

From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward A New Jewish Literary Thinking.

Dan Miron

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At the end of his magisterial volume *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, Dan Miron concludes a discussion of what he calls Sholem Ya'akov Abramovitch's (1835-1917) "integral bilingualism," his practice of writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish for the same audience during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In modern Israel, Miron quips, "Abramovitch's stories, in order to stand a chance of becoming readable again, must be re-translated into Hebrew from their original Yiddish versions; for as different in every possible way as the contemporary Hebrew reading public is from the Yiddish reading public of a century ago, it is still much closer to that reading public than to its Hebrew historical counterpart" (498).

Miron's acute observations about the constellation of Hebrew and Yiddish in contemporary Israel as representations and mediations of each other were borne out in a recent factual error made in the popular American press. In a 2010 *New Yorker* profile of the contemporary Hebrew writer David Grossman, George Packer mistakenly identified the fictional Anshel Wasserman, a European-based Hebrew author of the 1880s and the great uncle of Grossman's young protagonist, Momik, in *See under: Love* (1986) as a Yiddish writer. Indeed, in English translation it is easy enough to make such a mistake, because Wasserman's "Children of the Heart" reads awkwardly and archaically, as does Yiddish in contemporary Israel. In the Hebrew original, however, Wasserman's "Children of the Heart" is unmistakably Hebrew, fashioned as a satire of a late Enlightenment Hebrew text, in its bombastic, pastiche-like idiom. Nevertheless, Packer's mistake is attuned to the general ethos of the novel because it is through Hebrew writings such as those produced by his great uncle Anshel Wasserman that Momik gets a sense of the Eastern European Yiddish-speaking world his family left behind. Yiddish, for Momik in *See Under: Love*, is a language embedded in

Hebrew via Wasserman's texts.

It is by illuminating Hebrew and Yiddish bilingualism and diglossia in its literary context that Dan Miron has distinguished himself as the foremost literary historiographer of the last 40 years. His own multi-lingual scholarly output—in Hebrew, and English and Yiddish—is breathtaking in scope. While *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* posits itself as a streamlined historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hebrew and Yiddish literary criticism, it also serves as an excellent retrospective of Miron's scholarship. The book's strength resides in Miron's encyclopedic knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish literary production of the last two centuries, and his profound engagement with the critical voices that have brought that literary corpus into scholarly discourse. More specifically, Miron revisits some of his earliest and best criticism on the relationship between Abramovitch and his greatest fictional creation, "Mendele The Book Peddler," in order to cover new theoretical ground in his brilliant analysis of "differential" and "integral" bilingualism within not only a Hebrew and Yiddish literary framework, but within the longer continuum of Jewish literary history.

Differential bilingualism, according to Miron, is a bilingualism wherein different languages function differently within the same speech community. Integral bilingualism, on the other hand, refers to the parallel functioning of two languages within the same speech community, to fulfill the same or overlapping purposes. Hebrew and Yiddish, for most of their co-existence within the Eastern European Jewish community, were differential. It was only at the turn of the century in literary corpora such as that produced by Sholem Yaakov Abramovitch, that Yiddish and Hebrew linguistic relations became "integral." The ramifications of such a development create the groundwork for Miron's presentation of literary "contiguity."

The title of the book, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, alludes to the conceptual backbone of Miron's discussion in which he sums up the "problem" with the classic Hebrew and Yiddish literary critics as being their fixation on issues of literary and linguistic continuity within, according to some theorists, a Jewish continuum, and according to others, a European one, and calls for a new literary thinking that links Jewish literatures through a poetic of contiguity. Unfortunately this is where Miron's theoretical conceptualization of "contiguity" falls somewhat flat. Miron's definition of literary contiguity is "a kind of light or diminished contact[,] . . . a contact that avoids all permanencies, is in flux, can be seen as random, and yet as indicative of mobility—free and unfettered—within a space that is vast and open, but then also, in the final analysis, not infinite, because it is circumscribed by a borderline, which can be very fine and barely noticed, or deeply and clearly etched" (305-06). In

other words, contiguity as a literary model for theorizing Jewish literatures is basically an acknowledgement of the “winks” and “nods” of writers from disparate places and writing in different languages. He illustrates this through a not-so-convincing analysis of Kafka and Sholem Aleichem as models, in relation to one another, of contiguity. According to Miron, their contiguity is constituted by a “shared borderline of Jewishness; not of Judaism as a religious, civilizational, or national entity, essence, or system, but of the perception of reality through (or also through) the screen of the experience of being a ‘Jew in the world,’ to use Buber’s phrase” (307).

What is missing from Miron’s definition of contiguity is a blueprint for deploying his model. This is not to say that Dan Miron does not have the ability to theorize. Indeed, in reading his discussion of the unique bilingualism that characterized Abramovitch’s career, and in his presentation of the literary conditions that could foster that kind of bilingualism, albeit briefly, one feels that one is in the presence of a literary scholar who only comes along once in a generation, if even that often. In *From Continuity to Contiguity*, we find a breadth of engagement with the popular Jewish movements of the twentieth century, and a stark, incisive analysis of how those movements created not only a literature, but a rich literary discourse.

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WORKS CITED

Packer, George. “The Unconsoled.” *The New Yorker* 86.29 (Sept. 26, 2010): 50-61.

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