Israeli Literature and the American Reader

by ALAN MINTZ

THE PAST 25 YEARS HAVE BEEN a heady time for lovers of Israeli literature. In the 1960s the Israeli literary scene began to explode, especially in terms of fiction. Until then, poetry had been at the center of literary activity. While S.Y. Agnon's eminence, rooted in a different place and time, persisted, the native-born writers who began to produce stories and novels after 1948 never seemed to be able to carry their efforts much beyond the struggles and controversies of the hour. Then suddenly there were the short stories of Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, followed by their first and second novels. These writers were soon joined by Shulamit Hareven, Yehoshua Kenaz, Yaakov Shabtai, and David Grossman. Into the 1980s and 1990s the debuts of impressive new writers became more frequent, while the productivity of the by-now established ones only intensified.

What was different about this new Israeli literature was the quality and inventiveness of its fictional techniques and its ability to explore universal issues in the context of Israeli society. There was also a new audience for this literature; children of immigrants had become sophisticated Hebrew readers. Many of the best books became not only critical successes but best-sellers as well.

Was this a party to which outsiders were invited? Very few American Jews knew Hebrew well enough to read a serious modern Hebrew book, so that even if they were aware of the celebration, they could not hear the music. But soon English translations began to appear: Yehoshua's short-story collection *Three Days and a Child* in 1970 and his novel *The Lover* in 1978, Oz's *My Michael* in 1972, Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* in 1980, Shabtai's *Past Continuous* in 1985, and Grossman's *See Under: Love* in 1989, with many others in between and after. The translations were generally of high quality and published by good houses, and they received mostly enthusiastic and discerning notices in major critical venues, such as the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books.*

For those involved with modern Hebrew literature as teachers and scholars, this was a moment to savor. Hebrew literature had reached its first great flowering in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century in the works of Mendele Mokher Seforim, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Yosef Hayim Brenner, and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky; it had attained another high

point with Agnon and Uri Zvi Greenberg in Palestine between the two world wars. In this early phase of the Zionist revolution, it was often literature that led politics. Long before the Yishuv, the Jewish community, prospered, sophisticated masterworks in modern Hebrew were being written and read. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the roles were reversed, and it took time for the impressive social, political, and military accomplishments of the new enterprise to be matched by the same resourceful innovation on the front of the literary imagination. When the two finally came together, as happened in the 1970s and 1980s, the combination was powerful. Not since the time of the Bible and the ancient liturgical poets had so much that was so good been written in Hebrew. When, after a period, the English translations of these works began to appear, a unique opportunity presented itself. Scholars of Israeli literature could now turn to the Jewish public and say, "Look here! This is what we've been talking about; this is what has been so exciting!"

The response, to put it mildly, was underwhelming—the excitement turned out not to be infectious. When measured in objective terms, it is difficult to argue that Israeli literature has enjoyed anything more than a very limited success in the United States. Despite strongly favorable notices, Israeli novels in translation have not sold very well.[1] A few have done respectably and gone into paperback, but many of the key texts are out of print entirely, as anyone who tries to put together a syllabus for a college course in the field quickly discovers.

Even if commercial criteria are set aside, the record remains equivocal at best. When it comes to the generality of committed Jews who are affiliated with Jewish institutions and are involved with the life of the community, it is difficult to find much recognition of the names of Israeli writers, not to mention experience reading their works. In the case of the elite of the community—rabbis, educators, lay and professional leaders of organizations and federations—the name recognition may be there, but familiarity may extend only to the political views of the writers, for example those of Oz or Grossman, and not to their main literary work. Even university teachers of Jewish studies tend to regard Israeli literature not

[1]Exact sales figures are nearly impossible to obtain. Publishers regard these figures as proprietary information, and for a variety of reasons, are not willing to disclose them. What figures mean altogether is also rather slippery, because the number of books shipped to bookstores is often much more than the number actually sold, and this is further complicated by subsidiary rights of various sorts. In the end, because authors are paid only for books sold, it is only from royalties that sales figures are derived. The availability of information depends on the author's willingness to share it and his or her record keeping. I wrote to the authors discussed later in this essay with the hope of shedding more light on their relative success in America. Some responded sympathetically; some not at all. But none was able to provide the information I was seeking.

as a manifestation of current cultural creativity that makes claims on them as intellectuals, but rather as one area of academic specialization among others.

In the end, however, the muted reception of Israeli writing in the United States by Jews is less a reflection of the absolute number of its "users" than a sign of a failure of these writings to become part of the intellectual discourse and cultural repertoire of the American Jewish community. One might reasonably have hoped for more, given the relationship of involved American Jews with Israel. Certainly, the Zionization of American Jewish life is a striking phenomenon of the contemporary Jewish scene.[2] While only a small number of American Jews are Zionists in the classical ideological sense, the vast majority are pro-Israel in their attitudes, and a significant number are attached to Israel in a variety of ways. In addition, American Jews buy books: they buy fiction and works of general interest in higher proportions than the general public; and they buy many more books of Jewish interest than they did in the past, judging from the explosion in recent years of titles dealing with Jewish life and the Holocaust. Moreover, it is not the case that the Israeli novels under discussion are unapproachable or unenjoyable, as witnessed by their enormous sales in Israel. Sales of 40,000–50,000 copies, which are not uncommon for a successful novel in Israel, would be counted a substantial success even in the United States. Given the tiny proportion of readers in Israel to readers in America, the numbers are astounding.

The lack of response to Israeli literature in the United States is highlighted by a comparison with the situation in Europe. For nearly a decade, sales of Israeli literary works (including, occasionally, volumes of poetry) translated into European languages have been steadily increasing. Exact sales figures are hard to come by, but the number of new titles translated each year gives some indication of the current situation. In Italy, during the 1970s and 1980s, only two or three titles appeared yearly on average; beginning in 1989, the number began to climb, reaching 12 in 1994. In Germany, five or six titles appeared yearly until 1988, when the number began to climb dramatically to reach 27 in 1994. In the United States, by contrast, translations reached their peak in 1989, when 27 were published, but then dropped down to below 20 in 1994.[3]

It is startling to contemplate the fact that in Germany, a country with a tiny Jewish population, the same number of translations of Israeli literature now appear as in the United States. After Germany comes France

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[2]For a useful summary of these attitudes, see Eytan Gilboa, *American Public Opinion Toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Lexington, 1987).

