
When a copy of this volume was handed to me for a review, I heard that Gershon Shaked had been hospitalized. At the time, I did not realize the seriousness of his condition and hoped he would still be able to read the review. But on December 28, 2006, Shaked departed from his loving family, numerous friends, colleagues, and former students. With his unexpected death still reverberating in my mind, I would like to open with a personal note.

I first met Shaked during the eighties when he came as a visiting professor to teach Modern Hebrew literature at UC Berkeley, where I was doing my graduate work. The seminar he taught there on H. N. Bialik and S. Y. Agnon was a rare learning experience that shaped in many ways my attitude towards literary studies in general and Modern Hebrew literature in particular. During seminar meetings, his passion for close, nuanced reading of the two authors was complemented by his admirable literary and historical erudition. I was particularly intrigued by Shaked’s attraction to the troubling, grotesque, and subversive elements of these two pillars of Modern Hebrew literature. In reading Bialik, Shaked emphasized the contempt of this great “poet laureate” — or “national poet” according to Eastern-European tradition — for his own people; and in reading Agnon, he unveiled a dark, almost nihilistic dimension lurking in the works of this bearer of Jewish heritage.

Shaked’s enlightening readings did not promote any political agenda. As a literary critic and historian he always emphasized the in-built tension between great literary works and prevailing social expectations, norms, and ideologies. History, of course, has its ironies: as the years passed by, Shaked, the unorthodox, subversive reader of Modern Hebrew literature, was perceived by newer schools of criticism as a representative of “hegemonic Zionist” criticism. This image stuck to him partly because of his autobiographical essay *Ein Makom Akher (There Is No Other Place)*, in which he articulated his Zionist beliefs, and partly because his voluminous histories demonstrated the intimate links between the Zionist movement and the flourishing of Modern Hebrew literature. The growing Jewish Settlement — the *Yishuv* — in the Land of Israel and, after World War I, its adopting Hebrew as a spoken language provided the conditions for a rich development of Modern Hebrew literature. True, to discuss Modern Hebrew literature in purely aesthetic terms is almost impossible: after all, from its inception, the very decision of an author to write in Hebrew had existential and ideological implications. But labeling Shaked as a spokesperson of Zionist
hegemony neglects the assumption, underlying his entire oeuvre, that great literature is autonomous. It also neglects Shaked’s inclination to sympathize with authors and literary characters outside the mainstream: newcomers, uprooted foreigners in their own homeland, who enact his own formative experience as a Viennese-born child who came to the Land of Israel at the age of ten.

*The New Tradition* brings together a selection of articles and essays from four decades of prolific writing, during which Shaked published more than thirty books of criticism. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the ways in which Modern Hebrew literature balances between traditional Jewish heritage and the growing secular Jewish culture. They outline the major tensions between the two key terms of the book’s title, “new” and “tradition”: between the secular, even profane aspects of modern life in Israel and the sacred, religious Jewish heritage. Shaked’s judicious observations about the intricate dynamic processes of secularization of the sacred and sanctification of the mundane in these two chapters could be used in any introductory course on Israeli culture based on the assumption that “alongside a culture based on faith and mitzvah observance, a Jewish culture has been created in Israel that is based on the tradition but is not a religious culture” (29). These two essays, written during the nineties, not only provide some valuable socio-cultural observations but also express the author’s worries in the face of the polarization and fragmentation of Israeli culture, the weakening of the shared symbols and beliefs that had for decades constituted Israeli identity.

The title of the first essay makes this concern explicit: “Shall We Find Sufficient Strength? On Behalf of Israeli Secularism.” Alongside the socio-cultural analysis, Shaked expresses his apprehensions about the future of modern, secular Israeli culture. While fully acknowledging the crisis that Israeli culture is going through, he insists on its vitality and its *raison d’être*: “Israeli secularism has a right to exist: it is not inferior and impoverished, nor is it guilty, and it does not need to return to orthodoxy or emigrate from the country westwards” (27–28). Shaked, who began his career as a high-school teacher, seeks a cure for the processes of cultural disintegration in education: “one of the functions of the secular Jewish educational system is to strengthen these traditional links, whose sacral or secular interpretation allowed and allows a shared platform of symbols within itself and between secular and religious groups” (35). Whereas one may readily agree with Shaked that the educational system can play an important role in fostering productive dialogue centered on Jewish heritage, thus repairing Israel’s weakening cultural ties, I am somewhat skeptical as to its efficacy in the long run, especially in view of the profound changes in Israeli society (e.g., the alienation of large communities such as Israeli Arabs and ultra-Orthodox *Haredi* Jews from the dialogue that Shaked envisions). The questions Shaked raises in the opening chapters go far beyond literary scholarship. One can detect in them an elegiac tone, mourning the diminishing power of secular Israeli culture, along with a sense of faith in its vitality and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances.
The book’s opening section contains three other survey essays on thematic and historical issues: the Holocaust and the historical consciousness of Israeli society; tensions between the expected social uniformity and the actual literary heterogeneity in different generations of Modern Hebrew fiction; and the beginnings of Hebrew Literature in America. Other chapters focus on specific writers. Two long sections, each of three chapters, are devoted to two of Shaked’s favorite authors, on whom he has written monographs: Mendele Moykher Sforim and Agnon. Other chapters are devoted to Bialik, M. Shoham, Y. Amichai, Y. H. Brenner, Y. Shami, and D. Vogel.

Shaked provides essential background information on these writers: the historical, cultural, literary, and linguistic climate in which they worked, their readership’s horizon of expectation, and the literary models, Hebrew and non-Hebrew alike, that shaped their literary education. All these are viewed as factors in the specific artistic choices made by these writers. The chapters then focus on a single representative work — its style, structure, themes, archetypes — in an attempt to decipher and highlight the author’s Weltanschauung and artistic sensibilities.

