Epigonism after Abramovitsh and Bialik

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Who are the originals and the epigones in modern Hebrew prose? The great original was S.Y. Abramovitsh, according to H.N. Bialik and a century of impassioned literary reception. Abramovitsh wrote half a dozen Hebrew stories from 1886 to 1896 and subsequently translated his Yiddish novels into Hebrew. Ever since, many critics and teachers have repeated the notion that these Hebrew texts dominated the so-called revival of Hebrew literature.

On the occasion of S.Y. Abramovitsh’s seventy-fifth birthday, Bialik celebrated his accomplishments in Hebrew by crowning him ‘the creator of the nusah’. Bialik’s extravagant praise suggests that Abramovitsh (whom he calls Mendele) is the true original, and after him modern Hebrew writers could scarcely hope to be more than his epigones. This simplistic and overstated theory of the nusah found supporters throughout the twentieth century. Even today, some critics write as if the main line of modern Hebrew literature connects Abramovitsh and Bialik – through S.Y. Agnon, or through anti-nusah authors such as Y.H. Brenner – to the present. Following Bialik, many twentieth-century writers saw the nusah as a decisive influence, although they often tried to avoid its commonplaces and probably did not want to be perceived as epigones. In order to escape from this one-sided version of literary his-

1. I would like to thank: Renée Blok, for her assistance, and the Kröller-Müller Museum (Otterlo, Netherlands) for supplying a colour reproduction and for permission to reproduce the painting by Jozef Israels (figure 1); Anton Kras, for his assistance, and the Jewish Historical Museum (Amsterdam) for supplying a high-resolution scan of the Israels sketch (figure 3) and for permission to reproduce it here; the staff of Bird Library at Syracuse University, for obtaining the travel book by Israels in English and Dutch through interlibrary loan and for providing the high resolution scan of the second sketch (figure 2).
tory, we need to revisit Bialik’s theories. Among many pertinent writings, his most important essays are ‘Our Young [or New] Poetry’, 1907), ‘The Creator of the Nusah’, 1910-1911), and ‘Mendele and the Three Volumes’, 1912). One striking feature of these essays is their recurring use of imagery from the religious sphere to characterise the literary world.

‘Our Young Poetry’ provides a brief account of Hebrew literary history. After mentioning favourably three recent collections of poetry by Yakov Cohen, Yakov Steinberg and Zalman Shneor, Bialik comments on the poverty of earlier secular Hebrew poetry. Even in the Golden Age of Spanish and Italian writers, Judah Alharizi and Immanuel of Rome wrote ‘barbs’ (חרדית) and their rhymes were ‘shards of glass and shining needles’. Writers such as Ibn Gavirol, Moshe Ibn-Ezra and Yehuda ha-Levi, he adds, could have become great poets but were hindered by their religious and national commitments. Subsequently, medieval scholasticism ‘castrated all of the poetic newborns soon after they were born’; hence Maimonides’ prose was absorbed into the canon, while Yehuda ha-Levi’s verse was rejected. Bialik mentions Moshe Haim Luzzato, Shlomo Levizon, Naftali Herz Wessely, Abraham Dov Lebensohn, Mica Yosef Cohen Lebensohn and Abraham Mapu. He then dismisses most of the Enlightenment Hebrew poets as mere polemicists.

In the second section of ‘Our Young Poetry’, Bialik turns to more positive developments toward the end of the nineteenth century. Abramovitsh does not stand alone in this literary history: ‘Mendele, Frishman, Peretz, etc. – these are names of the first who broke down the barriers, this small faction of the fathers of our modern literature, who first brought Hebrew literature and its poetry into the realm of


3. When Bialik refers to Maimonides’ Hebrew writings, here and in ‘Mendele and the Three Volumes’, he seems to have in mind not the Mishneh Torah but the influential Hebrew translation of Morei Nevukhim (Guide to the Perplexed) by Samuel ben Judah Ibn Tibbon, published in 1204. They represent diametrically opposed styles: the Mishneh Torah uses clear Mishnaic Hebrew, while Ibn Tibbon’s Morei Nevukhim exemplifies ornate, post-biblical melitza.

4. Bialik, Kol Kitvei, p. 237
They did this, he writes, when they ‘dug the first ditch between the past and the present and built the first bridges over it’, which ‘opened up new pathways’. The modern authors also ‘trampled on the antiquated traditions of our Enlightenment literature’ and ‘sifted through the sand until they found the pearl’.\(^6\) Into this throng of metaphors, Bialik also injects religious imagery in order to say that modern Hebrew poetry should leave that realm behind: ‘Now, with the sunset, it appears that the time has arrived for national poetry to fold its prayer shawl and go out to say the evening prayer at home, in solitude’\(^7\). ‘Grandfather Israel’ will not ‘inspect the fringes of their prayer shawls’ or ‘look for a permissible portion (אמרות) of nationalism in their souls’.\(^8\) In other words, Bialik suggests, the time has come for Hebrew writers to liberate themselves from both religious traditions and nationalistic ideology. Bialik alludes to Isaac’s words, ‘the voice is the voice of Jacob’ (Genesis 27:22), when he has Grandfather Israel pronounce instead, ‘the voice is the voice of the future’\(^9\).

