

INTRODUCTION

When Dvora Baron, the first modern Hebrew woman writer, died in 1956 at the age of sixty-nine, she had not left her Tel Aviv apartment for thirty-three years. During the last twenty years, she was virtually confined to her bed, attended by her only daughter, Tsipora. She continued to write and translate, producing numerous stories as well as the definitive Hebrew translation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The circumstances of this self-imposed seclusion, and the part her daughter took in it, have never been fully established: there were health problems, for which she followed a strict dietary regimen of her own devising, resisting medical intervention; but Baron also implied that she was mourning the death of her brother, Benjamin, in the First World War. That Tsipora never attended school or made her own circle of friends, devoting herself completely to her mother, only deepens the mystery.

It is clear, though, that Baron's withdrawal from the society burgeoning all around her provided the space for a bold literary

self-fashioning. In the winter of 1910–11 a combination of personal tragedy and Zionist passions had brought her to Palestine and the very center of the local Hebrew culture, as the literary editor of a Zionist-Socialist magazine. But the realities of pioneer life did not engage her for very long, least of all as a writer: she gradually turned inward, in her life and work. Baron spent the second half of her career as she had spent the first, writing and rewriting stories that were primarily drawn from the world of the Eastern European shtetl, the world of her childhood and adolescence. This was a preference little to the taste of her readers, who demanded literature that reflected the new society coming into being in Palestine. Like others of her generation, Baron had uprooted herself in the most dramatic way; her readers could not understand how she had then resisted, for the most part, moving her literary universe as well. Even the critics, who always acknowledged her gift for Hebrew prose, came to consider Baron somewhat old-fashioned, a “minor” writer who limited her repertoire to such insignificant themes as birth and death, marriage and divorce, rather than focusing on “important” matters, that is, the great national questions of the day. It was taken as a matter of course—against all evidence—that the eighty or so stories Baron published were more or less straightforward autobiographical “portraits.” It didn’t help that she wrote only one longer piece, a novella called “Exiles”: short stories about the shtetl were not the stuff of literary nation building.

By contrast, when Baron first emerged on the Eastern European Hebrew literary scene in 1902, when she was just fourteen, her work created an immediate sensation, not only because of the author’s youth but also because of her gender—until

Baron, Hebrew literature had been, as far as its readers knew, a strictly male province. Critics and fellow writers alike hailed the arrival of a major talent. Even readers who hadn't managed to get hold of the Hebrew journals in which Baron's first stories were published were fascinated by the rumors circulating about the existence of a Hebrew writer who was a rabbi's daughter: an early reader remembers her excitement at finding an issue with a story by Baron, describing how all her friends clamored to see it and devoured every word. One writer, eager to see the literary phenomenon with his own eyes, made a special trip to her shtetl. The story goes:

As he came into town, Dvora Baron was standing barefoot at the well, vigorously washing the dishes. "Hey, little girl," the man approached her, "Can you tell me where the Baron family lives?" She pointed out the house. A few minutes later, her brother called to her excitedly: "Dvorka, it's you they came to see."

But the very precocity of Baron's work also aroused scandal: a few editors doubted that a nice Jewish girl could have written stories like these, suggesting that it must be a man hiding behind a female pen name (a common enough practice in Yiddish letters of the time); a few years later Baron's fiancé broke off their engagement, suspicious of the chastity of a young woman who could write so knowingly about love, and even sex. That a body of work can go from being too daring to being old-fashioned, without much changing its own course, tells us something about both the vagaries of literary taste and the paradoxical pulls within Baron's life and work.

It took a minor revolution in Israeli culture to bring Dvora

Baron back to the Hebrew reading public, a revolution signaled and aided by Nurit Govrin's rediscovery and publication in 1988 of Baron's early uncollected stories in Hebrew and Yiddish and by Amia Lieblich's publication, in 1991, of a biography of the author (issued in English translation in 1997 as *Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer*, the companion to this volume). Given the fervently Hebraist scene in which Baron wrote, it is not surprising that Baron's early Yiddish stories were not generally known before the appearance of Govrin's book. The renewed interest in Baron is part of a larger cultural shift, marked by a growing appreciation for Yiddish and the Eastern European past; in this context, Baron's literary world embodies a dimension of diasporic Judaism to which Israeli culture has only recently become more open. In an age when feminism has made some inroads, Baron's work can be valued for presenting the shtetl world from a perspective to which Hebrew and Yiddish literature rarely gave voice before—that of the Jewish woman, and of other disenfranchised members of the community. Baron's stories also reveal the author as a self-conscious participant in international modernism, continually experimenting with shifts in voice and perspective and inventing a complex expressive syntax in the service of her art. It is the modernist, feminist Dvora Baron that this translation has attempted to introduce to an English-speaking audience.

