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The Unhomely In/Of Hebrew Literature

A symposium dedicated to research and teaching of Modern Hebrew literature within the framework of a wide, interdisciplinary literary context, provides us with a precious opportunity to reflect upon our work in the field. For me, one course such reflection may take is a renewed consideration of literature's embedded tendency to dismantle predominant narratives, among them monolithic national narratives which literature in general, and Modern Hebrew literature in particular, is often assumed to support and fortify.

This is particularly relevant to my present research and teaching; My readings of the literature of some of the prominent authors of Hebrew literature of the past 100 years focus on their attempts at transgressing confined borders, by way of constantly searching for “decentered-ness” and exposing a fundamental yearning for otherness. These readings indeed expose literature's embedded resistance to the canonization of a national narrative, founded on prescribed conventions of identity, place and time. I believe an emphasis on these subversive aspects of Modern Hebrew literature provides a ground for studying and teaching it in the context of such recently flourishing interdisciplinary discourses as Diasporic Studies, Exile Studies, Migration and Immigration Studies, Minority Studies, Trauma Studies and Post-Colonial studies in general.¹

An outstanding example of a consistent resistance to a national narrative is the oeuvre of a unique and highly appreciated woman author of Hebrew prose, Yehudit Hendel. Hendel, a 2003 *Israel Prize* laureate, was a rather prolific writer until her death in 2014. Born in Warsaw in 1921 to “Bundist” parents who opposed Zionist ideology and refused to join their Hassidic family that had immigrated to Palestine, but later changed their mind, she arrived in Haifa at the age of 9.² She began publishing short stories at a very young age, and in 1949, after a

1 See, among others, my essays on nomadism in literary works by Aharon Appelfeld: Milner 2011; 2013.

2 The “Bund” (short for “The General Jewish Labor Bund for Lithuania, Poland and Russia”), founded in Vilnius in 1897 under the inspiration of the “General German Workers Association”, strongly opposed the Zionist movement. Historian Yosef Gorny defines the two parties as “two different – clashing and rival – versions of the idea of Jewish national revival in modern society (Gorny 2006, 1), indicating that “[...] both were extreme negators of exile at the level of ethical values – one liquidating the Diaspora by leaving it, the other liquidating it by staying there, or, in the telling expression of post-Holocaust Bund leader Emanuel Szerer, ‘to live in exile without the exile soul.’” (Ibid, 5).

short period of service in the armed forces, was assigned with the mission of collecting and editing a “compact” anthology of literary texts, to be distributed among Israeli soldiers, titled *Lamagen* – “for the defender” (Hendel 1949). This positioned her at the center of the political and cultural Israeli hegemony of the time, and affirmed her successful metamorphosis from a diaspora-born into an “Israeli born”, the so-called “Sabra”. It was taken for granted that she upheld and supported the national narrative of nation and state building.

However, Hendel’s literature eventually took subversive directions and never fully embraced the idea of the Israeli home as a haven, and as a yearned-for redemption from exilic existence. On the contrary, in her novels and short stories the Israeli home is often the scene of an unhomely experience, of *Das Unheimliche*, in Freudian terminology.³ Her works perform in their style, and express thematically, extreme and sometimes devastating fissures and breaches in the figure of the “home” – and an accompanying sentiment of detachment, of a wish to flee from anything that is too strictly restraining. It is very often haunted homes that she describes, haunted, among other things, by the memory of homes abandoned in Europe, and of mother-tongues, Polish and Yiddish, forced to be forgotten in order to create an exclusive status for Modern Hebrew as the language of revival. A drive to flee, however, never leads the protagonists anywhere, and they find themselves in a restless motion in-between places, never attaining a true feeling of being-at-home. Such is the case in one of Hendel’s early novels, *Hachatser shel Momo Hagdola* (Big Momo’s Courtyard) (Hendel 1969). Its protagonist, a Holocaust survivor in his thirties, wanders throughout the 17 years that have elapsed since he emigrated to Israel after the war, from one small and unwelcoming rented room to another, carrying with him his only belonging: a small suitcase that contains his childhood diary, written in Polish, a language he does not remember and can no longer read:

