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REUVEN BRAININ and the Y.L. GORDON CONTROVERSY

Stephen M. Wylen

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
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Referee: Professor Stanley Nash

For my Hebrew teachers, Dr. Stanley Nash, Dr. Yigal Yannai,
Chaya Gevish and Hannah Shenhar

and in memory of June Millner, zecher tsaddikah livracha,
a friend and study partner, may this thesis stand also
for the one you never got to write

and for my parents, who have guided and aided me to this
point in my life

INTRODUCTION

This study centers on the clash of two generations. We will see how the young critic Reuven Brainin (1862-1940) applied the literary criteria of his own generation in analyzing the works of the poet laureate of the previous generation of Hebrew writers in Russia, Judah Leib Gordon (1830-1892). Our major focus is on Reuven Brainin, but a proper appreciation of Brainin's role in Hebrew letters necessitates a few words of introduction concerning the great figure whom he criticized, Judah Leib Gordon.

Judah Leib Gordon was one of the great figures of the Russian Haskalah. He was the author of the watchword of the maskilim, "Be a Jew at home and a human being when abroad." He was a poet, an essayist, an editor, and a political leader of the Haskalah in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century.

Gordon was born in 1830, in Vilna, and died in 1892 in St. Petersburg. He was editor, or coeditor with Alexander Zedarbaum (Erez), of Hamelitz, the foremost Hebrew newspaper of that time, from 1880-83 and 1886-88.* He served as secretary of the Society for the Spread of Enlightenment Among the Jews of Russia.

Gordon's literary work is divided into three periods. The first is his romantic period, heavily

* Reuven Brainin was a member of his editorial staff.

influenced by the romantic poetry of Micah Joseph Lebensohn. Among his poems of this period is "The Love of David and Mikal" (1857). Typical of the poetry of this period, Gordon used Biblical themes and rhapsodized at length about love without developing the theme through his characters. His second period, beginning about 1868, was his realistic period. In this period he wrote poems about contemporary issues and actual life. He attacked the rabbis with special vehemence, especially in his poems on women's rights. In his poem "The Two Josephs ben Simon" Gordon turned his satiric wit against the maskilim as well. From this period also comes "Zedekiah in Prison", inspired by his own experiences as a political prisoner of the Czar. In this poem Gordon established the king as the model of the maskil and the prophet as the prototype of the rabbis who lead the people astray with their exclusive emphasis on otherworldly spirituality. Gordon's third period was his period of despair, beginning in about 1881, the time of the May Laws against the Jews. In this period Gordon doubted the future of the Jews and of the Hebrew language. He felt shattered and alienated. He felt the wells of his creativity dry up. Gordon bemoaned the loss of his creativity and his fears that Hebrew culture was coming to an end in verses full of despair: "For whom do I labor?", "Am I to be the last of the singers of Zion?".

Sometime before the turn of the century, progressive Jews in Russia underwent a change in self-perception. They no longer saw themselves as part of the Haskalah. They were disturbed by the assimilationism of the maskilim, which was contrary to the rising tide of Jewish nationalism. The new generation saw itself as the beginning of a national renaissance dedicated to restoring Jewish national pride, breathing new life into the Hebrew language, creating a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, and rejuvenating Jewish culture. Strictly speaking, the goals and criteria of the national renaissance were not unknown to the Russian maskilim. Neither did the perspectives and goals of the maskilim die out. Yet in the perception of the young generation of Hebrew writers which arose in the 1890's, a new movement had been born.

Reuven Brainin was one of the early prophets of the new movement. He was born in 1862 in the town of Ladi, in the district of Mohilev, in White Russia, to a poor family. Up to the age of fifteen, he studied Talmud, then medieval Jewish philosophy. Then he studied Haskalah literature in Hebrew and in other languages. His path from the shtetl to the wider world was typical of that of young men in that time. In 1887 Brainin went to Moscow to study mathematics at the university there. In 1888 he published an article on Smolenskin in Hamelitz. The article

was well received by the Hebrew reading public, including Y.L. Gordon, who at that time was editor of Hamelitz. Encouraged by Gordon, Brainin wrote and published some stories. Later he moved to Vienna to continue his university studies. He continued writing for Hamelitz and for other Hebrew journals.

In 1899 Brainin founded Mimizrah Umima'arav, a monthly journal, to broaden Hebrew letters and to combine Eastern Jewish culture with the ~~thought~~ and critical standards of the West. He wrote articles for his journal on Helmholtz and the Gaon of Vilna, and published articles by others on Tolstoy and Nietzsche. Only three issues were published, and a fourth a few years later in Berlin, but the journal had landmark significance.

Brainin's greatest period of creativity was the decade of the 1890's. He began to write biographies of modern Jewish thinkers and writers. In 1896 he published his book-length biography of Perets Smolenskin. That same year he moved to Berlin, where he wrote an article on Judah Leib Gordon for the first issue of Ahad Haam's new journal, Hashiloah. This article started a great controversy over Hebrew literary values and the quality of Gordon's work. This article and the resultant "YaLaG controversy" are the central issue of this study.

In the 1900's, Brainin's talents began to decline. His writings, published in the daily Hatsofeh, lacked the strength and clarity of his earlier work. In 1905, when

many Hebrew journals in Russia were closed down due to the revolution, Brainin turned to Yiddish journalism.

In 1910 Brainin moved to New York City, where he did some Hebrew writing and edited the Hebrew weekly journal Hatoren. The journal did not prosper, and eventually became a monthly. Brainin attempted a biography of Herzl, which he never finished.

In his last years Brainin again became a Yiddish journalist. He abandoned his associations with Hebrew and Zionism. The Zionists resented and eventually forgot him. Brainin became obscure in his old age.*

Brainin's strongest and most significant work was his 1896 essay on Y.L. Gordon. This essay was seen as a hallmark of the revolution against the values of the Haskalah, a turning away from the past and a turn into the great era of Bialik and Tschernichovsky. Gordon's many admirers and defenders rushed to his defense and attacked Brainin. The controversy extended through many years, and had a lasting effect on the literary evaluation of Y.L. Gordon. In this thesis, we will describe and analyze Brainin's essay on YaLaG and its effects, and attempt to determine Brainin's reasons for saving what he did about Gordon. This will give us insight into the controversy itself and, in a wider sense, into the intellectual ferment among the progressive forces at the leading edge of the Jewish march into the modern world at the end of the last century.

*see Dov Sadan, "Meever Lonehitsa", in Avnei Zikaron

Brainin's Criticism of Y.L. Gordon

In 1896 the young Hebrew critic Reuven Brainin wrote an essay on the great Hebrew poet Y.L. Gordon, an essay which sent shock-waves through the Hebrew-reading public. Brainin's essay, published in the inaugural volume of the journal Hashiloach, was vehemently critical of Gordon as a writer, as a leader of the Hebrew revival, and as a person. The article was entitled "Judah Leib Gordon — Memories and Thoughts".¹

During his lifetime, Y.L. Gordon was idolized as the foremost Hebrew poet of his age. He was the chief representative of what is now called the Second Generation of the Haskalah in Russia, roughly 1860 to 1880, that group which came between the earliest Hebrew secular writers and the generation of Bialik and Tschernichovsky. After his death in 1892 Gordon was idealized as a virtual god of the Hebrew movement. No less a poet than Chaim Nachman Bialik called him "the dead lion" (aryeh hamet). In a threnody full of exuberant praise, he wrote:

וַיָּמָת הַמַּשׁוּרֵר... בְּקֶדֶשׁ אֶחָד
כִּרְתָּ עַל כְּנוֹרוֹ, עַל נִשְׁיוֹנוֹ הַגָּדוֹל
וּבְנִצְחוֹ הַנִּשְׁתַּכְּחֵם רֹחַ אֵל יִסְמְנוֹ

The poet has died... Alas, in a sacred vision I see him/ playing upon his harp, singing his lyrics/ and when he plays his melodies, a divine spirit pulses.²

Only against this backdrop of idolization can we understand the sensation caused by Brainin's essay. Brainin had,

1. "Yehudah Leib Gordon — Zichronot Umachshavot"

2. Kol Kitve Ch. N. Bialik, D'vir Co., Ltd., Tel Aviv, 1945, pp. 363-4, "El Ha'aryeh Hamet", orig. in "Pardes", 1894.

it was perceived, pounced upon the fallen lion.

A. On Meeting Y.L. Gordon

In 1889 the young Brainin went to St. Petersburg, where for the first time he saw Y.L. Gordon. Brainin was, he says, still naive, and thrilled by the prospect of meeting in person one whose name was made great by his works. "To speak with the chief of poets face to face, I considered to be the greatest joy in the earth."³ He adds that now he has learned to avoid meeting the authors of works he admires, in order to avoid disappointment.

Brainin's initial shock came as he rang at the door, when the door was opened to him by a housekeeper who was "old and ugly". "I, who considered the residence of YaLaG to be the palace of poetry and beauty, was taken aback to see on his doorstep such a filthy maidservant as this."⁴

Brainin had expected Gordon's appearance to be as refined as his poetry, but he found instead that Gordon's face and hands were coarse, heavy, and hardened. "The lines of his face were coarse and hard (gasim vekashim)."⁵ Brainin was to use these terms again and again to describe Gordon and his poetry. The household furnishings, also, proved to be "heavy and coarse (kevedim vegasim)".

3. Kol Kitve Reuven ben Mordekai Brainin, vol.1, New York, 1922. p.3.

4. IBID.

5. IBID.

Everything was in order and in place. The books on Gordon's shelves were classics of Hebrew and European literature. Very little contemporary Hebrew literature was represented there. Brainin looked in vain for the "irbuvyah hapiyyuti", poetic disorder, or for "siman shel tsa'atsuim-sha'ashuim", a sign of light-heartedness. He felt that the spirit of Hebrew poetry was weighed down in the stodgy atmosphere of Gordon's study.

YaLaG received him well, but with the same lack of "neimut veroch", pleasantness and softness, which, to Brainin, characterized his poetry. Gordon showed him a recent poem of his, which Brainin saw was written "be'itsavon uvechavalim gedolim", with great effort and struggle, rather than in the free flow of poetic spirit which Brainin had expected. YaLaG spoke with a heavy heart of his literary and political battles,⁶ concerns which in Brainin's youthful eyes were outmoded and petty.

At that time he appeared to me as a 'Hebrew Maskil' from the old school, whose years of residence in the capital city, in the company of scholars and critics, had passed through him without leaving any noticeable impression, and the opinions of the scholars of his generation on the progress and development of the nations, and their enlightenment, had been lost to him.⁷

Gordon's speech was full of wit and jests, yet it was not light or sharp. His humor seemed forced, a disguise for the bitterness that was in his heart.

