

# THIRTY YEARS OF HEBREW LITERATURE UNDER INDEPENDENCE: 1948–1978<sup>1</sup>

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Political and cultural significances do not run on parallel lines. Great as the event of Jewish independence was after eighteen hundred and seventy-eight years of dependence, it was not reflected—immediately or subsequently—in Hebrew literature. The event was celebrated in ephemeral poetry by such non-ephemeral poets as S. Shalom and Nathan Alterman. Shalom enthused about the new Spring, the May of Independence, while Alterman, in grimmer mood, wrote about invasion in the morning—‘La-Boqer Pelishah’—immediately after the Declaration of Independence and before the actual Arab invasion. A few more enthusiastic effusions were produced and published in newspapers and magazines. But no work of significance, paralleling the event of significance, appeared between the era of David Ben-Curion and the liquidator of that era, Menahem Begin. 1948 did not represent a caesura in Hebrew letters; it meant continuation.

If this assumption is correct, then a brief characterization of the state of Hebrew letters at the beginning of statehood by the end of the forties is in order. The two great poets—the pre-eminent leaders of Hebrew letters in the days of pre-independence—were dead: Bialik, some of whose works had been translated by Canon Herbert Danby, the late Regius Professor at Oxford, passed away in 1934, Tschernichowsky died in 1943. The quartet of poets who reshaped Hebrew poetry in the twenties—Uri Zevi Gruenberg and Isaac Lamdan, Abraham Shlonsky and S. Shalom—created a minor volte-face by their efforts: Uri Zevi Gruenberg had published his first volume of verse *Emah Gedolah we-Yareah* (*The Great Terror and The Moon*) in

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1924. In format, in form and content, it was a conscious repudiation of preceding poetry. In format it was an album-like volume which had never been used before for a book of poetry; in form it dispensed with rhyme, the stanzaic mould of four or six verses, the brief line; in content it asserted the end of bucolicism; it vaunted isolationism from Gentiles; it exalted pioneerism as regeneration through just structures of living. Though it did not share the optimism of Walt Whitman, the glorifier of American pioneers, it owed the American poet a debt both in unorthodox prosody and exaltation of egocentrism which bordered on self-aggrandizing madness.

Lamdan's *Massadah*—an ominous reminder of despair and sacrifice and faint hope in its very title—was published in 1927 and became the symbol of the post-war generation of Israelis no less than T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which achieved the status of the authoritative poem of disenchantment in Europe and America after the First World War.

Shlonsky also shocked his generation into a new awareness of poetic art. For fifty years he was the Paganini of the Hebrew language: a virtuoso who evoked amazement with lingual excesses, sensational imagery which delighted in vulgarities, punning pyrotechnics, daring neologisms. Only in his cycle of poems 'To Father and Mother' did he achieve a genuine lyricism. For parental romanticism was a popular theme in the twenties: the young who immigrated to former Palestine without their parents were consumed with longing for *Abba-Imma*—dad and mom. That longing became almost a genre in Hebrew poetry of the twenties: Hameiri and Gruenberg, Lamdan and Shlonsky, were its godfathers. In origin it harked back to such sentimental Yiddish ballads as a *Brivele de Mamen* (*A Little Letter to Mom*) and, later, to the celebrated letters to the editor of the New York Yiddish daily *Forward* under the title *A Bintel Briv* (*A Sheaf of Letters*). Even Dov Sadan authored *A Bintel Briv Fun a Halutz Tzu Tate-Mame* (*A Sheaf of Letters from a Pioneer to Dad and Mom*). S. Shalom also wrote parentalistic poetry, though his chief contribution to Hebrew literature was a blend of mysticism and autobiography in verse. But in Shlonsky's work the poems *To Father and Mother* stand out in sharp contrast to his melancholic

sophistication in the dramatic poems *Devai* (*Disease*), which celebrate the demise of European civilization in juxtaposition to such disparate figures as Tubal Cain and Job and the Messiah. These represent the poet's inane indulgences in Baudelairean shocks which have been administered to the philistine and the bourgeois. In later poems Shlonsky ran amok in his parallelograms which amounted to parallelomania: such personalities as Maimonides, the medieval philosopher of the twelfth century, and Bakunin, the ancestral figure of revolutionary anarchism in the nineteenth century, Rabbi Shneour Zalman of Liady, the creator of a new approach to Hasidism, and Pushkin, the Russian poet, were juxtaposed with irresponsible abandon.

Of the poets who made their mark on the literary scene in the forties, fifties and sixties, Amichai and Alterman and Leah Goldberg, Alterman gained the greatest popularity with poems which first appeared in 1943 in the seventh column of *Davar*, the daily of the Israeli Labour Party. Hence their title *Ha-Tur ha-Shevi'i* (*The Seventh Column*) when they were collected in the first volume in 1948 and in the second volume in 1954. After the end of the Second World War some of the poems which were censored by the mandatory government were published clandestinely. And publication *sub rosa* served to increase the poet's popularity.