[3]I am grateful the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature and its director, Nili Cohen, for sharing information about the sales of Israeli literature in Europe.

in number of titles translated, and then Italy, Spain, and Holland, with a scattering of titles in Polish, Swedish, Portuguese, Arabic, Greek, and Chinese.

More important, perhaps, than the quantitative dimension is the fact that important new Israeli writers in Israel can become familiar to European readers, while American readers, including American Jewish readers, have no inkling of their existence. Orly Castel-Bloom, for example, is regarded as the most brilliant practitioner of an audacious, postmodernist sensibility in Israeli writing. French, Dutch, and German readers can sample four of her titles, while none of her books have appeared in English. Itamar Levy's *Letters of the Sun, Letters of the Moon* (1991) is the most important recent Israeli contribution to the representation of the inner experience of the Arab; it will soon appear in Italian, French, German, and Spanish, along with two other books of Levy's. Savyon Leibrecht is an accomplished short-story writer who is central to the rise of women's writing in Israel. She is being translated not only into Italian and German, but also into Chinese. Neither Levy's nor Leibrecht's books have appeared in English.

We return then to the question: Why is it that when Israeli literature has come of age and finds itself in the midst of its greatest boom, American Jewish readers, so cultured and so committed to Israel, evince little interest in it? Some answers to this question suggest themselves, having to do with the differences in the reading habits of Americans and Europeans, with the general fate of the audience for serious fiction in America, and with the deep ambivalence American Jews feel at the prospect of encountering the realities of Israeli society. Our first order of business, however, is to focus on the actual record of the reception of Israeli literature in the United States. It needs to be underscored that the failure of this literature to secure a broad audience is only part of the "career" of these books on these shores. The other part is the fact that Israeli novels are acquired and translated and published by prestigious commercial houses without subsidy; that they are reviewed thoughtfully in respected journals; that they make their way into bookstores and public, synagogue, and university libraries, and onto the lists of book clubs and reading circles, as well as the syllabi of college courses and adult education offerings. And, of course, they are purchased and actually read by thousands of people. All this is a tangible reality that demands attention.

The Dynamics of Reception

How does a piece of writing written in Hebrew and produced in Israel get translated, published, reviewed, distributed, read, and discussed in America? What are the constraints and mediations that favor some works over others?

The English translation of an Israeli novel may be said to represent, in publishing terms, a double survival. The book first has to get itself published in Israel before it becomes a candidate for the exceedingly smaller ranks of books published in a foreign language. How it joins these ranks is related to the publishing scene in Israel and the changes that have occurred in it over the years.

During the first decades of Israel's existence, the key publishing houses were allied with political parties and the kibbutz movements: Sifriyat Poalim, Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, Am Oved, and others. Beginning in the 1970s, these institutionally backed publishers were made to share the market with commercial houses such as Keter and Zemora-Beitan, which conducted themselves much more like their American counterparts. This shift, which echoed the larger retreat from ideology and the move to an open-market economy, produced complicated consequences. On the one hand, it made it easier for women, Oriental Jews, and other marginalized groups to get their voices heard in the literary marketplace and to connect with new audiences for literature. On the other hand, quality writing had to pay its own way and could no longer depend as much on institutional subsidies. The publishing scene became more driven by the search for best-sellers, whose appearance was attended by intensive public-relations campaigns.

How then does a writer get translated into English once his or her work has achieved some success in Israel? It is easier for some then for others, of course. Established writers such as Oz and Yehoshua and, by now, Grossman, have long-term contracts with publishing houses that have become their "homes" in America: Oz with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Yehoshua with Doubleday, and Grossman with Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Anything major that they write will almost automatically appear in English. (The justice of this arrangement is another matter. Many critics think that Oz's last several novels are inferior to the work of several younger writers who remain untranslated. But this appears to be a general state of affairs that is not special to the case of translation.)

Another factor is genre. Short stories have always been a hard sell in translation, although Israeli publishers and readers are more sympathetic to first books of stories than are their American counterparts. Often, as was the case with Oz's *Where Jackals Howl,* stories that were written and published at the outset of a writer's career have to wait until there is a successful novel (for Oz it was his second novel, *My Michael,* which was his debut work in English) before a publisher agrees to bring out the earlier stories.

Although the "serious" novel has long reigned as the genre of choice in translation, mysteries and thrillers are now mounting a challenge. Israeli readers have long had to satisfy their appetite for detective novels and mystery stories by recourse to the many translations into Hebrew

from English and French, the two languages in which this type of material has reached high levels of sophistication and variety. At present, however, accomplished Hebrew writers like Yoram Kaniuk, Shulamit Lapid, and Batya Gur are turning out mysteries that are rooted in the particularities of Israeli life which, in the tradition of Ruth Rendell and P. D. James, aspire to be something much more than entertainments. The success of Batya Gur's recent detective series, including *The Saturday Morning Murder* (1992), *The Literary Murder* (1993), and *Murder on a Kibbutz* (1994), are cases in point.

Then there are works that resist translation and writers who resist having them translated. Amalia Kahana-Carmon is one of the key figures in the New Wave that reshaped Israeli fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, and the most important precursor of the current boom in women's writing. She is usually grouped together with Oz, Yehoshua, and Appelfeld and spoken about with the same high regard. Yet whereas interested English readers are familiar with the work of the latter, Kahana-Carmon is locked away in a secret garden. In part, it is a concealment of her own making. It is said that she has never permitted her work to be rendered into English because she believes it to be untranslatable.[4] While her stance is idiosyncratic, it is not entirely a conceit. Her classic work explores the imaginative and fantasy life of female protagonists, and the highly lyrical and figurative language she uses to represent these inner states is indeed difficult.

