

DISCOVERIES OF READING:
STORIES OF CHILDHOOD
BY BIALIK, SHAHAR, AND ROTH

by

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Hayyim Nahman Bialik's *Aftergrowth* (*Sāpīah*, 1908), Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), and David Shahar's "First Lesson" ("Ši'ur rišōn," 1966) treat widely differing milieus and periods of history: Bialik in his fiction deals with an Eastern European village at the end of the 1900s, Roth with immigrant New York at the turn of the century, and Shahar with Jerusalem of the Mandate period. These three texts, nonetheless, share in common a central concern for childhood, and they focus prominently on a child's apprehension and mastery of language. The narratives render with exceptional sensitivity ways in which words mediate between the private, inner worlds of their young protagonists and the external social worlds with which those characters must contend. As a result, these works all also call special attention to ways in which language contributes to the child's emerging sense of self and growing awareness of his relationship to his surroundings, his culture, and Jewish tradition. The diversity of settings here—a diversity which reflects the dispersion of modern Jewish life—allows a comparative study of *Aftergrowth*, *Call It Sleep*, and "First Lesson" to put into relief divergent attempts by young people at self definition and at forging their own sense of Jewish identity.

In each of these narratives, one experience of language which has special impact on the child involves a first encounter with religious texts. These are particularly memorable episodes, for two interrelated reasons. First, each protagonists' initial contact with scripture forces him to reconcile discrepancies between formal religious training and his own personal intimations of the sacred or the divine. Secondly, learning to read—for each boy—means grappling in an intense way with limitations of verbal symbols. While the struggle with language crystallizes the religious problems here, the religious questions reinforce the significance of the linguistic ones. Such interaction comes about because all three narratives

feature extraordinarily impressionable young characters, whose deeply personal, highly individual perceptions of the world border on mystical vision and resist verbal formulation. As each discovers, through the discovery of reading, that language consists of signs and that no inherent, natural link binds signifiers to signifieds, these boys feel keenly the difficulty of communicating their own experiences of mystery, awe, or wonder. Consequently, they feel more acutely their own aloneness, and they retreat from trying to explain to others their innermost, most meaningful thoughts. The pain of this experience profoundly colors the response of each boy in his exposure to Judaism.

Disappointment

Bialik's *Sāpīah*, opening with a reverie on wonder, approaches these various matters by first exalting its protagonist's private, imaginative grasp of the world. The character, Shmulik, narrates as he looks back on childhood from the perspective of maturity, and he reminisces at length on the pervasive sense of reverence and amazement which suffused his early days. He states, for example:

I was surprised by everything: the ticking of the grandfather clock, the shadow and stains on the wall, the silence of an empty room, the darkness under the bed, the slippers lying there, the fine motes in the sunbeams that slanted through the window, dust in the air—all these were mysteries, elemental secrets which call for examination (p. 56).¹

That these concerns are directly related to issues of language soon becomes apparent, as the narrator comments on the ineffable quality of his childhood wonder. The child here, delighting above all in nature, experiences its miracles as both preceding and exceeding language. The phenomena he witnesses are prelinguistic, in the sense that the boy does not need language to apprehend them; they form part of a "primal, archetypal universe" (p. 39), and the child encounters them at an age when he does not yet "know how to ask questions or call things by their name" (p. 40). In addition, God's sights, as they are called, defy communication, for they are more profound than words and come to the little boy from "fathomless deeps of silence" (p. 42). Significantly, since language would be inadequate to express such visions, the visions possess a language of their own. The narrator explains:

There would be neither utterance nor speech; nothing but a seeing. What speech there was in all these had neither voice nor sound. A magical

1. Quotations from *Aftergrowth* in this paper are drawn from the English translation by I. M. Lask (1939). Page numbers from "First Lesson" refer to the English version of the story in *News From Jerusalem* (1974).

speech it was, that came as required. Though sound as such had been sublimated therefrom, yet it was fully existent as speech. Myself, I never heard it with my ears; it entered my soul through some other, hidden portal. In some such way the throbbing heart of a mother and her loving gaze reach the soul of the baby asleep in its cradle when she stands tremulous at his head (p. 42).

Shahar's narrator, David, like Bialik's Shmulik, also exhibits a remarkable capacity for wonder. His story opens with the following explanation:

In the Beginning was the miracle, and the miracle was, and is, and will be to be marveled at always.

As for me, I have not stopped marveling to this day, to the writing of these very lines. . . —and I am thirty-nine years old. And not only have I not stopped marveling, but the marveling increases from day to day, against all expectations and even, it might be said, against all ideas of decorum and good taste (p. 209).

As does *Sāpīah*, this narrative, too, recounts an early experience of awe: here, a first glimpse of the night sky in Jerusalem. At the age of three, riding in his father's arms, David greets this sight with a mixture of fascination, terror, and longing:

"Those are the stars," said my father, and added, "the host of Heaven." Somewhere a door creaked open and a stream of light poured out of the crack which opened in the blank dark wall, reaching the foot of the cypress tree which stood in our yard and wrapping its trunk in a mantle of day. Soft chill tongues of wind whispered between the branches, bringing with them from afar, from beyond the tombs of the Sanhedrin, a smell of damp earth and small humming, cricking, buzzing voices, the voices of night animals suddenly signaling and suddenly stopping, and the existence of the surrounding mountains—the mountains of Nebi Samwil and Sheikh Jarrah and Mount Scopus—was present and breath-stopping and heavy with the weight of an ancient-breathed quality, terrible in its dimensions, which were beyond the dimensions of man, and its eternities which were beyond the eternity of man, and in its indifference to the little men stirring on its back (p. 210).

