

METAPHYSICS AND METANARRATIVE
IN
THE STORIES OF DAVID SHAHAR

by

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ABSTRACT: The metaphysical concerns of David Shahar's short stories lead repeatedly to a pronounced metanarrative focus in this fiction. Metanarrative awareness develops on three complementary levels of Shahar's work: a) as explicit textual commentary by the narrator (e.g. *Ši'ur ri'šon*, and others); b) as complexities of narrative organization that struggle against the inescapably discrete and discursive nature of language; c) as dramatization of a concern with narration. Texts such as *Səpamo šel ha'apipior* and *Louidor, Louidor* introduce multiple narrators, suggesting that no one version of a story ever exhausts the preliterate or extraliterary experience to which it refers, for language never presents an iconic reproduction of the world external to words. Shahar acknowledges and grapples with the divergent views of language that emerged out of Symbolism and, from there, revolutionized much of subsequent twentieth century literature. The complexity and strength of Shahar's writing derives in considerable measure from his struggle with these issues and his refusal to opt for either a despair over language, a free play of signifiers dissociated from referentiality, or restrictively self-involved fiction about fiction.

David Shahar's stories return time and again, with persistent fascination and bemused wonder, to the stubbornly elusive relations of the sacred and the mundane. Shahar focuses recurrently on man's ever unfulfilled longing in the here and now for a more meaningful beyond, and as his narrators reflect on the irreconcilable differences between the spiritual and material realms, his tales chart uneasy attempts at encounter between the two, depicting brief glimpses through the concealments and

constraints of this world. Emerging from these concerns is an indissociable preoccupation with language, both with the mysteries that impel the writer toward self-expression and with the enormous difficulty of conveying in words experience that approaches the ineffable. This central aspect of Shahar's narrative manifests itself on three complementary levels of his work: as explicit textual commentary by the narrators; as complexities of narrative organization that, defying temporal sequence and linear plot development, struggle against the successive nature of language in an effort to expand the expressive capacity of the text; and as dramatization of the author's concern with fashioning language into stories. His texts frequently introduce multiple narrators and so draw attention to the telling of tales as a principal action in his fictional world.

Shahar states his basic linguistic dilemma most overtly in "The Woman with the Familiar Spirit" (*Ešet ba'alat ha'ob*). The narrator here experiences a series of nervous attacks, compelling visions of himself and his twentieth century contemporaries in medieval times. These episodes, which he perceives as if apart from his own body and which he defines as a privileged view into the fourth dimension, may occur in the least auspicious of surroundings. Indeed, the final episode of the story is precipitated ironically by a totally inept and farcical attempt at a seance. His flashes of insight nonetheless lead this figure to speculate with reverence on the life of the spirit and the barriers of the senses that intervene between men and spirit. He comes consequently to lament

this world of ours, the world of the three dimensional soul whose tools and concepts and language and conventions I am compelled to use to tell my story . . . forcing things belonging to the fourth dimension into the confines of the three dimensional world is liable to distort them to such an extent that they may end up by seeming ridiculous! (Shahar, 1974, p. 117).

An evaluation of words as reductive and inimical to spiritual insight introduces itself as well in "The Fortune Teller" (*Maggid ha'atidot*). This narrative revolves about the narrator's recollections of his Uncle Kalman, a lovably idiosyncratic, self-styled mystic, in whose opinion a person "could grasp the essence of things by rapt contemplation, by the annihilation of the self" (p. 12). Kalman affirms a desire to comprehend the nothingness and essence of existence, and so to dissociate himself from "anxiety, fear, sorrow, suffering and the pain of living in individuals and time" (p. 19).

1. The Hebrew versions of "The Woman with the Familiar Spirit," "The Pope's Mustache," "First Lesson," and "The Fortune Teller" form part of the collection *Maggid ha'atidot* (Shahar, 1966). Citations from these stories in this paper come from the English translations in *News From Jerusalem* (Shahar, 1974).

The narrator's fond admiration for this figure is sullied only by the memory of one period of his life, his years as a philosophy student, during which time he argued relentlessly with his uncle. Retrospectively he berates himself for having learned

how to turn everything into a game of words and triumph over any thinking feeling human being trying to express himself by these means . . . [and how to crush] Uncle Kalman simply by reducing everything he said to words, and then asking for the precise definition of every single one of them (p. 4).

In much the same way, the narrator of "First Lesson" (*Ši'ur rišon*) consciously calls attention to the shortcomings of words. Playing on the opening of the Gospel of John, the opening here rejects the primary importance of the word in favor of a sense of awe:

In the beginning was the miracle, and the miracle was, and is, and will be to be marveled at always (p. 209).

The narrator then recounts his first encounter with miracle, which he describes as an awareness of mystery inspired in him as a tiny child by the night scenery of Jerusalem. The mountains surrounding the city exhibited 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).