Sometimes the size and subject matter of a book are simply too imposing. By most accounts, S. Yizhar's *The Days of Ziklag* (1958) is the best Hebrew novel of the 1950s, the first important native Israeli novel, and the only work of the Palmah-generation writers to transcend the strictures of socialist-positivist aesthetic. Still, the novel runs to some 1,143 pages in Hebrew—Hebrew usually translates up to a third longer in English—and while it is set during the War of Independence and follows a fighting unit in the southern campaign, there is no conventional plot and no stirring battle scenes. The power of the novel stems almost entirely from the internal monologues of the young soldiers and the elaborate nature descriptions of the northern Negev. *The Days of Ziklag* has never been translated into English, although the German rights have been bought by Suhrkamp in Frankfurt.

Another example of an untranslated work is Haim Be'er's *The Time of Trimming* (1987), a long novel that examines the boundaries between Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy by focusing on a small army unit staffed

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[4]One short story by Kahana-Carmon that is available in English is "Na'ima Sasson Writes Poems," trans. Arthur Jacobs, in *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction*, ed. Carol Diament and Lily Rattok (New York, 1994), pp. 48–70.

by religious Jews and charged with burying soldiers who die in action or in training accidents. Be'er is one of the best of a small group of writers who probe the religious world of Israeli society using novelistic tools. (His first novel, *Feathers* [1980], is set in the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Ge'ula during the fractious controversy over accepting German reparations in the 1950s.) Although centering a long novel like *The Time of Trimming* on an army burial unit may work well with Israeli readers—the book was quite successful—it may well not resonate with the American reading public.

Personal relations, personal contacts, and personal presence also play a role in determining which books get translated. There are literary agents who represent Israeli writers, and the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature in Tel Aviv acts in the role of agent on behalf of individual writers in promoting and negotiating contracts for publication abroad, although more in Europe than in America. But the personal exertions of authors remain important. A good example is Yoram Kaniuk, a writer of comic grotesque fictions who lived in New York for many years in the 1950s and 1960s. Kaniuk is one of the best published Israeli writers in America, with six or seven books to his credit—from *The Acrophile* in 1961 to *His Daughter* in 1989. It would be surprising if Kaniuk's long sojourn in New York did not make it easier for him to get his work published here. He is an important writer, but his hefty representation in English is out of proportion to the standing he is accorded by most critics and readers in Israel.

Yehoshua Kenaz and Yeshayahu Koren, on the other hand, are two highly reputed writers who have been laboring for as long as Kaniuk but have only recently seen some of the their work appear in English: Kenaz's *After the Holidays* (1987) and *The Way to the Cats* (1994) and Koren's *Funeral at Noon* (1996). How their work got translated makes a related point. Both authors have been published in America by Alan Lelchuk's Steerforth Press, a small quality publishing house located in Hanover, New Hampshire. Lelchuk is an American writer who for a long time has taken an interest in Israeli writing; together with Gershon Shaked, he edited the important collection *Eight Great Short Hebrew Novels* (1983). Lelchuk's familiarity with the literary scene in Israel—and the flexibility afforded by a small press—have drawn him to some very fine writers who have been overlooked by the industry giants. Ted Solotaroff, who for many years was Yehuda Amichai's editor at HarperCollins, is another example of a powerful editor within the publishing world whose commitment to Israeli writing has been an important factor in establishing careers and advancing reputations.

Authors have to be lucky in their translators, and Israeli writers by and large have been. The major exception is Agnon. While he is regarded by

many as the greatest Hebrew prose writer, he wrote in a learned pseudo-naive style that laid many traps for translators; two of his great novels, *The Bridal Canopy* (1937) and *A Guest for the Night* (1968), do not come across as particularly magisterial in English.[5] The current group of Israeli writers, in contrast, works in styles that are more recognizably novelistic and are laden with fewer allusions to classical texts. Therefore, with some of the exceptions noted above, their work does not present obstacles to good translations.

In the corps of translators into English, there are two preeminent figures. Dalya Bilu is a translator of enormous energy and scope, who has worked with most contemporary Israeli writers; born in South Africa, her translations have a slight Anglo rather than American hue. Hillel Halkin, who is American, has also worked with a wide spectrum of current writers, although he has devoted considerable time to brilliant translations of classics of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, including the works of Mendele, Shalom Aleichem, Brenner, and Agnon. There is another group of translators who are principally associated with a single writer: Nicholas DeLange with Amos Oz, Betsy Rosenberg with David Grossman, and, recently, Jeffrey Green with Aharon Appelfeld. In each of these cases, a writer has found a translator who has a special affinity for his work and who can be relied upon to provide a continuity of voice from work to work. Other accomplished translators include Zeva Shapiro, Seymour Simckes, Richard Flantz, Philip Simpson, and Barbara Harshav.

Getting Noticed

Once a Hebrew book is translated into English and published in the United States, it embarks on an uncertain journey of dissemination, which moves along two tracks. One is a commercial track related to marketing, advertising, shipments to booksellers, and sales. The other track involves the growth of a book's critical reputation as formed by published reviews, word-of-mouth comment, and standing within the academy. Sometimes the two tracks move forward together, but sometimes not. Certain publishing projects can be born into more privileged circumstances than others and given better chances before they enter the world. An enthusiastic editor can build momentum for a book by getting the sales people excited about it; and their interest makes a great deal of difference when it comes to convincing the large chains like Barnes & Noble to carry

[5]An exception is Hillel Halkin's translation of *A Simple Story* (Schocken, 1985). See also the translations of some shorter texts collected in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* by S. Y. Agnon (Schocken, 1995), edited by Anne Golumb Hoffman and Alan Mintz.

the book and display it prominently. An advertising budget certainly helps, as does a budget for a book tour. If an author can present himself or herself well in English, personal appearances in the form of book fairs, talk shows, campus and bookstore readings, and consulate-arranged parties can provide an important edge.

There is no denying that published reviews play a role in the commercial dissemination of books. A glowing notice in the *New York Times* is important for sales. Not to be underestimated, however, are the low-profile but influential services that preview new books for libraries and bookstores such as *Publishers Weekly, The Kirkus Report,* and *Library Journal.* Book reviews, like movie and restaurant reviews, certainly function on one level as consumer reports, which are read with an eye to deciding whether a given book may be worth acquiring. Yet on another level reviews have a life of their own, which has to do with the making of reputations and with the general circulation of ideas. For the curious literate person, the ritual of sitting down, bagel in hand, of a Sunday morning to read through the *New York Times Book Review* is not an activity whose goal is to locate a desired commodity in a catalogue; it is an opportunity to eavesdrop on culture and find out what people are talking about in the world of ideas.

