

THE READERS IN THE TEXT: THE AUDIENCE OF JOSEPH HAYYIM BRENNER

by

WILLIAM CUTTER

Hebrew Union College

Los Angeles, California

This paper is about the tension between individual and audience as we see it in the prose writing of Joseph Hayyim Brenner, the most influential writer of the Second Aliyah.¹ The tension is basic, since most narrative prose proposes a conflict between a protagonist and his or her society. It arouses Hebrew readership with particular force because of the peculiarities of the Palestine community of 1910-1920. What audience is appropriate for a literature of melancholy written during a period of national revival? How is that audience related to us? Models of literary criticism which concentrate on the audience within the text as well as readers offer some new tools for examining the range of questions about readership then and now: the earlier group depressed by its tiny size, and perplexed by the community/individual struggle; the contemporary community exhilarated by the struggle and by the continued existence of the audience.

Three different questions inform this discussion. First is: "Who were Brenner's readers?" The second: "To what extent is a reader from this audience addressed within the stories?" And the third: "Is Brenner's ideal reader different from the other two kinds?" The question "who were Brenner's readers?" is a question for social history which leads us into one of the most fascinating cultural periods of modern Jewish life. The other questions lead us into an area which is relatively new to critical thought. The subject at hand, combined with some critical materials, should provide a fruitful opportunity to examine both a theme and a method.

Audience considerations in literary criticism are by no means new; they

1. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Josef Ewen, whose work on Brenner and Brenner's generation is basic to all who study that material.

were a concern of Aristotle, Horace and Longinus, and certainly continued through such contemporary scholars as Watt (1957) who explained the rise of the novel, and Abrams (1953) and Booth (1961) who called attention to the neglect of audience in rhetoric. But recently a more concentrated force has been drawn together to consider the full complexity of audience relation to literary text; and only recently has the ontological status of a work been questioned so boldly through such critics as Wolfgang Iser (1980).²

Newly popular areas of critical inquiry are susceptible to labels which may appear clumsy at first, but the concepts which the paper introduces suggest that aspects of this method may help move studies of Jewish audience into new literary context.

Jonathan Culler (1975) has reminded us of something which we surely know by instinct: that a narrative has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which a "competent" reader has assimilated. But that competency may be achieved in a variety of ways, and need not be limited to those readers who come to the conventions naturally. A reader may be able to imagine the assimilation of conventions; or he/she may become a fully "mock" reader, by projecting the self to fit the context. Beyond the question of what a reader must do to read a work, and beyond the particular qualifications that may join us to the literature of the Second Aliyah or may create barriers for us, there lies another issue. To what extent did Brenner anticipate readers like us as an ideal audience or even address those readers as "narratee", a term developed by Gerald Prince (1980). A narratee resides within the text, not as the reader the author has in mind, but as a fictive character. Theoretically, a reader of the 1980's may have the characteristics of a reader of the 1920's whom an author might imagine. Readers from both the 20's and the 80's may qualify as a "narratee", and as an ideal reader, although the two are not identical.

The study of audience when placed within the domain of reader response criticism, one can see, moves us from audience as a subject of social history into audience as specific literary fact. This, in turn, leads us into the question of public vs. private meaning; and will add to the continuing interest in the considerable literary achievement of Brenner, whose "oeuvre" was completed in a twenty year period between 1900 and 1920. In that period he worked in three places, Homel, London, and finally Pal-

2. Cf. Iser (1980, p. 106):

The work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization, but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism.

estine. The gradual shift of Hebrew Literature from European to Palestinian provenance was obviously a factor in the peculiar optimism and pessimism which writers felt about the potential size of their audience. Certainly the presence or absence of an audience affects an author's sense of an ideal reader who resides in his imagination, and perhaps within the story as a narratee. The overlap is difficult in theory and the mix is more formidable when we consider Brenner. Many of his essays are about audience, readership, and the effects of literature on readers: many of his stories speak directly to an audience as "narratee"; and yet much of his literature appears to be private rumination. But all of his writing must have had an ideal reader. His private artistic values often neglected the importance of audience and communal continuity even as he served as publicist and moralizer. Brenner's attention to audience as community, and his rejection of community may be partly typical of the Bohemian who resides within every author. But the contrast is not to be ignored, since it involves cultural survival. Lamdan once summarized the irony (1955, p. 281) with an innocent question: "How is it that from the readers of Berditchewski and Brenner and the haters of Israel there emerged a pioneer generation, plowers and reapers, those who made the desert bloom?" The social climate of the time is now well-documented from the perspective of social and literary history,³ and is certainly among the issues of the literature itself. But continued attention to the reader within the text and the reader for whom the text is designed ought to help us deal more intelligently with the fact that writers are often canonized by the very communities the writers reject. Such thought may create a new phase in the understanding of Brenner, since we need to make even more compatible the separate fields of social history, psychology, and literary criticism.

