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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Essentially this book is a study of a critic, Barukh Kurzweil. It is also, in part, a study of a national literature, Hebrew literature. And in its larger perspective, it is an inquiry into the general problem of Hebrew-European literary relationships.

I

The necessity for a critical presentation, analysis and assessment of Kurzweil's work hardly requires justification. Even now, a number of years after his death, the very mention of his name in Hebrew literary circles is apt to ignite as much controversy and debate as it did at any time during his life. Both in Israel and outside it, one finds totally conflicting opinions about his worth as a critic, opinions which have only in common the passion with which they are held. In some circles, for example, there is a consensus that would deny Kurzweil the very status of literary critic; at best he is seen as a cultural historian or as a sociologist of literature, at worst a "book-reviewer"--and a crabbed and arrogant one at that.¹ Those who would grant him a place within the field of criticism would extend Band's description of Kurzweil's work on Agnon to all of his practical criticism:

Most of Agnon criticism since the end of World War II was written under the fructifying, but ultimately destructive influence of Baruch Kurzweil's neoimpressionism, which focuses not upon the work of art, but rather upon certain general, European cultural problems that are also manifest in Agnon's fiction. . . . The antidote to this flagrant subjectiveness must be the analysis of the story as an organic, artistic structure and its₂ position within the context of Agnon's literary career.²

In other quarters a very different view obtains. Those who were closer to him personally and knew intimately both the man and the method are, though not always uncritical, more sympathetic and positive about him and convinced of his stature as a critic.

In the light of these divergent estimations, the need for a full-scale treatment of Kurzweil's criticism is clear. The Kurzweil corpus in its variegated entirety has never been dealt with in any extensive way and this book represents a first attempt

to do so. It must however be noted that three members of the Bar-Ilan University faculty, Moshe Schwarcz, Hillel Barzel, and Yehuda Friedlander, have all written seminal pieces of Kurzweil meta-criticism.³ The following chapters, which synthesize and develop these contributions, will reveal their indebtedness to them. But let it be stated clearly: the larger aim of this study is neither to defend nor disparage Kurzweil but to try to understand and explain him. I have no illusions that the following is an "objective" treatment; meta-criticism is no less interpretive than criticism itself.⁴ Furthermore, if what follows is indeed a rendering, an interpretation of Kurzweil, it is clear that it could not have been undertaken without a fundamental willingness to accept his written work. Donagan's observations in his introduction to his study of Collingwood is pertinent here: "If matters in which I agree with Collingwood did not far out-number those on which I do not, I should not have written about him." But at the same time so is Collingwood's own reminder that

it is impossible to reconstruct another man's philosophy without passing judgement on it . . . and knowledge of another man's philosophy that does not enable you to judge it critically is not philosophical, but simply a parrot-like capacity to recall what he said or wrote.⁵

This is what I have tried to avoid.

What I have in mind when I say that the larger aim of this study is to understand and explain Kurzweil is precisely what Collingwood implies here: that if we are to arrive at a proper appraisal of Kurzweil we must know his critical philosophy, that is, just what he intended by his criticism, what he sought to do. Ultimately we must measure a critic by what he asks to be measured by, not by criteria that we insist on imposing on him. Crane has put this matter very well, if inelegantly:

Any critical book or essay that makes coherent sense is a body of propositions the meaning and validity of any one of which cannot be properly judged until we have uncovered the precise question in the critic's mind to which the proposition is intended to be an answer. This again is obvious; but what is commonly forgotten is that no question or problem, in turn, has any absolute status or isolable meaning, but is always relative, as to both its content and the conditions of its answer, to the total context of the discourse in which it occurs--a context that exists independently both of "things" and of the critic himself once he has chosen or constructed it, as a particular and finite structure of terms in which the referent of any term is conditioned by the logical relation in which it stands to all the other terms, or conceptual elements, employed in the discussion, and ultimately to the special set of assumptions

concerning subject-matter and method upon which the discourse rests.⁶

One of the functions, then, of this study is to define and present the "special set of assumptions," the "conceptual elements" and the "particular and finite structure of terms" that are operative in Kurzweil's criticism. If Crane is correct--

that literary criticism is not, and never has been, a single discipline, to which successive writers have made partial and never wholly satisfactory contributions, but rather a collection of distinct and more or less incommensurable 'frameworks' or 'languages,' within any one of which a question like that of poetic structure necessarily takes on a different meaning and receives a different kind of answer [from what] . . . it is properly given in any of the rival critical languages in which it is discussed.

--if Crane is correct--then one of the objectives here, in pursuit of the larger aim, is to identify and clarify Kurzweil's critical language. In doing so, we shall realize a second objective: to relate Kurzweil's work to the main bodies of modern critical theory. Only when we have done this shall we have established the ground on which any evaluation of his work can proceed.

II

It is impossible to discuss Kurzweil without recourse to modern Hebrew literature. A number of preliminary observations about this literature are in order. "The development of modern Hebrew literature represents an almost unique phenomenon in world literature."⁸ Here is a language in which the Bible was created and yet which ceased to be a vernacular tongue from the Rabbinic period until the nineteenth century. Then, in response to certain historical developments, leshon hakodesh "the sacred tongue"⁹ was revived and again a Hebrew literature, a modern Hebrew literature, began to develop. We are dealing with a literary tradition, then, that is at once both very old and very young.

