The History of Hebrew Literature in Israel
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Introduction

The history of Hebrew literature in Israel is actually made up of many "histories," which can be traced back to literature written outside of Israel. The history of Israel's Hebrew literature is bound up with questions of identity and self-understanding. It reflects tensions between tradition and modern processes of secularization, between homeland and exile, hegemonic culture and the peripheries, as well as ethnicity and gender differences. On the other hand, the history of Hebrew literature in Israel can also be viewed as a one-directional movement and a transition from an exilic landless literature to a literature written on the land of pre-state Israel to an established corpus written in the State of Israel (known as "Israeli literature"). This view, however, is only part of the story or one of many possible stories (e.g. Miron, 1994; Schwartz, 2000; Hever, 2002; Shaked, 2006). This essay purports neither to tell the whole story, nor all the stories. It introduces three lines of development of this literature, while at the same time being aware of its partial and fragmented perspectives.

Exile and the Settlements of Hebrew

The Hebrew literature written in Israel is part of an ongoing project that began in the wake of the European Enlightenment when Jewish writers began to write in Hebrew in addition to their various national languages. Hebrew at that time was the language of holy scripture, the Torah and the language of prayer. Thus the emergence of modern Hebrew literature as part of the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskala*, also introduced a new project in the modern process of Jewish secularism: the secularization of language. Hebrew, which became a language of poetry, stories and novels as well as a language of literary journals and daily newspapers in eastern and central Europe, soon began to play a central role in the formation of a secular national identity.

A prominent example of the correspondence between tradition and innovation is the work of Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Born in eastern Galicia, Agnon was raised in a mixed cultural atmosphere that involved Yiddish (the language of the home) and Hebrew (the language of the Bible and the Talmud) supplemented by German (in secular literature). In 1907 he left Galicia and made his way to Palestine. Agnon's stories and novels, which take place in Jerusalem and the metropolises of Europe, the new

settlements of the [Yishuv] in Eretz Israel and the Jewish villages and *shtetls* in the Diaspora demonstrated the depth and diversity of Hebrew and Jewish traditions. Indeed, S.Y. Agnon's work embodies the transformation of old sacred traditions into the realm of modern secular poetics (Shaked, 2006).

This need to maintain old traditions within modern cultures of Hebrew can also be seen in a talk delivered to the "Legion for the Protection of the Language" in Tel Aviv in 1927. The speaker was [Chaim Nachman Bialik]. Bialik was born in the Ukraine in 1873, where he received a traditional Jewish education. His attraction to the Enlightenment movement led him to move to Odessa and, almost twenty years later, to the Land of Israel. In his talk, Bialik warns against the dismantling of the sacred content of Hebrew by the "New Hebrew." Not only does Bialik hint at the tension between Jewish tradition and secularism in the process of national revival, but he also raises the question of what the national Jewish language should be.

The question of language, of course, was not obvious, and the dispute between Yiddish and Hebrew (also called the "language war" that lasted until the 1940s) is an example of these tensions that were an integral part of political and cultural processes of self-understanding (Halkin, 2002). The issue of a national Jewish language can be traced back to 1879 when [Eliezer Ben-Yehuda] suggested reinstituting Hebrew as the official spoken language in the Land of Israel. This suggestion became political when, in 1907, the Jewish workers' party, *Poalei Zion*, declared Hebrew as the official language of the Yishuv. By contrast, at the 1908 [Czernowitz conference], Yiddish writers proclaimed that Yiddish would be the sole national language of the Jewish people. Despite the fact that the British mandatory authorities recognized Hebrew as the official language in 1922, the acuteness of the issue was still evident. There was, for example, a controversy regarding the establishment of Yiddish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1927. Bialik was in favor. However, the talk that he delivered in the same year ends with a different conclusion about Yiddish: Bialik recalled how in Russia when the battle for Yiddish began in the schools he resisted learning the alphabet "in that dialect", claiming that "the path for literature must be the path of the Hebrew word" (2000, p. 94). These apparently contradictory views on the secularization of Jewish language, and on Hebrew and Yiddish, reveal further ambiguities in Bialik's perception of national revival. These ambiguities are reflected in one of Bialik's famous poems that exposes another tension—that of "the negation of exile." The consolidation of a national home instead of a diaspora home that betrayed and a sovereign body instead of the rootless, homeless body that was associated with violations and insecurity, demanded the rejection of the exilic experience. In 1903, Bialik was sent to Kishinev to write a report on the pogrom. He stayed there a few weeks, heard the survivors' testimonies and witnessed the devastation. Instead of a documentary report, however, he returned with a poem called