Words cannot recapture that experience, the child soon realizes and the adult narrator confirms, remembering with painful but amused embarrassment his first reading class at school. Asked to read from Genesis as a small boy, he discovered quite suddenly the division of word and world, for he came to understand that the reciting of sacred words does not necessarily invoke or reenact the events to which they refer.

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. . . . He called my name and said, "Read," and I didn't understand. My cheeks burned, and the teacher started coaxing me to read. I didn't know what to read because I was waiting for the voice of God (p. 217).

This discovery nonetheless entails a positive lesson as well as disappointment. First of all, from his mature perspective, the narrator perceives

that the limitations of language, equivalent to those of our entire earthly existence, must be accepted for what they are. Moreover, they may offer a promise of something greater, outside of our reach and understanding.

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. 213).²

Secondly, a note of reconciliation to limitation asserts itself in the remark that the words of the first reading lesson “garbed” things in phrases so that they could pass from one man to another. This comment recalls the first line of “The Pope’s Mustache” (*Səpamo šel ha’apipyor*), which reads:

It is not the Pope’s mustache which will be spoken of in the story *I am clothing now in the language of words* and putting down in writing, but the mustache of Mr. Gabriel Luria in the distant days of the past (p. 188).
(Emphasis added)

Words are perhaps largely a concealment, an external covering that falsifies something more essential. Only adorned by this covering, however, can that essence become public and, shared as collective property, allow for a transfer of meaning. Language has its own logic, not quite autonomous from the world to which it refers, but this autonomy grants it singular expressive and communicative possibilities.

As Shahar comments on these fundamental tensions that inform his own work, he pays tribute to divergent views of language which grew out of symbolism and which, from there, revolutionized both twentieth-century poetry and prose. The symbolists attempted to stretch language to extremes in order more immediately to capture a basic mimetic link between signifier and signified, sound and meaning. Their efforts led them to realize the inevitable failure such an enterprise entails and then to appreciate language itself as a play of sound and rhythm, dissociated from referentiality. All subsequent modernist literature has had to confront the issue raised here of the fundamentally nonmimetic nature of language. Linguistic activity belongs inescapably in the realm of the discrete and the

2. The narrator’s attitude to language diverges sharply from traditional Jewish veneration of holy scripture and writing in general. The boy’s ideas on the subject eventually provoke a violent clash of values in “First Lesson” when, attracted to a nonverbal form of expression more suited to his sensibilities, he devotes his Saturdays to drawing pictures in crayon. His artwork so enrages his devout grandmother, who sees it as a sacrilegious exercise, particularly on the Sabbath, that she showers him with curses and runs him out of the house.

discursive, for it breaks information down into constituent units and provides rules for combining those items. Dependent on sequence and discontinuous components, it can never convey the continuous, the holistic or the simultaneous. Consequently, any endeavor to render the simultaneous into the successive or to translate the immediacy of experience into words gives rise to verbal self-consciousness.³ This metalinguistic awareness has frequently borne with it in twentieth-century literature a sense of defeat, of the inadequacy or inauthenticity of writing.⁴ In addition, though, in the syntactic convolutions and lexical inventions of works by, for example, Vallejo, Huidobro, Celan and Joyce, this understanding has brought with it a rejoicing in the arbitrariness and freedoms of language no longer directed primarily at extralinguistic reference.

Much of the complexity and richness of Shahar's fiction results from his grappling with these matters and his refusal to choose among alternatives. The author remains firmly ensconced in the struggle of writing against its own restrictions and thus opts neither to despair over language nor to abandon his work to a free play of signifiers. Writing for Shahar implies a resignation to our stubbornly limited existence in the world of time and individuals; like his narrator, as he says, he "must pay the price in writing." At the same time, nonetheless, characterizing his work is a sheer joy in the telling of tales as narrative in its own right, as language freed from pretensions to mimetic reconstruction of extraliterary events. "The Pope's Mustache" is a text that clearly exemplifies several facets of these problems.

The story recounts a seemingly simple incident. The protagonist, Gabriel Luria, catches sight of a beautiful young nun as she hurries on her way to work at a nearby hospital. He offers her a ride in the car of a friend, Boulos Effendi, and, when he compliments her on her striking beauty, she deftly rebuffs his flirtatious remark. This exchange, an apparently unportentous crossing of paths, has profound effect on Gabriel Luria. As a result of his brief conversation with Sister Mary Ann he throws away his panama hat, emblem of his dandyish ways, and he shaves his mustache, chief sign of his virility and pride in his own masculinity. Though

3. For a thorough, comprehensive, and stimulating study of this problem, not only in terms of literary history but as a critique of structuralism with bearing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, cybernetics and mathematics, see Wilden (1972).

