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## **The Kibbutz Novel as Erotic Melodrama**

Throughout the previous century, Israeli fiction contended with a basic challenge, which applied especially to kibbutz writers: writing realist literature in a social reality that was still in the making. The Zionist century was a historical storm of multicultural immigration waves, of shifting from Turkish rule to English rule to self-rule under American patronage, of the shock of the Holocaust, of eight wars and two *intifadas* (Palestinian uprisings), of the labor pains of Israel as a social democratic country (with the kibbutz as its leading pioneer), and of its privatization in the liberal-capitalist era. The writers of *Eretz Yisrael* in the pre-state era, as well as the Israeli writers after the establishment of the state, did not live in a cohesive social world, such as that in which the writers of Victorian England, Tsarist Russia, or the East European *shtetl* worked. Consequently, Israeli writers and critics have repeatedly claimed that, in such a dynamic historical reality, the writing of a realist social novel is a nearly impossible task. The challenge faced by kibbutz writers was even greater, not just because of the even greater dynamism of the kibbutz as an arena of social experimentation, but also due to the incongruity between a positive, common experience – such as that of realizing national and social ideals – and the personal, gloomy themes expected from “good literature.” The first part of this article is

devoted to the description of these basic problems. Its second part examines the main literary practice adopted by the most prominent kibbutz writers in dealing with them, while its third part criticizes this practice.

### **The challenge of realism**

In 1911, the most representative and important novel – or, rather, anti-novel – written about the Second *Aliyah* (wave of immigration), at the height of this pioneering period, Yosef Haim Brenner's *Mi-kan umi-kan* (From here and there), was published. It was perceived as such by the pioneers of that time themselves. Berl Katznelson declared that it was “the classic book of the Second *Aliyah*,”<sup>1</sup> Rachel Katznelson-Shazar testified that the book was “a source of confidence, reinforcement and hope” for her and her friends,<sup>2</sup> and Eliezer Moshe Slutzkin, one of the founders of the kibbutzim Degania, Kinneret, and Ein Harod, when asked, late in his life, whether he had ever, in a moment of despair, considered leaving the country, answered that he had arrived in Palestine already immune to despair, since he had read *Mi-kan umi-kan* shortly before. “It was,” he said, “a horrible story about *Eretz Yisrael*, an unusually cruel description of life in this land. I suffered and cried, but when I came here I had no surprises. No, I never thought of leaving the country.”<sup>3</sup>

The novel opens with an “apology” for not providing the descriptions of landscape and everyday life so favored by the general public:

Do these writings include descriptions of the life of *Eretz Yisrael*, as your readers would like to read in this book? Are there here poetic visions of the grandeur of the Carmel and Sharon, of tilling the land of Bethlehem, of the heroic deeds of those born or brought up here, the brave riders and

distinguished shooters, of the numerous hikes, by foot or on donkey's back, around Mount Hermon and in the Jezreel Valley, of the national celebrations held in Judea every single week, of the new, fresh life, of the love of the daughters of Zion and Jerusalem, so innocent and chaste? No, No! What is here of all these lovely things? Not even a vestige, not a trace....<sup>4</sup>

This “apology” for the lack of descriptive-picturesque elements in “these writings,” was, in fact, a satire of these very elements, which characterized the novels dealing with the local way of life – the “genre” literature, according to the Russian terminology used by Brenner and his contemporaries. And, indeed, in that same year Brenner published his article “The *Eretz Yisrael* Genre and Its Properties,” passing satirical criticism on the novels about the way of life of the pioneers of the Second *Aliyah* (Meir Vilkanski, Shlomo Tzemach, and similar writers), based on the assertion that the *Eretz Yisrael* literature had no essence of cohesive life, of stable existence, of a static state, to use an accepted term, but, at best, reminiscences and impressions of “the dynamic,” fluctuating state: I met this modern alms collector, talked to that rotten wheeler-dealer, or, on the other hand, observed this teacher, saw that excellent farmer, was impressed by the brave guard, liked the diligent worker, toured South Judea, took a hike in the Galilee – in other words, memoirs, but certainly not works expressing the life of the land, in the way that *Emek ha-bakhais* a work expressing the life of Russian Jews two generations ago!<sup>5</sup>

Brenner presents two arguments here – one overt and the other somewhat more implicit – against the novels about the local way of life in *Eretz Yisrael*. His overt claim is that the social reality in *Eretz Yisrael* was not yet sufficiently stable and solid to serve as a basis for realist fiction, and

would not be for a long time in the future. The main route of the European novel, from *Tom Jones* to *Buddenbrooks*, from *Dead Souls* to *Ulysses*, is that of social realism, based on the very existence of a given society, a specific social milieu, a social universe, with its own norms, values, customs, codes, representative “types,” and other clear and detailed characteristics. That was the nature of Jewish society in eastern Europe, and thus its cohesion allowed the writing of realist fiction, such as *Be-emek ha-bakha* (In the vale of tears), by Mendele Mocher Sforim, (Shalom Ya'akov Abramovich, 1835–1917), or *Tevye the Milkman* by Sholem Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovich, 1859–1916). At the time of Brenner, it was hard to discern in Palestine even rudimentary signs of a consolidated society. The Orthodox Jews of the “Old Settlement” lived in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias; the members of the First *Aliyah* inhabited the settlements supported by Baron de Rothschild and took care to impart French education to their daughters; the pioneers of the Second *Aliyah* built Tel Aviv on the sands north of Jaffa, while others, the socialists and anarchists, went to the communes of Degania and Kinneret. There was no territorial continuity and hardly any economic, cultural, or political connections between these Jewish enclaves, which were scattered sparsely over the Arab space west of the Jordan River. They were not different “classes” of one society, but, rather, separate Jewish communities, too small and closed in on themselves to offer a writer a full, complex social “world.”

Moreover, the situation in Brenner's time seemed entirely transitory. No one knew, nor could anyone guess, what future, if any, awaited the Jewish settlement in this neglected corner of the Ottoman Empire, or the attempts of the pioneers of the Second *Aliyah*, yeshiva graduates who had gone astray, to become farmers and construction workers and to revive Hebrew as a spoken language. All the optimistic and pessimistic

scenarios seemed to have the same likelihood. The reality of the Second *Aliyah* pioneers was “a new beginning,” not grounded in either the past or the future. Brenner, therefore, asserted that the *Eretz Yisrael* literature did not have – and could not have, till further notice – any “essence of cohesive life, of stable existence, of a static state,” which was the required and essential basis for the writing of realist fiction.

This is, then, Brenner's explicit claim against the *Eretz Yisrael* “genre.” But no less important is the implicit one, indicated by the examples he uses in order to demonstrate his assertions. The repertoire of contents and motifs of that “genre,” according to Brenner's satirical description, was optimistic Zionist kitsch (“I observed this teacher, saw that excellent farmer, was impressed by the brave guard, liked the diligent worker, toured South Judea, took a hike in the Galilee”) – the same kind of “poetic visions” he mocked at the beginning of his novel *Mi-kan umi-kan*, quoted above. The content of Mendele Mocher Sforim's *Be-emek ha-bakha*, on the other hand, is, indeed, the agony of Jewish existence; it is realist because it is tragic.