6. Gordon had agitated for increased political rights for Jews in Russia, and for religious and social reform in the Jewish community. In the literary world, he had quarreled with Zedarbaum, briefly his co-editor at "Hamelit", and with other literary figures of the day. These battles were personality clashes with no ideological basis. Gordon had been jailed by the Russians for his

love without a good dowry to back it up. Exasperated, Brainin was drawn to the question which led him to write this essay: "Is YaLaG, indeed, a poet?"¹⁰

B. The Hebrew Poet

Brainin describes the ideal type of the true poet, and tells us where YaLaG fails to live up to the type. Gordon had written, "I do not create ex nihilo, I am a painter ... I describe upon a surface with a stylus." But, says Brainin, the poet is precisely one who participates in the act of creation, "ha'shotaf bema'aseh bereshit", the one who lives amidst nature, the one who trembles before "hasod hagaḏol shel ha'Ayn Sof", "the great mystery of the Infinite One". Brainin draws from the language of mysticism to describe the poet.¹¹ The poet must be able to look into the future, to perceive in advance and express the aspirations of his people. "He senses the aspirations of coming generations ... he provides a new cultural-spiritual content and exalted ideals to his people."¹² He is needed to answer the desperate cry of his people: "nafshenu yevesha"— as the Israelites complained in the wilderness, "our soul is dried up". The Hebrew poet is called upon to give it new life. We need a poet who will

10. IBID. p.6. **האם באמת יליד מואר הוא?**

11. It is interesting to note that Berditchevsky does the same — perhaps a result of the influence of Nietzsche on the Hebrew mind.

12. IBID. **יחזק נשימת הנזרות הבאיק אחריו... יתן תוכן רוחני חדש ואידיאלי לנשגב לברי עמו.**

This says much about Brainin's personal stance between the Jewish and general European world, politically, socially, and philosophically. So much did Brainin admire the great writers, scientists and philosophers of his day, that he considered their works to constitute a new sacred **Scriptures**. As the prophets of old envisioned a perfected society, so did these new prophets. If only the nations would heed their words! Modernism could bring about the messianic era predicted by the Biblical prophets. Brainin is expressing, in a Jewish way, the beliefs of Comte and the logical positivists, which were much in vogue at that time. We may also see in this stance the influence of Brainin's study of medieval Jewish philosophy. The medieval philosophers saw all intellectual achievements, in which they included prophecy, as a result of connection with the divine influence on the human mind.

Y.L. Gordon stands in absolute contrast to this visionary type of the poet. "YaLaG is longwinded, glib, a master of metaphor, a fine writer, who has studied and learned much, but he is in no way a poet."¹⁶ In Brainin's view Gordon was not a leader with vision. His poetry would never inspire the dawning of a new age.

Brainin was ready to grant that Gordon was a meticulous and well-organized writer. Gordon invested great effort in finding just the right word, just the right mode of expression. He was very careful about grammar.

¹⁶. IBID. p.6.

Gordon had written that he loved the writing of Adam Hacoheh Lebensohn, above all else, because of his extreme grammatical correctness. In noting this, Brainin writes, "Gordon was more clever and sober than is appropriate for a poet ... (the true poet) despises those who take the middle path."¹⁷

Brainin believed that Gordon's overworked style of composition prevented his poetry from pleasing, soothing, and expressing the full range of feelings of the Jewish heart. Calling upon Bialik's imagery, Brainin writes, "Whenever we hear 'divine voices' escaping from Gordon's harp, we also sense the heavy hand-scratchings of the poet."¹⁸

In the latter part of his life Gordon expressed despair over the waning of his power of literary creativity and over the future of Hebrew letters in general. As he saw young maskilim become assimilated and desert Hebrew for Russian and German literary careers, as the burdens of his private life depressed him, Gordon gave in to a profound pessimism over the Jewish future and the value of his own work. This state of mind is best known through his famous poem "Lemi Ani Amel?", "For Whom do I Labor?" This syndrome of despair had been known to the German maskilim of an earlier generation, and it was to affect others after Gordon - notably Berditchevsky, who like Gordon retreated into the study and collection of traditional texts

17. IBID. p.7.

18. IBID.

in his old age.

Brainin attacks YaLaG for his despair and attendant lack of creativity. He quotes from a letter of Gordon's, "What shall I write about? ... God has departed from me and he does not answer me with new dreams."¹⁹ Brainin responds that the true poet does not ask this question. The true poet has a broad inner vision, like the blind poet Homer, which responds to any circumstance and environment. Brainin responds to Gordon's Biblical imagery that he has lost the "onions and the leeks and the garlic - that which all Jews desire". Gordon has lost not only this, Brainin says, but also the Jews themselves. "Nafal hacheret miyado" - "the pen (parallel to cherev, sword) has fallen from his hand." Gordon has lost the kingship of the Jewish people.

We must take note of the witty play on Biblical imagery, so common to Haskalah literature, which characterizes much of the style of this essay. In his poem "Zedekiah in Prison" Gordon had presented Jewish politics as a struggle between kings and prophets. The kings represent secularism, progress and enlightenment. In contrast to the Biblical view, they are the heroes in the contest. The prophets represent zealousness, backwardness, and an over-emphasis on spirituality which is destructive to the health of Jewish society and culture. They symbolize the rabbis of the time, while the kings represent the maskilim.

19. IBID. p.8 -A Biblical reference to King Saul after God had abandoned him.

Brainin reverses Gordon's image. The prophet is now the champion of the Haskalah. He is the visionary representative of social progress, the one who heartens and guides his people to step into the future. The kings now represent those Jews who, enmeshed in the petty political battles of their time, have lost the power to inspire their people and lead them into the future. Having established this new image, Brainin takes Gordon's comparison of himself to King Saul and turns it against him. Gordon has placed himself amongst the kings, who have turned aside from the true path. He represents the sterile line of King Saul. God will choose for himself a prophet — a true poet — to replace this worn-out king.

Brainin says, "The true poet sees the mysteries, the revolutions and contradictions in the soul of man and in the nature of existence itself."²⁰ Gordon has no conception of this level of existence, in Brainin's view. Gordon gives us only events in his poetry. All ~~conflict~~ in Gordon's poems is external, "between ~~lions~~ teeth". The lines of conflict are too clearly drawn to represent real life. Brainin believes that Gordon cannot feel, and therefore does not present, inner conflict and self-contradiction.

C. Judah Leib Gordon on Women

Brainin says, "The poet is best known by the sort

20. IBID. p.9.

of women characters he creates ... in this creature of loveliness we see the poet in the full power of his imagination."²¹ In this arena, the natural scientist must bow before the poet, who alone knows the heart of woman. Shakespeare, for instance, knew the soul of woman far more than all the psychologists and physiologists, Brainin says. This knowledge can be attained only through the trials of life itself. The poet must have experience with women. Brainin tells a tale told by Turgenev, of how he was ashamed before a group of French writers because of his sexual inexperience. How much more ought the Hebrew poet to be ashamed! "We are not able to compare our 'chief poet', in this debate, with the poets of the other nations Gordon, like all the Hebrew writers and poets of the past generation, did not grow up in the company of women. He did not know love."²² He was too poor and too busy with his studies to pay much attention to women, even to his wife, Hannah.

Paradoxically, Brainin writes "We are not sorry at all that our poet did not know women in the physical sense."²³ Brainin apparently believes that it would not be appropriate for a Jewish poet to have sexual experiences with Jewish women. However, he should at least have enjoyed the company of women and the sensations of romantic love.

Since Gordon passes two thirds of his life in

21. IBID. p.10.

22. IBID. pp.10-11.

23. IBID. p.11.

restricted surroundings, the women he does describe are simple, common women, and to these he dedicated his second period, the period of his political poems. The one woman he idealized in poetry was his wife, Hannah, about whom he wrote an ode. Brainin finds fault with Gordon's style and imagery in this one poem.

The poem opens with a list of the virtues of Hannah's beauty. Brainin complains that this exaggerated listing gives the reader no physical sense of her actual appearance. She is indistinct, and therefore not appealing to the heart. Gordon writes from the mind rather than the heart. The reader gets no sense of the relationship between the poet and his beloved, in contrast to the love poetry of Michah Yosef Lebensohn. Brainin wishes to see "tsiur mekori", an original creation, and not "melitsat kitve hakodesh", a pastiche of Biblical metaphors.

D. The Feminist Poems of Gordon

In his second period Gordon wrote three poems which publicized the issues of Jewish women's rights. "Kotso Shel Yud", "The Point of the Yud", illustrated the problem of the get, the Jewish divorce, and the agunah, the deserted wife. "Shomeret Yavam", "Awaiting the Brother-in-Law", illustrated the problem of levirate marriage. "Ashaka Derispak", "The Axle of the Wagon", showed the abuse to which wives could be subjected by their husbands, without recourse. The three poems have certain elements in common.

In all three there appear insensitive, narrow-minded, sophistic rabbis who by their inhumane adherence to legalism make decisions which doom the fair and virtuous heroines to eternal unhappiness. In each it is an exaggerated minor point which leads to human catastrophe. In "The Point of the Yud", the heroine, Bat-Shua, is deserted by her educated but unscrupulous and unpragmatic husband, Hillel. A handsome maskil, Favi, falls in love with her. Favi is pragmatic, cultured, and wise. He has a profession; he is a civil engineer. Favi traces Hillel to Liverpool and gets from him a get. Alas, Hillel's name is misspelled by the lack of a letter yud, and for this the rabbinical court declines to accept the get. "On account of a yud," Bat-Shua lives out her days as a lonely and impoverished peddler.

In "Awaiting the Brother-in-Law", two happy innocents, both named Yonah, dove, are married to each other. The husband falls ill and on his deathbed offers to divorce his wife to save her from having to wait for his infant brother to come of age for marriage or halitsa. But the rabbi demands payment for the get, and while the family tries to raise the money, Yonah dies.

In "The Axle of the Wagon", the pious wife Sarah is preparing dinner for Passover when she discovers a grain of barley in her soup! The family is too poor to replace the food, so at her husband Elifelet's bidding Sarah feeds her family, but refuses to eat, herself. The

next day Sarah finds another grain of barley in the pot, and she goes to the rabbi, who declares all of her food unfit. Afraid to return home, she refuses to leave the rabbi's home. He therefore sends two guards to lock up Elifelet. When he is set free he beats his wife and later divorces her, leaving her without home or children. Sarah moans, "Two grains of barley destroyed all of my joy."

