

Ziva Ben-Porat

Dept. of Poetics & Comp. Lit. — Tel Aviv University

FACT, FICTION, AND READERS' RESPONSES

A. Theoretical Considerations of «Fact» and «Fiction» in Interpretation.

Conceiving the opposition of fact and fiction only in terms of that aspect of interpretation which relates textual elements to prior knowledge about the world, I base this paper on two assumptions:

- 1) Fictionality and factuality are not imminent features of any particular type of text; they are pragmatic attitudes which readers adopt within the framework of a particular complex cultural, socio-historical and biographical context.
- 2) Factuality is at the same time a cognitive fact.

The two assumptions seem to contradict and even exclude each other. The first implies that factuality is a matter of choice; the second, that it is not. I'd like to resolve the seeming contradiction by making the following claims:

- I. A pragmatic decision of the type «text x is fictional/factual» effects differently the interpretation of the text as a whole and that of isolated, potentially factual, textual components.
 - I.1. «Potentially factual» components are concepts which form any reader's encyclopedia (Eco's term for organized knowledge structures or inter-texts). Names of places, people, historical events, and so forth, are prototypical examples of potentially factual components. Signifiers of this type are always perceived as referring to their codified concepts and activating the latter as cognitive tools. Readers cannot be expected not to use «potentially factual» elements as cognitive models¹.
 - I.2. Texts display various strategies for neutralizing the potential for factuality and foregrounding the fictionality of the «potentially factual» components. One could cite, for example, Ransmayr's post-modernist *Die Letzte Welt*, where trucks and movies appear in Ovid's exile place (Tomi) in the first century.
 - I.3. The most prominent device, for directing a reader away from factuality or towards it, is the use of pre-established pragmatic choices. These are

coded in a cultural typology of discourses in general (e.g. scientific vs literary) and of literary subgenres in particular (e.g. realistic novel vs science-fiction).

- I.4. The pragmatic designation of a text as fictional or factual does, in this way, determine its truth conditions, as it determines the reading procedure by which a text is to be interpreted.
- I.5. The typological directive is very strong, but not omnipotent.
- II. «Reading pacts», the tacit agreements supposed to obtain between competent readers and authors (or texts), constitute the cognitive content of the pragmatic attitude conferred upon a text by its typological designation. However, the pragmatic directive (i.e. this text is a realistic novel) does not yield a simple mechanism for disregarding, disqualifying or asserting truth-claims. Rather, it yields a complex, hierarchically ordered, and dynamic set of directions (e.g. «Apply the literal scientific procedure for the interpretation, or rather signification of potentially factual components; apply the figurative-allegoricizing procedure to the whole»).
- II.1. A «reading pact» allows authors to assume that their readers will read the texts according to the interpretative procedures which are appropriate for the truth-claims they posit for them (scientific or aesthetic).
- II.2. The successful realization of a «reading pact» depends on the use of the appropriate textual strategies on the part of the author, and on the «good will» of the reader. Readers may disregard the pact because they are misguided by the text. They may also be motivated to do so, and in extreme cases, when basic or cherished beliefs are involved, the rejection of the pact is explicit.

The rest of the paper attempts to validate these claims through an analysis of a particular example, Gabi Daniel's poem «Peter The Great», its complicated and hostile reception, and the author's defence, articulated in various interviews and in a second poem, «Appendix: The Private Knot».

B. The Case of Gabi Daniel: Stage I

B.1. The poem

Peter the Great

Peter the great
Paved the capital, Petersburg
In the northern swamps
On the bones of peasants.
David Ben-Gurion (First Israeli Prime-Minister)
Paved
The road to the *Burma road*, by-passing

{An alternate way to Jerusalem during the War of Independence, named after a similar road constructed in WW II; many battles were fought to maintain the road to Jerusalem open. Among them the unsuccessful battles of Latrun, May 1948, in which many soldiers, including survivors, died.)