The book supplements and daily reviews of the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* probably have the greatest impact on sales. But in intellectual and literary circles they carry little weight as compared to a number of smaller journals which usually publish their reviews too late to have an effect on the crucial initial sales of books. Reviews in the *New York Review of Books, Commentary,* the *New Republic,* the *Nation,* the *New Leader,* and *Midstream* tend to be longer, more nuanced, and more ambitious in seeking to relate the book at hand to larger complexes of ideas and cultural phenomena. In these intellectually influential journals the main challenge is getting noticed. Only a small number of the serious books published in a given season are chosen to become the subjects of these deeper and more extensive essays. Israeli literature has been moderately successful in competing for this scarce intellectual air time. It has been aided by the fortuitous fact that some editors are not only familiar with the Israeli cultural scene but also read Hebrew. Neal Kozodoy at *Commentary* and Leon Wieseltier at the *New Republic* are two cases in point. It has also helped that there are figures of great intellectual authority who are actively concerned with Israeli literature. Chief among them is Prof. Robert Alter of the University of California-Berkeley, whose writing on the subject comes in the context of his distinguished contributions to many areas of the humanities. The late Irving Howe, who was an intellectual presence in so many areas, also urged attention to Israeli literature in the 1970s and 1980s.

Critics like Alter and Howe, by example, underscore the role of reviewers and reviews as mediators between cultures. Translation is surely the great step in the process by which a work of literature written in one language and culture reveals itself to another language and culture. But it is book reviews that serve as the forward stations that first receive and process the messages sent by the foreign culture. It makes a significant difference whether these stations are occupied by "insiders," who are conversant with the cultural discourse of the foreign society, or by "outsiders," for whom the foreign culture remains foreign. In reality, of course, there is a continuum between the two; and in no sense does this distinction privilege the perceptions of one over the other. Nevertheless, being an insider is different because it brings with it a special burden of judgment. Knowing not just the work itself but the societal and cultural formations from which it emerges forecloses a kind of innocence and opens up another set of responsibilities.

When an insider reviewer writes about Israeli literature in a national publication, important possibilities open up. Such writing is unlikely to be parochial; rather it will seek to make connections to the general world of literature and current ideas. Such writing enhances respect for the subject and legitimizes its inclusion in the discourse of American culture. And there is always the hope that, having found the matter of a review intriguing, readers who have no previous associations with Israeli literature will pick up the book, read it, and take an interest in the subject.

Ten Books/Six Authors

To gain a better sense of the reception of Israeli literature in the United States, it is useful to look at how key works have been treated by reviewers in major national and Jewish publications. Such reviews, of course, represent only a part of a reception process that unfolds on many levels and never approaches closure. Thus, it would be revealing to check the acquisitions of libraries (university, city, Jewish community, and, especially, synagogue) and the borrowing patterns of their users. Many groups, especially synagogue sisterhoods and Hadassah chapters, have book circles or periodic programs in which book reviews are given. It would be informative to know how often Israeli literature is discussed and the reactions to it that are voiced. Even in the case of published reviews, examining local Jewish community newspapers would represent a different level of search, one that is beyond the scope of the present study. There are dozens of community papers; many carry notices by local reviewers, while others carry syndicated columns. Undoubtedly only certain works of Israeli literature in translation get selected for attention at this level, and it would be telling to find out which do and which do not, not to mention what is said about them.

The discussion that follows focuses on ten books by six authors. They are listed here with the Hebrew publication date given in parenthesis: Amos Oz, *My Michael* (1968), translated by Nicholas DeLange, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972; Amos Oz, *Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966), translated by Nicholas DeLange, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973; Amos Oz, *Where Jackals Howl* (1975), translated by Nicholas DeLange, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981; A. B. Yehoshua, *Three Days and a Child* (1962), translated by Miriam Arad, Doubleday & Co., 1970; A. B. Yehoshua, *Early in the Summer of 1970* (1972), translated by Miriam Arad, Doubleday & Co., 1977; A. B. Yehoshua, *The Lover* (1977), translated by Philip Simpson, Doubleday & Co., 1978; Shulamith Hareven, *City of Many Days* (1972), translated by Hillel Halkin, Doubleday & Co., 1977; Yaakov Shabtai, *Past Continuous* (1977), translated by Dalya Bilu, Jewish Publication Society, 1985; Aharon Appelfeld, *Badenheim 1939* (1979), translated by Dalya Bilu, David R. Godine, 1980; David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (1986), translated by Betsy Rosenberg, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989.

These particular books have been chosen for examination because they generally represent the first appearances of the authors in English, thus affording us an opportunity to see the beginnings of their American careers and the initial reactions to their work. The review publications surveyed are those tracked by two standard references: the *Book Review Index* and the *Index to Jewish Periodicals.* These guides cover major national and Jewish journals; they do not, however, index major newspapers except for the *New York Times.* In any case, the aim of the exercise is not to document case histories of individual works, but rather to look for broader patterns of response to major works of Israeli literature. These patterns, in fact, organize themselves under four general headings.[6]

THE STATUS OF ISRAELI LITERATURE AS LITERATURE

Whether Israeli literature should be taken as a direct reflection of the embroiled and besieged nature of Israeli society or should be regarded as a more removed literary artifact has been an important consideration

[6]There is an additional subject that should be mentioned in passing without making it a separate category: the tendency to compare Israeli writers to better-known Western writers. Oz is compared to Hemingway, Camus, and Plath and is even called a Levantine Jane Austen. In Yehoshua's case, names invoked include Kafka, Mann, Chekhov, Faulkner, Simenon, Gide, Hawthorne, and Pinter. Shabtai reminds reviewers of Proust, Balzac, Faulkner, and Joyce. Appelfeld evokes Edward Hopper, Mann, Kafka, and Proust. In Grossman's case it is Garcia-Marquez, Faulkner, Rushdie, Melville, Joyce, and Kafka, in addition to Bruno Schulz. The purpose of all of this glorious name-calling is both to domesticate the foreignness of these writers by comparing them to familiar masters and also to make claims for their nonparochial importance.

for reviewers since the first important translations began to appear in the 1970s. This issue comes to the fore in Richard Locke's surprised reaction to Oz's *My Michael,* in the *New York Times* (May 25, 1972):

> [A]dvance rumors hardly prepare one for this first translation of his major work. *My Michael* is anything but a provincial achievement; it has nothing to do with noble kibbutzim, Sten guns and sabras, nor with the Talmudic dryness of Israel's Nobel Prize-winner, the late S. Y. Agnon. It's quite the last kind of book one expects from a young writer living in the midst of a melodramatic political situation, for *My Michael* is an extremely self-conscious and serious psychological novel, slow, thoughtful, self-assured and highly sophisticated, full of the most skillful modulations of tone and texture.