Although "First Lesson" does not articulate the matter in so clear and expository a way as did *Sāpīah*, this boy as well beholds a vision both before and beyond language. The nocturnal scene depicted here bears primordial qualities which surpass the dimensions of man and so also the limits of that most human of things, language. The passage suggests, moreover, that the night, like Shmulik's miraculous natural world, has a language of its own: for David, a mixture of animal voices and natural sounds conveys evidence of metaphysical immensities and mysterious phenomena transcending the here and now.

Roth's protagonist, Davey, is a bit older than these other boys when he undergoes a comparable, privileged moment of insight or epiphany. Sitting by the side of a wharf at the age of seven or eight, this child marvels, spellbound, at sunlight flashing brightly on the water. We read,

Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. His spirit yielded, melted into light. In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped. Smokestacks fused to palings flickering in silence by. Pale lathes grew grey, turned dusky, contracted and in the swimming dimness, he saw sparse teeth that gnawed upon a lip and ladders on the ground turned into hasty fingers pressing on a thigh and again smokestacks. Straight in air they stood a moment, only to fall on silvered cardboard corrugating brilliance. And he heard the rubbing on a washboard and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion—Brighter than day . . . Brighter . . . Sin melted into light . . .

Uh chugchug ug!

—Cucka cucka . . . Is a chicken . . .

Uhchug ug chch ch—Tew weet!

—No . . . Can't be

Ug chug, ug chug, ug—TEW WEET!

What! He started as if out of a dream (pp. 247–48).

This is a trancelike moment, in which Davey undergoes a multisensual or, perhaps, suprasensual experience of breathtaking fascination that defies easy expression. Again here, indicating that Davey, like his counterparts in *Aftergrowth* and “First Lesson”, is transported beyond conventional language, we find a voice (“speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion”) which conveys not ordinary speech, but a mysterious language from another, more dreamlike world.

All three boys, indeed, are inveterate daydreamers. Shy and sensitive youngsters, they revel in these otherworldly, magical kinds of language, but communicate very little with other children or, for that matter, adults. Everyday conversation and exchange, by comparison with their inner lives, seem to them a diminishment of richness. They in turn are seen by others as somewhat alien, withdrawn and unable to keep up with the rough and tumble of children their age. Conflict between ordinary language and the language of the imagination comes to a head when these children attend school, for reading lessons, with their emphasis on phonics, accentuate the mechanics of verbal symbols and draw attention to the arbitrary, conventionally agreed upon nature of signs. In the course of learning to read, David, Davey, and Shmulik find—to their great disappointment—that language is not identical with experiences they wish to communicate. Words, they realize, do not possess a

magic capacity to capture, directly and with immediacy, their own perceptions. Young children in general share an inclination to equate words with entities to which they refer, and are reluctant to relinquish that misapprehension.² The children in these fictions, however, learn more rudely and abruptly than most of the rift between word and world; since they ask that much more of language than do others, they more quickly discover its limitations.

Shmulik, for his part, at first disregards the distance between the nonlinguistic realm and what he sees on the printed page. Trying to invest the alphabet with a mimetic quality, he sees letters not as signs which correspond to phonetic equivalents, but as icons that conjure up his own imaginary beings. In this way he comes to fancy the *aleps* as soldiers, "all arms swinging and legs striding" (p. 60), and he sees the *šin* as a horned snake with three heads, while the *lamed* becomes a stork, "stretching out its neck and standing on one leg" (p. 62). Altogether he finds in his prayer book "a vast medley of weird creatures" (p. 63).³ However, for his failure to grasp the nonmimetic nature of language and for his inability to master the alphabet, Shmulik meets with the derision of the other children; even worse, he brings upon himself the wrath and punishment of the teacher, a cruel, ill-tempered man who appears here as the veritable stereotype of the hateful *melammēd*. With no outlet for his imagination at school, this little boy draws back into his own shell and shuns both reading and the companionship of the other pupils.⁴

2. This inseparability of words and their referents in the minds of children is attested to by Vygotsky (1962), who writes:

When children are asked whether it is possible to replace the name of one object with that of another, for instance to call a cow ink, and ink a cow, they answer that it is entirely impossible, because ink is used for writing and the cow gives milk. The exchange of name means for them also the exchange of the qualities of the objects, so close and inseparable is the connection between the two (p. 129).

3. Diane Roskies (1979) documents that such comparisons were commonly used as mnemonic devices in *heder* pedagogy. Bialik does not emphasize the conventionality of the images; instead, the text seems to present the images as products of the child's imagination. The author may have supposed that his contemporary readers were largely familiar with *heder* education, and so it would be superfluous to comment on methods of instruction. At any rate the iconic comparisons here take on importance as they take on a life of their own in Shmulik's mind, impeding rather than aiding his learning.

4. Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) refer to this scene in *Aftergrowth* to illustrate their central thesis, i.e., that children can easily be taught to read if only more attention is paid to meaning, that is, to subjects of inherent appeal to children, and less to phonics and spelling. The main point of their argument has its merits, but this application of the scene from *Sāpiah* is inappropriate. After all, Shmulik does not in fact succeed in reading here. To the contrary, this episode in the story emphasizes his failure at schooling, even as it suggests the unappealing rote learning which was one typical facet of *heder* education.

Shahar's David in his turn discovers the division of word and world quite suddenly during a bible class, when he finds that the reciting of sacred words does not necessarily invoke or reenact the events to which they refer. The adult narrator notes,

[. . .] when my teacher read aloud during the Bible lesson the words "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep," the quality of the elements made tangible in the darkness suddenly welled up in me unendurably. "And God said, Let there be light," and in the wall of darkness a crack was revealed and the imprisoned light burst through it to wrap the rocks and clods of earth in a mantle of day. I had sensed the things as they were, from inside myself, and the written and spoken words garbed them in phrases like currency which could be passed from hand to hand, from one man to another. On hearing these words from the mouth of my teacher, Mr. Avisar for the first time, I waited with a pounding heart for a miracle like the miracle of the first night to happen (p. 217).