4. George Steiner (1975) reviews this development of disillusionment with language in modernist literature (see especially pp. 182-86). Shimon Sandbank remarks on the relationship of these issues to recent Israeli writing and he discusses the belated appearance of modernism in Hebrew letters in his essay, "Contemporary Israeli Literature: The Withdrawal from Certainty" (Anderson, 1977, pp. 3-17).

the protagonist does not put into words the motives behind his action (and, in fact, makes only the most matter-of-fact statement that he shall have to get rid of both the hat and the mustache), the tremendous emotional impact of the event is seen unmistakably through the reaction it inspires in witnesses to the scene:

[They] watched fearfully and wonderingly as the deed was done, a deed expressive of contempt for manhood's crowning glory, bordering on blasphemy and provocatively performed in public. "God the merciful, the compassionate!" said the owner of the restaurant stroking his own curly mustache as if to make sure that his honor was still intact and had not fallen to the destroyer, and the tamar-hindi vendor responded with a nod of silent understanding (pp. 200–201).

The discrepancy between Luria's nonchalant remark and this elaborate statement of reaction, with its elevated diction and religious overtones, suggests that what has happened defies accurate paraphrase. The experience can be explicated only through its ramifications but not in terms of itself. The central character, with his secular outlook, has directly confronted religious conviction, and, comprehending the enormity of the gap between his perspective and Mary Ann's, he realizes that he has transgressed some awesome boundary. He shaves as an act of submission to values greater than his own, but only the external sign of deference and not the emotions themselves can be translated into words.

Confirming this reading, two new versions of the incident enter the picture, each more extravagant than the other, each expressed in exaggeratedly pious language, each transposing the events of the afternoon into prodigious actions appropriate to legend, each dramatizing in lively parable the separation of body and spirit. What has happened between Gabriel and Mary Ann may resist conversion into words, but it nonetheless generates multiple interpretations and stories, each of which stands in its own validity as a partial truth. Boulos claims that Luria risked losing his soul in his pursuit of Mary Ann and that his mustache, brushing against the breast of the nun, pulled her entire body out of its dress and the soul of Gabriel free from his body. The man, invaded now by the soul of a sleeping dog, perpetrates a sexual assault on the nun, and his naked soul, watching from afar, is overcome with contrition for the bestiality of its own body. Jesus appears to save this soul and, finding the mustache at fault for the whole occurrence, insists it must be shaved to make possible Gabriel's salvation. The second narrator, the tamar-hindi vendor, accedes to the first telling, but in his own version he reinterprets the denouement: placing responsibility for the enmity of bodies and souls on Christian

tradition, he ascribes redemption to Mohammed, who took pity on the sufferings of Gabriel's spirit and restored it to its rightful place and proper demeanor. The meeting between the dandy and the nun thus occasions several different narratives, and the charm of "The Pope's Mustache" lies to a large degree in this plurality and in the inventiveness of the tales. Assuming the proportions of legend and dressed in the hyperbole of religious parable, the telling of the tale gains flexibility and persuasively conveys the depth of feeling involved in this very brief drama. It is only by abandoning any claim to plausibility that the stories come closer to a genuine expression of the magnitude of the protagonist's spiritual transformation.

The opening of the story, clarified by this analysis, serves reciprocally as a metanarrative commentary on the rest of the text.

It is not the Pope's mustache which will be spoken of in the story I am clothing now in the language of words and putting down in writing, but the mustache of Mr. Gabriel Luria in the distant days of the past. When all these things had come back to me, bobbing up to the surface of my memory, I went and told them to my wife Shulamith and she said that there was no connection at all between the Pope's mustache and this story of mine. "Right," I said to her, to Shula, "you're right." So I cannot exempt myself from saying something about the Pope's mustache, if only on account of its prominence in the title of my story. And if the manner in which I speak of his mustache pleases neither the sheep in the fold nor the lost sheep, and if it fails too to pass the inspection of the shepherds of the flocks of forms, I will have this consolation at least, which is no mean consolation either, that the words of my Shulamith do influence me, sometimes (p. 188).

The puzzling and lengthy circumlocution of these opening lines insists on authorial freedom in the writing of fiction. Facetiously, the narrator says that he has taken his wife's advice, that is, he has recognized the inappropriateness of his title. What he suggests, in fact, is that precisely in its inappropriateness the title is fitting and suitable at a higher level. The two stories of mustaches may be disparate, but it is the narrator's right to construct the story as he will by free association, just as Boulos Effendi and the tamar-hindi vendor take license to create from a single external incident their own imaginative narrative visions. The first paragraph thus articulates for the reader a possible justification for the subsequent structuring of the text through episodic digression.

