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Brenner's Breakdown and Bereavement is a masterpiece in literature. A demanding, ironic, complex treatment of the theme of alienation and identity, it compares favorably to the novels of Dostoyevsky. This thesis deals with the novel thematically and artistically. It considers Brenner's creation of an anti-hero protagonist, his evocation of Jerusalem circa 1910, his conception of madness, and briefly glimpses Brenner's own relationship to the work. The thesis both analyzes Brenner's work and reacts to it. A psychological novel of such high artistic quality requires no less.

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CHAPTER ONE:

The Novelist And The Novel

Yosef Haim Brenner died at the hands of Arab assassins outside of Jaffa in 1921 at the age of forty. A novelist, essayist and social activist, only a few days before his death he wrote a passionate article on the need to love the Arabs. He had been inspired to write the article after observing a young Arab boy working as a porter, laden with a crushing burden. He wrote:

> Laboring orphan, young brother, peace unto you, loved one. Whether you be akin to me in blood or no, responsibility for you rests upon me. It is for me to brighten your eyes, to teach how men ought to deal with one another. Not politics, but contact of soul with soul throughout many days, throughout the generations. Not from any aim and not from any motive save the motive of a brother, friend, companion.[1]

The prophetic tone of this article, its insistence on purity of motivation, its call not for toleration but love, reveal the passionate sincerity of the author. Brenner was an odd figure in Palestine, and was perceived both as saint and heretic. His unrelenting sense of personal responsibility was the crushing burden which he carried till the end of his truncated life.

Brenner's novels are very personal, largely autobiographical constructions. Shalom Spiegel goes so far as to say that his narratives "are nothing but fragments of a

confession, leaves from his diary, a setting down of his own experiences, his own torments, his own quest."[2] Unfamiliar with the journals of Brenner, I can neither affirm nor deny Spiegel's position. But it seems a rather extreme assessment in light of the true artistry which Brenner manifests in his last novel, Breakdown and Bereavement.

Brenner's personality is reflected in many ways in Breakdown and Bereavement. Yehezkel Hefetz, the protagonist of the book, could well have written the article exhorting love of the Arabs. The heroic cadence, and inflated sense of mission are characteristics of Hefetz which, in the context of the novel, become ludicrous and unjustifed. In fact, one might view Breakdown and Bereavement as a grotesque study in self-mockery, or at least in pessimistic self-scrutiny on the part of the author. And this reading especially comes across after consideration of the short prologue which Brenner affixed to the novel. In it he identifies the protagonist of the novel as a "certain homely and unfortunate individual" who "repeatedly stressed the need for an attitude of good will toward all men," and who "fell mentally ill."[3]

But Brenner's prologue does more than suggest the identity of protagonist and author. In claiming that the novel is actually a partially fictionalized version of some memoirs abandoned by this rather pathetic young man, it raises the question, on an artistic level, of the relationship between art and reality. And indeed that is the

essential theme of the book. On the basis of the prologue, the narrator of the novel becomes a distorting glass which separates memoiristic reality from fictive artifice. Throughout the book, the boundaries between memoir and narrative, art and reality, are never clear. Brenner's hand is always playful and ambiguous. The author's identity is one of several identity questions which the book provokes. Perhaps they are all summed up in the question: "Who is Yehezkel Hefetz?"

CHAPTER TWO:

Yehezkel Hefetz

There is a particularly deep shame in deceiving other persons into believing something about oneself that is not true. No one else knows of it; one has lied to oneself. This comes about in part because one doesn't know how to fit shame into the network of other emotions with which it is interwoven. It is closely associated with anger and bitterness, emotions that according to our code should be repressed, and may be turned against the self. Not knowing what should be done with shame one's first impulse is to conceal it, and this may produce further shame.

Helen Merrell Lynd

On Shame And the Search For Identity

While there is a universal theme to Breakdown and Bereavement, the isolated individual in an alien world, its narrative is, nevertheless, deeply rooted in a specific time and place, the world of the Russian Jewish intellectual at the beginning of the twentieth century. His world is crumbling; pogroms and official discrimination have threatened his self-understanding. His intellectual world is crowded with new appealing ideologies of salvation. Many Jews have become socialists, and, as members of the Bund, are active workers for the revolution. Zionism, the new ideology of Jewish redemption and group self-assertion, also has its adherents. Jews are beginning to leave Russia for Palestine. A new sense of cultural nationalism, espoused by Ahad Ha-am and others, is in the air. The national idea is supplanting the traditional God concept; Hebrew is being molded into the national language, the holy language is becoming the language of literature and even of daily speech.

The most ardent Jews, keenly infused with the idealism of the times, wend their way to Palestine to build a new life. Many other Jews turn to America, lured by the promise of economic prosperity. But the majority remain in the Pale.

