

# **When Innovation and Nationalism Clash**

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### **Abstract**

The need to fulfill national needs was a crucial factor in translation into Hebrew when the new Hebrew then Israeli culture was being formed. All innovation that went along with the process was eagerly adopted; any counter-current was marginalized.

In this paper I would like to outline some characteristics of the clash between the need for innovation in a new modern culture, in the first stages of its formation, and pressing national needs, as expressed in literary translation.

The paper will present a basic portrait of the culture builders. It will then proceed to trace a picture of the themes that were encouraged as opposed to the ones marginalized. On the one hand it will sketch the socialistic, heroic themes that found a central place. On the other, it will illustrate how innovations such as feminist writing, erotic writing, or personal expression were pushed aside. It will dwell on the selection of favorable, prestigious source cultures for translation import, as opposed to politically non favorable source cultures. It will provide a sketch portrait of the translators involved. Since the process was not undertaken under any formal censorship, the paper will conclude with thoughts on the role of norms and self-censorship in the formation of a new national culture.

### ***When Innovation and Nationalism Clash***

Innovation is a basic need in any cultural sector that does not want to face stagnation. It is obviously the basic need of a culture in the process of revival. But what if this notion of innovation clashes, not with the reactionary opposition, but with innovative tendencies which do not seem to fit in with the dominating ideology? Who will have the upper hand? For how long? When will a change begin to occur?

This paper will be an attempt to provide answers to these questions with the help of one extreme example, that of the revival of Hebrew culture; many other models of national identities in formation could serve as well. Covering such a large scope means, of course, that this will be no more than a general outline. Yet the large scope is necessary in order to form some theoretical conclusions.

The story of the Hebrew revolution, where, in Harshav's words "a whole people moved away from its place and its language" (Harshav 1988, 7-31), forgetting the old and adopting the new, is often described in terms of innovation only: a passage to a new

world. It was however, full of internal clashes and self-defeating tendencies. One of them is the clash between national feelings, i.e. the creation of the new identity, and the rejection of undesirable innovations. In other words, within the cluster, or clusters, of innovation offered by this revolutionary process, some were adopted and some gradually rejected.

The history of the rebirth of Hebrew culture is **a-normal** by definition, since it started after centuries in which the "dormant" Hebrew language did not serve as anybody's mother-tongue. This rebirth involved three main stages: a stormy burst of enthusiasm in the Enlightenment (the late 18<sup>th</sup> century), a gradual awakening during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by the frustrating realization that an updating of the language was vital, and a "second birth" in the 1880 and on, when the first wave of immigrants arrived in Eretz Yisrael (then under Ottoman rule). The gradual shift of cultural centers and culture shapers to Eretz Yisrael occurred mainly in the 1930s.

Generally speaking one may say that the first stage advocated use of Biblical Hebrew only, rejecting the Rabbinical and Talmudic strata as remnant of the Ghetto. The second and third stages acknowledged the need for all sources and layers of old and ancient Hebrew. Then began what is usually considered the miraculous revival of language and literature in modern Hebrew. Again, risking coarse generalizations, this paper will describe its main characteristics.

There was no doubt, from the onset on, that no revival was possible without the use of foreign literatures as models, and the use of translation as a language laboratory (Tury 1987; Z. Shavit 1998). Translating literature would serve as a source for models and genres, but at the same time as a way of developing the ancient language inventing new terms, reviving old ones, transcribing foreign terms; translated literature, and Hebrew literature that would follow, would also serve as means of teaching the language to new generations of speakers. The main task therefore lay on the shoulders of writers, translators, teachers and educators.

When we come to sketch the portrait of the early translator, **the main point to make would then be: they were men of letters, poets, authors.** The greater the author, the greater the authority he would have in imposing new repertoires, linguistic and/or literary. In fact, from the onset on, great writers not only did not consider translation "below" them, but took pride in translating. The greatest names connected with the revival of the language were famous writers, poets and journalists: Frishman, Bialik, Ben-Yehuda, Shlonsky, Ratosh, Dvora Baron, Lea Goldberg. This holds true for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only gradually did these literary personalities give way to professional translators who had little or no aspiration as writers.

**The second point** to be made in connection with the portrait of the early translators was **their ideological** mobilization. These culture-shapers were penetrated with the strongest motivation, a realization that they were undertaking a "historic" task, if not a "holy" one, that theirs was nothing short of a mission.

Their **third characteristic**, emanating from these first two, was their function as **innovators**. Innovation was both a goal and a necessity, in this cultural revival. Innovation in terms of lexicon, in terms of literary language, in terms of genres, repertoires – it was all new. They were the decision makers, the editors, sometimes the publishers, when serving as editors of the main literary organs.

A **by-product** of these characteristics was the fact that they took **liberties** in translation; they possessed what Bourdieu called "la griffe", the power to consecrate that went with their name, their reputation and their authority (Bourdieu 1980, 197).

As a consequence, they did not deem it necessary to translate from the source language, but often used **mediating languages**. The national poet Bialik did not know a word of Spanish, a fact that did not prevent him from writing his well-known translation of Don Quixote, which immediately became a classic. The famous poet and translator Avraham Shlonsky, who got a well-deserved prize for his translations of Shakespeare, hardly knew any English at all. He did brilliant translations via the Russian, with occasional glances at the German translations.

