

Life of the Non-Living: Nationalization, Language and the Narrative of “Revival”
in Modern Hebrew Literary Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Life of the Non-Living: Nationalization, Language and the Narrative of “Revival” in Modern

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This dissertation critically examines the question of language revival in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Hebrew literature. Focusing on major texts that participate in the political and aesthetic endeavor of reviving Hebrew as an exclusive national language, this study traces the narrative of revival and explores the changes and iterations it underwent in the course of several decades, from the 1890s to the early 1920s. Informed by a wide range of critical literary theory, I analyze the primary tropes used to articulate the process whereby Hebrew came to inhabit new discursive roles.

Building on close readings of canonical texts by authors ranging from Ahad Ha'am and Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky to Hayim Nahman Bialik, Rachel Katznelson, and Yosef Hayim Brenner, I argue that while modern Hebrew literature largely rejected the philological assumption that Hebrew was a dead language, it nevertheless produced a discourse around the notion of “revival,” in a manner that deferred the possibility of perceiving Hebrew as fully living. My readings show that while many of these texts contemplate linguistic transformation in terms of revitalization or birth, the national mission of language revival is in fact entwined with mourning, and ultimately produces the object of revival as neither dead nor fully alive. Dwelling on the ambivalence and suspension of that moment, and examining a range of nuances in its articulation, I explore the roles that Hebrew language and literature play in nationalization, Zionism, and the constitution of a new Hebrew subjectivity.

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1929-2018

Introduction: Life of the Non-Living

This country is a volcano. It houses language. One speaks here of the many things that could make us fail. One speaks more than ever today about the Arabs. But more uncanny than the Arab people [*unheimlicher als das arabische Volk*] another threat confronts us that is a necessary consequence [*mit Notwendigkeit*] of the Zionist undertaking: What about the “actualization [*Aktualisierung*]” of Hebrew? Must not this abyss of a sacred language handed down to our children break out again?¹

In December of 1926, Gershom Scholem wrote these by-now famous lines about the latent dangers of the “actualization” of the Hebrew language in Palestine. In a letter, to be included in an anthology of texts sent to Franz Rosenzweig on the occasion of his fortieth birthday, Scholem described an apocalyptic vision in which the sacred language threatens to break out, in a volcanic manner, against those who speak it. As Jacques Derrida and many others have noted, the problem that Scholem raises (the catastrophe to which he alludes) is a political and a national one. It concerns “the country,” “the Zionist undertaking,” and the proximity of the uncanniness of the Arab people.² At the same time, it is a problem of language: a danger, as well as a desire, that is inherent in a particular enactment of language, in a particular manner of speech.

In his reading of this text, Derrida asks, “What is it that grants its essential *Unheimlichkeit* to this situation...?” He locates the answer in the midst of Scholem’s indecision: “It is difficult to know whether what is more terrible is to walk on the surface as a blind man or to fall into the abyss as a man of lucid speech, awake, vigilant, awakened to the abyssal essence

¹ Gershom Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language,” in *Acts of Religion*, Jacques Derrida, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226.

² Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano,” in *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 195; Galili Shahar elaborates on the crucial role of Arabic in Scholem and Rosenzweig’s discussions on German and Hebrew. Galili Shahar, “‘A Third Reading’: The German, the Hebrew and (the Arab),” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 33, no. 1 (2013): 133–39.