His possessions, on the shelf, were disordered, and the suitcase of the small, torn books, whose covers rolled on the floor, was still open. He picked them up, searching for the small notebook from the days of his childhood, and opened it, leafing through it, standing up, without knowing how to read a word, continuing to stand up, staring at the strange letters of his childhood handwriting, which he had forgotten. The faded pages, non-equal, were torn at the edges, held by a pin, and he put them together, spreading them in the palm of his hand, snuffling them, as if their smell gave him back their language, but in no way could he remember, and the strange, childish handwriting, his own, escaped him again. (Ibid 65, translation from Hebrew mine).

3 On the Unhomely (the Uncanny, in the traditional translation of *Das Unheimliche* to English) in Hendel’s literature, see my article “Zarim Babait: Haalbeiti Beyetsirata shel Yehudit Hendel” (Strangers at Home: The Unhomely in Yehudit Hendel’s Oeuvre), (Milner 2016).

Hendel thus portrays a literary figure of a young man who is not only alienated from the concrete spaces he resides in, but also, and even more so, estranged from his core being as it was invested in his presently indecipherable childhood text. He is thus, as are other figures in Hendel's oeuvre, profoundly detached, and is ceaselessly on the move, never actually knowing what his destination might be, let alone succeeding in arriving at it: "The long summer day is fading, and he wanders along the allies, as if he knew them, and his being homeless again filled his heart with a strange sweetness." (Ibid 13, translation from Hebrew mine). This literary hero is as far removed as can be imagined from the hero of the national narrative, and he demonstrates the futility, for him, of the national project.

Indeed, Hendel's poetics is far removed from that of Hebrew literature of her time also in terms of her unique usage of language. Her sentences are long and associative, and at the same time missing and fractured. They often echo distinctly personal spoken words that are immersed in Yiddish tempo, syntax and figures of speech. Her texts break traditional literary modes (in a manner typical, to a certain extent, to women's writing – "écriture féminine"), and their awkward changes of modes, and above all their repetitiveness, manifest their restlessness, their constant transition and search for meaning and resolution.

In 1987 Hendel published a small book in which, under the title *Leyad Kfarim Shketim, 12 Yamim BePolin* (Near Quiet Villages – 12 Days in Poland) she assembled transcriptions of five radio talks, describing her visit to Poland a year earlier. It had been a trip initiated by The Israeli Broadcasting Authority, one of the very first official visits of Israelis to Poland in the post-Communist Era. The literary report of this trip, one of the first literary travelogues describing voyages to Poland that later became very popular, was, in a way, a "return of the repressed" as it exposed previously denied longings, an insatiable "Heimweh" ("home-pains") experienced, paradoxically, at home:

[...] and suddenly I was in the midst of a turbulence of uncanniness and longings, and of a desire to forget and of hatred and streets and number of streets, and shall I go to Lodz, and shall I go to Lublin, and will I be in Częstochowa, in Częstochowa, and maybe you go to the cemetery in Lublin, maybe you find my father, and maybe you go the cemetery in Krakow, maybe you find my mother, and heavy sacks that each and every one carries on the back, and big stories and little stories, a thousand stones emitted at ones from this volcano which extinguished and died a long time ago and was not buried." (Hendel 1987, 16, translation from Hebrew mine).

Hendel does not mention in *Near Quiet Villages* the fact that she is travelling to her country of birth. Or rather, she does so only metonymically, in a description

of her intended, but never carried out journey to the hometowns of three of her dearest ones: her mother, her husband (the prominent Israeli painter, Zvi Meir-ovich) and her friend, the acclaimed Modern Israeli poet, Avot Yeshurun (Yehiel Perlmutter). Titled “The Towns to Which I Did Not Go” (Ibid, 47–64) the chapter dedicated to this planned part of her journey, is, once more, a story about wandering around, approaching but never arriving, a story of avoidance and distance. This is how Hendel explains her decision to finally not to go to her mother’s hometown, Kalushin: An old man, originally from Kalushin, said to her on the phone, before she left Israel, first in Hebrew (translated here to English), then in Yiddish: “מה יש לך לנסוע לקלושין”; “What have you to go to Kalushin? Even the cemetery is not there, the cemetery is a potato field: “דער בייסעוילם איז אויך נישטן.” (Ibid, 14–15).