It is also a literature of limited dimensions. There are today approximately three million people in the world who speak Hebrew (mostly in Israel, some in the United States and in a few other countries), but the number who are of adult age and with sufficient education to deal with Hebrew literary works in a serious way is even smaller. Modern Hebrew literature is

written and read by a society whose intellectuals belong to a variety of language cultures, and is strongly subject to multifarious European literary influences.

The interplay of Russian, Polish, English, French and German literatures with Hebrew literature has greatly enriched the Hebrew literary scope and has given it its special flavor.¹⁰

From its earliest days the criticism that evolved along-side modern Hebrew literature has perceived and grappled with the diffuse issue of Hebrew--European literary relationships. In the twentieth century Joseph Klausner, Zvi Woislowski, Yeshurun Keshet, (Ya'akov Kapilowitz), Shlomo Tsemah, Eliezer Steinmann, Simon Halkin, Israel Zemora, Avraham Kariv, Dov Sadan and Barukh Kurzweil have all, in very different ways, addressed themselves to this subject, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly.¹¹ To be sure, their interest in it bespeaks general ideological concerns: how to relate Hebrew literature to Jewish nationalism and its aspirations, to historic Jewish culture and the ancestral religious tradition, and to the humanistic legacy of European culture. Though most of the younger critics now writing are not so preoccupied ideologically and have chosen to concentrate on the specifically artistic and technical problems of literature, this does not mean that the larger comparative questions have been clarified and resolved. Wellek and Warren's guidelines of a generation ago still seem to me to be worth considering with respect to modern Hebrew literature:

It is just the problem of 'nationality' and of distinct contributions of the individual nations to the general literary process which should be realized as central. Instead of being studied with theoretical clarity, the problem has been blurred by nationalistic sentiment and racial theories. . . . Only when we have reached decisions on these problems shall we be able to write histories of national literature which are not simply geographical or linguistic categories, shall we be able to analyse the exact way in which each national literature enters into the European tradition. Universal and national literatures implicate each other.¹²

For this reason almost all the above-named critics deserve monographic treatment, which collectively would provide a substantial filling in of the theoretical picture. This study of Kurzweil may, therefore, be seen as a step, however small, toward that ultimate objective.

From this perspective we can observe a series of other reasons for choosing Kurzweil specifically as the subject of this study. For one thing, there is the matter of critical temper. As I shall show in the next chapter, Kurzweil is a product of Western Europe, a cultural milieu very different from the East European context of modern Hebrew literary creativity. Because he is at a

greater distance from this context than virtually all of the above-named figures he is conspicuously more sensitive to and critical of the nationalistic sentiment and assumptions of modern Hebrew literature. Secondly, his German and Jewish background and training qualify him well to deal with modern Hebrew literature both in its synchronic and its diachronic manifestations. Finally, of all of the critics, his method is the clearest, the most obviously comparative, and therefore, most easily studied.

Every inquiry into the mysteries of a work of art . . . must clearly delineate three different stages in approaching it. . . . The basic operations in laying bare the first dimension of the work, its intrinsic coherence, are careful and sensitive attention to images, metaphors, rhythms, rhyme-schemes and central topics. Here the poem itself stands in its unduplicated immanence. The "how" and the "what" [of the poem], form and content, co-exist in mutuality. In the second stage literary study searches for the connections, whether visible or implicit, of the individual text to its literary - linguistic tradition and to the latter's motifs, images and figurative expressions. Thus, for example, any examination of the poetry of Shlonski, Shin Shalom or Altermann is obligated, as one of its primary tasks, to perceive how these poems grow out of the linguistic soil of Bialik, the Sacred Scriptures, Jewish liturgy and liturgical poetry. Only after the exposure of this second dimension can literary inquiry proceed to its final important job: to relate this thematics to that of world literature. In other words, literary inquiry uncovers three fundamental dimensions which are always interwoven within the literary work: its unique phenomenological essence, its linkage to its national linguistic and intellectual tradition, and its integration into the general literary context of its time.¹³

III

Barukh Kurzweil flourished as a critic for over thirty years, from 1941,¹⁴ when he published his first article on Agnon, until his death in 1972. During this period he wrote nearly four hundred essays, review-discussions and causeries. The Kurzweil corpus is exceedingly rich and covers an exceptionally wide range of subjects and concerns: theoretical and practical criticism of Agnon, Bialik, Tshernichovski, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and most of the Hebrew poets and prose writers from the turn of the century until such Sabra figures of the late sixties as Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua; criticism of more than twenty major Europeans from Cervantes, Goethe, Stendhal and Balzac through Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Hesse, Broch, Camus, Frisch and Dürrenmatt; explorations of the theory of fiction, tragedy, and the modern theater;