**The road which leads to the road to the capital Jerusalem,
With bones of youngsters form the *Sho'ah* .** {Holocaust}

The Hebrew trainer in shorts

Studied *KP''P* in the first Hebrew Kindergarten

{Hebrew initials for face to face combat}

From a *Kindergarten-teacher* who spoke eloquent Hebrew

{Probably the mother of General Yadin, a high ranking officer in 1948 and the 2nd Chief of Staff of Israel's Defence Forces}

Three hours a-day.

«How difficult climbing was for them»: «*azetkene berger!*

{«Such mountains» in a dialect of Yiddish, the language of diaspora Jews}

***Azetkene berger!* — they did not bring any muscles from the diaspora».**

(The connection is: that Berger,

Secretary of *KP''P*

{Palestinian Communist Party}

Also called Barzilai,

Hid in Arab villages

In the days of the *great uprising*

{The Arab name for the riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1936-1939}

In the mountains of Jerusalem). But the son

Of the first Hebrew Kindergarten-teacher {General Yadin}

In short pants and British whiskers

Directed with direct efficiency

All this fire.

[The Hebrew trainer screamed: «murder

In your eyes!»

{Formula used in «face to face combat» training}

— Innocent Hebrew youngster

Of the superior race: not like this will

You make murder.]

«*Gechalim Gechalim*» they were brought —

{batallions from abroad & burning coal}

Youngsters from the *Sho'ah* —

{Holocaust}

To blow into them

A little

Breath.

A little fire.

Ben Gurion gathered dust

Human {dust} — to throw into the enemy's eyes.

Also

{line added in the final version, not in the first}

On the bones of youngsters from the Sho'ah {Holocaust}
We paved the bypassing road
Mounting to Jerusalem.

Benjamin Harshav's *The Poems of Gabi Daniel*
 (Tel-Aviv: Sifrey Siman Kri'ah, 1990, pp. 96-97), translated by Ziva Ben-Porat for
 use in this conference.

As I have tried to show in the annotations the factual references are indisputable. The scandal which broke out centered around the analogy between Peter the Great and David Ben-Gurion, treated as a truth-claiming statement.

The poet, Harshav, is a survivor of the Sho'ah. In 1948 he participated in the battles of Jerusalem. However, he served in one of the elite Israeli army units, not in the 7th brigade which was defeated in Latrun, spoke fluent Hebrew and was politically related to the hegemonic group. His personal experience was not (at least, to the eyes of an outsider) typically that of the new immigrant described in the poem.

These biographical facts were known to all the published critics of the poem.

B.2. Preliminary discussion: The pragmatic directive — the lyric reading pact

This poem was published as a lyrical text. As an active cognitive model the term «lyric» attributes to a text so designated the following features: authenticity, subjectivity, sincerity, and even historicity on the one hand and aesthetic properties on the other. In other words, the central model (stereotype if you wish) of the lyrical poem is conceived as the sincere articulation of the poet's experiences, emotions, ideas in a «poetic» language characterized by the use of figures, sound combinations and so forth. Regardless of its freedom of expression (*Licentia Poetica*) the lyric poem falls, at least partially, under the jurisdiction of the autobiographical pact.

Consequently, every potentially factual element is perceived as referring to known verifiable facts whenever possible. In accordance with the conventional practice of this lyrical «realism», a speaker, using the first person, is intuitively identified with the poet, and places and public events that are mentioned in a poem are related to «real» places and events in which the poet has been present.

If, therefore, the poet mentions his participation in the bitter fighting of May 1948, the reader will not look for resemblance between that which is presented in the text and external events (as, Lejeune rightly claims, happens with readers of fiction), but would assume that this is a historical reference and look for differences. These (errors, deformations, misrepresentations) can all be attributed to the speaking/writing subject, and thus, for example, expectations of historical accuracy may be toned down by the admissibility of either subjectivity or artistry into the lyric articulation.

To sum up, the expected response to Daniel's poem should have complied with the autobiographical pact, treating its potentially factual components as references to subjectively interpreted truth, and attributing incompatible statements to stylistic

idiosyncrasy, justifiable through the evocation of the *Licentia Poetica*. Nothing of the kind happened.

