Form: Introduction
Vered Karti Shemtov and Anat Weisman

An issue dedicated to Benjamin Harshav (Vilnius, 1928–New Haven, 2015)

Everything is form and life itself is a form
Honoré de Balzac

Meter weaves a parallel thread underneath—and throughout—the verbal fabric
Benjamin Harshav

Form remains a word in common critical currency. It is, it seems, one that we cannot do without. After all, what other word could describe, with so little fuss, but also with due sense of estrangement and embodiment, the object in question: the art form in all its integral complexity? What other word could be so wittily and succinctly resonant, drawing into its small scope such a crowd of possibilities?
Angela Leighton

The word “form” itself, as Angela Leighton shows us in her book On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word, has a slippery meaning, one that changed from Plato to today. Although a necessary word for literary studies, it seems “self-sufficient and self-defining, is restless, tendentious, a noun lying in wait for an object.”¹ What do we talk about when we talk about form in literary studies today, one hundred years after the establishment of the Russian Formalist circles?² What are the objects that we have in mind? And can these objects be seen and studied as separated from other contexts?

² If we see the beginning of the movement as the 1916 establishment of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) in Saint Petersburg (then Petrograd) by Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, and Yury Tynyanov, and a bit over a century since the 1914 Moscow Linguistic Circle was founded by Roman Jakobson.
Contemporary literary studies seem to expand what some of the Formalists defined as form and to focus more on the intersections between the poetic, the social, and the political. For Caroline Levine, for example, whose essay for this issue of *Dibur* is a brief account of her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, form includes “any arrangement of elements—any ordering, patterning, or shaping.” In her work, she defines form as much more than the “artfulness of art.” If the Formalists tried to apply research methods from other fields to look at poetic forms, Levine suggests using the knowledge accumulated over hundreds of years of studying literary forms to read the social world as Form. She focuses on four examples of major forms that “cross back and forth between aesthetic and political domains”: whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network.

Not everything is qualified as a form. In this sense Levine questions Balzac’s famous words. She argues that literary studies engage with the gaps and interruptions, with subversions and collapsing binaries, and with “the impulses of force and affect and desire.” None of these, she writes, are forms. However, “while it is tempting to focus on exciting moments of emancipation and rupture, it is difficult to imagine a society altogether without order.” Forms are crucial for our understanding of our structures as well as of movements and progress. In this sense, Levine’s work builds on Formalist explanations of historical changes as resulting from intersections between different systems and forms.

Forms, then, not only interact with the social and political context but are junctions between the poetic and the world outside the text. To use Benjamin Harshav’s metaphor about meter, forms “weave a parallel thread underneath and throughout” the social world. Vincent Barletta, in “Rhythm as Form,” tracks the meaning of the word “rhythm” in ancient Hebrew and Greek and exposes the strong ties between rhythm as a poetic form and as a material form. Rhythm, in these texts, is associated with cutting, with measuring, and with ethics. “The considerable power of Pre-Socratic ideas on rhythm, while largely ignored by philosophical traditions built on Plato and Aristotle and by later poetic traditions principally concerned with matters of metrics and prosody, nonetheless managed,” according to Barletta, to find its way into the written work of several French intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century: Émile Benveniste, Henri Meschonnic, and Emmanuel Levinas. Rhythm as form, according to Barletta’s work, has more than one meaning and is a complex philosophical concept that crosses from aesthetics to ethics.

In this issue of *Dibur*, the thinking of the Formalist school is also reconsidered when it comes to defining “literariness.” In “Poetics, Fictionality, and the Lyric” Jonathan Culler looks at the limitations of Harshav’s theory of the Internal Field of Reference as a necessary feature of a literary work and argues that when it comes to the lyric form, what we need is not a theory of fictionality but rather an alternative model, a model that acknowledges the tension in the lyric “between story and character, on the one hand, and song, on the other.” Culler finds such a model in Käte Hamburger’s distinction between the fictional discourse and the lyric. Following Hamburger he suggests treating the lyric as “fundamentally a nonmimetic, nonfictional discourse that makes claims about the world.” He then turns to Roland Greene’s “conception of a foundational tension between fictional and ritualistic elements in the lyric” but adds that “often in the lyric the ritualistic dominates the fictional and prevents it from being a necessary condition of literariness.”

The discussion of the lyric as form is also at the center of Lilach Lachman’s article “Lullaby and Mother Tongue: Poetic Performance and the Hebrew Lullaby.” Lachman argues that the lullaby, much like the lyric, evolves out of an interconnection between poetry and song, as well

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as between poetry and its performative contexts. Both forms do not expect their addressee to answer, but the lullaby stresses the importance of both immediate voicing and poetic indirection as vital to the experience of the cradlesong. Furthermore, the lullaby in its parodic mechanisms, its self-references, and its mediation procedures (what Jonathan Culler calls “triangulated address”) also highlights both the event of address and its ritual transmission as acts that demand critical attention. Lachman’s essay begins with what is considered to be the earliest known lullaby and continues with an examination of the role and function of the modernist lullaby in Hebrew literature.

Another discussion of genres as forms can be found in Hannan Hever’s article, “The Politics of Form of the Hassidic Tale.” Hever argues that in order to understand the form of these tales, we need to think about them as “a concrete political act in the world.” This claim is based on “the Hassidic tale’s ontology, that, drawing upon Kabbalah literature and an immanent deity, has a gnostic character in which the opposition between good and evil, between pure and impure, appears as a power relationship between real entities. So, the evil that is represented in the Hassidic tale is not a product of a mistake in reasoning but appears as a piece of reality.” Looking at the tales as written retellings of performed tales and examining the context and implied audiences allow Hever to define the political nature and role of the form.