The poems of *The Seventh Column* were deeply rooted in daily events and succeeded, at times, in converting ephemera into aeterna. The most notable example, *Magash ha-Kesef* (*The Silver Salver*), was on everybody's lips in Israel. A clever paraphrase of the dictum by Weizmann—a state is not given to a people on a silver salver—it celebrates a young man and a young woman who combine the ruggedness of pioneers and the labours of defence in their stark way of life. They stand before the nation and say: we are the silver salver on which you were given the State of Israel. So popular was the poem that an anthology of Alterman's poetry which was published by the Ministry of Defence in 1974 was called *The Silver Salver*. The poet's favourite ploy, however, was the ironic rather than the grave comment on an event. And the resultant poem often approached the ballad form—especially when it was set to

music. As a song it also enhanced the poet's popularity.

The ballad, incidentally, is Alterman's best gift to Hebrew poetry. Almost a fifth of *'Ir ha-Yonah (The Oppressing City)* contains one ballad *Shir 'Asarah Aḥim (The Song of Ten Brothers)*, which is based on a popular ballad in Yiddish *Tsen Brider Zenen Mir Geven (Ten Brothers Were We)* and which also appeared in a special bibliophile edition in 1961. The simplicity of the Yiddish ballad is retained in Alterman's transformation. But a new locale—an inn—is provided for the fraternal vicissitudes, a new theme is evolved in the convivial din which acts as companion and generator of the tragicomedy of life.

Alterman's *Sefer ha-Tevah ha-Mezammeret (The Hurdy-Gurdy Book)* is a sort of a balladeer for a mixed audience of children and adults. A single example can perhaps illustrate the import and impact of these ballads. In the poem *Mass 'ot Binyamin mi-Tudela (Travels of Benjamin of Tudela)* the medieval traveller sets out from Spain for foreign lands and records the marvellous sights in a rush of breezy lines:

He saw the giants prowl and prance,  
The dwarfs of smallest stature.  
He saw uncouth barbarians dance  
A dance like tarantella.  
He saw their queen: a captive by  
The name of Miss Adela.  
Ah, what a brilliant traveller,  
Ah, what a brilliant traveller  
Was Benjamin of Tudela.

The art of the balladmonger also informs some of Alterman's plays: *Pundaḳ ha-Ruḥot (The Inn of the Winds)* and *Esther ha-Malkah (Queen Esther)*. It is no accident that the poet translated Scottish and English ballads. There is a genuine streak of the bard in Alterman, a reincarnation of a wandering troubadour who delights to entertain and solicits a genuine rapport with the audience.

But he is also a poet of an embattled generation, an arbiter of its aspirations and an assessor of its achievements. Was he a poet of surfaces or a poet of depths? The dynamics of his poetic antinomies consisted in simultaneous mystification and demystification of reality. The ultimate irony of his oeuvre, its best

effects, have been achieved in the earliest rather than in the later poems, in *Kokabim ba-Huẓ* and in *Simḥat 'Aniyyim* (*Stars Without and Joy of the Poor*) rather than in *The Seventh Column* or *The Oppressing City*.

Before Alterman made the transition from a personal to a transpersonal stance, he wrote moving poetry on the mystery of the female body, on young love, on the mad rush of days and nights. Even in his nationalist poetry the young Alterman utilized daring metaphor and paid his modernist debt to pleasing obscurity.

Who can look at you, my country, with obtuse  
Eyes? You bare like lightning names and things.  
The all-blue giant, caught in your sweet noose,  
Languishes. The Golden Scalpel stings.

The clarity of Israel shines through these lines in spite of their excessive burden of imagery. Originality atones for the congestion of metaphors: the all-blue giant, the sky, and the golden scalpel, the sun, point to the ferocity of the tropical day which threatens all creation with extinction.

In his posthumous *Sefer ha-Ḥidot* (*Book of Riddles*) Alterman encapsulated his *Weltanschauung* in two observations: 'Man is a riddle that solves riddles' and 'the world is a riddle but the riddle is a world'. The mystery is the thing; the solution matters less. In his entire poetic output Alterman shows a delight in verbal acrobatics and he often bends them to nationalist exigencies. This procedure generates the tension in his verse: there is the conviction of the eternal mystery of existence and the compulsion to cope with the harsh realities of his people's fate. In sum, Alterman is an adroit manipulator of the unmanipulatable—the mechanism of perception, the associative leap, the intricacies of such farraginous processes as thinking, feeling and imagining.