Another result of this a-normal interlacing development of the literature and the language was that for a very long period of time **written Hebrew**, of a very high stylistic register prevailed. One must bear in mind that one of the functions of literature was, in the early Enlightenment period, a didactic one, namely teaching Hebrew. Spoken Hebrew did not penetrate into literary dialogues till well after the 1960s. Slang took even longer to be introduced into literary texts, and very old-fashioned collocations prevailed till late in the 1970s (Weisbrod 1999).

This literary awakening cannot be described apart from the whole cultural process, for it was **part of the Zionist revolution**. Nationalism, patriotism were the key-words. A new identity had to be formed, that of the New Hebrew, as opposed to the Old Jew, supposedly effeminate and hysterical. Theories like that of Otto Weininger, which classified Jews and women as inferior creatures, incapable of cultural sublimation, took root not only among non-Jews, but among Jews too, in a way that could be described as self-hatred. The New Hebrew, much as the German "Wandervogel" youth-movement model dictated, was a gymnastics-enthusiast and a nature lover (Mosse 1981, 116). He had to *know* his motherland, almost in the Biblical sense, to "conquer" every yard with his feet. Literature was mobilized, or to be more precise, felt mobilized, to enhance this image and give prescriptions of what this New Hebrew should be like. Translated literature did its best to join in this mobilization in the following ways:

1. The **choice of source cultures**. Due to historical reasons, German and Russian literatures prevailed for a long time as the most prestigious and desirable source cultures. Changes began to occur after World War II, when German literature lost its status, and after the disillusionment with Stalin, when Russian literature suffered a heavy loss of prestige.

2. The **choice of genres**. In the process of forming a new identity non-fiction had a predominant function. However, it smacked of indoctrination and did not reach the general public as naturally as fiction. Lighter genres were needed to reach women and children as well.

For a long time, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the novel was considered a cheap genre, and when accepted, there was a marked preference for the **historical novel**. Though there were no servants in the emerging culture, romance was considered "for servants", detective novels were a waste of time, and erotic or pornographic novels were bad taste, reserved for new immigrants, not for the real Sabra.

3. The **choice of themes**

**Classical masterpieces** were of course the most translated. They were considered "safe", although even here the source culture would be carefully chosen according to

the usual criteria of prestige and ideological relevance. Yet innovation cannot rely on classical repertoires only, and new sources for models had to be carefully selected.

**Modern literature:** A glance at the lists of modern books published in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals a limited choice of themes, dictated by ideological criteria. So do the announcements made by publishers at the time. Here are some favorite themes: **Heroic themes**, i.e., heroic survival of an individual. After the two world war the focus turned to heroic survival of refugees, heroic survival of orphans (*Sans Famille* by Hector Malo could be a typical example, but also *Tarzan*); heroic battles of Few against Many (Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*).

**Life in nature**, glorification of nature, simple, pure life away from the evils of the city (Yohana Spiri's *Heidie*); survival in nature; **nature in conflict with culture**. Conquest of the Wild West served both as a model for pioneering and, somewhat paradoxically, as a model for bravery surviving the harshness of nature. The "savage" – the Bedouin Sheik, the fearsome Indian in Fennimore Cooper stories, could be used as a prototype for a people one with their surrounding.

**Patriotism** (*The Heart*, by Edmondo d'Amicis)

**Realistic, socialistic** novels – Obviously the Russians, Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, but also Italians – Ignazio Silone, Alberto Moravia; Scandinavian - *Hunger* by Knut Hamson.

**National themes**: first and foremost- there was a rejection of the "I" in favor of the community. Personal poetry or prose was undesirable. Symbolist poets, who wanted to write according to models imported from France, for instance, had to give in to the mobilized poetry of the National (Gertz 1988, 275, 84-85, 108-110).

**Historical novels** – carefully selected as to periods. Pogroms and dark ages were not desirable. Heroic periods, on the other hands, were introduced into the national ethos.

**Masculine themes** – the Sabra and his rejection of his father's generation were on the agenda for many years. Women had to adapt and write "like men" or they could not be published. Even when, in the late 1950s and early 1960s a de-idealization occurred in the central literature, and it began to shake off its didactic functions, it continued to express the dilemmas of the Sabra and remained basically male as well as elitist (Schwartz 1995).

On the other hand, culture shapers showed a marked aversion to "improper" themes and genres. The most obvious example would be feminine literature and non-canonic literature. Every wave of **Feminism**, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, would be rejected, mostly under the (false) claim that Israeli women were equal and free.

**"Pulp" fiction** had no place in a culture designed to build a new moral identity. It was left for the negative "other", to better characterize the "self".

Not that there were no **silent side tracks**, or subversive side streams. Non-Zionist literature was written and translated, as was literature by women, or, much later, "gay" literature. American cheap novels were translated by small marginal publishers, especially after World War II. But the mainstream did not acknowledge these side-streams until well into the 1970s.

