In this article, I seek to examine the story “From the Beginning” from its central poetic feature, that of a congestion of literary references. These references are drawn from other Hebrew stories—from the late 1800s and the beginning of the twentieth century—about rootless male characters and their “erotic failures.” The degree of concentration of literary innuendoes, the context and the method with which they are brought to bear on Brenner’s narrative, result in a deliberate exaggeration that makes “From the Beginning” a “parodic homage” of these earlier texts and their characters, including types and situations previously encountered in Brenner’s other stories. “From the Beginning,” with its features of intertextuality and irony, has the characteristics of a postmodern parody, or, at the very least, invites a postmodern re-reading.

A.

Yosef Hayim Brenner’s lengthy Eretz Israel narratives, “Bein mayim lemayim” (Between water and water) (Brenner 1964a),1 “Mikan umikan” (From here and there) (Brenner 1964b),2 and Shkhol vekishalon (Breakdown and Bereavement) (Brenner 1971),3 have garnered much interest in research and literary criticism. This is a curious contrast with his long short story, Mehathala (From the beginning), which has received few references and little attention.4 Fate intervened when ironically and tragically, a story bearing the notion of “beginning” in its title became Brenner’s last. Published after his death in 1922 in the literary periodical, Hatekufa, the story, in a nearly complete version, was found in his backpack at the site of his murder, horrifyingly mimicking the way in which texts were often claimed to have been discovered in many well-known fictitious prefaces to his stories. In fact in the preface of “From the Beginning” as well, the character of the publisher states that the manuscript was like one found in the diaspora, abandoned in a wrecked house and without the writer’s signature.

From a letter written by Brenner to Shalom Shtreit in May 1919,5 it has been ascertained that initially the story was called, “The Beginning,” and only later Brenner changed it to “From the Beginning.” This revision illuminates his poetic intentions, a point that will be discussed further in this essay. The story deals with the lives and dilemmas of a group of adolescents in a Hebrew secondary school in a moshava6 in Eretz Israel. Therefore, its title is perceived as being related to the days of youth, or the beginnings of adult life. Another explanation for the title was suggested by Menachem Brinker who
claimed that Brenner himself was aware that he was starting over as a writer. After completing a cycle of observations on the life of a Jewish man, from a diaspora childhood and adulthood to becoming a resident of Palestine, he was now beginning an additional cycle and returning to the observation of life from the beginning, but this time of the new generation of Jews born and raised there (Brinker 1990, 236). So while he was widening his scope, some of his common tropes, like a preface describing an orphaned manuscript, remain consistent. The revised title of this particular story underscores that these concerns of Brenner’s were expressed in his fiction “from the beginning.”

Various Hebrew and Yiddish writers and their works are mentioned in Brenner’s “From the Beginning”: Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Peretz Smolenskin, Sholem Aleichem, Mordecai Ze’ev Feierberg, Micha Joseph Berdichevsky, Yeshayahu Bershadsky, David Frishman, Haim Nachman Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky and others. Furthermore, the story includes quotes from works by other authors, which are at times identified clearly, and at other times not. Brenner, it seems, relied on the intellectual readers’ literary knowledge and plays with them by making slight changes to the quotes, or not specifying the source from which they were taken.

What is the purpose of the many literary references and quotes in the story? In terms of the plot they are warranted, since the protagonists are adolescents attracted to stories of unrequited love and heroes searching for their way in life. Therefore they turn to texts that deal with these issues and quote them, while the main character that inspires them is the rootless young man—the talush—who appears in many of the best Hebrew stories at the turn of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it is also clear that on the meta-poetic level, there is a calculated artistic process at play here. Brenner observes the male protagonists, portrayed as anti-heroic characters since the beginning of modern Hebrew literature, with both humour and awe, and introduces their positive and negative influence on youthful readers who adopt their language and their experiences. In addition, here, too, as in all of Brenner’s stories, the question of the relationship between life and literature arises. Whereas in his previous stories the interaction is described as fluid—where life and literature combine naturally—here, there is a sense of false intentional attachment. The young people attach themselves religiously to texts that do not necessarily reflect their existential state, copying them into their notebooks, and repeating them over and over as slogans.