B.3. Readers's reactions

The poem appeared in August 1986 in a literary almanac, *IGRA*, under the pseudonym G. Daniel. The identity of the author, Benjamin Harshav, was, however, hardly a secret.

Less than a week after the almanac came out, the literary supplements of the leading Israeli newspapers were full of reactions to the poem, all of them written by people who fought in the War of Independence, some times in the Battles of Latrun, and who belonged to the hegemonic elite of that time.

The common denominator of all the aggressive negative responses is an explicit disregard for the poem as a lyrical (i.e. poetic-artistic) text, an emphasis on the biographical-historical aspect, and the concomitant condemnation of its statements as «terrible lies».

For example, Chanoch Bartov, a novelist, writes: I am not going to engage in any literary discussion. To hell with it. This is the end. Not of literature, of the whole business. How could Daniel's hand stay alive while composing this false analogy? (*Ma'ariv* 22.8.86).

Gouri, a poet himself, writes: I wish I knew why Daniel wrote this. Why he? why now? I am not treating the poem appropriately, submitting it to a «semantic», «semiotic», «textual» and «structural» analysis — I know that the poem shall remain as an evil record, (bringing iniquity to remembrance *mazkeret avon*) not as a powerful reprimand on the sacrifice of the diaspora volunteers in the War of Independence but as a false testimony (*Davar* 22.8.86).

Evidently the impact of the historical references is so strong that all pacts obtaining between poets and their readers become inadequate and cannot counterbalance the activation of the historical-scientific reading procedure, whose position in the hierarchy of interpretative procedures in the lyrical poetic pact is usually quite low. Daniel's (rather late, as Gouri points out) contribution to the destruction or questioning of our most cherished national myths (Jerusalem as the heart of the Jewish nation and the Jewish state, the *sabra* as the new ideal of Hebrew manhood, the solidarity of the Israeli and the diaspora Jews) does not allow readers to see the poem other than as a malicious slander, where they could have been expected to see it as an hyperbolic expression of personal pain.

B.4. Harshav's journalistic defence

In many private and published interviews which follow the scandal, Harshav uses a number of strategies to defend himself. The first is aesthetic: an invocation of the *licentia poetica* and of the different status of poetic utterances. Harshav claims, for example, that a poetic analogy is not a statement of truth of the order to which scientific analogies aspire. Poetic language should be treated differently. «A poem

is a poem. I think that a poem should state things sharply, with extreme comparisons, in a model which can be internalized, effective, provocative» (Kol Ha-Ir, 29.8.86). Moreover, he argues elsewhere, a poetic text should be analyzed in all its aspects.

Had that been the case, it is easy to see, redundancies (as in 1.7-8), ungrammaticalities (as in 1.4), and primarily sound associations (as in 1.16 ff), might have led readers to a more careful and more balanced reading of the poem. As we have seen, critics have been, for the reasons specified above, adamant in their refusal to accept Harshav's implicit demands concerning the way the poem should be read. Responding to Harshav's explicit demands critics (very few) tended to diminish the literary value of the poem. «Had I been the editor of a literary journal I would have refused to publish the poem on account of its poor artistic quality», writes A.B. Joffe (Al Ha-Mishmar, 12.9.86), reacting to Harshav's defence (Kol Ha-Ir, 29.8.86)².

The second defence strategy, aimed at warding off attacks on Harshav's integrity with regard to his known-to-be-different personal experiences, is literary and explicitly contractual. In many interviews Harshav claims: I did not do it; Gaby Daniel said those things. I invented Gabi Daniel as a fictional person. This is a well known literary game. — When it became known that I composed the poems of Daniel I lost interest in sharply separating our biographies and Daniel started using themes from my biography... but I still see it as a persona in a novel. An author is ultimately responsible for what his characters say, but a given sentence is not the author's» (Kol Ha-Ir, 29.8.86).