Similar criticism of the *Eretz Yisrael* genre was repeatedly expressed throughout the twentieth century. Baruch Kurtzweil, the dominant literary critic during the 1940s and 1950s, consistently attacked the works of the native-born writers of the 1948 generation, from S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilanski) to Natan Shacham, for the same reasons that Brenner had criticized those of Vilkanski and Tzemach. “Has our life in the village, kibbutz, and farming community of *Eretz Yisrael* consolidated to the point of actually being able to serve as the raw material of epic work?” wondered Kurtzweil in his harsh criticism of the stories of Yigal Mosenzon. Exemplary European novels, from *Don Quixote* onwards, prove “the dependency of the novel and story on a world with an ancient

tradition,” he maintained, and concluded from this that “a young world, lacking coherent lines, groping in semi-darkness for its place, is not the appropriate spiritual soil for the novel and story.”<sup>6</sup> Kurtzweil thus repeated, thirty-five years after Brenner, and despite all the developments in the Jewish settlement in Palestine from the days of the Second *Aliyah* until the period of the struggle for independence, the latter's first claim: the social reality in *Eretz Yisrael* had not yet consolidated to the extent required for realist fiction.

Brenner's second claim, regarding the unsuitability of “positive” content for worthy literary writing, was echoed many years later by the most prominent of the writers of the post-1948 generation, Amos Oz:

In the lives of nations, faiths and cultures, periods of flourishing success, of dynamic creativity, periods when things are getting bigger and stronger, are not propitious to storytellers.... The greatest creations in world literature have generally been produced in the twilight.... But the light in Israel at the moment is the light of midday, of midsummer, a bright blue light.... What can a storyteller do in this light, with this overwhelming rush of energy?... If you write a story or a poem or a play about a successful undertaking, a dream that has come true, a struggle that has culminated in a resounding victory, it can never be as fine as the achievement itself. No poem about an act of heroism will ever be as splendid as the act of heroism itself. A poem about the ingathering of exiles or idealism or the delights of love cannot compete with life itself. A story about a railway bridge that has been well designed and well made and does its job well is nothing but a heap of redundant words beside the bridge itself?<sup>7</sup>

Thus, three of the most prominent voices of Hebrew literature agreed that the emerging social reality in *Eretz Yisrael* was not suited to the

immediate growth of realist literature on the European level. Brenner, who put forward this argument in 1911, thereby paralyzed a whole generation of writers, and delayed, by many years, their adoption of the realist route. According to Nurit Govrin, this essay by Brenner curbed the will to confront the *Eretz Yisrael* reality through literature, and delayed this confrontation for a number of years. Under its influence, the writers and their literature escaped from the battlefield, and turned to other paths, to substitutes. Only years later did they dare come back and use the actual reality as raw material for their work.<sup>8</sup>

The escape routes from the challenge of writing realist *Eretz Yisrael* literature were varied and diverse. Writers such as S.Y. Agnon and Dvora Baron continued to write about the east European *shtetl* of their childhood, even after they moved to Palestine.<sup>9</sup> Only in 1945, about thirty years after the period of the Second *Aliyah* ended, and after publishing the novels *Hakhnasat kalah* (The bridal canopy, 1932), *Sipur pashut* (A simple story, 1935), and *Oreah natah lalun* (A guest for the night, 1939), all dealing with the *shtetls* in Galicia, did Agnon publish a novel set in *Eretz Yisrael*, *Tmol shilshom* (Only yesterday). And even this novel, eventually, withdraws, together with its anti-hero, from the confrontation with the reality of the pioneering Second *Aliyah*: Yitzhak Kumer runs away from his unrequited love to Sonia, the bohemian from Jaffa, and from the sense of sin that has haunted him ever since he left the religious fold and joined the ranks of the heretical pioneers, and buries himself in Orthodox Jerusalem, where his marriage is arranged to the virtuous Shifra. Other writers escaped from the present, and from the realist tools of its literary description, to the mythical-romantic past of the biblical stories and Talmudic legends, as did Bialik, while sitting in Tel Aviv, in his collection of pseudo-archaic legends *Va-yehi ha-yom* (And it

came to pass, 1934). Some ran away from the present to the genre of the historical novel, while others found refuge in the orientalist exoticism of describing the life of the natives – the Arabs and Bedouins.

Most writers, however, found another, more effective, escape route from the challenge of realism – surrealism. Agnon took this path in the stories of *Sefer ha-ma'asim* (The book of deeds), published between 1932 and 1942, and thus supplied the main model, which some of the most prominent writers of the post-1948 generation – A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Yitzhak Orpaz, Amos Keinan – followed when writing their early stories in the 1960s. Kurtzweil, who applauded Agnon's stories in that book, beginning with his enthusiastic essay about the story “Pat shlemah” (A whole loaf), conferred on the surrealist option its formative status in Israeli fiction, and Gershon Shaked, the authoritative critic and literary scholar of the post-1948 generation, granted a similar status to the early stories of Yehoshua and Oz.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of *Sefer ha-ma'asim*, of the surrealist chapters in *Tmol shilshom*, and of Agnon's surrealist stories such as “Ido ve-Inam” (Ido and Inam, 1950), “Shvu'at emunim” (Oath of allegiance, 1952), and “Ad olam” (Forever, 1954), on the Israeli writers of the post-1948 generation increased when Kafka's works were translated into Hebrew. *America* (*The Man Who Disappeared*) appeared in Hebrew in 1945, *The Trial* in 1951, *Stories and Observations* in 1965, and *The Castle* in 1967 (a dramatized version of *The Castle* by Max Brod had already appeared in Hebrew in 1955). Numerous articles and books in Hebrew about Kafka published during those years accelerated and deepened his hold on the minds of both the readers and the young writers of that generation. Kurtzweil included two chapters about Kafka in his book *A Treatise on the Novel: Two Sets of Essays on Shmuel Yosef Agnon and on the History*



*of the European Novel* (1953),<sup>11</sup> and the very inclusion of chapters about Kafka in a book devoted mainly to Agnon presented surrealism as the common denominator of these two Jewish literary giants (a matter that was later the subject of a comprehensive study by Hillel Barzel).<sup>12</sup> Until then, many of Agnon's readers had disdained his surrealist works, seeing them as nothing but capricious deviations from his naïve (or pseudo-naïve) *shtetl* stories, but once Kurtzweil wrote about Agnon and Kafka in one volume, surrealism – including that of Agnon – gained the status of a central, canonical modernist version in the mind of the post-1948 generation. In 1955, Max Brod's biography of Kafka appeared in Hebrew. In 1956, Gavriel Moked published a research book about the story “Metamorphosis,” and in 1959, Felix Weltch's book *Religion and Humor in the Life and Work of Franz Kafka* appeared in Hebrew as well. A.B. Yehoshua was 22 years old at that time, and Amos Oz was 20. Becoming acquainted with Kafka's works was one of the formative experiences of their adolescence.