of language.”³ Derrida underscores Scholem’s equivocation which, he argues, cannot be resolved within the framework of the text. He shows that in Scholem’s own cryptic language, the proclamation of the apocalyptic is enigmatic. The disastrous potential in language is one and the same with that in language which needs to be protected: “The apocalyptic should be saved, guarded in the language but as the very thing from which one must save and guard oneself.”⁴ In Derrida’s reading, then, Scholem’s text is positioned in an unresolvable tension, in what he calls “an experience of language” which is at once alluring and threatening, which permits a passage or a movement between contradictory ends, and which suspends the ambivalence of that passage. This dissertation argues that a similar tension, and therefore a similar experience of language, is inherent in the broader literary discourse on the revival of Hebrew as a national language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Building on close readings of literary texts by prominent Hebrew writers, I argue that while modern Hebrew literature largely rejected the philological assumption that Hebrew was a dead language, it nevertheless produced a discourse around the notion of “revival,” in a manner that deferred the possibility of perceiving Hebrew as fully living. Dwelling on the ambivalence and suspension of that moment within Hebrew literature, and examining a range of nuances in its articulation, I explore the roles that Hebrew language and literature play in nationalization, Zionism, and the constitution of a new Hebrew subjectivity. This enables me to raise a set of theoretical questions: What constitutes the “life” of language? What types of action in language does revival imply? What are the myths and narratives obfuscated by the deeply affective concept of revival? What creative potentials are promised in the name of revival, and in what

³ Derrida, 202.

⁴ Ibid., 203.

ways is it “threatening”?

In his letter to Rosenzweig, Scholem notes that “this inescapable revolution of the language . . . is the sole object of which nothing is said in this country.”⁵ And yet, within the terrain of modern Hebrew literature (not “this country” per se, but a locus in which, and by means of which, the creation of the national project has been made possible), the revolutionary transformation of the Hebrew language and the linguistic anxiety it evokes is what everyone speaks of constantly. On the horizon of these debates is a danger that threatens to destroy those who claim to create and safeguard the threatening element. It is that superfluous, anxious speech about the Hebrew language and the dangers of its purported revival, that this dissertation seeks to explore.

A key term in the terminology of modern Hebrew literary discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “*tehiyah*” (תחייה), translated here mostly as “revival,” echoes different significations. Within the Hebrew literature of the time, it is typically invoked in reference to either “the nation,” “the literature,” or “the language.” Under the name *tehiya*, I argue, these categories are often conflated, and their synonymy is implied.⁶ Nation, literature, and language are sometimes seen as the objects of *tehiya*. But *tehiya*, in and of itself, affirms neither a temporality nor an agency that operates in the background of its occurrence. It does not stage a clear, determined relationship between “reviver” and “revived,” but merely implies a

⁵ Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language,” 227.

⁶ This argument joins Hannan Hever’s claim that the historiography of New Hebrew Literature is based on the concept of revival, which bounds together, within one organizing narrative, both national and literary renaissance. See *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le’om: Kri’ot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-‘ivrit (The Narrative and the Nation: Critical Readings in the Canon of Hebrew Fiction)* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 19.

permutation that maintains an affinity for “life” (חיים) and that is underway.⁷ This inherent abstraction of *tehiya* necessarily complicates any assumed linearity or strict power relations that may be construed from it. Moreover, the interplay between the purported “objects” of *tehiya* further problematizes the question of who or what is reviving and who or what is being revived.

While “revival” seems to be the most common translation, *tehiya* could be (and has been) translated into English in different ways. Renaissance, regeneration, rejuvenation, resurgence, resurrection, revivification, resuscitation, revitalization, renewal, and rebirth are all among the possible equivalents. That the prefix “re-” appears in all of these potential translations hints at the repetition and alteration entwined in how the word is understood. *Tehiya* implies a transformation that occurs *anew*. Just as in Scholem’s letter, the notion that the language is transforming—be it by means of secularization, actualization, aestheticization, colloquialization, or nationalization—is accompanied by the reassertion that *something* from its former state endures. Whereas in the context of modern Hebrew literature, *tehiya* indeed evokes a cultural renaissance, it also enfolds the specificity of “revitalization.” *Tehiya* captures a particular relation to life, which already questions the life of its implied subject or object. In this respect, *tehiya* implies both the revitalization of a force that was always already there, and the present fluctuation of that force between life and death—not dead, yet not entirely living. This liminal vacillation and its uncanny ghostly effect are crucial for an understanding of what is too easily evoked to this day as the story of “the revival of Hebrew” (תחיית העברית).