Many works include audience within their fictive world. There are the obvious kinds of narratee whom we have all met: the "dear reader" or the auditor to someone's tale—whether Coleridge's wedding guest, or Portnoy's psychiatrist. But narratees may exist just as well within novels where we as readers do not have the prominence of the "dear reader," or where there is no surprise character whose appearance at the end of a novel requires a re-reading of the story. The narratee's relationship to an ideal reader is more elusive than narrator relationship to author, a more familiar problem on which Brenner critics have toiled for some time. (Ewen, 1977 & Fleck, 1981). Brenner's audience occurs as "dear reader" in many of his

3. See Brinker, Miron, Shaked, Shapira, and Shavit. See also Cordova's and Herzog's interesting essay distinguishing intellectuals from intelligentsia (1978).

works, especially in the author's introductions, but that audience appears even more often through some opaque literary strategies which present a greater challenge to us. The challenge can be a bit easier when we keep in mind aspects of the social setting out of which Brenner's readers came.

By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, post-Haskala optimism about Hebrew culture had degenerated (Miron, 1981). Examples are numerous. Editors of *Happô'el hassá'ir* first contemplated publishing in Yiddish (ben Nahum, 1971), although a shift to Hebrew was made reluctantly so that non-Europeans would at least not be excluded from the readership. A Yeshivah student from the Ukraine named Brenner began his literary career in the midst of a cultural revival which was fraught with ambivalence: the period and the man suited each other. The paradox is stated simply by Miron (1981) and Shaked (1977 and 1979): the writers at the turn of the century had more in common with readers who were likely to have "passed" into universal culture. The universal intellectual conventions of the literature suited one kind of audience, and the Jewish conventions another. The situation threatened the production of literary materials, and especially journals, but it was re-enforced among the writers who struggled between the intrigue of individualism with all of its discoveries and the imperatives of the community with its search for collective morality. That community needed the perpetuation nourished by the collective conventions of the Jewish world; and Brenner, in his role as popularizer and publicist, was part of it. But he was also the chronicler of the tensions shared by those who rejected community. Stanley Nash (1980) has written of the radical expression of that tension in suggesting that just writing in Hebrew, even to nihilistic ends, was redemptive. We cannot yet be certain that this notion captures the psychology of the time, for it may only be current perspective which prompts it. The fascination with Christianity shares in this discussion, for—as expressed in Hurwitz—it comes down to a liberation of the individual from the collective (p. 272).

Brenner's Palestine experience was one of ambivalence and despair, and the shared melancholy of his comrades. Indeed he helped define it. Anita Shapira (1980, pp. 45 ff) describes a Jaffa port which was as busy with people leaving Palestine as with people coming: a metaphor for that despair. The *Yerîdôt* and *'Aliyyôt* which she describes are apt pictures for some of Brenner's works. It was the title of his 1912 essay on the subject, (Brenner, " 'Aliyyôt . . . ") and served as an image for early titles of sections of his last novel (Cutter and Ewen, 1974).

Brenner wrote within a milieu which lacked a European center, and which—at least to Brenner's way of thinking—lacked a Palestinian Center.

He cynically reminded a hopeful Galician Shofman not to be too excited about being published in Brenner's *Hammē'ōrēr*, since only ten Galician readers subscribed anyway (Brenner, 1908, Letter #337). The question of Hebrew readership found explicit expression in *Missābīb lannequddāh* of 1908, where Abramson and Davidowitz ask each other why Abramson continues to write stories in Hebrew for such a narrow and meager audience. Shaked, in his general history (1977, pp. 3-31, and chap. 5), notes that Brenner's coterie was a group of writers without an audience, "pioneers for no followers." Yet the act of writing has an optimistic quality which may make us apprehend Brenner's lament as the more subjective projection of the writer's own personality. In that spirit, Zohar Shavit (1979) has suggested that the relative size of the readership of the Second Aliyah period was, in fact, quite robust. Thus, one could say that even if Brenner wrote only for "people like myself," or for his coterie, he may have had a sense that the coterie would have a kind of spiritual future, and perhaps even a future nourished by the kind of figure his ideal reader represents.