It should be noted that the narrator feels he must comment on his writing here specifically because there is a lack of connection between

title and incident recounted, i.e. between the context of narration (*discours*) and the context of the events narrated (*récit*).⁵ Raising to the level of extended narrative discourse issues operative at the lexical level as well, we face once again the problem of referentiality. Just as words do not refer with any kind of one-to-one correspondence or iconic reproduction to the phenomena of the extralinguistic world, so, too, the title here does not pertain directly to the adventures of Gabriel's mustache. The narrator's discomfort at this disalignment between the subject matter of his text and his presentation of that material leads him to admit the inadequacy of the telling as a reliable vehicle for the tale, but it brings him, too, to exhalt the autonomy and the integrity of the telling itself.

The falsely modest disclaimer of the opening at the same time encourages the reader to question further. How are we to make sense of the two unrelated anecdotes, if they are indeed unrelated? Can we, perhaps, find something in common between them just as the narrator originally thought he had? These questions begin to be answered when we see—even as we celebrate the whimsy of the various narratives about Gabriel's mustache, become cognizant of the many interpretations necessary to convey the wondrous deeds at hand, and recognize a flight from the authority of a single, unified plot—that a contrary narrative impulse is at work. The narrator acknowledges the limitation of individual verbal accounts, yet he inscribes those finite pieces of narrative within an overall organizational schema that strives to move beyond their differences and so grant admission into a vision that encompasses them all. Fragmentation and totalization of vision act as two sides of the same coin here. Inviting the reader to look for parallels between disjunct events and to see past the individual peculiarities of the anecdotes, the narrator suggests that something of transcendence, which eludes unmediated statement, connects the Pope and Gabriel Luria as well as the stories of Boulos and the tamar-hindi vendor. The Pope in question is John the 23rd, who sported a mustache for a short time during his youth. He shaved it, however, upon entering religious life as a chaplain in World War I. Shaving, then, both in this case and in the case of Gabriel, indicates submission to spiritual values. The splitting of the text into multiple segments persuades the reader to see religious growth as a unifying motif of the story even as it remains an experience difficult to describe that yields only understatement or overstatement.

In other stories by Shahar, the connection between digressive composition and thematic concern with language and narrative does not assert

5. These terms come from Genette (1975).

itself as forthrightly as in "The Pope's Mustache." This example nevertheless alerts us to ways in which episodic structure serves much the same function in various of this author's works. The chains of associations in many texts are generated by a single major problem: how to accommodate a greater dimension of meaning in a lesser one without producing hopelessly reductive results. How is it possible to transpose the infinite into the finite, interpret the sacred in terms of the mundane, convey the plenitude of experience in space through the restrictive temporal sequentiality of narrative? In Shahar's fiction, the material world, striving to contain the spiritual, is always found wanting, and writing epitomizes that insufficiency. The very unlimitability of the divine, when confined by human space, wreaks havoc on the world of limitation. And, just as the everyday, straining with this irrepressible force, is bound to crack, so narrative trying to subsume what is beyond it breaks into multiple fragments. The title of the trilogy, *The Palace of Shattered Vessels* (*Heykal hakkelim haššəburim*), clearly underscores this basic pattern of Shahar's work through allusion to the Lurianic kabbala and its message of God's self-exile: poured into earthly vessels, the presence of God splintered into myriad pieces that must be restored to unity for the Messiah to come. Similarly, as earthly containers give way under the abundance of divine emanance, Shahar's texts can barely contain the rich detail and sweep of the narrator's memories, his moments of revelation.

Critics have indeed noted that the associative composition of Shahar's texts which challenges linear development is allied to a search for epiphanic insight. At stake here is less a question of turning point or sequential plot outcome than illumination achieved through juxtaposing various situations and perceiving in them hints of timeless truths.⁶ It should be recognized, in addition, that this manner of organizing a text clearly encourages a metanarrative focus, and in modernist literature has led over and over to fiction about fiction and poetry about poetry. Shahar's work, bearing close affinities to Proust, fits squarely in the modernist aesthetic of discontinuity which plays down the importance of temporal and causal narrative ties and which Joseph Frank has explored so aptly through his concept of spatial form.⁷ Because, as a structuring principle, a tendency to spatial

6. See, e.g., Barzel (1972, pp. 297-313) and Shaked (1970, pp. 59-64).

7. Frank (1963, pp. 3-60). It bears repeating that spatialization of narrative represents a *tendency* toward emphasis on relations of similarity and dissimilarity rather than on relations of time and causality. Shahar's fiction, to be sure, does not present an extreme example of spatial form, but this critical concept does help clarify some of the effects of structuring a story through associations. It should be remembered that Frank developed his theory orig-

form fights against the successive nature of writing, the necessity of having a beginning, a middle and an end in a piece of prose, it calls attention to what language cannot do even as it tries to do so. Disruption of sequence, furthermore, involves a reorientation of reading. When segments of discourse gain coherence primarily in relation to one another and not with regard to an external frame of reference, the focus of significance of the work remains largely internal to the text itself. Such a work constantly directs attention back to other elements of the text, and so language acquires special prominence and acts less as a medium to external understanding than as a design that itself is the repository of meaning.