Near Quiet Villages closes with an anecdote of a postcard Hendel sent her family in Tel Aviv while still in Poland, in which she praises the experience of homecoming. The postcard arrives at its destination when Hendel is already back in Israel. Thus she becomes the recipient of her own message, sent from afar. She reads (and writes) what the postcard says: “When this postcard arrives I will already be home and that will be fantastic.” (Ibid, 102). Although “home” seems to refer specifically to her apartment in Tel Aviv, homecoming, as well as late arrival, are obviously rather ambiguous concepts here: they are, in fact, the essence of both journeys: *to* and *from* Warsaw, *from* and *to* Tel Aviv. Thus, the concept of home is decentered and loses its firm foundation, and the desire for home turns upon itself and collapses into a wasteland.

Merging geographical itineraries and back-and-forth movement are, then, the core of the written text – both the postcard and the entire travelogue that it synecdochally represents. Motion then seemingly finds its place of stability and rests only in the text. However, the text itself does not rest: it, too, as I have already mentioned, is in constant transition. Not only through the post (the postcard that “travels” from Warsaw to Tel Aviv, as does the childhood diary in the novel *Big Momo’s Courtyard*), and not only among landscapes and longings, but also among languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and English all appear in the text) and among styles (refined and eloquent Hebrew changes rapidly into idiosyncratic tropes and idioms). This is magnificent and at the same time menacing and hard to traverse. The restlessness of the text, in other words, is often a manifestation of the *Unheimlich* it represents.

In these terms, Hendel echoes the poetics of distinguished Hebrew writers from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, such as Russian born Y. H. Brenner and Polish-Galician born S. Y. Agnon. In the height of an era of what was conceptualized as a redemptive return to the Holy Land, of waves of idealistic immigration to the Land of Israel, their works were profoundly suspi-

cious of the intended metamorphosis Zionism aspired to, the imagined transition of the Jewish subjects from a “nation of the book” (in Hebrew: “am hasefer”) to a “nation of the land” (“am haaretz”), ironically, the latter being in fact a traditional offensive label for the illiterate. Brenner’s and Agnon’s works do not readily endorse such a transition and the relinquishing of Diasporic terms of existence it entails. Rather, they hesitatingly contemplate the possibility of nomadic, de-centered being, as a cultural and ethical ideal. This is in line with thinkers such as Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (1994), George Steiner (1985) and others who have elaborated on Franz Rosenzweig’s notion of nomadism as inherent to Jewish existence and as representing Judaism’s singular contribution to Western Culture.

The protagonists of two of Brenner’s central novels – *Mikan Umikan* (From Here and There, 1911), and *Shechol Vekishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement, 1920)⁴ – are psychologically disturbed men, traveling in small, shattered boats that leave the shores of Palestine, heading West. Both are so sick that eventually they are taken off board. Both leave behind, on deck, their orphaned scripts that contain the stories of their attempted, and obviously failed, Zionist endeavor. These are stories of long voyages through Europe, England and the United States, of a number of trips to Palestine, and of repeated movement – by train, by carriage or by foot – to and from Jaffa, a kibbutz in the Galilee, Jerusalem, Petach-Tikva and Jaffa again. The fragmented, haunted scripts (haunted by their authors who no longer have authority on them), are eventually published with the help of their alleged “discoverer” (also a fictional figure), a co-traveler on the boat leaving Palestine, himself a wanderer. They are published almost un-edited (in *From Here and There* more so than in *Breakdown and Bereavement*), chaotic as they were written and as they were found. The novels thus take the form of assemblages. They combine various practices and mediums of writing (letters, postcards, notebooks, journal articles, newspaper items, a diary); various levels of Hebrew (biblical, ritual, Talmudic, as well as the then newly invented Modern Hebrew); various traditional Jewish texts (primarily ancient songs of lamentation); various other languages (Aramaic, Yiddish, Russian, English, Arabic) as well as various non-verbal vocal communications, such as sighs, murmurs, cries and silences. This self-aware textual nomadism is a central aspect of Brenner’s genius, constituting his main contribution to the emergence of Modernity in Hebrew literature. Abandoning the protagonists in a non-place, in the middle of a journey which they are unable to complete, after their having failed to find a home in the