Fichman (1960, p. 192), made a statement whose syntax captures the two sides of the problem. Brenner, he said, "was a folk writer who never addressed the folk. His community was not the people, but the kernel which sprung from the people, (or which, perhaps, the new people had given rise to). A new kind of person!" There is an ambiguity in the antecedents in Hebrew syntax which suggests the two sides of our problem: the springing of an individual from a community, or the springing of a community from an individual.

The proposed misreading of Fichman's notion underscores the conviction that there is a future implied within the Brenner texts themselves, suggesting a future within the very literature of despair which seems to deny it. The conventions which Brenner's ideal reader and sometimes fictive narratee share with our pool of readers evidence that optimism.

Among the most telling links is suggested early in *Šekōl vekiššālōn*, Brenner's final and major novel. The narrator, as introduced in the frame opening, is merely "reporting the protagonist's diary" and this confusion of authorship serves as a model for confusion in readership. As the story within the story begins, Hefetz, the protagonist, suffers a hernia lifting wheat onto a wagon. His hernia is immediately associated both with sexual inadequacy and physical inability, a metaphor, some would suggest, for writers who tried to be laborers. A subsequent emotional collapse triggers memories within the members of the *Qevūšah* where Hefetz has returned after sojourn in Europe. The narrator reports that peoples' scorn for him on this previous occasion might have been diminished had they been able

to blame his bizarre behavior on moral concern for the welfare of the community. But they had no patience for the privateness of emotional breakdown. Yehezkel Hefetz ruminates on the relationship of his private emotions to the collective destiny of the people, wondering himself about responsibility to the collective. But the narrator (presumably Hefetz, but confused intentionally) has a broader set of concerns: Is the sickness within this individual a function of the sickness without? Is it a symbol for that sickness? Is collective sickness the sum total of the private sicknesses, and thus more than a symbol? How are the readers supposed to react to this in light of the introduction to the novel which records a mental collapse? Clearly, private pre-occupations are set in opposition to community needs. A reader committed to the importance of private concerns is posited. And it must be a reader who apprehends the narrator's contempt for that community.

This moment of memory occurs during the occasionally hilarious scene at the meeting of the *Qevūsāh*, where the community which is charged with redeeming the nation cannot even decide which hospital should receive their outsider-member who has experienced a hernia.

For Brenner, as for Berditchewski, the bridge to the future is only the individual; although Brinker (p. 24) underscores the fact that it is not a sure bridge at all. The emancipation of the individual (which attracted Hurwitz) can mean the springing free from the community to do something beneficial at last. Each community portrait within *Šekōl vekiššālōn* is almost a parody of gracelessness. The "breakdown" of people is ugly when we see it in clusters of people but more sympathetically viewed when seen in private individuals. This is not unlike the response we have in our daily routines when the behavior of a group offends even as the habits of an individual within that group are viewed sympathetically. Brenner understood this psychological phenomenon and capitalized on it within his stories. Goldman, the entrepreneur, surrounds himself with a crowd of sycophants, but Hefetz's part within that crowd has positive resonance. The *Qevūsāh* is hapless and greedy, but Hefetz keeps returning to it; and the hospital community is the gathering place for the rejects of the earth, but those incapacitated become the characters we care about. The connection between Jesus and the little old Jewish ladies who hover in the courtyard of the hospital is incongruous, but the pastoral attentions of people towards Hefetz are not ridiculous at all, and retain a "Christian" quality. Jerusalem in general contains the ruptured collective; but the herniated individual has redeeming qualities which are not ridiculous.

Brenner's narratee shares much of the emotional distance we have from

his community; and that distance makes possible the absorption of the story's ironies when we identify with the narratee. Hefetz's decision to work for Goldman is partial rejection of his prior isolation and self-indulgence, and is a positive step in terms of personal psychological health; but the reader who has assimilated certain conventions (as in Culler's formula) understands the irony of the protagonist solving personal problems in the den of a foolish bourgeois. The narrator is as perplexed about the value of the action as are readers of 1980's Western Europe and America, whose intellectual conventions may make them feel smothered by community bonds of the kind which Goldman represents. The next step is the suggestion that this contemporary reader is an ideal reader.