Dvora Baron was born in 1887, in the small Lithuanian town of Ouzda, where her father was serving as rabbi. She was her father's favorite, and he personally educated her. She left home at the age of fifteen—with her parents' blessing!—to acquire a secular education in Minsk and Kovno, working as a tutor

and establishing her reputation as a Hebrew and Yiddish writer. Whereas a number of women had overcome the odds and written in Hebrew before her, Baron was the first woman to make a career for herself as a Hebrew writer. In 1910, after her father died, her shtetl was destroyed in a pogrom, and her long engagement to the Hebrew writer Moshe Ben Eliezer ended, she immigrated to Palestine. There she met and married Yosef Aharonovich, a prominent Zionist activist and the editor-in-chief of *The Young Worker*, where Baron also held a position on the editorial staff. Shortly after their daughter's birth in 1914, Yosef and Dvora were exiled to Egypt by the Ottoman authorities along with hundreds of others and allowed to return to Palestine only at the end of World War I. In 1922, both of them resigned their positions at the magazine and Baron began her long seclusion from the larger world, cared for by her daughter until her death. In her last thirty-three years, she did not set foot outside her apartment, not even to attend her husband's 1937 funeral. Tsipora, who never married or had children, died in 1971.

If Baron was exceptional, it was, first of all, in being the child of a rabbi who defied convention when it came to educating his gifted daughter. Girls in Baron's milieu were kept from acquiring an education in Hebrew texts, the core of a traditional Jewish education. At most, they were taught to read the Hebrew alphabet (which was also used to write Yiddish); the Jewish woman's library was limited to Yiddish Bible translations and prayer books. Baron's father, however, ensured that his daughter would learn the biblical and rabbinic sources, allowing Dvora to attend the classes he held in the town synagogue for boys while she sat behind the partition in the

“women’s section.” Acquiring a traditional education, it should be noted, was the only way to become a Hebrew writer in Baron’s day, when Hebrew had not yet become a vernacular. Baron’s work, with its dense layers of allusion, demonstrates how thoroughly she absorbed these sources. Nevertheless, the fact that she had been given only qualified access to the community of scholars complicated her place in the world of Hebrew letters: sitting alone in the women’s section, she was physically and intellectually isolated from the worlds of both women and men.

However remarkable the image of the young girl studying Torah behind the partition, it never found direct expression in Baron’s stories. The closest the writer came to describing that experience is perhaps in “Deserted Wife,” the last section of which describes a preacher’s sermon from the perspective of an uneducated woman sitting behind the synagogue partition; the story makes an implicit case for the power of a woman’s “misunderstanding” of rabbinic discourse, of her literalism in understanding the sermon’s allegorical description of Israel as God’s abandoned bride. Indirectly, though, Baron’s curious position on both sides of the synagogue divide shapes her work everywhere. She uses an erudite, incisive Hebrew prose to portray characters whose class and gender would never have allowed them access to the knowledge she had (or the social status it conferred). Her early, uncollected Hebrew and Yiddish stories are particularly forthright in their critique of traditional Jewish culture: “Sister,” for instance, is a bitter indictment of a family’s disappointment over the birth of yet another daughter. Some of Baron’s concerns seem remarkably contemporary: “Kadish,” first published in a Hebrew version in 1908 and in Yid-

dish two years later, involves a young girl's determination to say kaddish for her grandfather, a ritual reserved for male offspring; this very struggle later came to occupy the center of American Jewish feminist activism. "Burying the Books" transposes the struggle for gender equality to the sexually segregated world of the Jewish sources; the young narrator fights to have her mother's damaged *tkhine*, a Yiddish prayer collection for women, ritually buried alongside the damaged Hebrew books.

Baron may have felt that some of these early stories were too nakedly angry; in any case, she resisted including them in the various collections she published beginning in 1927, calling them "rags" (the very term of denigration used against the mother's *tkhine* that "Burying the Books" criticizes). Themes from the early stories sometimes resurface in the later collection; but while Baron's critical voice tends to be muted in this later work, her subversive wit still comes across, if more subtly and ironically. It is now the structure of the stories, their allusions and shifts in perspective, that carry the critical force, rather than direct pronouncements by the narrator or characters. "In the Beginning," for instance, by echoing Genesis (in Hebrew, the biblical book is called "In the Beginning," after its first word) makes the largest possible claim for its author's ambition: to do no less than reimagine the Bible, this time with a woman at center stage. The allusion goes further than the title: "In the Beginning" echoes the double creation narrative in Genesis—the narrator begins her story by describing the first horrified reaction of the urbane rebbetzin, the rabbi's wife, to the squalid shtetl in which she will be living and then stops herself short to begin the story again, "in a more appropriate version," by talking about the crucial event, the arrival of the new rabbi,

with the wife now kept properly in the background. We hope it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the truncated opening might echo the self-censorship that directly preceded the publication of this story.