"In the City of Slaughter," which demonstrates an ambivalent relationship to the victims and to what the Diaspora embodied (Miron, 2000; Gluzman, 2005). The poet accuses the (male) victims of passivity and failure to protect their families and to resist the violators. However, the intimate meeting and the over-identification with the sufferers generate poetic distance and aggressive protest that reflect the anxiety, shame and fascination in complex processes of identity and rejection, resemblance and difference.

The Diaspora that reappears as pathology is found in the work of Yosef Haim Brenner. Born in the Ukraine, Brenner also received a religious education, but as a young man he joined the Bund, a Jewish socialist movement, and later became a Zionist. He immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1909 and was killed by Arab rioters in 1921. Brenner's language reflects the tension between homeland and the countries of exile. He wished to shape a secular language to deal with the human condition, free from the burden of Jewish history but also free from the localities of a place and a territory, as can be seen in his famous essay, "The Eretz Israel Genre and its Accessories" (1911). In his novel, *Breakdown and Bereavement* (1914), Brenner interweaves political, sexual and pathological discourses that are represented and engraved in distorted bodies; those that seek redemption in the Land of Israel. The remedy becomes a disease, however, in the form of an oppressive mechanism. Brenner's criticism is not nostalgic; for indeed, the exilic experience imprinted on distorted bodies requires repair. Yet the promised correction through the reshaping of the "new" appears to be no less destructive.

The Diaspora can reappear in many ways (e.g. Ezrahi, 2000) and the return of the repressed—which refers not only to Europe—has also linguistic manifestations. This is how the Diaspora experience of other places returns in Israel and how the other language—now called "foreign"—returns in the Hebrew.

The fact that Hebrew became the undisputed dominant language in Israel did not prevent writers from writing in their native languages: Arabic (Shimon Ballas), Polish (Ida Fink), Yiddish (Yossl Birstein) and German (Werner Kraft) among others. The major works written in Israel, however, including the canonic works, were composed in Hebrew, with the result of a reverberating tension between exile and homeland, a remnant of the polyglot context of the Diaspora, as Hebrew was compelled to emulate, outdo and incorporate linguistic rivals (Alter, 1994).

This issue of exile and homeland becomes a dominant theme in the 1980s in the works of writers who sought to tell the life stories of Jews in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Germany, Austria, France, or of immigrants of European or North-African descent in Israel. Along these lines was the emergence of a group of women writers such as Judith Katzir, Alona Kimhi, Leah Aini, and Dorit Rabynian. One well-accepted

view of this tension explains that these writings were a symptom of the fractures in the national consensus that dominated the Zionist narrative (one that excluded minorities and rejected diversity in favor of hegemonic themes and a coherent, homogeneous language) as a consequence of the collective trauma following the War of 1973, the radical change in the political map of Israel in 1977 and the War of 1982 (e.g., Hever, 2002; Shaked, 2006). The despair, disintegration and decline in the wake of post-1967 emigration, the military scandal exposing Israel's hubris of power and control, the ongoing dismantling of the heroic ethos and the hegemonic (socialist) ideology that constituted the national narrative were reflected in different literary works.

