Yaakov Shabtai (1934—8.4.1981)

An Israeli Hebrew author, playwright, lyricist, and translator, Yaakov Shabtai was born in Tel Aviv. Shabtai began translating plays and writing lyrics and original plays after his military service when he lived in a kibbutz. In 1967, he moved back to Tel Aviv to dedicate himself to writing. In 1972, a collection of his short stories appeared. Both his plays and short fiction received mixed reviews at the time of their original publication. In 1977, Shabtai published his first novel, *Zikhron Dvarim* [translated into English as *Past Continuou*s], which was immediately recognized as a unique literary achievement and as one of the most significant works of modern Hebrew literature. Shabtai died in 1981 of heart failure. His second novel, *Sof Davar* [translated as *Past Perfect*], edited jointly by his widow, Edna Shabtai, and by the literary critic Dan Miron, was published posthumously in 1984, and likewise won critical acclaims.

Shabtai’s prose has clear spatial, temporal, and social coordinates. But for few exceptions, it takes place in what is today the cultural centre of Tel Aviv. His novels are situated temporally mostly in the 1930s and 1940s, and from the late 1960s through the 1970s, and feature characters who emigrate from Eastern Europe to Palestine in the 1920s. In Palestine these characters form the working class or the *petite bourgeoisie*, and share social-Zionist worldviews. Shabtai is most noted, however, for the grammar and style of *Past Continuous*, which is partly reproduced in *Past Perfect*. The earlier novel is made up of a single paragraph, with extraordinarily long sentences, many of which span over two pages or more. Simultaneously, the novel remains realist in style. Shabtai’s novels are also noted for their success in integrating spoken Hebrew—both its vocabulary and grammar—into their literary language.

Whereas the experimental grammar of *Past Continuous* remains *sui generis* in Hebrew fiction, the style and language of Shabtai’s novels played a crucial role in the development of Hebrew fiction from the 1980s on.

(Written by Shai Ginsburg)