None of the poets in the last three decades—not even Alterman or Amichai or Leah Goldberg—equalled Bialik or Tschernichowsky in achievement and authority. The shadow they cast after their deaths, the light they generated while they were alive, shaped the unique chiaroscuro for almost a century. Hence it is in prose that one must seek the greater originality in Hebrew

literature under independence. That transition from the predominance of poetry to the reign of prose is a fascinating phenomenon in our contemporaneous generation. For poetry was the ancestral core of Hebrew literature. Its grandest achievement—the Bible—is an overwhelmingly poetic document, though its poetry differs in form and content from Western poetry. It is not structured in symmetries of feet but rather in symmetries of syntactic units, the so-called *parallelismus membrorum*, a term invented more than two hundred years ago at Oxford by Robert Lowth (1710–87), Professor of Poetry, in his *Praelectiones Academicae de sacra poesi Hebraeorum*. These syntactic units convey a unique intensity—an intensity which is, perhaps, beyond the capabilities of prose. The great masterpiece of Hebrew prose, the Mishnah, was achieved by the end of the second century AD. It is available to English readers in the excellent translation by Herbert Danby.

The transition from poetry to prose in the last three or four decades was no less dramatic. Though they co-existed, no one doubted that the prose of Agnon and Hazaz was greater in aim and achievement than the poetry of their contemporaries. Their predecessors in prose are puny in comparison. Neither an Ever Hadani, who discovered the Kibbutz as a theme, nor Asher Barash, who delighted his readers with his historical tales, neither Kabak who dared to write a Hebrew novel—the first Hebrew novel about Jesus—nor Avigdor Hameiri, who achieved ephemeral fame with the novel on the First World War, with *Ha-Shigaon ha-Gadol* (*The Great Madness*), can measure up to their achievement. One has to go back to the last years of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century to tap the work of Brenner and Berkowitz and Berdyczewski as serious prose—though not on the level of an Agnon or Hazaz. Brenner with his only theme, the devastating denunciation of his people, Berkowitz with the elegance of his style in his own fictive oeuvre and in the translations of the work of Shalom Aleyhem, his father-in-law, and Berdyczewski with his Nietzschean thirst for transvaluation of values were genuine innovators. But in the work of Agnon and Hazaz a new stance came to the fore in Hebrew letters.

Though Agnon began publishing before the First World War and Hazaz at the end of the First World War, they made their initial reputations in the twenties and continued to produce solid work till their deaths in the seventies. Much has been written, little has been said about them. And the commentaries often obfuscate their texts. Is Agnon a minor writer with a major style? Is he the Hebrew Kafka? Is he the gentle chronicler of traditional and transitional Jewry? It is certain, in spite of the mountain of overpraise heaped on his work, that Agnon does not belong with the great immortals of world literature. Throughout his writing career he remained essentially a *laudator temporis acti*, a celebrant of the past. This is neither a detriment nor a literary vice except in the eyes of critics whose vision of the present is synonymous with the latest headline. But critics who view the present as a repository and refinement of the past will accept Agnon's vision of the past as continuous contemporaneity and adumbrative future.

Connoisseurs of the novelist will not fail to indicate that not one but several novels of the sole Hebrew Nobel Prize winner confront the twentieth century. One such is *Sippur Pashut* (*Simple Tale*), which is neither simple nor a tale but the portrait-in-prose of a man by the name of Hershel who loves Bluma but marries Mina. Erotic complications unsettle his mind for some time and finally reconcile him to his unloved wife. But the protagonist is neither Stephen Hero, who fights his way out of religious traditionalism to artistic integrity, nor Kafkaesque K in *Der Prozess*, injured by his environment, but a type not uncommon in the naturalist novel *à la* Zola or in the realistic novel *à la* Gorky.

*Oreah Natah la-Lun* (*A Guest for the Night*) is another paradigm of contemporaneity in Agnon's oeuvre. The protagonist of the novel returns, after many years of absence, to a town ruined by war, spiritually devastated and sustained by a single hope: emigration to *Erez Yisrael*. It is not without interest that Agnon also visited his native town Buczacz in Eastern Galicia between the two world wars—perhaps in search of his youth—and settled in Jerusalem where redemptive hope for the individual and the nation springs eternal. In a third confrontation with the present,

in *Temol Shilshom* (*Yesterday, A Day Before Yesterday*), Agnon tells the tale of two cities, Jaffa and Jerusalem, in the decade preceding the First World War. Isaac Kummer, the sorrowful protagonist—as the name indicates—abandons Jaffa, the symbol of stagnant rather than live tradition, settles in Jerusalem and marries an orthodox girl. His flirtations with modernity anchored him, at last, in self-perpetuating, self-renewing traditionalism. In a fourth and fifth confrontation with the contemporary scene, the posthumous novels *Shirah* and *Ba-Hanuto Shel Mar Lublin* (*Shirah* and *In Mr Lublin's Store*), Agnon again resumed his portrayals of the present through the eyes of simple folk and academic dignitaries respectively. The fascination with the groves of Academe is an Agnonic theme of long duration. In *Shevuat Emunim* (*Bethrothed*) the novelist presented a scientist before the First World War in a renascent Jewish milieu in Turkish Palestine, in 'Edo and Ename' he depicted an archaeologist in Israel after the Second World War. Some unfulfilled craving for the spiritual solidity of an academician—as Agnon imagined it—overwhelms the stories and novels of the queer intellectuals who are safely ensconced in their world of research.