The surrealism of Agnon and Kafka was one of the two main factors that diverted the literary mind of the post-1948 generation in a nonrealist direction. The second one was existentialism. In the 1950s, Israel and France were allies (an alliance that produced the nuclear reactor in Dimona and the Sinai Campaign in 1956). Israeli radio broadcasted French *chansons* and Hebrew imitations of them, and Paris was a popular destination for Israeli writers and artists who had become disappointed with the State of Israel as soon as it was established and moved to Paris for a number of years of self-searching and absorbing the intellectual vogue. When they returned home, they brought with them the existentialist message of Sartre and Camus and the Theatre of the Absurd of Beckett and Ionesco. Alongside the French channel, existentialism trickled into the mind and literature of that generation through the Anglo-

American channel of modernist poetry such as that of T.S. Eliot, which influenced Nathan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, David Avidan, and the other poets of the “Likrat” (Towards) group, which was active from 1952 till 1959. In contrast with the national poetry of the “Revival” (pre-state Zionist) generation and the 1948 generation, the members of that group wrote personal, individualistic, and existential literature.

Existentialism, like surrealism, granted Israeli literature an exemption from confronting the concrete Israeli reality, with the complexity of a binational, multicultural, immigrant society, with its history and actuality, with the Israeli condition, which was not merely “the human condition” (the name of the individualist-existentialist novel by Pinchas Sadeh, which appeared, ironically, in the spring of 1967, at the onset of the Six Day War that fundamentally changed the Israeli condition). In other words, existentialism granted Israeli literature an exemption from realism. The human being as a historical creature belonging to a specific people, generation, culture, socioeconomic sector, and ideological habitat – the person described by realist literature – was replaced, in the work of the Israeli writers and poets who had adopted existentialism and surrealism, by a vague “everyone,” walking around in an abstract world, almost in a vacuum. And what is no less important, existentialism and surrealism supplied Israeli writers with the desperate gloominess that the prevalent modernist taste deemed a prerequisite for good literature. Even if the Israeli writers did not seriously accept the view of human existence as absurd, but only donned the fashionable fineries of salon existentialism, they still found an emergency exit, captivating in its gloominess, from the blinding light of the Israeli condition, “the light of midday, of midsummer, a bright blue light,” in the words of Amos Oz. The typical protagonist in the Israeli literature of the 1960s is, therefore, according to Nurit Gertz,

alien, disconnected from himself and from the world around him, living in misery and desolation. Therefore, he cannot understand what he misses, or what is missing from the reality around him. This is an unconscious hero, who feels uncomfortable in his cultural environment and is drawn, through incomprehensible and unexplained actions, to nature, to its destructive representatives, to contact with unclear, mystical forces, to contact with a woman.... Nor does he find refuge in society or family. The society is fake and degenerate, and its pioneering Zionist values have turned into hollow clichés.... The protagonist yearns to break out of his desolate and alienated condition, and the only way open to him involves destruction and violence.<sup>13</sup>

There was something phony in this desperate, ahistorical and asocial existentialism, transplanted from Kafka's domains of rootlessness and horror into the intense Israeli reality. There was something phony in the literary description of the experience of living in this stormy country as that of a lonely, self-centered youth, who did not understand what was happening around him and was not a participant – enthusiastic or critical, but, in any case, concerned – in the Zionist project. This phoniness was all the more obvious when the site of events that the writers tried to wrap in an atmosphere of alienation and existential despair was socially, communally, culturally, and ideologically intense. The site least suitable for existential description was the kibbutz.

This was the basic difficulty faced by kibbutz writers. They found themselves in a catch. On the one hand, faithful to Brenner's legacy, they took great care not to write kitschy novels about making the wilderness bloom, in the style of Soviet socialist realism, with its “positive” cardboard heroes. On the other hand, the honest ones among them knew that the Israeli flirtation with existential despair falsified reality,

especially when dealing with the kibbutz. What were they to do, then? How were they going to narrate the kibbutz?

### **Paradigmatic kibbutz novels**

Of all the literary devices that kibbutz writers used in their attempt to overcome the problem described above, the most prominent one to emerge was that of the erotic melodrama, which was based on the most central, prevalent, tried-and-true, and formulaic model of the European realist novel. The main feature of this model is a structural separation between an intimate foreground and a panoramic background. In the foreground of the novel, at the center of attention, there is some minor entanglement – intrigue, romance, melodrama – leading to a wedding, betrayal, divorce, suicide, a son rebelling against his father, criminal involvement, etc. This is the plot, and it takes place against a specific social background. A different background will produce a different novel, even if its plot is the very same one that has already supported countless other novels. The distinction between the petty bourgeoisie of a dusty provincial town and the high society of a capital is what distinguishes the story of a provincial woman, like Emma Bovary, cheating on her dumb husband with silly lovers, from that of an aristocrat like Anna Karenina, who betrays her husband, the senior politician, with a lover as dazzling as herself. The plot in the foreground is fictitious, while the social panorama serving as its background is, to a large extent, documentary.

It should be noted that it is not the plot but, rather, its social background, that gives the realist novel its prestige as a product of high culture, since the lack of such background – the lack of the documentary dimension – is the common denominator of the genres that are consumed as popular trash, entertainment for the masses: romance novels, detective thrillers,

horror literature, science fiction, etc. It is important to understand, then, that the documentary dimension of the realist novel is no less significant than the fictional one. Actually, the former is the more consequential of them, in terms of the literary-cultural prestige of the genre, since its existence is, precisely, what distinguishes the realist novel from the entertaining-popular genres.

A fictitious plot against a documentary background – the pattern of the realist novel became that of the kibbutz novel. Not all kibbutz writers followed it, but it was the prevalent paradigm, and among the canonical kibbutz novels, from David Maletz's *Ma'agalot* (Circles, 1945) and Moshe Shamir's *Hu halakh ba-sadot* (He walked through the fields, 1947) to Amos Oz's *Menuhah nekhonah* (A perfect peace, 1982), it is hard to find even a single exception to this rule. The pattern of the realist novel released the kibbutz writers, all at once, from the two basic problems of the “*Eretz Yisrael* genre,” pointed at by Brenner, Kurtzweil and Oz. First, pushing the social panorama to the background, while focusing on an intimate fictitious plot, saved the kibbutz novel from the pettiness of impressions of the local way of life and other “memoirs” (in Brenner's words), and endowed it with durable, human-universal meaning, as expected from worthy literary work. Second, turning the settlers-pioneers, with their burning faith and glorious achievements, into mere “fillers” for a personal, tragic plot provided the kibbutz novel with the pessimism expected from a modern literary work, together with the individualism associated with such a work in the liberal world. Thus the kibbutz writers escaped from the bright blue light of the social panorama to intimate stories about love and darkness.

