and open; he was connected with the Labor movement—the central movement in Eretz-Israel—and immediately became one of its symbols. The literary ethos formed by Agnon was the opposite: the ethos of one who is solely involved with literature and denies any modern social relation, even if that relation is basically literary, sophisticated, and rich in meaning. Thus, the symbolic debate within Israeli culture between Brenner's works and those of Agnon, or the debate between the schools, was not a direct and immediate debate. Only in the course of the years, as Agnon's works became increasingly accepted, were they considered an expression of a symbolic world view, though Agnon did not present it thus directly or present anything, in fact, beyond the literary expression.

The notion of a school presupposes a convergence of composer, composition, and reader; its concepts are constructed partly by the writer who created the school, partly by other writers who see themselves as belonging to that school, partly by literary critics, and partly by readers of the work and readers of its critics. Therefore, the literary school is the result of a social process produced by years of activity. What was clear regarding Brenner's works from the outset, nearly became unanimously accepted regarding Agnon, albeit as a result of a process over time. Thus, the division into two schools is the result of a retrospective view that can rightfully be presented now. If one follows Agnon's writing, on the one hand, one will see that it was consistent throughout the years and that the earlier works predicted the later ones. But on the other hand, the Agnon School is to a large extent an empty school—his world view is accepted but real heirs to this unique artist are few and those are only partial heirs.

Yet, in spite of all that has been said here, each of the schools can be summed up in a sentence or two. The Brenner School casts doubt on the social values of Judaism and of Zionism, which sprang up in response to Judaism's modern needs. The Brenner School uses contemporary revolutionary concepts to conduct a debate about the Jewish, secular, Zionist person. It does not hesitate to express its conclusions, even if that involves a lack of confidence in the human potential, especially in the Jewish human potential, and also in secular-Zionist moves. The Agnon School entails staying within the boundaries of methodical doubt. It assumes that early Judaism exists and is

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This paper presents the outlines of a charged and complex discussion. After defining in detail the notion of the "school," the relations between the two artists will be presented in brief. Then their works will be presented, their literary positions and what they symbolize in Israeli Hebrew literature in the 1960s, the first generation of the State of Israel.

## 2. THE AGNON-BRENNER RELATIONSHIP

Throughout his life, Agnon had a deep friendship with Brenner; Brenner's name and memory were dear to him. Agnon claimed that their friendship began already with their first meeting in Lemberg, on his way to Israel, when Schoffman brought him to Brenner.<sup>1</sup> Yitzhak Bakon, who has researched both Brenner and the young Agnon, contends that, in fact, at the start of his literary career Agnon intended to copy Brenner's literary style.<sup>2</sup> He incorporated the leading figure of a storyteller-confessor into his stories, and their prefaces, which present the opening words of the storyteller-confessor.<sup>3</sup> But this brief phase in Agnon's literary career ended when Agnon decided to blend the old and the new in his work, to construct the work using the language and the concepts of the old, religious world together with the psychology of the new, secular world. Agnon primarily incorporates a different type of narrating figure, one that is hidden, non-confessing, and buried deep in his particular linguistic style. This chapter in Agnon's career ends, according to Bakon, when Agnon decides to do away with the persona of the writer-critic—the writer as public figure who writes essays in which he expresses his views and passes judgments on current events.

<sup>1</sup> S. Y. Agnon, *ברנר בחייו ובמותו* (Brenner in his life and in his death), first published in *מולד* (*Molad*) 19, no. 156 (1961): 271–290.

<sup>2</sup> This was even before Agnon wrote *עגונות* (*Agunot*; Abandoned wives), when he was still in Tczaczkes.

<sup>3</sup> In Bakon's book *עגנון הצעיר* (*The young Agnon*), see the chapter "Traces of Brenner on Agnon's New Path;" see also pp. 100–128. *עקבותיו של ברנר בדרכו החדשה של עגנון, הקתדרה לאדיש באוניברסיטת בן-גוריון, באר-שבע, תש"כ*.

Yitzhak Bakon rightly contends that from *The Death Dance* (*Meholat ha-mavet*)—in Yiddish and Hebrew—through *The Writer's Legend* (*Agadat ha-sofer*)—in Yiddish and Hebrew—and *Abandoned Wives* (*Agunot*)—in Hebrew—Agnon gradually chooses a new prose, first in Yiddish and then in Hebrew, and forms the basis for his new school. To put it differently, the persona of the writer differentiates Agnon from Brenner. Agnon builds upon this, which apparently is not the result of a spontaneous breakthrough but of consideration and thought, and it is this which partly distinguishes between him and Brenner as well as other writers of his generation. Brenner violates the formulas of Mendele and of Berdichevski primarily in one realm, by creating a confessional-moral narrator who is frank and rough. Agnon opposes this in many ways: he creates a “Jewish style” which blends the old and the new and condones continuity and not revolution, and he creates a wise, multi-dimensional prose that draws on Jewish sources.

Brenner and Agnon were cognizant of the profound differences between them, notwithstanding their mutual appreciation and the special relationship that the younger and the then less-known Agnon had with Brenner. Brenner, in the second decade of the twentieth century, was a central figure in Hebrew literature and in the settlement of Israel. Their few remarks can testify to this. For example, in one of Agnon's rare comments, he describes Brenner, the creator:

ראיתי שאני עומד לפני חדרו של ברנר ואירע שאותו יום שכח ולא נעל את הדלת.... מצאתיו עומד לפני עמודו... וכשהסב את פניו ועטו היה בידו היה כליסטים מזויין.... פעם אחת אמר לי, אילו היינו מסתכלים בשעת עבודתנו במראה היינו רואים פנים של רוצח.

