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# Transformations of Tradition: Herzl, Nordau, Zeitlin and Brenner

## 1 Introduction

My paper focuses on a “Jewish moment” in the history of *fin de siècle* Central Europe and Russia. During that moment, a peculiar constellation of voices was discussing and representing, in different styles and forms, “the Jewish Question” vis-à-vis modernization, the enlightened critique of tradition and the scientific and literary “alternatives” to the religious worldviews of the past.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the situation of Jews in Europe and Russia seemed to have been immensely improved compared to their reality in the previous century (Avineri 2013). Before the French Revolution, Jews were mostly dwelling in rural areas, in quasi-autonomous communities, suffering from isolation, legally discriminated against and very limited in their ability to acquire higher education or gain socially respected, well-paid professional or public positions. In contrast, the discourse on Enlightenment that had given birth to the idea of citizenship – namely, equal rights to all people living within well-defined territorial units – has paved the way for the idea of emancipation for the Jews. Thus, the nineteenth century witnessed concentration of Jews in urban areas and the opening up of the system of education, resulting in the economic and social mobility of many who were beginning to identify themselves as Germans or French of the Mosaic faith.

These developments encouraged high expectations – especially among educated Jews – to leave behind their state of social “outcasts” that had been part of the traditional hatred of Jews, ignited, among others, by religious antagonism (Nirenberg 2013). In some European capitals, such as Vienna, Budapest and Berlin, Jews became owners of fancy mansions, sometimes called ‘palaces’, located at the city center. They also started to build magnificent synagogues that signaled the rising economic status of their communities. Their social success as well as their over-representation in economic life, in academic professions, in science as well as in the arts was outstanding. Not unexpectedly, however, their new status has provoked much envy and resentment among their neighbors. Thus, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Jewish life became manifestly ridden with strong new tensions.

Among the Jews themselves – not only those who remained religious and tied up to their communities, but mostly among the successful, educated and

“emancipated” Jews – the desire to cultivate their particular group identity has not waned. One of the symptoms was the revival of Hebrew as a philosophical and literary language and its adaptation for writing in non-religious contexts, which was part of the movement of the Jewish “Haskalah” (Feiner 2004). Simultaneously, the emergence of the Romantic movement in Europe and Russia has created strong tensions between the longing to preserve an imagined “pure identity” of European nations based on their common history and traditions (Talmon 1970 [1967]) on the one hand, and the universality of the Enlightenment message on the other. Similarly, tensions were created by the call of the carriers of Enlightenment to anchor people’s worldviews in human reason, seen as a promise for progress that seemed, however, to endanger the traditional religious belief in divine providence as a constitutive principle of human history.

In this field of tensions, common to non-Jews and Jews, the place of the latter in society and their rights has grown particularly vulnerable towards the end of the nineteenth century. The emerging cultural space created by the spread of journalism and the development of new literary forms, especially the novel, became the scene on which the tensions within Jewish society and between Jews and their fellow-neighbors were staged and exacerbated. In fact, modern subjectivities of Jews and non-Jews alike were carved and shaped by such tensions, inscribed in the psyche of many, and articulated in the texts of those who were writing and taking a stand in the journalistic and literary field.

After having shortly delineated the general contours of the field of tensions where Jewish journalistic initiatives and literary activity took place, my aim in this paper is to present some variations of the transformation of tradition assumed in the writings of four well known Jewish literary-public figures. The first two voices I will present are of Central European figures: Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau. I shall then move to discuss the encounter between Hillel Zeitlin and Yosef Haim Brenner in the small town of Homel in Belarus. My main thesis is that the transformations of the Jewish tradition occurred in an ambiguous and often contradictory literary public sphere, characterized by a plethora of languages including, among others, Hebrew, Yiddish, German and Russian. This field then acquired an essential cultural-political significance in the process of constructing the modern Jewish nation at the turn of the twentieth century, and later on while the state of Israel was being founded.

My analysis will emphasize three foci of tensions in the Hebrew-Jewish cultural field:

- The tension between the liberal-universalistic principles stemming from the discourse of Enlightenment that has become attractive for many Jews with the promise for emancipation on the one hand, and the quest for national

sovereignty in which the particularistic Jewish identity could be asserted on the other hand.

- The tension between the secular vision for the future Jewish state and the difficulty of many to leave behind the warmth, familiarity and strong emotional ties of the traditional religion and community of their fathers.
- The tension between the humanistic mission imagined for the revival of Hebrew literature on the one hand, and the political role expected of that literature in building up a modern nation on the other hand.