The main character of “From the Beginning” is Ben-Zion, a fourteen-year-old boy, who comes to Israel alone from Russia. In the beginning he dreams of becoming a doctor of philosophy, later he dreams of becoming a teacher, then he decides that it is more important to be a man of the land, and finally he becomes the editor of the school’s literary journal. The story covers two years of his relationship with his surroundings: his friends and teachers, his first experiences of love and sexual desire, and his disappointments. Ben-Zion befriends three girls: the beautiful and proud Hulda, a member of a moshava; the anguished Nehama, who has arrived from Lithuania by herself and who quotes Berdichevsky’s Orva parah (Nonsense) (Berdichevsky 1960b)7 and Feierberg’s “Hatslalim” (The shadows) (Feierberg 1968),8 and Yael, with whom he experiences his first kiss but for whom he feels no real love. At the end of the story he stands gloomily on a hill by the ocean. He waits for Hulda, who does not arrive, he feels dirty and miserable for kissing Yael, and does not understand the remoteness inherent in his relationship with Nehama. He is certain that all his dreams have proven false, that he has no
future and that he is nothing more than, in his words, “[a] wanderer on life’s path” (Hato’eh bedarkhei hahayyim) (Smolenskin 1944).9

The narrator is apparently a teacher at the school who cares for Ben-Zion and Nehama, and there is a sense of duality in his approach to the events he recounts. On the one hand, he takes into serious consideration the adolescents’ feelings that their problems are critical, and, on the other hand, he observes them from an adult perspective, amused and aware of the ridiculous disproportion of their feelings to their behaviour. Thus, two levels of reading are possible. In one, Ben-Zion can be viewed as an additional character who joins the gallery of rootless characters in Hebrew literature, seemingly another young protagonist experiencing a writing crisis and an “erotic failure.” And on another level there is the concern with identifying the intertextual connections and connotations in the text, and understanding how they create an awareness of the stratagem of parody.

This manner of reading implies that the text is postmodern. I am not using the term “postmodern” chronologically, but rather as a qualitative and critical concept. David Gurevitz explains postmodernism as a Stimmung, a mood and an attitude, an artistic style that displays a polyphonic, carnivallistic, and pluralistic way of thinking. It is not about a postmodern alternative to content, he explains, but a new method of observation. It is about using postmodern practices to re-read texts from the past (Gurevitz 1997).10

B.

In order to fully demonstrate these two levels of meaning in “From the Beginning,” one naive and the other a “parodic homage” to the talush in Hebrew literature, I must first explain the concept and definition of parody upon which this article is based, as well as attend to the seeming contradiction that lies in the phrase “parodic homage.”

Obviously, the term “parody” has a long history and many nuances. What was traditionally considered to be parody was coupled with the comic ridiculing characteristics of a work, but this view is reductive. Approaches that broaden the perception of the term see in parody multiple layers of meaning, including the serious and admiring aspects alongside the more common ridicule and reproach. According to Linda Hutcheon, the shared denominator of all definitions of parody throughout the ages is “imitation,” although modern parodies require additional ironic and critical dimensions. Therefore, she says, modern parody is a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text (Hutcheon 1985, 6, 10).11 Parody, she further argues, uses familiar patterns while organizing components differently; it deviates from the pattern and even contradicts it (Hutcheon 1985, 5–10). It is a discursive text, a work that uses repetition to link itself to other works. And whereas repetitiveness and imitation might indicate similarities, here a critical distance allows the singling out of difference at the very heart of similarity (Hutcheon 1988, 26).

Margaret Rose argues, as well, that ridiculing is not the variable that defines the function of modern parody. Following the work of F.J. Lelièvre and G. Murray who studied ancient parody, she points out that even when something like ridicule was used it did not mean that the parodist was completely negative about a target. Even
Aristophanes, who parodied Euripides, combined insight, criticism and admiration in his parodies (Rose 1993, 24).

If ridicule is not the only, or main, element defining parody, then mocking intentions might not be the motivation for the writing of parody. Respect, along with criticism, is also a critical element. Laughter is not necessarily required to achieve these aims. Numerous literary works are considered parodic while being known for their gravity, severity, and serious representations and delivery. Intertextuality, however, is an essential feature of parody. Viktor Shklovsky (2006), in his article on the use of parody in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, claimed that every parody is by nature intertextual, since it is an adaptation of an artistic expression that involves transitioning between the high and the low, and thus causes dissonance and a comic effect.

Postmodern intertextual parody, according to Hutcheon, does not, and cannot, reject its content. Rather, it appropriates and reformulates canonical works. Postmodernism signals its dependence by using the canon, but rebels against it through ironic abuse (Hutcheon 1988, 130). Hutcheon claims that postmodern parody does not disregard the past and the context of the references it cites. Instead it acknowledges the fact that what occurs today is inevitably from that past—by time and by the subsequent history of those representations (Hutcheon 1989, 94). There is a significant difference between postmodern parody and modern parody, according to Hutcheon. Indeed, they both use the strategy of appropriating the past, but they differ in the final impact of the two uses of parody:

> It is not that modernist was serious and significant and postmodernism is ironic and parodic, as some have claimed; it is more that postmodernism’s irony is one that rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance. Complicity always attends its critique. (Hutcheon 1989, 99)

In twentieth-century art, argues Hutcheon, parody encapsulates a wide scope, both thematically and structurally, and it is one of the forms most adapted by texts which tend to be self-reflective. Therefore, precisely because of this, parody does not always intend to have an authority superior to the original text that is quoted, and the object text is not always the target or the object of ridicule. The reader then does not necessarily know with which voice to identify (Hutcheon 1985, 2–4, 31–32).