I saw that I was standing in front of Brenner's room, and it happened that on that day he forgot to lock the door.... I found him standing in front of his stand...and when he turned his face, with his pen in his hand, he looked like an armed bandit.... Another time he told me that if we were to look in the mirror while we were working we would see the face of a murderer.<sup>4</sup>

From his description of Brenner, Agnon appears to accept Brenner as the latter would have wanted to be seen as a creator: direct, open, and “genuine” to the point of being “dangerous.” On the other hand, one needs to be impressed by Brenner's deep understanding as a literary philosopher. When examining his comments on *בארה של מרים* (*Be'era shel Miriam*; Miriam's

<sup>4</sup> H. Be'er, *גם אהבתם גם שנאתם* (*Gam 'ahavatam gam sin'atam*; Their love and their hate) (Tel Aviv; Am Oved, 1992), p. 119.

Well), one sees that he understood from the very beginning of Agnon's work both the importance and the uniqueness of that work:

אינו בא לספר לנו את האמת על חיינו—את האמת המציאותית אנחנו יודעים זה כבר—את זה סיפרו לנו כבר הרייזן [ים שלנו], נומברג, ובקינצור נמרץ [גמור] אבל בעמקות [נוראה] גרשון שופמן. הוא בא לספר לנו על עצמנו, על נפשו.  
ש"י עגנון הוא אדם שיש לו נפש משלו. נפש זו אינה דומה לזו של הראובנים והשמעונים. ולפיכך הוא [מענין] מלא ענין כל כך, קרוב כל כך. הנפש הזו רכה היא עדינה היא, [רגשנית] דקה היא—ובמובן החיצוני—שונה היא כלה מן הבאר העברי שבמדינת פולין אבל אין [היא] עגנון זורק אבן בבאר הזה, כפייארברג וחבריו, ואין הוא שר לו זמירות [סנטימנטליות] בכוונה, כאש וחבריו. אין הוא זורק אבן—מפני שאין דרכו בכך, אין לו צורך בזה, אינו אוהב את המלחמה, אלא במובן זה ישר שלם הוא ורוצה הוא בשלום ושלוה... ואין הוא שר מאידך גיסא זמירות [סנטימנטליות] בכוונה—מפני שהוא נאמן לב יותר מדאי... גם הראליגיויות שבו אינה ראותנית אלא רגשנית....  
חמדת, גיבור הפואימה, נמשך מעיר מולדתו ל"ארץ הצבי", לא לפלישתינא, לא לארץ ישראל אפילו, אלא דוקא לארץ הצבי. הוא בא ליפו וכל הפרובלימה של תחית עם ישראל בארץ ישראל, אפשרותה ולא אפשרותה, כאילו אינו נוגעת בו אף במשהו....  
ולוא דמסתפינא, הייתי אומר שבוזה הוא דומה במדה ידוע לברדיצ'בסקי, שלמרות השיגו את כל עניות הקולטורה שלנו... הרי כל מהותו, כל ראשו נעוץ בקברות אבותיו... אצל ברדיצ'בסקי הניגוד הזה הוא אחד הקרעים של נשמתו; אצל עגנון, כאמור, אין הצד הלאומי של אי שביעות רצון ניכר כלל—ולפיכך נשאר רק הצד השני.<sup>5</sup>

He does not come to tell us the truth about our lives—the real truth we already know—that the Reizens and the Nombergs and, briefly but terribly profoundly, the Gershon Schofmans [contemporary writers] already told us. He comes to tell us about ourselves, about his soul.

Shai Agnon is a man who has a soul of his own. This soul is unlike that of the Toms and the Harrys. That is why it is so full of interest, so very close. This soul is soft and delicate and thin, and in an external sense, it drinks from the Hebrew well in the State of Poland. But Agnon does not throw a rock into that well, as Feuerberg and his colleagues do, and he does not sing sentimental songs on purpose, as Ash and his colleagues do. He does not throw a rock—because that is not his way, he has no need to do so, he does not like war. But in this sense he is honest and complete and he wants peace and tranquility...and, on the other hand, he does not sing sentimental songs on purpose because he is too loyal...and also because his religiousness is not exhibitionist but emotional....

<sup>5</sup> From Brenner's unpublished notes on Agnon's *Miriam's Well*, preserved in his archives at the Lavon Institute. Written in the summer of 1909, signed by his pseudonym H. B. Bezalel.

Hemdat, the hero of the poem, is drawn from the city of his birth to the "Land of the Deer" [one of the biblical names for the Land of Israel], not to Palestine, not even to the Land of Israel, but precisely to the Land of the Deer. He comes to Jaffa, and the whole problem of the revival of the people of Israel in the Land of Israel, its possibility and impossibility, apparently does not affect him even slightly....

And if it were not for our fear of being disillusioned, I would have said that in this regard he is quite similar to Berdichevski, who despite capturing all the poverty of our culture...his whole essence and his mindset stem from the graves of his fathers....In Berdichevski, this contrast is one of the tears in his soul; in Agnon, the dissatisfied nationalistic side is not apparent at all—and that is why only this side remains.

Brenner's stories describe the difference of the Jew, often unflatteringly. Brenner's stories reflect the desire that Hebrew literature resemble the modern norms of European literature. Agnon's stories reflect the necessity of its difference, of its Jewish uniqueness. This notwithstanding Agnon's great attraction to the Western twentieth-century figure, which was described very well, too. Agnon's stories describe the Jew as different by dint of his existence as well as his choice. Agnon's stories trace the connection of the twentieth-century Jew to the source of Judaism.

The other two writers mentioned above, Berdichevsky and Genesin, also greatly influence the new Hebrew literature, but they can be considered within the framework of the Brenner and Agnon Schools outlined here. Berdichevsky's work is written in the spirit of the Agnon School and Genesin's work in the spirit of the Brenner School.