Yaakov Shabtai's prose collection, *Uncle Peretz Takes Off* (1972), and particularly his novel, *Past Continuous* (1977), reconfigure and reveal the dissonances that the revolutionary vision of the collective - Zionism's socialist 'promise' - is unable to resolve. His prose is filled with urban spaces of alienation and isolation, and his literary characters include detached immigrants and relatives from Europe wandering in the workers' community in Tel Aviv. Their foreignness and displacement strikes out in the poetic language, translated and imprinted in broadly-stretched, unbalanced structures of Hebrew.

The relations (desire-negation) between exile and the settlements are also reflected in the response to the poetry of David Vogel, a European Hebrew writer, who died in a concentration camp during World War II. However, it was only in the 1980s that Vogel's prose was published and added a unique voice to the question of homelessness. *Married Life* (1986) offers images of Western-European decadence and detached urban life, a fascination with Christian traditions and anti-Semitic ideas. Vogel's prototypical hero is immune to the seductions of Vienna and is haunted by attraction and fear, thus giving a glimpse, even if only by negation, into Jewish identity that was shaped by a process of "self-hatred."

Another poetic reflection of the complex relationship between homeland and the Diaspora is demonstrated by Sami Michael. Born in Baghdad, he fled in 1948 to Iran, making his way to Israel a year later, where he worked for four years as an editor for Arabic-language dailies. In his first novel *All Men Are Equal, But Some Are More* (1974), Michael critically deals with the socio-cultural oppression and humiliation of the Mizrachim (Jewish immigrants from Eastern countries) by the hegemonic Ashkenazi (Jews of European descent) officialdom. In subsequent novels, Michael explores inner ethnic tensions and the challenging relationships and love-hate bonds between Arabs and Jews, immigrants and refugees in the State of Israel.

Foreign voices can also be heard in the works of Yoel Hoffmann, who emigrated with his parents from Europe when he was one year old. His literature tells the stories of

immigrants who came to Israel from Germany, Romania, Hungary and Iraq and indicates the potential dialogues that failed between different traditions of language, culture and religion. The foreign location and sound transfigurations echo in the titles of Hoffman's works: *Katschen* (1988), *Bernhard* (1989), *The Christ of Fish* (1991), *Guttapercha*(1993), *The Schunra and the Schmetterling* (2001), *Curriculum Vitae* (2007), among others. These works, written as musical fragments lying between genres (poetry and prose) explore the realms of past and present, invention and documentation, utopian fantasies and nightmares. They demonstrate an ambivalent relation to the Diaspora by suggesting both redemption through and negation of the exilic experience. In the way the poetic personas invoke the sights and voices of another place, and yet would never return there, Hoffmann's literature itself becomes a medium of memory.

The "place" becomes a site of experiments within which identities are being shaped and invented, reconstructed and deconstructed in the work of [Ronit Matalon]. Her novels sketch geographic and territorial borderlines, document movements of immigration, and speak of strangers at home and homelessness as a state of existence. For example, *The One Facing Us* (1995) takes place in different countries and moves between languages, Arabic, French and English as they are incorporated in the Hebrew. Using family photographs that somewhat challenge the binaries of memory and documentation, fiction and factual dimensions, the novel tells about an Egyptian-Jewish family who immigrated in the 1950s through the life stories of the children: Failure to live in a kibbutz, life in the periphery, in France or in colonial Cameroon, military service and occupation in the Gaza Strip—as if these experiences were anticipated by the collapse of utopian, Levantine promises of intellectuals in Cairo in the 1930s. The novel *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008) is another allegory of the inability to find "home". By incorporating manifests and notes written by her father who rejected the hegemonic officialdom in Israel, the narrator tells about dislocations and distracted identities in which foreign voices interfere with national symbols and cultural stereotypes, reverberating with absences and disappearances.

In 1987 and 1990, two novels by [A. B. Yehoshua] were published: *Five Seasons* and *Mr. Mani,* respectively. The novels deal with the relationships between territory and identity, myth and historical understanding. They document the attempts and failures to become a national subject and are deeply imprinted with ethnic, gender and cultural differences and haunted by the Jewish figure of Diaspora. In both cases, the central characters are of [Sephardic] descent and seem to offer alternative stories, counter versions or mirror inversions of the Zionist narrative. The novels thus become a medium of performance, role experimentation and self-reflection through which the tensions of identity and the paradoxes, hybridizations and dialectics of being an Israeli are explored.