⁴ The novel was translated to English and published under the title *Breakdown and Bereavement* (Brenner 1971).

Place that was to be their ultimate Home, and leaving a legacy of a restless nomadic text, exemplifies Brenner's resistance of an oversimplified national narrative.⁵

Agnon in turn takes the protagonist of his 1939 novel "Ore'ach Nata Lalun" (translated into German in 1964 as "Nur wie ein Gast zur Nacht") for a long trip from Palestine to his hometown in Eastern Europe, only to find out that a concrete and straightforward return to a primal scene is, of course, impossible. The so-called guest holds a key to the old, deserted Beit-Midrash that he hopes to bring to life, but loses it. The key – to the Jewish house of scholars which is the "Beit-Midrash", and to its neglected library of Jewish texts – is finally found in the traveler's bag upon his return to Eretz-Israel. This is of course another version of a belated appearance of a "leftover", a relic, which is inherently destabilizing, as it offers an option of a textual rather than a material being.

For Agnon specifically, this is an almost overt literary manifesto, proposing that in his view, Modern Hebrew literature, written in Israel, is a continuous voyage toward, and the key to, Jewish multilayered textuality. This literature, Agnon thus states, is never of its time and of its place,⁶ never "settled": it is inherently, and willingly, wandering. Indeed, almost none of Agnon's protagonists are sincerely comfortable in a concrete, earthly "home"; many of them yearn for the text as their homeland (to paraphrase George Steiner's "Our Homeland, the Text"). Agnon famously chose for himself, upon his immigration to Palestine, a family name that he had initially used as a pseudonym with which he signed one of his first published short stories, "Agunot" (Agnon 1908) – plural of the Hebrew word Aguna, originating from the Hebrew word Ogen – an anchor). Though this Halachic term, which pronounces a deserted woman being chained to her marriage, it has come to symbolize also an unsuccessful attempt to break away, a life in a limbo and in in-between-ness. Phonetically related to the word "Aguna", the name Agnon expresses this leading Hebrew author's profound identification with such terms of existence, which his entire oeuvre expresses and performs.

Many Israeli poets and prose authors, among them Avot Yeshurun, S. Yizhar, Yehoshua Kenaz and Yoel Hoffman, as well as women writers such as Dvora Baron, Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Ruth Almog (who also write about gendered aspects of the "Un-homely") offer various versions of homes as haunted sites of das *Unheimlich*: haunted by the voices of previous homes and of previous, expelled, owners, haunted by the "refusal" of the mythical landscape to metamor-

⁵ See a further discussion of these works by Brenner in my essay "Yosef Haim Brenner's 'Mikan Umikan': The Telling of Trauma" (Milner 2012).

⁶ To paraphrase on the title of a novel by Yehuda Amichai, *Lo Meachshav Lo Mikan* (Not From Now, Not From Here), (Amichai 1968).

phose into a mundane homeland, haunted by an aspiration to transcend physical borders. It is in light of these aspects of restlessness, movement and transition, which is of course shared by both Jewish and non-Jewish Modern literary corpora, that I believe Hebrew literature can and should be integrated into the broader context of academic research and teaching. As such, it offers a unique view of the universal saga of the human project of settling: in a language, in a place called “home” and in an identity.

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