It would be reductive to see Baron's stories, even the early ones, as motivated solely by a feminist or, more generally, by an ideological critique of traditional Jewish society. She is, first of all, a prose writer of many styles. Baron has been credited with refining modern Hebrew literature through the exquisitely detailed realism typical of her later, better-known work. Largely overlooked have been her early stories, in which high-modernist surrealism combines with an artful manipulation of such popular genres as the gothic and the fairy tale to explore the psychosexual depths of human relations in a traditional culture. A story like "Kaddish," for instance, cannot be reduced to a battle cry for women's right to memorialize their dead: rebellion and pious love are curiously intermingled in the girl's mourning, and the suggestion of incestuous attraction between the girl and her grandfather further complicates the matter. The story ultimately invokes the tensions inherent in the relations between the sexes, the generations, even the living and the dead. Elsewhere, Baron pioneers a sexual (rather than historical or economic) exploration of Jewish-gentile relations, in the case of "Liska," through the figure of a "Jewish" dog.

Perhaps Baron is most appreciated today for her ability to present without sentimentality a world that no longer exists, in all of its singularity and nuance. In Baron's stories, place acquires the weight and dimensions of plot and character. Her work shows us a shtetl that is class-ridden and full of human

complications, a shtetl that includes the gentile street (often obscured in other Jewish writings)—Baron never succumbs to the nostalgic fantasy of a lost unity, the form in which many American readers will have encountered this world. What we experience in these stories is not a composite portrait of life in Jewish Eastern Europe but rather the materiality of a single remote Lithuanian town, the smell of each season, the texture of fur jackets and tattered caftans, of rough bark and steaming hot potatoes. The shtetl, in these stories, emerges anew with its intricacy and tensions intact.

This book presents eighteen (a felicitous Jewish number) of the eighty or so stories Baron published in her lifetime. Nine of these are from the earlier work, and another nine from the later, post-1927 collections. The first section presents the better-known, “mature” Baron, starting in quasi-biblical order with “In the Beginning” and “The First Day.” The second section of the book presents the best of her early work; our placing them after the later stories reflects Baron’s own sense that her early writing was marginal to her work as a whole. These stories are important not only for their historical value, as artifacts of a radical young writer or evidence of early talent; some of these stories are as well crafted and powerful as anything in Baron’s collections, and many of them, moreover, attest to the writer’s stylistic affiliations with the early modernist prose of this century. Most of the stories in both sections come from her Hebrew corpus; in three instances we translated a Yiddish story, or a Yiddish version of a story that also has a Hebrew version (noting the Yiddish original at the end of the story). Where

versions of stories exist in both languages, on rare occasions we took the liberty of choosing an apt phrase from the version in the alternative language.

Dvora Baron's style is both fluid and intricate, pushing the flexibility of Hebrew or Yiddish syntax to its very limits. Her stylistic toolbox is enormous, ranging from virtuoso passages that capture the shifting movement of the eye or the disturbances of a half-conscious mind to the rough rhythms of colloquial speech. Baron's work, early and late, is also highly allusive, reflecting the author's profound knowledge of both biblical and rabbinic literature. This allusiveness operates on the broadest levels (entire short-story collections echoing Genesis, for instance) and in specific words and phrases, often to ironic, or even iconoclastic, effect. Baron uses mock-epic allusion, for instance, to describe the gentile postman of a village abandoned by all its Jewish men as the shtetl's King Saul, "towering head and shoulders above the crowd" of Jewish women. Hebrew sources are, of course, the basic material for Baron's writing, as they were for her peers, but there is nothing automatic or "learned" about Baron's gestures toward these texts: Baron's characters live both very close to the Bible and at a sometimes comic distance from it. There are moments when her narrator comments on the two worlds her characters inhabit: "In the Beginning" juxtaposes the parched heat in the background of the weekly Torah portions with the muddy Eastern European autumn and frozen winter when these portions are being read, capturing both the proximity and distance between the Bible and those shtetl folk who live, unnaturally, by its refracted light.

Our major challenge in translating Baron was to capture the

impressionistic syntax, the reversals, interjections, and shifts and render them in idiomatic English prose. We also tried to register her allusiveness as often as possible, quoting from recent translations of the Bible, for their readability, combined, at times, with the King James version, for its usefulness in signaling the “biblical” flavor of the Hebrew to English readers. We kept the original Hebrew or Yiddish in the case of those words that might be familiar to the English reader; at the very least, these words help to signal the foreignness of the milieu Baron depicts. For readers unfamiliar with these terms, we have provided a brief glossary at the back of the book.

Because Baron’s work is rich in ethnographic detail, we debated the question of footnotes, finally deciding that they would lend an academic air that belied the vibrancy of her writing. In the case of unfamiliar objects, customs, or rituals, of which Baron’s work could fairly serve as a compendium, we either trusted the context to convey something of what was meant or inserted a short explanatory phrase in the text itself—unobtrusively, we hope. If these stories are nevertheless wondrous and strange, we would not have wished it otherwise.

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