It was mainly because of the 'contemporary' stories and novels that Agnon's name became linked with the name of Kafka. Yet he declared to me personally—and the declaration was reiterated in *Maariv* (9 March 1973)—that he was totally ignorant of Kafka.

The problem of Kafka's influence on Agnon is one of many myths which bedevil the history of modern Hebrew literature. But modern critics—Edmund Wilson, the American, whose knowledge of Hebrew was rather spotty, the Israelis Baruch Kurzweil and Hillel Barzel—have searched and have found allegedly parallel perceptions and appreciations of contemporary malaise in the works of Agnon and Kafka, two novelists who are worlds apart. Agnon's characters live in a landscape of love and compassion; the vigilance of the Almighty envelops them with protective care. Kafka's characters are beset by uncertainty, accused but unaware of their guilt, judged but ignorant of the intent and import of justice. Agnon's is a deeply ethical landscape; Kafka's is an amoral landscape. Finally, Agnon's characters live by tradition—either rejecting or accept-



ing its terms; Kafka's characters are completely deracinated. And it is exactly in confrontation of tradition with non-tradition that Agnon's work assumes more than transitory importance. In a world of shaken values he presents the solid principles of moral regeneration. These principles are not preached and not presented by the objective elucidation of the modern social scientist or sociobiologist; they are lived by men and women and raised to the level of esthetic experience by Agnon's art, especially in *Haknasat Kallah (The Bridal Canopy)*, which may be regarded as the centre and core of Agnon's work. The name of the chief character, Reb Yudel, points to the symbolic totality of Israel; his quixoticism—unlike that of the romantic lover of medieval knighthood—is not crammed with heroic exploits and erotic adventures but with desire to emulate Jewish sages in adventures of learning and piety. The sources of his strength are neither the *Roman de la Rose* nor *Tristan and Iseut* but the Bible and the Talmud, the homilies and the codes. Though assisted by a Sancho Panza of his own—Note the coachman—he is not in quest of a beautiful Dulcinea del Toboso but in search of a very realistic goal: to find husbands for his three nubile daughters. And his horses bear no resemblance to Rosinante; they are Jewish horses burdened with Jewish woes; they reminisce in sorrow; they quote the apocryphal, post-Biblical Ecclesiasticus to bolster their convictions; and their names Drawme and Willrun are lifted from the Song of Songs. *Don Quixote* is the epic of renaissance Spain; *The Bridal Canopy* is the epic of hasidic Jewry.

The cast of characters in *The Bridal Canopy* is inexhaustible. The villages and towns on the list of Yudel's peregrinations add character upon character. As village follows village, as story follows story in that novel, which is a tangle of tales in a coherent text, new personages appear and disappear with kaleidoscopic variety. But context intrudes into text with unifying vigour. Thus, the independent stories have an independent life of their own and a dependent life on the whole. Within the larger context they reinforce the moral tone which reverberates throughout the novel. For the Hasidim who, with Yudel, are the protagonists of the story, life is religious: dedication to Torah—the sum total

of Jewish law and lore—and expectation of the redeemer and liquidator of the Exile and its attendant litany of woes.

As far back as 1920 Agnon published a story titled *The Bridal Canopy*. The theme and structure of the future novel dominated his imagination—in all probability—for two decades. Even a casual glimpse at his manuscripts in the Agnon Archive, which contains twenty thousand letters, partially published in 1976 in the posthumous volume *Me-'Azmi El 'Azmi (From Me to Myself)*, and almost one thousand manuscripts, proves with the impact of immediacy that the author spared neither labour nor effort to produce the desired effect in a word, a phrase or a sentence. The changes made from the manuscript version to the printed versions of *The Bridal Canopy* could furnish several candidates for PhDs with a wealth of textual material.

The idiom of hasidic life, reflected in *The Bridal Canopy*, is so removed from any Western idiom that in its intransigence the novel may well defy the translator's art. Good Hebraists savour an unprecedented sweetness in Agnon's modes of expression which feed on the continuum of Hebrew letters for 3,500 years—a longer span of life than any Western literature. With the possible exception of Hazaz, Agnon is the only modern Hebrew writer who has full use of the Hebrew language from its biblical beginnings through its rabbinic, philosophic, haskalic, mystic and hasidic continuations to its modern efflorescence. Yet his style is not eclectic; it is an artistic blend of lingual strata at an unusual pitch of intensity. Any paragraph in any story or novel by Agnon teems with half-phrases and quarter-phrases from the Bible, the Talmud, the medieval tract, the hasidic tale, the didactic homily, the philosophic discourse. And these language-pebbles form a mosaic of unusual splendour and unusual brilliance. In an age which has enriched but also impoverished the Hebrew language through indiscriminate vulgarization, Agnon stands out as the self-appointed guardian of its purity, its wealth, its Semitism. He has no equal in that domain. In the past two hundred years two types of style dominated Hebrew letters—the pseudo-biblical and the pseudo-rabbinic. The pseudo-biblical was the invention of the period of enlightenment, the pseudo-rabbinic was developed by Mendele Moker Sefarim. Agnon forged a new

style for Hebrew prose out of all the resources of the Hebrew language. That was one of his major contributions to Hebrew literature. But a negative stricture must be interposed: the heavy burden of allusionism in Agnon's work is mannered and monotonous. It is a repository of erudition rather than elevating élan.