The Jews that come to Palestine in the early years of the new century are an unusual lot. They are buttressed with romantic expectations. Some are adventurers. Others are drawn by religious conviction. Some sense that the

Jewish element of their identity is not an accident or a misfortune but that it reaches to their essence. There are, in their mist, dreamers, pioneers, speculators, heroes and fools.

Zionism and socialism, both quasi-religious movements, offer salvation to the individual in payment for his renunciation of individuality. They call for the willing sacrifice of the individual in the name of lofty ideals like brotherhood, equality, humanity, peoplehood, and dignity. And socialism not only attacks private property, but also threatens the private world of the individual.

These two ideologies find concrete expression in the early labor-zionist workers' colonies in Palestine. Coupled with the belief that man's highest perfection is in the production of tangible commodities and the belief that Jews need to live in their own homeland in order to develop their own national culture, is the added motivating ideology, propounded by A.D. Gordon and others, which advertises the redeeming value and inherent dignity of working the soil.

This briefly is the idea world in which Yehezkel Hefetz lives. Any individual stands the possibility of being consumed by it. Hefetz, struggle though he does, can neither be consumed by it nor digest it. He is buffeted about by the heroic idealisms of his time, forever regarding himself as a failure, for his inability to match up, torturing himself

because of his non-heroic imperfections, unable to face himself, in limitation, as viable individual.

Breakdown and Bereavement studies Hefetz primarily against the background of Jerusalem society. Jerusalem in 1910 was an odd place for a Jew to live. The future of Eretz Yisrael lay in the agricultural communes to the north, not in a Jewish enclave in an Arab town. Some of Jerusalem's residents were old pious Jews who had come to die and be buried in the Holy City. But most of the Ashkenazic residents had arrived in Jerusalem by a circuitous route and for varying reasons.

The novel begins with a bathetic descent. Hefetz, working triumphantly, shoveling hay on a workers' commune, fulfilling the heroic ideal, overdoes it. Doubled over with the pain of a rupture, he embodies the epithet cast upon him by Menahem, the migrant laborer with whom he has been working: "Shlemiel!" His accident precipitates his exit from the commune. Unable to work, he becomes a consumer, a dredge on the communal pocket. The commune decides to send him to Jerusalem to recuperate. There he has family who will presumably care for him, thereby saving the commune the cost of his convalescentce. Menahem accompanies him on his trip.

The trip to Jerusalem, the traditional pilgrimmage known as an "ascent," is, under these circumstances, a descent, an expulsion not a pilgrimmage. During the trip,

Hefetz looks back on the tortuous contours of his life, rather than forward to the City of hope and rebirth. Jerusalem is simply the inevitable next stop; but is is also a refuge. In Jerusalem lies the hope of recuperation. But during the trip, Hefetz is obsessed with his shame. The sudden shame of his recent accident reminds him of past failures and past humiliations. Once before he had lived on the commune and had been expelled - after a shameful exposure. To remain among the workers, he had felt obliged to wear a mask - for their ideals exceeded his grasp, and their life-style seemed to him pointlessly spartan.

But as long as he could mask his secret alienation, he could continue to act in the arena of communal life.

Brenner expresses masking through the device of words used to obscure inner voices. Hefetz makes keen social observations in order to deflect attention from his private anguish. He reaches to the heart of the shared anxiety of the Jewish workers in the Galil during feverish tirades on the dangers implicit in the rise of Arab nationalism. His apparent obsession with the possibility of an Arab pogrom is in reality a desperate cover for his true feelings of revulsion for the life of communal labor. On a symbolic level, his inner loathing and outer dissimulation are identical. The Arab motif, is, throughout the book, one of lurking threat and alluring desire. The

Jewish workers' commune is, in reality, a precarious foreign enclave subject at any moment to engulfment by the indigenous enemy. Similarly, Hefetz feels himself a marginal member of the commune, threatened with engulfment by his own desires for romance, intrigue and bourgeois comfort. And he feels humiliated by his desires, for they mock the values of the world he struggles to live in.

The burden of sustaining the mask is ultimately too much. When he adopts a pose of silence, his mask is ruptured; his presence becomes unendurable to the commune members. He becomes the enemy within - a symbol of the same Arab presence he had earlier verbalized! Judged deranged, he is expelled for treatment. Silence is private; privacy cannot be tolerated in the commune. Privacy is a sign of sickness; health is public, communal.

Having placed Hefetz in the ascetic world of the SEcond Aliyah, Brenner next situates him in a bourgeois environment. How will he function here? Was his discomfiture merely the result of an inimical environment? Here too Hefetz fails. Unable to live up to imposed external demands, he is no more successful at satisfying his own internal desires. And the bourgeois world also necessitates masks and performance, the veneer of culture, the affectation of European mores. The bourgeois world too has its ideals: romantic love, beauty, marriage, family, comfort, and culture.