Alan Lelchuk makes a similar point in reviewing Shabtai's *Past Continuous* in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 21, 1985): "No kibbutz utopias here, no Jerusalem mystique, no Zionist uplift, no sabra heroics—in other words, no magical society."

Locke and Lelchuk write against the background of a popular perception of Israel fostered by such American books—and their Hollywood versions—as Leon Uris's *Exodus.* In this version Israel exists only as a beleaguered and vulnerable nation populated by idealistic soldier-farmers. Certainly, American Jewish organizations labored mightily during the first decades of Israel's existence to reinforce this image. Yet this is not the actual world revealed in Israeli fiction, as Faiga Levine remarks in reviewing Oz's *Where Jackals Howl* in *Book World* (May 31, 1981): "[the] characters are not the joyous prototype kibbutzniks of the United Jewish Appeal posters." For many reviewers, the encounter with Israeli literature in translation, experienced as sophisticated and nuanced literary art, comes as a radical surprise.

Israeli literature in translation has often been welcomed by reviewers for its truth-telling capacity. Lily Edelman, for example, writing about Yehoshua's *Early in the Summer of 1970* in the *National Jewish Monthly* (April 1977), argues that the book provides a "key" to "the malaise, the despair, the somber reckoning of the soul that constitutes the stuff of the contemporary Israeli nightmare." While she finds the translation of his stories flawed, she considers them "indispensable for any reader desirous of touching truth about the contemporary Israeli mood and situation."

Far-reaching claims for the truth-telling function of Israeli literature are also advanced by James S. Diamond in *Conservative Judaism* (Winter 1979), the journal of the Conservative rabbinical organization. Writing as both a rabbi and a scholar of Hebrew literature, Diamond urges his fellow rabbis to take Israeli literature with full seriousness. His text is Yehoshua's *The Lover,* whose plot centers about deviance and family dysfunctionality. It would be a "grave misreading," Diamond argues, to regard *The Lover* as a "pulp novel best serialized in a women's magazine." He continues:

> What I . . . wish to claim is that [*The Lover*] offers as revealing an insight into post-Yom Kippur War Israel as any political, economic or sociological tract of the last two or three years. The novel was written during the months preceding the May, 1977 election and can be read as a fictive presentation of the context in which the Labor-led coalition was repudiated. By exposing the immoralities and the emptiness of much of life in Israel today, Yehoshua is tacitly reaffirming a rational Zionism of humanism and moral development. It is antithetical to the mythic Zionism that celebrates Jewish power, blood, and soil.

Some reviewers have discerned a collective dimension in Israeli literature that sets it apart from other writings. This point emerges most forcefully in discussions of Shabtai's *Past Continuous* and Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*. In reviewing *Badenheim 1939* in *Partisan Review* (Winter 1982), William Phillips makes the bold claim that "[i]t is the weight of the *Badenheim* theme that forces one to reexamine the ideas about fiction that we have inherited from both the modernist and avant garde traditions." Writing at a time when there was much talk in literary circles about the "disappearance of the subject," Phillips sees in Appelfeld's work the centrality of historical events as they are experienced by a people or a society as a whole. At the heart of Applefeld's fiction, he maintains, are historical and social forces rather than individual psyches.

Irving Howe puts forward a similar claim in reviewing *Past Continuous* in the *New York Review of Books* (October 10, 1985). Taking note of the dozens of characters who populate the novel, Howe indicates:

> One soon comes to feel that one "knows" a good many of them, for [Shabtai's] is an art of the representative, an art of the group. A community is releasing its experience, a generation is sliding toward extinction: the community, the generation of "labor Israel," socialist Zionism, which was central in the creation of the young country but has by now—say, the late 1970s—succumbed to old age and debility. If there can be such a thing as a collective novel, then *Past Continuous* is one.

Sven Birkerts echoes Howe's point in the *New Republic* (May 27, 1985) in observing that Shabtai takes the stream-of-consciousness mode of writing, which is "by definition a subjectively centered idiom" and turns it "into a means for expressing the collective life of an extended human network."

While Shabtai's and Appelfeld's novels are surely distinctive in giving expression to a collective dimension, this element is touched upon in the critical response to the full range of Israeli writings, including recent postmodernist and "post-Zionist" narrative. Again and again, the point is made: Israeli literature, despite individual realizations, is about the nation as a whole.

THE MASTER THEMES OF ISRAELI LITERATURE

In the case of the reception of Israeli literature in the United States, it is fair to say that every reviewer reports on a new work in translation from within some previous conception of what the enterprise is about. Each reader "realizes" the meaning of the work according to what is most relevant to his or her concerns. These conceptions—variously called by literary theorists "master plots" or "meta-narratives"—are elaborated by reviewers from within their own interpretive frameworks. What are the master themes that reviewers discern in the Israeli writings under consideration here?

For many reviewers, without doubt, the master theme of Israeli literature is life under the conditions of war. Anatole Broyard goes directly to this issue in his review of Oz's *Where Jackals Howl* in the *New York Times* (May 22, 1981): "What is it like, the emotional life of people who exist in a constant state of crisis? Does the political cheat, or does it intensify, the personal? Do deeply felt causes constrict or expand character?" Broyard's answer is that they constrict. He thus finds Oz's writing powerful, but his characters lifeless and controlled by principles and fixed ideas. This is a widely shared view of Israeli literature as a whole. It expresses a sympathetic understanding of the constraints under which Israelis live; it identifies those constraints and the unremitting and tragic conflicts that produce them; and it expresses a detached inquisitiveness about the nature of behavior under these conditions.

