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Literary Genres in Discourse with Zionism

Ahron Appelfeld's penultimate novel, *Laish* of 1994, marks a certain closure in the scope of his prolific literary production. Recognized as the central author of Holocaust literature in Hebrew, Appelfeld described life before and after the Holocaust, conjuring up the catastrophe by indirection. However, he never addressed the Zionist option. It was clear that the missing link between Hurban and T'kuma, destruction and revival, is in and by itself a statement both about the place of Zionism in the minds of his diaspora Jews, but it also implied disenchantment with Zionism as an answer, indeed, as a resolution and a compensation for the Holocaust. The novel describes the pathetic voyage of a caravan of Jews through Eastern Europe at the beginning of this century, (in the pre-Zionist era), on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The caravan includes thieves and orphans, drunks, prostitutes and learned old men, a mixture of so called idealists and opportunists who are fed and nurtured along the way by even poorer villagers and peasants. The dream of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, (although some of the travelers and their supporters have doubts about its existence), sustains the continuity of the voyage, which ends, as does the

novel, at the port just before embarkation. The reader never knows if they ever arrived, but of course that is not the issue of the novel. Fashioned after the Exodus myth, pilgrimage tales, and the archetypal legends of the wandering Jew, the ultimate question with which the reader is left is not whether that unlikely pack will reach its destination but what sort of Jerusalem will it find, what sort of Jerusalem would it be able to buildThis is Appelfeld's first dialogue with the Zionist narrative, and could be superficially considered as his relocation from the so called periphery of the central narrative to the mainstream. But as I hope to indicate, this closure, seen from the viewpoint of the culture and not from the viewpoint of this individual author, is indicative of a change in the center itself.

The existential condition of being stranded on the threshold, neither in nor out, is much more prevalent in modern Hebrew Literature than the actual arrival, the grand entrance, the disembarkation and the union of wanderer and homeland. (And I intend to use this metaphor in the most paradigmatic manner). Even many of the so-called Sabra heroes of most of the proclaimed Zionist narratives are portrayed as torn by doubt and hesitation, as in the works of Izhar, Megged and Shamir... The roots of the dialogue with the Zionist dream can be traced to the initial stages of the dream itself, indeed, they are inherent in it.

In today's presentation, I wish to suggest a view of the new literature, that of the 90th, not as a continuation or an elaboration of that dialogue but rather as a distrust in that

dialogue, a rejection of the narrative which ultimately denies the possibility of a dialogue all together. Moreover, I will suggest that the narrative itself had collapsed from within, partially because of its predictable Weberian pattern, but also because of its response to the alternative narrative of the previous generation, which, in turn, brought about the recognition of multiple narratives. In other words, the views of the so called marginal voices have been in fact adopted by the so called center, absorbed and internalized to a degree that eventually led to the collapse of the tale. The very idea of an exchange, or even a confrontation, between the suppressed experience and the imposed experience, had reached its terminal stages and has been replaced by a new sense of identity which is independent of that narrative.

This, indeed, is a post modernist concept in the literary perception of reality, but the point made here is that post-colonial and post modernist interpretations have already been transported to their next re-reading, namely, that of diasporism.

For the purpose of this discussion, allow me to clarify my usage of some of the terms. In applying post-colonial theories to the Israeli literary scene, one could claim that the Zionist narrative functioned as the voice of the cultural Empire: Eastern European socialist ideologies, nurtured by romantic nationalism and historical developments were formulated to create a vision of a New Jew in an old-new land governed by new social orders and a reborn

language. These were transplanted into the dreamt homeland and imposed on an immigrant population mostly foreign to that construct. In terms of the theory, the situation is a typical colonializing process where a minority elite enforces its value system onto a majority which is perceived as marginal, inferior and retarded. Moreover, the marginal majority accepts the superiority of the colonizing culture and develops a certain amount of resignation and apology for its authentic culture. Thus, for instance, Indian literature of that stage is "more English than English". The next developmental stage witnesses the withdrawal of the central colonizing power and the reclamation of dignity and authenticity by the voices from the margin, who actually internalized some of the characteristics of the main stream and are recruiting those newly found measures to speak back to the empire, as suggested by Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin in their "The Empire Writes Back " (1989, Routledge). We have seen this happen in India, Trinidad, and Kenya after British Colonialism, but also in feminist literature, African American literature, Sephardic literature in Hebrew, and even the secular literature coming from the orthodox-religious sectors in Israel (Channa Bat Shachar). These dialogues with the hegemonic narrative are marked by an identity crisis as they incorporate indigenous or 'native' language and values into the internalized, adopted mode. Thus, Arabic words and Ladino idioms would show up in those texts (Sami Michael, Elli Amir), which are otherwise Eurocentric in genre and structure. Even when the contents of these works stand in argument with the central