Brainin analyzes these three poems at some length. He has a number of basic criticisms. He accused Gordon of writing about people and events, rather than creating full characters and letting their own actions and words speak for them. There is no way for us to empathize with the characters. We want to know "hayye hanefesh vehalev", "the life of the soul and heart", not just events. There is no human interaction, hence no causality. We do not know why the characters act as they do. What is special about these people, that we should care about their lives? "Everything is as conventional and accepted in love stories of this type, without the least change in the formulation."²⁴ There is no originality, but only inflated metaphor. Brainin accuses Gordon of stereotyping. Gordon blames the rabbis for everything, "as if the entire tragedy of the Jewish woman were just on account of the rabbis."²⁵ In actuality, Brainin says, such an evil rabbi was a rare creature in that generation. Gordon fails to see the wider

²⁴. IBID. p.19.

²⁵. IBID. p.27.

causes of the problem, within the nature of marriage itself and the basic condition of women, Jewish or non-Jewish. Brainin asks for a picture of the true everyday life of the Jewish masses. Where is the battle for survival, the joys, the arguments, the endearments of husband and wife? Brainin wants realism, the details and common relationships which make life what it is. Gordon describes Favi as "a maskil in all of his ways", who reads books and writes himself. What does Favi read, Brainin asks, and what does he write, "so that we may know his virtues and the paths of his soul"? Favi and Bat-Shua are so wonderful in Gordon's eyes, but the reader does not know why. Gordon creates his pure female characters not to show us their lives, but only "so that she may say the bitter words which he places in her mouth at the end of the poem."²⁶

Brainin accused Gordon of lack of originality, true characterization, and explication of causality. Above all, though, he accused him of not understanding the heart of the Jewish woman. When Bat-Shua hears of her pending divorce, Gordon says of her, "The joy in the heart of this agunah, who could recount it!". Brainin comments, "How much Gordon did not know the secrets of the heart of the Jewish woman, if at a time like this, when Bat-Shua has suddenly heard that her husband has written her a bill of divorce — if at a time like this he can see only joy in her heart."²⁷ Where is her disappointment, her dashed hopes

26. IBID. p.22.

27. IBID. p.19.

for the return of the father of her children?

When Favi proposes to Bat-Shua, he speaks to her of financial security. Brainin asks, is this the language of love? Then she kisses him. "Could this be, that a proper and modest woman like Bat-Shua would kiss, before she is divorced from her husband, a strange man, though her love for him be stronger than death?"²⁸ When Favi offers Bat-Shua a monthly income, after the get is invalidated, could he really think "that the devastation of this lovely woman, who longs for life and love, could be remedied by a monthly income?"²⁹ Brainin asks, "Is this a Jewish woman? Is there in her a single drop of actual life?"³⁰ And Yonah — could she have stood by her husband for seven weeks, praying for his recovery, only out of fear of levirate marriage? Is it enough, as Gordon says, that "a daughter of Israel knows her duty."? What of love? "Does Gordon know a woman's heart in general, and the Jewish woman in particular?"³² if at a time like that she has nothing to say?

Brainin concludes that the new generation is too deep-thinking and aware, too sensitive and high-minded, to be satisfied with Gordon's work. "They are not able to find satisfaction with poetry, which does not contain deep and true feelings, elevated ideas, or pictures which broaden the eye and elevate the soul — even if they contain lovely metaphors."³³ Gordon's sole concept is to present the

28. IBID. p.20.

29. IBID. p.21.

30. IBID.

31. IBID. p.24.

32. IBID.

33. IBID. p.27

"disaster and troubles of the world of Israel", an idea which "was upon the lips of every one of the first generation of maskilim in Russia ... and our poet did not reveal a single new side to this idea."³⁴ If Gordon had concentrated more on the sorrow of the woman than on the evils of the rabbi, suggests Brainin, he would have made a greater impression, and he would have been much more poetic.

E. Gordon's Nature Poetry

"The true poet is known also by the vision of nature which he describes to us."³⁵ Here there is a great Jewish tradition, from the Bible to the poetry of Judah Halevi and the other Sephardic poets. Only the most sensitive souls, says Brainin, can live with nature and receive her influence. To appreciate nature, "one must be educated upon her knees.", but "our poet [Gordon] never in his life lived upon the knees of nature, and he was distant from her."³⁶ He lived his life in the cities and in the house of study. In his old age he went to the spas of Austria, but even there he passed his time in study and in writing. It is no surprise, then, that "the few poems which our poet dedicated to nature are but a mixture of medieval philosophy and selected quotations from the Bible,

³⁴. IBID. p.28.

³⁵. IBID. p.28

³⁶. IBID. p.29

but there is in them no true feeling."³⁷ Gordon, in the last analysis, is the Jewish scholar who feels damned if he stops by the way to admire a tree.³⁸

F. Gordon as an editor and Editorialist

Y.L. Gordon exerted a great literary influence as an editor of "Hamelitz", the Hebrew newspaper. "Hamelitz", says Brainin, was the proving-ground of a whole generation of Hebrew writers. Brainin credits YaLaG for rationalizing the editorship of the paper, after years of dictatorial incompetence under Zedarbaum, the previous editor. Zedarbaum had used the paper as a vehicle of recrimination in his personal battles. He rewrote articles according to his own tastes and opinions — destroying, in Brainin's opinion, many fine articles while leaving others untouched. In contrast, Gordon encouraged young writers, granted editorial freedom, and toned down the vindictive recriminations and exuberant praises which so characterized the Hebrew criticism of that period to its detriment.

Brainin found Gordon's love of the particulars of the Hebrew language to be more appropriate to his task as an editor than as a poet. "His primary obligation as an editor Gordon saw as the extolling of the language and its beautification, in his own articles and those of his writer."³⁹

³⁷. IBID. p.30.

³⁸. a reference to a passage in the Pirke Avot, III.9

³⁹. IBID. p.41.

Nevertheless, says Brainin, Gordon himself had a poor writing style.

The purity of style! ... that is, a unique style, compact, pure and free of foreign mixtures. It seems to me, that Gordon certainly never had such a style.... Not only was his style not pure, but it was never original.... He loved those writers who knew how to use the Hebrew crown of melitsa, even where it was totally extraneous..... He was never concerned ... that they should use language which was precise and to the point."⁴⁰

Gordon was appointed as editor of "Hamelitz" in the aftermath of Czar Nicholas' enlightenment schools scheme.^{40a} He wrote then that until the present Hebrew had been used only as a vehicle for enlightenment, but that now it must be used to touch on the questions of life and on what is good for the Jews. He spoke of the Jewish awakening in the 60's and 70's of the Nineteenth Century. He pointed to the turn of educated Jews to the sciences and the professions. The question for Hebrew writers, said Gordon, was how to resolve the traditional life of the Jews with the requirements of the new life.

Brainin finds that Gordon's historical perspective was narrow. Gordon, Brainin says, believed that it was the Hebrew journalists who single-handedly brought modern education to the Jews. He did not see the wider historical causes. Gordon placed all hopes for the Jewish future in the yishuv in Eretz Yisrael and yet, says Brainin, his own half-heartedness, his failure of courage due to lack of

⁴⁰. IBID.

^{40a}. A plot, put forward by the Czar's observation of the Jews of Germany, to encourage assimilation through secular education

conviction, and his lack of broad vision prevented him from making any genuine, original contributions to the cause. Gordon was torn between his adopted ideal of Zionist Nationalism and the ideals he had inherited from the original maskilim. For instance, he feared lest the growth of the yishuv lead to an increase in rabbinic power. In the end, Gordon excelled only in his analysis of specific, practical problems of the yishuv.

Brainin presents Gordon's three-point program for the Jews: 1) the education of Jewish boys and girls in Judaism and in secular trades 2) a program of support for Jewish social institutions and functionaries 3) the encouragement of international peace.

Brainin comments, "Gordon created not a single innovation — decidedly not a one — in his program"⁴¹ The first two points Brainin considers hackneyed and the third he opposes. For Brainin "peace" connotes complacency. "Peace! But where there is life, advancement and progress, there is no peace, but rather eternal struggle."⁴² Gordon is for the status quo. He belongs to the past generation. In his political perspectives and in his laborious writing style he is of the old school.

Brainin does credit YaLaG with a positive influence on the younger generation of writers. He discovered and encouraged talented writers. He dealt fairly with all who

⁴¹. IBID. p.36.

⁴². IBID.

sent him material. His deep Jewish knowledge was an influence on young Jewish writers of the European enlightenment to study Jewish sources. Brainin tells that when he himself, as a beginning writer, sent an article to Gordon, Gordon mailed it back to him to make the necessary corrections himself — a nice thing to do, and rare in Hebrew journalism of that era.

Despite these passing compliments to YaLaG, the cumulative impression of Brainin's article was an intensely negative one. Brainin had found Gordon wanting as a poet and a writer. Gordon's style, Brainin said, was ponderous and unlyrical. His characters were flat, stereotyped, and unbelievable. He lacked poetic sensibilities, and therefore gave no uplift of spirit to his readers. Gordon was unable to appreciate either love or nature, the two greatest areas of poetry according to Brainin. Brainin appraised Gordon's political goals to be passé. His political labors were of no use to the Jewish people. Gordon lacked the vision to properly foresee the Jewish future and guide his people towards it. Gordon had failed in his role as a political and spiritual leader. Not only were Gordon's ideas outmoded and his writing talent misdirected and eventually lost, said Brainin, but Gordon's very character was unacceptable for a true poet and leader of the Jewish people in the contemporary world. Gordon was from the old school, the yeshiva and the Haskalah.

His values and interests were the old values and the old interests. These, Brainin said, would no longer do. Brainin had repudiated Gordon and all that he represented in Hebrew letters and Jewish politics.

CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BRAININ'S ESSAY

A. Negative Response of the Hebrew-Reading Public - Shub's Reply

Brainin's essay on Y.L. Gordon had an effect on the views of the Hebrew-reading public which has lasted to this day. Literary historians of a later time, such as Joseph Klausner and Shalom Spiegel, still mention that there is some question as to whether Gordon was a true poet or merely a political rhymester. The "YaLaG controversy" grew as Hebrew critics wrote outraged responses to Brainin's article, running to Gordon's defense. Responses were printed in "Hatsefirah" (Bernfeld, 1896; Ahima'ats, 1897) in "Hamelitz" (Zinger, 1897) and elsewhere. The major critical response was a pamphlet entitled "T'shuvah Nimretset", "A Forceful Response", by Sh. Shub, published in Berditchev in 1900.

In the last of his five articles on Y.L. Gordon, published in New York in 1918, Brainin devotes a few paragraphs to the overwhelming negative response to his original article. While much of this response probably took place in the discussion circles of the day and remains unrecorded, it would seem that Brainin was defending himself primarily against Shub's article. We draw this conclusion because Shub concluded that YaLaG wrote epic poetry (shire alila), not love or nature poetry,

and that he must be judged on these grounds. Indeed, Brainin's last essay was a positive appreciation of "The Epic Poems of Y.L. Gordon".