Subsequently David fails to read properly from the text, for he is "waiting for the voice of God." Though divine words, according to Genesis, did indeed initiate and enact creation, here they have lost that power. Nothing happens, and, as was the case previously for Shmulik, David's inappropriate estimation of what language can do invites both misunderstanding and embarrassment. The teacher and the other students take his silence, erroneously, for ignorance, and another child is called on to read. As this one takes his turn, rattling off the entire passage like a poem recited by heart, David remains quiet and humiliated. Taken aback by such superficial reading without regard for meaning, he nonetheless does not defend himself nor explain what happened; recognizing that a formidable barrier divides private and public experience, he prefers to suffer shame rather than allow the teacher to enter his intimate thoughts too deeply and "start fumbling about with the delicately tuned strings inside" (p. 218).⁵

Rote verbal learning also oppresses Roth's Davey in his *heder* class. *Call It Sleep*, however, emphasizes the multilingual setting which significantly aggravates the problem. In "*Ši'ûr rišôn*" David's classmates speak Hebrew as their everyday language and so they know, at some level, that the holy words they recite have meanings. Bialik, writing in Hebrew, obscures the fact that his child characters undoubtedly come from a

5. My article (1982) comments on this incident in the context of self-conscious narration in Shahar's short fiction. Shahar's recurrent focus on unfulfilled longing in the here and now for a more meaningful beyond brings his work frequently to a special awareness of the limitations of language and the difficulty of conveying the ineffable.

Yiddish environment. Roth's narrative, however, explicitly stresses that Davey's classmates are Yiddish and English speakers for whom Hebrew words as yet seem merely gibberish. While Davey is clever at learning the alphabet and sounding out syllables in the holy tongue, he balks at the divorce of sound and sense which characterizes his reading instruction. Thus, as his mind wanders from the lesson he grumbles inwardly:

Why do you have to read chumish? No fun . . . First you read, Adonoi elahenoo abababa, and then you say, And Moses said you mustn't, and then you read some more abababa and then you say, mustn't eat in the traife butcher store. Don't like it anyway. Big brown bags hang down from the hooks. Ham. And all kinds of grey wurst with like marbles in 'em. Peeuh! (p. 226).

This kind of religious guidance is by far inadequate to satisfy Davey's compelling curiosity about God and faith. His is a particularly keen interest in religion, for he is an unusually bright and sensitive child, with difficult problems to overcome. Beginning to make his own way in the world, he is faced with the rude struggles of a confusing, poverty-ridden, and sometimes sordid environment. In addition, he suffers from the exaggerated Oedipal tensions of his home. Made fearful and insecure by his father's jealousy, rejection, and violent temper, Davey longs for a comforting haven to replace the tenderness and excessive protectiveness his mother provided him at a younger age. As a result, preoccupied with guilt and fear, the boy searches for some belief to ward off his uncertainties and anxieties. His hunger for an understanding about God goes far beyond the very partial answers that his rabbi and parents offer him, and since much of the novel revolves about his search for peace of mind, his *heder* experience appears especially unsatisfactory.⁶ As was true for Shmulik and David, Davey's early encounter with religious instruction proves disappointing.

Recuperation

The discovery of reading and of tradition in these three texts does not end, however, with these episodes of disappointment. On the contrary, the discovery is just beginning, and in each work a pivotal reversal comes about with regard to the children's attitude toward language and religion. The case of Roth's Davey most clearly dramatizes this turnabout—precisely because of his pressing need for faith, which impels him to

6. For extensive discussion of Davey's emotional and religious development see Lyons (1977). Also of interest is the Spring, 1979 issue of *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, which is devoted to work on Henry Roth. A number of articles address religious motifs in *Call It Sleep*, most notably those by Freedman (1979) and Mooney (1979).

return to scripture with new appreciation. The little boy begins to suspect, and later confirms, that beyond the initial barrier of arbitrariness which linguistic symbols present, reading has enormous rewards to offer. These rewards turn out to be in fact all the richer, because words indeed are not inherently meaningful, but depend on the disjunction of signifier and signified.

The reversal in Davey's experience of reading comes about in this way. The rabbi has briefly mentioned in class Isaiah's vision of an angel who brings a burning coal to purify the prophet's lips. Yearning for his own sense of purification, Davey hopes to learn more about the story. Then, following the episode at the wharf, he is assaulted by a gang of Gentile boys, and they force him to short circuit some trolley tracks nearby. Associating the powerful flash of electricity released from the tracks with that captivating brilliance he witnessed at the waterfront, Davey assimilates both experiences into a notion of God as a being of radiant light. Sensing that some insight about these matters resides in the text of Isaiah, he rushes back to his *heder* to search for the passage about the burning coal. Wondrously, as he sounds out the words—none of which he understands *per se*—the text gratifyingly revivifies for the boy the spellbinding scene at the dock:

“Beshnas mos hamelech Uziyahu vavere es adonoi yoshav al kesai rum venesaw, vshulav malaiim es hahahol. Serafimomidim memal lo shash knowfayim, sash kanofayim lawehhad, beshtayim yahase fanav uvishtayim yahase raglov uvishtayim yaofaif.”

All his senses dissolved into the sound. The lines, unknown, dimly surmised, thundered in his heart with limitless meaning, rolled out and flooded the last shores of his being. Unmoored in space, he saw one walking on impalpable pavements that rose with the rising trees. Or were they trees or telegraph-poles, each crossed and leafy, none could say, but forms stood there with footholds in unmitigated light. And their faces shone because the light in their midst was luminous laughter. He read on (pp. 255–56).