Metanarrative awareness also develops in this kind of text through the marked discrepancy between *récit* and *discours*. The way a story is told is never identical to a temporal-causal order of events, but fragmented narrative makes us particularly conscious of the narrator's role in modeling his material as he rearranges his discourse away from an objectified chronological and logical order. Such texts invest themselves with a pervasive subjectivity and a concomitant emphasis on the imagination and on the capacity of the mind to fashion its own worlds. *Discours* is intimately associated with personal locution, for it involves a dialogue between an I and a you. *Récit*, on the other hand, represents a more impersonal kind of narration, stressing, as it does, the experiences of an objectified other. For these reasons Frank (1978, p. 238) remarks that

just as description tends to spatialize narrative, so *discours* inevitably exercises a more or less perceptible spatializing effect on the micronarrative level, by its constant interruption of pure chronicity. This helps explain why an increase of interest in man's subjective and emotional life, when translated into terms of literary form, automatically seems to lead to an increase in the spatialization of narrative (sentimentalism in the mid-eighteenth century, the time of the epistolary novel and Sterne, and the influence of Freud and Bergson at the beginning of the twentieth).

With a text emphasizing *discours*, the reader becomes aware of the limitations of language in terms of the relativity of the narrator's point of

inally with special concern for the fiction of Proust, to which Shahar's writing bears special resemblance.

Frank (1977, pp. 242-43) comments on the relationship between the development of spatial form in modern literature and a concern with recapturing some sort of primordial, irrational experience or wholeness which persists through romanticism and symbolism, continues into modernism, culminates in much contemporary fiction, and of course, is the central focus of Shahar's stories. Frank sees this search for plenitude as an effort to dissolve the schism between thought and feeling which resulted from the rise of science, rationalism, positivism and industrial technology in the second half of the nineteenth century.

view. By introducing a number of narrators, e.g. in “The Pope’s Mustache,” Shahar highlights the narrating figures’ capacities, both in their freedom to mold their own world or vision and in their limited power to render external reality to their audience.

The story “Loudior, Loudior” further illuminates and is illuminated by these ideas. An excerpt from *The Palace of Shattered Vessels* (which was also published separately as a short story), “Loudior, Loudior” presents a clear example of the striving after (and failure to capture) transcendence that is common to so many of Shahar’s works.⁸ These concerns surface in this work in terms of the characters’ lives and also the central narrator’s strategies for telling his tale. Incorporating a multiplicity of narrators to a greater degree than “The Pope’s Mustache,” this text aptly demonstrates how the digressive structure coincides with the author’s metaphysical and metanarrative interests.

Loudior’s story is a complicated one, and the intricacies of its telling signal to us the complexity of speaking about events that transpire here. The tale itself is deferred a full five pages beyond the opening of the text, and as this sequential gap warns the reader of a difficulty in approaching Loudior’s life, the interim in fact allows the narrator to expound on the problematics of narration.

The first paragraph, with its straightforward, laconic report of a violent death, instills the reader with both horror and curiosity. A host of urgent questions arise as these lines force us to ask, who is this man? Why has this horrible incident happened? Why is it reported so casually?

Early one morning, on the path leading up from Wadi Kelt to Nebi Mousa, Arab ruffians from Abu Isa’s gang caught Loudior the Silent, tortured him, and cut off his penis. Two Arab goatherds from the village of Abu Dis who were on their way to the river tried to stop them, claiming that Loudior was a Jewish saint. To this the men replied, *Hada mush wili yahudi, hada jasus sahyuni* (meaning, ‘He’s no Jewish saint but a Zionist spy’), and warned them not to interfere in something that was none of their business. The goatherds escaped, and told the story to the Greek monk from the Greek church of El-Azariyeh, who was driving back to Jerusalem from a visit to the monasteries of the Jordan Valley with several Catholic pilgrims. When their car reached the path, they found Loudior lying bleeding and unconscious with his amputated male member stuck in his mouth (p. 75).⁹

8. The story appears in Friedlander’s anthology (1975, pp. 313–30). Citations here in English are from the version in Anderson (1977, pp. 75–95), translated by Dalya Bilu.

9. This passage comes in the final and not the initial paragraph of the novel’s account of Loudior. The looseness of structure in the trilogy allows for a certain amount of compositional rearrangement without fundamentally altering the reader’s understanding of the text.