It would be interesting to know more about Shub. Unfortunately, my research has revealed nothing about him. It would appear that his general influence and reputation were small. We might guess that Shub's reply to Brainin was not so much original as a summary of the things that were being said some four years after the publication of Brainin's article. Shub's article is as vitriolic as its title, "T'shuvah Nimretset", suggests. It is a good example of those excesses of personal attack which Brainin credits YaLaG with having toned down in "Hamelitz".

B. Brainin and the "Mahalach Hehadash"

The major literary current in Europe in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century was Naturalism. Naturalism is based on the philosophy of Comte and the logical positivists. The Naturalists believed that advancing technology and intelligent social engineering would lead to the salvation of humankind. They were materialistic and pragmatic, opposed to religion and in favor of education in the trades and the natural sciences. Klausner sums up their views in his statement that for the Naturalists, a pair of shoes were more important than Shakespeare.⁴³

⁴³. History of Modern Hebrew Literature, vol.3.

In this spirit, the Naturalists strove to educate the masses in modern secular knowledge and to improve their material living conditions.

In opposition to the Romantic Idealists, the Naturalists felt that literature must reflect real life and experience. It must be realistic. Literature should express social issues, and the psychological realities of the inner mind and of relationships. There was a desire as well to expand the horizons of literature, to find new modes of expression, to present an international outlook, and to enter subject areas of general human interest. The movement began with Zola in France. It spread gradually across Europe to Russia, where it began to exert a strong influence on the Hebrew literary world.

Brainin wrote often of the need for a "mahalach hehadash", a "new direction" in Hebrew literature. Lachover identifies this as a call to introduce the criteria of Naturalism into Hebrew literature. He says, "In Hebrew literature there was one writer in particular in this period of flowering ... who brought also into Hebrew literature the aroma of this flowering, and this aroma helped in its time to perfume the air in this sanctuary of the generations. Reuven Brainin was this writer."⁴⁴

Lachover identifies the German Naturalist school as being a particular influence on Brainin, especially in his attack on Gordon. The German critics had accused the older

⁴⁴. Toldot Hasifrut Haivrit Hehadasha, vol.3, part II, p.3.

generation of being coarse, insufficiently lyrical and psychological, of not loving beauty or artistry. Brainin borrowed from them these accusations and attributed these same deficiencies to YaLaG. Brainin borrowed directly from the German aesthete Paul Hesse, chief of the young critics in Germany, the accusation that YaLaG had an unattractive library and an ugly maid.

Shub claims that Brainin was heavily influenced by the Russian naturalist critic Pissarev. He sees this as the source of Brainin's interest in the natural sciences and in experience as the basis of writing, and in Brainin's desire to achieve fame by contradicting famous writers. Shub sees in Brainin's use of European literary criteria a slavish devotion to foreign culture which is untrue to the uniqueness of Jewish culture and literature. Shub points out that Pissarev had criticized Pushkin because he labored to write his poetry. Brainin had accused Gordon of too much workmanship and insufficient inspirational flow in his poetry. Only in imitation of Pissarev, says Shub, did Brainin level this accusation against Gordon.

In his journal Mimizrah Umima'arav, "From the East and West", Brainin carried out much of his program for the "new direction", in accordance with the criteria of Naturalism. He attempted to educate his readers in the natural and social sciences, to acquaint them with the important writers and philosophers of his day, and to broaden the expressive capabilities of the Hebrew language. He

published one article, for instance, on new Hebrew terminology for modern agriculture, which shows his practical and scientific concerns and his concern for expanding the vocabulary of modern Hebrew. He published articles on Tolstoy and Nietzsche to familiarize his readers with the latest in thought and literature on the international scene. He exhorted his readers in his introduction to the first issue of his journal, "Yarhonenu", "Do not fear, Jacob my servant! Philosophy and science, the spirit of beauty and good taste will benefit the spirit of Israel as it has benefited the other nations."

As much as Brainin was involved with Naturalism, we would be mistaken to associate Brainin's "new direction" in Hebrew literature totally with Naturalism, or to say that Brainin criticized Gordon as a way of heralding Naturalism to the Jewish world. First of all, Gordon was himself a Naturalist in many ways. According to J. Klausner, Gordon was himself influenced by the Russian Naturalist Gogol. Gordon's call for education of Jews in the trades, his concern for the plight of women in society, his political and social involvements, were all very much within the Naturalist school of thinking and writing. Yet it is precisely these aspects of Gordon's work that Brainin attacks, while he leaves alone Gordon's earlier romantic poetry. Brainin's call for the poet to be a prophet, to deal in values and visions, is the very opposite of naturalism.

Shub recognizes the contradiction between Brainin's call for the poet to write by prophetic inspiration and his call for realism in poetry. He says that there are two opposing approaches to the art of writing - one, that the writer should be inspired, the other, that the poet is a normal human being with a sensitive heart, a seeing eye, and a writing hand, who writes out of his own life. He is also limited by his own life, but this is acceptable. It takes hard work, says Shub, to transform sensitivity to paper. Shub is himself a defender of Naturalism. He blames Brainin for not selecting a single critical approach and sticking to it. He says, "Pissarev was a true realist, faithful to his method, whereas in our critic (Brainin) idealism and realism are combined together in a weird and strange chaos, and this chaos he injected into his judgments on YaLaG. There is no comparison between this one and Pissarev."⁴⁵

Was Brainin merely an imitator, lacking any consistent criteria of his own, as Shub suggests? It seems closer to the truth to say that Brainin was not concerned with movements, that he was an eclectic who drew from one source and another according to his own view of the necessary direction for Jewish literature and the Jewish people. Brainin's criteria were heavily influenced by naturalism, but they were not limited by it.

We see Brainin's same criteria, and his two-sided

⁴⁵. T'shuvah Nimretset, p.20.

relationship with Naturalism, in his famous essay "Smolenskin Betor Mesaper" ("Smolenskin as a Writer"). He judges Smolenskin against many apparently naturalistic criteria.

Smolenskin did not write with a tranquil spirit, rather he always cried or laughed.....and this is the essence of his influence upon most of the Hebrew readers of the past generation, that they were not ready to take pleasure in simple pictures, beautiful and pleasant, which neither trouble the soul nor awaken crude humor.... Also in "The Wanderer", his best story, we do not find among all the many characters even one from the Jewish masses, not one scene from their simple and sad life.⁴⁶

There is only one way for the artist to create a true and complete work - to relate the history of feelings or the character of the person.... it is incumbent upon the artist, the painter, to understand the internal necessity of the growth of a feeling or a trait and the reason for its disappearance and its contradiction.⁴⁷

In the same essay, Brainin speaks in favor of the considered approach to writing, in contrast to his statements in the essay on Gordon. "It is an error ... to think that true poetic creativity is blind, and that one creates without forethought or without any prior design."⁴⁸ On the other hand, Brainin speaks clearly in places against Naturalism.

The artist brings his characters into being; he does not copy them from life.⁴⁹

Naturalists oppose a moral in favor of "real life", but both types of writers write out of their own

46. Kol Kitvei Reuven Brainin, vol.1, p.114.

47. IBID. p.93.

48. IBID. p.87

49. IBID.

lives and express their own point of view. The only difference is that Naturalists dig through the garbage piles of life and bring from them the material for their novels, while the others create for themselves more pure material.⁵⁰

We may see most clearly what Brainin means by a "new direction" in Hebrew literature from what he says about Tchernichovsky in his introduction to that poet's first book of poems. Brainin says of Tchernichovsky, "Congratulations, here is a poet who is a master of the 'new direction'".⁵¹ The young poet "seeks a new content and a unique style", and "new ways in the paths of use of the language". "In the majority of the poems of Tchernichovsky we see and feel the longings of a poet, a soul which yearns. This poet is a lover of life, a seeker of love, one who values nature and its pleasantries and embraces everything beautiful and elevated. He does not compose poetry for any ulterior purpose, to parade any important event before the eyes of the public. He is a poet on account of his trembling soul."⁵²

In Brainin's view Tschernichovsky gives us just what Gordon lacks. We note the consistency of Brainin's criteria. He wants a broadening of the Hebrew language, a true psychology from an elevated soul, a genuine appreciation of the world around us. He opposes the use of verse for political purposes. Poetry should deal with nature and the human soul. The poet should awaken a sense of longing for the finer spiritual level of existence.

50. IBID.(paraphrase)

51. "Miktav el' Hamotsi Le'or", in Shaul Tschernichovsky: Mivhar Maamarim al Yetsirato, ed. Yosef Ha'efrati, p.22.

52. IBID. p.24.

Why does the Jewish people need such a poet?

Our soul is dried up ... therefore we shall bless every poet who brings our feelings to life, increases their number and strengthens our longing for life. Feelings, longings, desires, tendencies, yearnings and trends - these indeed are life itself. Philosophy and 'wisdom' come only to decrease their image and put out their light.⁵³

Brainin apparently believed that all the philosophical and political writings on the plight of the Jews were misplaced, considering the fallen state of Jewish society. The Jewish people were beaten down. They were not willing or ready to accept and respond to exhortations on issues. Elevate the soul of the people, lift their eyes above the mire of material struggle in which they were stuck, and the people would, of their own striving and longing, march into the modern world. Hebrew poetry, finally freed from Biblical imagery and the constraints of the language itself, would be the means for bringing about this transformation. This is the new direction of Hebrew literature. Its purpose is not to politicize the Jewish masses by reflecting their life, but to spiritualize them and give them true culture by reflecting the world in all its breadth.

We have seen that Brainin was influenced by Naturalism in different ways. He borrowed from German and Russian Naturalist critics some of the criteria by which

⁵³. IBID.

he judged Gordon. He borrowed some of their accusations against the old guard. Brainin's attention to the unaesthetic details of Gordon's environment, his emphasis on psychology, experience, and human interaction in the works of the artist, his progressivism, were borrowed from such Naturalist writers as Zola and Pissarev.

On the other hand, Brainin did not totally accept the criteria of Naturalism, nor was Gordon unconnected with it. We cannot say that the purpose of Brainin's essay was to introduce Naturalism to the Hebrew world; that had already been done, and Gordon's second period, his political period, is its prime example. Brainin borrowed from the other young critics around him, many of whom were naturalists. Yet Brainin seems to have chosen only those criteria of others which suited his own vision for the future of Hebrew letters, the vision of the poet-prophet.