The imagery of fluidity and spatial displacement here clearly recapitulates that of the earlier passage describing the sunlight on the water; while before we had “molten sheen”, “smokestacks fused to palings”, and lathes that “contracted in the swimming dimness”, here we have senses that “dissolve” and lines which “roll out and flood the shores” of Davey's being. Further establishing parallels between the two descriptions, the ladders in the first vision correspond here to the trees which might also be taken as telegraph poles. Both are susceptible to interpretation in the Freudian terms frequently applied to *Call It Sleep*, and both,

because of their resemblance to crosses, may also be read as part of the Christian motif which figures prominently throughout the novel.

This scene, in which mysterious words reactivate earlier images, does not simply represent a wrongheaded misconstruing of a text. Instead, it presents a creative and significant misreading which involves intense linguistic drama and a struggle for understanding intimately bound up with Davey's ideas about religion.

At work here, first of all, is a central attribute of language: because words are not identical with the entities they signify, they can refer to contexts not immediately present. For this reason language plays such an important role in enhancing memory; it is well documented that things are more easily remembered when clearly labelled in our minds.⁷ By naming something, that is, by placing a cognitive boundary around particular perceptual phenomena, we can recall those stimuli in association with one another more readily than would otherwise be possible. Davey is using the excerpt from Isaiah, in its entirety, as a kind of verbal reallocating of perceptions. No single word in his vocabulary can sufficiently express the stunning vision he has had, and so his recitation of unknown words becomes an act of naming, a way of invoking something he could not otherwise easily isolate in his thoughts and define.

In addition to an act of retrieval, though, a creative act of synthesis takes place here as well. Thanks to the capacity of words to help us recall information, language also permits us to combine information from separate contexts and so to generate new ideas and meanings. This is just the process that Davey enacts as he appropriates traditional Jewish symbols and imbues them with his own meaning, and it is the introduction of a written text that in large part permits these events to develop. Because a sign can be reproduced, because it is not tied inseparably to a single entity or meaning, it is subject to reinterpretation. This fundamental iterability of signs is more evident in written form, though, since text as a material object can easily be transported from one place or context to another. In this way it becomes relatively detached from speech act situations. While in face-to-face conversation speakers may attempt to clarify intended meanings or rectify wrong impressions should they sense that their audience misunderstands them, written communication presents less opportunity to delimit or control audience response. Davey's case illustrates the point; no one is there to guide him in understanding what the biblical passage has signified traditionally.

7. For an overview of the sizeable research done on the topic of verbal mediation in cognition, see the survey by Erwin and Miller (1970).

Consequently, unrestrained by schooling, Davey lets his imagination go and reads his own experience into the text.

This scene in *Call It Sleep* is important in part for its own excitement, as the little boy synthesizes diverse ideas to arrive at his personally felt conception of God, and as reading brings him a discovery of discovery: here he begins to realize his own potential to uncover and produce meaning from personal experience. This episode takes on importance, too, as it exemplifies what will become Davey's principal strategy for threading his way through a hostile world. Getting what he can in this instance from the Hebrew bible, he later similarly adopts Christian symbols (the rosary and the sacred heart painting that belong to his friend Leo) as talismans able to ward off evil. These he combines with personal memories of intense serenity or anguish and with ideas culled from his mother's tales, legends, and superstitions remembered from a girlhood in Poland. Together, all these factors contribute to the boy's notion of a transcendent power. The pluralism of America in this way allows him to arrive at a childish, but genuine, spiritual eclecticism; lacking strong religious guidance or a homogeneous cultural environment with stable values, Davey relies on his own explorations of the complex world about him to fend off insecurity.

Davey's experience of language in his reading of Isaiah is, for all this, an immature one. Because his apprehension of meaning here ignores traditional significances of the text, Davey misappropriates the prophet for an overly personal reading. To be sure, the narrative asks us to view his reading sympathetically and to respect it on its own terms; while Davey's notion of religion as protective magic is limited, it represents a sincere desire to understand and the serious struggle of a sensitive child with powerful tensions and anxieties. All the same, because of his failure to appreciate the conventional aspect of signs, Davey's efforts do not earn him respect from those around him. Words refer most efficiently through consensus, and only by agreeing that certain signs signify in certain ways can we enjoy language which allows us to understand one another. Since Davey's reading is idiosyncratic, and since he as yet lacks the means by which persuasively to express his own, unique feelings in words accessible to others, he inevitably meets with misunderstanding. Therefore, when the *melammēd* happens upon him, surprising him at his recitation, Davey stumbles over his explanation for his presence in the *heder*:

"I went and I saw a coal like—like Isaiah."

"What kind of a coal, Where?"

"Where the car-tracks run I saw it. On Tenth Street."

"Car tracks? You saw a coal?" The rabbi shut his eyes like one completely befuddled.

"Yes. It gave a big light in the middle, between the crack!" (p. 257)

After hearing this weak rendition of the afternoon's events, the rabbi proceeds to severely mock and rebuke Davey for confusing God with a flash of electricity. Reb Yidel Pankower, under the best of circumstances, might not have been a sympathetic listener, but his reaction here is exacerbated by the boy's lack of skill at communicating his thoughts. Without the support of mutual understanding, furthermore, Davey's feeling of breakthrough and insight remains but a momentary attainment. Alone he cannot long sustain the intensity of his sublime discoveries, and under the strain of fending off the rabbi's anger, Davey's solemnity begins to break down. As he recites some additional passages in Hebrew, the words begin to dissolve back into nonsense syllables and Davey dissolves into giddy laughter. Once again merely sounds, empty of meaning, words revert here from being the most meaningful of things back to being the most senseless.