The Grandfather image takes on another, unexpected connotation in ‘The Creator of the Nusah’.\(^10\) In 1888, Sholem Aleichem had begun applying the term Grandfather to Abramovitch – who was his senior by just 23 years.\(^11\) Bialik now takes Sholem Aleichem’s affectionate naming in a new direction. Toward the end of the essay, Bialik asks, ‘Have you seen the Torah scribe (scriba) on the canvas in the painting by Malays?’ Then, referring to Abramovitch (or Mendele), he asserts: ‘That’s

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 238.

\(^6\) Idem.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 240.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 241.

\(^9\) Idem.

\(^10\) This Hebrew essay was first published in an issue of Hâ’olam devoted to Abramovitch, marking his 75th birthday. See Hâ’olam 5, no. 50 (23 Dec. 1910 / 5 Jan. 1911), p. 6-8.

how the Grandfather looks. He sits and strings pearls. Drop by drop, pearl by pearl – and behold, he has given us a new style, and we have a new artistic *musah* and a new literature’.

Bialik is alluding to Jozef Israel’s painting, ‘The Torah Scribe’ (see figure 1). Israel’s painting was first displayed publicly (and reproduced in *Ost und West*) in 1902. The artist discusses the inspiration for this painting in his travelogue about his trip through Spain and North Africa. In a chapter entitled ‘Teners’ (in the Dutch edition) or ‘An African Landscape’ (in the English edition), Israel includes a sketch of the scribe (see figure 2). This sketch – like another drawing (see figure 3) and the subsequent painting – was based on a scene in Morocco, where Israel came upon a scribe leaning over his parchment:

I had entered a dark room, lighted by a narrow, oblong, horizontal little window, by which I mean a cut-out aperture, which was closed at night or in bad weather with a shutter. The light cut sharply through this square and outlined itself upon the stone floor. Pushed close to this aperture stood a long work-table supported by trestles, and over it lay a great roll of parchment, which covered nearly the whole width of the table, and hung down below. Behind the table sat the Jewish scribe, leaning forwards with his arms upon the parchment, and turned his majestic head where I stood. The head seemed much too large for the body, which was obscured by the shadow behind and beneath the low table. It was a splendid head, with a fine, transparent pallor like alabaster, and wrinkles large and small ran around the small eyes and the great hooked nose. A little black cap covered the white skull, and a long yellowish-white beard lay spread in great flakes over the parchment document. He sat in a sort of armchair without a back, and a pair of crutches lay slanting from the chair down to the ground... He proudly displayed to me the beauty of his manuscript, the excellence of the capital letters, and the evenness of the whole, all written without ruled lines. He took up his

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13. The painting was first published (as ‘Der Thoraschreiber’) in *Ost und West*, 2 (1902), p. 613-614. Following the appearance of Bialik’s essay, the painting was published again in *Ost und West*, 11 (1911), p. 772.
Figure 1. Jozef Israels, *The Jewish Scribe*, oil on canvas (1902), Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, inv. no. 1147-47.

Figure 2. Jozef Israels, sketch from *Spanje: Een Reisverhaal* (The Hague 1899), p. 123-124.
great goose-quill in a grand manner, dipped it into the black bottle that stood beside him, and showed me how he wrote.¹⁴

For Israels, part of the powerful effect of this austere scene came from seeing the ancient scribal art in an unfamiliar North African context. Israels lived in Amsterdam, where there were also Torah scribes — as there were in most major European cities. But Israels responded to a foreign and exotic manifestation of this scribal art.

In light of the reference to Israels’s scribe, it is interesting that Bialik opens his Hebrew essay by saying that he will discuss only one feature (מַר) of Abramovitch’s accomplishment. מַר is also the word that is used to describe the ornamentation over certain Hebrew characters in scribal calligraphy (figure 4). Bialik prepares for the later art reference by speaking of Abramovitch using a figure from calligraphy. Another intriguing fact about Bialik’s reference to Israels’s painting is that it was omitted from the almost contemporaneous Yiddish version of this essay.¹⁵ One unclear point is how Bialik knew about the Israels painting; he could have seen its reproduction in Ost und West in 1902. Before 1912 it seems to have been exhibited only in Amsterdam (1902) and The Hague (1903).¹⁶ Bialik did visit The Hague in summer 1907, as a delegate to the Zionist Congress, but there is no direct evidence that he saw Israels’s painting there.

Even if we take into consideration the figurative richness of Bialik’s prose, it is astonishing that Bialik associates Abramovitch with a traditional Torah scribe. The scribe writes nothing new — apart from mistakes; his function is to copy the Torah accurately. The scribe’s creative contribution is limited to the aesthetic effect of his writing, including the specifically prescribed calligraphic ornaments. While writing a Torah scroll fulfils a commandment, from a pragmatic standpoint printing


presses made scribes unnecessary and confined the scribal art to the realm of religious custom. Nevertheless, the Torah scribe is a symbol of sanctity, because he transmits the holiest text in the Judaic tradition.