C. The Nietzschean Influence

In his remembrances of Brainin, David Neumark remarks that Brainin expressed great interest in the philosophy of Nietzsche. He discussed Nietzsche at length with Neumark and asked him to write an article on the philosopher and on the "Übermensch" for Mimizrach Umima'arav.⁵⁴ In his many biographical sketches, Brainin shows a Nietzschean admiration for the values and personal

⁵⁴. Hatoreh, IX, no.3, 1922, p.12.

ways of special human beings. Lachover comments, "There was in this an echo of the concept of the *Urbarmensch* of Nietzsche, in its literary form, extremely unphilosophical, which was quite prevalent in those days in the circles of writers and in the literature by which Brainin was influenced."⁵⁵

The poet-prophet about whom Brainin rhapsodizes may be seen as Brainin's Jewish version of the *Urbarmensch*, although Brainin never actually uses the term in this context. The poet's vision is clearer than that of others, his heart more sensitive, his mind more understanding. His aesthetic sensibilities are finely tuned. He grasps each moment in its fullness, whether it be in communion with nature, in the company of others, or alone with himself. He does not conform to the stale values of his age; he does not look to the past. Through his own vision of life he creates new values, which his nation may then emulate. He is disorderly and unpragmatic, for minor issues cannot interest him. The poet-prophet rises above the mass of common humanity. Yet he still retains his distinctly Jewish character.

The poets of Greece and Rome were impressed by the elevated and the beautiful in and of themselves.. Not so our prophets and seers.... Not power and not beauty, but goodness and the path of humility and justice uplifted their souls.⁵⁶

Brainin saw the prophets of old not traditionally,

55. P. Lachover, *Shira Umahshavah*, Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1953, p.210.
56. "Smolenskin Betur Mesaper", p.84.

as communicants with God, but as sensitive souls who by their literary powers transmitted new values and new inner strength to the Jewish people. The contemporary Hebrew poet, if he is endowed with the same visionary inspiration and might pen as the prophets, may fulfill the prophetic function for his own time. The Jew in the modern world was a lost soul. The values of the shtetl no longer applied to his life and, in the absence of a modern Jewish way of life, he had no choice but to assimilate. The painful inner conflict of the Eastern Jew in the Western world has been well-documented. Brainin himself must have felt it. He cherished the hope that a synthesis could be created between the authentic Jewishness of the East and the philosophy and science of the progressive West. His own journal, as its title suggests and his words express, was dedicated to this proposition. Hebrew nationalism and cosmopolitan European intellectualism would combine for the material and spiritual benefit of the Jewish nation. The poet-prophet would provide the impetus, the spiritual strength and the new values for the Jewish renaissance.

Gordon represented to Brainin the antithesis of his vision. No real human being could possibly live up to Brainin's vision, and he may have been sincerely, if naively, disappointed upon meeting the greatest living Hebrew poet in the flesh. By returning to the study of traditional texts Gordon had turned backwards to the old

values for comfort, when Brainin expected from him, of all people, the repudiation of those values for the sake of the new. Brainin found Gordon's literary repudiation of the prophets to be a perfect counterpoint for the expression of his own views, which extolled the prophets of old. As the chief representative of what had already become the "old order" of modern Judaism, the Haskalah, Gordon was a perfect target to fire at for the beginning of a Jewish "reevaluation of all values". Gordon was a natural antithesis to Brainin's futuristic vision both as a real person and as a literary straw-man, the representative of a point of view which was to be repudiated.

D. The Comparison to Western Literature

Shub accused Brainin of denigrating Jewish literature and thought for the sake of effect, because he knew that Jews always think less of their own thinkers than of the thinkers of other nations. Shub is essentially correct. Brainin did look with envy at the European literary world, and he made many invidious comparisons in his writing. He was not motivated, as Shub claims, by a craze for sensationalism, but by a sincere, even sycophantic admiration for Western literature. He felt that Hebrew journalism and belles-lettres lagged far behind their Western counterparts in style and content. He wished to see the writers of his own nation adopt the personal and literary values of the West, to reach the same level of

quality and progressivism.

We find in Brainin's writings numerous examples of such comparisons, in which the writers and the writing style of the Haskalah, the generation of Gordon, are negatively compared to those of the Europeans.

If we should read for many days the literature of the nations ... and afterwards return to read the stories of Smolenskin - then we will feel in our hearts the sort of feeling that is in the heart of one who returns from a land of breadth, from a land of culture, enlightenment and useful labor, to a primitive land, a place where all the powers of nature are slumbering and no one has awakened them.⁵⁷

Simon, the philosopher of Smolenskin, sees happiness only in the shadow of a wife, any wife ... Newton, Spinoza, Kant and other young inquirers were free of a wife all of their lives, and for all that they did not sit in sorrow all of their days.⁵⁸

Smolenskin copied the French writers ... but he did not acquire from the best of them aesthetic taste ... from the Germans he learned to philosophize, but not the depth of the true poetic spirit. From the English he learned ... to moralize, but not the refined analysis of the personality nor clarity of style.⁵⁹

Hebrew literary style, bogged down in melitza, full of stereotyped characters, centered on action but without psychological causality, was indeed inferior to the style of European literature. Brainin wished for young Hebrew writers to immerse themselves in Western literature and to free themselves from the stylistic influence of Haskalah literature. To this end he attacked the style of

57.IBID. p.83.

58.IBID. p.124.

59.IBID. p.126

Smolenskin, whom he admired, and all the more so that of Gordon, whom he did not admire. It is not that he saw no value at all in their works, for he confessed in various essays to appreciate many aspects of their writing, but he felt that it was necessary to banish the old in order to herald the newer and better. Brainin stood on the eve of the great generation of Bialik, when Hebrew literature truly came into its own, and he presaged its coming by repudiating, with some violence, the values of the old generation. Brainin's essay on YaLaG stands as a watermark in the search for true expression in the Hebrew language.

One must note that for Brainin not only enslavement to a bankrupt style, but also bondage to traditional values of Jewish living, were obstacles to the development of the true Hebrew writer. The writer must experience life in its many facets, and Brainin felt that the Jewish emphasis on marriage and domestic life prevented the development of the true artist and philosopher. He bemoaned many a time that the writers of the generation of the Haskalah married young and did not know any women besides their wives.

Brainin saw that one of the reasons for the inferiority of Hebrew literature was the sorry state of the language itself, with an impoverished vocabulary and without contemporary idioms for expression.

I gazed upon the stand upon which Smolenskin wrote

most of his stories and articles ... and in my eyes the broad desk, almond-like and decorated with all the utensils, upon which Zola wrote his stories, was a symbol of the rich French language, and the stand, narrow and bare, small and constrained, of Smolenskin, as a symbol of the Hebrew language.⁶⁰

Brainin himself labored to broaden the Hebrew language. He encouraged Eliezer ben Yehuda in his work of creating a Hebrew dictionary. He wrote on good style, and his own style was remarkably fluent for the era in which he wrote. He saw the languages and literatures of Europe as a paradigm for what Hebrew should become.

Brainin believed that the Jewish world did not properly honor and appreciate its writers.

Among the enlightened nations, whose life is influenced by literature, and literature by life, the great writers are elevated to be the leaders of society, and they stand at the head of the government; there literature is like a school for those who are involved in the welfare of the public ... It is not so amongst our people!⁶¹

Brainin may have been unrealistic in his evaluation of the status of the literary figures of Europe, but he imagined them to be the honored rulers of the peoples. When the poet-prophet arises, if the people will place him at its head, then Israel will reach the level that the nations of Europe have achieved. It is ironic that Brainin could imagine his visionary poet, the dreamer of dreams, to be

60. Peretz Ben Moshe Smolenskin, p.93.

61. IBID. pp.110-11.

also the political leader of his people. Brainin knew that the man of dreams is not always the man of action. He recognized that Smolenskin, for instance, was incapable of carrying out his nationalistic program in the real world. But Brainin thought that the change of attitudes wrought by literature was a necessary prerequisite to political action, and that therefore the great writer had the ultimate political power, the power to affect opinions and aspirations. Brainin wanted the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe to drop their opposition to the progressivism of the Hebrew movement, and this view of the status of writers amongst the nations was a polemic meant to encourage the masses to attach themselves to Hebrew nationalism. Brainin believed that shame at Jewish backwardness compared to their neighbors would goad the Jews into reading the writings of the Hebrew writers, then into adopting their attitude towards the Jewish future.

Brainin appreciated the difficulty of editing a Hebrew journal in his time. This is the one area in which he showed a positive appreciation of Gordon. He looked upon the thriving journalisms of France and Germany, and taking them as his model of perfection he enunciated the sorry state of Hebrew journalism.⁶² Its greatest failing was a shortage of Hebrew writers. Editors had to chase after their writers, and in enforced gratitude could not take a free hand in editing. They had to write too many of

⁶². see pp.141-42 in the biography of Smolenskin.

their own articles. The greatest need, then; was for the finding of new talent in Hebrew writing. Gordon did this, and Brainin's only regrets were that Gordon narrowed rather than broadened the concept of the proper subject for Hebrew journalism, and that he encouraged grammatical correctness rather than stylistic improvement. Gordon wished to beautify Hebrew; Brainin wanted to modernize and Europeanize it. Brainin also wished that Gordon had written in a way that would appeal more to the younger generation, to draw in more writers and a wider readership.

Brainin wanted Hebrew journalism to move away from the narrow and outdated goals of the Haskalah, which Gordon represented, and into the broader and more contemporary goals of general culture and civilization and Zionist Hebrew Nationalism. Unlike Ahad Haam, who felt that Jewish culture would come into its own by freeing itself from excessive assimilating influences, Brainin believed that the way for Jewish culture to achieve respectability was through emulating what was best in European culture. Brainin, it seems, could not approve of a writer like Gordon, who in his old age turned his back on the European world and returned to ancient Jewish sources for inspiration. In this light we may understand Brainin's disdain for the works represented on Gordon's bookshelf and for Gordon's work in studying and collecting stories from traditional sources,

E. The Influence of Smolenskin

Brainin was much taken with the personality and the writings of Peretz Smolenskin. His biography of Smolenskin, published in Warsaw in 1896, was his magnum opus. His article "Smolenskin as a Writer" is considered by Lachover to be one of his finest. Smolenskin's Hebrew nationalism was agreeable to the Zionist Brainin. Brainin appreciated Smolenskin's heroic work in Hebrew journalism and literature which he performed through his journal Hashahar, the first Hebrew literary periodical. YaLaG and Smolenskin were contemporaries, and Brainin's views on the latter shed much light on his views on the former.