## 2 Zionist “Scientism” and Science Fetishism in *Fin de Siècle* Central Europe

Theodor (Benjamin Zeev) Herzl (1860–1904), an Austro-Hungarian Jew was born in Budapest to a relatively integrated, German speaking and economically successful family. As a young person he saw the Germans as the best *Kulturvolk* and embraced the ideal of *Bildung*. His family moved to Vienna in 1878, where he studied law, had a brief legal career but soon turned to journalism and literature. He became the literary editor of the journal *Neue Freie Presse*, and has published several theatre pieces. Herzl’s official biographies tend to stress the role the Dreyfus Affair played in his growing awareness of European anti-Semitism, followed by the beginning of his role as the “visionary” and “father” of Zionism. His most famous quotation: “If you will, it is no legend” (“Wenn ihr wollt, ist es kein Märchen”) well-expresses his gift for turning the quest for a “Jewish national home” into a political plan. His public-political activism has transformed Zionism from a vision into a political movement.

Herzl believed that the revival of Jewish life will be achieved through modernization in the framework of Jewish sovereignty. In other words, he strove for a political-national solution anchored in modern education and technical know-how that will guarantee economic success and progress. In his pamphlet of 1896, *The Jewish State* (Herzl 1946 [1896]), Herzl foresaw the potential of science and technology to destroy the old and build the new. “This century has given the world a wonderful renaissance by means of its technical achievements”, he wrote (Herzl 1946 [1896], 4). In order to transform the idea of a Jewish state into a reality, Herzl argued, “many old, outgrown, confused and limited notions must first be entirely erased from the minds of men. [...] We shall not revert to a lower stage, we shall rise to a higher one.” (Herzl 1946 [1896], 7). Jews, Herzl predicted, “will construct roads, bridges, railways and telegraph installations; regulate rivers; and build their own dwellings”. (Herzl 1946 [1896], 12).

Herzl understood the Zionist idea as being inseparable from his belief in the power of science to be a counterforce to the power of religion: “Faith unites us”, he said, but “knowledge gives us freedom” [liberates us from religion – R.F.] (Herzl 1946 [1896], 38).

Nevertheless, reading his *Jewish State* today, one cannot overlook the tensions it is riddled with. “We should there form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism. We should as a neutral State remain in contact with all Europe [...]. We should form a guard of honor about these sanctuaries.” [meaning ‘of all religions’ – R.F.] (Herzl 1946 [1896], 13), he writes, giving vent to a “universal” cultural mission in the spirit of Enlightenment. Yet, his identification with such civilizing mission did not erase his longings for a homeland for all Jews on the basis of their particular historical experiences: “Palestine is our ever-memorable historic home. The very name of Palestine would attract our people with a force of marvelous potency” (Herzl 1946 [1896], 13).

Herzl was no positivist. He did not believe that science and technology could offer solutions to all problems of human society, and Jewish society in particular. But among the Herzlians – especially West European, educated Jews who converted into Herzl’s political Zionism – some were. A good example is Max Nordau (1849–1923), a Hungarian Jew who studied medicine in Budapest, was sympathetic towards Lombroso’s positivist criminology, and moved from Budapest to Berlin, Paris and Madrid, until he finally settled in London, where he became a rather famous journalist, physician, dramatist and novelist and acquired popularity among the middle classes (Aschheim 1993). Eventually, he joined Herzl’s Zionism and was active in the first Jewish congresses, second in his outstanding dedication and influence only to Herzl.

“When I reached the age of fifteen”, Nordau wrote, “I deserted the Jewish way of life and the study of the Torah.... Judaism remained a mere memory, and since then I have always felt as a German, and as a German only.” (quoted in Avineri 2017, 205). Nordau was a sharp critic of European literary and artistic “modernism” from a “scientific” conservative point of view. In 1892, he published his critique of European modernism in a volume entitled *Entartung (Degeneration)* which he dedicated to Lombroso, and in which he claimed to use Lombroso’s psycho-physiological methods in his attack against modernist European art, literature and the new philosophy of Nietzsche that he described in terms of a degenerating disease: “Exclusively literary and aesthetic culture is [...] the worst preparation conceivable for a true knowledge of the pathological character of the work of degenerates. [...] this book is an attempt at a *really scientific criticism*” (Nordau 2016 [1898], 14–15, emphasis mine).

Nordau complained that “the subjectively garrulous critics are furious when it is pointed out how shallow and incompetent they are” (Nordau 2016 [1898], 15). But

this did not prevent him from publishing his critique, for “The danger [...] to which he [the critic] exposes himself cannot deter a man from doing that which he regards as his duty. When a *scientific truth* has been discovered, he owes it to humanity, and has no right to withhold it.” (Nordau 2016 [1898], 15, emphasis mine).