Harshav points out the lack of identity between himself and the official author of the poem as a way of disavowing biographical-historical responsibility. But although Harshav actually created a persona, endowing Daniel with a biography of his own, the critics are unwilling to accept this excuse. Following the practice described by Lejeune, (and in this way providing evidence for the role of the autobiographical pact in the reading of lyrical poetry), they claim that a pseudonym does not annul the speaker/author identity in lyrical poetry. As long as the lyrical «I» does not have an independent identity (as in a dramatic monologue), the author may use any name he likes, but it is his voice which is heard. In this particular case the reliance on a distancing device is taken as nothing but a cowardly copout (A.B. Joffe, *Al Ha-Mishmar*, 9, 1986).

What is highly revealing in this particular instance is the fact that critics use the autobiographical pact when it serves their needs — the right to demand factual truth, whereas they ignore it when it hampers their attack — in allowing subjectivity to a role. The author does the opposite.

The third defence is referential, although it activates the autobiographical pact in its appeal to the author's right to subjectivity. Harshav claims that the poem is an articulation of his experiences, of the way he feels about things. However, because he obviously does not want to marginalize his presentation of these particular events in Israeli history, Harshav refers to objective history as well. He claims, contradicting himself (as the critics pointed out), that the Israelies did indeed behave as if they

were superior to the diaspora Jews, spoke of the survivors as worthless dust (this metaphor had been used by national leaders such as Ben Gurion and Tabenkin), and mobilized them upon arrival without training them properly or making sure they know enough Hebrew to understand orders on the battlegrounds. Such defence made the situation even worse, because presenting these elements out of context seemed an even harsher breach of the truth. As for the biographical justification, Harshav's critics pointed out the discrepancy between his descriptions and what is known of his life. In short, inasmuch as they were attentive to the claims of the autobiographical pact, critics felt obliged to challenge Harshav's autobiographical narrative.

The ultimate defence took the form of a second poem.

B.5. Harshav's poetic defence.

Appendix: The Private Knot [Plonter]

David Ben Gurion was not
An omnipotent tyrant.
David ben Gurion was
Only a synecdoche

For the madness which blew all of us
Into paving a symbolic mount
Towards a pentagonal/armed magical city
Called, in an unusual penultimate accent,
Ye-ru-sha-la-yim. {Jerusalem in Hebrew}

Do I, a son of the *generation of the wilderness*,
{The Hebrews who came out of Egypt but had to die in the desert}
Need to swear by it invoking the heavens
Day after day, for forty years,
Whenever my mouth feels dry?

Tell me: how does one pave
Such a super-historical
Roman rampart? {An allusion to the now controversial symbol of Jewish
heroism — the collective suicide of the besieged fighters of Metzada in 73, as
narrated by Josephus Flavius.}

Not with comfortable hysteria.
Not with flowery Hebrew.
Not with placards.

The victimized generation
Was not
A burnished silver platter
With which a poet decorated

Celebrations of Independence. {An allusion to Nathan Alterman's poem, «The Silver Platter», which is a permanent and conspicuous component of Independence Day ceremonies.}

One by one they fell to die.

This knot

The private, the classified,

That had been woven from early childhood-

Colored glasses of words

And trembling scratches

In the furrows of an individual brain,

The simultaneous dialogues

Between flares

Of remembered takings off,

In bulbs

Of neurons rushing around

In a unique cosmic configuration —

This twisted, private knot

Would not get up.

That which was given a name, a stronghold and a mountain —

What had it to do with the torn flash

On the side of an armoured truck,

Bones scattered or buried between Mount Herzl and Mount Gilboa?

{Mount Herzl is Israel's official military cemetery; Mount Gilboa is the death place of King Saul and his son Yehonathan.}

What has this to do with affirmation?

What has this to do with evil?

You, who ran between the lines,

Bare-foot babies, confused

Between the legs of your shabby history,

Who extolled the prattle

In a new language —

Even your feet at the plough's edge

Have not been the roots of a tree

Belonging to a different race.

Children of the same people, that defiles

Its yesterday's remembrances.

But now,

When you have put on an adorned *Sho'ah*

{Holocaust}

As a poeticized justification

Of vain pretentions,

Remember:

There were also some that remained —

Unimportant,

Unrestful.

It only blew fears at their backs,

And they responded

With doubled pride.