Smolenskin had created a furor with his attack on Mendelssohn and the Berlin Haskalah. Mendelssohn had been a virtual untouchable god in the eyes of the maskilim, and Smolenskin achieved notoriety for daring to question the values and the results of the movement he created. Later, of course, it became quite fashionable to denigrate "the Germans", and Smolenskin appeared as a prophet. Brainin may have wished to follow Smolenskin's example in achieving recognition as a giant-killer. This may have been the prime reason that he singled out Gordon, the poet laureate of the Russian Haskalah, for his criticism.

In his biography, Brainin criticized Smolenskin for the vehemence of his criticism. Too powerful an opposition to set ideas, said Brainin, achieved the opposite of its purpose by encouraging the defense of those ideas.

"I cannot justify the weapons which P.S. chose against the Jewish 'Socrates'", said Brainin.⁶³ It is ironic, then, that Brainin took up the same weapons for his attack on YaLaG.

Gordon and Smolenskin had different and conflicting personalities. Gordon was a practical man of affairs. He was politically involved, and had in fact spent some time in prison for his liberal views. He was a leader of the Society for the Spread of the Haskalah Among the Jews. His personal style was formal, careful and precise. Smolenskin was an impractical dreamer. He proved incompetent in the few practical political tasks which were assigned to him, such as his expedition to Rumania to report on the plight of the Jews there. Despite his inability to achieve practical ends, Smolenskin thought of himself as a prophet. He believed that his own ideas, spread by his own journal, were the prime cause for the Jewish national revival. He credited himself with the ability to predict the future directions of the Jewish people and to lead them along the proper path.

Brainin was drawn to prophetic types. He was, himself, an impractical dreamer who credited the writer with nearly magical powers of leadership. He was a naive dreamer, a lover of companionship, and a Jewish nationalist. He was naturally drawn to the personality of Smolenskin and repulsed by his opposite, Gordon.

⁶³.IBID. p.100. see pp.98-100 for Brainin's full critique.

In the biography of Smolenskin, Brainin compared the letter-writing styles of Smolenskin and Gordon. Gordon wrote in a careful style, while Smolenskin was impetuous and careless.

Gordon, who was so dry in his comportment with his friends in person, was soft, pleasant and endearing in his letters. Not so P.S. He was pleasant in his conduct with his acquaintances, and somewhat dry in his letters to distant ones.⁶⁴

Brainin mocked YaLaG's despair by contrasting it to Smolenskin's optimism. Smolenskin, too, had gone through a period of futility, when his creativity dried up. Then a tour of Russia, in which his readers and supporters showered honors upon him, restored his faith in himself, and he wrote with renewed vigor. Smolenskin believed in himself and in Hebraism. Brainin quotes from a letter of Smolenskin's in which he responds to Gordon's image of despair in his poem, "For Whom do I Labor?" The question is misplaced, Smolenskin wrote to his friend The Hebrew writer must keep on writing, because it is a sacred duty.⁶⁵ What a condemnation of Gordon's despair! Brainin, always the optimist in his youth, could not understand Gordon's feelings. The contrast with his hero, Smolenskin, must have damned Gordon all the more in Brainin's eyes.

Brainin mentions more than once in the biography that Smolenskin was fond of playing chess. He kept the

⁶⁴. IBID. p.150.

⁶⁵. IBID. p.147.

game out on a table, and idled away many an hour with friends in pursuit of this pastime. Brainin looks kindly upon this little indulgence in friendly competition. Brainin liked the "ish reim lehitro'ea", the man of friendships, who presented a pleasant face to all. What must have bothered Brainin so much about Gordon's little game of solitaire was not the waste of time, but the symbol that Gordon seemed to prefer solitude to the company of men.⁶⁶

In 1882 Smolenskin and Gordon had a quarrel, which Brainin recorded in terms unkind to Gordon. He uses the quarrel as an occasion for an uncomplimentary comparison between Gordon and Smolenskin. The quarrel began when Smolenskin forgot Gordon's jubilee birthday.

YaLaG, who was quick to anger, became angry with P.S. ... since then complete hatred was in the heart of YaLaG towards P.S., and neither did Smolenskin love the poet. ... (Smolenskin) did not take his "book of values" ready-made from the marketplace, but he followed the path of his heart. ... His powerful love for his people and his strong belief in the eternity of Israel, which was based on the feelings of the heart and not on the foundations of knowledge, and his recognition that he was a writer enslaved to an elevated concept of the heart, raised him above the writers who did not believe in their work and in their secret hearts envied the writers in other languages. Just the opposite was the poet, YaLaG. He was of a hard disposition, narrow-minded, and a calculator of the minutiae of money and friendships, his mouth and his heart were not equal, and he loved to receive flattery from others and to parcel it out. His values were the cliched ones of the majority of people. With one hand he grasped his harp and set pearls upon the neck of his muse, while in the other he measured out every dollar and penny and half-penny as if it

⁶⁶. see above, p.4.

were his whole living. The relationships of others to him, and his relation to others, he weighed in a scale that was rusty. ... His acquaintances were many, and he acquired them through great efforts, yet they were kept at a distance. With light, measured steps he climbed the ladder of the Enlightenment, and he hesitated on every rung. ... Smolenskin did not love YaLaG as a man, but he admired his muse and honored his talents and knowledge, and if he did not send the poet his blessing on his jubilee celebration, P.S. was not guilty, if we believe his words, for no one had informed him.⁶⁷

The affair ended when Smolenskin wrote an article in praise of YaLaG and sent him a letter of appeasement.

Smolenskin had many close friends, and he was a man of personal warmth. He aided and befriended many a poor Russian Jew in Vienna, finding work and lodgings for all those who came to him. Although he was always poor, Smolenskin was free with his money in helping those in need. This, Brainin admired. Brainin himself befriended many a talented young Jewish man, and Neumark reports that his parlor in Berlin was a meeting-place for young intellectuals. Neumark recalled with fondness the special attentions and encouragements which Brainin bestowed upon him. He records, "In a short time Brainin became the lion of the group. His house was open to culture, and it was in truth a meeting-place of the wise. Students, men and women, from the University of Berlin were eternally coming to his house. Discussions on every literary issue of the day, and every economic, social and political question,

67. IBID. pp.105-6.

filled the house."⁶⁸ The language of discussion was Russian; Brainin, like Smolenskin, had made his home a sanctuary for Russian Jews entering the Western world.

Brainin must have hoped to find a similar atmosphere in the home of YaLaG in St. Petersburg. Instead, he found solitude and despair. He must have been sorely disappointed, even though YaLaG encouraged him in his literary pursuits. We notice also that Brainin makes much of Gordon's miserliness and Smolenskin's open hand. It is quite possible that Brainin was in need of financial assistance upon his arrival in St. Petersburg, and that YaLaG denied him this favor. Yet whether or not Brainin held a personal grudge against Y.L. Gordon, he clearly admired the personality type of Smolenskin and disdained that of Gordon.

F. Brainin's Futurism and YaLaG's Pessimism

Brainin, as we have said, admired the prophet. He was himself somewhat of a prophet in his younger days. Brainin was among the first to propose the founding of a Hebrew university, in the "Luah Ahiasaf" of 1903, which Brainin edited. He was an early encourager of Eliezer ben Yehuda. He discovered the talent of Tschernichovsky, and wrote the introduction to his first volume of poetry. He had even suggested renewing the institution of the Sanhedrin to modernize Jewish law. Brainin predicted and

68. Neumark, "Reuven Brainin", Hatoren, IX, no. 8, 1922. p. 13.

encouraged the direction of Hebrew literature, away from melitsa and Biblical romanticism and into contemporary issues and literary forms, flexible style, and modern vocabulary.

Brainin saw Jewish textual sources not as the vehicles of the eternal force of Judaism, but as the creative literary works of the past. Any turning back to these sources was a turn away from the creative power of his own generation of Judaism, in Brainin's view.⁶⁹ Brainin wanted "a new heaven and a new earth", a new Talmud and a new law, as it were, to come from the creative thinkers of his own time and place, as the first Talmud had been created in its time and place. For this reason he opposed encyclopedic tasks, such as the dictionary which took up much of Gordon's energies in his later years. When Ahad Haam suggested that Ahiasaf devote its energies to the creation of a Jewish encyclopedia, instead of to a new literature, Brainin was outraged. He wrote in response,

Ahad Haam has intimated, in the mentioned article, that we do not have original powers (kohot mekoriyim) in this generation. And I think, that from the day that Israel went into exile never have we had a generation as rich in original powers, in cultural powers which stand on their own merits, as our very own generation.⁷⁰

The task of the Jewish writer, according to Brainin, was not to collect the sacred texts of the past but to create new texts which, by their social, cultural, and spiritual

69. IBID.

70. IBID. p.16.

impact, would become sacred to our times.

Brainin's criticism of Gordon was directed not just against the man but against a point of view and against the values of a generation that had passed. The Haskalah was dedicated to getting the Jews out of the ghetto, physically, psychologically, and intellectually. It was too busy fighting the forces of reaction within and outside of Judaism to concern itself with the future, in Brainin's view. Hebrew was to the maskilim a force of culture and enlightenment, a spiritual force which was not to be devalued by everyday usage. Gordon's stress on grammar and beauty of language, at the expense of clarity and freedom of expression, reflects that old attitude. In Brainin's view, Hebrew must be the language of the Jewish people in every aspect of their nationhood. Gordon had authored the famous statement, "Be a Jew at home and a person (mensch) out of doors." Brainin's generation was saying, essentially, "Be a Jewish person everywhere." Brainin's repudiation of Gordon was a repudiation of the old issues of Jewish modernism and a heralding of the new issues.

Gordon feared that modernism was leading to wholesale assimilation. As happened in the Berlin Haskalah, Gordon feared that the Hebrew renaissance in Eastern Europe would be only a brief pathway to be traversed from the exit door of the yeshiva to the entrance way of the

German and Russian universities. He feared that as soon as the yeshiva boys learned German and Russian they would forget Hebrew — thus, "For whom do I labor?". Brainin believed that this fear of assimilation and the expenditure of energies in combatting it could only detract from the Jewish renaissance, and perhaps destroy it by sucking up and binding its creative energy. Perhaps again taking a cue from his master Smolenskin,⁷¹ Brainin believed that the Hebrew national spirit would overcome assimilationism, and that the experience of European culture would prove to be an ultimate good for the Jews. He believed, like Smolenskin, that there was a special soul in the Jew which would always lead him back to the Jewish fold; Jewishness could never be lost. In opposing YaLaG, Brainin opposed a perspective which, to his mind, was an obstruction to the process of Jewish renewal.

One could argue that Brainin was arrogant and insensitive in not sympathizing with the despair of the old maskil who could not go home again, who had labored to undermine the world of his youth and who ended up feeling rootless and lost. Gordon's "return to sources" was a personal nostalgia for a world that had stagnated, but which was great in its time.