In light of the reading options presented in this article, “From the Beginning” is a polyphonic work, to use the term Mikhail Bakhtin employed in discussing Dostoevsky. He claims that this writing is not about presenting one objective world according to the author’s consciousness, but rather a distributing of several layers of consciousness of equal status. The main character is not necessarily an expression of the writer’s ideological standpoint. Therefore, the design of his and other stories of this kind is different from that of stories using a monological mode. It processes a new attitude towards its object (Bakhtin 1984, 6–8). Parody, Bakhtin argues, belongs to the realm of the serio-comical, and has a carnivallistic nature. In antiquity, parody was linked to a carnival sense of the world, and parody created a “decrowning double,” that is, a double wherein this “crowning” reflected the “world turned inside out.” For this reason, parody is an expression of ambivalence. The ritual decrowning, which is dualistic, celebrates the shift itself; the process of replacability, and not the precise item being replaced. Carnival laughter is deeply ambivalent as well, since in its origin it is linked with the reproductive act.
Ritual laughter directed towards something higher (a deity or authority), shames them through ridicule in order to force them to renew themselves. Ambivalent carnivalesque laughter directed towards this shift of authorities, and truths, embraces both poles of change and combines death and rebirth, negation and affirmation (Bakhtin 1984, 107, 125–127).

In light of this, it is clear why parody is often used to indicate generational substitutions, since it juxtaposes the two conflicting voices of rebel and deposed. In this regard, Brenner’s admiration for his literary ancestors, Berdichevsky in particular, together with his criticism of their literary modes—which is well known through his critical essays—is revealed in “From the Beginning” by combining portions of text from Berdichevsky’s writings and from other writers of his generation. However, the target of this intertextual artistic work is complicated and twofold.

Thomas Green (1982, 46) indicates that mutual criticism is sometimes involved in imitative works such as parody and that “[e]very creative imitation mingles filial rejection with respect just as every parody pays its own oblique homage.” Combining respectful homage with a “thumbed nose,” is characteristic of numerous parodies, according to Hutcheon (1985, 33), and this is what makes parody a sophisticated genre that relies on the competence of the reader. The hermeneutic process, therefore, is pivotal and depends on the readers’ full implementation of it. Nonetheless, Hutcheon draws attention to the role of the author of the parody who has a power in controlling the hermeneutical contrast inferred by the reader. The parody’s “double voicing” calls attention to the presence of both author and reader positions (Hutcheon 1985, 84–88).

The two varied voices in “From the Beginning” are the old texts placed in the story that portray the talush in the full depth of his problematical character. This is in opposition to the parodic option portrayed through the young characters’ falsely adhering to experiences they do not fully understand. In this way, not only is the later work understood in light of earlier texts, but the earlier texts are also enlightened by the later work. This reciprocity is most likely one of the effects Brenner consciously strove for in the artistic creation of this particular story.

C.

Dan Miron (1987, 151–153) refers to the use of parody in Hebrew literature through the character of the talush, a process he explains as a sign of the dynamics of the field’s literary genealogy. He claims that while the writers of the modern literary generation internalized the collective mental drama of the previous generation and identified with it, in actuality they used it to express detachment, achieved through parodic design of the moment of identification. Nonetheless, this type of design can be directed against the new generation, or simply be a conscious distancing whose true purpose is nostalgic, even though critical, observation. Miron examines the phenomenon in a number of texts. The one relevant to this discussion is the relationship between Brenner’s Bahoref (In winter) (Brenner, 1964c) and Berdichevsky’s Orva parah (Berdichevsky, 1960b). Both these texts serve the parody in “From the Beginning,” a point that will be clarified later in the essay.

According to Miron, the literary references in In Winter serve to state that “this and this happened to me as well.” In “From the Beginning,” the intertextual connotations
are sorted into two prominent types: the first are references to works from Hebrew and world literature. Interest in them is derived from the erotic descriptions they contain. For example, Tolstoy’s short story, “Fransuaza,” is referenced for the description of sailors torturing a prostitute; or Y. Bershadsky’s 1899 novel, Be’ein matara (Aimless), for its scene where the protagonist seduces the virgin Raisa in a dark room; or even a lewd story in the biblical book Ezekiel of two wives who cuckold their husbands (Brenner 1964d, 475–476). The adolescents interested in this literary material are the kind of boys who disgust Ben-Zion by their vacuous behaviour and their attitude towards young women. These are mostly the native-born boys or others who aspire to be like them.