This dialectic is also explored and imprinted in the innovative language of Orly Castel-Bloom. Her novel *Dolly City* (1992) demonstrates the language of hysteria. Castel-Bloom deconstructs linguistic forms, displacing discourses of fear and anxiety about extermination and contemporary terror with the experience of the Holocaust. The novel's protagonist is a mother who carves the territorial borders of Israel on her son's back. The body of the son thus becomes an estranged site of medical experimentation and traumatic discourse, a combination of technological fantasies and national figurations that harbors the horrors of modern being.

The figure of Diaspora haunts also the protagonist of Nurith Gertz's biographical fiction *Unrepentant* (2008). It tells the life story of Amos Keinan, her life partner, an author and columnist, who embodies the diversity and complexity of Israeli identities. A son of secular socialists, he was a member of the *Hashomer Hatzair* youth movement, and joined the Canaanite movement in 1946. Later, he joined the *Lehi* underground and fought in the IDF during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. He immigrated to Paris in the 1950s, returned to Israel in the 1960s, participated in the subsequent wars and engaged privately in negotiations with Palestinians. The biography ends, however, with an ironic, satirical acknowledgment of the inability to find "home" and the unavoidable deformation—political, ethical, and cultural— reflected in the metaphor of a "mutation" that failed to become the new man of the Zionist vision.

The Zionist Narrative and the Shoah

The variations and embodiments of the "new" that emerged at the wake of a modern Hebrew culture were inseparable from political agendas—calamity and disaster transformed in visions of redemption and salvation in the national home – the Land of Israel. It is well known that already in 1898 Max Nordau spoke about the "Jewish problem" as an acute question that demanded a radical solution (see Nordau, 1941). Forty years later this question revealed other horrific layers. In the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion emphasized the inevitable connection between the "Jewish problem" and the necessity of a sovereign land, a homeland in Eretz Israel: "The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people— the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe—was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State" (Quoted in Artmitage, 2007, p. 238). It is not my purpose here to show how and to what extent people in the Yishuv dealt with the Holocaust and the catastrophe of World War II. Scholars have pointed out how, until the 1960s and the shift as a consequence of the Eichmann trial, the experience of the Holocaust survivors was denied and repressed in favor of heroic narratives: The contribution made to resistance during the war, the heroic struggle and the riots in the ghettos— instead of responding to the suffering and the pain of the victims (e.g. Feldman, 1992;

Zerubavel, 1994; Shapira, 1997). It took more than a decade until dealing with the trauma, the destruction and the suffering, the terror and the death, was no longer a minor phenomenon in the Israeli cultural and public sphere.

Hebrew literature written in Israel demonstrates these tensions in dealing with the Holocaust and the catastrophe of World War II (e.g. Mintz, 1996; Schwarz 2000; Ezrahi, 2000; Milner, 2003). Until the 1960s it was mainly poets such as Nathan Alterman, Avraham Shlonsky, Abba Kovner, Amir Gilboa, who responded to the events in Europe. In 1951,*Streets of the River*, Uri Zvi Greenberg's monumental lament on the disaster of European Jewry was published. A different mode of response to the catastrophe can be found in the work of Dan Pagis, a poet of a younger generation who was born in Bukovina and interned in a concentration camp during World War II. In 1946 he arrived in pre-state Israel. His famous poem "Sealed Transport," from the poem collection *Transformation* (1970), resonates with the problem of representing the "unrepresentable" while seeking a mode of writing about the Holocaust. Pagis condenses into a single verse the remnants of a biblical allusion and the concreteness of a horrible devastation. His poetic work composes and decomposes universal myths and particular reality, creates and erases images and sounds in anonymous traces of being that reverberate with absence and uncompromising loss.