From the perspective of the small Swiss town in which Hefetz eventually takes residence, Palestine is the symbol of selfless idealism and Europe the symbol of selfish indulgence. Too timid to acknowledge his tumultuous inner desires, he is also too willful to yield to their insistence. Rather than falling in love, he falls into a trap. This trap serves artistically to prefigure his fate in Jerusalem. He takes residence as a boarder with a poor Russian emigré family - a sickly woman, abandoned by her husband, and her several children, including a frail, sickly adolescent girl. Hefetz is lured by sickness - midst sickness he can feel healthy. Disgusted with his repeated failures at instigating love affairs, here he can indulge his passion to be helpful. Neither pioneer nor lover, here he can conceive of himself as benefactor. With this identity, he can yet justify his weakness, and take the sting out of his self-reproach.

He never falls in love, his passions are never kindled, rather he conceives a passion, creates a love. As the object of this willed love, he chooses the sickly adolescent girl. But she never takes on any reality, and there is never any question of there being an actual relationship between them. She is a lap to cry in, a body to fondle, an object to dream about, the cornerstone upon which Hefetz can build his new bourgeois identity, the

dream of which is simulatneously attractive and repulsive to him.

Bourgeois identity, however, is epitomized in the person of Hamilin. (In the course of the novel, Brenner uses two archetypal characters, Hamilin and Menahem, the latter concretizing the virile, hardy, pioneer ideal, to good mythopoeic effect.) Hamilin, Hefetz's nemesis, becomes his private obsession. He is the embodiment of success, charm, and complacency. There is about him an arrogant surliness and also a certain immoral freedom of movement. (He had married an older woman for money and later abandoned her and his child by her.) He is a man who permits himself pleasure.

A living critique of Hefetz, he fulfills his role by seducing Hefetz's beloved. Hefetz feels himself humiliated at the hands of beauty, power and harmony. Once again he faces himself as a failure - this time at love.

He leaves the scene of his ruined romance and returns to Palestine, certain, that there, he will be able to avoid the problems of love.

But Hefetz will avoid no problems in Palestine; his past is an indelible part of his present. Hamilin had entered his life in Switzerland and gained entrance into his soul . And Menahem too, the narrative inobtrusively

notes, first met Hefetz in that small Swiss town. The emigré household in the Swiss town, to which Hefetz had been drawn in the first place, for reasons of nostalgia, is the womb from which he never quite emerges. There he experienced love, ambivalence and failure, and there he learned the role of the benefactor. Jerusalem, the widowed city in mourning for her children, awaits him.

CHAPTER THREE:

Jerusalem As Masquerade

You know without having to reason about it the price of a bale of cotton, or a quart of molasses. But no value has been put on human life; it is given to us free and taken without being paid for. What is it worth? If you look around, at times the value may seem to be little or nothing at all. Often after you have sweated and tried and things are not better for you, there comes a feeling deep down in the soul that you are not worth much.

Carson McCullers
The Ballad of the Sad Café

Brenner's Jerusalem is timeless. It is in a perpetual state of dissolution and decomposition. It is an escapade of dissatisfaction, disappointment and envy. Jerusalem citizens rail against her injustices and absurdities, but there is no response.

The first scene is the hospital. The groans and sighs of the sick and the dying, pious interjections, and loud complaints about man's inhumanity to man reverberate against the walls of the hospital courtyard. A pall of futility hangs over Jerusalem.

Hefetz thinks of Jesus who "in the innocence of his delusion.... and the foolishness of his pride believed that he could cure the sick, the suffering, the weary and the burdened."[4] Against the backdrop of changelessness, individual striving is vain.

The conversation in the courtyard expresses the poverty and the venality, the piety and the bitterness which make up Jerusalem's complex personality. It is a hard, insensitive city - in which the poor are downtrodden - the sick maltreated.

Again, Brenner uses the motif of masking to superb effect. Hefetz talks to elude his inner distress, or to cover it over; his words are a brilliant, scathing, insightful attack of Jerusalem and her fragmented, pathetic society, while his thoughts, expressed in a powerful interior monologue, are a scathing attack of himself. Yehezkel is ironically cast in a prophetic role.

He lives up to his name, Ezekiel, the prophet who swallowed God's scroll of lamentations. His scroll is his internal self-loathing, his prophecy, condemnation of Jerusalem.