Nordau’s portrait of European degenerates was actually based on the image of the traditional outcasts excluded by European society such as criminals, the insane, the sick, the corporeally and mentally weak, and in particular – Jews. Nordau saw art and literature as symbolic of the decadence, because they seemed to challenge “the entire liberal universe based upon scientific truth” (Mosse 1992, 566), “rational convictions arrived at by the sound labor of the intellect” (Nordau quoted in Mosse 1992, 566). In order to recapture the dignity of Jews, he insisted on the necessity to build up a “new type of Jew”, physically fit and robust, and keen to fulfill his duties in a disciplined way. Thus, his critique of degeneration actually expressed his faithfulness to bourgeois norms of masculinity towards which he hoped to re-educate and train Jews for their Zionist, national mission. There was no division in his mind, writes Wendling, between his Zionism and his critique of degeneration. Rather, for him science integrated the economic, social, intellectual and national aspirations of the bourgeois class to which he belonged (Wendling 1989).

Herzl and Nordau were both convinced that the Jewish question could not possibly be solved within the confines of Europe. Their writings well-represent the different shades of Western-European national-liberal politics and a firm belief in scientific and technological progress, which they thought the Jews could carry with them wherever they would go, whether to Palestine or to Uganda. However, unable to imagine the immanent dark side of Western Enlightenment – the “Dialectic of Enlightenment” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s terms (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007), they adopted the scientific ideal and story of progress of the West in an uncritical way. Believing that science could defend them from the “oppressive side” of the Jewish tradition, which they aspired to overcome, they were blind to the inbuilt-tendencies inscribed in the Enlightenment discourse towards Eurocentrism in which they were taking part. I shall mention just one example from Herzl’s utopian novel *Altneuland*, and another one from the insightful interpretation of Nordau’s enterprise by Hans-Peter Söder (Söder 1991).

Herzl’s novel was published in 1902 and immediately translated into Hebrew, Yiddish and soon into many other languages including Ladino (a translation published in Thessaloniki). These translations exemplify the international nature of his literary production that served his national mission. The novel testifies, in fact, to Herzl’s “colonial dream” – projecting internalized European images of the colonized – according to which a fictive Arab intellectual, Reschid Bey, expresses his feelings of gratitude towards European Jews coming to develop the backward

Palestine. When asked about Jews who buy Palestinian land, Bey finds the very idea ridiculous. Against Pro-Zionist scholars who tend to emphasize “Arab gratitude for the Zionists’ technological bounty”, Palestinian scholars like Muhammad Ali Khalidi, for example, note:

that Bey is the only Arab character in a novel peopled virtually entirely by Jews, that the novel’s descriptions of Arab villages are altogether indirect, limited to Bey’s own testimony, and that at an interfaith Passover seder bringing together Jews and Christians of various denominations, no Arab cleric, Muslim or Christian is present. [...] Herzl depicts Arabs as one of many tolerated minorities in a Jewish commonwealth as opposed to an indigenous people with national rights of its own. (quoted in Penslar 2005, 69–70)

A similar tendency to identify with a European enlightenment characterizes Nordau’s vision, as pointed out by Hans-Peter Söder:

[...] his ambition and lifelong obsession was to draw up a “natural” – that is, scientific – *Weltanschauung* that could supersede liberalism and the need for nationalism and religion. [...] in his late works, Nordau drew up the plans of a society that was nourished by Kant’s categorical imperative and thereby would make a society of enlightened and unbiased individuals possible. Bonded together by mutual respect and [...] “human solidarity”, his future society no longer needed to operate with images of the “Other” or similar ideological constructions. (1991, 480–481)

Rather than a critique of Enlightenment, then, Herzl and Nordau tended to project the “malaise” of modern, industrial societies into universal human irrational impulses, the root of both degenerative disease – according to Nordau – and endemic anti-Semitism, in the eyes of Herzl. In Söder’s words, they were both caught in the “dialectic of the Enlightenment” (1991, 482), unable to overcome its paradoxes. Both saw the Zionist enterprise as an expression and realization of Western, technological progress and of Western values, through which they hoped to save the Jewish people.

In contradistinction, at the turn of the century East-European Jews tended to develop a critical view of Western progress and a new diagnosis of “the Jewish disease.” They thought that Jews were not simply victims of degeneration and anti-Semitism coming from without. Rather, the Jewish problem was diagnosed by them as an inner, existential malady, related to their conditions in society at large, but also to their traditional ways of life which some of them aspired to transform. The rest of my paper will be dedicated to the eastern-European Jews’ version of the critique of modernity and *Haskalah*, but also of traditional Jewish ways of life. This critique, as we shall now see, was directed towards scientific positivism and authoritarianism as expressed in family life as well as in the discourse on nationalism.