Agnon can also be charged with a simplistic view of the world. His characters lack depth—either as individuals or as participant actors in a social milieu—because they move in a static environment. Even when, as in his 'contemporary' novels or stories, they are placed in a movable area of change, they fail to play the dynamic role in that change.

Within these two limitations, the limitation of psychological and lingual depth, Agnon has achieved an almost perfect vision of Jewry in Eastern Europe, especially in nineteenth century East Galicia, which was largely hasidic at the time of his birth. Our contemporaries tend to view with favour the movement of Hasidism, which was the last major efflorescence of Jewish faith and piety in Eastern Europe. But that was not always the case. When the movement originated some 250 years ago, it met with opposition by the orthodox, who regarded it as a heretical excrescence on the body of Judaism, and by the literati of the enlightenment, who regarded it as an obscurantist group of mumbo-jumbo fanatics. Then an interesting change of attitude took place. As the movement declined at the end of the nineteenth century, historians like Simon Dubnow and Samuel Abba Horodetzky took a long and charitable look at Hasidism. Micah Joseph Berdyczewski rendered the tales of the Hasidim in elegant Hebrew, Martin Buber transposed them into elegant German. They paved the way for a new attitude to Hasidism. Then came the writers—Judah Leb Perez in Yiddish, Samuel Joseph Agnon in Hebrew—who rediscovered Hasidism with reverent piety and recreated in fictive art that bygone world of intense spirituality.

This volte-face in Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes to Hasidism was more than an act of romanticism on the part of writers and scholars: it filled a need for religious regeneration. The rationalist bias of the 'enlightened' blinded them to the virtues of Hasidism. A hundred years after their initial attempts at discrediting that

movement another climate of opinion prevailed in the West. The void, left by the erosion of religion and the so-called 'death of God', was filled by non-rational movements in theory and practice: intuitionism, mysticism, the refined techniques of anthropology, Jungian archetypes and the awesome angelology and demonology of men uncovered by psychoanalysis. The death of God was paralleled by a rebirth of God.

In the work of Hazaz, the younger contemporary of Agnon, younger by a decade, Hebrew literature reached its greatest achievement under independence. Both writers received a thorough Jewish education in their respective places of birth: Agnon in the quiet isolation of the peaceful Galician town of Buczacz before the First World War, Hazaz in the Ukrainian village of Sidorovichi, where he was privately tutored in biblical and rabbinic studies. As a young author he immortalized the quiet exaltations and despairs of isolation in his novel *Be-Yishuv Shel Ya'ar (Home in the Woods)*. In spite of its 427 pages, it is an unfinished novel, a stepchild in his oeuvre, an unacknowledged masterpiece both by the Hebrew reader and the author who did not deign to include it in the edition of his complete works. Like Tschernichowsky, who was admired by Hazaz and who discovered rural Jewry in Russia for Hebrew letters, Hazaz depicted Jewish life in the forests of pre-revolutionary Russia during the first decade of this century. And he caught the last glimmer of Jewry's setting sun in the Slav environment. With an incipient mastery of style and characterization he achieved a plethora of gentile and Jewish types in persuasive portraiture. The Jews, mainly members of one family, pale in the vigour of stark gentile strength. They are the strangers in the forest, bored and lonely and isolated from Jewish companionship. The magnificent vignettes of landscape underline the anticipated agonies of doom. For the forest itself is being uprooted physically and symbolically. The novel begins with a massive destruction of trees against the historical background of the Russo-Japanese War and the booming rhetoric of the revolution by the socialist tutor, who craves contact with Jews and gentiles and manages to remain the loneliest of protagonists. The end of the novel is a symbolic idyll: preparation for Shabuot, the holiday which

commemorates the gift of Torah to Jewry, the source of Jewish tradition.

The seminal experience of the youthful Hazaz was the Bolshevik revolution which made him anti-Communist for life. With three stories on the great event of the twentieth century he gained immediate fame. They were published in 1924 and 1925 and were fused eventually into a major novel *Daltot ḥoshet* which first appeared in 1956, was revised in 1968, and translated into English in 1975 under the incorrect title *Gates of Bronze* instead of the more fitting *Doors of Brass*. The three stories shocked and seduced readers and critics with their freshness and newness. The great event with its global implications, with its call for transvaluations of traditional values, forced acceptance or acquiescence or opposition—acceptance by the younger, acquiescence or impotent opposition by the older generation of Jews. It focused attention on an ageless Jewish theme and dream: redemption of mankind, justice for all, universal brotherhood. In the three stories some characters, generally the old and the mature, suffer in pathetic helplessness and inability to adapt to the cataclysmic change. But the young are either idealistic to the point of mild folly or ruthless to the point of thoughtless violence. They make speeches and they make love with the grim abandon of fanatic reformers; they deprecate the Jewish and the Russian bourgeois and they destroy tradition with unimaginable recklessness. This is how they hitch their thoughts to the star of redemption.