Internally he thinks:

> What an ugly way to suffer....what an ugly way to suffer.... In the book of Job the Leper it is written: 'And he took a potsherd to scrape himself with.'
> ....Only I am not Job: I have no complaints against God. In fact, I have no God. I have nothing to do with God. And even if I could complain - I'm not complaining and I don't wish to protest. I'm not Job. And I don't sit in ashes, either, but in dung, in the dung of my own ugly suffering. Only I don't let go of the potsherd. I can't stop scratching. Yes, a potsherd is probably the one thing I can't do without.[5]

While outwardly he says:

> Yes, Menahem, there's no lack of dust, and the pious housewives nearly faint from it in the streets whenever they go out.... At the very same time, their menfolk, who really aren't men at all, are sitting in their study houses, or in their shops, or by the Wailing Wall, and drinking dust there too; and their children, the children of the ruins....Whose heads are full of the dust of prayer books and Talmuds, though none of it means a thing to them.... sway back and forth and daydream feebly of distant lands.... where the people are rich.... and without whom Jerusalem would be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye. A sublime poem, isn't it? A poem of dust![6]

On a symbolic level, the external world of Jerusalem reflects the internal world of Hefetz. He reduces himself to a third-rate Job whose only similarity to the great sufferer is that he too suffers. And Jerusalem, he reduces to dust. Jerusalem chokes on the dust of its debilitated old age, even as Hefetz gags with disgust on the dung of his suffering. Jerusalem is a dependent, fragile city, lacking the vitality to be a city of hope and rebirth, and Hefetz sees himself as a feeble and fragile sufferer, who nurses his wounds without protest. Jerusalem the dream, the ideal, is demeaned by the reality. A city of squalor sitting on a dust heap, it is a fraud, a pretense. Its truth lies in its dust. Hefetz recognizes his own ugliness and falseness in the contours, social and physical of the Holy City. When he rails against Jerusalem, he castigates himself.

The society of Jerusalem is closed, riven, frustrated, confused. It is not happy, not noble, not constructive. It is a pathetically complaining, bickering, backbiting, deceitful society. None of the characters whom Brenner depicts are satisfied with life, and all of them blame Jerusalem for their dissatisfaction. None of the residents is a vibrant, confident individual; rather, all of them lack a true sense of self-worth. None of them is tragic, all of them, in their own way, are pathetic, deserving of compassion, not harsh judgment.

They have come to Jerusalem for a variety of reasons. But none of them knows why he remains.

Brenner uses soliloquy as his primary technique of characterization. The Jerusalem denizens, introduce themselves as it were, in long monologues directed either at another character or at an audience of listeners. This technique creates an almost theatrical effect as the various cliques and coteries develop. Brenner also uses satire and caricature, as he gradually crowds the stage of Jerusalem to the bursting point.

Except for the Hefetz family, with whom Yehezkel lives in Jerusalem, none of the characters are fully developed. They are representative of types, expressive of positions, religious, social and philosophical. The Jerusalem scenes culminate in a grotesque party which brings all the residents together. It, more than any other scene, expresses Brenner's sense of Jerusalem as masquerade.

The center of focus in Jerusalem is the Hefetz family, and the center of that family is Reb Yosef, the family patriarch. Yosef is a complex person. A self-taught scholar, like any autodidact, he is proud of his knowledge, yet uncertain of his worth. In Russia he had made a decent living by tutoring; in Jerusalem his services are not sought. Indigent and embittered, he scoffs at the shallow pretentiousness of scholarship in Jerusalem and observes

that titles, not learning, earn a man respect. This observation he concretizes with reference to Hamilin, who reappears as the man with the best façade, the title of Doctor even before finishing his studies.

Yosef is particularly proud of the breadth of his learning. He considers himself as fluent in Kant as in the Talmud, and evinces a tendency to identify himself with Spinoza, who spurned in his own day as a heretic, enjoys posthumous acclaim as a scholar-saint. Yosef too feels unappreciated, unaffirmed, and longs for vindication. And Yosef too has glimpses of himself as a heretic, as internally he struggles to maintain a balance between his modern scientific perspective and his traditional piety.

On a thematic level, Yosef reflects the inner stress of modern Jewish life, the tension between Haskalah and Hassidut. Brenner also uses him to introduce philosophical themes which relate directly to the central issues of Breakdown and Bereavement. In speaking of the pursuit of the true good, Yosef observes that appetite, wealth and honor are all mirages. And with regard to the issue of free will and determinism, he follows Spinoza in asserting that knowledge liberates man from necessity by revealing to him the truth, and thereby ennabling him to attach himself to God. Both observations are ironic. For Yosef is soured by his life, contemptuous of those who have

honor or wealth because he feels himself unjustly denied these rewards and longs for them. And, although he speaks of freedom, he relies heavily on authority. He cites philosophers the way talmudists cite rabbis. The issue of reward, the problem of freedom, and the nature of the true good are central themes of the novel .

