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**Song of the Nerves:**

**On Yosef Haim Brenner's Poetics of Melancholy**

**Abstract Submitted for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy**

**By**

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**Abstract**

The present dissertation addresses the literary work of Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921). It seeks to place the linguistic form of Brenner’s work in the context of its unique, melancholic nature.

This nature, although a well-known characteristic of Brenner's literature,[[1]](#footnote-1) is examined anew as an affect of his poetics. The same melancholic thematology that shapes his prose, I show, finds singular expression in its syntax.

I argue that Brenner formed melancholy into a verbal poetic expression that amounts, in effect, to a poetic method. Brenner honed that method into a modernistic form – a secular lamentation. Understanding the melancholic language as a method of artistic expression will illuminate Brenner's place in the history of Hebrew literature, as well as his decisive role in the rise of the "Holy Language" in modern Hebrew literature at the turn of the century.

In this dissertation, I derive my understanding of the term "melancholic language" from the linguistic theory Walter Benjamin introduces in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916):

What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language. […] Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is

language itself. The answer to the question "*what* does language communicate?" is therefore "all language communicate itself." […] for in language the situation is this: *the linguistic being of all things is their language*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Following Benjamin, I argue that melancholy is a “mental being,” felt and apprehended, which communicates itself in melancholy language. I examine Brenner's melancholic literature, therefore, as an expression of melancholy; melancholy communicating itself as both existential mode and poetic utterance. Benjamin, as mentioned, claims that the “mental being” is communicated *in* the language and not *through* it – that is, the medium, the form of expression and representation generates the identicalness, the so-called reliable imitation, to whatever folds in the emotions and reveals itself in the same mode of expression.

In our case, Brenner's writing becomes melancholy in order to express melancholy; the ability to overcome the feeling lies within the ability to express it.

This argument brings us to the gates of literature, the art of linguistic expression.

Brenner's melancholy poetics can be read as a modern modification of long and complex system of representations, in which melancholy finds its utterance in literature and literature utters itself as melancholy: the text as sadness and sadness as text. By invoking the term melancholy, we name an aspect or motif that under one name or another – "tragic" (Megged, 1972); "absurd" (Sagi, 2007); "self-flagellation" (Kurzweil, 1972) and so on – features in almost every discussion of Brenner’s writing. Yet I intend to extract the term from its limited context, as a psychological expression of a cultural shock, and present it as a poetic assembly of abilities. I strive

here to deconstruct the represented world in both the text and the representing medium itself, i.e. the literary text.

My examination of this complex assembly of expressions and images brings to light a paradigm of an essential human experience--an existential experience that lies beyond language. That experience is made manifest in the body, is grasped by the senses and felt in the psyche. To address melancholy as a state of mind, being felt in the living body, is necessarily to raise the question: how does one write emotions? This question goes to the nature of literature and its connection to human experience, as a human need. As such, the question bears relevance to Brenner's time and place, as a writer in the rejuvenation period – and to the meaning of Hebrew melancholic literature to Hebrew readers. Brenner's melancholic language therefore presents melancholy as a universal human essence even as it underscores its Hebraic uniqueness.

Let us widen this point. A reading into the world of emotions represented in literature is a reading of affect.[[3]](#footnote-3) The examination of affects and emotions as textual phenomena is far from obvious. Emotions are complex mental phenomena, intermixed with multiple conditions and mental strata situated in dynamic cognitive spheres.[[4]](#footnote-4) The first and crucial problem the affect presents when considered as a literary tool is the difficulty to define it and recognize it in the text. To search for the affects of a literary text is to declare that we are entering a dimension of the text which compels us to be guided by our own intuitions and feelings; aspects that are not

easily subject to proof or disproof. In addition, most current research into affects and emotions belongs to the cognitive or neurological fields. Although today the basic assumption of the complexity of the human mind demands an interdisciplinary approach, it was only recently, as Patrick Hogan notes, that literary and linguistic art forms were added to these disciplines.[[5]](#footnote-5) Since the poetics of melancholy are also poetics of extreme emotions, the poetics of melancholy affects, we must pose a fundamental question: how can we examine the affects of a literary text?