Why would Bialik associate Abramovitch (or his persona, Grandfather Mendele) with such a traditional figure? This image seems to be at odds with the central message of 'The Creator of the Nusah' with regard to the originality and power of Abramovitch's Hebrew style. At the heart of Bialik's theory of the nusah is a paradox: modern Hebrew literature needed to free itself from the biblical epigonism of Haskalah writers—and yet, following Abramovitch, it did this by incorporating many other historical layers of Hebrew writing.

Abramovitch himself saw his relationship to biblical Hebrew as a problem. His friend Simon Dubnov describes a pertinent scene in his memoir Fun 'zhargon' tsu Yiddish. One of Abramovitch's literary 'grandchildren' saw him at his desk and asked, 'What are you writing, grandfather?' He purportedly answered, 'I'm not writing — I'm driving away flies'. Abramovitch then explained his metaphor: 'When I write Hebrew, all of the prophets fall upon me: Isaiah, Jeremiah, the authors of Song of Songs and Psalms, and each of them proposes that I take, for this expression, some ready-made verse or established phrase from him alone. In order not to write according to an established pattern (shablon), I must first drive away all of those flies'.17 This is a graphic restatement of the longstanding problem of Enlightenment Hebrew style, with its emulation of the Prophets.

Y.H. Ravnitzky, in a letter to Abramovitch dated 29 August 1906, raises the question of influence. He explains that the editors of the journal Ha-'omer asked him to write an article about Abramovitch's Hebrew style 'and its influence on the young writers'.18 In this connection, he asks Abramovitch several questions. First, 'who were “the best of the writers” whom you set up as examples (she-hitzavta lekha le-mofet) and

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tried to “walk in their footsteps” at the beginning of your work in Hebrew literature (of course, the main part of my question has to do with style)? In his answer, Abramovitsh first rejects Ravitch’s phrase, ‘whom you set up as examples (םשנתה קל לומפת)’, and replaces it with ‘who worked upon me (שאמרת עלי)’. He never deliberately emulated particular authors, he says, but from his childhood studies he was familiar with styles ranging from the biblical to the rabbinic:

The expression ‘whom you set up as examples’, which you use as is common among writers, does not sit well with me. It would be more befitting to say: the writers who worked upon me; that is, on my style… In my youth I studied a lot of the Mishna of the Sages and rabbinic scholars – Akedat Yitzhak, Kuzari, Morei Nevukhim, Sefer ha-‘Ikarim and what follows from them, and they gave me a language of learning without any knowledge or choice on my part. I didn’t hold up all of these before me as examples and then write ‘at the beginning of my work in Hebrew literature’; but rather, when I wrote, their styles were familiar to me [upon my tongue]. And it was the same with biblical language. The Tanakh, in which I was skilled in childhood, also worked on my language. At the start of my literary work I was like an infant that is beginning to speak in the language of its parents and tutors – not because he deliberately places them before him as examples, but because that is how he must speak. And

when the child grows up and gains knowledge and wisdom, he then distinguishes between good and bad, while his language progresses and strengthens and he acquires a language of his own.

This response seems to reflect a certain ‘anxiety of influence’: even though Abramovitsh acknowledges some dominant models, he denies having emulated them. Abramovitsh then, in his response to Ravnitzky, stakes a claim to originality and influence. In a somewhat grandiose passage, he asserts that his Hebrew style is ‘a new creation’ (bri’a hadasha), which was very difficult to achieve, and he complains that contemporary writers have been using this new style without mentioning the name of its creator.22 Ravnitzky cites this passage, leaving out Abramovitsh’s complaint about contemporary writers’ unacknowledged use of his style.

Abramovitsh comments that, as the Torah forbade shatnez, clothing that mixed linen and wool, the Talmud separated between the biblical and Mishnaic styles: 23

הוורת אסריה לא לישריאלא שטניא, צמר ופשיהים ידירו, כל ימי וליאור
כדמת. הוורת אסריה לישריאלא שטניא כל ימי וליאור... הםדברי
על פרת החשים אנומר: שטנ ליחרי חפצי שטנ היימי לחרד... המילתי
מליצת לוחש נביאים והדיבור לוחש חכמה.

The Torah forbade the people of Israel from using shatnez, wool and linen together, a hybrid garment and a hybrid orchard; it permitted the writers of Israel to use a hybrid language and style... Our Sages were strict about the purity of language and said: the language of the Torah by itself, and the language of the Sages by itself... Melitza is rhetoric based on the language of the Prophets, while speech is like the language of the Sages.