By contrast with *Call It Sleep*, *Aftergrowth* does not concern itself much with details of psycholinguistic verisimilitude. While Roth concentrates on portraying how the individual intelligence grapples with problems of identity and cognition, Bialik writes an idyll, in keeping with Romantic tradition, celebrating the primacy of the Imagination as inner reality takes precedence over external event. Within the framework of this differing aesthetic and outlook, though, Bialik has his character make discoveries fundamentally similar to Davey's. While Shmulik fails to recover a mimetic, iconic link between words and his own perceptions, he does begin to appreciate how language offers us freedom from context. We readers are not informed about the workings of his mind as he makes this discovery, but we learn that with the help of a new and kindly teacher Shmulik soon moves past his initial disappointment with reading. He progresses quickly beyond sounding out words and starts to grasp stories as a whole. In the process he realizes with enchantment that language can convey to us events which happened long ago and far away, transporting them to the here and now and breathing new life into them.

The bible stories Shmulik reads appeal to him so much, in fact, that he immerses himself in them, letting his reading become his world for him. An ordinary walk home from school, therefore, is recounted in the following manner:

On my way I had joined the caravans of the Ishmaelites or of the men of Dodan and I had not departed from them. Where they had gone, I would go; and where they lodged, there did I stay.

By day we crossed the desert, a land of drouth and thirst, the dwelling place of serpent, basilisk and scorpion.

[. . .]

At one spot we are joined by the Gibeonites [. . .] None of the caravan knows who they are, or what they desire, except me, Shmulik, since I know all their secrets and subterfuges in advance out of the Book of Joshua (pp. 97-98).

While Davey gleans what he can from Jewish tradition as he picks and chooses spiritual guides in a pluralistic world, Shmulik is enveloped by tradition and he assimilates it thoroughly into his own imaginative play.⁸ As was true for many an Eastern European Jewish school boy of Bialik's day, biblical heroes and the figures of legend become more real for this child than are his own dreary, daily surroundings. Nonetheless, though entranced by tales of courage and heroism, he does not abandon or subordinate his personal sense of wonder to religious values from without; instead he incorporates religious symbols into the world of his own imagination and works out his fantasies of adventure in terms of these biblical symbols.

This development takes on importance within the context of the narrative as a whole, for it allows the character a way of bridging the gap between inner life and external social values. Shmulik may never be able to reestablish the paradisaical bliss of earliest childhood that knew no break between imagination and reality and no painful separation between self and nature, but through reading he knows a kind of happiness which recalls those earlier times. Schooling is a necessary part of his socialization, but it also provides him fuel for the fantasy life which shuts out the rejection and neglect he suffers from parents and classmates. These episodes of reading, furthermore, anticipate later chapters of *Sāpīah* that chart patterns of gratifying dream fulfillment and harsh clashes with reality. For Shmulik, books are a source of consolation, as

8. The issue of how children actually come to grasp written language and how they convert letters on a page into understandings is, of course, the subject of considerable debate, with tremendous implications for practical application as well as theoretical discussion. For some summaries of this debate, see Brown (1958), especially chapter 1, and Bryen (1982). Mendelsohn (1973) argues that the value placed on literacy in traditional Jewish culture in itself may well account for the success of Jewish children, throughout the ages, at learning to read. Their accomplishment, he claims, is due not to the effectiveness of particular methods so much as to the child's powerful desire to emulate adult ideals.

are nature and the visions of joyous union, erotic and mystic, which form the latter part of the text.⁹

Shahar does not dramatize a pivotal reversal in his story so emphatically as do Bialik and Roth. By contrast, negative ramifications of the first reading lesson continue to figure throughout the text more importantly than in either *Aftergrowth* or *Call It Sleep*. The bulk of “*Ši‘ûr rîšôn*” in fact concerns the child’s retreat from the “god-that-is-learned” (p. 217), i.e., from the concept of religion which the schoolroom has fostered. The anecdote about the bible class serves as a preamble for recounting David’s conflicts with his aged grandmother and her inflexibly orthodox views. When Grandmother forbids him to draw on *šabbāt* for example, that is, as her rigidity interferes with his most spontaneous form of self-expression, the boy grows increasingly antagonistic toward established religion. In this moment of crisis he flees from her house and feels, with renewed conviction, his rejection of her values. The narrator remarks,

Grandmother didn’t know and never learned until the day she died, fourteen years after waging this godly war on me, that the God who created the heavens and the earth and said “let there be Light” and there was light, did not forbid me to draw on the Sabbath (p. 241).

This boy’s attitudes above all are ones of openness to variety. Davey’s father, before him, had broken with orthodoxy, leaving his own early *heder* and *yešibā* training in the Old City to follow the paths of a secular Zionist education. Davey, then, in his parents’ home lives in “complete freedom not only of religious precepts, but from any kind of compulsion at all” (p. 220). Embracing the heterogeneity of the world about him, the child not only appreciates his father’s differences from the grandparent generation, but also is intrigued by the British, the Arabs, and the Sephardic Jews around him. He is fascinated by the differing customs and the medley of languages found in Jerusalem: Yiddish, English, French, German, and Arabic, in addition to Hebrew.

The interest in diversity here is symptomatic of Shahar’s writing as a whole, a corpus of work peopled by individuals from many faiths and affiliations. Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, figure

9. David Aberbach (1979 and 1982) discusses the sensitivity of this child protagonist in psychological terms, with reference to aspects of Bialik’s own life and with regard to the treatment of childhood in Bialik’s work as a whole. He notes that Bialik, having at a young age lost his father and seen his mother reduced to a humiliating poverty, frequently expressed in his writing a heightened response to nature. Aberbach sees in this yearning for paradisaic merging with nature a hoped for compensation for early bereavement.

in this fiction alongside all manner of Jews, together with Muslim mystics, believers in seances, and enthusiasts of Eastern philosophies. This variety of characters helps put into relief the author's preoccupation with transcendence, for the celebration of diversity suggests that there is no one right answer to questions about the meaning of life. The multifarious characters form part of the narrator's search for something larger than any one of them alone. According to Shahar, moreover, such awareness of diverse values is not simply a quirk of personal biography nor merely fictional invention. In interviews the author has argued that cultural heterogeneity, typical of the Mandate period, has been under-represented in Israeli fiction (Maoz, 1982); in "First Lesson" David's exposure to a multiethnic environment is very much part of his growing up as a Jew in ³*Ereṣ Yiśrā'ēl*. His sense of himself develops in a setting more comparable to Davey's New York than to Shmulik's village by virtue of its mix of cultural values. Whatever David's identity as a Jew might turn out to be, it is clearly not one bound up closely with Judaism as a religion.