Hogan, a literary theorist at the University of Connecticut, claims that the research of emotions should not overlook the literary field, given the intimate connection between literature and emotions. The history of literature—and the lines of every literary text—offers a wealth of data which begs interpretation. According to Hogan, both literary and neuro-psychological research yield tangible results: as far as emotions go, the interpretation offered by the literary critic is no different from the one offered by the scientist. In literature, emotions undergo a process of encoding and representation, and it is to this process the literary critic ascribes meaning.[[6]](#footnote-6) This meaning is in turn translated into knowledge and later forms a theory. But in order to locate and identify a literary emotion’s code and representation, we must first define what emotion is.

This question, which has haunted philosophers and psychologists for ages, is discussed in Aaron Ben Ziv's article: "The Thing Called Emotion."[[7]](#footnote-7) Ben Ziv tries to capture the subtleties of the subject through a typical description and definition of emotions as a mental state. He concludes that emotion should be portrayed according to its characteristics: instability, temporality, incompleteness, and relativity. It consists

of cognition, evaluation, motivation and feelings, each of which is subjected to variants such as relevance and intensity. In short, it is the most complex and dynamic of all mental states. Ben Ziv's definition might appear at first glance as vague. Yet it provides a framework, if not to understand what emotion is, then to recognize its appearance, its occurrence.[[8]](#footnote-8) As far as literary research goes, his definition helps us understand emotions as a vibration, a pulse, a momentary acceleration or deceleration, an event that may take place on every representation level of a text.

In his essay "An Author's Reveries" (1908), Brenner characterized his prose as "merely impressionistic";[[9]](#footnote-9) i.e. his work absorbs and emits impressions of emotions. An appropriate way to read this kind of literature, I argue, will be sensitive to the vibrations, pulses, and moments of acceleration or deterioration that mark the occurrence of an emotional event. The origin of all these affects is in the living body, but we will regard the body of the text. Alongside the physical and mental conditions of the characters acting in it, we will point the material value of the words that construct it – their aural and graphic qualities.

That same felt, present, literary affect, which occurs thanks to the singular shape of Brenner's texts, the syntax his prose fashions and transforms into emotions, is nought but melancholy.

This dissertation reads Brenner's major works – *In Winter* (1904); *Around the Point* (1905); *Nerves* (1910); *From Here and There* (1911); *Breakdown & Bereavement* (1920) - in a chronological order in order to show the development of the discussed themes. I find in these works Brenner's unique way of translating the tradition sedimented in the Hebrew language into a modern form – from religious tropes osorrow to secular ones; from ancient crises (the condition of exile) to the modern experience of absurdity and dislocation. I show how Brenner, as a modern Hebrew author, took upon himself an ancient poetic-social role, and gave it a new meaning. He became a singer of lament.

1. Baruch Kurzweil opens his essay "On the Essence of Suffering and Life in the Stories of Y. H. Brenner" with the following claim: "the thematical starting point of Brenner's stories is the suffering of men in general and the suffering of Jews in particular." (In: Baruch Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, Jerusalem & Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1966.) And in a contemporary essay, Shmuel Schneider writes: "it is a well-known fact, indeed, a well-known ‘truth’ in Brenner's research, that the theme of pain and suffering – on its reflections and bifurcations – is according to many, the one and only theme of his writings, fiction and non-fiction alike." (In: Shmuel Schneider, *Existence and Memory*, Jerusalem: Carmel, 2010, p. 169.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* vol. 1, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Cambridge & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a book dedicated to the Hebrew author Israel Zarchi, Nitzan Lebovic claims that like Brenner (and S.Y. Agnon) Zarchi did not distinguish between the fictional and the documentary, or between the mythic and the realistic. In illustrating the gap between messianic expectations and reality, Lebovic says, Zarchi imitated the melancholic model of his predecessors. Unlike Brenner, however, for Zarchi "the metonymy of failure is not limited to the main characters and their inability to separate fiction from reality, but spreads and engulfs the language of the narrator himself as his affect language." (*The Short Life of Israel Zarchi: A Melancholic Zionist*", Jerusalem, Carmel, 2015, p. 154). In this dissertation, I dissent from Lebovic's claim, and argue that Brenner’s shattered, "bad" language is in fact a language of affect, singular to his poetics. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Goldie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us About Emotions,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Aaron Ben Ziv, "The Thing Called Emotion"*, The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotions*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yosef Haim Brenner, *Writings*, vol. 3, Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1977, pp. 270-289. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)