Already in his first Hebrew poem collection, *The Fire in the Stone* (1957), Tuvya Ruebner deals with the calamity and the loss of family. Born in Bratislava and arriving in pre-state Israel in 1941, his poetry hovers between his home town in Europe and the Israeli kibbutz, between European landscapes and the sites of the new land and between Hebrew and German – his mother's language.

Europe is also the location of Leah Goldberg's play, *The Lady of the Castle* (1956). Besides dealing with the question of Jewish survivors, it reveals another layer in the conflict that preoccupied Goldberg throughout her work; namely the gaps between the European literary and aesthetic traditions and the cultural alternatives that have been shaped in the Zionist homeland. Another play that depicts the complex relationships between the European immigrants who experienced the disaster, and the local population in Israel in the first decades of the state is Ben-Zion Tomer's *Children of the Shadows* (1961). Its protagonist, who was brought as a child to pre-state Israel from Teheran during World War II, while his parents were left behind, tries to detach himself from his exilic identity by becoming an Israeli "Sabra", but is haunted by shadows of the past.

In *The Syrian-African Rift* (1974) Avot Yeshurun mourns his dead parents and the devastated hometown by means of fragmented, broken forms. Yeshurun translates the destruction into a poetics of ruin. He writes about death and about a deep feeling of

absence and shame experienced by those who stayed alive while their parents were left to die in Europe ("Poem on the Guilt"). Yeshurun's poetry is written in Hebrew but it also incorporates fragments of Yiddish, Polish, Arabic and English into a hybrid tongue and unstable textures of language that reveal the unsolved tensions of cultural and political traditions, identity and territory. The poetry interweaves the mourning and the consciousness of catastrophe with a sharp criticism of the political agenda in Israel. Yeshurun is a political poet. His poetry responds to the Arab-Israeli conflict by demonstrating the unfulfilled dialogues and blindness toward others.

In subsequent decades, additional authors of prose have written about the Holocaust such as Yonat Sand, Yoram Kaniuk, Hanoch Bartov and Aharon Appelfeld. The younger generation, children of survivors, such as Savyon Liebrecht, Nava Semel and Amir Gutfreund also published Holocaust-themed prose.

A fascinating example that introduces innovative modes of dealing with the Holocaust in Hebrew literature is David Grossman's novel *See Under: Love* (1986). In exploring the problem of representing this historical event, the author subverts traditional modes of speech and description by merging genres (apprenticeship novel, encyclopedia, biography) and the realms of testimony and fiction, documentation and fantasy. The first chapter out of four tells about a son of Holocaust survivors in Israel who secretly grows a Nazi animal in the cellar—an imagined figure he creates in order to have an enemy he can overcome and beat. The pathology of the boy who is haunted by the ghosts of the past is revealed as a monstrous distortion in the process of repression and denial. His pathology also points to the power and fixation of a collective ethos and ideology that leave no space for mourning and empathy.

In the search for an appropriate mode of dealing with the catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust, Nathan Shaham adds a different perspective with his sequential novels*The Rosendorf Quartet* (1987) and *Rosendorf's Shadow* (2001). In confronting cultural traditions and ideological experiments, he tells the story of musicians who emigrated from Germany in the 1930s to pre-state Israel. The letters from Europe, a testimony of a place and a culture (which betrayed their most devoted inhabitants) that harbored a calamity, are incorporated into the events of the Yishuv in Israel and the foundation of the state.