While the child here remains at odds with his grandmother and the god-that-is-learned, nevertheless a turnabout in attitude does finally come into play in "First Lesson", and in fact operates as a motivating force in the narrative. It is not with continued anger, but with humorous affection, that the adult narrator reminisces on the "wars of Jehovah" once fought with Grandmother. The attitude toward language has also changed; the narrator has made his peace with language and, indeed, despite early disenchantment with reading, has turned to writing as his own vocation. Both new attitudes on the narrator's part reflect a greater tolerance for limitation; he has accepted human foibles and conflicts which repelled him as a child, much as he also accepts the inadequacies of language which once dismayed him. He never tells us explicitly of the process by which he arrived at this conciliatory stance, but he does link the two phenomena, explaining them as an accommodation to reality. The limitations of language, he notes, must be accepted like those of our entire earthly existence, and as such they may also promise something greater, outside our reach and understanding. He comments:

[. . .] the body is the veil and the limit, and the penetrating into it does not lead to the essence beyond, and you can journey beyond it only in it and through it, and in order to get everything there is to get out of the journey itself, you must pay the price of yearning and longing in advance [. . .] As for me, it seems that I must pay the price in writing, black on white (p. 242).

In the earlier passage, from the episode in the classroom, David observed that he had felt inspirational feelings from within, but words “garbed them in phrases like currency which could be passed from hand to hand, from one man to another.” As a child he felt that words were an external covering and tended to conceal or distort the more essential ideas they conveyed; the grown-up David recognizes that that status of a covering assures words their nature as a medium of public exchange. Only shared as collective property can language allow for a transfer of meaning, and the crux of the matter remains that this narrator wishes to be understood. To this end he sets out in this narrative to accomplish precisely what as a child he had failed to do: to convey effectively the wonder felt on his first encounter with the night sky and to win a comprehending, empathetic audience to share in this revelation. Language for Davey, then, has become an instrument of inquiry and exploration; for Shmulik, a way of integrating the social world back into his own imagination; for David, language signifies a necessary reconciliation to the world, and he shows a new appreciation for words and his own writing as a means to lessen the distance between himself and others.

Artistic Implications

Shahar, acknowledging that his character has become a writer, openly incorporates the issues confronting the child protagonist into the problematic of narration in the text as a whole. As the narrator stubbornly persists in trying to say what cannot be said, we see that the retreat of the child into shyness in the story (*histoire*) has resurfaced in the account of the adult (the *discours*), transformed as a delayed attempt to find appreciative listeners and so a belated sense of communion. Indeed, Shahar’s story in this regard articulates what Roth’s and Bialik’s texts likewise attempt; all three narratives endeavor to express the early experience which the children characters could not make understood and for which they suffered. To be sure, important differences remain among these texts. Shahar’s treatment of language stresses neither cognitive processes, as does *Call It Sleep*, nor the triumph of the imagination, as does *Aftergrowth*, but rather philosophical considerations about language and self-conscious narration. All three texts differ as well in their portrayal of religion—their characters make very divergent, personal accommodations to Jewish tradition. Even so, none of these works abandons the primacy of that childhood awe which their characters treasure, and as a result, attempting to do justice to that ineffable wonder, the texts share a number of artistic attributes in common.

The first and most notable of these is the way each text struggles against the representational limitations of language and stretches the expressive capacities of words beyond simple denotation. Availing themselves of a greater command of verbal skill than did the children characters, these narratives, as designed by adult authors, engage a number of stylistic devices to try to express the inexpressible.

The disjunction between the child's and the adult's handling of language is particularly clear in the case of Roth—Davey's lame, almost inarticulate account of the afternoon's events contrasts sharply with the narrator's powerful, lyric versions of them. Hermetic, written in a Joycean manner, the narrator's descriptions gain some of their force from the use of verbal metaphor. As Davey reads from Isaiah, for instance, the verbal metaphor infuses intensity into the prose, implying the extraordinary impact of Davey's reaction to his reading: "the lines *flooded* the last shores of his being." In a related strategy the text links nouns with verbs or predicates usually considered inappropriate for them. The result is to create a synaesthetic effect, confusing various cognitive categories. Hearing, during the scene at the dock, overlaps with visual perception, and the intangible with the tangible: "*words* [. . .] *opened* like the bands of a burnished silver accordion;" "*light* in their midst was luminous *laughter*;" "*sin melted*."

Roth at times also omits verbs or presents an elliptical kind of sentence with enigmatic effect:

And he heard the rubbing on a wash-board and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion—Brighter than day . . . Brighter . . .

No specific subject here governs the predicate "brighter than day", and so it is hard to know exactly what is becoming brighter: the sunlight on the water? Davey's memories of lights? a supernatural force which he alone envisions? Similarly, no particular verb governs the object phrase, "a voice speaking words". This absence of a verb suggests that the voice is something ultimately mysterious. It operates here as a disembodied presence, not perceived through the usual sensory channels. Finally, no specific referent defines which rubbing or which acrid soap the narrator has in mind. The definite articles in these phrases endow the statement with an imposing self-evidence, as if these were events of elemental importance. And yet we are left unsure what events the narrator intends us to recall. The onomatopoeia at the end of the passage ("Ug chugchug ug chug!" and so on) further represents an expansion of lexicon beyond ordinary reference. Dramatizing the approach of the tugboat that startles Davey out of his reverie, these words attempt to recapture a mimetic

link between signifier and signified, affording an immediacy not available to standard vocabulary.