Moshe Shamir explained it as follows:

One of the characteristics of our written expressions (and maybe one of those of kibbutz life) is that our festive, “positive” expression always degenerates into flowery language, and fails to reach a literary level; but when our life is given an intimate, spiritual, lyrical, and even revealing expression, we get literature, real literature, and with it, regrettably, all the one-sidedness [i.e., negativity] that our critics find in it.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that Shamir still used the first person plural – “our expressions,” “our life” – even though it was already five years since he had left his kibbutz (Mishmar Ha'emek), immediately after submitting the manuscript of his novel *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, and four years since the stunning success of the novel and the play based on it, produced by the Cameri Theater, in the midst of the Israeli War of Independence. This nationwide success lifted Shamir from the narrow, sectorial status of a kibbutz writer, which others, such as David Maletz, Nathan Shaham, and Tzvi Luz had to be satisfied with, to the national status of a canonical Israeli writer. Why, then, did he continue to speak like a kibbutz member (and like a kibbutz writer) after his departure and the establishment of his position “outside”? The main reason, it seems, was the sense of guilt that had burdened him since he left the kibbutz, as indicated by his letter to Meir Ya'ari, the spiritual leader of Hakibbutz Ha'artzi movement: “Meir, I am fully conscious of how wrong my action was. I do not intend to lose hope in myself, nor in my faith in finding a way back, once certain obstacles are removed, nor in my membership in the movement, nor in regaining the trust of many members.”<sup>15</sup>

He did not return, of course, either to the kibbutz or to the dovish left of Hashomer Hatza'ir, but continued to move away from them, to the right, until he established, in 1967, twenty years after he had left the kibbutz, the Movement for Greater Israel. In any case, Shamir's insistence on

speaking on behalf of the kibbutz writers expresses his wish to impose the paradigm of the realist novel on kibbutz literature. He could have said: “the pattern of the realist novel, which was the one used when I wrote *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, does not fit the needs and expectations of the readers of kibbutz literature, since, instead of centering on the kibbutz (and concentrating, for that purpose, on “positive” characters, as dictated by Soviet socialist realism), it focuses on a personal tragedy, pushing the kibbutz to the background. When I decided to write my kibbutz novel according to this pattern, I declined to deliver the goods expected from a kibbutz writer, and this literary decision led me, necessarily, to leave the kibbutz.” But Shamir did not say that. He said the opposite. He presented the problem he had faced as a kibbutz writer – that of “the festive, ‘positive,’” superficial expression of the kibbutz way of life – as the problem of all kibbutz writers, and, consequently, presented the pattern of the realist novel, and its paradigmatic realization in *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, as the desirable solution for all of them. That is why he spoke on their behalf, as one of them, even after he had left.

In 1953, one year after Shamir delivered his lecture on kibbutz literature, the novel *Derekh ge'ever* (Man's way) by Yigal Mosenzon was published. Like Shamir, Mosenzon had left his kibbutz (Na'an) even before he published his novel, and for a good reason. *Derekh ge'ever* angered his kibbutz readers with its favorable attitude toward the pre-state right-wing underground organizations Etzel and Lehi, which were hated bitterly by the labor movement in general and the kibbutz movements in particular, and shocked them with its explicit sexual descriptions, culminating in a detailed account of sexual intercourse, spread over more than four pages.<sup>16</sup> The writer Yehuda Burla accused Mosenzon of pornography and ruled that “any decent publishing house would be ashamed to publish such a book.”<sup>17</sup> But it was, actually, an example of the same

phenomenon: behind the political and sexual provocation of the novel hid the same tried-and-true pattern of the realist novel – the same one used by Shamir (and Maletz before him), this time being dragged to the realms of cheap sensation.

The plot of *Man's Way*: Ra'ayah, Yosef Alon's wife, cheats on him with Reuven Bloch. Yosef Alon does not know if his five-year-old daughter is indeed his daughter or Bloch's. Bloch, for his part, cheats on his wife, Dina, with Ra'aya. Refa'el Hoover's wife is also in love with Reuven Bloch. Refa'el Hoover kills Reuven Bloch (he claims it was an accident, but it may have been murder), runs away from the kibbutz to Tel Aviv, and there sleeps with another woman (over more than four pages, as mentioned above). In the background: everyday kibbutz life during the "Saison," the Haganah's pursuit of members of Etzel and Lehi. Refa'el Hoover, who identifies with the right-wing "seceding" organizations, betrays everyone: the kibbutz, the Haganah, and his wife.

Rachel Katznelson-Shazar defined this plot "melodramatic-journalistic,"<sup>18</sup> and this definition fits well the description of the novelistic pattern of a fictitious foreground and a documentary background: an erotic melodrama in the front, and journalism in the background. According to Gershon Shaked, even if Mosenzon had gone too far, his themes were, basically, the same ones on which the writing of most Israeli writers of his generation centered around 1950:

A pathetic relationship between men and women, embedded into the Zionist super-plot, focusing on the Jewish people struggling for its independence. The heroic deeds of the protagonists of the melodrama take place within small, closed groups, that is to say, in the kibbutzim and moshavim, where sex-wars are waged within closed doors, while the outside group confronts an external enemy.... Through the documentary



element, Mosenzon tries to impart social authenticity to the erotic melodrama with ideological implications.<sup>19</sup>

The reference is mainly to what Shaked calls “the Zionist-settlement poetics,” which produced novels with typical characteristics:

They are dominated by documentary and ideological elements, and the melodrama moves the action in space.... Everything comes together through a love story, without the factors uniting into a complete plot. The authors do not create a necessary, reasonable connection between the documentary description and the ideological essays, on the one hand, and the fictitious love story.<sup>20</sup>

And what Shaked says, in a somewhat abstract manner, about the “Zionist-settlement” novel, Reuven Kritz applies specifically to the kibbutz novel:

At the center of the plot [of a typical kibbutz novel] usually stands a couple of pure, innocent lovers, who have to overcome internal difficulties (too shy, temporary misunderstandings) as well as external ones: separation, temptation, and even ... real intrigue. Their success in realizing their love is bound up with the success of the kibbutz in building itself.<sup>21</sup>

The key word here is “intrigue,” in the erotic-melodramatic sense: an entanglement of falling in love, betrayals, romantic triangles, spouse swaps, and incest.<sup>22</sup> These were the typical themes of the “*Eretz Yisrael* genre” in general, and of the kibbutz novel in particular. The pattern of the realist novel was realized by most kibbutz writers as an erotic intrigue set on the kibbutz, and, in this respect, there was no essential difference between Yigal Mosenzon's erotic melodrama and those of Maletz, Shamir, or Oz. If the plot of *Derekh gever* was,

according to Rachel Katznelson-Shazar, “melodramatic-journalistic,” then, that of *Hu halakh ba-sadot* was, in the words of a young critic, “a pioneers' soap opera.”<sup>23</sup> The plot of this soap opera: the love of kibbutz-born Uri and the young Holocaust survivor Mika clashes with Uri's vigorous activity as a kibbutznik who is devoted to his work in the vineyard and as a member of the Palmah (elite fighting force of the Haganah, the Jewish pre-state underground military organization) who is devoted to his training, during which he is eventually killed in an accidental hand grenade explosion. In the background: life on the kibbutz in the mid-1940s, with its intergenerational and social tensions – the pioneering fathers against their Sabra children, and both of these against the Holocaust survivors.