The second use of intertextual connotations are references, quotations, or innuendos from the best of the “rootless” stories in Hebrew literature. Ben-Zion and Nehama, the talush-like protagonists, who are taking their first steps in matters of love and romance, are most interested in these types of stories. This is where an examination of the way the intertextuality serves the parodic strategy of the text is required. The purposes of this strategy are few: to salute the rootless characters and, at the same time, to doubt their becoming models for imitation and adoration; to ridicule the generation of young worshippers, and indirectly, the generation of new readers. And it is also possible that Brenner covertly wonders about the essence of modern Hebrew literature and its future. It may be that in order to do so, he needs to go back to its origins, to start his examination from the beginning. True, one can wonder why Brenner depicts Nehama and Ben-Zion, male and female, alike, without making gender distinctions. Brenner, it seems, thinks that the differences between the natives and the immigrants are much larger than gendered ones, a position maintained by grouping Nehama and Ben-Zion together in opposition to the rude and vulgar adolescent native-born male.

The more complex intertextual method in the story is built around Ben-Zion, the main protagonist, and allows for a parodic outlook on Brenner’s work as well. Besides references and quotations from other authors, there is an echoing of other situations and characters that appeared in Brenner’s previous texts, especially Fayerman from In Winter.

“From the Beginning” and In Winter have similar characteristics: in both texts there are numerous references and literary quotations, and both contain a plot that is built around a protagonist who moves from one idea to the next, who is disgusted by his friends’ flirtatious behaviour towards the opposite sex, and who experiences heartbreak and remains in despair of life. In “From the Beginning,” the whole effect is lighter and more humorous. Also they both have a dialogue with Moshe Lilienblum’s (1970) Hata’ot ne’urim (Sins of youth) and specifically with Zelaphchad, the main character.15 Ben-Zion is an adolescent involved with writing and has an important literary role: he is in charge of editing and publishing the class’s literary journal. However, he experiences writer’s block and is not able to finish his story, and therefore refers to Sins of Youth for inspiration:

Ben-Zion’s unfinished story delayed them. Ben-Zion didn’t come, he pretended to be ill. He lay and read, Sins of Youth all day and at night he sat down to write, and his protagonist’s words echoed Zelapchad’s. (Brenner 1964d, 482)

In In Winter however, Sins of Youth is not mentioned explicitly but, rather, echoes the story’s introduction. According to Alan Mintz, in Fayerman’s words, which claim
that he is not a hero and that there are no interesting incidents in his past, there is great resemblance to Zelaphchad’s apologetics in the chapter entitled, “A Kind of Preface to the Reader” (Mintz 1989, 128):

I am a simple man and do nothing but write about my past. In my life there are no astounding effects or incidents, but there are troubles and tortures hidden in the chambers of my heart [ . . . ]. And if they are of no use to me, they may still be of use to others. This is why I write my life’s story. (Lilenblum 1970, 95–96) \(^{16}\)

The resemblance to In Winter, Mintz points out, is clear—the same idea and almost the exact words. In addition, in Sins of Youth, he argues, there are already many references to texts from different periods and times of Hebrew literature; so, too, In Winter rewrites themes and ideas from earlier works, such as M.A. Guenzburg’s Aviezer on childhood, Feierberg on apostasy, and Berdichevsky on erotic obsession (Mintz 1989, 128–130). An effect of a Matriyoshka doll is created when “From the Beginning” forges an intertextual chain: Aviezer → Sins of Youth → In Winter → “From the Beginning.”

In addition, the intertextuality of “From the Beginning” and its parodic manner, return the reader to Brenner’s beginning as a writer, to his first story, since they share common elements. According to Boaz Arpaly (2008), many of the critics saw In Winter as a Bildungsroman, while others saw it as a parody of the Hebrew Enlightenment Bildungsroman. Arpaly sees In Winter as sharper parody—not only as a parody of the Enlightenment Bildungsroman, but as a serious parody of the essential principles of the coming-of-age genre itself. In Winter, he argues, takes advantage of the plot structure of the Bildungsroman but at the same time destroys it (Arpaly 2008, 37–38). Parody, then, is a form Brenner was familiar with, and which he had used previously.

If we examine “From the Beginning” as a parody, we see that Brenner’s use of quotations from other works is intentionally repetitive and purposeful in the way it serves the parodic strategy: it is meant to illustrate the extent to which a talush can charm adolescents, and to reveal how they do not fully understand his intellectual and emotional entanglement. They adopt his desperation and create banal replicas, and through this they romanticize the situation. For example, Ben-Zion thinks about the words of an unnamed author, whose protagonist claimed that “love is only sorrow, rising over humanity, and confessing life’s misfortunes” (Brenner 1964d, 483). The reader is not given the source, but even when the reader identifies it, this quote is illuminated differently from its original meaning in light of the new context. Even if it is a most transparent marker, according to Ziva Ben Porat (1976), explicitly denoting the text alluded to here, immediate identification of the source text does not substitute for the activation of elements that remain to be identified. Moreover, the text alluded to and its specific characteristics cause a shift in the hierarchy of representational elements in the original system (Ben Porat 1976, 109).