### 3. THE BRENNER SCHOOL

On the face of things, Brenner's fundamental stance is that of the primary position that has existed in Western culture since the Renaissance and, even more so since the nineteenth century when this position became one of the marks of modernism: modern man defines himself even by doubting his values. That is to say, criticism is a necessary process in social development. Every human being, every individual, is alone to a certain degree. This loneliness is the basis for the individual's moral responsibility, for his need to be free, to experiment, to examine, to cast doubt. As this is a necessary process, it is best to accept it positively and to consider it as a positive and constructive process. One must examine the ideals and norms, since not everything that a cultural prophet presents is absolute truth. Brenner sees himself and those akin to him—the Jewish intellectuals of his time who did not reject Judaism



and to a large extent, the Jewish proletarians who did not have the opportunity to consciously choose between different styles of life—as living in a transitional period.

During this transitional period, Brenner reaches a juncture between traditional Judaism and Zionism. Traditional Judaism is subjected to an exacting criticism and its conclusions are somewhat difficult. But the Zionist ethos also deserves examination. The Labor movement accepts this norm of “Socialist Zionism through examination” and turns Brenner into its hero, its ethical-ideal hero, its ideological hero, its literary hero, but also the suffering and sober hero who cannot consent to things with his eyes shut. Because of this, because of the deep connection between the Labor movement and the Zionist enterprise, between the Labor movement and the establishment of the State of Israel, Brenner became the cultural hero of the new Hebrew literature, a supernatural figure of the ethos of Hebrew literature and later, of Israeli literature.

I contend that this is not Brenner’s world-view. His ethos is not one of scrupulous and frank self-examination; many aspects can be discerned in his writing that contradict one another, and which were seemingly written in a state of severe distress. These were not meant to present a clear picture to the reader but rather a problematic picture based on doubt and skepticism. Brenner’s supporters would say that the doubt presented in his writing, in his belletristic fiction, his critical essays and his diaries, is secular-religious or pure confession. His detractors will say that it is not doubt but rather self-hatred, or at least, confusion. Beyond this debate one fact needs to be seen: in the eyes of many of his readers and critics, his conclusions are not the central value in Brenner’s cultural work, but rather his working style that affirms a way of life. Of supreme value in his work is the mode of direct exposure. A life of self-integrity is presented as a value even before the conclusions that would stem from it. Literary critics<sup>6</sup> have already shown that this presumably factual and direct way of writing, “straight from the potter’s wheel of life,” is a creative technique like any other fictional technique. For Brenner, the presentation of the writer’s certificate of integrity above and beyond the conclusions reached by that writer of integrity, serves not to reinforce those conclusions but to detract somewhat from their importance.

In conclusion, Brenner belongs to the revolution that occurred in nineteenth century Western literature, which was fundamentally a revolution in the culture, the political systems, and in all the conceptual models. On the one

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Miron, Nurit Govrin, and Yitzhak Bakon.

hand, Brenner placed the “little man,” the anti-hero, and the marginal in center stage. This is one of the consequences of the industrial revolution. But along with the rights that he bequeathed to the underprivileged, and with the broadening of the conceptual frame regarding what is “human legitimacy,” this revolution gave rise to more than a few problematic results. For example, it led to decadence on the one hand and to the shattering of necessary social frameworks, on the other. In Brenner’s works, this form of social revolution takes the form of an attack on the Jew. A large part of Brenner’s ethos involves “original suffering” and “original guilt” as the cause of self-suffering, almost in the spirit of Catholic Christianity. In this ethos, the human figure (in Brenner’s case it is the figure of the Jew) has no chance from the outset, because the “debt” is greater than its ability to pay it back. Brenner’s Jew is ugly from the start, and Brenner’s Jew is guilty from the start. The Brenner School presents the need developing in early Israeli society to see itself as part of the revolution of the anti-hero, but it is worse, guiltier, and it suffers more. Jewish alienation is dissimilar to universal alienation because it is not “merely” alienation, but a state that stems from guilt.

In *שכול וכישלון* (*Shachol ve-kishalon*; Bereavement and failure), the novel that was the last of his Eretz-Israel writings, Brenner describes Jerusalem in harsh terms. In the opening of the description, one of the novel’s sentences won special fame:

חצרות-בתי-החולים שבירושלים, כפרוזדורי-בתי-הכוללים שבה, היו מלאות המונים תשושי כוח ודוויים, עניים ואביונים, חבושי פרצוף ונגררים אחרי מקל, נאנחים ונאנקים—לא פחות מאשר אז, לפני אלפיים שנה, כשנתגלה בה אותו האברך הגלילי, שבתומת הזיותיו וגאותו האוילית האמין, כי רפאות בידו למדוי המוכים והנגועים השעונים והעמלים....  
אך הרוח הירושלמי הקל, רוח-השפיים הצח, טישטש את כולם ועשה אותם לאפס, ללא-כלום, למחוסרי-תוכן....  
עיר! גם בה חיים ומתים בני-אדם, גם בה אוהבי ושונאים... ארובות-עשן של בתי-חרושת לא תרקנה עליה ענני פיה, אך תחת זה ינשאו בה כיפות-המסגדים, צלבי בתי-הכנסיות אשר לנוצרים ותימרות-האבק.

The yards of the hospitals in Jerusalem, like the corridors of its Orthodox seminaries, were filled with masses of the feeble and the sick, the poor and the impoverished, bandaged faces and people dragging themselves after their canes, sighing and groaning—not less than when, two-thousand years ago, that Galilean scholar was revealed there, who through his innocent hallucinations and his foolish pride believed that he had the power in his hand to heal the beaten and the stricken, the excited and the toiling...

But the light Jerusalem breeze, the fresh mountain breeze, blurred them all and turned them into naught, nothingness, insubstantial...