Since Shamir's heroes are a 19-year-old youth and an 18-year-old girl, their melodrama is too innocent to give rise to an erotic intrigue replete with betrayals and offspring with undetermined descent. It might be surmised, however, that had Shamir not killed his hero in a training accident, their love story would have developed, sooner or later, into a full-fledged erotic intrigue, “a soap opera,” and thus Shamir would have authored a David Maletz novel. After all, what are the plots of Maletz's novels – *Ma'agalot*, *Ha-sha'ar na'ul* (The locked gate, 1959), and *Le-darko ha-to'ah* (Losing his way, 1976) – if not “pioneers' soap operas” of erotic intrigues against the background of kibbutz life?

The plot of *Ma'agalot*: a married woman is attracted to the serial womanizer of the kibbutz, a nihilist who “tries to find in obsessive sexual conquest the answer to the terror of extinction,” haunting him since his older brother committed suicide.<sup>24</sup> Wondering whether she will cheat on her husband or restrain herself keeps the readers in tension, until she

succumbs, like her predecessors, to the seducer's charm and sleeps with him.

The plot of *Ha-sha'ar na'ul*: a Jerusalemite student falls hopelessly in love with his philosophy professor's wife, who does not reciprocate, and reads enthusiastically articles about Spinoza, authored by an intellectual from one of the kibbutzim. For these two reasons, he leaves the university and joins the intellectual's kibbutz. There he has an affair with a married woman and later commits suicide.

The plot of *Le-darko hato'ah*: a sensitive, agonized youth falls in love with a gentle girl, but she prefers a sensual man who lost his innocence and his virginity at an early age and had, in his youth, an affair with a Polish whore. The broken-hearted youth tries to deliver himself from his humiliating loneliness by rescuing the ugliest, most rejected woman on the kibbutz from her own humiliating loneliness, but after a few months of living together and getting her pregnant, he is so disgusted with her and with himself that he leaves her and the kibbutz.

These erotic melodramas were by no means created by a frivolous author seeking to write a bestseller, nor by a writer such as Mosenzon, with a penchant for provocation. Maletz, one of the founding pioneers of Kibbutz Ein Harod, and one of the most esteemed intellectuals of Hakibbutz Hame'uhad (the United Kibbutz Movement), was a perceptive writer, educator and essayist, who was as strict with himself as with others. He wrote his novels in order to express his spiritual, moral, and ideological misgivings, not to entertain his readers. "Human beings seek in literature an expression for the mysteries of their soul, for their spiritual straits," he wrote in one of his essays; "they seek in literature a partner in their spiritual world, in the possibilities of building their spiritual world."<sup>25</sup> Having been raised, like the other pioneers of the

Second and Third *Aliyot*, on the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, he tried to investigate through his novels the profound questions that tormented him, and first and foremost, as noted by Moti Zeira, “the question of whether there is a spiritual basis for this new life, which is devoid of the belief in God, that can be a solid foundation for a permanent, stable, and moral life experience.”<sup>26</sup>

Instructive, in this respect, are Maletz's references to Kafka. His sensitive youths read Kafka's works, delve into them, and discuss them throughout most of the fourth chapter of the novel *Le-darko ha-to'ah*:

In those days, the strange and shocking books by the Jewish-Czech writer, Franz Kafka, were published in Europe. Among the books published posthumously, after their author had died young of tuberculosis, the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* reached the group here as well. The books were passed from one to another. Many read them, few understood. They used to talk about them and discuss them a lot, wonder and be amazed at them.... [In these novels] you don't know where, in which country or state, the described events took place, and when, at what time, they occurred.<sup>27</sup>

Maletz's agonized hero reads *The Trial* with ardent empathy and tries to infect the girl who is about to break his heart with his enthusiasm. A person who dislikes *The Trial*, he tells her, does not feel the inexhaustible and insatiable thirst and yearning of K., Kafka's hero, for the fresh air, the sun, poetry – divine poetry, I would, perhaps, daresay. And when there is thirst, when there is, as it is written, my soul has thirsted for God, then there is life, then the stifling air may become clear, even just for a moment, clear and extremely pure, extremely precious, extremely wonderful.<sup>28</sup>

Through the discussion of Kafka, Maletz points to the seriousness and intellectual depth of his heroes, and also of his novel and of himself. And precisely because of that – because of his literary and intellectual pretensions – the formulaic, routine, automatic use of the erotic melodrama pattern is even more salient in his work than it is in the sensational, unpretentious novel of Mosenzon. The more the fixed pattern is employed within the framework of higher expectations for serious, deep content, the more marked and discordant is the incongruity between content and form, between the thematic (philosophical, and even religiously-oriented, in Maletz's case) seriousness and the melodramatic plot.

Similar unease, although from a different direction, is aroused by Yosel Birstein's kibbutz novel, *Be-midrakhot tzarot* (On narrow sidewalks, 1959, originally published in Yiddish in 1958). The incongruity here is not between the melodramatic plot and the ideological weight of the content, as in Maletz's novels, but, rather, between the former and the high level of the style. Stylistically, *Be-midrakhot tzarot* surpasses, in terms of its refinement and polish, any kibbutz novel preceding it and most of those that followed it. It is written with fine observation of human beings and atmospheric details, while completely avoiding, in a sharp deviation from the prevalent pattern, a flowery style and other linguistic excesses. Unlike Maletz's novels and those of the other kibbutz writers of that time, it is marked by an almost open indifference to the ideological questions that were rocking this ideological community.<sup>29</sup> Birstein lived in Kibbutz Gvat in the 1950s, witnessed the ideological crisis (mainly over the issue of support for the Stalinist Soviet Union) that brought about the split in his kibbutz movement, including his own kibbutz, and yet, in the eye of the storm, he wrote an intimate, low-tone novel, one that was minor in every respect (content, style, publication in Yiddish), with

the only storm disrupting its serenity being that of the erotic melodrama of the plot.

The center of the plot is a romantic triangle. Loti leads a double life, between her husband, Daniel, a dispirited shepherd and kibbutz writer, who uses crutches following an injury on the pasture, and a more masculine man, the reticent field worker Ze'ev, who is married to Menuha. While Ze'ev cheats on his wife with Loti, Menuha betrays him with Feivel. Unlike Loti, who cannot make up her mind, Menuha divorces Ze'ev and marries Feivel, who commits suicide shortly thereafter. Loti continues (and according to the open end, will continue for a long time) to divide her nights between Daniel and Ze'ev.

This was the first and last time that Birstein wrote a novel whose plot is an erotic intrigue. When he returned to deal with the kibbutz, after *Be-midrakhhot tzarot*, he wrote only short stories and novellas,<sup>30</sup> and when he did write novels, they were not about the kibbutz. It seems that he himself did not feel comfortable with the kibbutz novel as an erotic melodrama, after having written one.