We begin here with incontrovertible fact: simple condensed exposition that informs us of specific events, availing itself of definite nouns and proper names. All the same, we are faced with a kaleidoscopic confusion of events and a number of perceptions of Louidor's identity. Is he a Jewish saint? Zionist spy? Victim of arbitrary violence? The authoritative presentation and the undeniable particularity of the report clashes with uncertainties here which derive from the man's being defined chiefly through reputation, through what is said about him instead of through his own actions or words.

Rather than appeasing our curiosity, the narrator turns now to a careful account of how he himself heard the tale of Louidor: "This happened not long before the outbreak of the Second World War, and I heard about it that same evening from Pesach the Fat, owner of the Cancán Cafe" (p. 75). Pesach the Fat, we then learn, had heard all the details from the hospital doorman, and following this information comes a paragraph describing the emotion with which Pesach tells the tale to a crowd in his cafe. The narrative thus deflects focus from narrating the life of Louidor to the act of narration itself.

It is only belatedly that we learn of the narrator's encounter with the protagonist in person and not through hearsay. On the previous day he had seen Louidor preaching near the Jaffa gate, without recognizing the man as an old acquaintance. Yet again, however, before proceeding to inform us of Louidor's identity, the narrator insists on his own doubts about the matter and confronts us with a proliferation of other views. A series of voices offer accounts that purport to solve the puzzle, and so *discours* again intervenes with *récit*, or, we might say, *discours* itself becomes the subject of *récit*. Two Englishwomen in the crowd proclaim the man to be a Dervish, a Moslem holy man. Heightening the perplexity of the narrator, an Arab man then calls Louidor the "Jewish *wili*." Shifting attention to the memory of other narrations, the narrator then recalls Mrs. Luria and her tales of *wilis* in Turkish times. Yet another narrator enters retrospectively as the recollection of Haim Longlife once saying that he had seen Louidor in Ramleh in Bedouin robes, "and Mrs. Luria listened to this tale—as she listened to all Haim Longlife's wild tales—with a scornful smile and a wave of her hand" (p. 78). Finally the reader learns that the narrator meets Berl Raban, who promises to tell him "exactly what Louidor the Silent wants" (p. 79). Only now do we arrive at any kind of extended

As a short story, "Louidor, Louidor" certainly gains dramatic intensity through this rearrangement; in particular the deferral of the main action becomes more suspenseful as a result.

explanation of the events themselves, and even here, reinforcing awareness that narration itself has a priority in the reader's attention, the text dwells on the distance between Berl's dispassionate remarks and the passionate exhortations of Loudior to the crowd at the Jaffa gate. The narrator comments

instead of calming me, what Berl told me distressed me even more. It seemed to me that I was watching a man being roasted alive on burning coals, and even as the smell of his charred flesh rose in my nostrils, I was reading a newspaper article about him, this man who had set himself on fire for political reasons (p. 79).

What is the effect of suspending the action so long, of juxtaposing various views of a single topic, of introducing numerous narrators and insisting on expressly metanarrative statements? How has this apparently secondary material of undisguised conspicuousness prepared us to understand what follows? First of all, the differing perspectives lead to a clash of expectations. The abundance of explanations of who Loudior is suggests that none of the spectators can quite fathom, can quite get around this phenomenon. Secondly, as the lack of consensus suggests that the observers do not know what to make of this man, the elusiveness of the text alerts us to the elusiveness of the character himself. This reading provides us with a clue to penetrating the mystery, for Loudior's enigmatic and indeterminate role results from his own pursuit of elusive otherworldly ideals that become dangerous and distorted when actualized in the here and now.

Loudior is a European, intellectual Jew, a rationalist and a pacifist. Through a pattern of repetitions that evolve out of a series of juxtaposed vignettes of his life the reader comes to see him as a figure trying repeatedly to escape the confines of his own identity and to obliterate the singularity of his self. Motivated by a desire for disinterested purity of intention, he attempts constantly to overcome the self-centeredness of his own life. As a young man, Loudior had admired Tolstoy and planned to move to a commune to realize the writer's most important teachings: love of man, renunciation of property, and pacifism. This admiration faltered, however, when Loudior came to comprehend the depths of Tolstoy's antisemitism and his failures as an idealist. Loudior turns his admiration then to Konstantin Shapiro, a figure who exemplifies in the story the danger of following a dream. Shapiro's writing of secular, Zionist Hebrew poetry had enraged his orthodox Jewish family and so, excluded and rejected by both the traditional Jewish world and the antisemitic gentile world, this poet lost all identity and died unknown and unappreciated. In emulation of him, Loudior loses himself in Zionism only to find his new

principles in jeopardy upon arrival in Jaffa. Profoundly disturbed by the fact of the large Arab population already residing there, he foresees that Zionism is in for a major conflict and he redirects his energies yet again to love for a woman, Yael Gutman. The narrator interprets this attachment clearly as another attempt at self-effacement and transcendence:

only with Yaeli was Loudidor able to talk about himself with a smile, the easy, relaxed smile of a person at one and the same time inside and outside of himself, above and beyond his thoughts and memories and ambitions and feelings and fears . . . (p. 84).