Bialik's prose, less cryptic than Roth's, turns to less radical means of expanding its referential capacities. As Shaked has pointed out (1977, pp. 278–86), Bialik heavily employs anaphora, alliteration, and internal rhyme in his extended descriptive passages. These features contribute to a blurring of boundaries, both semantically and musically, between words, and the result is to heighten the obtrusiveness of the prose itself, as if to underscore that his language is symbolic and that it points at more than simply the natural phenomena it denotes:

First of all, the pictorial language expands what is written, until the passage no longer refers to a given world and is no longer limited in context, but rather becomes an expressive passage, which superimposes the world of the soul onto the material world (Shaked, 1977, p. 285).

These qualities in Bialik's writing work together with personification, which blurs the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate. In conjunction with conspicuous images of multiplicity, frequent repetitions and an abundance of synonyms, all of these characteristics foster in the descriptions of *Sāpīah* a suggestion of exuberance and vitality. These in turn effectually reveal the inner enthusiasms of a young boy as the child's imagination transforms the world about him into a vision of radiant beauty.¹⁰

Shahar's prose, too, turns to repetition and elevated diction to heighten his rhetorical stance and make his statements more lofty or imposing. Note, for example, in the description of the night sky, the parallelism of such phrases as "the voices of night animals suddenly signaling and

10. Shaked analyzes the following passage to illustrate his point, though many other examples from *Aftergrowth* would appropriately serve this purpose as well. The narrator here describes his village after a rain:

Everything has received a fresh face, from the blue of the sky to the green of the garden and the field. The mighty tree, with its broad top and heavy boughs, stands in the middle of the village, fresh and more magnificent than ever. The soil has drunk its fill and left some water over; it tells its overflowing joy to all and sundry, to near and far, in the happy song of trickling, running water and the quivering of gleaming rills.

Roofs and trees drip with gold; buds and blossoms wear necklaces of pearls and weep with joy. On the trail of the hill, in the damp sand, lies a strip of glass, glittering and glittering away as though it had suddenly become great and mighty. Lord God! How many suns! How many heavens! Each dribble of water has its sun within it; every pool and puddle its own heaven for backing. Fragments of worlds upside down and sections of new skies under the water. They are infinite in number, veritably three hundred and ten worlds, as the number which is kept for every

suddenly stopping”; or “an ancient-breathed quality, terrible in its dimensions, which were beyond the dimensions of man, and its eternities which were beyond the eternity of man”. More significantly, though, the narrative relies on lengthy sentences which consist of numerous phrases, sometimes joined in apposition, sometimes subordinated one to the other, and sometimes strung one after the other in extended serial fashion. This prose, by contrast with that of Roth, relies less heavily on oblique reference to suggest an apprehension of mystery, but the impression we receive from the convolutions of his narration is that the narrator is trying to express many things at once and doesn’t quite know where to start. The multifaceted beauties of the nocturnal sky all catch David’s attention simultaneously, and it is hard to recapture that experience in linear, sequential discourse.

This kind of involuted structure also characterizes Shahar’s narrative organization as a whole. The text consists of associations, which needn’t actually come in a specified order and which consequently challenge linear textual development. David turns in “*Ši‘ûr rîšôn*” to many, only loosely related topics: reflections on his writing, admiration for an unencumbered zest for life, memories of his reading class, an anecdote about a Frenchwoman disciplining her child; the story of Grandmother’s relations with her family. The resulting intricacies of composition do not add up to sequential plot outcome so much as to a juxtaposition of various situations and an aggregate of ideas. All the elements of the story pertain in some way to David’s preoccupation with a realm of meaning which exceeds the here and now, but he never, except in the passage about the night sky in Jerusalem, discusses the nature of that transcendence itself. The circumlocution here, as a principle of narrative organization, though, suggests that the narrator talks all around a subject which cannot itself be treated directly.

righteous man! Birds amid the branches and little chicks in the grass go crazy with joy, open their throats, spread out their wings, open their beaks and sing at the top of their voices . . . Song and praise on high, melody and harmony below (pp. 122–23).

In the original Hebrew, the musicality of this selection derives in large part from the parallelism or pairing of rhyming words, e.g., *sôkekim-nôšim*, *šîšim-prâhim*; *šir-šebah*; *pošim-pîpîyyôt*; and the repetitions *‘âgam ‘âgam*, *gannôt gannôt*, *šebâhim šebâhim*. (See pages 224–225.) Personification is found in the description of the tree that drinks and announces glad tidings. Multiplicity is emphasized through the exclamation, “How many suns! How many heavens!” and general exuberance through the rhetoric of exaggeration: “chicks . . . go crazy in the grass. . . . Song and praise on high, melody and harmony below.”

Despite these elaborate artistic means through which the authors hint at experience intrinsically exceeding language, the three texts all the same never fully endorse their own verbal recreations of wonder. This point brings us to the second fundamental element of narration shared by all three texts. Unlike the children characters, who overestimate the capacities of language, the authors do not suppose that language can adequately convey epiphany. More circumspect than were the children in this regard, the narratives inscribe their efforts to express the inexpressible within stories that emphasize the unrecountability of wonder. In this way they hedge their bets, warning the reader that they are attempting something inherently undoable, and they protect their sensitive subject matter from ridicule or rejection by implying that much more is at stake here than their words can possibly communicate.