There is a special irony in this, that Brainin himself came to suffer from the same malady of despair for which he mocked Gordon. In his later years Brainin lost

71. see the biography of Smolenskin, pp.126-130.

his creativity. He ceased to write fiction, and his articles lost their former intellectual sharpness. He eventually practically deserted Hebrew altogether and became a Yiddish journalist. In an about-face from his Zionist nationalism, Brainin supported the Stalin plan for a Jewish autonomous republic in the U.S.S.R. His prophetic vision and his progressivism were gone. The general evaluation of Brainin is that "his old age did no honor to his youth."⁷²

It took the lesson of years to teach Brainin the woes of a person who had been a pioneer in his own time and then been passed by. Even if Brainin did injustice to Gordon, though, he may have done greater justice for the next generation by being among the first to articulate its aspirations. Brainin's personal tragedy is that he stood between these generations and did not fully belong to either one. He stole the thunder from Gordon and his contemporaries, but could not stand before the greater talents of those who followed soon after him, Ahad Haam and his contemporaries.

G. The Feminist Issue

Not just on stylistic grounds did Brainin choose to attack Gordon specifically for his feminist poems. The issue of Jewish women's rights called forth powerful

⁷². Lachover, Kariv, et al.

emotional responses from a Jewish male. Gordon had taken a courageous stand in speaking for the liberation of women from the abuses of the old way of life. He wanted to give women some control over their own destiny, education, and the power to earn a living in their own right. Not all Jews, even those who were progressive on other issues, could resign themselves to the emancipation of women, with its attendant power of free choice in sexual matters. There is good reason to believe that Brainin was opposed to Gordon's feminism, despite his call for the Jewish man to become more familiar with the company of women and with affairs of the heart.

We see Brainin's condescending and overprotective attitude towards the Jewish woman in his biography of Smolenskin. Smolenskin's attitude seems to be to his liking.

He knew the soul of women, their conversation and the ways of their soul; he knew their rebukes and their changes of heart. He honored and treasured women, the strength of their patience, he greatly loved beauty and comeliness and his heart was soft as wax to receive every pleasant emotion and without reserve he honored in women modesty and simplicity more than every other trait and virtue. He was a great and ardent opponent of equal rights for women, and he poured out his contempt upon the young women who sought to act like men, lest they no longer be pious and modest like their mothers of old. ...Nature created women to sit in the house.⁷³

If Brainin has any objections to this attitude, he certainly keeps silent about it. In fact, he lauds

73. Biography, pp.136-7.

Smolenskin and considers him to be an expert on women. He revels in Smolenskin's opposition to women's rights, bringing example after example. In his criticism of Gordon's female characters, to what does Brainin object? To any display of devotion towards any male but her husband, no matter if he has treated her badly, to any display of interest in material and economic matters which are not for the delicate, emotional souls of women, to any display of "immodesty", according to the most rigid standards of the past. Where is Brainin's "reevaluation of values" when it comes to women's rights? His illogical inconsistency can only be explained by the extreme emotionalism of the issue. Brainin sees himself as the defender of the traditional virtues of the Jewish woman. Perhaps the Jewish writer must, to be a true poet, become familiar with the company of women, but not at the expense of modesty and virtue!

Brainin was not disposed to separate his agreement or disagreement with others on this issue from his overall evaluation of the other person. On the contrary, he saw a man's attitude towards women as the true revealing factor in the total personality. He said,

Smolenskin describes to us in his story "Simhat Hanef" the love of a true Hebrew maskil. ... This is the touchstone of every person, the thoughts and opinions of the man. ... All other traits are the result of education and habit ... but love, desire and strong emotions bring the individual outside of his given environment.⁷⁴

⁷⁴. "Smolenskin As A Writer", pp.122-3.

Shub picks up Brainin's inconsistency on the issue of the Jewish woman, and he uses it in his attack. He confuses the issue further by depicting Gordon, who wanted to alter the status of women, as the defender of traditional female virtues, and Brainin as the would-be deflowerer of Hebrew virginity. Brainin demanded of YaLaG that he should have given some insight into his relationship with his wife in his ode to Hannah.⁷⁵ Shub replies that a Jewish poet is permitted modesty. Lilienblum found fault that Favi kissed Bat-Shua. Should YaLaG give people immodest thoughts about himself and Hannah?⁷⁶ Brainin found Bat-Shua to be an improbable character. The Jewish woman, says Shub, understands practicality and responsibility. She is not like the flighty women of Western Europe. On the other hand, her generation was not that of Deborah and Judith; she cannot be expected to withstand all misfortune and economic woes. YaLaG, says Shub, understands the Jewish woman better than Brainin. Brainin wants a Jewish woman who will fight misfortune. But the Jewish woman is trained to wage her fight against her evil inclination!⁷⁷ Bat-Shua was, after all, educated only to women's work. As for Gordon's failure to describe the joys and sorrows of Bat-Shua's marriage, Shub replies that Jewish marriage was very prosaic in those times. He accuses Brainin, correctly, of applying European cultural standards to Jewish art. He

⁷⁵. see above, p.12.

⁷⁶. Teshuvah Nimretset, pp.31-2.

⁷⁷. IBID. pp.40-1.

wants Jewish art to reflect traditional Jewish cultural standards. The Jewish woman of that generation, writes Shub, was too pure and simple for the type of romantic tragedy that Brainin wants to see.⁷⁸

Shub points out, again correctly, that from Brainin's rhetorical depiction of the heart and soul of women, one would think that they were beings from another planet. No, says Shub, the heart of woman is no different from that of man. Brainin is merely borrowing from the "vain musings" of the French, showing off his acquaintance with foreign literature.⁷⁹

Shub brings out many of the weak points in Brainin's criticism of YaLaG's female characters. Brainin was, as he says, unrealistic about the Jewish woman, and about women in general, and defective in his understanding of Jewish society a generation earlier. Shub rightly brings up the issue of the relationship of values to art and accuses Brainin of unfairly applying foreign values to Jewish art. Yet in his defense of Jewish womanhood, Shub misses the entire point of both Gordon and Brainin. He fails to see that the life which Gordon depicted for the Jewish woman was intended as a satire, not a recommendation of traditional female virtues. He says, "Actually, Bat-Shua, Hillel and Favi are very human."⁸⁰ He approves of the limitations which established the type of Bat-Shua as

⁷⁸. IBID. p. 43.

⁷⁹. IBID. p.15.

⁸⁰/ IBID. p.46.

a Jewish woman — incredibly, not recognizing that it was these very limitations that Gordon wished to end. Shub does not seem to recognize that, politically, he is on the same side as Brainin here, in defending traditional female virtues. Gordon, for his political purposes, undoubtedly intended the characters in his feminist poems to be caricatures; he intended them as types, representing an entire state of affairs which he opposed. For Shub to defend the reality of the characters is ridiculous. For him to defend the state of affairs is even more ridiculous.

Inner consistency gave way to emotional response when these "enlightened" critics wrote about the Jewish woman. Both Brainin and Shub got carried away by their personal vision of the virtuous woman. Brainin saw her as an unworldly, delicate, sensitive creature. Shub saw her as the paragon of strength and virtue — within the natural limits of being a woman. The emotionalism attendant upon the entire women's issue was largely responsible for the vehemence of Brainin's attack on Gordon and of Shub's response. Brainin's opposition to feminism may have been a major cause of the entire YaLaG controversy.

H. Remarks

Why did Brainin attack Gordon so vehemently? Was it necessary or fair of him to be so harsh with the Jewish poet laureate of his time? One way of looking at the YaLaG controversy is as a battle of the generations. From

this perspective it was not YaLaG the person who was really being attacked, but YaLaG the symbol of the Russian Haskalah. Brainin was repudiating the Haskalah and heralding a new movement, the Hebrew National Renaissance. Brainin may have been unfair to Gordon in presenting such a one-sided view of the man and his works, but we may justify the unfairness as a necessary evil. The political and cultural renaissance could not progress if the young leaders looked backwards for their models. The old must be rejected to make room for the new. A little arrogance and a lack of historical perspective are understandable in a young and eager visionary leader.

This perspective is partly true. Brainin clearly had some political goals in mind when he wrote his essay on Gordon. He certainly saw himself as the prophet of a great new era, and Gordon as a symbol of the bankrupt past. But this is only part of the story. Brainin, as we have seen, did not write his essay for any one reason. He was not reliant on any single influence. Furthermore, Brainin did not hesitate to praise figures of the past whom he found agreeable to his own notions, such as Smolenskin. He polemicized with figures of his own generation, such as Ahad Haam. Ultimately, we are not dealing with movements in this controversy but with personalities. Brainin had numerous reasons for attacking YaLaG as he did. He had many goals. We have tried to identify as many of these as possible. Only by considering them all together can we fairly evaluate the YaLaG controversy.

THE LATER ESSAYS

Brainin wrote four more essays on Y.L. Gordon in the course of his career, None of them added anything of great significance to what Brainin had said in his first essay, but they do provide some additional perspective on Brainin's views on Gordon and how they developed over the course of the years. The essays are: 1)"Sketches on the Personality of Judah Leib Gordon" (c.1902)⁸¹ 2)"Judah Leib Gordon's Relationship to Hebrew Literature" (date uncertain)⁸² 3)"Judah Leib Gordon and his Relationship to the Hebrew Language" (1907)⁸³ and 4)"The Epic Poems of Judah Leib Gordon" (New York, 1918).⁸⁴

A."Sketches on the Personality of Judah Leib Gordon"

This essay was inspired by the publication of the last two volumes of Gordon's complete works. In reading over Gordon's poems, Brainin says, he determined that it was time for a new evaluation of YaLaG as a poet and as a person. Brainin then presents a few thoughts of his own on the value and the shortcomings of Gordon's work.

We find in this essay an oblique reference to the widespread negative response to Brainin's first essay on YaLaG.

The admirers of the poet showed their power and

81."Sirtutim Letsurato Haruhanit shel Yehuda Leib Gordon

82."Yihuso Shel Yehuda Leib Gordon El Hasafut Haivrit"

83."Yehuda Leib Gordon Veyihuso El Hasafah Haivrit"

84."Shire Ha'alilah Shel Yehuda Leib Gordon"

might in calling his [Gordon's] critics "dogs" ... "a living dog falling upon the dead lion", but not one of them has troubled himself to collect the requisite material for a biography and characterization of the poet and writer YaLaG⁸⁵

We can see in the rebuke in the latter part of this statement a weak attempt at self-defense. Instead of attacking Brainin, he says, the critics should be showing their love for Gordon in more constructive ways.