This study offers a critical analysis of this story. Based on close readings of literary and essayistic texts written within the aesthetic and political project of “reviving” Hebrew, this dissertation explores key moments in the discourse of revival, from the 1890s and up to the early

⁷ The Hebrew words “תחייה” and “חיים” share the common root: ה.י.ה.

1920s. These texts were written in shifting Jewish cultural centers (including Odessa, Warsaw, Berlin, and Palestine), and circulated in the Russian Empire and throughout Europe. Although nascent debates on the revival of Hebrew could be traced back to eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah), it was only at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century that the heightened preoccupation with language, and with the notion of language revival, reached its peak. The literature written during this period, which overlaps with the emergence of Zionism, is known in the historiography of Hebrew literature as “the revival literature” (ספרות התחייה), a title which alludes both to the ways in which it has been framed as a literary renaissance and to its particular affinity for life and the mission of revitalization. This literature repeatedly situates Hebrew in a liminal space that lies between the dead and the living—a space that, I argue, can be read as constitutive of Jewish nationalism.

The Life of Language

Dan Miron has argued that the understanding of the concept of “life” within modern Hebrew literature changed dramatically in the 1890s. From a dialectical socio-historical category, which marked a generational battle between fathers and sons, it transformed into a psycho-biological category, which centered around the experience and the consciousness of an individual “self,” driven by an instinctual-libidinal flux. According to Miron, this new understanding of “life,” which was informed by current anti-rationalist European philosophical trends that arose in reaction to the Enlightenment, affected every aspect and every genre of modern Hebrew literature. Hebrew poetry, fiction, literary criticism, and polemics all became invested in exploring the sovereignty and autonomy of emotion and unconscious drives, insofar as these were experienced and processed through the prism of individual consciousness in its relation to a

national collectivity. Miron argues that this new view of “life” was in the background of numerous polemical controversies during the turn of the century, concerning the constitution of national identity, the formation of the Zionist movement, and the articulation of the forms and trends of modern Hebrew culture.⁸ These discussions were steeped in questions of will and desire, often expressing a wish to “return” the nation to the purported origins of its emotional and libidinal existence—namely, to return the people to its vital national “self.” However, this sense of selfhood was simultaneously understood as exceeding the limits of what was construed as the narrow and restricted category of diasporic Jewish identity. In this respect, “reviving” the nation by “returning” it to the origins of its own psycho-biological life meant at once unveiling the vital origins of the “self” and questioning the vitality of its current embodiment.⁹

Within these debates, language was understood not only as the means of but also as the site at which such a revival might occur. Along with this new understanding of “life” emerged a new understanding of language. Preoccupation with the “life” of language, and its conception as an organism in need of revival, resonated with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic, nationalist philology. Prominent German thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich

⁸ Dan Miron, *Bo’ah, lailah: Ha-sifrut ha-‘ivrit beyn higayon le-i-gayon be-mifneh ha-me’ah ha-‘esrim: Iyunim bi-yetsirot H.N. Bialik u-M.Y. Berdichevsky (Come, Night: Hebrew Literature Between the Rational and the Irrational)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1987), 12–13, 197–201.

⁹ Numerous critics of nationalism have argued that the nationalist imagination is organized around a series of paradoxes, among which are the simultaneous enunciation of continuity and discontinuity, as well as the wish to return to the “origins” of the “self” while negating the “self.” See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991); Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Schleiermacher, articulated a link between language and nation, and highlighted the singularity and distinctiveness of various languages. Each language was now perceived as different from and comparable to all others, and as reflecting the inherent “genius” of the distinct nation to which it “belonged.” By the nineteenth century, this view brought about the rise of comparative linguistics, in the framework of which languages were studied in terms of their genetic relatedness. As Michel Foucault has argued, with the emergence of the philosophical paradigm of the nineteenth century, “language began to fold in upon itself, to acquire its own particular density, to deploy a history, an objectivity, and laws of its own. It became one object of knowledge among others, on the same level as living beings, wealth and value, and the history of events and men.”¹⁰ This understanding of language as an object, and its new approximation to economic and biological systems gave rise to the metaphorical framework within which the anatomy of language could be analyzed.¹¹ Since the imagined “body” of language, observed through the prism of a humanistic inquiry, had been subjected to the scholarly gaze that constituted it as such, language could be viewed as both an “asset” and an “organism,” at once a property “owned” by the nation, and a creation or a creature that bore its own generative forces and its own forms of “life.”