Other conflicting impulses in these works similarly characterize the treatment of wonder. The authors, for example, cushion deeply personal modes of discourse with surrounding narrative that is by and large easily accessible to others. The texts integrate heightened, symbolic narrative into fiction which essentially depicts familiar, recognizable milieus, plausible characters, and coherent configurations of events, and the essentially realistic framework around the perception of miracle allows the reader to view the characters' perceptions of mystery from a distance and dispassionately. In addition, the contrast between adult narration and the child's consciousness allows for a more objective perspective on events, and for humor or irony, all of which spare the child's delicate vision of awe itself from too much direct exposure.

These conflicting tendencies in the texts serve the purpose of both disclosing private experience and also limiting its exposure, and such tensions finally result in paradox: the more these narratives attempt to make that experience accessible by discussing it in easily understandable terms of distance or bemusement, the more they are in fact concealing of that experience itself. At the same time, the more difficult, elusive aspects of the text—the involuted, associative structure of Shahr's story, Roth's stream of consciousness, the musicality of Bialik's extended lyric passages which remains secondary to the more directly referential qualities of his writing—these things are less accessible and easily understandable, but more revelatory of experience that eludes verbal formulation, for they hint at what ordinary words cannot do.

All of these contradictory qualities in *Aftergrowth*, *Call It Sleep*, and "First Lesson" originate in that gap between the sayable and the unsayable, brought into focus by the episode of the reading lesson in each text. These scenes can therefore be considered as key scenes for all three

narratives. They define the opposition, thematically central to the texts, between language as the conventionalized medium of social interchange, and experience as something intimately individual, particular to each person's consciousness and so, strictly speaking, incommunicable. In addition, they also encapsulate generative tensions that account for the final strategies of narration here—the combining of the difficult with the less difficult, and the telling of a tale with a disclaimer for that very act of telling.

These scenes account significantly also for the assuming of a retrospective and introspective stance in each narrative. The texts entertain different degrees of autobiographical inclination, but all suppose to some extent a coincidence of protagonist, as a child, and narrative voice, as an adult.¹¹ The texts therefore share in common a backwards view which both sustains an early vision of wonder and reconciles that vision to a need for words. It is in the remembrance of things past that the narratives honor the child's early sense of awe, but it is also in this same action that they acknowledge the special capacities of words—a specialness which the children protagonists first began to perceive with those disappointing reading lessons. One of the great beauties of language, which resides in the disjunction of sign from referent, is that words can refer to things no longer present. Language may never fully recreate private, unimpartable experience, but it helps retrieve and preserve the past, albeit imperfectly.

These matters come most pointedly to attention in "First Lesson". The first person narration of the text, the clear presentation of the protagonist as writer, overt commentary on the nature of language and its place in the character's thinking—all these alert us to the narrator's role as one of recovery, recall, and renewal of past experience. Bialik's text adopts a similar narrative stance, acknowledging the protagonist as memoirist if not as writer. By contrast, Roth, with his implied narrator, makes no explicit comment on the act of reminiscing, which as author he brought to his writing of the novel. *Call It Sleep*, as the text progresses, dramatizes the unfolding, and not a remembering, of Davey's experiences and understandings. As such it engages most deeply in the illusion of capturing childhood in its immediacy, unimpeded by the filter

11. Shahr's narrator presents himself clearly as a writer commenting on his childhood and on being a writer; Bialik's Shmulik clearly reminisces, but he does not define himself explicitly as an author. The last chapter of *Aftergrowth*, though, which portrays him as a youth at 17, focuses on his inability to choose an occupation because of an inordinate love for reading. This section, then, may hint at the character's future development as a literary figure. Roth's is an implied narrator, but in interviews the author has discussed the close relation of *Call It Sleep* to events from his own life. See Lyons (1977).

of memory. This emphasis in *Call It Sleep* reminds us that for all three works the language of art takes on legitimacy in its own right. Fiction is not simply a failed recreation of the past, but creation with an integrity of its own. The artist's words here serve as a compromise between, and a transmutation of, the everyday language of convention and that language of the heart which remains beyond the reach of words.

The discoveries of reading in *Aftergrowth*, *Call It Sleep*, and "First Lesson", as they alert us to these issues, go a long way toward explaining the *raison d'être* of these texts. Imaginative writing, for the adult, has become an outlet for personal religious impulses felt when first a child and not satisfied by established religion. After their initial opposition in the stories, writing and religion reapproach one another, for through their literary efforts these individuals help record and define their own sacred regions of the heart. In the process they also explicate their varying stances *vis-à-vis* Jewish tradition, and the texts come to function, too, as portraits of the artists. Thanks to this dynamic underlying *Aftergrowth*, *Call It Sleep*, and "First Lesson", these texts, to a significant degree, incorporate within themselves the story of their own genesis as fiction.

This is a story, moreover, whose echoes reverberate throughout modern Jewish writing. Much Israeli, American Jewish and European Jewish writing of the past century and a half concerns the journey from tradition to the secular world, and that journey is often the impetus for this writing as well as its subject; as a result of the spiritual, political, social and geographical upheavals which have characterized Jewish life during the past 150 years, energies once directed toward religious observance and writing have often been redirected, in a quest for new spiritual expression, toward secular poetry and fiction. In connection with these developments, the treatment of childhood has taken on prominence in modern Jewish literature, for nostalgia and a reassessment of origins, understandably, constitute a stance often adopted by individuals who have traveled far from their past. Some of the intriguing affinities among Bialik, Shahrar and Roth explain themselves quite naturally, then, in this context. At stake here is not a matter of influence, but rather of underlying similarities of Jewish experience and literary history, despite the distances of time, space and circumstance that separate these writers. All the same, Bialik, Shahrar and Roth make a special contribution to the commonly told tale of growing up Jewish; they bring to their work an uncommon sensitivity to the linguistic drama of childhood, and therein lies much of the distinction of *Aftergrowth*, *Call It Sleep*, and "First Lesson".

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