Yaeli's rejection of him, though, leads Loudidor to humiliating impotence that recalls his final defeat and physical mutilation. These last events, in their turn, accompany his culminating and most misguided attempt at altruism. Acting on behalf of the Jewish people, he seeks to end the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine by convincing the Arabs to leave the land. Since he feels he has no moral right, as a Jew, to ask this of the Arabs, Loudidor converts to Islam, becomes a Moslem holy man, and, returning from his pilgrimage to Mecca, undertakes to persuade the population to move en masse. This was the purpose of his appearance near the Jaffa gate, and shortly thereafter he meets his bloody end.

All of his failures suggest that it is perilous to be marginal, not to belong. To pursue wholeness, plenitude or selflessness may be to court disaster if the ideal disrupts order, defies social categories, or oversteps the boundaries which people set for themselves in their private or collective lives. Loudidor has an insufficient respect for limits, personal and societal. At this point the metanarrative emphasis of the initial part of the story begins to clarify itself. The difficulty of putting Loudidor's life into words parallels the difficulty of putting ideals into practice, and the opening section of the text sensitizes the reader to understand this issue. The narrator, having concentrated on convincing us of the obstacle to narrating the tale, finally does approach all the complex ingredients of Loudidor's life, imitating the narrators in "The Pope's Mustache," only by throwing caution to the wind and giving rein to invention. He delves in and out of the private thoughts and dreams of the characters, telescoping the dreams of Konstantin Shapiro into the dreams of Loudidor, cutting back and forth from one period of time to another, and blurring the boundary between Berl Raban's report and his own discourse. Having weighed fully the hazards involved in his task as a narrator, he mediates Loudidor's experience and makes it available to us by skirting the issue of plausibility. Relinquishing authority as a source of verifiable fact, he rests ultimately on

artfulness as a more direct avenue to authenticity. In this way he gets around questions about the limitations of writing.

Much of the strength of Shahar's writing derives from the fact that its complexities are not simply virtuoso performances. This is not so much self-involved literature as fiction in which metanarrative qualities evolve inevitably from a constant grasping after that which necessarily exceeds the writer's reach. At the same time, this writing gains resilience and subtlety from the fact that the author does not spend himself entirely, like the unfortunate Loudor, in the process. In the dialectic between the grand and the disappointing, wholeness and limitation, the narrators of Shahar's texts often content themselves with accepting partial truths, celebrating the small things in life, and taking joy in narrative for the sake of telling a good story. The author relishes language in its rightfully diminished place in the cosmic scheme of things and so frequently accomplishes more with less. He does this in a number of ways.

As Hillel Barzel (1972) points out, the retrospective narration of these stories contributes to a diminutivizing, a narrowing of scope, that makes these stories so delightful. While the predominant voice of these tales (who narrates the story and to whom) remains constant, the mode (the point of view that orients the text) is dual: we contend here with both an adult narrator and, through memory, with his outlook as a child.¹⁰ The child's viewpoint allows us to see things at close range; the limited understandings of a small boy help make familiar even questions of the greatest magnitude. In addition, the humor and affection that the narrator brings to his memories make the characters and their activities more human-sized. Fond remembrance makes even mysticism more assimilable to the reader, as in the case of Uncle Kalman, and by the same token, when contrasts between the holiness of Jerusalem and the down-to-earth details of the lives lived there result in irony, there is nothing angry, only endearing, about the all-too-human portraits conveyed.

Zvi Luz (1970) and Sarah Katz (1975) reinforce this analysis of the importance of small things by calling attention to the particularity of descriptive detail and speech that Shahar uses to evoke a specific ambience. In this manner, the author evinces a plausible, convincing familiarity in his fictional settings. The fact that the narrator appropriates a child's impressions allows him to portray incidents with an innocent kind of accuracy. The boy, because he has few preconceptions, is not only easily filled with wonder but is also observant, and, while not comprehending

10. This very helpful distinction between mode and voice comes from Genette (1972).

everything he witnesses, nevertheless takes it all in. The author's penchant for detail represents a counterbalance to his characters' search for the essence and nothingness of existence; offsetting the excess of metaphysical speculation in these texts, this quality brings the narrative always gently back down to earth to a comfortingly concrete here and now.

Gershon Shaked's assessment of Shahar's *The Palace of Shattered Vessels* is pertinent here, for it comments on the delicious detail of individual scenes and anecdotes within the work that contrast with the vagaries of the text's overall structure:

The entire book reads like a kind of exposition for a novel that has not yet been written. These remembrances are memorial stones that do not add up to a building, even though each one of them has a charm of its own, and even though each one of them is considerably rich in delicate human situations and steeped with humor . . . (1970, p. 63).