Another key theme that emerges in discussions of Israeli literature is the "Arab question." This is the case despite the fact that the subject has only a slight presence in the works being considered here. Israeli literature has largely construed Israeli reality internally, with the Arabs largely excluded from the literary imagination. With the arrival of Oz and Yehoshua on the scene, the issue began to open up, but only in sporadic and partial ways.[7] Still, the "Arab question" is much on the mind of reviewers. For example, while Oz's *Where Jackals Howl* contains only one story—"Nomad and Viper"—in which an Arab character is portrayed, A.G. Mojtabai, in his review in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 26, 1981), argues that the "most haunting issue" raised in the book "[i]s that of exclusion, dispossession—the question of Isaac and Ishmael, why one son is favored and the other not." Praising *Where Jackals Howl* as "strong, beautiful, disturbing," Mojtabai locates its distinction in grap-

[7]A real breakthrough occurs with the character Naim in Yehoshua's *The Lover*. For the first time in Hebrew literature, the inner life of an Arab is explored and the character is allowed to speak in his own voice. Yet this genuine innovation goes largely unnoticed in the reviews.

pling with "a dimension of the Israeli experience not often discussed, of the specter of the other brother, of a haunting, an unhealed wound."

In reviewing Oz's *My Michael* in *Time* (July 3, 1972), A.T. Baker points to the Arab twins who appear in Hannah Gonen's dreams as the factor accounting for the novel's "smashing success" in Israel. He continues: "The passion that animated the early founders of Zion has cooled. The new passionate people are the Arab fedayeen, and in some small dark recess of the national psyche, the Israelis are jealous." It is this political reading of the novel that Robert Alter seeks to counter in his treatment of *My Michael* in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 21, 1972). "Any consideration . . . of a Palestinian Question," Alter mainstains, is "irrelevant to [Hannah's] conjuring with the Arab twins, who represent an alluring, threatening dedoublement of the male principle, an image of suppressed desire to submit to brutal sexual forces."

Writing in the *New York Review of Books* (December 21, 1978), Alfred Kazin also takes up the "Arab question" in considering Yehoshua's *The Lover*, a novel in which the Arab theme is indeed conspicuous. He observes: "What I value most in *The Lover*, and never get from discourse about Israel, is a gift for equidistance—between characters, even between the feelings on both sides—that reveals the strain of keeping in balance so many necessary contradictions." The "gift for equidistance" that Kazin identifies here refers not to political discourse, but to imaginative discourse, in which the impacted conflicts are not resolved, but rather observed with varying degrees of sympathetic distance.

Other efforts to identify master themes of Israeli literature focus on internal changes within Israeli society, especially the transition from what Amos Elon has called the generation of the founders to the generation of the sons. While this is a central preoccupation of Oz's early work, it did not force the attention of most reviewers until Shabtai's *Past Continuous* placed it unavoidably between the cross hairs of critical focus. That novel begins and ends with both the death of one of the members of the founding generation (Goldman's father) and the suicide of his son (Goldman). In his extraordinarily perceptive review of *Past Continuous* in the *New York Review of Books* (October 10, 1985), Irving Howe underscores the point that the novel takes off from one of the conventions of Western literature—the "myth of historical and moral decline." The generation of Goldman's father, Howe argues, was seized by "a tremendous yearning for social and moral transfiguration, a leap through history, a remaking of souls" that culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel. In the aftermath of that state-making enterprise, he observes, the founding fathers have slumped into an "irritable mixture of rectitude and cynicism," while their children are caught up in despair and dissipation.

The theme of generational decline as depicted by Shabtai in *Past Continuous* is put in perspective by Sven Birkerts in his review in the *New Republic* (May 27, 1985):

> The transformations that other nations have undergone over centuries have in Israel been compressed into decades. The elders were faced with clear obstacles and did what had to be done. Goldman and Israel and Caesar have had no such luck. To them has fallen the task of defining the values of the culture, and they do not know where to begin.

In reviewing a broad sampling of Israeli literature in *Commentary* (January 1978), the present author argues that the speed with which change has occurred in Israel under conditions of war has produced a powerful current of nostalgia and a strong desire to escape history. I point to a number works, most especially Shulamith Hareven's *City of Many Days,* that give expression to a yearning for the Mandate period as a time when the cleavages between Jews and Arabs and among Jews themselves had not fully hardened, and when the possibilities of individual identity, even for women, had not yet been overwhelmed by historical necessity.

Between the individual and society stands the family, and some observers of Israeli literature see the disintegration of the family as yet another master theme. Once again, it is Shabtai's *Past Continuous* that provides the focus for critical discussion, since, in addition to being "about" the disintegration of families, the novel is structured at its very core by an interlocking network of family relations. Highly dysfunctional families also populate Yehoshua's fiction, a point stressed by reviewers of *Early in the Summer of 1970.* Writing about Yehoshua's *The Lover* in the *New York Review of Books* (December 21, 1978), Alfred Kazin notes that the family is the "traditional center of Jewish existence," but that in Yehoshua's work it is a center that dramatically does not hold.

Amid the search for master themes, the more perceptive reviewers have not lost sight of the fact that much of Israeli literature is given over to an engagement with the basic elements of human experience. The persistence of the nonrational, the crushing of sons by fathers, the corrosive effects of isolation and repression—these are some of the themes that have been identified in the review literature. This whole area is brought nicely into focus by Lily Edelman in her review of Yehoshua's *Early in the Summer of 1970* in the *National Jewish Monthly* (April 1977): "[I]n a masterly mix of realistic detail and bemused perception, Yehoshua raises the particular to the universal. War of husband vs. wife, Arab vs. Jew, and nation vs. nation is transformed into man's battle against himself, against his ideas, his goals and purposes, man's eternal, unrelenting struggle against nature, society and God Himself."