Pulp literature was written and translated, mostly **pseudo-translated**, to gain some kind of legitimization, but it was published in unknown popular Printing Houses, translated by "professional amateurs", if I can coin this self-contradictory term. It was sold in kiosks and second-hand book stalls, and hardly got any reaction from the press, the critics, or the establishment. It was not acknowledged by the many readers, for that matter, because they would not admit to having read them.

Officially, there was no censorship of books. No list of forbidden books. Unofficially, every publisher, every writer, every translator was well aware of what was proper and

what was not. In the mid 1960s, the Ministry of Education formed a **voluntary** body, headed by Dr. Melkman-Michman that offered to read "problematic" texts and decide whether or not to publish them. Publishers cooperated voluntarily, although this endeavor had no legal standing. But mainstream publisher had no ground for fear of "smut": writers, translators, editors who worked for them **refrained** from writing/translating improper stuff.

Let me give you an example of a policy that seemed to be innovative, but led to conservative results. The new approach to **sexual knowledge** demanded openness, a direct scientific no-nonsense approach. Part of it was due to norms brought over from the Russian **Bolshevik** revolution that advocated freedom of sex as well as equal rights for the two sexes. The need for "the right kind of" sexual guides arose, so as to keep eroticism and sex under control (Foucault 1976, 39, 72-73). It was necessary in an immigrant society, especially in the years after 1948, when many immigrants from Arabic countries started to stream in. Nevertheless, the task of translating sex encyclopedias and guides was not put into the hands of the well-known poets and authors – these were in fact puritans who had an inborn and ideological aversion to the topic. It was left to amateurs (doctors, pedagogues or other "professionals") who fought their way across Latin and German terminology, trying as well as they could to produce a Hebrew equivalent for the heavy Freudian phraseology. Since no other sexual literature was produced (other than the cheap pulp fiction in the periphery), the Hebrew language suffered, and still suffers, from a lack of a modern erotic vocabulary. The modern Hebrew writer who wants to write an intimate love or sex scene has, at his disposal, either **pseudo-medical terms** or **foreign slang** ones. The first are too clinical, the second - too dirty. My research taught me that this was the fate of many ex-Communist cultures: China after the Cultural Revolution, for instance, suffered from the same lacunae in erotic repertoire. It was not, however the fate of other puritan societies, who had a rich undercurrent of previous erotica to fall back on. In a culture where the previous erotic repertoire (such as it was) was in the Bible, and more "recent" attempts were made in Middle-Age Spain, this counter-innovation Puritanism had far-reaching effects.

#### 4. The **choice of language**

Although the strong need to teach Hebrew via literature and use translation as language labs dissipated with time, and although the Hebrew language no longer needed the mobilized support of literature, it took generations for the prevalence of high literary language to dissipate. In the process of rejecting popular literature, especially of the romantic or erotic genres, whole strata of the language remained fossilized. It took a revolutionary eruption of women's literature in the 80s and 90s to freshen up the repertory of love and erotica, yet it still suffers from long years of neglect.

**The result** of long years of mobilized translations is even more crucial in that there may not be previous models to fall back on, when mobilized literature gives way to normalization.

What general conclusions could be drawn from this particular case?

- a. That, as Even-Zohar pointed out, in times of growth or crisis, translated literature has a primary role to play (Even-Zohar 1990, 69).
- b. That in those times it can dictate norms, both primary and operational. It can be bold and take liberties. It can afford to be subversive. It can choose to introduce innovations, even those unacceptable by the mainstream original literary system.

- c. That when various forms of censorship imposed from above dictate norms, rules and laws, translation has the option of playing a subversive role. On the other hand, when self-censorship is imposed from within, it is much harder to oppose (Ben-Ari 2000).
- d. That when well-known authors or poets, as part of the culture shapers, have the upper hand, they may introduce innovations, if it fits in with their ideology. They may also give way to the national agenda, as was the case of poets who had to subdue their desire to write or translate personal symbolist poetry, where the "I" was the center. They may, on the other hand, impose "negatively" viewed innovations on the image of the *other*.
- e. That no matter how small the group of translators/culture shapers, or how big the silent majority, when mobilization starts from within and takes the form of self-censorship, numbers are meaningless.
- f. That in "normal" periods translated literature would follow the dictates of original literature. This does not mean that in the so-called normal periods ideological norms do not intervene. They may be "played down", they may be self-imposed. But the power game always pulls one way or another. Moreover, translation is one of the most powerful vehicles of manipulation, **especially in normal times**, for there is no reason to suspect that texts had been manipulated. The tension between "pure" literary translation norms and ideological demands is always present, even if it lurks in the background or hides underground. What is normalization, then? In liberal countries it is the delicate balance between ideological dictates and literary, esthetic, artistic, cultural needs. In other words, normalization is the stage where **several** ideological norms may **co-exist**, and where they are so fully **incorporated** into the culture that they become practically invisible.

In all, from a repertory of (clusters of) innovations offered as a starting point, the shaping of a new cultural/national identity may proceed to select and crystallize the more "commendable" items, all the while eliminating undesirable elements, which may gradually be marginalized and/or transposed to the *other*.

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