A city! Here, too, human beings live and die, here too they love and hate... the chimneys of factories would not empty their sooty clouds over it, yet instead, the domes of the mosques, the crosses of the Christian churches and the pillars of dust rise up.<sup>7</sup>

A city like any other. Its horizon is broken by tall buildings, but unlike in a proper socialist society, not by the chimneys of factories, but by the shadows of mosques and the crosses of churches. Jerusalem is a city of backwardness and retardation, for Brenner, for as much as he dislikes Jewish religious culture, he dislikes Islam and Moslems more. His attitude to Christianity is also ambivalent, and is dependent on the context.<sup>8</sup>

The thrust of Brenner's critical attitude is directed toward the Jewish world, in the name of "honesty." "Honesty" is one of the central values upon which the conscious world of Brenner's characters rests. The considerable criticism that exists in this literary world is comprised of the opposition it has not only to what is represented as the negative values of the old world, the Orthodox world, but also to not a small part of the new Jewish secular world was built in its wake. This critical opposition justifies itself by dint of the "honesty" from which it stems. Morality comes in the place of God. This magical formula, which can save the world in the name of some new, secular, and healthy morality, was perceived as the beauty of Brenner, as his primary power, as his major contribution to the culture of Eretz-Israel. This is an existential system, and Brenner appears to be offering an existential solution. The suffering individual can choose internal freedom by turning the terrible necessity of a harsh and bland reality into a moral choice. The value lies in doing. Not the "what" but the responsibility for the "what." This is what Hanoch meant in *Bereavement and Failure*: "אני אחרוש במה שיש" (I shall

<sup>7</sup> Y. H. Brenner, *כל כתביו* (Collected works of Y. H. Brenner) (Tel-Aviv: I. Dvir & Hakibutz Hameuhad, 1984), pp. 381, 383.

<sup>8</sup> The ending of *מי כאן ומי כאן* (*Mikan u-Mikan*; From here and from there) should be mentioned here, for example, which preceded *Bereavement and Failure* by approximately ten years. In this novel, the Christian symbols are the most significant:

שרירי קוצים היו להם לשניהם על בגדיהם הפרומים ובראשיהם. אז קראה להם אופת-הלחם לעזור לה, ויקמו שניהם ויעמדו. ואותו הסוד הגדול היה גם בקוציהם גם בעמידתם. על משמרתם עמדו. על משמרת-החיים עמדו הזקן והילד, נעטרי-הקוצים.

remnants of thistles were in their threadbare clothes and on their heads. Then the bread baker called them to help her and they both got up and stood. And the same great secret was in their thistles as well as in their posture. They stood guard. On guard for their lives stood the old man and the boy, adorned with thistles. (*Collected Works*, 1:374)

plow with what there is);<sup>9</sup> what there is in terms of the means to plow the field, and what there is in terms of the means of existence. I will live with what I have; I will not ask for metaphysical or for human help. For Brenner, Zionism entails revival and meaning only if its socialism and the hard work it necessitates comes from an existential source and turns into a personal choice of existing means. However, we know from Brenner's books, only a few can arrive at this solution. The leading character in *Bereavement and Failure* is not Hanoch but Yehezkel Hefetz, who, in spite of all that is positive in him, is too weak to realize Hanoch's solution. Other characters do not even reach the level of Yehezkel, and Hanoch himself dies while following the path that he deliberately chose.

This is the question: Is the existential solution of the personal mode of behavior, and not of sweeping collective values, right for everyone? Could the path of difficult, personal trial and of difficult, personal choice be the solution for a broad social movement, as Zionism tried to be? The answer is no. Indeed, the existentialism in Brenner's works was hardly comprehended by his Zionist reader, neither in his lifetime nor later.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, despite the fact that in his Eretz-Israel texts, Brenner was perhaps the first existentialist in Hebrew literature, there is no emphasis on his existentialism in the way Brenner was accepted and in the Brenner School. Existentialism occupies a major place in Brenner's work and a secondary place in the Brenner School.

Even when a later writer who belongs to the Brenner School responds positively to the existential aspect of Brenner's work and praises it, this still remains part of the private code of the literati. An example of such a response by a distant cousin in time to Brenner is that of Amos Oz. In light of the things said here, it is possible to understand why I consider Amos Oz, like most of the writers of Israel's first generation, a perpetuator, and a central one, of the Brenner School and not of the Agnon School. This is in spite of the fact that he writes extensively about Agnon and not Brenner.<sup>11</sup> From Oz's comments on Brenner, one can learn about his relation precisely to Brenner, one can understand the nature of Brenner's influence on him, and one can understand the nature of the character of Brenner that Oz presents to his readers. This is the same tortured, existential character that Brenner himself forges for his greatest anti-heroes, like Arie Lapidot in *From Here and*

<sup>9</sup> Y. H. Brenner, *שכול וכישלון* (*Shachol ve-kishalon*, Bereavement and failure) in *Collected Works* (1920), 1:389.

<sup>10</sup> Existentialism never existed as a "global movement" in Israel's culture.

<sup>11</sup> His writings on Agnon are part of the masking technique that exists in Oz's writing. This stems in part from the caution of the writer who "holds his cards very close to his chest," in part from his desire to be accepted, and in part from his worldview.

*From There*, and Yehezkel Hefetz in *Bereavement and Failure*. Oz characterizes the most fundamental in Brenner thus:

אני מצירי אניד איפוא בזהירות: "איך להיות קדוש בעולם שאין בו אלוהים?" [שאלתו המפורסמת של טארו ב'הדבר' של קאמי, א. ב.] לא. פחות מכך. הרבה פחות מכך. איך לא להתבהם בעולם שאין בו אלוהים. ואיך אפשר הישאר פחות או יותר שפוי בעולם שאין בו אלוהים. והאם אפשר למצוא איזה שקט פנימי, איזו "מרגעה." שאלות אלה עינו את גיבורי ברנר חרף כל המרכאות הכפולות והן עינו את ברנר עצמו כמו גידול ממאיד....