Reb Yosef's two daughters are on the one hand diametric opposites. Esther is old, frail, sickly. Miriam is young, attractive, supple and healthy. Esther is submissive, Miriam rebellious. On the other hand, they are quite similar. Both of them are afflicted by a sense of their own worthlessness, the inferiority of women being a proposition Reb Yosef has inculcated in them. Both feel that their lives are pointless. Esther longs for a passionate love affair to compensate her for her unrewarded years of self-sacrifice, to lend new meaning to her life. Miriam dreams of education as the antidote to her sense of worthlessness. Both of them find their present lives unbearable and oppressive. Miriam is a flirty, manipulative coquette; Esther, a faded stingy old maid. Miriam is the embodiment of life, Esther an allusion to death and decay. But ironically, Miriam dies young and Esther lives on.

Reb Yosef's brother, Haim, is his typological opposite. He is a kind of vagabond Jew who came to Palestine years before his brother in order to escape prosecution by

Russian law for his involvement in smuggling. A slow-witted laborer, a simple man, he idolizes his brother the scholar. And he bears a permanent, almost obsessive grudge against Reb Yankev Goldman, at whose hands he has experienced repeated humiliations. Haim, not a contentious person himself, cannot understand why bad feeling reins in Jerusalem. He is a man of simple taste, and simple faith.

Shneirson is a satirical figure. A self-styled modern, Jewish intellectual, he serves as Miriam's tutor in payment, one assumes, for the promise of her affection. But Miriam is not easily subdued. Shneirson serves also as a foil to Reb Yosef. He expresses the latest intellectual fads and is countered repeatedly by Yosef.

Shneirson had come to Palestine with the Young Hebrew Nationalists whose path to Jerusalem Brenner deftly traces. They enter the country at Jaffa feeling great excitement. They are put off by the Arabs whom they encounter in Jaffa; they take their meals at the hotel; they try their hand at work in one of the agricultural communes, then they make the pilgrimmage to Jerusalem, wander about the Galil and end up as secretaries or teachers in Jerusalem or Jaffa. Their expectations not met, they sell out their dreams for bourgeois comfort.

A bit of a fop, Shneirson moves from group to group in Jerusalem, bemoaning the insipidity of Jerusalem culture and projecting himself as a connoisseur. As he fancies

himself a keen observer of humanity, he is wont to stare intensely at a new acquaintance in order, as it were, to pierce the mask. A caricature of himself, Shneirson boasts that he does not perceive people as people, but rather as characters. And like a satirist, he gives stereotypical labels to everyone he meets. Yosef is the phenomenon, Hefetz the maniac, Miriam the nymph. Brenner's rendering of Shneirson is nearly comic. But Shneirson too senses no purpose in his life; is fearful of other people's impression of him. And he too becomes obsessed with hate and envy for Hamilin, who, during his stay in Jerusalem, shows himself a better actor in the same role.

Reb Yankev Goldman is the wheeler-dealer par excellence. Well before he enters the stage, he is the object of much anger. For everyone is financially dependent upon him. The personification of greed and hypocrisy, Brenner has named him with Dickensian aptness. The object of Haim's grudge, he is also the private obsession of Yosef, for his wealth has brought him the honor and authority which Yosef so dearly desires.

Goldman is director of the guest house, a landlord, and an official of one of the charities. A successful cheat, he exercises much power. Eventually Esther, Yehezkel and Haim all come into his employ. His house if filled with luxuries; but his wife complains of being overworked; his

mother, a recent arrival from Rumania, complains of his insubordinance; and he himself constantly complains about expenses. A nervous, sneaky man described as having an Adam's apple that bulges like a lemon, he has power but not contentment.

Lesser characters gather in the chapel of the guest house and on the rocks outside of the Har El Hotel. The chapel group includes Herr Kaufman, a business man from East Prussia, who two days after his marriage abandoned his wife and journeyed to Palestine on the heels of a revelation. A fundamentalist, he believes in mysterious powers and the devil's strength, blames the dissolution he sees, the immorality of the Zionists and the younger generation, on their abandonment of God. He came to Jerusalem with visions of a business enterprise, but was unable to culminate a single deal. Now, five or six years after his arrival, he merely maintains a charade, carrying around an empty attache case. In the chapel arguments he constantly opposes Yosef, whom he brands a Godless Russian, for he brings out Yosef's skeptical side. Kaufman is the foolish conniver who masks his immorality in a cloak of religious mysticism. Although he rails against news of the impending exodus from Jerusalem of several people and calls it the devil's work, he, too, is prepared to leave on a moment's notice. When he discovers that Esther has access to money,

he is immediately incited to woo her.

Mr. Bassin is the sexton of the guesthouse chapel. A Jerusalemite by birth, and also by birth a member of one of the poorer charity doles, he married into a wealthier charity, but plans anyhow to leave Palestine for America. A gossip, cantor, and administrator, he rails against the economic corruption of Jerusalem, the absurdity of the dole system. But in leaving Palestine, he abandons his poor beggar of a mother to probable starvation. The self-serving social critic who blames the system for his own betrayal.