One who did feel comfortable with the kibbutz novel as an erotic melodrama was Amos Oz. When he wrote *Makom aher* (Elsewhere, Perhaps, 1966), Oz utilized, with full force and no inhibitions, the erotic melodrama pattern that had taken root in kibbutz literature through Maletz and his successors, and when he wrote *Menuhah nekhonah*, he even took the trouble of informing his readers, on the last page, that he was indebted to Maletz: "Author's note: In 1959 a novel, *The Locked Gate*, was published by David Maletz against the backdrop of kibbutz life; several threads connect my own book with Maletz's; such things have been known to happen."<sup>31</sup> This acknowledgment, which can also be viewed as a eulogistic gesture, since Maletz had just died (on 11 October

1981), does not only concern the debt of this particular novel to that specific novel of Maletz but rather Oz's general indebtedness to the legacy of the kibbutz novel, of which Maletz was the founding father, and his outspoken view of himself as the keeper of the legacy of the erotic melodrama, à la Maletz. Through this author's note Oz lets us know that he is not a mere epigone of Maletz (had he been, he would not have been aware of it), but, rather a writer who consciously, out of thoughtful, artistic choice, continues to follow the proven formula of the kibbutz novel.

Writers who are well aware of the literary tradition in which they have grown tend to react to it parodically, as did Cervantes in his parodic reaction to the legacy of the knightly romance, as did Fielding in his parodic reaction to the legacy of the sentimental novel, à la Richardson's *Pamela*, or as did Nabokov in his parodic reactions to the legacy of the “double” (*doppelgänger*), which flourished in the literature of the nineteenth century, from E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gogol to Stevenson and Dostoyevsky. Not Amos Oz. His keen awareness of the erotic melodrama tradition of the kibbutz novel à la Maletz did not lead him to parody it but, on the contrary, to adopt it in order to overcome the blazing light of the collective experience, and in order to realize it better than any kibbutz writer preceding him. He succeeded not just by virtue of his great talent but also because of his natural tendency to erotic melodrama. His novels are operas in prose. All his plots, not just those of his kibbutz novels, are erotic melodramas,<sup>32</sup> and it seems that only once, in his postmodernist novel *Oto ha-yam* (*The same sea*, 1999), did Oz parody it.

The operatic plot of the kibbutz novel *Makom aher*: Eva deserts her husband Reuven and her adolescent daughter Noga. Reuven consoles himself in the arms of Berger's wife, while Berger sleeps with Noga, who,

in terms of her age, could be his daughter (and she does see him as a stepfather, of sorts, since his wife is having an affair with her biological father).<sup>33</sup> Noga gets pregnant from Berger, marries another man in the middle of her pregnancy, and gives birth to a daughter. She thus destines her daughter to live, like her, in the tension between her stepfather and her biological father.

The plot of *Menuhah nekhonah*: Yonatan, the son of the secretary of the kibbutz, abandons his wife and runs away to the desert. His place in his wife's bed is filled by a strange guy who happens to be on the kibbutz. When Yonatan returns from the desert, they live as a threesome.

The erotic melodrama was, then, the super-plot of all prominent kibbutz novels, from *Ma'agalot* to *Menuhah nekhonah*, whether the style in which it was presented was instrumental and awkward, as that of Maletz and Shamir, refined and quiet, like that of Yosl Birstein, or baroque, like that of Oz. Through the erotic melodrama, the kibbutz writers hoped to overcome the two basic difficulties of the “*Eretz Yisrael* genre” pointed at by Brenner and Kurtzweil (and after them, by Shamir and Oz): writing realist fiction in a social reality that is still in the making, and writing intimate and gloomy literature (that is to say, good literature, according to the accepted literary standards) about people who are busy making history. However, this literary decision, which generated and established the kibbutz novel as an erotic melodrama, was based on two errors. Both of them can be already discerned in Brenner's comments.

### **The burden of Brenner's mistakes**

Brenner's first error was his claim that a dynamic social reality, which had “no essence of cohesive life, of stable existence, of a static state,” was unsuited to the writing of realist fiction. A diametrically opposed



argument was put forth by Georg Lukács in his books *The Historical Novel* (1937) and *Studies in European Realism* (1948). The greatness of the distinguished realists, said Lukács, derived from the fact that they perceived and described the present not as an inert state, but, rather, as a stage – moment – in a historical development. The task Balzac undertook, wrote Lukács in *The Historical Novel*, was “to present this section of France's history, from 1789 to 1848, in its historical connections,” and to portray it as “the last crucial act of this great tragedy” of class struggles.<sup>34</sup> Tolstoy, according to Lukács, was “the powerful depicter of Russia's period of transformation from the 1861 emancipation of the peasants to the 1905 Revolution,” and, in the novels of writers such as Balzac and Tolstoy, “the conflict is not given ‘in itself,’ but through its broad objective social connections, as part of some large social development.”<sup>35</sup> Through individual human destinies, they describe historical trends, historical crises, deep changes – not “an essence of cohesive life cohesion, of stable existence, of a static state,” but turbulent social dynamics:

The most significant feature of the really great novels is precisely the portrayal of such [historical] directions. It is not a particular condition of society or, at least it is only apparently a condition which is portrayed. The most important thing is to show how the *direction* of a social tendency becomes visible in the small, imperceptible capillary movements of individual life.<sup>36</sup>

And again, in *Studies in European Realism*, the society described in the great realist novels is not a “given,” “finished” one. It is an arena of struggle, and the protagonists of those novels are not mere spectators in the social struggles taking place in it, but rather participants in them, “making their own history,” each one fulfilling his or her active part “in

the great drama of society.”<sup>37</sup> This is, in fact, the criterion used by Lukács to distinguish between the great realist novels and the naturalist and modernist novels of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth: in the former, society is the drama in which the individual participates, while in the latter, society is the given capitalistic reality, “a tedious, endlessly repeated routine.”<sup>38</sup>

*Studies in European Realism* was translated into Hebrew and published, under the title *Ha-re'alizm ba-sifrut*, in 1951 by Sifriyat Po'alim, the publishing house of Hakibbutz Ha'artzi, which was located at that time in Merhaviva, Meir Ya'ari's kibbutz, and was the main literary and intellectual home of the Israeli left. The days were those of Stalin. Lukács's name was widely known as the greatest theoretician of the “progressive” literature, and it is hard to believe that there was a single kibbutz writer who failed to read his book. This was evidenced by the fact that four years later, when Sifriyat Po'alim presented its readers with the Hebrew translation of *The Historical Novel*, it happily announced on the first page: “*Ha-re'alizm ba-sifrut* – the first Hebrew translation of the work of G. Lukács, published by our publishing house – rapidly went out of print and is still in constant demand. We hope that the second book, too, the one before us, will fulfill its role in the wide circles of students and readers.”<sup>39</sup>

No, the book did not fulfill its role in the wide circles of students and readers – at least not among the kibbutz writers. Had it done that, the conquest of kibbutz literature by the erotic melodrama would have been checked, and the kibbutz writers may have stopped viewing the kibbutz as the “background” of an erotic melodrama and discovered the narrative potential inherent in the kibbutz itself.