narrative, they do not subvert that narrative , and that is the distinction I wish to stress. The argument is presented with the basic tools of the other side, thus affirming that other side. The image of the mythic sabra as a literary hero is countered by an aging hero, a holocaust survivor, a woman or a child (as we see f.i. in the novels by Ruth Almog, Yehoshua Kenaz, David Grossman), but these are portrayed as alternatives, fashioned after the already established main hero with which they take issue.

While these dialogues are still continuing, we notice the development of the young literature of the 90th as divorced from that literary tradition, replacing the 'condition Israelienne' by 'condition humane', that is, perceiving the human existential condition as that of eternal exile, not as an ex-patriation from an assumed existing homeland or center, but as a permanent and unresolvable axiom. The failure of the homeland to provide a sense of rootedness, the borderless global village and the constant geographical mobility are but a few of the contributing factors to that perception of reality. The Zionist idea of rootedness had lost its appeal, as Shaked claims, and distant lands attract the new Jewish-Israeli vagabonds, rehabilitating the negative cultural image of diaspora (which, in Hebrew is often, tellingly, interchanged with exile, Galut and T'futzah being one in the Zionist narrative).

The futility of the dialogue led to the rejection of the very vehicle which meant to carry and sustain it. From a purely

literary viewpoint, the arena in which this notion is executed is in the realm of genre, as I will try to demonstrate in the following discussion.

The genre, as an organizing principle of any literary work, assumes two basic premises: one, that in its attempt to search and unravel some order in reality, art imposes structure which in and by itself is a statement of meaning: any order, (f.i. chronological, psychological, causal), driving and binding the text, imposes some ulterior significance, a purpose or a reason for the events described. The second assumption is that by appropriating a single work to a traditional genre, that work draws on the viability and longevity of that genre, therefore re-affirming the notion of tradition and continuity. Even when a literary work subverts a genre, it, in fact, reaffirms it by the very engagement of a dialogue with that genre.

I will cite three recent examples of innovations within the genre-tradition which indicate the frenzied search for new vehicles upon which to start a new narrative, rejecting both the Zionist narrative and the post-colonial dialogue simultaneously. These works chose to break away from the literary traditions of that narrative, subverting the ideological concepts by subverting the literary concepts which confirmed them.

The most obvious example is the corpus of Orly Castel-Bloom, whose three novels and three collections of short stories pretend to use the traditional formats in order to negate them from within. Her

last collection of short stories (1993) is titled "Involuntary Stories", short prose works which defy any definition of the short story. (Handout includes example). These are not even anecdotal... they have no plot, no consequence, no development. The characters have no history nor aim; events occur, when and if they do, in a Kafkaese manner but without even the absurd systematics or the implicit protest of Kafka. The non-heros are indifferent, passive, unmoved and not surprised by their alienated reality in the generic-geography and indistinct habitat. In the context of Israeli literary history, authors of the State generation, the social realists, created a hero who came from the sea (Shaked's metaphor for the rejection and denial of Jewish historical roots) and cultivated the desert into fertile land amidst a collective altruistic enterprize; the second generation turned to the surrealistic and the symbolic, universalizing the Israeli experience and focusing on the individuation of the hero, his psychological traumas, the establishing of his singular identity within the collective and his moral and ethical dilemmas; these were what we call the hegemonic narratives. But as we witness the Castel-Bloom generation, we find cartoon characters of no individual markers nor collective attachments, flat and superficial people who surface and float on a hazardous plain, existing without memory, personal history, hence without a redeeming psychology, myth, talent, emotion or profession. They are busy with physical nurture, defensive driving on the arbitrary roads of a life that lead nowhere. They encounter each other without even expressing the