Also

With the dust

Of bones of youngsters from the *Sho'ah*

{Holocaust}

We paved the by-passing road

That mounts to Jerusalem.

Benjamin Harshav's *The Poems of Gabi Daniel* (Tel-Aviv: Sifrey Siman Kri'ah, 1990, pp. 98-100), translated by Ziva Ben-Porat for use in this conference.

C. Conclusion

C.1. The poems compared

A comparison of the two poems reveals a number of things.

In the second poem Harshav deliberately foregrounds what can be called the «poetic pact» (or the *licentia poetica*) by explicating his analogy and introducing a rhetorical term in the first stanza. The more conspicuous stanzaic arrangement as well as the polemic allusion to Alterman's canonized poem (i.e. «The silver platter») work in the same direction.

Harshav also foregrounds the «autobiographical pact» by using the first person singular and the second person throughout the poem. In the first poem the second person is used by the speaker only in 1.27, and the first person (in the plural) in 1.40. The long passage describing the uniqueness of each individual subject works in two complementary directions: on the one hand it indirectly establishes the uniqueness of the speaking subject and by doing that enhances the poet's subjective authority; on the other hand, the passage circumvents the danger of marginalization by presenting many individual subjects.

Finally, Harshav responds to the demands of the activated historical-scientific pact by pointing out the symbolic and metaphoric nature of some of his potentially factual elements (Ben-Gurion in 1.3, Jerusalem in 1.6), and by changing focus. The problematic relation between diaspora Jews in general and *Sho'ah* (Holocaust) survivors in particular and the native Israelis becomes the center of attention. The unpalatable metaphor is restricted to the end of the poem. At this point, still an effective and privileged position, the closing statement can be viewed within the right

perspective. To the redeeming element of the original version (namely, the use of the first person plural) is added a second — the brightly significant conjunction «also». Marshav apparently deemed this correction of the historical truth so important as to include it in the final version of «Peter the Great».

C.2. Conditions for breaching contracts

While I believe that the changes illustrate the poet's awareness of the practical consequences of the various pacts, and that the analysis validates the claims which I made at the beginning, I cannot say that the second poem made a real difference to the critics whom I discussed above. They simply ignored it when it was published much later. Motivated readers who did respond to questionnaires said something like: of course he can express his feelings, but the poem still misrepresents the facts and is dangerous. Younger readers, who did not participate in the War of Independence and who did not lose their Israeli born friends in the Battles of Latrun, accepted both poems as lyrical utterances, but judged the second to be a better one.

It is therefore possible to conclude with a new claim: compatibility with the reader's major (i.e. most cherished) beliefs is an implicit term of any reading pact. When this term is not actualized, the pact, like legal «frustrated contracts», opens up for reinterpretation and re-hierarchization of the reading procedures³. Readers motivated by a threat to their beliefs make their own pragmatic decisions concerning the factuality/fictionality of the text which they interpret, regardless of coded pragmatic directives and textual strategies.

Notes

- ¹ A comprehensive model describing the semantic status of potentially factual elements is offered in B. Harshav's (Hrushovski) theory of Integrational Semantics; in particular in his notions of Internal and External Fields of Reference. See for example, «Integrational Semantics» in Heidi Byrnes, ed. 1982. *Contemporary Perceptions of Language: Interdisciplinary Dimensions* (-GURT 1982) (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP); «An Outline of Integrational Semantics: An understander's Theory of Meaning in Context», *Poetics Today* 3:4, 59-88 (1982).
- ² A week later seven editors were asked whether they would have published the poem. Six of them responded in the affirmative, grounding their response in the poetic quality of the text or the centrality of its author in Israel's culture.
- ³ To the best of my knowledge, the first use of the notion of «frustrated contracts» in literary theory appears in the work of Samuel Fleischaker. My source is «Frustrated Contracts and the Truth Conditions of Poetry», Paper presented in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Metaphor: Philosophy, Psychology, Literature, Linguistics, and Art*, a joint conference at Tel Aviv and Bar-Ilan universities, May 1992.