Abramovitsh seems to criticise authors who blur the line between languages or historical styles,24 or who do not adequately blend the separate elements, but he does not complete the argument.25

23. Ibid., p. 68-69.
25. The more exact Talmudic quotation is לוחש תורחי לישריאלא שטניא חכמה לוחש (from Hullin 137b and Avodah Zarah 58b), cited by Shmeruk, op. cit., p. 69 n.
Ravnitzky's article, 'On the Hebrew Style of Mendele Moykher Sforim' (1907), presents Abramovitch's style as a mixture, giving a more positive rendering of the shatnez figure. He writes that 'the style of Reb Mendele is not biblical, not Mishnaic or Midrashic, but a style in which all of these have been absorbed, digested, and blended together'.  This formulation evidently influenced Bialik's notion of the nusah as a synthesis of many layers of Hebrew.

Yet Ravnitzky's discussion is more nuanced: he illustrates, for example, how Abramovitch's style evolved between the years 1886 and 1900. Moreover, he points to the key role of Abramovitch's translations of his Yiddish works into Hebrew. Finally, he places Abramovitch's Hebrew style more in continuity with that of Y.L. Gordon, who 'also made efforts to nourish himself comfortably with the language of the Sages'. Gordon's language was also quite immersed in rabbinic vocabulary (Mal'ol, דרבס) and expressions (ערבי חיות). Since Mendel Lefin and Joseph Perl, using Mishnaic Hebrew had been one way to move beyond Haskala melitza. Ravnitzky argues that there is a marked difference between Abramovitch and Gordon, however, because in Gordon's 'two-faced' writings the biblical and the Talmudic elements are not fully blended. In contrast, Abramovitch combines these elements so successfully that the reader does not encounter לֵשָׁן הָגָדוֹל וְלֵשָׁן הָכָא לָצֵד as in Abramovitch's discussion of shatnez and hybrids.

Bialik's essay 'The Creator of the Nusah' tries to show how Abramovitch was able to escape biblical epigonism and invent a new literary style. The biblical phrase is 'conservative, and we must fight an unending battle against it; but, at the same time, we must also seek within it a support'. In earlier times, Bialik acknowledges, 'Hebrew lit-

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28. Ibid., p. 171.

29. Ibid., p. 172.

30. Bialik, Kol Kitvei, p. 245.
erature could, for lack of any alternative, put some of its new wine in old bottles’.\(^{31}\) Yet the results, in Enlightenment Hebrew, were unsatisfactory: ‘The words are tired, poured out like water, without colour or taste; the combinations of words are powerless’. And this failure resulted not only from a lack of talent, Bialik comments, but mainly from ‘the lack of a fixed and accepted nusah’.\(^{32}\)

Bialik does not describe the nusah in literal detail; instead he gives a series of metaphors to describe it. Mendele’s nusah is like a pattern or shablona used by craftsmen: it is the template that serves as the basis for later creativity. Bialik notes that the term nusah derives from a liturgical, cantorial context: in Volin, he says, it describes ‘a tradition of prayer melodies that are accepted among the people’.\(^{33}\) He claims that this nusah is the essential foundation on which individual authors create, as individual cantors base the music of their prayer on established melodies or modes. Hence the creator of the nusah was like the inventor of the first needle, who enabled tailors to do their work. Or he was like an alchemist who ‘extracted the bit of gold from the dross of their spirits and pressed it into coins’.\(^{34}\)

A further description of the nusah appears in Bialik’s 1912 essay about Abramovitch’s collected works, ‘Mendele and the Three Volumes’.\(^{35}\) Bialik asserts that, as the first to create a modern Hebrew style, Abramovitch ‘annulled imitation’ (ביסל אצ החיק). Bialik goes on to say that Abramovitch discovered the ‘higher synthesis’ (הרמנותו שלוחה) by amalgamating virtually the entire history of Hebrew writing, ‘the Scripture and the Mishna and the Midrash and the Sidur and medieval poetry and Guide to the Perplexed and Hayei Adam…’\(^{36}\) On the other hand, one might object that this list of precursors shows that, far from annulling imitation, Abramovitch embraced it.

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32. Idem.
33. Idem.
34. Ibid., p. 246.
35. H.N. Bialik’s essay מיכל הלשון המרות (‘Mendele and the Three Volumes’) was first printed as a preface to Kol Kitvei Mendele Moyalcher Sforim, vol. 3 (Odessa 1912); quoted here from Kol Kitvei Mendele Moyalcher Sforim (Tel Aviv 1965), p. 243.
36. Idem.
Bialik’s formulation presents Abramovitsh’s accomplishment as an innovative synthesis more than as the creation of a new style. Perhaps this helps us understand why Bialik saw fit to compare Abramovitsh to a Torah scribe. If Abramovitsh is like a Torah scribe, then in spite of his innovations his work is antiquated, drawing its inspiration from the past.