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need for social encounter, and move on without origin, lineage or destination. Only by a stretch of the philosophical imagination can one detect a trace of a dialogue with the Zionist narrative: the accumulated sense is, that if two voices are a prerequisite for any dialogue, the other voice is missing. Moreover, the only voice we hear is that of the 'other'. (A distinction must be made here from the half-dialogue of Yehoshua in Mr Manni: whereas Yehoshua, by omitting the second voice of the conversations, assumes the existence of a second voice while maintaining the malfunctioning of the conversation, Orly Castel-Bloom does not allow for a second voice in principle. The possibility of conversation is negated from the initial stage).

The second example is diametrically opposed to the Castel-Bloom approach, yet leading to similar conclusions. The minimalist, leanness and meagerness of Castel-Bloom is in total contradiction to the pathos, redundancy, clutter and layered text of "Megillot Ha'edut" by Abba Kovner, the poet known for his leadership of the Vilna ghetto uprising, his testimony in the Eichman trial, his leadership during the War of Independence and status in the socialist kibbutz movement. Kovner is the author of 12 volumes of poetry and a two-volume novel...From a generational viewpoint he is two generations senior to Castel-Bloom. And yet, this posthumous volume, Published in 1994, is a reversal of Kovner's work to date, an ideological statement conveyed by the significance of the unlikely genre. A rather large book, it is presented as a

liturgical text for the purpose of recitation, repetition and chronicle, to be secured in the collective memory. Generically speaking, it is situated somewhere between a Haggada and a Machzor. It tells the Holocaust by providing a composite page in which the central text, in enlarged type, is an individual account of the Holocaust, whereas the crowded margins of the pages enhance the narrative with explanations, interpretations, clarifications, songs, poems, glossaries, quotations, statistics and facts.

In his search for an appropriate form for his literary quest, Kovner experimented with various genres throughout his 50-year career. But at his last stage he turned back to the format and genre of the Talmudic page, which, in its original form contained a depository of Jewish cultural creativity of the first five centuries of the Common Era. That format was later, in 1525, emulated by the Mikraot Gedolot in the Venice edition of the Bible, incorporating accumulated translations and commentaries since then. Page 153 of Megilot Ha'edut, which you have in your handouts, is self-referential, or meta-poetic: it includes Kovner's reference to the Mikraot Gedlot which he imitates in the Megilot. However, there is a critical difference between the traditional composite text and the modern one. The Megilot are not a depository of historical literary and cultural layers. Quite on the contrary, and bitterly ironic, Kovner provides the commentary together with the narrative; not a cross-generational tradition but an instant, post-modern text, fragmented rather than augmented, written by a single author and not by a succession of commentators who, by re-reading the text

ensured its survival.

Kovner doubts the survival of the past, the present, as well as the future of the cultural narrative. He resorts to the surviving traditional genre but subverts its defining principle, not trusting the survivability of the narrative, the devotion of the reader or the eventual need of re-interpretation: that need marks a society which preserves its narrative and needs to re-negotiate it for its own reality. This fundamental apprehension is proven by the type of comments Kovner selects to introduce: as you can see on page 51, Kovner defines what should be common knowledge: The utopian novel "Altneuland" by Theodor Herzl, whose function as the central romantic text of the Zionist meta-narrative and myth, Thomas Moor's "Utopia" and the common Yiddish expression 'fartik'. From this sample page alone, one can discern the embedded irony: Kovner assumes a vacant collective memory where Humanistic idealism, Zionism and Judaism will all be erased and therefore require glossing, defining and translating. The turn to the genre of the Talmudic page, then, is an act of despair and not an act of hope. Despair in the function of the national narrative, in the function of literature, in the existence of cultural depositories. As in post-modern textuality, the margins and not the main text provide the authorial viewpoint, the hegemonical is challenged and threatened, rather than supported, by the commentary, which is now seen as the 'other' (see: "Margins" by Derrida, Foucault, Culler).