ברנר זה, הרצון, המעוות, החולני וכן-הלאה, דווקא הוא זכה ומצא סוף-סוף איזו מינהרה, איזו דלת-סתרים שבעדה אפשר להגיע 'בקפיצת-הדרך' מן המרתף המעופש ישר אל עליית-הגג...ממש כך: מן המרתף, בפסיחה על כל מדורי הבריאים והמדושנים, עד הגובה האפשרי. מן החולי—אל מתק-הסתרים. מן הייאוש—עד סף-המרגעה. מן השומאה—ועד קירבת הקודש. והלוואי עלינו מתק-הסתרים הזה.

For my part, I would ask cautiously: "How to be a saint in a world in which there is no God?" [Tareau's famous question in *The Plague* by Albert Camus—author] No, less than that, a lot less than that. How can one not bestialize in a world without a God. And how can one stay more or less sane in a world without a God. And can one find some inner quiet, some "tranquilizer." These questions tortured Brenner's heroes, and in spite of all the quotation marks, they tortured Brenner himself like some kind of malignant growth...

That Brenner, exhausted, grotesque, morbid and so on, it was precisely he who finally found a type of tunnel, a secret door of some kind through which one could leap from the moldy cellar straight to the attic.... Just like that: from the cellar, skipping over all the rooms of the healthy and the sated, to the highest possible height. From the sickly—to the sweet secret. From despair—to the brink of tranquility. From impurity—to the proximity of holiness. What we would not give to have that sweet secret.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. THE AGNON SCHOOL

In contrast to the Brenner School, the Agnon School subscribes to the uniqueness of the Jew as a solution to a problem or, adversely, as a characteristic of a problem one cannot ignore. One may also see Agnon's skepticism. And yet, Agnon treats Judaism as something that is chosen or something that imposes itself; Judaism is the basis, after all, of "A nation shall

<sup>12</sup> A. Oz, "פלא מנוחך תלוי מעל הראשים" (*Pele' meguhak taluy me'al ha-rashim*, Ridiculous wonder hanging above our heads) in *באור התכלה העזה* (*Be'or ha-thakelet he-'azah*, Under this blazing light) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), p. 40.

reside alone” (עַם לְבָדֵד יֵשֵׁב—Num 23:9). Judaism is a significant heritage that continues to exist even if one fights against it because the moment one negates it, one negates the heritage as well as the continued existence of that which is dependent upon safeguarding this heritage. Agnon’s criticism of Judaism is partial; he criticizes the phenomena without calling into question the fundamental structure.

Agnon began his literary career as Tchachkes from Butczacz and ended it in Jerusalem. He lived a long life and produced many and multi-varied texts. Agnon gives expression to the uniqueness of the Jew in all the levels of his works, both chronological and thematic, where the chronological frame necessitates thematic change. One needs to distinguish in Agnon’s work between a number of layers: the narrative that describes the Jewish village and the different angles of Jewish life therein; the narrative that describes the breakdown of the village and its abandonment; and the Eretz-Israel narrative.

One illustration of this multi-layered aspect in his larger works is the connection between *A Guest Spent the Night* (*Oreah natan lalun*) and *Yesterday and the Day Before* (*’etmol shilshom*), two great novels, both in their subjects and their scope. The disappearance of the Jewish village in the Diaspora, described in one novel, obligates the novelist to transfer the Jewish motifs to Eretz-Israel in the second novel. In the Eretz-Israel culture, the Agnon School cannot construct or plaster or paint everything anew, but it can take into account what was; it can relate to it and bring it into the renovated structure. The Agnon School is also skeptical, at least methodically so, toward the human way of life as it is, and this theme is present in almost all the layers of Agnon’s works, insofar as they are modern. As a modernist, Agnon gives his skepticism psychological expression. His characters have drives and latent urges, some of which they are not aware of, and when they are aware of them, they cannot fully control them. The characters face doubt and suffering, and dark obstacles. Nonetheless, the skepticism is methodical and partial. In Agnon’s fictive world, a kind of security prevails, which, despite its limitations, colors the entire system.

The Agnon School is as modern as the Brenner School. The difference between the two world-views, the two schools, lies in the way the modern conception of the world is realized. Both include skepticism as part of their modernism. They are distinguished by the degree of this skepticism, that is, by the scope of the skepticism vis-à-vis the other creative elements that work to produce the school’s world-view. In fact, the two canons can be compared on this basis. Agnon camouflages his skepticism while Brenner publicizes his;

moreover, Agnon curbs and limits his doubts in a much more determined way than Brenner.

### 5. NERVES AND THE WRITER'S LEGEND

Brenner published his first works in Israel, *Nerves* (*Azabim*) and *Between Water and Water* (*Bein maim lemaim*) in 1909, during the first year of his arrival in Israel. In the same year, Agnon published the first version of *The Writer's Legend* (*Agadat hasofer*)—part of *Luz*, which is part of *Miriam's Well*.<sup>13</sup> A comparison between these works, those of the young Agnon and those of the older and well-known Brenner (who was not yet thirty), serves to clarify the discussion of the two very different schools that were created.