### 3 Russian Jews Reading Nordau and Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in 1890's Homel

Hillel Zeitlin's (1871–1945) and Yosef Haim Brenner's (1881–1921) writings were imprinted with elements of a Nietzschean critique of European rationalistic and scientific traditions. In this sense they differed substantially from Herzl and Nordau. Moreover, Zeitlin's and Brenner's readings of Nietzsche were actually mediated by their admiration for the great nineteenth century Russian authors. Thus, Zeitlin was busy 'translating' the ethical implications of contemporary European thought for young educated Jews, while Brenner attempted to shape his world by experimenting with modernistic literary forms such as the novel. The life and work of Zeitlin and Brenner represent a moment in which Zionism was both embraced and rebelled against, similar to Nietzsche's ambivalence to the European scientific tradition. This moment gave rise to a literary-political culture of critique, the legacy of which became predominant in the Hebrew public sphere for many years to come.

The historical Brenner – writer, translator, literary critique, publicist and editor – has become a quasi-mythological figure ever since his untimely death at the age of 40, murdered in Eretz Israel / Palestine during the Jaffa riots of 1921. Born in 1881 to a poor Jewish family in the Ukraine, under the Russian empire, he underwent the course of orthodox education in a Heder and a Yeshiva. Like others before him, he was soon attracted to external, unholy books, written in Hebrew, and to non-Jewish books. As a result, he was thrown out of the Yeshiva where he was studying at the time. After having completed his Yeshiva education elsewhere, Brenner came to Homel, a city in Belarus where more than half of the population was Jewish. He stayed in Homel for a few years. Eventually, he became a librarian in the Zionist library of Homel where he was preaching an idiosyncratic message of Zionism. Unlike the available national ideologies, Brenner's peculiar Zionism conveyed more loyalty to the poor masses of the Jewish people than to the "revived nation". He believed that under modern conditions, on the background of an international system of sovereign states and growing anti-Semitism, Jews could only survive as a people in a land of their own, namely in Eretz Israel. But he was indifferent to Herzl's political Zionism and also painfully aware of the pettiness of Zionist activists whose chances to realize their dreams seemed extremely meager in those days (Shapira 2008, 34).

Homel of the 1890's was a small, alternative center to the much more established centers of Jewish writers in Odessa and Warsaw. Brenner was critical of the leaders of these other centers – Bialik, Peretz, Ahad-Haam – whose Zionism he deemed too "bourgeois", not really committed, in his eyes, to the lot of their

fellowmen whose poor conditions of life was Brenner's main concern. In those years, Homel became a center for radical, young Jewish intellectuals but also for non-Jewish Russians with whom they used to speak Russian. Brenner's early life-story, briefly delineated above, is a typical biography of a whole generation of semi-educated, auto-didactic Jews, detached from their religious traditions and families, and experiencing loss of faith in God (Shapira 2008, 8–45). No less uprooted were the young lower-class Russians who started to join the ranks of the *Intelligenza* in the 1860's, after the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, but were not fully accepted by the upper-class professional and literary elite (Tsirkin-Sadan 2013, 22).

In spite of their sympathy for the previous generation of Russian liberals – Western-oriented thinkers and critics such as Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) – many of the newcomers could not fully identify with science-oriented, positivist and utilitarian ideas. They tended to reject abstract, philosophical discussions which they deemed unrealistic and utopian. Nor could they adopt the Romantic models of writing that had been popularized by the previous generation of Pushkin and Lermontov. Thus, both groups – the young Jewish intellectuals on the one hand, and the newly educated Russian *Intelligenza* who found themselves in Homel in the 1890's – were strongly attracted to the writings of Tolstoy (1860's) and Dostoevsky (1870's), on the backdrop of which they read Nietzsche, translated into Russian (Ohana 2016, Chapter 3). Indeed, in the 1890's, Nietzsche's oeuvre became an object of philosophical debates and even cultic admiration in Russia. Furthermore, for the Jews among them, the reading of these texts was mediated by the Hebrew texts of Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), their slightly older friend and mentor, well-versed in Jewish Kabbala and Hasidism, but also a devout student of Kant and Hegel's, Comte, Spencer, Darwin, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's.

Zeitlin's series of essays titled *Good and Evil: According to the Jewish Sages and the Philosophers of the Nations* [חכמי העמים]<sup>1</sup>, presented to his followers a genealogy of the good and the evil. This genealogy begins with the three great ancient civilizations – the Jewish, Indian and Greek civilization – and leads up to the modern age of rationalistic philosophies, scientific positivism, mystical Kabbala and Hassidism. It also includes the literary representations of evil in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and the poetic visions of Nietzsche. Author Yaacov Fichman, who was also a member of this group, testified later on, that Zeitlin's book was the main source for acquainting him and his close friend Brenner with contemporary philosophical debates. Brenner, who learned Russian only in his teens (Bar-Yosef

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1 A series of essays, published first in the journal *Ha-Shiloach*, then as a book in Warsaw.