Letters from Europe arrive also in Yehudith Hendel's work. Her first collection of stories, *They are Different People* (1950), correlates between the War of 1948, mourning and bereavement and the arrival and displacement of the Holocaust survivors in the Land of Israel. Later, in her novels, *Street of Steps* (1955) and *The Yard of Momo the Great*(1969), she writes about socio-cultural issues, migration and the poverty, hardships and ethnic tensions in Israel of the 1950s, while critically exploring the national promise of the "melting pot." The Holocaust is reflected in

encounters with survivors that often disrupt the harmonic image of redemption inherited in the Zionist promise. In her last novella of the story collection, *The Empty Place* (2007), Hendel returns to the War of 1948, this time to tell about the Arab flight and expulsion from Haifa, by juxtaposing it with the remnants of the German Jewish exile. *Near Quiet Places*, a non-fiction collection of five radio conversations about her visit to Poland, was published in 1987. Warsaw, Hendel concludes, is empty of Jews, a fact that also resonates with the denunciation of exile as reflected in the claim that there is "no other place" (Shaked, 2006). Despite this, Hendel ends her Polish travelogue with two Jewish poets, whose work of language became a work of memory: Avot Yeshurun who mourns his dead parents and Paul Celan, a writer in German who survived the concentration camps, yet years later put an end to his life in the Seine.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict, War and Literature

The history of Hebrew literature in Israel also reflects political times; namely the time period of the state and the times of war. Indeed, war and the discourse of war have always been part of Israeli literature (e.g. Miron, 1994, 2006; Hever, 1999, 2002, Schwartz, 2000). Associated with the crucial moment of the [establishment of the State of Israel]{.link} and its formative role, the roots of this literature, as mentioned above, can be traced back to Europe and the complexities of Diaspora and homeland, shedding light on myths of rebirth and processes of national self-identification and giving secular form to religious experience and theological vision. It is a literature that has elaborated different and sometimes contradictory narratives of revival and catastrophe. Part of this literature was shaped by the Israeli-Arab conflict by reflecting on political struggles and giving poetic forms to violence and aggression, terror and anxiety, mourning and bereavement. While this literature contributed to the construction of a national identity, at the same time and along the similar lines, it has also called into question the binaries of good versus evil, friends versus enemies, Israelis versus Palestinians and Jews versus Arabs.

The political time is engraved in the titles of literary groups such as "The [Palmach]{.link} Generation" ("Generation of the Land") and the "Statehood Generation". The explicit correspondence between literature and political engagement is already demonstrated in the role played by writers and poets during the years of the Yishuv. Alterman, a prominent poet, whose symbolist poetry of the modern metropolis and the living-dead "wanderer" became a part of the canon, wrote "The Silver Platter" in 1947. This poem, which was published in the daily newspaper, *Davar*, shortly after the United Nations' decision to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab States and the outbreak of the 1948 War, gave poetic embodiment to the death of young people that enabled the creation of the national Jewish state. Thus the "living-dead" figuration was transformed into a "national

allegory" (Hever, 1999)—an image of a collective rebirth that confirmed the Zionist narrative.

This same theme is seen in another celebrated poem by Haim Gouri that describes the beautiful, aesthetic "resurrection" of young soldiers who had fallen in the battlefield. Their rise from the dead is given a name and meaning in the symbolic form of a nation—the State of Israel. The emergence of a new generation of writers born in pre-state Israel, natives raised in a Hebrew environment (the official language of the Yishuv), who participated in the War of 1948 and were later involved in political life, showed this strong linkage between the collective ethos and the literary creation. Authors such as Moshe Shamir, Yizhar Smilansky (S. Yizhar) and Igal Mossinsohn focused on the struggle for national independence during the years of the British Mandate, World War II and the Holocaust and the War of 1948. Their plots deal with national and collective conflicts in the Land of Israel—both in contemporary and in ancient times. Examples are [Moshe Shamir]'s novels, *He Walked through the Fields* (1947) and *His Own Hands* (1951), which, despite the apparent confirmation of the Zionist narrative, his protagonists —embodiments of Sabras and of the desire to rid themselves of the burden of the Diaspora— cannot be redeemed even in Israel, or on the battlefield. Similarly, his historical novel, *The King of Flesh and Blood* (1954), uses the period of the Second Temple and the struggles under the regime of Alexander Yanai to criticize Ben-Gurion's policies. The interference with national, collective values based on heroic norms, confidence in the process of settling and subjugating the land and uncompromising readiness for self-sacrifice in the long process of internalizing the collective social and militaristic agenda is revealed in the work of S. Yizhar. *The Prisoner* and *Hirbet Hiz'ah* (1949) sharply criticize the Israeli Army while hinting at the analogy between here and there, now and then and Jewish and Arabic exiles. The work itself, however, did not reject the hegemonic Zionist narrative.