Both narratives are connected to the biographies of the two writers. Brenner's story describes a process very similar to that which Brenner went through in 1909, the year in which he arrived in Israel from Western Europe. The narrator of the inner narrative is characterized by the narrator of the frame as:

איש כבן שלושים, בעל שכם הגון, נטוי, לא אצילי כלל, ופנים גסים, עבים,  
מחוטטים וזרועים בהרות לבנות.

a decent broad-shouldered man, stooped, not at all aristocratic, with a rough,  
thick, pockmarked face covered with whitish blotches.<sup>14</sup>

This description resembles Brenner himself, both as he saw himself and as others saw him. This narrator, like Brenner, went through the difficult process of immigrating to Israel. He too, like Brenner, has a hard time doing the physical labor required of the pioneer, and he too, like Brenner, finds relief in telling his story. This message is appropriate to the direct, confessional and autobiographical narrator that Brenner develops at the beginning of his career. Agnon's narrator, by contrast, is not characteristic in her first appearance in *The Writer's Legend*, but the narrative is related as the inner story of *Miriam's Well* by the poet Hemdat, who is the Eretz-Israel version of Agnon himself.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Published in *לזו—מרשימות עובר אורח על חורבות החיים* (*Luz—From the lists of a passerby about the ruins of life*) (Hapoel Hazair, 1908), p. 40. *Miriam's Well* is published in it, issues 14–18.

<sup>14</sup> Y. H. Brenner, *עצבים* (*Azabim*) in *Collected Works*, 1:283.

<sup>15</sup> J. Halevi-Zwick, *עגנון במעגלותיו* (*Agnon bema'aglotav*, Agnon in context) (Tel-Aviv: Papyrus, 1989), p. 11.

Brenner's narrative is an Eretz-Israel one, in which Brenner, as is his habit, gives expression to the current events in his life and in his friends' lives. In its confessional mode he expresses not only feelings but holds a comprehensive discussion about the reasons for immigrating to Israel. He depicts the immigrants of the second wave of immigration, and ponders the historical justification for immigrating and on its chances for success. Agnon's narrative is the foreign and small town; its language, characters, and subjects are all situated in the village and the Diaspora. Hemdat is situated outside of all that, but the story he tells, and the complete version of *The Writer's Legend*, which was published ten years later, is positioned entirely within the exilic village and its system. Moreover, Agnon prefers to put into the mouth of Hemdat, his alter ego and the Eretz-Israel writer, a story that is of an exilic nature. This story, certainly in the first version that is discussed here, has as its major motif *The Death Dance*—the motif "*Eros and Thanatos*."

There is no doubt that the two parallel subjects, complementary and different, of the two stories, one of Eretz-Israel and one of the Jewish world, point to the fundamental difference between the stories. The stories prove them to be the work of two central Hebrew writers around whom two different schools arose. These complementary and different subjects, the depiction of the images and the nature of the narrators in both, are a good introduction to the differences between the two schools that the writers under discussion produced in the Hebrew literature of the twentieth century.

*Nerves* is Brenner's first Eretz-Israel story. Already in the first story, Brenner includes all of the Eretz-Israel characteristics that he would draw upon in the next twelve years of his Eretz-Israel compositions. Reading the story, one concludes that there is no development in Brenner in his relation to the land, and that he brought all of his emotions with him when he arrived from London. They are not acquired here, and they do not even develop here. To illustrate this, three points will be indicated which characterize Brenner's work from *Nerves* to *Bereavement and Failure*, and that are already present in the first story.

1. Doubt in *Historic Justice* (*Tzedek Histori*) accompanies the immigration to Israel. On the one hand, there is a return to a biblical atmosphere but on the other, an acknowledgement of forefather Abraham's other "offspring" who are already present in the country and are rooted in it more firmly than the Jews appear to be. This comes in spite of the severe criticism Brenner has of the Arabs, the contempt he feels toward their culture, and the fear he has of their bad influence.
2. On the one hand, the story contains the understanding that the socialist experiment, as expressed in work per se and in social justice, constitute the only



possible remedy for the Jewish malaise. But on the other hand, the narrator repeatedly expresses doubt as to whether the Jews will alter their way of life in Israel, and whether the minority who came to set up cooperative settlements—the remedy that Brenner subscribes to—can determine the way of life of the immigrant majority who did not come to Israel for socialist reasons, but for entirely different reasons.

On the one hand, there are the romantic Zionist longings for the *Splendid Panorama* (*Yefe Nof*, one of the names for Jerusalem), as Brenner puts it in *Nerves*—the longings of the Jew for his homeland to the point of asking: ליהודים לא יתנו לבוא לארץ-יהודה? (And would they stop the Jews from coming to the land of Judea?). And on the other hand, there is the painful rhetorical question that borders on self-hatred: מה לנו ולארץ-יהודה בכל המובנים! (What do we have in common with the land of Judea in every sense!) which extends the previous question and completes it.<sup>16</sup>

*The Writer's Legend*, Agnon's early story, stands in contrast to this. It is the story of a Jew who speaks from the Jewish world of the Diaspora as if he were speaking from an existing world. This is not only the story of one who carries hope, but of the Jewish Klotz (Hassidic synagogue), of the European river, of the village and its customs, all of which are frozen in the framework of an eternal "legend," as indicated by the title Agnon gave to his story. This is not a world that is crumbling, certainly not on the outside, but an introverted world. If it has its difficulties, they stem from the inside and are expressed in the nature of its images and the way they work.

Brenner often introduces Israeli landscapes and climate, and his story is extroverted, that is, it takes place "outside"—in rambles, in trips by train, sailing on the deck of a boat, or taking a walking trip outside the settlement in Judea. Brenner tries to express himself very precisely when he is describing the unique Israeli climate or the unique Israeli landscape. His descriptions of the outdoors work together with his confessional and deliberately revelatory character. By contrast, Agnon's descriptions are limited. Most of them are descriptions of the indoors, of the writer Raphael's room, of the Klotz and the synagogue. His ambivalent style does not reveal, but rather tends to conceal, does not attempt to explain, analyze, or clarify, like Brenner's special narrator declares. Rather he insinuates, and conceals, emphasizing the secret on the one hand and the psychological complication on the other as reasons for the impossibility of adding, explaining, or externalizing.