The chapel coterie includes Bassin, Haim, Kaufman, occasionally Yosef, and infrequently Goldman and whoever else the sexton can round up for minyan.

The cabal on the rocks, is composed of sharetraders, storekeepers, artisans, landlords, beggars and others. It is dominated by the voices of Shneirson, Yosef and Kahanowitz, Shneirson's roommate. Kahanowitz, a graduate of a Lithuanian Yeshiva, is determined to start his studies all over again, this time in conformity to the standards of modern secular education. He wants to go to school with fourteen year old Sephardic boys. When he is refused entry, he turns his Talmudic mind to nasty gossip and creative innuendo, directed particularly at exposing his roommate. Disappointed, he turned bitter.

Henya, Goldman's daughter, divorced Hanoch, Haim's son, because he chose to be a watchman at a Jewish settlement surrounded by Arab territory. Now she lives with her parents and her son by Hanoch whom she beats mercilessly. She slowly adopts the manners of a grande dame, somewhat unbecoming to her plump peasant frame, in order to appeal to Hamilin, who marries her anyway because she is rich.

The Jerusalem merry-go-round of treachery and pretense, reaches full spin at a party given by Goldman, ostensibly in honor of his daughter's wedding. Obsessed with his own self-advancement, he transforms the party into a ceremonial event to mark his latest philanthropic contribution. The party becomes a grotesque, masked ball. Wealthy old businessmen search the party for prospective wives. Zeydl the hunchback, a pathetic lusty figure, comes to try his luck with the Jerusalem belles. A passing visitor to Jerusalem, disillusioned with the land and ready to move his family from Russia to America, reads his lofty rhetorical letter, a paen to pioneering. And an old man receives applause for his fervent speech on the supremacy of the Jews.

Brenner's characters crowd the world that is Jerusalem. Their words and antics turn Jerusalem into a tawdry Venice, a corrupt circus, a hall of cracked mirrors. The exodus from Jerusalem, which finally comes, is actually an

explosion at the center, a falling away, an abandonment.. All of Jerusalem's children hate her! Even Goldman sees his ugliness reflected in Jerusalem: "A den of swindlers - that's Jerusalem for you!"[7] Only Reb Yosef, no lover of people (though fond of "humanity") loved Jerusalem. And his appreciation of the city ends in humorous bathos.

Basing himself on the Kuzari he begins:

> Jerusalem! A widowed desolate deserted city crying for mercy like the Israelite nation itself.... a sacred site.... because of its beauty...[8]

And he concludes with a eulogy of the persistent mosquitoes and clever cats of the Holy City.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Madness as Quest

What is man that Thou shoulds't remember
him? An individual. A single sick
individual. And an individual has no
right to judge the mass of men. An
individual can only say: 'What have
I to do with them? If I'm unhappy--
well then, I must be hard to please.'
But the others are right too. 'So
you're unhappy, are you? Of course, you
can tear your hair out if you like but
what are we, the mass of men, supposed
to do about it?'

From Yehezkel Hefetz's
monologue during madness[9]

Is man no more than this? Consider him
well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the
beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the
cat no perfume.... Thou art the thing
itself; unaccommodated man is no more
but such a poor, bare, forked animal
as thou art.

Shakespeare
King Lear

Against the chaotic interpersonal battleground of Jerusalem, a special madness is difficult to distinguish. Jerusalem is an incoherent society, a city in search for its soul. Obsessions, compulsions, delusions, are not the property of any one person. Yosef is obsessed with Goldman. Goldman is obsessed with position, power and wealth. Miriam is romantically obsessed with Hamilin. Shneirson is also obsessed with Hamilin. And the list goes on. There is no model of health and sobriety to be found in Jerusalem. Each resident wears his identity like a mask, plays his role like an actor in a drama in which there is no plot or development. Unlike the workers' colony, Jerusalem is not ideologically repressive. And unlike West Europe, Jerusalem is not in thrall to a single bourgeois ideal. Jerusalem tolerates deviance, for it lacks norms, it can accommodate a plurality of identities because it lacks identity.

And yet Yehezkel Hefetz breaks down. He spends a month in the asylum outside the city. Brenner's treatment of Hefetz's breakdown is ambiguously suggestive, at once opaque and transparent. On the one hand there is a sense of inevitability about it. He feels it coming on as if it were beyond his control, an illness like any other, like malaria, of which the mosquito is the determinant cause. But there is also a suggestion that Hefetz has willed his madness, that he desires to go to the asylum, that he wishes

to be alone. His madness results from a will to suffering, a perverse disorientation of character, a revolt against life, a kind of suicide.