Shaked’s reading of Bialik’s “The Dead of the Desert” (in a section entitled “Poetry and Drama”) illustrates his method. It first presents two models of long narrative poetry of the nineteenth century, popular at the time when Bialik began writing his powerful long poem (or poema, as it was called after the Russian literary tradition). In Hebrew poetry, there was the “heroic” tradition exemplified by N. H. Wessely’s “Poems of Glory,” where a retelling of the Bible was tailored to the portrayal of contemporary personalities (thus the biblical Moses resembles Moses Mendelsohn). In contrast to this positive model, where the poem’s hero represents a socially desired ethos, another model, traceable to Byron, expressed a critical stand, attacking dominant social values. This model was partly adopted by J. L. Gordon’s satire on Jewish orthodoxy. Shaked argues that Bialik did not opt for either of these models; instead, he developed his own, mythical one. The poem’s half-dead, half-living gigantic figures neither embody positive social values nor lampoon society. Rather, they are representative of some of the deepest tensions, struggles, and agonies embedded in the human experience. Their inevitably failed rebellion against God is described by Shaked as “a Sisyphean experience, a permanent ‘fall,’” but one that “bestows dignity on man and grants him tragic glory” (116).

According to Shaked, we should not only appreciate Bialik’s originality in forging his own literary model but also be wary of a national interpretation, like the one suggested by F. Lahover, an influential literary historian who also wrote a detailed monograph on Bialik. Shaked admits that the poem is replete with allusions to the Bible and to Talmudic legends, evoking Jewish history and textual heritage. He argues, however, that reading “The Dead of the Desert” merely as an allegorical representation of Jewish history would impoverish this complex, multidimensional poem by ignoring the unresolved tensions which characterize
the story of the enigmatic giants. It may also diminish Bialik’s heroic attempt to cope with perennial issues of the condition humaine.

The book devotes lengthy chapters not only to prominent figures of Modern Hebrew literature but also to authors who were not, to borrow Leavis’s term, part of its “Great Tradition.” The two concluding chapters are devoted to Shami and Vogel. Shaked opens the chapter on Vogel by stating that “it sometimes happens that along the back roads one may find the most charming wildflowers, whose beauty is more intoxicating than that of the houseplants encountered along the main boulevard” (309). Shami and Vogel “chose to use the Hebrew language as a medium of literary expression,” but that choice did not signify “a nationalist-Zionist social commitment” nor did it contain a “specifically Jewish point of view.” And because these writers are the exception, it makes them “very interesting examples of literary creativity” (309–10). Shami is described as a writer of “nothing more than Arabic stories written in Hebrew, which neither relate to Jewish social situations nor reflect Jewish or Israeli mental processes” (310), and Vogel is portrayed as a Viennese writer in Hebrew: “Vogel’s uniqueness and attraction lies in the fact that he wrote in Hebrew on a theme that was popular in the German fiction of his time, but without trying to adapt this theme to the language of the culture for which he was writing” (322–23).

This tendency to call attention to authors outside the literary mainstream is characteristic of Shaked’s critical endeavor throughout the years. His influential essay on the transition from “A Generation in The Land” to “The New Wave” in the Israeli fiction of the sixties (included in his Gal Khadash baSiporet haIvrit (A New Wave in Hebrew Fiction, 1971) is significantly entitled “On Many Small Windows at Side Entrances,” a phrase taken from Yehuda Amichai’s “Not Like a Cypress”: “Not the sharp ring that wakes up / the doctor on call, / but with tapping, on many small windows / at side entrances, with many heartbeats” (13).

Shaked’s The New Tradition is a major contribution to criticism available in English on Modern Hebrew literature. The book presents us with the mind of a great scholar and intellectual, capable of perceiving the bearings, the links, and the nice dependencies (to adapt Pope’s phrase) of literature, culture, and history. The book may also show us that there is not necessarily a contradiction between approaching Modern Hebrew literature equipped with unbiased, sharp critical tools and a deep sense of love and commitment to one of the greatest achievements of the Jewish people in modern times.

Works Cited


Robert Polhemus is an engaging writer and a critic with a notable record of publication, but his latest work, *Lot’s Daughters*, is a mixed bag of a book, and one that leaks badly at the seams. Some idea of its heterogeneous nature is provided by a mere noting of its contents. The opening section, about one-quarter of the book, is devoted to pre-modern views, mainly rabbinical and early Christian, of the story of Lot and his daughters. Most of the book, about 300 pages, discusses the following subjects: Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park*; Mary Shelley and *Mathilda*; the Brontë family, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*; William Stead and Lewis Carroll; Freud and “Dora”; Shirley Temple; Woody Allen and Mia Farrow; Carolivia Herron and *Thereafter Johnnie*; and Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. To bind this material one clearly needs a unifying theme — in a word, a complex. This Professor Polhemus lavishly provides with what he calls “the Lot complex.” But that is where the trouble begins.

What most people remember of the Lot story is that his wife, fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah together with her husband and two daughters, looked back when she had expressly been forbidden to do so, and was instantly turned into a pillar of salt. But that is only a prelude to the main story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19. Since this tends to be forgotten, perhaps repressed in memory, it may be as well to quote what happens when the fugitives take refuge in a cave:

> And the firstborn said unto the younger, Our father is old and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth: come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night: and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose.

The next night the younger daughter repeats this, and so were “both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.” The story of Lot and his daughters, therefore, is predominantly one of incest, not discounting the daughters’ presumed wish to repopulate the earth following what they took to be the elimination of the