THE DIASPORA CRITIQUE OF ISRAELI LITERATURE

American Jews are Diaspora Jews, and the way in which the Diaspora is represented in Israeli fiction—an infrequent occurrence, be it noted—can generate strong responses on the part of readers. A good example is David Stern's review of Oz's *Elsewhere, Perhaps* in *Commentary* (July 1974). The novel depicts a Diaspora Jew, Siegfried Berger, who embodies a kind of radical evil unlike that of any of the other characters in the novel. Stern finds Berger's character to be "embellished by Oz with all the grotesque flourishes that once marked the typical anti-Semitic caricature of the Jew." Stern goes on to declare that "Israeli literature, if it is ever to mature, will undoubtedly have to confront the critical issue of the relationship of Diaspora Jewry to Israel and the relation of Israel to Diaspora Jewry, in all its troubled complexity. . . . The novel fails precisely where the imagination might have offered insight into the nexus of Zion and Diaspora."

The differing political views of American Jews about the Israel-Arab conflict also provide a standpoint for interpreting Israeli literature, although this happens less frequently than one might expect. This political angle is especially evident in the way in which some reviewers treat Grossman's *See Under: Love.* The "politics" of the novel is by no means clear, but because Grossman has revealed his distaste for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in *The Yellow Wind* (which was written after *See Under: Love,* but published in translation in the United States before it), there exists a kind of invitation to connect the two books. This connection as seen from the political left is developed by Adina Hoffman in *Tikkun* (March/April 1990):

> [E]qually fierce [in *See Under: Love*] is Grossman's admonition against an understandably but woefully misguided reliance on the past as eternal justification for the present. No doubt he would contend that the bankrupt moral state of Israel's present policies is due in part to the too frequent sounding of Holocaust alarms, designed to drown out the din of Israel's own aggressive actions against others.

From the political right, Ruth Wisse develops a very different point in her scintillating review of *See Under: Love* in the *Boston Globe* (March 26, 1989). She also invokes *The Yellow Wind,* but does so in order to identify a weakness in the novel:

> For all its invention, there is no moral tension in this book of the kind that derives from the decisions of protagonists who must take reality into account in the conduct of their lives. Instead, the author pits his imaginative will and his will to innocence against the human condition. In fact, readers familiar with *The Yellow Wind* . . . will recognize here the same dilution and avoidance of moral complexity that distorts his reportage of Arabs and Jews on the West Bank.

Among the issues that figure importantly for some American Jewish reviewers but find little resonance in Israeli literature is feminism. Israeli literature of the 1970s is not rife with portrayals of self-actualizing women, yet this is the lens through which Gloria Goldreich, writing in *Hadassah Magazine* (May 1972), sees Hannah Gonen, the troubled heroine of Oz's *My Michael.* For Goldreich, Hannah is a "woman, programmed into women's work—marriage and motherhood—struggling to free herself and become her own person." Another issue is baldly stated by the unnamed reviewer in *Choice* (April 1979), who, after generally praising *The Lover,* opines—with an enormous reserve of naivete—that the only weakness in the book "is its rather shallow treatment of Judaism and its religious values." The present author has expressed disappointment—less naively, I hope—with Grossman's failure to draw upon the enormous and varied repertoire of responses to catastrophe in classical Hebrew sources.

THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE HOLOCAUST

In sheer quantitative terms, one is struck by the large number of reviews of Holocaust-related novels such as *Badenheim 1939* and *See Under: Love,* as against the works that focus on contemporary Israel. *Badenheim 1939* and *See Under: Love* are impressive works of fiction, but the breadth of their reception cannot be explained by their inherent artistic achievement alone. One cannot help noting that publications which had previously barely acknowledged the existence of Israeli literature wrote—often glowingly—about Appelfeld's novel. These include *Newsweek,* the *Christian Century,* the *Nation,* the *National Review, Partisan Review, Present Tense, Punch, Sewanee Review, Tradition,* the *Voice Literary Supplement,* the *Wilson Library Bulletin,* and *World Literature Today.* The expanded list of publications covering *See Under: Love* includes the *American Book Review,* the *Boston Review, Commonweal,* the *Los Angeles Times Book Review, Review of Contemporary Fiction,* and the *West Coast Review of Books.*

What is most telling about the critical reception of *Badenheim 1939* and *See Under: Love* is that for most reviewers the fact that they are written in Hebrew by Israelis from within the enterprise of Israeli literature is largely irrelevant. To be sure, Nehama Ashkenazi, writing in *Tradition* (Summer 1982), points out Appelfeld's connections to Hebrew writers like Brenner and Agnon. Similarly, in his treatment of *See Under: Love* in the *New Republic* (May 15, 1989), Hillel Halkin is careful to situate Grossman's Holocaust novel in the context of his previous non-Holocaust writing and to identify the Hebrew stylistic devices and period echoes in the work. When all is said and done, however, the generality of review-

ers approach both novels in terms of the solutions they offer to the problem of representing the Holocaust in literature. It is as if these novels were contributions made to world culture by Israeli literature in which the origin of the gifts, while perhaps noted, is not terribly important.

Moreover, these works belong to a very privileged circle. Edmund White concludes his review of *See Under: Love* in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 16, 1989) with this encomium:

> In a few mythic books, such as Faulkner's *Sound and Fury,* Gunter Grass's *Tin Drum,* Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* large visions of history get told in innovative ways. *See Under: Love* may be a worthy successor to this small but awesome canon.

Badenheim 1939 is everywhere compared to Kafka, and after calling the book a "small masterpiece," Irving Howe, also in the *New York Times Book Review* (November 23, 1980), identifies Appelfeld as a "spiritual descendant of European modernism, though he lives in Israel and writes in Hebrew."

It may be pointless to try to prize apart the two components of this phenomenon: the fact that these are books about the Holocaust and the fact that they are significant literary achievements that depart from the conventions of Israeli literature. It seems fair to say, however, that no work of Hebrew fiction whose subject is contemporary Israeli society, no matter how outstanding its artistic realization, is likely to garner the amount of attention and admiration won by Appelfeld's and Grossman's Holocaust novels.

If It's So Good, Why Don't People Read It?

If this extended sojourn among the reviewers has proven anything it is that in at least one place in American culture, even if that place is not a broad avenue, Israeli literature is being taken seriously and written about thoughtfully. What we have sampled is only a selection of early books by key writers; the volume of critical discussion would be amplified considerably if we went on to include later works by Oz (*Perfect Peace, Black Box, To Know a Woman,* and others), Yehoshua (*Late Divorce, Five Seasons, Mr. Mani, Open Heart*), Appelfeld's many novellas, Meir Shalev's *Blue Mountain* and *Esau,* Grossman's *The Book of Intimate Grammar,* and others.

