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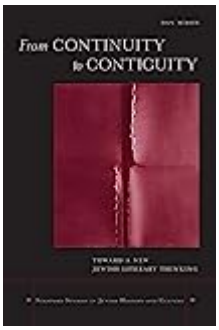

Dan Miron. *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 560 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6200-7.

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Continuity, Contiguity, and the Modern Jewish Literary Complex

Dan Mironâs *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Literary Jewish Thinking* is a masterpiece of literary and cultural analysis. The senior Israeli critic and historian of Hebrew and Yiddish literature from Columbia University aims high: to introduce new theory to the study of modern Jewish literature in all languages. It might be asked, why write such a monumental book in a postmodern era engaged in deconstruction, disintegration, and hybridity? It seems that the time for positivistic definite histories of literature is long gone. Miron admits that a book such as his has not been written in any language for the last few decades. The book laments the disappearance of strong meta-narratives while at the same time rejecting them.

Mironâs rationale for the revival of such a discourse is, therefore, paradoxical: he wishes to write the most continuous book of literary contiguity. The two opposing poles of this book are continuity and contiguity. Continuity, according to Miron, is a concept shared by scholars of Hebrew and Yiddish literature to define the unifying and homogenous aspects of Jewish literature stretching from the Bible to modern times and transcending geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Mironâs pluralistic notion of contiguity tries to bypass the continuity fallacy so that instead of looking at what connects Jewish literature one should pay attention to what separates and discontinues it.

Mironâs journey towards literary contiguity begins in a thorough–one would even argue too thorough–polemic with previous generations of scholars who may have little to say to contemporary readers. The writings of the Israeli critics Dov Sadan (1902-89), Barukh Kurzweil (1907-72), and Shimon Halkin (1889-87) and the Yiddish critics Baal Makhshoves (pen name of Israel Isidor Elyashev, 1873â1924), Shmuel Niger (pseudonym of Shmuel Tsharny, 1883â1955), and Borekh Rivkin (1883-1945), to name but a few, are refuted one by one, exposing their intellectual limitations and ideological biases. At the end it all comes down to what Miron suspects stands in the background of all continuity theories: the naÃ¨ve belief that there is a unified Jewish literature written by Jews, for Jews, mostly yet not exclusively in Jewish lan-

guages, and that this literature embodies a specific sense of Jewishness that can be only understood within a Jewish context.

Mironâs starting point for his critique of the continuity fallacy is the abnormal condition of Jewish literature in the Diaspora. Jewish authors, both religious and secular, wrote in remote places, in various languages, and under different cultural influences. For scholars of Jewish literature to compare, say medieval Hebrew poetry in Spain to Yiddish modernist poetry in twentieth-century New York is by far more complicated than it is for an English-speaking college student to compare Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Miron brings this approach *ad absurdum*, especially in his discussion of the concept of âSifrut Yisraelâ (the literature of Israel) in the Zionist thought of Dov Sadan. According to Sadan (who apparently had a superb memory and forgot nothing), one should read, compare, and echo synchronically all forms of Jewish creativity: biblical commentary, Talmudic homiletics, Hasidic hagiography, modern Yiddish literature, and Judeo-Arabic folklore. Sadan sadly acknowledged that in modern times this majestic intertextuality was shattered, making room for crisis and amnesia. However, Sadan was optimistic when he asserted that upon Zionismâs victory all aspects of Jewish writing would eventually find their right place in the grand mosaic of Jewish literature through reliable Hebrew translations.

Miron, who was Sadanâs student, remains totally unconvinced, showing how this seemingly heterogeneous approach reaches a dead end not only because of its rickety and idiosyncratic methodology (how can one study such diverse texts using the same interpretative tools?), but more so because it asks the wrong questions. This is mostly felt, according to Miron, in what Sadanâs cartography leaves out, which is literature written by Jews in predominantly non-Jewish languages for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. Sadanâs nationally oriented approach demanded that a Jewish text address primarily Jewish readers in a Jewish context. If the approach were followed only marginal literature written by German or Russian assimilated Jews in the nineteenth century by and for people who were still not well integrated into the general public would be read. Only in this limited transitional phase was it possible for Jewish writers to write Jewish literature in a non-Jewish language for Jewish readers. The minute Jews made their way into the major centers of Western culture this literature was forgotten.