Lucy Alford takes us away from the study of the junctions between “referential forms” and “literary forms” to the question of what is formed by poetic form. In her essay, “ʻFull / of Endless Distances’: Forms of Desire in Poetic Attention,” she looks at some of the ways in which poems form our attention. By examining poems by Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Robert Hass, and Wallace Stevens, Alford shows how desire, as one mode of poetic attention, is produced, manipulated, and formed through the “formal orchestration” of readerly attention.

Na’ama Rokem also contributes to our discussion of the lyric through a close reading. Rokem looks at a German-Hebrew poem by the mid-twentieth-century poet Arie Ludwig Strauss. In her essay, “The Rhythms of Language Mixing: Ludwig Strauss’s Notes for an Impossible German-Hebrew Hymn,” Rokem (much like Lachman) looks at multilingualism and form and follows Jahan Ramazani’s work on how the mixture of languages in poetry performs specific poetic tasks. She argues that this kind of mixture is “at work in Strauss’s stitching together of the German and the Hebrew to form a single poetic unit. In this reading, the poem is not about the relationship between German and Hebrew and its task is not to claim, against historical appearances, that a covenant between the two is possible. Instead, it is written to explore and expose the relationship between the two, specifically as poetic languages, by highlighting their materiality. Furthermore, it is a poem about the history of poetic forms as they evolve interlinguistically, and especially as they evolve on the seam line that switches and stitches between German and Hebrew.” Strauss’s poem serves as a test case for revisiting Harshav’s arguments regarding the role of adoptions and adaptations in the history of the formation of a Hebrew national literature.

Many of the articles in this collection move away from looking at distinct literary structures and instead study forms as fictional and real, as structures and content, as performances, as literary and political, as part of ethics, hierarchies, and power, as visible in the text but also as materializing with a reader or an audience. It is the complexity of form rather than its contours that seem to take a central stage, at least in this issue.

At the same time, meter, rhythm, and prosodic forms still occupy significant space in this conversation about form. In Thomas Pavel’s essay, “Robert Marteau and the French Blank
Alexandrine,” he investigates the history of French verse and “its elusive relations between meter, rhythm, and poetic breath.” Pavel seems to stay close in this article to Harshav’s use of the word “Form” in his “The Systems of Hebrew Versifications.” Harshav limits the word here to refer to “all poetic patterns that employ elements of sound for the composition of poetic texts.” Pavel examines the features of the rhymed alexandrine—the classical type of French verse—and includes in his study the various attempts to go beyond the form’s limits and the “recent creation of a blank alexandrine, which blends rhythmic balance with ample phrasing and syntactic scope.” Form is expanded here in a different direction. It not only includes the very conventional structures but also shows us how literary studies can account for deviations and for prosody beyond the traditional alexandrine.

This collection of articles does not strive to present a wide-angle shot of the current discussions and studies of form. We didn’t represent here, for example, the important work that is being done in digital labs at Stanford, Princeton, and other institutions. The studies in this issue were collected with the intention of creating an explicit (as in the case of Pavel, Rokem, and Culler) and an implicit conversation with the work of Benjamin Harshav. Harshav was, among other things, a brilliant scholar of comparative prosody, of modern poetry, and of Hebrew and Yiddish versification. He was closely affiliated with the Formalist school and with the Tel Aviv school that he established together with other colleagues. He was committed throughout his academic career to the understanding of Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms as world literatures.

In Harshav’s opening words in a workshop that he led in Bar Ilan University in Israel, he shared with the audience the following story: “Once I was invited to give a lecture in a famous American university. My lecture was about the discovery of rhyme in postbiblical poetry; this was most likely the origin of the entire European rhyming system… There were colleagues there from Comparative Literature that were excited about this claim, they never heard about it before, and indeed this was my own discovery. My host, a rabbi from a famous lineage that was also an American professor, said, ‘so you think our forefathers were Russian Formalists?’ The rumor was that I am a Russian Formalist. I answered him that they were not Russian Formalists but Jewish Formalists… Our forefathers were much more disciplined, precise, and formalistic than Hebrew poetry today. In a positive and in a negative way.”

Harshav’s work continued the Formalist and structuralist methods, and especially the work of Roman Jakobson, whom he knew personally. As he said about himself in the introduction to his book Fields and Frames: Essays on Literature and Meaning: “I am a phenomenologist in my queries, a structuralist in my methods, and a positivist in my answers. I am a phenomenologist in the sense that I strive to understand the literary phenomena and related phenomena… I am a structuralist because I strive to present a systematic description of the research results… I am a ‘positivist’ not in the sense of the philosophical movement… but in the sense that I believe that one should say what can be said, and there is much that can be said.”

In 1967 Harshav created the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University, where he also promoted semiotic perspectives in literary studies. In 1979 he founded the journal Poetics Today. In 1987 he became the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Professor

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of Hebrew Language and Literature at Yale University and was later nominated to be a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Toward the end of his life he published many of his works that were known mostly to his many students and colleagues.

While this special issue honors the academic work of Benjamin Harshav, we chose to end the issue with an article studying his poetry and its influence on the evolution of Hebrew poetry and poetics. This aspect of his work is discussed in an essay by Chana Kronfeld entitled “Harshav’s Likrat: Toward a New Poetics and Politics of the ‘Statehood Generation.’” Kronfeld looks at the history of the Yiddish literary group Yung Yisroel as a precursor of the Hebrew literature group Likrat and focuses on “Harshav’s role as a smuggler of modernist Yiddish poetics into [Likrat,] the formative group of Statehood Generation Hebrew poetry.”