2008, 179) was simultaneously reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, with a special interest in the latter. According to Shapira, by 1899, Brenner's command of Russian has improved: "He is now reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev [...] He discovers the writings of the humanist critic Vissarion Belinsky, and is enthusiastic about him". In a letter to a friend, he says of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: "I have no words to describe my enthusiasm about the psychology of this precious and sublime book." (Shapira 2008, 25, translation mine).

Zeitlin's text on the good and the evil offers his readers a road map of the available intellectual-ethical options in *fin de siècle* Russia: scientific/positivist materialism; revived religion; and Nietzscheanism. Positivism, he argued, sprang from the presupposition that there is no correspondence between the human intellect and the world in which humans are embedded (Zeitlin 2016 [1911], Chapter 12). Scientists, in other words, have been discouraged either by the Kantian subjective epistemological turn (the idea that there is no way of knowing the thing-in-itself, *Ding an sich*) or by the Hegelian presumption regarding the historical nature of reason. From this state of affairs, they have concluded that a search for the foundations of knowledge or the principles of the world is superfluous; all we need to know are the phenomena and the relations that hold among them. True, the ethical counterpart of this attitude may lead to pessimism and despair, which the Positivists rejected as untrue and immoral. Accordingly, Zeitlin takes Nordau's *Degeneration* and *Paradoxes* as prototypical for those who argue that pessimism is simply a disease. Against this, the positivists claimed that "Optimism is [rooted] in the depth of human nature" (Zeitlin 2016 [1911], 115; all translations from this text are mine, R.F.), basing this claim on a theory of biological and social evolution. After all, in the struggle for existence, higher forms of life develop from the processes of natural selection and survival of fittest, which benefit society as a whole. Thus, social evolutionists – including Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Ethics* (1887), from which Zeitlin quotes – concluded that:

To the extent that life is becoming more complex, and to the extent that the opinions grow [...] and public life becomes better fitting to the purpose of life [...] superfluous labor will decrease, the right of every man will be recognized, just division of labor will be more common, labor suffering will decrease, and pleasure and satisfaction will increase. (Zeitlin 2016, 120)

But, Zeitlin continues, this scientific view of human nature is superficial. "We should elevate ourselves from such a superficial view", in order to really understand the world "with all its virtues and defects" (2016, 123). The struggle for existence is becoming harsher and harsher: many are wounded in this war. The cry of the defeated is tearing the sky and the heart apart. But the winners are not

happier than the defeated. They are struck by boredom, “ennui”, lack of meaning. Reason has failed them; imagination has proved to be deceptive. Thus they turn to faith which “shines a new light on their world”. (2016, Chapter 12). No doubt, Zeitlin’s role-models here are the Russian writers: Graf Tolstoy, “a man of superb logic, but whose logic is different from ordinary logic”. The man for whom “love”, “true love of people” is the purpose of life; and Dostoevsky, who absorbed himself in the sorrow of “poor folk”. Dostoevsky’s immense love for the torments of the low and the poor, and his ability to feel their pain eventually brought about his realization that faith – simple faith in God – is the only path towards understanding the world and towards virtue. In this he was closest to Tolstoy: a man was not created for his own pleasure and utility, but in order to be part of the divine “project of love”.

In *fin de siècle* Russia, many members of the higher class *Intelligenzia*, including Dostoevsky himself in his youth, were oscillating between the materialistic Western-oriented, scientifically-informed liberalism represented by Belinsky on the one hand, and the revival of religion, experienced by Tolstoy late in his life and by Dostoevsky, on the other hand. But for many young Jews who gathered in Homel around Zeitlin and Brenner – those who had lost their faith and distanced themselves from tradition; those who had no economic means and scarcely any opportunity to acquire proper education or a professional job; those who continued to identify with the fate of their people, the majority of which was living a tragic life of poverty on the margins of Russian society – for them, neither Nordau’s “scientism” nor *traditional* religion was a real option. For them, the voice of Friedrich Nietzsche represented a clear new option: a radical rejection of the traditional, Jewish way of life in the small towns and villages of the Russian pale. Furthermore, beyond the void of such “negation of the diaspora” also lurked the possibility of revival of biblical Hebrew, surprisingly praised by Nietzsche in contrast to his scorn for Talmudic Judaism, or a renaissance of Kabbalistic myths (Ohana 2016, Chapter 1). Zeitlin thus presented a Russian-Jewish version for the German philosophy of life, namely, Zionism as a critique of positivism.