<sup>16</sup> Y. H. Brenner, *Nerves*, 1:290.

Brenner's narrator, like the author himself, is an essayist who tells a story. The declarative part is no less important, than the analytical part of his comments. The personal confession is part of a historic analysis he conducts, in which he situates himself within a general, or national, historical phenomenon. Brenner's conclusions can provide a lesson to Israeli culture to this day. He is one of the first to turn to existentialism as a basis for his Zionist socialism, and he combines the two. His story tells of an immigrant, a refugee, who is not only "thrown" from one society to another but also thrown apathetically into the world. This man is afraid of not-being. He is one of the first men in the twentieth century who no longer believes in historical promises, and he looks for the possibility of self-realization in his world and sphere. He makes a personal choice of Zionism, as he is a Jew. Notwithstanding, as an existentialist, he does not offer his solution as an agenda or a general solution for an entire public, but as a personal solution for any individual who will face, as he did, a decisive moment and will be capable of choosing at that moment. In this story, everything is focused on human feeling and on the choice that stems from it. Everything is "nerves," and each choice is subjective. Nevertheless, since life is one big "in the meantime," (*beintayim*), the existential choice is the best in light of this tentativeness. Following is an example of the confessional-essayist style of the narrator as he is discussing this subject:

אהובתי בת האחת-עשרה, שהחזיקה כפות-ידיה הקפואות בשרווליה, הוציאה אותן משום-מה ושלחה לי מבט אחד... ושוב נדמה לי, בעצם הצרה הקיצונית, בעצם המצב של אין-מוצא, כי כדאי, כדאי לחיות, כי יש בשביל מה לחיות... רגע! [ההרגשה במקור, א. ב.] היה הרעיון הדמיוני ההוא, במעוף-עין בא וכהרף-עין חלף, אבל בן-תוכן היה אותו הרגע. בפני בקורת-השכל לא היה גם הוא יכול לעמוד, בפני קרח הכרת המציאות, כמו שהיא, והאפסות שלאחריה, כמו שהיא—לא כל שכן... ואולם כל מהותי צעקה באותו רגע: כן! כן! כן!

My eleven-year-old love, who held her frozen palms in her sleeves, took them out for some reason and sent me a glance... and again it seems to me, in the face of the extreme misfortune, in the face of the condition of the dead end, that it is worthwhile, worthwhile to live, because there is what to live for.... Momentarily (emphasis in the original) that imaginative idea came in a split second and passed just as fleetingly, but that instant did have substance. Even he could not withstand the mental criticism, the frigid reality check as it were, and the nothingness that comes after it.... But all of my being screamed at that moment: Yes! Yes! Yes!<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Y. H. Brenner, *Nerves*, 1:291.

Brenner's story is ostensibly optimistic, but like the quote above, it is anxious in its depiction of reality as an absolute void and of instantaneous human solutions. Amid these instantaneous human solutions, the Jewish religious solution is no solution at all and the modern, secular Zionist solution is cast in heavy doubt. The message of the story that was composed at the start of Brenner's own personal act of immigration is the act of doing itself. Notwithstanding, he casts this in doubt. The confessional and extroverted spirit in which the entire story is told, and in which his nature and that of his narrator is exposed, turns his conclusions into real and necessary ones. It is as if there is no pretence, no personal predilections, but a man of truth who presents the truth as if it were a public service.

In contrast, Agnon's story is clearly introverted. The narrator does not draw conclusions, include the reader in indecision, analyze, or openly judge. Agnon publishes the final version of *The Writer's Legend* ten years later, in 1919. Unpacking the story, one exposes the profound irony of the narrator, which is latent in the first version. Raphael and his wife Miriam (the name is borrowed from *Miriam's Well*) are childless because, in spite of their love, they do not have sexual relations. They do not have sexual relations since it is written on an eastern wall in their small home (East is the direction of Jerusalem), "The land and everything in it is for God" (לה' הארץ ומלואה). In the whole world, not to speak of in their home, there is no site devoid of holiness. Their lives have no dimensions, that is, no time or space. There is no room for personal expression or for intimacy. Agnon's criticism, which appears more pointed than Brenner's, is actually considerably less so. The two characters in the story—Raphael and Miriam—have forgotten the words of King Solomon, "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven" (לכל זמן וזמן לכל-הפועל תחת השמים) (Eccl 3:1). The reformation that is required of them is to walk the path of the golden mean and to moderate themselves. Their problem is personal and psychological. In the first version of the story, this takes on the romantic character of *The Death Dance*, which reflects Agnon's perpetual attraction to *Thanatos*, and in the final version, it takes the form of the way in which the two fulfill the biblical commandments. But this is not a critique of the essence of Judaism. The Jewish world that Brenner rejects is the basis for life in Agnon.

Agnon's story preserves the spirit of Diaspora Judaism within the reality of Eretz-Israel, and he does this for the Hebrew reader. For Agnon, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Hebrew reading public in Europe and the reading public in Israel are the two target audiences for his narratives. He does not point to the need for destruction, for deep change or

revolution. For Brenner, both change and revolution are needed, but it is doubtful if they will help. It is as if everything is lost at the outset. These are fundamental positions of the two schools. A revolution that is modern, contemporary, necessary, socialist, and existentialist, and that is built on the foundations of real doubt in human ability in general, and in the Jewish ability in particular—this sums up the Brenner School. The desire to preserve Jewish values—linguistic, conceptual, moral, and metaphysical—even if he is critical, and even if he adopts a psychological modernism—this comprises the Agnon School. Outwardly, Brenner's narrative offers to those who identify with him, to be contemporary and up-to-date in his modernism. Agnon's narrative offers to those who identify with him to be anachronistic, to at least recognize the Jewish concepts, if not to live in accordance with them, and to accept part of that world.