In an attempt to be even-handed, Brainin makes some effort to enumerate Gordon's strengths as a poet. He shows an appreciation of Gordon's Hebrew style

The poems of YaLaG, even the weakest of them, are written in the Hebrew language as it was handed down to us through the generations, and as it was developed and nurtured according to his natural spirit and character. ... The poetic language of YaLaG is close in many places to common prose, and that is its excellence. ... He always finds the most simple and most usual words.⁸⁶

Brainin admires YaLaG's profound knowledge of the Hebrew language, which the younger poets would do well to emulate.

Who among us today can say to the Hebrew language, "You are like a Holy Temple to me, like the visage of the Lord is you visage!" ... He loved the Hebrew language with all his heart and soul, and therefore he perfected himself in its knowledge and use until the day of his death. He constantly studied the original sources of the language.⁸⁷

So, for all that Brainin had reproached Gordon for

85. Kol Kitve Brainin, p.57

86. IBID. p.56

87. IBID. p.61

searching through the volumes of the past, Brainin had come to appreciate the need for a Hebrew writer to ground himself in the sources - and not only for the sake of language and style, but to capture the authentic idiom of the Jewish heart.

It is hard for me to put down The Collected Poems of YaLaG ... for this reason, that I find in them scenes and bits of scenes from our life in the exile.... The style is Hebrew, the groans — the groans of the nation, and the satire — the satire of the bitterness of the exile.⁸⁸

This is a major concession to the greatness of Gordon, that he captured and expressed the soul of his people. But of course, to Brainin, the role of the poet was not merely to reflect the life of the people but to lead them to a new spirit and a new life. In this he still finds Gordon wanting. He has not changed his overall negative evaluation of Gordon.

In my youth I was also one of the admirers of the muse of YaLaG. But in the past few years I have overcome this admiration. That which I demand of the poet is much greater and much higher now than before.⁸⁹

Brainin requires new ideas of the poet. Gordon had only two ideas which ran through all his works, according to Brainin, his opposition to the rabbis and his demand that the Jews acquire enlightenment, but without abandoning their Judaism. Gordon gave no new visions to his people.

⁸⁸.IBID. p.56

⁸⁹. IBID. p.57

He only repeated the shop worn themes of the Haskalah.

Brainin finds much of the fault for Gordon's failings in his personality.

The soul of the poet was full, all of his life, of injuries and sorrows, doubts and despair ... the kingdom of the beautiful was foreign to him ... the hope for the rebirth of the nation on its ancient soil was not strong in his heart ... therefore it was no mere metaphor when he said, "I am not a poet, but a lamenter."⁹⁰

Gordon labored politically for his people, but his character prevented him from gaining a following. In all of his good deeds and leadership roles "there was no nobility of spirit or strength of soul."⁹¹

Despite his continued personal distaste for the character of Gordon, in this essay Brainin sees Gordon's faults more as the faults of an era than of an individual. Brainin has gained in historical perspective. This essay, much more than the first, represents the distaste of the new generation for the values of the Haskalah, regardless of personalities. "The ideas and thoughts of YaLaG were those of a Hebrew maskil of his generation of the usual sort."⁹² "If he indulged on occasion in overblown and tasteless metaphors", it was because, "he studied too much in the school of the early maskilim."⁹³ In bemoaning the lack of literary "tact" in Gordon's works, Brainin says,

90. IBID. p.58.

91. IBID. p.59.

92. IBID. p.57.

93. IBID. p.61.

Perhaps the fault lies not with the poet, but with our state of exile. ... With the influence of the exile and the school of the early maskilim we understand the 'obscene mouth' of this poet.⁹⁴

Gordon had achieved no more than could be expected from one who had not yet been freed from the mental state of exile. The ultimate blame for Gordon's failings as a poet lies with the values of the Jewish past, established by the condition of exile, which the Haskalah only perpetuated.

Brainin gives us further evidence that his argument with Gordon was over contrary views on "The Jewish Question" and its solution, and not over the issue of literary style alone.

Gordon would describe with his stylus the truth not only of what he saw with his eyes, scenes of the life around him, but also the state of his own soul and spirit. Most of his poems were "occasional poems" ... poems, which were not gathered from thin air and not influenced by other poems he had read, but flowing from life itself.⁹⁵

Surely this is a recognition of the naturalism of Gordon. Brainin did not disapprove of Gordon because of his stylistic school, but because he represented the values of an era which had to be repudiated. In Brainin's eyes, the Haskalah represented the "golah mentality", and Gordon represented the Haskalah. A true Hebrew poet can only arise from those who have restored their national spirit and who believe with perfect faith in the rebirth of the Jewish nation.

94. IBID. p.62.

95. IBID. p.63.

B. "Judah Leib Gordon's Relationship to Hebrew Literature"

This is a short piece with very little criticism or analysis. Brainin shows here a much more positive appreciation of YaLaG than he had previously shown. He recognizes the achievements of Gordon against the limitations of his historical era. He sympathizes with Gordon's despair over the future of Hebrew literature and the depletion of his creative energy.

Brainin tells of the early influences on Gordon.

In the early days of YaLaG's work in the field of Hebrew literature he had perpetually before his eyes the harsh judgements of ADaM Hacoheh (Lebensohn) and the judgements of the elders of the Hebrew maskilim in Vilna.⁹⁶

Gordon was much influenced by Lebensohn and by his son, Mikah Joseph Lebensohn (known as Mikal), the romantic poet, who was popular in the early days of Hebrew literature. Mikal was YaLaG's childhood friend, and through him he came under the wing of the father, "the high priest in the Temple of Literature".⁹⁷ In those days, Brainin says, all young writers needed the critical approval of the leaders of the Haskalah. Gordon did Hebrew literature a great service, in Brainin's opinion, by breaking away from the influence of his master and the tyranny of the the "High Priesthood" of the Haskalah, whose endorsement had been required

⁹⁶. IBID. p.51.

⁹⁷. IBID. p.50.

before a literary work could be published. Gordon established the right of a writer to criticize himself and establish his own literary criteria. As Brainin saw himself as a revolutionary in his generation, so he now saw Gordon as a revolutionary in his own generation.

Gordon's relationship to Hebrew literature was, for the most part, like that of a beloved and loving only son towards his old sick mother, whom he does not believe has long to live.⁹⁸

Gordon despaired for the future of Hebrew literature. Brainin has said this before, but always with derision. Now he simply states the facts. We see a general softening of his critical attitude towards the poet. Quoting a few lines from one of Gordon's poems of despair, Brainin remarks, "What bitter truth in this inner confession!".⁹⁹ "Despite his despair, YaLaG joined himself to those young starting writers if he saw in them a sign of talent for writing."¹⁰⁰

Brainin gives no reasons for his positive reappraisal of YaLaG. He merely states certain facts about Gordon's life and works. He is occasionally clever in his use of language, but, on the whole, this essay lacks the force of the first essay on YaLaG. Brainin has left his convictions and opinions on YaLaG out of this essay. It may be that Brainin was only interested in recording a piece of literary history for the future. More likely, this essay

98. IBID. p.52.

99. IBID. p.55.

100. IBID. p.53

represents an attempt to back down from the strong position against YaLaG which he had taken in the first essay.

C. "Judah Leib Gordon and his Relationship to the Hebrew Language"

In this essay Brainin continues to soften his stand against YaLaG, sometimes at the expense of contradicting his initial criticisms. He also grows in historical perspective. As in the former essay, he depicts Gordon as one who improved greatly upon what came before him. The new generation of writers, Brainin writes, cannot imagine how difficult it was to write clearly in Hebrew a generation ago. Hebrew literature then had no sense of style. Beforehand, Brainin had criticized Gordon for sacrificing style to grammatical correctness. Now, Brainin praises Gordon as one of the great founders of Hebrew style.

These two [Y.L. Gordon and Eliezer ben Yehuda], each in his own way, laid new tracks in the use of the Hebrew language and its adaptation to new modes of thought in Israel. All contemporary Hebrew writers owe great thanks to these, our leaders.¹⁰¹

Gordon is also to be praised because he loved Hebrew for itself, unlike other maskilim who saw the language only as a means to the end of enlightenment.

101. IBID. p.47.

D. "The Epic Poems of Judah Leib Gordon"

Brainin opens this essay by complaining about the tremendous negative critical reaction to his first essay.

That essay awakened in its time a great uproar in the Hebrew press. The literary debates ... about my essay in Hashiloah have not ceased from the pages of the Jewish press over a number of years. Against my harsh criticism they have arrayed criticism which is yet harsher. ... These wretched writers have not wanted to see and understand, that I honor YaLaG and respect his great talents more than them, and precisely because I was one of his admirers ... I debated with him over minutiae.... I only attempted to give him his proper place in the Temple of our literature. ... I loved YaLaG, but Hebrew literature and Hebrew creativity I loved more yet.¹⁰²

If we are to believe Brainin's words here, then his first essay was a conscious attempt to point to the negative side of YaLaG, only as a corrective measure meant to draw contemporary writers away from the models of the past. It is hard to believe these words, though, when we consider all the genuine disapproval of YaLaG as a person and as a writer which Brainin expressed in his initial essay. Brainin seems to be relenting and recanting before the vehemence of his critics. It is in this light that we must see Brainin's great disclaimer in this essay,

Even today I would say ... that YaLaG's strength was not in lyric poetry nor in depictions of nature. ... He was unable to receive refined

102. IBID. p.281. The final sentence is a paraphrase from a speech of Brutus in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar". Brainin apparently sees himself as Shakespeare depicted Brutus, as a good friend sincerely dedicated to a higher cause.

impressions from the real world. Nevertheless, he had a great talent for writing epic poetry.¹⁰³

Brainin retracts his accusation that Gordon did not understand women. He seems especially concerned about Shub's accusation that he has demanded of the Hebrew writer an immodesty which is inappropriate for a Jew writing about Jewish women.

None of our new writers, of the era of Bialik and the like, have described the modesty, the innocence, the elevated soul and the pure spirit of the young Hebrew woman as Gordon has in this poem ("Bemitsulat Hayam"). I must point out here, and pay to our great poet YaLaG the debt which is due him, that he always described ... the Hebrew woman ... in bright colors, with complete devotion and veneration.¹⁰⁴

Brainin credits YaLaG for expressing "the claims of the generation of the Haskalah ... of the era of the awakening of a new life in the land and of the great uprising against exaggerated spirituality."¹⁰⁵

We end with Brainin's last word on YaLaG:

"We may freely state today that 'his stream did not flow in vain'.¹⁰⁶

103. IBID.

104. IBID. p.283.

105. IBID.

106. IBID. p.288.

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