These words, Ben-Zion claims, are taken from Berdichevsky’s story, “Shtei shanim umaehetsa” (Two-and-a-half years) (Berdichevsky 1960a). \(^{17}\) Shmuel, the protagonist, is in contact with three sisters and is engaged to one of them. Because he delays, she marries another man and he remains to ponder love, using the same words Ben-Zion quotes. There is an apparent similarity between both plots in the entanglement with three girls, but this is purely external. Shmuel has no real sexual appeal, whereas Brenner’s Ben-Zion, though only a teenager, has already kissed Yael. Ben-Zion cites Shmuel
automatically, though the two young men are nothing alike. He does not truly understand the depth of Shmuel’s erotic inferiority and emotional complexity. A reader who recognizes the source is aware of the incompatibility that stems from the gap between Shmuel and Ben-Zion’s situation and the parodic effect derived from it.

Additional examples occur in Nehama’s use of different quotes. She sits and studies the books on her table:

Feierberg’s writings, “From Within and Without” “From the Recent Past”—she’s read all these a few times and even copied the lines of poetry that touched her into her notebook, sometimes even changing the language from male to female, to accommodate herself—what can you do—when there is nothing new to read! . . . she picks up her notebook and reads: in the big vast universe with its pleasant entertainments, nothing captivated me but shadows. (Brenner 1964d, 476)

The sentence Nehama has written in her notebook is taken from Feierberg’s, “The Shadows,” but is not explicitly recognized in Brenner’s text. Even though Feierberg’s name was noted previously, along with Berdichevsky’s “From Within and Without” and “The Near Past,” in Nehama’s notebook it occurs in a mixture of quotations that appear without a source or any indication of the transition from one author to the next. But what does this mean? Why does Brenner create such a combination?

It is quite clear that Brenner greatly appreciated these writers and works, as expressed in some of his short articles. Even so, in this fusion between works there is a hidden argument that concerns young readers who are, in fact, the future generation. They are no longer concerned with plot or with author identity. The rootless characters captivate them, even those like Ben-Zion and Nehama who are growing up in Eretz Israel, and not in the diaspora. They are still in thrall to these characters and it will be difficult to shake off their charm and influence. These postmodern parodic examples are clearly in evidence in “From the Beginning,” as well as an anti-nostalgic attitude, for when protagonists express nostalgic emotions they are criticized. Nonetheless, at the same time the opposite argument is presented paradoxically, and expresses what is obscured in Brenner’s stories that take place in Eretz Israel: that settling in the Promised Land does not cure rootlessness. In this story it is expressed in the youth’s adoration of the talush who embodies diaspora-era conflicts. This contradiction between the arguments stems from the initial tension between the two possible readings of the story—the parodic level, which is a product of a meta-poetic reading, and the plot level, which is the automatic linear narrative reading. Vacillation between the two interpretations and the creation of reader insecurity is one of the consequences of reading the story within a postmodern approach.

This principle repeats itself throughout the story, for example where Nehama quotes from Berdichevsky’s “Nonsense” with slight changes that once again allude to the misunderstanding of the rootless characters’ complex problems, here specifically of Elimelech, the protagonist (Brenner 1964d, 477). Brenner makes a strong argument, that the talush is almost like the golem of Prague, an uncontrollable construction whose eventual destructiveness could not be anticipated by its creator. It seems Brenner thought it would be better if the new generation of Jewish youth was raised with a role model that set the example of a productive life, instead of adopting a hero given to constant introspection. This kind of role model was not available except in literature
that idealized life in *Eretz Israel*. In his article that outraged many, “*Hajaner ha’eretz-yisraeli ve’avizareyhu*” (The Land of Israel genre and its accessories) (Brenner 1960), Brenner took this kind of literature to task.

The last scene in “From the Beginning” recreates final episodes from Brenner’s previous stories, but the childish attitude of Ben-Zion and the amused tone of the narrator reveal the seeds of parody. In a few well-known stories by Brenner, we find the *talush* in a suicidal state of mind, often described in the final scene as sprawling on the ground through loss and desperation. For instance, in the story *In Winter*, the protagonist, Fayerman, lies on the ice; in “Around the Point” mournful Abramson sits barefoot on the wet ground; in “Between Water and Water” Shaul Gamzo lies on the ground beside a well. “From the Beginning” apparently ends the same way. The frustrated Ben-Zion—whose grades are unremarkable, whose relationships with the girls have failed, and whose numerous dreams about the future confuse him—is standing on a hilltop, waiting and hopeless. He waits for Hulda who does not arrive, and reflects on his fate and future and refers to himself as “a wanderer on the path of life”—in a gloss honouring Peretz Smolenskin’s work—and thinks sombre thoughts:

He wanted to skip (a grade) but this is not the way… He wanted to become a worker of the land but didn’t know how… he wanted to ask Nehama all the difficult things—but distanced himself from her… he didn’t want get involved with Yael but he did… and he’s waiting for Hulda, but she’s gone… At the beginning of the winter everything had started out so well! The path was seemingly a straight line… but, at some point, it started winding—and he didn’t know. Nothing happened, he was walking his path but he felt he had missed it, he was “a wanderer on the path” but what happened? What made him lose his way? He stretched out on the ground, his future bleak. Or more correctly—he had no future! He felt as if he were thrown on the threshold, the threshold of life, in the corridor of the universe—and nobody was letting him in, no one pitied him. He was getting more and more lost, he already was lost. (Brenner 1964d, 486)

The narrator puts the whole experience into proportion and says, “his whole life is ahead of him: he isn’t yet sixteen” (Brenner 1964d, 486). The story ends with the narrator’s amused view of Ben-Zion, and it seems Ben-Zion’s self-destructive fall to the ground is also part of the parody in the text:

But Ben-Zion didn’t weep this time. An emotional numbness got hold of him, sweeping away every thought. There was no one to be seen. He was abandoned by all. Only the wind attacked him, mussed his hair, and stirred him and finally, wallowing in the sand, he willingly rolled down the hill. (Brenner 1964d, 486)

All of Brenner’s rootless characters, whose storylines end with a self-destructive collapse onto the ground, are reflected here in a scene that is almost a caricature, creating a transition from pathos to bathos. For at the end, Ben-Zion, who is still a child, enjoys the wind and happily rolls down the hill. His mournful speech to himself is absurd since he is so young and the *talush’s* great despair is not really his fate. Brenner portrays the way the adolescents recycle the trite phrases of the *talush*, but the effect is parodic as a result of
the gap between the situation of the latter and the real circumstances of the former. The reference to Smolenskin’s story, “The Wanderer on the Path of Life,” is parodic as well.

In fact, not only does the concluding scene produce an intertextual play with Brenner’s previous texts, but Brenner relates to concerns that have already appeared specifically in his previous Land of Israel narratives—the Hebrew teacher and the Hebrew agricultural labourer. For example, Ben-Zion thinks the idealistic Hebrew pioneer is superior to the drunken Russian land worker who was born to be a farmer with no choice. An opposite claim is expressed in Brenner’s stories, “Between Water and Water” (Brenner 1964a), “From Here and There” (Brenner 1964b), and in the novel Breakdown and Bereavement (Brenner 1971), through the protagonists’ failure to become agricultural labourers and the explicit declarations that a young Jewish man is not suitable to be a labourer.19

A polyphony is thus created between Brenner’s works. Is the latter view about the superiority of the Hebrew pioneer the determining stand? The possibility that Brenner changed his mind about the inability of the Hebrew young man to become a pioneer is not likely. It is more reasonable to assume that Ben-Zion expresses this view as part of the parodic weaving of the text, a stratagem meant to show its absurdity in order to cast doubt on Ben-Zion’s credibility. His childish attitude emphasizes that he cannot be a talush, even if he declares that he is a “wanderer on the path of life.” Doubt surrounds Ben-Zion’s declarations in any case, in light of his youthful innocence and his inability to see the wider picture as it presents itself through different concerns in the story.

In “From the Beginning,” to some degree Brenner rehabilitates the disrespectful impression he had created in ridiculing Hebrew teachers in “Between Water and Water” (Brenner 1964b). Indeed, here, too, as well as in previous stories, there is criticism of these characters, only not as severe, and with greater understanding and sympathy. Some of the criticisms are now turned on the lazy students, the scorn of the staff and management, and the low pay:

—And if you want to be considered a good school, you need to increase publications, hypocrisy, languages, fields of study and ceremonies, […] And the teacher, if he hasn’t been teaching for twenty years and if he doesn’t possess an outstanding memory, will not know the lesson plan if he doesn’t prepare it or write it down an hour before he goes to teach. […] And if you want to be considered a good teacher you will know how to demand of your class and how to win its heart. But by doing what? By being overly precise?—you will be ridiculed and disrespected—by conceding?—you will not be forgiven—By giving freedom for independent work?—you will fail; the class is not in favour of spiritual work except during unusual times. We will be empathetic towards the few [teachers] that have a questioning soul and are not just doing their job, who give so and so hours and receive so and so francs […] (Brenner 1964d, 469)20