important critiques of modern Jewish and Zionist theology and philosophy in essays on Buber, Rosenzweig, Ahad ha-Am, Yitshak Breuer and Gershom Scholem; and scores of polemical and satirical responses to the foibles, pretensions, designs and achievements of those who variously perturbed or opposed him and who he chose to attack. Of this writing, about half has been collected into ten volumes with specially written prefaces that are indispensable sources for understanding Kurzweil; the remainder lies scattered throughout various newspapers and periodicals and would perhaps fill three or four more. Implicit in all his writing are two things that are of concern to us here: a consistent, though always developing methodology, and a coherent theory of modernity. These two unite to allow Kurzweil to develop a theory of modern Hebrew literature and its relationship to the European tradition that is itself remarkably consistent and coherent. It is a serious misperception of Kurzweil to ignore the unity of conception and method that underlies his disparate articles, a mistake which a number of his detractors have made. They point to the fact that he never authored a sustained discussion of a subject or a problem which was not meant to appear in piece-meal fashion in the press as evidence that he is not a bona fide literary scholar but a high-grade journalist.¹⁵

The truth is that if Kurzweil is anything other than a literary critic, he is a philosopher of Judaism, though not a systematic philosopher and certainly not a theologian. Kurzweil can be approached in this way and, as from the esthetic standpoint, Schwarcz has laid out the first steps which any such study will have to traverse.¹⁶ Nevertheless, considering that the bulk of Kurzweil's work overtly deals with literature, it is clear to me that if we wish to do it justice, we must apprehend it through literary categories.

This is not to suggest that this monograph will tell the full story about Kurzweil. As I have indicated, my prime concern is to determine how Kurzweil's critical method works, how he reads and why he reads as he does. This is, it seems to me, what an introductory study must do. My scope, therefore, is general and, even when I shall examine the practical criticism, a theoretical one. A more practically-oriented study of Kurzweil, one that tracks and analyzes in detail his readings and interpretations of specific works and figures still has to be done.

IV

In the passage I have quoted above (p. 5), Kurzweil continues as follows:

Any attempt to approach the literary work with a preconceived, a priori set of ideas and criticism by which to measure the object of research misses the point and is destined to fail. This was the common mistake in most of our [Hebrew] literary scholarship. No matter what the perspective was: Zionist, religious, Marxist, psychological or existentialist--the main thing is that it was not a perspective intrinsic [to the literary work]. That is what happened to the works of Bialik, Tschernihovski, ¹⁷Greenberg, Agnon, Brenner, Shalom or Shlonski

This is one of Kurzweil's most interesting statements because in it he demands precisely that quality he was accused throughout his career by his contemporaries of lacking--critical detachment and objectivity. How can we reconcile this affirmation of a "perception intrinsic" to the literary text with the "flagrant subjectivism" that Band, for example, observes?

I here state my agreement in principle with Strelka, Krieger and others that, even when it is deeply grounded in the text, literary criticism is performed by a person, not a machine, and thus is perforce "subjective."¹⁸ Hence I state even now my contention that the above assertion by Kurzweil of the primacy of the intrinsic quality of the literary work must be understood not within the assumptions of the Anglo-American critical tradition of New Criticism, as I think Band does, but within the framework of European phenomenology, specifically that of German phenomenological hermeneutics and its particular epistemology, which attempts, in its relation to the literary text, to transcend the accepted Cartesian subject-object dualism.

That Kurzweil brought to his reading a distinct hierarchy of esthetic criteria is obvious. What needs to be brought out is that these criteria are the result of a passionate commitment to specific cultural and religious values which, I shall show, were distilled from two sources: the Central European tradition, particularly the legacy of German classical humanism bequeathed by Goethe, and the German sensitivity to "Sprachlichkeit, the linguisticity of man's way of being"¹⁹; and the world-view of traditional Judaism of pre-Holocaust Central Europe, particularly, but not exclusively, the neo-Orthodoxy that developed in Frankfurt.

In the following pages I shall demonstrate how the dialectic within and between these two sources enabled Kurzweil to attain to a view of modern Western literature, and modern Hebrew literature in particular, that allowed him to both explain the latter and relate it to the former in a way that, I submit, is definitive and, within its frame of reference, unassailable. Evaluations of Kurzweil like those of Band are not only inaccurate in that they seek to measure Kurzweil by the wrong criteria; they are also misleading in describing Kurzweil's criticism as "neo-impressionism," its influence as "ultimately destructive," and in suggesting that an objectively "correct" reading of and approach to Agnon, or anyone else, is possible.

The succeeding chapters shall parallel the path taken by any critic as he moves toward the literary text, reads the text, and then moves away from it towards evaluation. After identifying the broad philosophical presuppositions that energize Kurzweil's criticism (Chapter III), I shall try to dig down to the epistemological bedrock upon which this criticism is founded. That is to say, I shall work towards defining his attitude to a literary text by describing his understanding of just what literature and criticism are (Chapter IV). At that point we shall be in a position to see the relationship between Kurzweil's theory and praxis as they operate in his treatment of modern Hebrew literature (Chapters V and VI). This will lead to a further evaluation and some conclusions of my own (Chapter VII).²⁰

But the very first undertaking is to supply a perspectival element hitherto lacking in the published work on Kurzweil--a cultural biography.