Another theoretician whose help the kibbutz writers could have used, had they become familiar with his writings in time, was Mikhail Bakhtin. In the same year in which Lukács's *The Historical Novel* was published, Bakhtin wrote his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," which gave rise to conclusions similar to those of Lukács regarding the history of social realism in literature. Bakhtin starts at the beginning. He shows that the fiction of the ancient era was not familiar with social realism, since it was totally uninterested in society as a historical category. In the Hellenistic adventure novel, all experiences and actions of the protagonist are of an entirely private nature and have no public significance, since, as he says, "the pivot around which content is organized is the main characters' love for each other and those internal and external trials to which this love is subjected," and "even such events *aswar* have meaning only (and exclusively) at the level of the heroes' love activities." The world in which the heroes of these novels move is a static, complete, ahistorical background. "As a result of the action described in the novel, nothing in its world is destroyed, remade, changed or created anew. What we get is a mere affirmation of the identity between what had been at the beginning and what is at the end."<sup>40</sup>

This is one of the two ancient roots of the realist novel. The second one, which contradicts the first, is the "folkloristic" root, which Bakhtin finds in Homer's epics:

Individual life-sequences are present in the epic as mere bas-reliefs on the all-embracing, powerful foundation of collective life. *Individuums* are representatives of the social whole, and the significance of such events (on the individual as well as on the social plane) is identical. Internal form fuses with external: man is all on the surface. There are no petty private matters, no common everyday life: all the details of life – food, drink, objects of everyday domestic use – are comparable to the major

events of life; it is all equally important and significant. There is no landscape, no immobile dead background; everything acts, everything takes part in the unified life of the whole.<sup>41</sup>

In this respect, Rabelais was Homer's successor, and one cannot disconnect the tumultuous historical time in which he lived and wrote – the period of transition from the Middle Ages to the New Era, with the rise of the Reformation and humanism and with the religious war that erupted because of it, culminating in the massacre of the Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's Eve, 23 August 1572 – from the historical consciousness behind the adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel:

The evolution and completion of a man as an individual is not distinguished in Rabelais from historical growth and cultural progress.... Thus growth subsumes the limitations of an individual and becomes historical growth. Therefore the task of assuming a complete personality is conceived in Rabelais as the growth of a new man combined with the growth of a new historical era, in a world that knows a new history but that is also connected with the death of the old man and the old world.<sup>42</sup>

From the Hellenistic root, the authors of the modern novels absorbed the amorous adventure as their narrative default, and from the folkloristic or Homeric source they derived their social and historical awareness. The problem was that most of them did not merge these two literary legacies into a unified private and social plot, but split them, as described above, into the plot, on the one hand, and “the background” on the other: a private-erotic occurrence against a social-period background. As Bakhtin put it: “In the era of developing capitalism, the life of society and the state becomes abstract and almost plotless.” In a common modern novel, only private life has a plot, since all human affairs, which were perceived, before the modern era, from Homer till Rabelais, as social-communal

practices and rituals – eating, drinking, reproduction, death – are now viewed as private matters. The premodern person experienced the familiar world as one of common toil and common struggles. In such a world “All objects are thus attracted into life's orbit; they become living participants in the events of life. They take part in the plot and are not contrasted with its actions as a mere ‘background’ for them.” But in the modern world, “When collective labor and the struggle with nature had ceased to be the only arena for man's encounter with nature and the world – then nature itself ceased to be a living participant in the events of life. Then nature became, by and large, a ‘setting for action,’ its backdrop; it was turned into landscape.”<sup>43</sup>

Like Lukács, Bakhtin differentiates between the realism of Balzac and Stendhal, which flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the naturalism of Flaubert and his successors, which prospered in its second half. He considers Balzac and Stendhal great writers, because of their success in merging private affairs and social and historical matters into an organic narrative unity, “the interweaving of petty, private intrigues with political and financial intrigues, the interpenetration of state with boudoir secrets, of historical sequences with the everyday and biographical sequences.”<sup>44</sup> In the work of Flaubert and his followers, however, there is not and there cannot be such a merger between the private and the social-historical aspects, from which they are alienated. The characteristic setting of their novels is, therefore, a small, petty-bourgeois, banal, dull, and eventless town, where time lacks any sense of historical development and therefore cannot serve as the main time of the novel, but only as that of the background.<sup>45</sup>

Well, if there is a place which is completely in contrast with a petty-bourgeois, banal, eventless town, it is the kibbutz. And what could be

said, in this respect, about the kibbutz, could, actually, be extended to the whole pioneering, experimental life experience that Brenner, even though he participated in its formation, did not believe capable of sustaining worthy realist fiction. He was wrong in his demand for an “essence of cohesive life, of stable existence, of a static state,” as a prerequisite for the writing of realist novels, since the great realist novels of the nineteenth century were written precisely in the midst of historic transformations and dealt with them.

This was, then, Brenner's first error. His second one was the optimistic, simplistic, image, devoid of any tragic depth, which he attributed in advance to any literary attempt to describe the pioneering settlement enterprise. As we have seen, this was also the error of Amos Oz, since, when he claimed that “periods of flourishing success, of dynamic creativity, periods when things are getting bigger and stronger, are not propitious to storytellers,” and when he wondered “what can a storyteller do in this light, with this overwhelming rush of energy?” his words implied that pragmatic Zionism was experienced by those who realized it as a happy fabric of “flourishing success, “light” and “rush of energy,” because, had it been otherwise, storytellers could have done a whole lot with it.

Need we say the obvious – that the realization of Zionism involved tragic costs and was experienced by the pioneers and their children as a combination of successes and defeats, faith and despair, creation and bereavement? Need we say that a jubilant, simplistic description of the practice of Zionist realization could only take place outside of literature, through propagandist-populist means, such as posters, speeches, patriotic songs, and official propaganda films, and that the claim that this practice

is not an appropriate subject for good literature, possessing tragic depth, is, therefore, baseless?

Those who describe the pioneering period, or the early years of the state, under the leadership of Ben-Gurion, as a time of confidence and rejoicing simply ignore its terrible aspects. Internal and external conflicts, resounding failures, longing for parents or country of origin, waves of emigration, suicides, and the death of youth and children from all kinds of diseases always accompanied the activities of settlement and creation. The pogroms of the early twentieth century were among the childhood memories of many of the pioneers. Many veteran kibbutz members were, and still are, Holocaust survivors. About three thousand kibbutzniks fell in the wars and left, on every kibbutz, numerous bereaved parents and siblings, widows and orphans. The schism of the United Kibbutz Movement in the early 1950s was a terrible crisis in the lives of thousands of kibbutzniks and their children. The division of the labor movement in the 1960s, as a result of the furious abdication of Ben-Gurion, and the establishment of Rafi; the downfall of the Labor Party in the 1970s following the Yom Kippur War, until its defeat in 1977; the collapse of the stock exchange in the 1980s, which caused the economic breakdown of many kibbutzim and the consequent “kibbutzim settlement,” which led to the privatization agonies of most kibbutzim during the last twenty years – all these painful events and processes have been no less central and critical in the lives of the kibbutzniks than the joyous ones of settlement, building, and growth. A faithful, complex and multifaceted description of the Zionist story in general and of the kibbutz one in particular would, therefore, be no less tragic, no less deep or poignant, than the erotic melodrama that has become the paradigm of the kibbutz novel.