## 4 On the Backdrop of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy: Zeitlin and Brenner Reading Nietzsche

Zeitlin titled his chapter on Nietzsche “New Values”. That was the message of the “tremendous” [כביר], “enlightened” [נאור] man from Ashkenaz (Germany, in Hebrew) – Friedrich Nietzsche – who paved his own unique way in dealing with all problems of life. Zeitlin believed that despite the diversity and even contradic-

tions within it, Nietzsche's oeuvre nonetheless expressed one predominant tendency: to push the freedom of the human spirit to its extreme limit.

For Zeitlin and many of his followers, Nietzsche's approach justified and legitimized their own convictions about the need to disentangle themselves from the old Jewish world in search of alternatives. In Nietzsche, they also found the courage to reject all prejudices and received ideas as symptoms of illusions and self-deception. Destruction and rejection of the familiar is certainly a source of great sorrow. But Zeitlin took Nietzsche's pessimism as an aesthetic choice, a sublime source of spiritual and moral depth. Thus Zeitlin "prefigured" Brenner's translation of philosophical ideas and existential distress into an aesthetic choice of a highly original modernist style of writing. The positivists' interest in the "phenomena" and the "relationships holding between them" seemed limited, "superficial" – in Zeitlin's own words – while the idea of life, its purpose, its inner being, its depth – that was a true inspiration for meaningful experiences. Bourgeois life seemed nothing to Zeitlin, compared to the search of sublime spiritual contents. The "will to power" was interpreted by him as the will to free oneself from the pettiness of such a life. He knew the pain, the sorrow involved in such aspiration. Nevertheless, he writes, "it is impossible to do without sorrow in this world", and Nietzsche was, at the end, able to "raise himself" above sorrow, which Zeitlin now read in the mystical, Kabbalistic and Hassidic sense of "ascent" to God. "A sublime moral and aesthetic quality", he writes, "usually gives birth not to optimism but to pessimism" (Zeitlin 2016 [1911], 143).

Zeitlin's portrayal of Nietzsche seems to be anchored in the model of Dostoevsky's tormented protagonists rather than the historical author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. His younger friend Brenner followed Zeitlin's strategies of reading but rejected many of his judgments and conclusions. Adopting Nietzsche's radical critique of hypocrisy, self-delusion, self-righteousness predominant in European society, and adapting it to the Jewish condition, Brenner rejected the immoral implications – in his eyes – of the idea of the superman. Far from dreaming of implementation of Nietzschean ideas, he rather tried to create a linguistic space within which the "will to power" is deconstructed (*avant la lettre*), such that lack and nothingness are made acutely present everywhere. In addition, he was writing under the inspiration of his admired Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, no less than under the impression of Nietzsche.

Needless to say, I cannot elaborate here either on Brenner's critical view of Zionism or his rejection of the wretched Jewish life which he saw everywhere, in the areas of the Russian Empire, or in Whitechapel / London – where he spent four years, or in Eretz Israel / Palestine, where he spent the last 12 years of his life. Brenner used these biographical experiences as "life materials" for creating the fictive protagonists of his novels. Nevertheless, I shall try to adduce some

evidence and point at some clues in support of my claim that the critique of “positivist” Zionism found its expression in Brenner’s literary-political project. In particular, I shall make two points: The first concerns Nietzschean critical pessimism and the theme of “life” emerging as an antidote to the Jewish traditional concern with studying; the second touches on the relationship of life and literature, on the role of the author as philosopher and a public figure – both following the literary model of Dostoevsky. I shall draw my examples mainly from *In Winter* (בְּחֹרֶף), Brenner’s first novel, published when he was 22 years old (1903).

*In Winter* tells the life story of Jeremiah Fireman (alluding by name to Brenner himself), his miserable childhood and youth as the son of an unloving couple. He is raised in the shadow of an unkind, ambitious father who shamelessly uses his bright child as a means for achieving social status and money for himself, and is incapable of providing his son with a proper model for identification. The mother is a kind, plain-looking orphan, apologetic and ever in need of gratifying the man chosen for her by her step-father, a man who makes a meager living teaching toddlers the Torah. This unhappy couple form together a pathogenic family for the aspiring, serious, study-loving but destructively self-critical young Jeremiah: “[...] my desire for learning was certainly natural to a large extent, stemming from my austere, religious character; but the main motivation was a pursuit of glory, my effort to make myself a name [...]” (Brenner 1972, Chapter 4, all translations are mine). Thus, the initial conditions of Jeremiah’s fate are encapsulated in this judgmental self-description. The lack of fatherly love and support together with the high demand for excellence from a naturally gifted child, left their imprint on the open minded, sensitive soul of Jeremiah: “I was observing everything with the depth of my soul that was always open, seeking impressions” (1972, Chapter 4). The fatal combination resulted in an ambivalent, subversive subject that expresses himself in enigmatic, distorted language – far from any ideal of realistic transparency or aesthetic beauty – endowed with a sharp critical view of the world.