His madness is also a kind of masquerade. The mad man relinquishes a socially recognized role, he lowers his mask. As such, he is a threat to the other players who remain in the masquerade. And yet he inadvertently adopts a new mask, or is given a new mask by the other players, the mask of the maniac. But this mask is stigmatized. To wear it is still disconcerting to the others, and it is painful to himself. It is never clear whether Hefetz actually requests to be sent to the asylum or whether he is expelled from the Hefetz family. His original intent had been to hide the real nature of his "sickness" from the family, and to feign malaria. His real "sickness" was a hernia, which in his already distracted condition he had perceived as a badge of sexual shame, a sign of his ugly weakness. In trying to hide his shame, he inadvertently exposed it. If hernia was a betrayal by the body, then madness was a betrayal by the mind.

Hefetz's madness is also a magnification of guilt; he fantasizes himself a criminal and an inveterate sinner. His guilt mania is related to his delusive sense of his own power. He feels as if he is responsible for his own suffering and for the suffering of other people. He feels he must be careful lest he cause other people to suffer. On a personal level, his problem is a skewed perception of himself and the

world. On a social level, though, against Jerusalem reality, his perception is relevant. What are the relationships between the people of Jerusalem? Individuals do cause each other enormous pain and they do so unwittingly. Yosef is unable to express his love for his daughters, he knows only how to criticize them. Is he responsible in some sense for Miriam's possible suicide?

Hefetz's madness is a sociological critique of Jerusalem society, and it is also a dramatic reiteration of the philosophic issues raised by Yosef. What is the good, and can man perform it? His madness raises the social-philosophical question of the interdependence of man. Is no man an island? In what sense?

Hefetz experiences himself as a solitary island floating in an anonymous sea. Is his experience untenable? He knows two ideologies of relationship, one the socialist dictum of self-sacrificing service to one's brothers and sisters, and the other, the bourgeois notion of romantic love. The former is a will to love, the latter a capitulation to a greater will involving desire and attachment. These ideologies do battle in him and that battle is his madness.

For the ideologies are mutually exclusive. If romantic love is real, then one must follow the dictates of one's desires as they lead to the beautiful. If love is an illusion, then one must will oneself to be compassionate. The reward for the first course is love itself; the reward for the second is the sense of being virtuous. But what if you are cast

in the role of being a beloved and the dictates of compassion demand that you satisfy the need of your lover, namely, that you return his or her affection? This situation forces a clash of the ideologies. Should one fake love in the name of virtue or renounce virtue in a capitulation to love? And then to further confuse the situation, add the fact that your lover is repulsive to you. Hefetz's madness is a flight from Esther, his inflamed lover, into an asylum where he can loosen the double bind.

Jerusalem is a backdrop to the bizarre relationship between Hefetz and Esther. She is a pathetic old virgin filled with remorse for her unrewarded years of self-sacrifice to the Bund and to the commune. And now, her youth faded, her repressed passions cry out for fulfillment. Hefetz sees his own sickness in her; he quickly apprises her need and is caught in the bind. She pursues him, even to the asylum, and he tries to hide from her. He must find the courage to refuse her, to reveal his dislike for her and to endure the spectacle of her suffering, or he must swallow the bitter pill and take what pleasure he can from being compassionate. His madness is a retreat from decision.

His madness is also a mourning for self, a collapse of faith, a falling away of ideological ground. For Hefetz's madness is parallelled in Yosef's collapse, a kind of creeping despair which renders him silent; and in

Miriam's collapse, an unbearable sense of isolation which drives her to suicide, and in Haim's tortured renunciation of God.

These collapses all share one essential characteristic, the element of humiliation. Humiliation is an unmasking of oneself to oneself, a painful realization that the universe one has created is false, that one's identity is no longer sufficient. Yosef is humiliated when he is forced to vacate his top floor apartment and to take up residence in a smaller room on the first floor. He is forced to endure the humiliation of poverty, the recognition that his fate is not in his own hands, but rather in the hands of a man he deteste, Goldman. Haim too endures a final humiliation at the hands of Goldman. From his perspective, not only has Goldman robbed and dishonored him, but now he shames him by taking him into his employ. And Miriam too, proud rebel in her father's house, is humiliated in Jaffa, where, instead of being free to pursue her fantasized education, she must become a menial laborer in order to support herself. The come-down and the resultant sense of meaninglessness render her already lonely world unbearable. Hefetz's humiliation is the shattering recognition that before the ideals which he struggles to fulfill, he is an incompetent shlemiel.

Brenner's portrayal of Hefetz's madness is composed

of three elements: 1) A narrative depiction of hallucination
2) The motif of linguistic playfulness reminiscent of Shakespeare's fools
3) The motif of pellucid insight in the midst of madness reminiscent of Shakespeare's Lear.