The ironies within the novel's architecture of ironies may be stronger because they are experienced by readers who themselves are tempted to identify with communal behavior even as they reject it. That closeness to both poles, the self and the collective, makes the competent reader susceptible to some of the optimistic suggestiveness of *Šeqōl veḳiššālōn*. The reader's role thus enhances the case for the bits of affirmation which some critics have found in the novel. Positive acts are appreciated because they comport with our values or with one pole of our value system. We represent a suitable audience for Brenner. Might we have been more like his intended audience than his own readership? We are, after all, like those people of his essay "*Aliyyōt vīrīdōt*" who didn't make it in Palestine, the seed and spiritual heirs of the Europeans who have become a part of his audience.

Some peculiar elements within the novel require an audience different from the anticipated audience of Brenner's immediate environment. Hefetz's hernia, his responses to his own sexual behavior, and the way in which dreams are portrayed can be understood best by an audience of our training, competence, and proclivity. It is particularly suitable for a reader in the 1980's, for example, to understand that a character would have guilt feelings from a lack of sexual resolution, but not for a reader contemporaneous with Brenner, who might have experienced guilt feelings for having sexual fantasies in the first place. Similarly, we bring a kind of sophistication to our understanding of Hefetz's dream processes which is suitable to Brenner's intentions. The dreams, though clearly meant to metonymize emotional distortion, are like the dreams of the healthy dreamer. Thus, according to our conventions, while we project back as mock readers and understand the convention in his terms, we bring also an understanding of our terms. Hefetz is ill and well at the same time. So it is that a hernia which, in the conventions of that period, had a specific dramatic meaning

attached to it, is actually used to make more comic and peculiar the entire connection with mental illness and sexual guilt. We understand the conventions of that time, but we still have a comic "dated" feelings about them because we hold on to ours. We understand the conventions of that time, and we bring to the events the conventions of our time. We also combine the two times through the overlapping of the conventions: the hernia is comic and serious at the same time because of the overlapping conventions of overlapping readership. Brenner would have liked this complexity.

The power of the individual reader to effect the meaning of the story is also aided by the quantity of individual ruminations addressed to individual readers. We may identify with the redemptive processes which Brenner adumbrated in a series of trial titles for the novel, or for its major sections: "In the Cauldron"; "The Last Descent"; "On the Verge of Relief"; etc. The negative in each of these titles is matched by possible hermeneutic shifts: the cauldron is where you get purified; descent can precede the last ascent; on the verge of relief implies hopefulness. This kind of shift may also occur in Brenner's cry that he and Berditchewski were the last ones on the wall (*Hamme'ôrér*, Jan. 1906). At least there is someone on the wall.

There is a future for Brenner's narrator and his narratee. The future reader, someone like those of us who read criticism, is metonymized in the lives of several of the characters, once these characters undergo some metamorphosis ("*Gilgûlîm*" was another one of Brenner's trial titles). That metonymy is underscored in the most literal way in the frame opening of the story: "someone will always be interested in the problems of the embattled emotional sufferer." Key characters within the story turn out to display different characteristics or different destinies than the narrator had led us to expect. They change, and we (perhaps the reader become narratee) change. Uncle Hayim is able, after all, to rebound after the death of his son; Esther is able to gird her loins and assert herself over Hefetz—perhaps to the end that she will someday ungird her loins for the right man; Hamilin, the sexually depraved "fraud" physician turns out to be a decent fellow once he is removed from purely imaginary existence in Hefetz's mind (once he is out from under the definition of Goldman's community as well). Hefetz, the sick, becomes a healer. These changes create a dynamic climate which implies a future for reader and for characters. This story has a perpetual continuation through the frame opening which has no symmetrical conclusion. So it is that the narrator's statement that the problems of individuals will always be with us in an affirmation of the fact that there will always be individuals to read this story. The collective may not always be around to read as a collective, but there will always be indi-

viduals springing free from the community. Those individuals are Brenner's audience, and they must also be his projected readers, sometimes residing in the text as narratee, and sometimes restricted to the status of an ideal audience.