To grasp the limitations of Bialik’s notion of the nusah, we may begin by noting that he leaves out an important other tradition, which originated with Hassidic writing. From Joseph Perl’s anti-Hassidic Hebrew to I.L. Peretz’s neo-Hassidic stories, a genre emerged that provided a model for an alternative to the nusah. That Bialik was knowledgeable about the Hassidic tradition is evident from his overview of the Hebrew literary canon in his essay 'The Hebrew Book'. Yet Hassidic and anti-Hassidic writing do not figure in the components of the nusah, as Bialik presents them. Moreover, in ‘The Creator of the Nusah’, Bialik does not refer to the independent contribution of authors such as Peretz.

Originality in modern Hebrew style appears to have two general modes: synthesis (from prior Hebrew models) and translation (from other languages such as Yiddish and Russian). The first typifies ‘Mendele’s nusah’, while the second is found in Hassidic writings and in the literary tradition from Joseph Perl to I.L. Peretz. Abramovitsh innovated by bringing together many historical layers of Hebrew; Perl and Peretz innovated by introducing into secular Hebrew fiction a style that is based on translation from Yiddish. Abramovitsh’s accomplishment, by means of his nusah, was to help break the stranglehold of Haskalah Hebrew, with its excessive reliance on biblical melitza. Yet the nusah was not the only way to escape biblical epigonism. The linguist Abba Bendavid comments on the usual consequences when Ashkenazic Hebrew authors tried to escape biblical style: ‘Whoever abhors imitations from Isaiah and Rabbi Yehuda only makes room for other imitations: from Yiddish or Russian, from German or Polish’.38

On the other hand, Abramovitsh was not the first modern Hebrew writer to use a more Mishnaic style; this practice is sometimes associated with the works of Mendel Lefin. Abramshtish himself engaged in a massive translation project, when he translated his own Yiddish works into Hebrew. The difference is that his translations seldom sound as if they have been transferred from Yiddish; to avoid this impression, Abramovitsh sometimes uses Aramaic expressions to convey a vernacular idiom. A striking example of this occurs in Abramovitsh’s first translation from one of his Yiddish novels, Kitser Masoos Benjamin ha-Shlishi. When Benjamin tries to address a peasant in Russian, saying dobre dyen, Abramovitsh parenthetically glosses these words with the medieval, quasi-Aramaic tzafra tava. In Fishke der Krummer (Fishke the Lame, 1888), there is a Russian provincial policeman (stanavai) who becomes, in the Hebrew rendition Sefer ha-Kabtzanim, an Aramaic pristka demalka.

It is worth considering the relationship between Bialik’s nusah theory and his own writing. According to Gershon Shaked, Bialik’s prose was viewed by his contemporaries as epigonic: ‘the critics, of his generation, tried to distinguish between his poetry and his fiction and emphasised the originality of the first type and the epigonism (in relation to Mendele) of the second.’ The theory of the nusah was itself one reason for seeing Bialik’s fiction as epigonic. This situation echoes the


problem of artistic influence and imitation discussed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Nietzsche refers to the gradual accumulation of Kulturgut, after which a 'spendthrift heir' will come to expend the surplus (aphorism 53). Ordinary patterns of speech accumulate, after which 'belated' authors squander the accumulation by shifting norms. In Bialik's conception, the *nusah* represents the culmination of all prior Hebrew styles in an original synthesis.

How close is Bialik's Hebrew prose style to that of Abramovitsh? In a letter of 26 January 1901, David Frishman expressed his view that Bialik's translation of the opening chapters of *Fishke der Krumen* (as Sefer ha-Kabtzanim: Nun Kefisha*) was an artistic copy of the original: 'If I had not heard it from you, I would not have believed that Reb Mendele himself was not the translator.' Yet according to Yosef Klauzner, Abramovitsh expressed a critical opinion of Bialik's translation of *Fishke*: 'The bride is too beautiful. Bialik doesn't know the secret of condensation. His style is too rich, overflowing with too many idioms, expressions, and words.' As a result, Abramovitsh would have to retranslate it himself.

In claiming originality for Abramovitsh's *nusah* in prose, Bialik was also claiming originality for himself in poetry. He succeeded in convincing generations of readers that Abramovitsh and Bialik would be followed by epigones of the *nusah*. But it has not been easy to mould the language of modern Israel into the forms established by the *nusah*. The model of translation from other languages and literatures has also exerted vast influence, both in terms of vocabulary and syntax.\footnote{For a discussion of the revival of modern Hebrew from a linguistic standpoint, focusing on the influence of foreign words, grammar and idiomatic expressions, see I. Garbell Chanoch, *Fremdsprachliche Einflüsse im modernen Hebräisch*, PhD dissertation (Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Berlin, 1930). She cites many authors, including Abramovitsh, Bialik and Brenner. More recently, R. Lapidus has written in detail about the Russian influence on Brenner's fiction. See *Between Snow and Desert Heat: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature, 1870-1970* (Cincinnati 2003), chapter 2.}
porary Israeli writing is as much a successor to Perl and Peretz as it is to Abramovitch and Bialik.47

To illustrate the porous boundary that separates Hebrew styles in the nineteenth century, I offer several examples. Here are three examples of dialogue, arguably the most difficult form of speech to write in Hebrew of that time:

What are the essential differences between these three passages, which date from 1838, 1890, and 1894?48 All of them read reasonably well today,


48. The passages are taken from: J. Perl, Bohem Tzadik (Prague 1838), p. 20-21; S.Y.
in spite of the wide-ranging stylistic changes that occurred in the twentieth century. In the first passage, Joseph Perl is trying to capture the feel of a Yiddish conversation, translated into Hebrew.49 The final phrase, ‘eikh nofel lekhem zot’, calques the Yiddish expression ‘vi falt es eykh ayn’ (‘how can such a thing occur to you?’; over-literally translated, ‘how does that fall upon you?’). Distinctive in the second passage is Abramovitch’s use of the rare word for expulsions, ‘teirudin’, which he draws from the Midrash and Rashi. By using such words, leaning toward Aramaic, he broadened the vocabulary of modern Hebrew prose. The third passage is typical of Peretz’s neo-Hassidic writing, which uses a straightforward style that seems close to Yiddish.50

Yakov Fichman gives an astute description of Peretz’s Yiddish and Hebrew style, in connection with some letters he wrote to M.Y. Berdichevsky: ‘The essence of Peretz’s work,’ Fichman writes, is ‘the flawless melody, the folk rhythm, the organic expression.’51 According to Fichman, ‘it was not in his power to achieve this in Hebrew before it had become a spoken language’. Fichman contrasts this with Abramovitch’s ability to ‘cast, polish, and mint the coinage of idiom’

49. The primary a Hebrew Bohn Teadik is even more impressive than that of Megale Temirin (1819). The latter is primarily a satirical novel, infused with comic exaggerations, while the former comes closer to representing everyday speech. See my article, ‘Joseph Perl’s Escape from Biblical Epigonism Through Parody of Hasidic Writing’, Association for Jewish Studies Review 29 (2005), p. 265-282. Y. Klausner points out the flaws in the Hassidic Hebrew of Megale Temirin: ‘To this day, “the language of Megale Temirin” is a name for faulty, Yiddish inflected, barbarous language’ (‘Lashon shel Megale temirin’ hi ’ad ha-yom kinui le-lashon meshubeshet, mechburet u-barbarit.) See Y. Klausner, Historia shel ha-sifrut ha’Iverit he-hadasha, vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1937), p. 309. But Klausner goes on to defend some redeeming features of folk Hebrew: ‘much of what there is in the folk language, and which is considered corrupt in the eyes of the enlightened and the authors, after a certain amount of time becomes naturalised and slowly enters the enlightened literary language... Sometimes the corrupt, folk language of the hasidim is more alive and more natural than the flowery, Enlightenment language’; ibid., p. 304.

50. This story is especially close in style to some writings by Rabbi N. Sternharz, such as Hayei Moharan (1872). Compare my article ‘Parody and Hagiology: Peretz’s “As-If” Hasidic Stories’ (in Hebrew), Chalutz (Journal of Research on Yiddish Literature and Its Relationships to Hebrew Literature, Haifa), 7 (2002), p. 45-52.

The figure of coinage returns us to the language of Bialik's essay, 'The Creator of the Nusah'. And it is true that one often finds, in Abramovitsh's Hebrew writings, novel uses of archaic expressions, such as the words batlan and nagid; and these are often listed as primary examples of modern usage in Abraham Even-Shoshan's dictionary.

In his essay on תחילת השן (Birth Pangs of Language), Bialik raises the question of how writers should extend the range of Hebrew. Not, he argues, by trying artificially to translate all of the words included in some English, French, German or Russian dictionary. Instead, innovations by creative writers should guide the expansion of the vocabulary. The right way to extend Hebrew, according to Bialik, is to look within the language itself – and other Semitic languages, especially Aramaic – for new possibilities. This is the view that led Bialik and Abramovitsh to draw on Aramaic for particular, new expressions. In theory, Bialik and Abramovitsh may have been right; but, in practice, many of the Aramaisms – even those that had been present in Yiddish – have fallen into disuse. One reason for the sometimes archaic feel of Abramovitsh's Hebrew today is precisely his use of Aramaic words and phrases that are unfamiliar to most Israeli readers.

Yosef Klausner sheds light on this subject when he analyses Bialik's 'language feel'. He argues that Bialik made his most significant mark on modern Hebrew, not by inventing new words, but by reviving obscure, archaic words. Bialik, Klausner writes, 'took up an ordinary biblical or Talmudic-Midrashic word (or a word that was not well understood) and granted it a new soul – and immediately it was turned into a European idea or concept, for which no other Hebrew poet or prose writer had found a suitable Hebrew expression'. This analysis conforms with

52. Idem.
54. Ibid., p. 6-7.
55. For a fuller discussion of Abramovitsh's use of Aramaic, see my article ““Nusah Mendele” be-mabat bikoret’ (Mendele’s nusah: A Critical Perspective), Dappim le-Mekhar be-Sifrut, 14 ([Haifa], 2004-2005).
56. See Klausner's article entitled 'Bialik's Language Feel', in H.N. Bialik ve-Shirat Hayav (Tel Aviv 1951), p. 127.
Bialik's stated intent with regard to broadening the scope of modern Hebrew.