Madness may be pointless, but it may also be productive. It may have method! In the throes of madness, Hefetz begins to produce a new ideology, an ideology of life, affirmation, in spite of it all. Out of his madness, a kind of capitulation to death, he begins to forge a new will to life. In his hallucinating mind, this ideology is propounded by Menahem, who tells him that he must open himself to life, that he lacks experience, that suffering is an inevitable part of life, that miracles happen here and now, that life is good, and that one must experiment with it.

Hefetz pulls himself from madness on the wings of this new ideology. Since life is the absolute good, love and virtue need no longer battle for hegmony. He begins to conceive of himself as healthy and vital.

CHAPTER FIVE

Exodus

My Father, Father of life and light,
may thou be blessed, selah! My Father,
Father of orphans, be gracious unto me,
let the sun's rays send me a gift. And
I, an orphan of orphans, shall receive
thy gift with thanks, with love, with
hope.I know how to prize Thy gift, Thy
goodness, selah! My heart sings and
shouts to Thee, O Father of Life,
blessed art Thou, selah![10]

Yehezkel Hefetz's prayer to
life at age thirty-one

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing
a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd
from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents
the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect
health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Walt Whitman
"Song of Myself"

There is a vacillating rhythm to Breakdown and Bereavement, a sense of cyclical repetition. People are drawn to Jerusalem with dreams and are driven away bereft of them. People leave Jerusalem in search of new dreams and yet their fulfillment is doubtful. Hefetz, seen first in the Galil, had come to Jerusalem in search of health, and midst sickness, he does find a modicum of well-being. Miriam leaves Jerusalem to improve her lot in life, but her efforts result in death. Yosef leaves Jerusalem for Tiberias, but the hot baths offer no relief to his nearly paralyzed legs. And in the end, Haim, sitting on the bank of the Kinneret, looks to Jerusalem, hopefully, for from there will come his grandson. Jerusalem is thus the object of persistent attraction and repulsion.

Against this oscillating background of events, Brenner develops a powerful driving narrative which evokes the new surging sense of life that Hefetz experiences. Hefetz is not a joyous, triumphant, dancing pagan like Menahem, who returns beneficently to help the Hefetz family settle in Tiberias. He has a rather mellow, nostalgic attitude toward his life which avers both defeat and defiance, resignation and hope. Against the background of Miriam's death, which drives Esther to guilty despair, Hefetz thinks about the will to live, and piously asserts the sweetness of life even in suffering. He compares himself to a mangy dog cracked over the head by a rock, who retreats discretely to his hole to hungrily savor the remaining days of his life.

Free finally of Esther - after a tragi-comic scene in which she thoroughly humiliates him by splattering him with a pot full of her excreta - Hefetz, though still enwombed, begins to explore the possibility of freedom. He may leave Tiberias for Haifa or Alexandria, he thinks.

On his thirtieth birthday, appropriately cast under the sign of Libra, the scales, he feels the closure of an epic in his life. He weighs the past, the good and bad, the light and dark and affirms it all. He feels orphaned but hopeful. Like the child in Tiberias who conjures up his dead father any time he wishes to speak with him, Hefetz speaks to <u>his</u> father, the "Father of life and light." He does not experience himself as an aspect of life, but rather as a dead vessel in receipt of the gift of life.

The sense of duality, the balancing scales of life and death, youth and old age, hover over the last chapters of the book. The scales also represent reward and punishment, guilt and innocence, justice and mercy. Yosef ponders the possibility that Miriam's death and his bereavement may have resulted from his sins. And Haim's pathetic reaction of veiled envy upon seeing a group of young muscular Bedouin Arabs frolicking and swimming in the Kinneret raises the spectre of future violence and possible vindictiveness.

The final scene is horrible. Yosef has gained some insight from his humiliation and Hefetz has found a new sense of self, but Haim has lost what balance he had. When Haim lost God, his life lost meaning. As he gazes now at the bobbing masts of a boat on the Kinneret, he begins to scratch himself fitfully. In that act, remindful of Job the Leper, the end of the book meets the beginning. His mind turned to Jerusalem, his body expressive of suffering, Haim's presence seems to say nothing has changed and nothing will change. Although the motif of time is virtually non-existent in Jerusalem, it frames the Tiberias scene, it brings new perspective, but not essential transformation. And the prologue, one remembers, refers to a certain young man about thirty-three years old, who falls mentally ill.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Shalom Spiegel. Hebrew Reborn. p. 385.

[2]Ibid. p. 397

[3]Y.H. Brenner. Breakdown and Bereavement, prologue.

[4]Ibid. Part I, Chapter 2.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid. Part II, Chapter 6.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid. Part II, Chapter 2.

[10]Ibid. Part III, Chapter 5.

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