The three stories, unlike Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, breathed an immediacy of feeling: they were written in the midst of the upheaval. The novel *Doors of Brass* boasts a larger perspective but also a more distant point of vantage. In the three decades that elapsed between the three stories and their fusion into a novel the holocaust and the establishment of a Jewish State lent apocalyptic dimensions to Jewish history: doors of brass have closed upon the tradition-centred world of Jews. Thus, in a sense, the novel is an epitaph on the shtetl—the little town in Slav countries, the centre of a pulsating Jewish life. It was already moribund on the eve of the Russian revolution. And in a later story *Dorot ha-Rishonim* (*Former Generations*), Hazaz recollected

its past glories with nostalgic fervour:

I have a fondness for the small towns of the past . . . which have been vilified by generations of writers, undermined by poets and poetasters, mocked by fools and sages . . . till at last they came to naught and passed out of the world. . . . In mourning and in sorrow my thoughts cleave to them, to their pettiness and greatness . . . their longing and their despair . . . and their entire world which seems so calm and whole like a legend that has aged in its passage down the corridors of generations.

Hazaz is unjust to hosts of writers who have not vilified the shtetl. And even to the young revolutionaries who undermined the values which gave the shtetl its *raison d'être*. For the shtetl died a slow death even before political and technological change overwhelmed its existence. In its heyday it monopolized the work of the Hebrew novelists: Brenner and Berkowitz and Barash in Hebrew, Shalom Aleyhem, Shalom Ash and Judah Leb Perez in Yiddish.

The shtetl which, like the Greek *polis*, was the self-contained centre of life in communal, economical, social, religious and cultural aspects, lacked the political vigour and artistic strength of the Greek polis. But it teemed with a superabundance of religious learning. Hazaz composed the epitaph on the shtetl and the consequent loss of tradition. That loss of tradition which was not mended by the revolutionary thrust has also been the primary theme of the leading writers in our century, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust, who have composed the great texts of man's alienation in the modern world.

Hazaz reached full maturity when he became conscious of the fact that European Jewry was part of the totality of Jewry. As the first major Hebrew novelist who fashioned the first novel on Yemenite Jewry—in addition to stories and novels on European Jewry—he deserves a place of honour in the history of Hebrew letters. With the Orient and the Occident safely tucked away in his work, he is the first Hebrew writer who may be regarded as the chronicler of total Jewry. What Mendele Moker Sefarim did for Russian Jewry of the nineteenth century, Hazaz accomplished for the totality of Jewry. The former encompassed in his work the misery and, to a certain extent, the hope of Jewry

in Eastern Europe; the latter confronted the misery and the redemptive drive of total Jewry in his work.

In *Ha-Yoshevet be-Gannim (She Who Dwells in the Gardens)*, and in the four-volume novel *Yaish* and in a number of minor stories, he erected an enduring monument to Yemenite Jewry. In the first he depicted three generations of Yemenites in Jerusalem, in *Yaish* he recreated the life of an exotic community of Jews in Yemen. In both novels the protagonists carry the burden of poverty with a mixture of royal disdain and messianic hope.

An author who shows concern with the totality of Jewry in his work is forced to interrogate Jewish history in major confrontations. In the work of Hazaz the historical theme is the major theme. His story *Ha-Derashah (The Sermon)* is justly famous as a historiosophical text. The chief character Yudkah, a symbol of Jewry like Agnon's Reb Yudel, is, in contradistinction to Agnon's protagonist, an unlearned and inarticulate member of a cooperative village. Yet he articulates, in an unintentional sermon, disenchantment with Jewish history:

We have no history . . . What is its content? Evil edicts, defamations, persecutions and martyrdom . . . From the day we were exiled from our land we were a people without history . . . Exile, martyrdom, Messiah: These are three which are one.

Exile . . . Holy, beloved, intimate, close to the heart, closer than Jerusalem, more Jewish than Jerusalem, more rooted, more spiritual . . . Exile is our pyramid. The base—martyrdom, the apex—Messiah . . . Belief in the coming of the Messiah: this is the typical Jewish illusion . . . Commanded, Jews are commanded to stay in exile till redemption by Heaven . . . They do nothing . . . no effort . . . They sit and wait . . . They believe . . . and yet, in their heart of hearts . . . they don't believe . . . This is also a Jewish trait . . . to believe . . . and yet not to believe . . . Redemption is their [the Jews'] chief desire . . . but at the same time . . . they pledged themselves . . . not to be redeemed for ever and ever . . . Because they don't want to be redeemed . . . They don't ever want to return to the Land of their Fathers . . . This is not deceit . . . this is not duplicity . . . Zionism and Judaism are not the same . . . Zionism is not continuation . . . it is the opposite of what has been . . . it is . . . the seed of a different people . . . The Land of Israel—that is not Judaism.

