Yosef Hayim Brenner (1881-1921)

Yosef Hayim Brenner was born in 1881 in Novi Mlini, in the Russian Empire (now Ukraine). Like many Hebrew and Yiddish writers of his generation, he received a traditional religious education but later rejected his religious training. As a young man, Brenner migrated to urban cultural centers, including London. Brenner’s own brand of modernism was characterized by formal as well as thematic elements. Formally, Brenner’s fiction mirrored the disintegration of modern life in its circularity and fragmentation. Brenner himself linked what he called the “brokenness” of reality with the formal brokenness of narrative in modernist fiction like his own (Pinsker 15). This fragmentation of the narrative reflected the existential alienation of many of his characters, who were trying to find their place in the chaos of modern life.

Like his characters, Brenner wandered widely in search of a place to call home. In the early years of the twentieth century, Brenner lived in the regional capital of Homel, where he encountered a circle of Hebrew writers and intellectuals as well as the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzche, Dostoevsky, and the Russian symbolists. Also in this period, Brenner published his first story, “Pat lechem” (A Slice of Bread) in the Hebrew journal *Ha-melitz*, beginning a literary career that would continue up until his death. In 1901 Brenner was drafted into the Russian Army, but he deserted at the outset of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and escaped to London.

Brenner’s sojourn in London brought him into contact not only with a community of modern Hebrew writers, but also with English modernism itself. There Brenner edited the Hebrew monthly *Ha-meorer* (The Awakener), which did not present itself as an avant-garde or experimental journal, but nonetheless published the work of some of the most prominent Hebrew modernists of the time, including Brenner himself. Brenner also published translations of (and sometimes translated himself) works of major European modernists, including Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen. In this period, Brenner published his first novel, *Ba-horef* (In Winter), a semi-autobiographical tale of an ex-yeshiva student’s psychic and sexual maturation in the modern, secular world. The focus on sexuality and the inner life of the protagonist in *Ba-horef* would come to be a characteristic element of Brenner’s modernism. His second short novel, *Misaviv lanekuda* (Around the Point), continues this focus on the interior life of the protagonist, as well as introducing urban themes and a focus on the city.

As a young man, Brenner had been drawn to Zionism, and in 1909, he immigrated to Ottoman Palestine, in pursuit of the Zionist goal of settling and working the land. Shortly after his immigration, Brenner published his long novel *Mikan umikan* (From Here and From There), which relies on modernist techniques of fragmentation. The novel purports to be a found text comprised of a variety of generic elements, including documents, letters, and articles, and the text is chronologically and syntactically disjointed. In response to criticism of this novel, Brenner published an article titled “Ha-genre ha-eretz-yisraeli ve-avizarehu” (The Eretz-Yisraeli Genre and its Accompaniments), in which he argued against the stifling national concerns imposed on Hebrew literature, and suggested that the very instability of conditions in the *yishuv*, the settlement of Jews in Palestine, necessitated a multi-faceted, fragmented approach based on the subjective experiences of the protagonist or narrator. This essay aligned his own literary philosophy with contemporary modernism.

Nonetheless, Brenner’s work as well as his philosophy of Hebrew literature retained pre-modernist elements of romanticism and social realism. Part of his argument against the current trend in modern Hebrew literature was that it should better reflect the lived realities of life in Palestine rather than ideologically pure Zionist utopian fantasies of that life. Early in his career he explicitly rejected the decadent trend in modern literature and, in a famous letter to his friend, the writer Uri Nisan Gnessin, the notion of art for art’s sake. Yet much of his work exhibits the kind of interiority, narrative fragmentation, and crises of sexuality, identity, and place that characterize modernist literature. Brenner’s final work, the novel *Shekhol vekishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement), written around 1914 but not published until 1920, describes the lives of young Jewish pioneers in Palestine through the eyes of its narrator, Yehezkel Hefetz. In this novel he attempts to realistically portray the difficulties and disappointments of the life of the Zionist pioneer in Ottoman Palestine, countering the utopian myths of the “genre” literature he advocated against. Yet Brenner again employed the device of the found manuscript, explaining the disjointed, incomplete character of the narrative, and reflecting the fragmented consciousness of his mentally ill protagonist. Brenner himself became a literal victim of his own search for home when he was killed in the Arab riots of May 1921.

List of works

Brenner, Y.H. (1903) “Ba-horef,” *Hashiloach* 11-12.

-. (1904) “Mesaviv lenekudah,” *Hashiloach* 14.

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-. (1920) *Shekhol vekishalon*, New York: Shtiebel.

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Pinsker, Shachar. (2011) *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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