Brenner's manuscript changes also reflect a kind of optimism which promises a future audience. Hefetz, in the original rendering of the introduction, is a suicide whose diary is left behind for the writer/narrator. But in the final edition of the manuscript, illness replaces death. Very soon we learn that the problem "of the sick individuals" is more enduring and that the glorious days of community quickly tarnish. We are still sick, after all. Yehezkel Hefetz's name changes over a six year period of redaction from that of the false messiah Alroi (see Ewen and Cutter) to a name suggesting three modifications of the original false hope: Yehezkel Hefetz—desire, a vessel in which there is no delight, and a prophetic first name suggesting affirmation and despair, rejection and acceptance. The wandering of Brenner's characters from exile to exile, and from privacy to involvement with community has been noted by nearly anyone who has worked with this material. But not enough work has been done about the effect of these "*gilgūlim*" upon readership, nor about Brenner's motives for these adjustments in terms of both his projected audience and his fictive listener.

Formal aspects of style may strengthen narratee identity, and points to a reader like us. The lack of simpler utterance within Brenner's characters' language, a legendary aggravation to Bialik, represents a rejection of one set of conventions and of community, but brings individual readers into the novel's mode of communication. Some of the long speeches within the novel, failures from a theatrical point of view, strengthen the role of narratee and actually give our kind of reader a place. Seated around the table in the uncles' Jerusalem apartment, we participate in those endless pedantic sessions more easily even if we are impatient with the discourse (see Chapter 3, Section I for the best example of this point).

We must examine, as well, the other introductions which make us aware that only an individual in acting self-consciously as an individual will respond to the stories which our narrator is about to write. The introductions are not uniform, but each of them shares some intimacy with the imaginary reader regarding the provenance of the story.

The later introductions say more about the nature of the audience, for added to the apology is a specific consciousness about the nature of readership, its responsibilities, and indeed the compatibility between the text and audience. In *Mikkān 'umikkān* the problem is the very simple one of reader interest: will a story about Eretz Yisrael interest anyone? And the

fictional publisher determines that it will. Will a story written in realistic to naturalistic style have appeal? And once again the publisher decides in the affirmative. *Šeqōl vekiššālōn*, as we have already noted, affirms that the sufferings of individuals are relevant even in times when communal issues (in all their intensity) dominate the public agenda. The problems will be with us forever, and so will the audience for those problems. This is a kind of optimism suggested by A. D. Gordon's affirmation that we had better keep culture alive because once the war is over we will need culture again (ben-Nahum, p. 12). But for Brenner it will be a culture in which individual problems are boldly probed against a background of communality. We must save the literature so that we can once again experience those positive sentiments towards individuals who reject the community and whom the community rejects.

The ultimate case for attention to the individual reader is in the introduction to "*Mahatāllā*," a more realized statement about an ideal reader and perhaps narratee. Here the narrator announces that if one does not have the same honesty and pain with which this story is written, reading it will do more harm than good. The implication of danger suggests an emotional threat to the non-competent reader. If one kind of reader may become ill reading the work, we can suggest that another kind of reader may become well.

This paper suggests that Brenner's preoccupation with the individual as character is parallel to his preoccupation with the individual as reader. The introduction to the final two works, *Šeqōl vekiššālōn* and "*Mahatāllā*" are keys to the discussion. Concerns with "particular" and "general" reflected in both theme and format, and the fact that these stories promote a sense of individual redemption (which capture just the faintest touch of Christian private charity), make it possible for the individual reader to participate in the narrative content independent of his community. The issues which have caused the political right wing to reject much of Brenner for his cosmopolitanism (read non-nationalism) make it possible for the greatest number of individuals to read him. The individual character and reader is still the most universal figure we have; the collective in its apparent broader implication is still the narrowest, both as character and as audience. Only certain kinds of reader could be addressed with this point, and those readers have a particularly contemporary sensitivity.

Within a short time after Brenner's death, a dying Franz Kafka was struggling to learn Hebrew and to read Brenner's final novel. He wrote to Max Brod that the reading of *Šeqōl vekiššālōn* was taking too much effort and that it was not a very good novel. But he was intrigued by that "un-

happiness in Palestine" (Kafka, p. 388). Somehow in that historical datum lies a prefiguring of nearly sixty years since Kafka's struggle for other readers to become part of Brenner's audience. For Kafka was a writer distanced from his community and closer to ours. In the same way there is surely continuing evidence that the readers of the 60's - 80's can see themselves not only as suitable readers, but even as ideal audiences. And there is reason to suggest that Brenner addresses a reader of the 1980's who, although concerned about the moral destiny of community, understands the personal dilemmas which that concern creates.

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* Since this paper was developed, Zohar Shavit has published a more thorough investigation of cultural life in the *yiššūv*, entitled *Hahayyim hassifrūtiyyim be'eres yisra'el 1910-1933* (Tel-Aviv, 1983).