Mironâs critique of literary continuity is seasoned with a strong sense of discontinuity. Not only does he expose the discontinuous aspects of Jewish continuity (nothing unheard of in todayâs post-national discourse), he also points out the historical necessity of the continuity approach that enabled scholars like Sadan or Kurzweil to represent in an orderly fashion the blurry nature of the modern Jewish literary complex. When Kurzweil published his magnum opus *Sifruteinu hachadasha–hemshech o mahapecha?*(*Our New Literature–A Continuation or a Revolution?*) in 1959 this discourse was already passÃ© in the eyes of contemporary Israeli intellectuals. Kurzweil, a product of Central European enlightenment and romanticism, was not able to see beyond the tragic dialectics of revolution and continuation. Modern Hebrew literature reached its peak in the pre-statehood works of Chaim Nachman Bialik and Sh. Y. Agnon that expressed the transcendental tension between tradition and modernity, faith and heresy, exile and homecoming. Israeli writers completely liberated from these outdated formulations were of no interest to him. Literary normalcy is what, Miron asserts, made the Jewish metaliterary discourse in the State of Israel superfluous.

The first 302 pages of this book are dedicated to the debunking of continuity. The last 196 pages (the book is not well balanced between continuity and contiguity) consist of Mironâs most fruitful achievement–the creation of the flexible concept of contiguity out of the more rigid notion of continuity (the sound resemblance of the two words is telling). The prominence of Jewish authors writing in non-Jewish national languages (today mostly in English) is for Miron the ultimate proof for the irrelevancy of Jewish literary canonicity (here he is in sharp disagreement with Ruth Wisseâs *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 2000). The impossibility of a coherent canon for modern Jewish literature is for Miron not a liability but a liberating challenge.

The final chapters of the book illustrate major trends of Jewish contiguity in the works of Frantz Kafka and Sholem Aleichem. Miron views Kafka as the modern Jewish writer par excellence precisely because he rejects national continuity. As a scholar immersed in Jewish knowledge Miron is surprisingly ready to assert that Kafkaâs ambivalent, reductionist, and at times negative perception of being Jewish (*Judesein*) might be the only somewhat possible metaphor to define the Jewish condition. For Kafka being Jewish is to live on the margins, powerless and weak, denied any substantial influence on life and destiny, but with the remarkable ability to authentically reflect on this crisis. And who in Jewish liter-

ature is the most contiguous with Kafka? Not the Zionist Agnon, who was incorrectly crowned (by Sadan among others) as the legal heir of the Kafkaesque, but rather the nineteenth-century Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem, who shared with Kafka a basic suspicion of laws, norms, and ideologies, which Miron argues is the essence of being modernly Jewish.

One does not have to fully agree with this unorthodox approach to Jewish literature (how can Kafka be the greatest modern Jewish writer if he wished to annihilate his Jewishness?) to notice its usefulness in our time and age. It simply shows how writers of different backgrounds and credos shape their own sense of Jewish identity. If they say they are Jewish they might as well be and it is up to scholars to explore what that means. The theory just follows the literature. And this brings us to why this book was written in English. At first glance it does seem puzzling that Miron invests so much effort in a polemic with dead scholars who were rarely translated into English. The reason becomes clear when Miron as an Israeli admits defeat; since particular Jewish literature in predominantly Jewish languages (Miron also acknowledges the existence of Israeli Arab writings in Hebrew) is on the decline and diasporic literature in Europe and America on the rise, the perfect haven for productive Jewish meta-literary narratives is America. Dan Miron has written a contagious book about literary contiguity. The notion of contiguity is catchy; however we must remember that while previous generations of critics noticed only the unifying aspects of Jewish texts, contemporary readers, armored with Mironâs compelling book, should be advised not to overemphasize what separates them. Continuity and contiguity are two sides of the same coin.