It soon transpires that the meaning of “family” in the novel is not limited to the “personal” family; rather, it signifies the larger Jewish community of Jeremiah’s backward, traditional hometown Z., and even beyond, the whole Russian and East European Jewish society as perceived by the young Jeremiah. The Jewish family and Jewish community are both a prison and a shield. On the one hand, they impose living at the expense of others by fostering an ethos that pretends to confer the highest value on men wholly devoting themselves to studying the Torah. Secretly, however, this ethos ignites in young talented men (and their parents) the desire to make a living and gain status from the position of *Talmidei Chachamim* (“students learning from the wise”, scholars of the Talmud), pretend-

ing to be studying instead of finding themselves real work and decent income for feeding their families. Moreover, the materials actually studied are dull, boring and lack any real significance: “These were some details about building the temple [...] some corrupted and obscure passages from the book of Job [...]” (1972, Chapter 4). Looking back on these materials, the narrator Fireman comments that he finds it impossible “to understand the very possibility of chewing all this straw with faith” (1972, Chapter 4). Very soon, though, Jeremiah, who makes his first attempt to escape the prison of family by joining a Yeshiva in another town, and who had always favored Aggadah, and Midrash – the Jewish literature on morality and ethics – over the dry, juristic Talmud, finds himself absorbed in “the spirit of Turgenev’s novels and Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s poems on the one hand, and the essays of Pisarev, Shelgunov and others, the aesthetic destroyers of the 1860’s, on the other hand” (1972, Chapter 4). Paradoxically, the sharp pleasure that Jeremiah had in reading the latter provided him with a kind of justification for his literary preferences. As a true Jew, he claims, he has always preferred the justice (of the critics) to the beauty of the poet.

In spite of the danger, Jeremiah continues his reading of non-Jewish books and is soon caught committing this unforgivable sin. He is then expelled from the Yeshiva, his early escape from the prison of his family ending up in a disaster that pushes him back to the shield of home and inaugurates a series of later escapes of the same pattern. These escape-attempts signify the tension between the need to leave the prison, and the necessity to return to the intimately unbearable but at least familiar environment of his childhood and his fatherly traditions. Wherever he finds himself – whether still trying to stick to traditional study or attempting to go beyond it, Jeremiah experiences his life as a long war. “I was reading different books and was fighting them, defending the old against them [...]”. (1972, Chapter 9). As long as he lived in the closed world of Torah studying (“the years of my rotting in the Klois”) he used to tell himself: “I study because it is impossible not to study, because life is nothing without God’s Torah, because this is the fundament of the world”. (1972, Chapter 8). Later on, however: “...my torments were the worms of doubt [...] my dreams – dead Gods.” (1972, Chapter 9). And yet:

I was seeking life [...] together with the recognition of my baseness, my worthlessness, together with the deep and special sorrow [...] my eyes turned to the future, feeling within myself the power to inherit it [...] To behave in total freedom, not to believe in nonsense – that was my religion, positive and extremely pleasant. (1972, Chapter 11)

This is a Nietzschean moment – “dead God” and “Gay Science”; in seeking life, the protagonist finds power within himself. But for Brenner, it is a moment bound to transpire as just another delusion at the end.

Fireman's Sisyphean struggle for a meaningful life is expressed, among others, in his attempt to give himself a minimal scientific education and his sense that his efforts are futile:

I pick up the geometry book, open it, and start studying it aloud [...] I concentrate, gazing at the diagrams of circles and squares, as my hands are mindlessly grabbing Tolstoy [...] I go back to geometry, pronouncing some insignificant term twenty times, while thinking that Tolstoy was quite right in his judgment that in the books of Chekhov there is much art, and much truth [...] that happy is the man who reads the books of the great authors in his mother tongue [...] and that I belong to a people who have no language, no literature, miserable and unhappy [...] Damn it! Damn it! Da-mn-it!... Why should I know all this?... To work for the sake of society? Or occupy a position? To consider myself important? And frankly, in order to do good for others I do not need all this science and wisdom... (1972, Chapter 11)