This text is a major document of modern Hebrew literature, a plea for a new philosophy of Jewish history by a semi-literate worker. Three great paradoxes of Judaism are enunciated by

him with unmistakable clarity: Exile—rootlessness by definition, means rootedness for Jews; Belief in redemption from exile is, at the same time, hope for non-redemption—belief and non-belief, faith and its denial exist in co-habitive relationship; Zionism and Judaism are antithetic rather than complementary entities.

A futile exercise in sterile academicism seeks to determine whether the basic ideas enunciated by the protagonist of *The Sermon* are also the ideas of Hazaz. They are there, on the printed pages of the first volume in the collected works of the author. And they play havoc with the accepted notions of Jewish history.

As for Western Jews, in contradistinction to Russian Jewry, they are essentially the inheritors of the Reform Movement, so-called Liberal Judaism:

First, they wanted to be like gentiles everywhere; a century later they wanted to be like Jews everywhere. Börne, Heine, Marx—they left the Jewish community in order to become Germans. A century later their co-religionists left the German community in order to become Jews—not out of choice but out of necessity.

Similarly an American Jew argues in the novella *Ofeq Natuy* (*Expanded Horizon*) that the prophetic message, the mystery of redemption, is enshrined in exile which is the model for all peoples. The State of Israel changed the course of Jewish history, diminished the stature of Jewry. The return to the Land of Israel after two thousand years of trials and tribulations: that is the letdown. And the protagonist expresses that immense disappointment in a metaphor of brilliant originality: it is as if Jesus, after the triple drama of crucifixion, the descent from the cross and the resurrection, had gone back to carpentry in Nazareth. In his last novel, *Be-Ḳolar Eḥad* (*Chained Together*), Hazaz continues his discourse on Jewish history in fictive form. There Jewish history is viewed as *the* myth of mankind; the hero of the mythological universe in the past and in the present is the Jewish people engaged in a holy war against the powers of evil. Salvation is annihilation of the Satanic drives and forces by Jewry.

Jews and non-Jews: the eternal dichotomy disintegrates.



Europe is a spiritual child of Jewry, Philo the Alexandrian is the first European. So argues Moroshka in another story by Hazaz in *Harat 'Olam (Creation of the World)*. Both—Yudkah and Moroshka—symbolize the Janus-like attitude to Jewish history. One represents a negative caricature, the other, a positive caricature. Yudkah disdains exile, Moroshka extols it. Gentiles, in the latter's view, have requisitioned all spiritual goods of Jewry except one: exile. Sinai, Land of Israel, exile—this is Moroshka's parallel trinity to Yudkah's trinity of exile, martyrdom and Messiah. Moroshka's argument is carried to the height of hubris: without exile Jews would have been like gentiles, mere provincials who never left their original habitat and who never discovered new lands and new horizons. Logic dictates, then, that gentiles need exile in order to understand the world and man's place in the world, his ideals of 'love for fellow men and pity and truth and justice and honesty: a nation, endowed with holiness, goes into exile. . . . For the spirit of holiness brings about exile, and exile brings about a spirit of holiness.'

The new, inexorable paradox: in Israel Jews are like gentiles; they are Jews without Judaism, apostates, ignorant converts. And then, in a final gasp of provocative irony: 'a state . . . every nation has a state. But exile—only we had exile.'

For centuries Hebrew literature was a literature of alienation. *Golah*—exile—meant alienation. With the establishment of the State of Israel the concept of alienation assumed new significance for Jews. It was no longer a sociological designation for the plight of a people; it was a label for the isolation of the individual in a faceless, technological society. At that point it intersected with alienation, which was a forgotten phenomenon as far as modern peoples and literatures of the West were concerned. And at that point poets like the Hebrew poet Yehiel Mar and the English poet Auden and the American poet Allen Ginsberg meet in strange encounter: Mar in his frantic search for 'the other'—any other, any thou; Auden in his capitulation to technology; Ginsberg in his cult of the bizarre ego. All three abandon traditional poetics for new devices in form and format, in theme and content. Consciously or unconsciously they intimate and indicate that the driving force of our civilization, technology, is also the major

cause of our dehumanization, decline, alienation. In the words of Heinrich Böll at the Congress of PEN in Jerusalem in 1974, our century was characterized as 'a century of exiles'.

In medieval literatures man was regarded as a *homo viator*, a 'wayfarer in a strange world'. Two major texts in the Bible furnished the basis for two forms of alienation in the medieval world: Exodus 20: 3 and Psalms 39: 13: 'You shall have no other Gods before me' and 'For I am a stranger among you, a sojourner, as all my fathers were.' Since 'other Gods' in Exodus read 'deos alienos' and 'a sojourner' appears as 'peregrinus' in the Vulgate, alienation was regarded (1) as 'a failure to love God', and Satan as chief *alienus*; (2) as a pilgrimage on earth in the words of the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, an early tract on Christianity which characterized the lot of Christians in the following words: 'they dwell on earth, but they are citizens in heaven.' That characterization fits Jews as well, not only in medieval but also in modern times.