In the 1960s a new generation of authors emerged such as Yehoshua Kenaz, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, Ruth Almog, Itzhak Orpaz, A. B. Yehoshua, and Amos Oz. Their works expose collective and national issues, generational struggles reflected in Oedipal narratives and a partial merging of the limits between self and others, Israelis and their enemies. Amos Oz wrote his first collection of stories (1966) around life in the kibbutz. The story *Nomads and Viper* focuses on a conflict between members of a kibbutz in the Negev and the Bedouins, the Jewish settlers and the Arabs, in which the "wandering Jew", a negative trope in modern European anti-Semitic discourse is reflected in the uncanny (*unheimlich*) figure of the Arabic nomad.

The demonic, haunting figuration of the Arab reappears in A. B. Yehoshua's *Facing the Forests* (1963). The story's protagonist, an Israeli student who is assigned to guard the national forests, escapes from the city to the solitude of the forests with the aim of achieving a breakthrough and making some discovery in his doctoral dissertation on

the Crusades. A discovery does take place, although in a different direction from what he had anticipated. Not the Crusades, but rather the remnants of an Arab village are revealed after the trees from the forest which covered them go up in flames. The shadows of the past rise up from the void of forgetfulness, breaching the "silence" of 1948. Yehoshua's allegory traces a reality that was shaped, among other things, as an ethos of growth and prosperity tied to ideological forestation projects, sometimes for the purpose of concealment and denial of destruction and ruin.

In *Musical Moments* (1980), Yehoshua Kenaz tells the story of a boy in the Yishuv in [British Mandate](#) times, his encounters with the immigrants from Europe and his decision to stop playing music (an exilic European inheritance) in favor of militaristic activity. Army service—itself a formative experience of the melting pot ideology that imposes restrictions and regulations on the subject—is called into question in *Infiltration* (1986). The novel tells about a group of Israeli soldiers who fail to write themselves into the homogeneous national narrative. They pose an alternative that cannot, however, be fulfilled as the narrator, a witness to identity processes, documents moments of distortion and deformation in the birth of the new, native body.

The poets of the Statehood Generation too, offered an alternative perspective for dealing with the national tensions and the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Their poetics demonstrated an individual and skeptical voice, rather than the collective voice that confirmed and played a formative role in shaping the national heroic ethos. The characteristics of this poetic revolution were defined by Natan Zach in his 1959 critical essay on Alterman. It was also Zach, who in 1954 wrote about the "forgotten poet" David Vogel. Two years later, a prominent female poet, Dahlia Ravikovitch, published her first poem collection, *The Love of an Orange* (1959), followed by other collections, which created a unique voice that resonates with violence and pain, desires and oppression of a female subject. In *True Love* (1987) and *Mother with Child* (1992), Ravikovitch dealt with the violence, horrors and suffering associated with the War in Lebanon. The poem "Hovering at a Low Altitude" presents a female narrator who announces how she watches an aggressive act of violation from a safe distance. The image of "low altitude" hovering over an atrocity hints at the moral distortion of detached observation in any political realm. This poem was a part of the political poetry published in the early 1980s as a response to the war, including the events in Sabra and Shatila.