It is here that Brenner unexpectedly and seriously analyses the implication of being a teacher, which is so unlike the parodic view of them in “Between Water and Water.” There may be two reasons for this: One concerns the fact that while writing the story, he had already faced the reality of being a teacher. The other lies in the narration: it is likely that the narrator is a teacher. That is why it is not he who is being parodied here. Like most of Brenner’s narrators, he is not free of self-criticism.
In this story Brenner examines the evolution of the *talush* from the autobiographical works of the Hebrew Enlightenment, through the narratives of apostasy that track his loss of faith, and up to the fiction that describes him as a pioneer in the Land of Israel, including his adolescence as a high-school student. The metamorphosis shows that one is never really rid of the characteristics of the *talush*. This conclusion, that he will continue to be one of the main protagonists of modern Hebrew literature—with its depressing influence—takes a discouraging view of the ongoing development of Hebrew literature. On the other hand, from the perspective of the wider continuum of the Hebrew literary tradition, Brenner’s prophetic vision has shown itself to be precise. The figure of the rootless character appears in various metamorphoses in Hebrew-Israeli fiction to this day, and remains an embodiment of this tradition and its renewal.

Although presenting Brenner as “contemporary,” Boaz Arpaly (2008) does not have a postmodern point of view. In my opinion, reading “From the Beginning” as a parody, as a decidedly postmodern text, reinforces Brenner’s intention. This story is endowed with self-awareness and clearly the quotations and the references are calculatedly employed. I believe that Brenner, who is well known for his intricate architectural structures, even if they appear incidental in this story, created a form that is nevertheless as deliberate as his others, that is postmodern in nature, and that can be read as Janus-faced in two different ways. A naïve and facile plot and an underlying parody await recognition (anticipating “postmodernism”).

What did Brenner mean by the title “From the Beginning”? Should we go to the beginning, to youth, to find the genesis of erotic failure, even for a young man raised in the Promised Land? Or should we go to the beginning of modern Hebrew’s literary roots in order to show that it is impossible to thematically disentangle them from their modern literary heritage? Or maybe we should turn to Brenner’s beginnings as a writer with his first story, *In Winter*, which can be read as a parody as well, and see this one as closing the circle of his creativity before opening another? Is it significant that it is being closed ironically with a parodic homage to the *talush*? On its various levels the story allows for all these interpretations, and if Brenner’s work had not been ended by his untimely murder, the picture would surely have become clearer. However, its hermeneutic ambiguity suits its postmodern nature.

It is necessary to go back to the words Brenner puts into the publisher’s mouth in the preface of “From Here and There” to understand better his use of the *talush*:

> There is nothing new in this personality. And this good young idealistic type has already been presented—though weak-willed and a complete good-for-nothing, without any ability to withstand life’s hardships—in a surfeit in our literature! (Brenner 1964b, 321)

In this fictitious preface, the publisher argues about the quality of the literary material given to him by the character who supposedly found the manuscripts and brought them to the publishing house. The publisher claims that the story lacks what the readers of his time are looking for because it does not include beautiful descriptions of life in the Land of Israel, and because the rootless character is banal, repulsive and boring. Even though Brenner portrays the publisher’s point of view in a mocking light, the story “From the Beginning” also illuminates the phenomenon of the *talush* that is also discussed in the fictitious preface of “From Here and There.” “From the Beginning” insinuates that
the literary argument between the one who brought in the manuscript and the publisher might be the expression of an internal conflict Brenner was enduring himself. The innovation of “From the Beginning” is that he relates to the same texts that have always been his frame of reference, but in a parodic mode. If, as Menachem Brinker suggested, Brenner was indeed ending one cycle in his writing and hoping to develop a new one, the parodic homage to the rootless character of modern Hebrew literature is, by all accounts, an appropriate and honourable literary expression. Brenner, as Arpaly (2008, 12) has noted, deconstructs his narratives all by himself, as we see in the text itself, and is better at it than anyone else.