Tormenting doubt, oscillation between indescribable pain and an unquenchable thirst for life constitute the core of Fireman's being, and dominate his experiences in his next destination: the relatively bigger town N. (a representation of Homel in the novel), a center for several groups of Jewish young men, among them Zionists, socialists, assimilating bourgeois Jewish professionals seeking to become dentists and pharmacists, and, most importantly, aspiring Hebrew writers and intellectuals. But these writers and intellectuals fail to provide the liberation Fireman has been aspiring for. Rather, it soon transpires as nothing more than yet another disappointment. "Only in my room – everything is worthless, rotting, dead [...] a stifling silence". (1972, Chapter 15). Fireman – but no doubt Brenner as well – thus discovers that by leaving the traditional world of the Torah and entering the universe of Haskalah [Enlightenment], he has not found himself a place in the world. Rather, his present alienation is even worse than his former estrangement, for he discovers the world to signify nothing but loss and absence. "It was then that I was struck by black despair of the life into which I found myself to be sinking [...] It is winter [...] Yes, winter... winter at home, winter outside, winter in the heart, in the soul... [...] This winter I teach at a distant, desolate village..." (1972, Chapter 34).

Brenner's literary oeuvre, its seemingly careless, sloppy style, its indifference – not to say aversion – towards aesthetic beauty is nothing else but a representation of a traumatic moment in the life of a nation. At that moment, what Brenner rejects more than anything else are false fetishes that may promise redemption but tend to produce violence. Brenner's most popular publicist text ("On the Way" על הדרך), was written in London in 1905, and echoes Nikolai Gavrilovitch Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to be done* (1863). It was published in *The Awakener*, the journal Brenner initiated and edited for two years. Brenner writes there:

...We are standing in a time replete with fateful facts that should have significant consequences, and hence we are sure that the Hebrew audience would take interest in our enterprise [...] however [...] we say: 'the firm facts [...]' – never do we live off them! Our attitude towards them must always be the attitude of free Hebrew men who aspire for self-redemption [...] We want the Hebrew man... whose soul has always been subtle and sharp, and who has this old sorrow in his heart [...] [we want that man] to find in his language [...] everything that is close to his heart [...] and the man whose heart has been awakened will come, and listen to the next awakening voice [...] Today, when ignorance reigns, and words of wisdom are scarce, when we are all blind in darkness, and skepticism is eating our heart and soul, and spleen is everywhere, and sorrow is growing [...] Today – I come to you, poor brother [...] With me you will know no peace and quiet, my brother, no pleasure. Because I am coming to awaken you, brother, so that you would ask: where is the way? Where?... With no peace and no self-conceit, no fear of the consequences whatever they may be, no grain of falsehood and soft heartedness... look straight into being, acquire its essence, its honor. Prepare yourself for sacredness!.... (Brenner 1906)

This is Brenner speaking in the voice of the prophet, the voice of Dostoevsky who read in public Pushkin's poem "The Prophet" (Frank 2010); the awakener who hopes his voice would be heard by other awakers, other prophets, other Hebrew writers and leaders. But the history of the *Awakener* was soon interrupted for lack of money, lack of suitable literary materials and not least because of Brenner's psychological fatigue and despair. Instead of a fetishistic clinging to science that enabled Herzl and Nordau not to experience the full impact of the break from tradition, Brenner created a literature of ambivalence, a kind of melancholic linguistic space that expressed his inability to separate himself from tradition and become fully Zionist, or to try and reconstruct the tradition from within its inner fractures.

The literary space created by Herzl and Nordau, Zeitlin and Brenner was open-ended and mobile in form, expressing their tension-ridden existence and hybrid identities. All of them were carriers of the European-Russian traditions as well as their Jewish inheritance about which they wrote both to the nations and to their own people. Herzl and Nordau imagined their subjectivities in European terms without denying their search for political sovereignty for the Jewish people. Others, like Brenner, have become compassionate toward the "poor folk" of the Jewish masses by reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Nietzsche's traces were recognizable in their ambiguous search for individual liberation from religion and the critical edge in representing the Jewish ways of life and traditions. In Zeitlin's case, the dependence on translations of world philosophy and literature was manifested in his adaptation of the contents of world ethical thought from all civilizations into Hebrew. No less was he dependent on the re-discovery of ancient Jewish Kabbala which he understood as a road to redemption. Similar was Brenner's import of Russian authors into Hebrew discourse while writing about

sorrow as the foundation of individual ethics, and later on by publishing the first translation into Hebrew of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which he stamped with his Jewish soul by titling it *The Sin and its Punishment* (Dostoevsky 1959).

Through all these venues our protagonists gave vent to the tensions that pervaded their lives and writings: between the universal quest for Enlightenment and their particular national identity; between a secular way of life and their longing for a Jewish identity; and between the cultural and the political role of the new literature they created, which both reflected their human condition and was about to give birth to the new collective identity of the modern Hebrew nation.

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