In a way that is pertinent to the theory of the *nusah*, Chaim Rabin casts doubt on received ideas about the so-called 'revival of Hebrew'. According to the official version, Rabin writes, 'the language itself was reconstituted from the ancient sources (the Hebrew of the Bible and the Hebrew of early rabbinic literature) in a synthesis credited to Mendele Mokher Sefarim'.\(^7\) Rabin first points out that the language of the Haskalah was not as biblical as it pretended to be:

The ability to express nineteenth-century thought in Biblical Hebrew had been built up in a long process, going back to the early middle ages, in which each generation benefited from the discoveries of its predecessors. This process included the creation of compounds and new idioms to express concepts not found in the Bible, as well as changes in the meaning of Biblical words, which were thus fitted to fill gaps in the semantic spectrum. While the forms of the words were Biblical, the syntax of *haskalah* literature – except for the Biblical idiomatic phrases – is that of a European language.\(^8\)

Later in the essay, Rabin questions the notion that Abramovitsh's style was either a synthesis or an extension of Haskalah Hebrew:

The amount of Mishnaic and Aramaic elements in the language of Mendele's post-1885 writings goes far beyond anything found in Yiddish and puts his style in the tradition of the mixed style, except for the more conscious artistic form of his language. This suggests that rather than see in his style a 'synthesis' of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew, or an enrichment of *haskalah* Hebrew with Talmudic elements, it would be more correct to define Mendele's innovation as the return of a modern Hebrew writer to the prose language of the last thousand years of Hebrew writing...\(^9\)

This view of Abramovitsh's Hebrew writing, Rabin continues, 'also explains a fact which otherwise would remain close to the miraculous: the


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 18.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 21.
immediate effect his innovation had upon so many writers of his time, and the rapid establishment of the mixed style as the norm of Hebrew writing'. Rabin's essay supports efforts to see beyond the extreme claims of originality made by Abramovitsh and Bialik.

In the letter Abramovitsh wrote to Ravnitzky in 1906, he expresses his discomfort with Ravnitzky's question about which authors he took as his models. Rejecting this form of the question, which would imply a deliberate emulation of precursors, Abramovitsh refers back to his broad studies of Hebrew writing. As Rabin writes in the passage quoted above, 'it would be more correct to define Mendele's innovation as the return of a modern Hebrew writer to the prose language of the last thousand years'.

Perhaps part of the problem is that the nusah was never as coherent a concept as Bialik made it out to be. In some respects, there is continuity rather than a sharp break between the nusah and the style of some of Abramovitsh's precursors. In 1906-1910, during the period when Abramovitsh, Ravnitzky, and Bialik were writing about the nusah, was Abramovitsh really the great originator who had made most of the Hebrew writing since 1886 possible?

Abramovitsh took a crucial step when he moved beyond the biblical melitza of the Haskalah, and there is little doubt that Abramovitsh and Bialik enriched modern Hebrew usage with their vast erudition. It was necessary for Bialik's generation to distance itself from Haskalah writers in a somewhat exaggerated way, in order to assert their identity. As we have seen, in Bialik's figurative description, the new writers 'dug the first ditch between the past and the present and built the first bridges over it'. They 'trampled on the antiquated traditions of our Enlightenment literature' to set themselves apart from it.

Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorisms provide insightful models for the study of epigonism. In Menschliches, Allzumenschliches, he represents influence as a dance in chains:

In Ketten tanzen. – Bei jedem griechischen Künstler, Dichter und Schriftsteller ist zu fragen: Welches is der neue Zwang, den er sich

60. Idem.
auferlegt und den er seinen Zeitgenossen reizvoll macht (so daß er Nachahmer findet)? Denn was man ‘Erfindung’ (im Metrischen zum Beispiel) nennt, ist immer eine solche selbstgelegte Fessel. ‘In Ketten tanzen’, es sich schwer machen und dann die Täuschung der Leichtigkeit darüber breiten – das ist das Kunststück, welches sie uns zeigen wollen. Schon bei Homer ist eine Fülle von vererbten Formeln und epischen Erzählungsgesetzen wahrzunehmen, innerhalb deren er tanzen mußte: und er selber schuf neue Konventionen für die Kommenden hinzu. Dies war die Erziehungsschule der griechischen Dichter: zuerst also einen vielfältigen Zwang sich auflegen lassen, durch die früheren Dichter; sodann einen neuen Zwang hinzufinden, ihn sich auflegen und ihn anmutig besiegen: so daß Zwang und Sieg bemerkt und bewundert werden. (#140)

Dancing in chains. – With every Greek artist, poet and writer, one may ask: what is the new compulsion, which he imposes upon himself and which he makes attractive to his contemporaries (so that he finds imitators)? For what one calls ‘invention’ (in metrics, for example) is always such a self-imposed shackle. ‘Dancing in chains’, making it hard for oneself and then spreading the illusion of facility – that is the trick they want to show us. Already in Homer can one perceive an abundance of inherited formulas and epic narrative precepts, within which he must dance; and he himself created new conventions for those to come. This was the training school of Greek poets: first submitting to a multifaceted compulsion, through the earlier poets; then inventing a new compulsion, submitting to it and gracefully conquering it, so that the compulsion and its conquest are admired.