Having documented this solid critical reception, we are brought back to the question of why Israeli literature in translation has had disappointing sales and failed to make an impact on the American Jewish community. Answers to this question are necessarily conjectural,but a few lines of analysis suggest themselves.

The relative success of Israeli literature in European countries in comparison to America, to begin with, can tell us something about the reading habits of Americans in general. Because Europe is divided into small countries, European readers have long been accustomed to reading in translation, not to mention the fact that many can read in another language altogether. If you are Dutch or Swiss or even German or French and you are a reader of literature to begin with, you will as a matter of course find yourself reading translations of serious literature. This is due to a number of factors. Among them is the awareness of an interdependent European identity and the plain fact that the literary systems of smaller countries are expanded and enriched by translations into that language. The result is that European publishers and readers are not just open to but often eager for translations of good works of fiction. And this is completely separate from whatever interest in Israel and the Jews is satisfied by these works.

Americans are very skittish when it comes to reading literature in translation, and publishers know this better than anyone. The world of published books already written in English is perceived to be so extensive and so polymorphous that given the limited time Americans have for reading to begin with there is no pressing need to look farther afield. Reading literature in translation also reminds Americans of college courses when they were required to read difficult works of European modernism or long continental novels. This applies to American Jews, as well. Even if they buy more or read more books and even if they are interested in Israel and the Jewish world, there is nowadays no lack of domestically produced books to answer their needs.

American Jews who wish to engage Israel through reading fiction, moreover, do not have far to look. Beginning with Leon Uris's *Exodus,* there has been a steady stream of popular novels covering this territory. More recently, one sees an increase in multi-generational family sagas written from the point of view of female protagonists. What is common to most of these works is a focus on heroic moments in the history of the state of Israel: its founding struggle against the background of catastrophe and world war, the capture of Eichmann, the Six Day War, the raid on Entebbe, and so forth. In reading these paperback sagas, American Jews are using literature to connect to Israel in a way that characterizes a much larger pattern: They are using Israel to buttress their own identities. The glow of the heroic-romantic version of Israel abets this process; the moral realism of the Israeli literature we have been discussing apparently does not.

Israeli literature, it would seem, is experienced by some as disquietingly subversive. The point is made affectingly by one reader at the very be-

ginning of the arrival of the first translations of the new Israeli writers. Jerome Greenfield's review of Yehoshua's early stories in the *Jewish Frontier* (December 1970), the magazine of the Labor Zionist movement in America, records the difficulty in squaring the existential despair reflected in the stories with a constructive and uplifting vision of Israel. The violence and emptiness of Yehoshua's characters in these stories provides an interesting test case because the potentially disturbing content does not derive from slice-of-life actualities of Israeli society but from a deeper and more universal vision of the human condition. This is one type of "difficult" material, but the reaction to it typifies the larger problem of reconciling the vicarious investment of Diaspora Jews in a certain vision of Israel with the way that society is experienced and represented by its writers.

Greenfield's sense of disorientation is worth quoting at length because it expresses what must have been a sincerely felt dilemma for many readers.

> In the space of some half century [Israel] has succeeded in creating a new type of society, a new type of man. Granted that the image we get of this new society and man is often polished over by public-relations efforts of various Zionist organizations or ideology-blinded observers. Yet there is, by common agreement, an irreducible core of truth to this image, attested to not only by the objective achievements of Israel and Israelis in peace and war but also by the thousands of outsiders who have been visiting the country every year over the past decades and come away invariably entranced by the open vigor of its life style, the uncomplicated patriotism of its people, the direct affinity they feel for their natural environment, their simple, unself-conscious ease in the general social milieu—which often stir American Jews so deeply, beset as they are with the many complexities of their own intricate, hyphenated existence in the U.S. And the problem that Yehoshua poses is how we are to relate his unrelenting morbidity, the invariable isolation of his protagonists, their destructive self-negation, their total unadjustment to their forests, their deserts, their climate and cities to this other image we of Israeli life and, indeed, that Israelis have of themselves.

Aware of the respect Yehoshua's work has been accorded in Israel, Greenfield knows that the contradiction cannot be "rationalized away" by taking the stories as "sickly atypical." Instead, he works toward the difficult realization that our understanding of Israel needs to be enlarged to accommodate what is learned from Yehoshua's writing about the "persistence of human irrationality and destructiveness and the need of such feelings for outlet at the expense of civilized, constructive rationality." This is a learning that is courageously arrived at but hardly celebrated. Although the reviewer has learned something about how Israelis "deal with their inner lives," the conclusion of the review leaves some question as to whether the native admiration of American Jews for Israel can re-

main unaffected by the unwished-for insights thrust upon them by Israeli literature.[8]

From its inception Hebrew literature has always seen itself as a truth-telling literature. In this it is really no different from the serious literature of all advanced cultures which propose to offer a critical representation of the way we live now. As a genre, the novel itself, from the days of the knight from La Mancha to the present, has taken as its goal replacing illusion with reality. Whatever the perfection of artistry and literary form, truth-telling is an appealing quality only to those who want to know the truth. For American Jews, reading Israeli literature in translation must feel like eavesdropping on the internal squabbles of a family whose dirty laundry one does not want to see because it is too troubling to one's own purchase on purity.

Israeli literature is likely to remain important to those who have a different kind of relationship to Israel, to those who have discovered these writers in college courses, and to serious readers of fiction generally. The circumscribed compass of that aggregate reflects a larger truth about the Jewish people at the end of the 20th century: the drifting apart, in what seems to be an irreversible tectonic process, of American Jewry and Israeli Jewry.

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[8]The anonymous reviewer in *Choice* (May 1977) had this caution to offer about *Early in the Summer of 1970*): "One admires Yehoshua's noteworthy technique, but his negativistic, almost nihilistic, philosophy makes one hesitate to recommend this work to a general college audience, and then only after they had been exposed to other writers, such as Agnon."