Review Essay

Klal Yisroel LITERATURE OR VARIOUS NATIONAL JEWISH LITERATURES?: TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

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Whereas Dan Miron is concerned with uncovering the common ground of various modern Jewish literatures, predominantly those of Eastern Europe, Andrew Furman devotes himself to Jewish-American fiction. In the final essay of his book, Miron delineates and discusses at some length the Hebrew critic Dov Sadan’s concept of a dialectical continuity of a unified modern Jewish culture. Since this theory illustrates the different angles from which Miron and Furman interpret Jewish literature, it is a good place to start. I will do so – albeit in a simplified form, not taking into account its historical dimensions.

Sadan developed a graph shaped like a Star of David, consisting of two triangles, i.e., the language triangle and the ideological trend triangle. The first points in three linguistic directions: the Hebrew language, the Yiddish-diaspora-language, and the direction of non-Jewish languages. The second points in three ideological directions: the traditional rabbinic, the Hasidic, and the secular-humanistic. Whereas Miron is mostly concerned with Yiddish diaspora language and the Hasidic, and to some extent also with Hebrew language and the secular-humanistic
strain in Judaism, Furman focuses on the last in conjunction with its expression in non-Jewish languages. Therefore, all writers whom the two critics mention somehow belong to *klal yisroel* (all-inclusive Jewish) literature, but their way of writing, their interpretation of the world, and their didactic aims are as different as can be. So, what does this mean for readers? Should we look for a common denominator? And if we are able to find one, will it reveal something profound about the concept of Jewish identity, which encompasses – ideally – all six elements of Sadan’s points? This question and some convincing and thought-provoking answers Furman and Miron come up with definitely make reading their books worthwhile, even if one is not a lover of nostalgic shtetl literature or Philip Roth’s complaints.

Throughout Furman’s book, the reader gets the impression that he himself is still very much trying to find his own place in life as someone who loves to read Jewish-American literature and, above all, “dares” to demand a place for it in American university curricula. This impression is fostered by autobiographical anecdotes that keep cropping up; by a (thoughtfully selected) reading list of contemporary Jewish American fiction at the back of the book; and, above all, by his introduction. By and large, the last laments that multiculturalists in America are increasingly ignoring the Jewish voice. To Furman’s mind, the main reason for this is that the second or third post-Holocaust generation of American Jews does not suffer enough, and that consequently, their writing does not portray suffering like that of the Tamils or boat people, for example. Since nowadays Jewish Americans lack the quality of “victimhood,” they are pushed aside. But are writers like Thane Rosenbaum, whom Furman discusses in his fourth chapter and who recreates the horrors of the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of second-generation children, taking a step back in the right direction? Will we still have to listen to “the ghosts” of Holocaust victims if we do not want “Jewish continuity” to be lost? Can narratives about horrors which we did not experience first-hand but only know from the tales of our elders create a strong sense of community? Furman does not answer these questions definitely, so that the reader has to ask himself critically whether today it still makes sense to build one’s own postmodern American-Jewish identity upon an event in the European past.

The writer Melvin James Bukiet for his part, analyzed in Furman’s third chapter, devotes his novels to religious themes, especially to that of redemption. Furman concludes approvingly that Bukiet thus tries to stem the spiritual descent of Judaism after the Holocaust. Chapter Six, on Robert Cohen, is similar; here, Furman stresses Cohen’s historical and