According to this graphic portrayal, the creative artist essentially establishes new constraints and then performs masterfully within them. When later artists feel drawn to imitate that dance, the prior artist becomes a classic exemplar.

Bialik’s theory of the nusah follows in Nietzsche’s footsteps. When he wants to explain that the nusah was essential to Hebrew authors, he writes that:

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The creation of a nusah means: giving a fixed form to the thoughts and feelings of the generation, and thereby facilitating the process of

both of them. The creator of the literary nusah supports his generation, and the people of average talent in his generation, in thinking their thoughts and feeling their feelings. He introduces discipline into their spirit and organises their inner world.

In Bialik's discussion, Abramovitsh's importance as a Hebrew author revolves around the literary model he provided by means of the nusah. On the surface this contribution seems to foster liberation rather than a dance in chains, because the synthetic style is supposed to free authors from the constraints of melitza. Yet Nietzsche's portrayal helps us see why authors such as Y.H. Brenner perceived the nusah as an obstacle to their creative processes.

To conclude, I return to Bialik's image of Abramovitsh as the Torah scribe in the painting by Israels. What was wrong with that image, perhaps leading to its omission from the Yiddish translation of this essay? Associating the Grandfather with a copyist evidently diminishes his claim to originality. At the same time, it links him to the Haskalah writers who were deliberate epigones of biblical style. Bialik may have spoken more truly than he realised, or than Abramovitsh wished, because it now appears that the so-called nusah was not as original as Bialik claimed. Instead of seeing all Hebrew writers after Abramovitsh as his epigones, we need to place his Hebrew in 'the continuum of modern literary Hebrew'. As Rabin points out, this continuum includes Hassidic literature and traditional rabbinic writings of the mitnagdim – both of which were far more popular than maskilic literature. For this reason, I have alluded to another axis that derives from and turns against Hassidic writing, from Perl to Peretz. Implicitly relying on translation from Yiddish, it provided an independent model, an alternative to the nusah.

The most distinctive aspect of the nusah might best be associated with a technique: searching out obscure corners of the Hebrew lexicon, reclaiming words that were forgotten or poorly understood, and applying them to modern concepts or realia. Some of these novel usages stuck and became widespread, while others remained obscure and were better suited to poetry, with its higher register. Perhaps for this reason, Bialik's poetry is still central to the canon of Hebrew and Israeli poetry, while
Abramovitsh's Hebrew stories are seldom read by Israelis today. Twenty-first century Israeli fiction is heir to the anti-*nusah*, which developed in conjunction with the low, popular Hebrew of Hassidic and neo-Hassidic writing. As I have argued, the translation model has ultimately defeated the *nusah*, at least in the realm of prose and everyday usage.

Much as Sholem Aleichem began to establish his Yiddish literary lineage by referring to Abramovitsh as Grandfather, Bialik named himself a Hebrew disciple and successor to Abramovitsh by framing the theory of the *nusah*. In some ways, the students surpassed the master: Sholem Aleichem was ultimately more successful in conveying the illusion of a speaking voice, while Bialik's appropriation of the *nusah* for poetry was more effective than its use in prose.

Who, then, was the great original, and who were the epigones? According to Bialik's exaggerated theory of the *nusah*, Abramovitsh was the prose originator and all subsequent Hebrew writers would be his epigones; Bialik transferred the *nusah* to poetry and became 'the national poet'. Abramovitsh was the Grandfather but never the national Hebrew or Jewish writer – in part, because his fiction was so closely associated with the diaspora. Perhaps this justifies Bialik's image of Abramovitsh as Israel's Torah scribe: far from Zion, he wrote himself into the Hebrew literary tradition.

As Zionism carried the Torah back to the Land of Israel, to be read and chanted by the new generation, Bialik carried to Palestine the literary Torah of Abramovitsh's *nusah*. In a post-Zionist era, however, it is becoming more possible to recognise the limitations of Grandfather Abramovitsh's Torah – and to see that his Hebrew scribal art was unable to convey the richness of his original Yiddish fiction. After Abramovitsh and Bialik, Hebrew epigonism was more a virtual programme than a certainty. They had few epigones among native Hebrew speakers, because their literary form relied so heavily on ancient and medieval sources that could not keep pace with colloquial usage. The popular Israeli writers today, when they follow European models, sometimes move closer to the folk Hebrew tradition of the Hassidic stories told by Nahman of Bratslav and written down by his scribe, Nathan Sternharz.