Moreover, the very literary separation between the private domain (that of the erotic melodrama) and the social-national-historical one (serving as “background”) does not at all reflect the experience of most of the kibbutz founders and their children, since their strongest and most significant personal experiences have been those of being kibbutz members, settlers, pioneers, founders, farmers, and fighters. Their self-consciousness was a devotional, Zionist-socialist one, and, therefore, the personal story of each one of them was that of his or her participation in the national and communal story. To write honestly about these people is, mainly, to relate the way in which every one of them participated in this historic drama – and to tell it not as the “background” of an erotic melodrama but, rather, as the narrative material of the plot itself, as in the Bible.

“And you, our brothers, the elite of our salvation in Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn Ganim and in Um Juni, which is now Degania, you went to work in the fields and the gardens, the work our comrade Isaac wasn't blessed with,” wrote Agnon on the last page of *Tmol shilshom*, and ended the novel with a promise:

Completed are the deeds of Isaac  
The deeds of our other comrades  
The men and women  
Will come in the book *The Parcel of Land*.<sup>46</sup>

He was serious about it, too. Agnon knew that the literary focus of Brenner and himself on the anti-hero, the anti-pioneer, had not done justice to the complex reality of the Second *Aliyah*, which was not just one of “shkhol ve-khishalon” (bereavement and failure, the title of Brenner's novel of 1920), nor was it one of “a song in the heart and a spade in the hand” (as in the old Israeli children's song). He knew that a depressing description of that period was no less of a fake than a nostalgic one, so, to balance the picture, he set out to write, as promised,



a kibbutz novel, entitled *The Parcel of Land*. The plot, he decided, would relate the love story of Gideon, the son of Sonia of Jaffa, who had broken Yitzhak Kumer's heart in *Tmol shilshom*, and Yehudit, the daughter of Yitzhak Kumer and Shifra, born after her father's death – an erotic melodrama against the background of the kibbutz. Agnon abandoned the novel, and Dan Laor explains this as follows:

He knew intuitively – as did Brenner before him – that the literature depicting the life of *Eretz Yisrael* was committed to showing the via dolorosa of the immigrant coming to the new land, while the heroic story of the successful settlers, whose presence indeed affected the entire period, had to be relegated to the margins of the novel, or left as a promise for the future.<sup>47</sup>

Was that it, or was it the other way around? Did Agnon not know intuitively, as Brenner had not, and as most kibbutz writers had not known, that the tale of the via dolorosa of the immigrants and the heroic story of the successful settlers were one and the same? Did he not understand now, when he lost faith in the kibbutz novel he had started to write, that in order to tell this tragic and heroic story one should desist from splitting reality into a fictitious, personal, agonized “foreground” and a documentary, panoramic, simplistic “background”? Did he not abandon the novel because he realized that an erotic melodrama was not the plot that would tell the story of the people of Kinneret and Merhavia?

*Translated from Hebrew by David Ben-Nahum*

## Notes

- 1 Shapira and Abir, eds., *Hartza'ot Berl Katznelson*, 25.
- 2 Katznelson-Shazar, “Nedudei lashon” (Language migration) (1918), in idem, *Masot ve-reshimot*, 17; see also Shapira, *Brenner*, 222.
- 3 Tzur, *Ahavah tekhasseh*, 10–11.
- 4 Yosef Haim Brenner, “Mikan umi-kan” (From here and there) (1911), in idem, *Ktavim*, 2:1266–67.
- 5 Yosef Haim Brenner, “Ha-zhanr ha-eretzyisre'eli ve-avizareihu” (The *Eretz Yisrael* genre and its properties) (published in *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*, August 1911), in idem, *Ktavim*, 3:571.
- 6 Baruch Kurtzweil, “Ha-sipurim ha-eretzyisre'eliyim le-Yigal Mosenzon” (Yigal Mosenzon's *Eretz Yisrael* Stories), *Ha'aretz*, 25 September 1946.
- 7 Oz, “Under this Blazing Light,” in idem, *Under This Blazing Light*, 21–27.
- 8 Govrin, *Brenner*, 181.
- 9 Govrin, *Brenner*, 188.
- 10 Kurtzweil, “Pat shlemah,” 145–47; Shaked, *Gal hadash*.
- 11 See Kurtzweil, *Masekhet ha-roman*, 380–99.
- 12 Barzel, *Bein Agnon le-Kafka*.
- 13 Gertz, *Hirbat hizah*, 77–78.
- 14 Shamir, *Ha-omdim ba-pirtzah*, 103.
- 15 Moshe Shamir to Meir Yaari, 2 July 1947, in Halamish, *Meir Ya'ari*, 303.

- 16 Mosenson, *Derekh ge'ever*, 248–53.
- 17 Yehuda Burla, “Sefer pasul” (An unacceptable book), *Davar*, 12 March 1954.
- 18 Rachel Katznelson-Shazar, “‘Derekh ge'ever’ le Yigal Mosenzon” (Yigal Mosenzon's *Man's Way*), *Dvar ha-Po'elet* 19, no. 11, November 1953, 220.
- 19 Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit*, 4:277–79.
- 20 Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit*, 2:288.
- 21 Reuven Kritz, introduction to Kritz and Kritz, *Sipurei ha-kibbutz*, 1:32.
- 22 See *ibid.*, 47.
- 23 Ma'ayan Zigdon, “Mamshikh lalekhet” (He keeps on walking), 25 April 2010, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART2/098/081.html> (accessed 15 February 2012).
- 24 See Keshet, *Ha-mahteret ha-nafshit*, 154.
- 25 David Maletz, “Yesodot be-Shoffman” (Elements of Gershon Shoffman's prose), *Davar*, 22 July 1937.
- 26 Zeira, *Af be-knafayim shvurot*, 214.
- 27 Maletz, *Le-darko ha-to'ah*, 84.
- 28 Maletz, *Le-darko ha-to'ah*, 87.
- 29 See Zvi Luz, “Be-midrakhot tzarot” ([Birstein's] *Narrow Steps*), *Niv ha-Kvutzah* (May 1953): 345–46.
- 30 See Inbari, “Sipurei ha-kibbutz.”
- 31 Oz, *Menuhah nehonah*, 382.
- 32 Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit*, 5:213.

- 33 Milner, "Sipur mishpahti," 94.
- 34 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 83.
- 35 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 85, 143.
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- 39 Lukács, *Ha-roman ha-histori*, 5.
- 40 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 109, 110.
- 41 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 109, 218.
- 42 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 109
- 43 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 109, 209, 217.
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- 45 See *ibid.*, 247–48.
- 46 Agnon, *Tmol shilshom*, 642.
- 47 Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 372.

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