The Hebrew reader of Eretz-Israel and the later Israeli reader chose, if he chose at all, the Brenner School. Nevertheless, Agnon's linguistic and stylistic richness and his complexity, which also has a modern, psychologicistic side, has gained wide appreciation in Hebrew literature for its aesthetic value and not for its philosophical value. During the first half of the twentieth century, when Agnon was received, his school was an "empty school," an important symbol of cultural ornamentation but a source for epic writing only. During the 1960s, precisely when a new literary generation was born, the first generation of the State of Israel, the two schools were put to the test again.

## 6. THE WRITERS OF THE 1960s

Under the influence of the dominant culture of the Labor movement, which accompanied the development of Eretz-Israel prose, the Brenner School was the one that determined the state of the Hebrew literature of Eretz-Israel, and later, of Israel. This is the only Hebrew prose to be written in the world after the Holocaust and the annihilation of the Hebrew-writers and Hebrew-readers in Europe. This process has one interlude. "The *Palmakh* Generation" (*Palmakh*—volunteer military strike force in Mandatory Palestine, established in 1941, lasted until 1948) distances itself apparently from both the Brenner School and the Agnon School, and gives rise to the type of the native Israeli Sabra, deeply rooted and healthy. This is not the young European who runs away to Israel or who comes to Israel to search for a corrective to the damage done to him by the Jewish education received in his father's house in the village. This is the young person who, if he was not born in Israel, at least received most of his education there, and he already

belongs to the local agricultural, socialist culture, with its Mediterranean landscapes and climate, whose natural language is a living, everyday Hebrew. On the surface, this is a literary generation whose parent is the *Moshav Ovdim* (the collective settlement), in which Brenner saw the only chance for the Zionist remedy. But this is not a Brenner-like generation, since it does not know the Brenner-like rupture, the rupture of the immigrant, and it does not want to know it. The struggle with the Brenner School can be seen in the work of two major writers of the *Palmakh* Generation, Moshe Shamir and Aharon Meged, and in the development of their writing in the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

The *Palmakh* Generation exists as literary phenomenon until after the establishment of the State. During the first decade of the existence of the State of Israel, a deep rift developed in the movement, as the role of the intellectual literati was partially given over to the political establishment, as the everyday reality was seen to be problematic, and as individuals were left to their problems at the cost of a collective identity. During the 1960s, a time of literary revolution, young writers rebelled against this movement. Then, the Agnon School appears to return to the scene precisely among the group of the then young writers, who had created the literary revolution. This was a revolution within a revolution, since it occurred during a process in which prose writers rose up and took the place of the poets as the primary addressers of the Israeli public; prose became dominant once again over poetry. These young writers include A. B. Yehoshua, David Shahar, Yoram Kanyuk, Amos Oz, Itzhak Orpaz, and Amalya Kahana-Carmon.<sup>18</sup>

For these new writers, the Agnon style is aesthetic and not ideational, especially for the young A. B. Yehoshua, the most Agnonian figure of them all, according to the critics. No one will contend that this change in the prose of the first-generation writers constitutes a return to Jewish sources, or even a return to Agnon's sources, or a return to any of Agnon's religiosity, not in the religious version of Kurzweill or in any other version. The image of detachment, even that which characterizes Brenner too, can be found in their writing as well. Camouflaged, it took on new forms and a seemingly new identity. For example, A. B. Yehoshua's student from Jerusalem in *Facing the Forests* (*Mul ha-ye'arot*) is an archetypal figure of disengagement in the wake of the War of Independence. So is Michael, the son of Hannah Gonen in *My Michael* (*Michael sheli*) by Amos Oz, and so is Hannah Gonen herself.

<sup>18</sup> O. Bartana, *הפנטזיה בסיפורת דור המדינה* (*Hafantasyah besiporet dor hamedinah*, Fantasy in literature in the years from 1960) (Tel-Aviv: Papyrus & Hakibuz Hamewuhad), 1989.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the apparent acceptance of the Agnon School involved the acceptance of the style only; this conditioned the change in the status of the narrator in the narratives of the first-generation writers. There is a move from the narrator who gives the reader the mere outlines of the story to the sophisticated and multi-faceted narrator who camouflages himself in the intricate linguistic structure. There is no return to sources here, but a movement from confession to disguise.

Until today, the stylistic change in the prose of the 1960s constituted the most explicit acceptance of the Agnon School that occurred in Hebrew literature. For before Israeli prose—during the Eretz-Israel period of Hebrew prose, and certainly during the period before that, of the European Hebrew prose between the two World Wars—Agnon's works, with all due admiration, did not achieve the status of a school nor Agnon the status of a spiritual father. The writers of the first generation introduced a stylistic change vis-à-vis the work of the *Palmakh* (*Palmakh* Generation lasted at least until the 1960s). They turned their backs on the latter's exclusive realism and returned to a writing full of fantastical effects. Their writing is mostly allegorical or symbolic, and less frequently, metaphysical.

This is a kind of writing whose stylistic effects did not always announce a deep change in the worldview. This writing technique required cultural baggage that went beyond the Brenner School, beyond the fatigue of constant disengagement. In part, this baggage affected a closeness to Berdichevsky and Agnon, as two stylistic fathers. What is impressive about them is the virtuosity of the narrators in the stories of these two writers. However, the broken, disengaged young people of the Brenner School merely went through a cosmetic change by the first generation of writers. For the young people of the 1960s, Berdichevsky and Agnon were "merely" writers of fiction. Their work was not sacred; it consisted simply of cultural symbols which the reader could interpret variously and subjectively. The writing of the young people of the 1960s was intentionally allegorical and opaque. From the viewpoint of the beginning of the twenty-first century, all this constitutes much ado about nothing. The Agnon School still serves as aesthetic decoration, while the Brenner School continues to dominate.