Notes

1. Published in 1910 in a special edition of Hasifrut in Warsaw.
2. Published in 1911 in a special edition of Hasifrut in Warsaw.
4. And all appear in Hebrew books and journals. Adir Cohen (1972, 139–141) indicates Brenner’s ability to describe the lives of adolescents in the years of sexual awakening. Nurit Govrin (2006, 124–125) examines the ways in which Tel Aviv is described in Brenner’s story, alongside stories by other authors who also describe the city. In a different article, Govrin (2008) examines the terminology and language of Israeli youth. She claims that this story was the result of Brenner’s work as a teacher in the secondary school Gymnasia Herzeliya in Tel Aviv during 1915–17, and how it reflects his concerns about the teenagers’ waning language skills and shallow slang. Gershon Shaked (2000) relates to the structural problems of the story and claims that it is actually based on two systems—the relationships between the characters that represent social groups (a sociological story), and episodes in the maturation process (an initiation story)—and claims that in fact the two systems parallel one another. In a discussion of Brenner’s artistic thought processes, Menachem Brinker (1990, 236) mentions “From the Beginning” as a story that perhaps marks a new beginning in his literary path.
5. Shalom Shtreit was an Israeli writer, critic, teacher, and friend of Brenner’s. In a letter Brenner tells Shtreit that Menachem Poznansky advised him not to print the story, fearing it would have a bad influence on the youth, even though he agreed that despite minor flaws it indeed had virtues. (Menachem Posnansky was a writer, translator, editor and close friend of Brenner’s. After Brenner’s murder, Poznansky set about gathering his works and letters): Brenner 1967, 421.
6. A moshava is a farming community of private farms developed by the pioneers of the First Aliyah (1882–1903).
7. An Aramaic idiom which means baseless.
8. The short story “Hatzlalim” by Mordechai Zeev Feierberg, was first published in Luah-Ahiasaf, Warsaw, 1899.
9. Peretz Smolenskin’s novel, A Wanderer on the Path of Life, was first published in Warsaw, 1905, and recounts the story of Joseph the orphan’s experiences and travels.
10. There are numerous examples of this practice: Derrida’s well-known re-reading of Shakespeare’s plays, such as his study of Hamlet (Derrida 1994); and postmodern re-readings of the Bible (McKnight [1982], or Collins [1989]). These books raise
the question of whether a postmodern biblical theology is possible. And there is the re-reading of ancient texts, such as the study of Plato’s writings (Corrigan and Turner 2007) or the literary collection Postmodernism across the Ages (Reading and Schaber 1993) that illuminates why postmodern re-reading in a chronological sequence is both possible and important. As they explain: “Our argument is that the postmodern displays the rigidly periodized temporality that has hitherto governed the institutional discourse of literary studies, that it does so in a way that doesn’t render the past irrelevant or precious but makes it more pressing and less familiar. […] The essays perform a series of acts of reading whose difference lies in the relationship that they evoke between texts and a time that is no longer ‘theirs’” (Reading and Schaber 1993, xii).

11. Hutcheon seeks to distinguish between “parody” and “satire” which are often confused. Satire, unlike parody is both moral and social in its focus, although sometimes parody can be used to satirize (Hutcheon 1985, 16).

12. Hutcheon points to a number of works that are considered to be parodies but are very “serious” in their manner of delivery. One very famous example is Joyce’s Ulysses. For more examples, also in other forms of art, see Hutcheon 1985, 5–15.

13. Bahoref (In Winter) was first published in Hashiloah 1902–1904.


15. Sins of Youth by Moshe Leib Lilienblum was written in 1872–1873 under the name Zelapchad bar Ḥushim hatoheh and was published in Vienna, in 1876.

16. All citations translated into English by the author of this article.

17. The short story “Two and a Half Years” was first published in Warsaw, in 1902.

18. The article was first published in Ha’poel ha’atzir in 1911, following harsh criticism of his story, “Here and There” (Mikan umikan) (Brenner 1964b).

19. Ben-Zion, the protagonist of “From the Beginning” praises the Hebrew labourer who is not a vulgar drunk like the Russian labourer but rather an idealist who fights for his goals (Brenner 1964d, 469). In “Between Water and Water,” on the other hand, Shaul Gamzo, the protagonist of the story, agrees with the argument that is expressed during the moshava meeting that the young Jew is not qualified to be a pioneer (Brenner 1964a, 308). In “From Here and There,” Oved Etzot (the protagonist’s pseudonym which means “hopeless”) claims in his published collection, “One small question,” that there are no good Hebrew labourers because the Jews were not born into it; it is unnatural to them (Brenner 1964b, 358).

20. In “Between Water and Water” the Hebrew teacher’s character is deliberately ridiculed through the dialogue between the teachers who are referred to not by their names but as Teacher A and Teacher B (Brenner 1964a, 294). In “From Here and There” the critique is expressed through the experiences of Lapidot’s hunchback son, who does not integrate in the teaching system in Israel due to the teacher’s envy and the teaching method in Israel (Brenner 1964b, 334–335. In Breakdown and Bereavement the teacher’s character is also perceived as negative, both as a teacher and as a character (Brenner 1971, 392).

21. Arpaly’s research, as he states, is based on formalist and structuralist approaches: Arpaly 2008, 12.

22. For instance, “From Here and There” (Brenner 1971) according to Menachem Brinker (1990, 65–114), deliberately creates an impression of being fragmented while it is well-planned.
References


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**Dr Heddy Shait** is a lecturer in the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, University of Haifa, Israel. She teaches twentieth-century Hebrew poetry and prose. Her primary research area is modern Hebrew literature, focusing on the “rootless character” (*talush*) and images of masculinity in modern Hebrew literature. **Address:** Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, University of Haifa Mount Carmel, Haifa, 31905, Israel. [email: heddysh@netvision.net.il]