The third example is, once again, totally dissimilar from the

others. The text is "Akud" (Bound), a novel composed of three novellas by Albert Suissa, published in 1990. It is so far the only work by this Moroccan-born author, which was hailed as the first authentic literary expression of the grim experience of the mass of North African immigration of the 1950's. The book tells the story of 3 boys from Ein Ganim, the underprivileged Jerusalem neighborhood where thousands of large north African families were housed in tiny apartments and then forgotten. It tell the childhoods of violence, cruelty and chronic alienation within and without the family. The patriarchs crumble under the new circumstance, impotence rules, anger and eros take control. The time is the celebration of Independence Day early in the 50th, but neither the protagonists nor their parents are aware of the narrative---why or what is being celebrated.

Like the other works I cited today, this novel deserves a serious reading, but for the purpose of my argument it is in the realm of genre that the author replaces the dominant narrative. Page one of the first novella, "A blessed Orphanhood", is included in your handout. Although some parts of the book were already translated, the first novella is still awaiting its turn, but I'll do my best to convey the dynamics of the work. Imposing Eurocentric traditions on this novel, some critics, typically, defined it as baroque in style, while it is actually an arabesque. It starts in medias res, indicating an on-going argument. The page holds one complete sentence ending on the fifth line, and one more which ends only on the next page. The winding, swiveling, entwined clauses are

in harmony with the cyclicity of an interior monologue but also with the sense of entrapment and entanglement of all characters, and there are many. The abundance of detail, not all furthering the plot, is typical of Mediterranean literary traditions which adhere to aesthetic principles of decoration, redundancy and deviation rather than functionality and plot development. This cyclicity is echoed in the metaphoric structure which is obsessed with round objects such as the cesspool, the discarded tractor-tires, almonds and figs, the wheel of fortune, deep pits, the underground bomb shelter etc. The feeling of disorientation, lack of purpose or the lack of ability to identify and focus on any purpose, the social disarray, the emotional clutter and the physical litter all heap and accumulate into a meaningless and devastating reality. Binary opposition reflect confusion and inner torment: the public bus is described both as dilapidated and as festive, its loud radio playing the Zionist hymn "Anu Banu". It is, in the eyes of the young narrator, "galloping in the capital", replacing the horses and donkeys of his Moroccan frame of reference.

Suissa did not engage the Western genre for his story, but revived the rhythm of the family's conversational dynamics: whenever they are gathered, they switch to Arabic and French, they speak the language of impulse, they control by language and the force of language; silences and conversational taboos are employed as disciplinary measures.

As a coming of age story, this one suggest orphanhood as a double blessing: orphaned of a malfunctioning father, the young man is

caught in a tautology which, ironically, amounts to a positive statement. Not only is orphanhood a genetic disability in that family, but the new patriarch, the Zionist ideology which is prompted to replace the collapsed hierarchy, is malfunctioning. That leaves him blessed with the option of inventing his own life, as the author invents a new narrative by celebrating HIS and not the State's sacred time of Independence. The protagonist needs to loose both his father and the Colonizing Empire in order to stand on his own. Independence is, therefore, contingent on father-lessness and homeland-ness... on accepting the state of permanent exile.

I wish to conclude with a footnote regarding the response of the authors generally associated with the Zionist narrative as they confront their own development, the changing environment and the rise of the new narratives. To be sure, none of the central authors remain aloof to any of these. S. Izhar was silenced until the 90th and finally reappeared with an impressionistic trilogy of nostalgia and nightmare...Yehoshua traveled in genre, in geography and in time to distant continents and distant centuries, creating seemingly weaker, more human and feminine protagonists who shed a tear and find solace in nurturing (Molcho) and healing (Open Heart). Oz focuses on retired intelligence officers (To Know a Woman) and ex-generals (Don't Pronounce it Night). These new anti-heros are in a serious dialogue with the Zionist narrative. They tell it from a different , more mature and indeed, a more jaded

retrospective. The new writers, however, dismiss that dialogue as they dismiss its genres and replace them by a poetic as well as an ideological alternative.

The language of the new literature does not negotiate with the previous one via the characteristic oedipal process whereby the past is betrayed and recycled, but rather, it invents or retrieves models outside of the Zionist mainstream. Castel-Bloom can be traced back to Agnon, Kovner revives a model from a remote and religious Jewish past, and Suissa unashamedly introduces a modern variant of the style known as 'one thousand and one nights'. These and others like them, represent a self-proclaimed exile from the story we tell ourselves for 50 years.