In much of Shahar's writing, the looseness of organization does contrast with the eye for minutiae in the prose. It could be argued, though, that this contrast is not a weakness but, on the contrary, an enriching complement. While one level of the text attempts to encompass vague grandiosities, the other in its miniature portraits ironizes the aspiration to unattainable fulfillment. A celebration of small things would seem merely small, unimpressive local color fiction, were it not for the background of a struggle with immensity, inevitably doomed to failure, which makes the concreteness of small achievements all the more positive and treasured.¹¹

The setting of these stories by and large in Jerusalem of the Mandate period coincides with and buttresses these issues, for Shahar takes advantage of a multifaceted cultural scene and heterogeneous social makeup to stress particularity. This is a moment of indefiniteness, a precarious moment before the splintering and polarizing of a society, when all groups still intermingle and yet the identity of each group stands out. Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Arabs, Ethiopians, Christian missionaries from Europe, even American characters crowd Shahar's narrative in a bright collage of elements that refuse to blend. All, moreover, are seen against the

11. Bersohn (1980) disagrees with Shaked about the success of Shahar's overall organizational schema in the trilogy. She claims that the first volume by itself may appear incomplete, but that taken in conjunction with the other two volumes its structure is far more satisfying, and integrates qualities of the psychological novel with the metarealistic novel. While her point is well taken that the novels gain greater coherence when seen together rather than apart, I find Shaked's observation of the looseness of structure and the attention to detail to be very perceptive. My argument is that the text as a whole gains added meaning precisely because of the contrasting impulses of the prose and the general composition.

backdrop of Jerusalem, the holy city, with its constant reminders of belief in absolutes. In this fashion, Shahar reinforces our sense of a central tension between the individual and the eternal, specificity and transcendence.

Also contributing to the power of the minute here is the role of marginality. Just as the grand vision, translated into the realities of this world, results in marginal characters—oddballs who don't fit in and may appear grotesque—so the marginal may be a trace of the extraordinary and following it may bring us to a special gateway to greater understandings. The implication seems to be that the small, what is accessible to human perception, in actuality is tremendous, for only through it can we come to our visions of truth. It is the Loudors, and the Kalmans, and the Uncle Abies (*Dəbarim šebəteba' ha'adam*) who approach saintliness, idiosyncratic and even laughable as they may be.

Marginal events are an important structuring device of Shahar's stories since they often open up new realms of meaning to the characters by jolting the memory, triggering a sudden association, and changing the direction of narrative sequence. The Englishwoman's overheard remark about Dervishes in "Loudor" sets off a chain of thoughts in the narrator's mind and so initiates his interest in the "Jewish *wili*." That marginal incidents can create similar transitions or pivotal moments for other figures is stated explicitly in the body of this story: Tolstoy died twice for Loudor, once physically and once spiritually. The second occasion comes about as Loudor catches the name Konstantin Shapiro in one of Tolstoy's published letters, and the contempt with which the famous author speaks of Shapiro dashes the young man's hopes and beliefs.

That little Konstantin Shapiro killed the great Tolstoy. . . . Tolstoy died because of poor little Konstantin Shapiro—marginal, insignificant Konstantin Shapiro, bowing and kneeling outside the gates, shut out of the circle of Tolstoy's life—not because of the big, important, obvious issues, the fundamental issues . . . (p. 81).

The opening to "The Pope's Mustache," again, provides striking commentary on this as on many other points that affect both this text and Shahar's writing in general. The narrator introduces the anecdote about John the 23rd by saying that "the mustache came before the Pope" (p. 189). Literally the statement is true, since Giuseppe Angelo Roncalli grew the mustache long before he became Pope. In addition, however, the disproportionate amount of importance imputed to the small thing rather than the big thing, the priority given to the mustache rather than to the Pope, invests the mustache with symbolic value; it is clearly worth more

than its intrinsic value.¹² The personal detail not only makes the Pope seem more accessible, thus contributing to his reputation as a beloved spiritual leader, but points to a major facet of the entire story—the central discrepancy between worldly and sacred values. Eventually the former are subordinated to the latter, on the part of both the Pope and of Gabriel Luria, but the minor thing (one of the worldly values!) plays a decisive role in directing the narrative as a sign of major transformations. Throughout his fiction, Shahar similarly relies on the marginal event of seemingly little consequence to constantly readjust the focus of the narrative, just as he also cherishes the small detail, the marginal character, and the limitations of language as promises, comprehensible in human terms, of an incomprehensible but more meaningful beyond.

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12. This understanding of symbolism is suggested by Sperber (1974) and Wilden (1972).

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