But a deep change occurred at the turn of the century. And Hazaz chronicled that change. The protagonists of his stories and novels erected, brick by brick, a new edifice of Jewish history. They are reformers rather than philosophers; they draw sustenance from the wellsprings of Jewish tradition and Jewish ethics. No writer in the last half-century has submitted diaspora and Israel, Israel and the world, to an assessment of such poetic depth as Hazaz. One has to go back to the second chapter of Yehudah Halevi's *Kuzari*—a work published in the twelfth century—to find words of similar resilience and relevance on the position of Jews in the world. A perceptive Hebrew critic, Abraham Kariv, has compared the work of Hazaz to Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*. There is a certain validity in the comparison. Both writers share a romantic exuberance in their respective styles as well as in their character delineation, both are driven by an ambition of totality. In his enormous series of novels Balzac endeavoured to encompass nineteenth-century France as a microcosm of humanity. In his oeuvre which is, quantitatively, of much more modest scope, Hazaz sought to present Jewry as a model of mankind. But the French and the Hebrew master of fiction part ways at an important *carrefour*: Hazaz aims, over and

above his art as teller of tales, at a historiosophy of Jewry. Balzac never shoots beyond his mark: in his novels the game of human existence is played by people who have no message except their being and performing and existential act.

The characters of Hazaz in his *Comédie Juive* are value-conscious and history-conscious, even when they act out their common tasks of daily living. And the inestimable contribution of that inspired writer to Hebrew literature—besides his immense enrichment of Hebrew prose—is a deeply felt and deeply imagined reorientation of contemporary Jewry. Between the two world wars and almost in three subsequent decades he is the most seminal figure in Hebrew literature. Even the important historical novel of a younger contemporary, Moshe Shamir—whose *Melek Basar wa-Dam* (*The King of Flesh and Blood*) owes the distinguished English version to the elegant pen of David Patterson—is a powerful reverberation of his semi-didactic stance: the confrontation of Judaism with the non-Jewish world. The artificers of the contemporary Hebrew novel—Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua and Amalia Kahana—Carmon went a step beyond Hazaz. They broke up the Ciceronian style, the orderly progression of words, and their harmonious symbiosis; they created the curt, febrile style, the asymmetry instead of the symmetry of idiom, the emotive emphasis instead of logic of syntax; they chose or were chosen by the direction of surrealism.

In the battle of surrealism and realism the latter is sure to gain the victory. André Breton and Guillaume Apollinaire, even Joyce and Pound, are no longer the seminal figures they were once thought to be. Or, to take an example from contemporary literature, Günter Grass published *Die Blechtrommel* in 1950 and became, at once, the central figure in German fiction. Whatever he produced after that novel was regarded as sensational revelation. The dwarfed drummer's wild waves of surrealistic gibberish in the safety of the institution for the insane titillated not only Germany but all the numerous civilized and not so civilized countries where the work was available in English and French, in Italian and Spanish and Portuguese, in Dutch and Danish, in Swedish and Norwegian and Finnish translation. It was a fictive documentary of twelve years of global madness—from the

ascent of Hitler in 1933 till his demise in 1945—and it engulfed the reading public with its caricaturist and purgative stance, with its marvellous resuscitation of the German language from impoverishment and superficialization. The fame of Grass—though not his stature—was maintained with his succeeding novels, *Katz und Maus* and *Hundejahre*. Then came the gradual decline of interest in Grass. Perhaps it was a failure of the creative impulse, perhaps (more likely) the impossibility to maintain and sustain madness in a world which moves, albeit with slow pace, towards sanity.

Surrealism is excess. Realism, in its endless varieties, is the stuff of life. Hazaz belongs with the great realists of our time, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust, even though he lacks the former's epic sweep and the latter's psychological depth. In Hebrew literature he is sure to figure as the most authoritative voice in the last half-century. With him the novel of a small renascent nation has again entered, potentially at least, the stage of world literature.

It has struggled for that re-entry since the renaissance. It has embraced emancipation in the eighteenth century through the mediacy of Mendelssohn and exposed itself to a protracted influence of German literature. It has clung to the revolutionary ideas and ideals in the Slav countries in the nineteenth and in the beginning of this century. It has sought new avenues of expression and listened attentively to English and American innovative trends in this century. In a narrow strip of land, it has opened its doors to the wide winds of change.

'A people lives by its geography,' said an Oxford scholar, Sir Maurice Bowra. And history, I should add. And the trouble with the Jews is that they have 'more than enough history, too little geography', as another Oxford scholar, Sir Isaiah Berlin, maintains with facetious levity. No restoration of balance can be achieved. The literature of independent Israel, as it enters its fourth decade, is certain to tilt the balance in favour of history. May that history be a reaffirmation of the prophetic promise and, beyond the prophetic promise, an indication of a new spiritual map for humanity.