Another poet of the Statehood Generation is [Yehuda Amichai](#), who immigrated to the Land of Israel from Germany shortly before World War II, and started to write during the fighting of 1948 (see Gold, 2008). In this respect, his poems were shaped by the establishment of the state. Amichai seemed to take a different direction from that taken by older poets, using everyday language, apparently simple, yet highly complex,

and including rich intertextual layers (Kronfeld, 1996) to deal with the horrors and traumas of the war. His poetry resonates with the ongoing Israeli war that goes under different names—mourning friends who have fallen on the battlefields ("Rain on the Battlefield"), interweaving childhood spaces with the sites of war ("Two Poems about the First Battles"), and blaming and calling the existence of God into question (e.g., "God Full of Mercy" and "To My Mother"). The experience of exile that seemed to be torn out, forgotten and expelled from his "Israeli poems", returns in his last collection of poems. In *Open Closed Open* (1998) the remnants of exilic sites, broken tombstones in Jewish cemeteries, fragments of Jewish prayers, and memories from his German hometown find their way back to the poetry that has become part of the Israeli consciousness.

The prose of the 1990s was apparently indifferent to the political agenda in Israel. Literary works by Castel-Bloom or Etgar Keret were characterized by everyday, "thin" language that was full of slang and shortcuts, concepts of commodity and consumption, popular media images, a macabre humor and semi-childish consciousness. Yet in shaping these poetic textures, the authors subvert ideologically fixated binaries of gender, nationality and ethnicity, as well as political myths and deceptive stereotypes that are imprinted in contemporary Israeli discourse. Their texts thus resonate with the ongoing political conflict by offering a critical perspective on the cultural discourses in Israel; including those that are heard at the "borders," in checkpoints and other points of contact between Israelis and Palestinians.

Another sign of subverting the undisputed "truths" and fixated binaries of the national literature can be seen in the merging of genres: The publicist and journalist with the poetic and the literary. An example is David Grossmann's interviews with Jewish settlers and Palestinian refugees in the West Bank published in *Yellow Wind* (1987) that appeared close to the outbreak of the First Intifada. Grossman's most-recent novel, *Until the End of the Land* (2007), is not only a dreadful document of war, but also acts as a resonating medium of Israeli society. This is an account of war from a mother's perspective, a mother who never participated in *Siach Lochamim* (literally a dialogue of fighters, translated into English as *The Seventh Day*) and who demonstrates her terror through her attempts to postpone and defer the death of her son. The novel hovers between places and dates that are imprinted in the Israeli collective memory. It shifts between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the [Galilee](#) and the Jezreel Valley, Hebron and Sinai, Jenin and Jaffa—landmarks of unresolved tensions and uncompromising sites of contesting narratives.

Through these sites the poetic characters retrace misfortunes and distortions, violence and abuse, along with moments of happiness and minor flashes of pride, love and longing. Walking along the "Israel Trail" that criss-crosses the land and constitutes a chronicle of the state, the journey embodies the story of a place and a nation, the story

of "reterritorialization." It is a story of ongoing confrontation and conflict between Israel and Palestine—a story of military power and terror attacks, of helplessness and defeat, of occupation and oppression, and of endless suffering. A woman's flight from a message of death: She indeed flees, wishing to reach the end of the land where the message about a dead child will never reach her. Her flight that unfolds in poetic time and space is also a return—an ongoing confrontation with angst that transcends conventional categories and cultural binaries. The flight brings her back to the point of departure, to the "home" in the fullest sense of the word—the bare, unbearable consciousness of death.

Conclusion

In exploring the history of Hebrew literature in Israel, this essay emphasizes the ambivalent moments and ambiguous interrelations that tend to challenge monolithic narratives and conventional categories. It shows how this literature that responds to historical processes also reflects the contemporary complexities of Israeli society. The essay focuses on three major tensions that have been imprinted in Israel's literary canon since its emergence—main roads that meet and diverge, merge and become separate once again—Exile and the national territory of the Hebrew language, the Holocaust and the Zionist narrative, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's Hebrew literature demonstrates the reappearance of that which should have "disappeared" in the process of becoming an independent nation, namely the return of the exilic Jewish body despite the attempts to constitute the new Israeli body, the victimhood bound up with the disaster of World War II despite the ethos of sovereignty and heroism, and the ongoing oppression of the other despite the promise of emancipation. In this sense, it recalls how the Zionist enterprise with its cultural ramifications encompasses not only the ideal but also its failed implementations.

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