Yasemin Yildiz, in her discussion of the emergence of the monolingual paradigm, has shown that a central component of this new perspective on language had to do with the idealization of “primary language,” namely the assertion that one can only think, speak, and

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 322.

¹¹ See Edward Said’s discussion of Ernest Renan’s concept of the “philological laboratory.” Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 123–48.

write authentically in a single language: the “mother tongue.”¹² Yildiz argues that the modern concept of “mother tongue” conceals an affective relationship between language, subject, and nation, in the framework of which language is imagined as emanating from the mother’s body.¹³ She explains that within the concept of “mother tongue,” the element “mother” “stands for a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation . . . the ‘mother’—a markedly gendered kinship concept—stresses a static mode of belonging to the national collective.”¹⁴ According to Yildiz, then, “mother” functions discursively as a crucial emotional and biological link between national subjects and language.

These psycho-biological, nationalist, and gendered views on language percolated into Hebrew literary discussions at the turn of the century, and profoundly affected their rhetoric and forms. However, these notions posed a challenge for a project whose aim was to conceptualize Hebrew as a modern national language. The nationalist European discourse on language and its idealization of the “mother tongue,” for instance, rendered Hebrew inadequate to perform its national role. Both within the Hebrew literary discourse and beyond, Hebrew was largely viewed as a non-spoken language, associated with an ancient sacred textual tradition and bound to The Book. Moreover, women were traditionally deprived of Hebrew and for the most part did not receive Orthodox Jewish education and as a result had little to no access to the language. In this respect, before the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Hebrew could barely be

¹² Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

¹³ Yildiz, 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

thought of as a proper “mother tongue.” As opposed to colloquial Yiddish, which was traditionally referred to as *mameloshn* (literally: “mother tongue”), Hebrew was seen as disconnected from the public sphere, from everyday life, and by extension, from “the mother.” Its “maternal” character was problematized, and it was often portrayed figuratively as an inadequate, or overbearing, mother.

These are among the dynamics that affected the rhetoric of the purported endeavor to “revive” Hebrew as a modern national language. Within the modern Hebrew literary discourse, particularly on the grounds of its universal aspirations, Hebrew was largely conceived as an anomaly, “exceptional” in relation to European languages and literatures. Although the language was figuratively debated in biological terms, it was commonly depicted as a sick, wounded, or dysfunctional body (and a feminine one, at that). These articulations of Hebrew’s “exceptionality,” in response to the discursive constraints it faced due to its own liminal position, corresponded to the continuous attempts to align the project of modern Jewish nationalism with an ethnocentric European nationalist discourse. In the broader European discussion of national languages and literatures, Hebrew was often construed as lacking and deficient, a language in constant need of recovery.

However, that proclaimed “exceptionality” of Hebrew, along with the opportunity for potential normalization it summoned, was simultaneously construed as a particular, distinctive feature, which essentially determined the identity of the language. For writers who began to articulate, in differing styles and tones, the nascent forms of a Hebrew modernism—from Berdichevsky and Bialik to Yosef Hayim Brenner, Uri Nissan Gnessin, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon—the deviations of Hebrew from an imagined linguistic ideal often bore a powerful poetic potential. That unnamed element in Hebrew, a persistent remainder that marked its difference

(and deficiency) and at the same time was essential to its integrity, was perceived by these writers as something in language that must be embodied and safeguarded. Yet, just as in Scholem's letter, that which needed to be saved in the language often also emerged as threatening; the very thing "from which one must save and guard oneself."¹⁵

The Promise and Threat of Hebrew Speech

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler addresses the claim that language could be injurious. This claim at once underscores a vulnerability to language and a force in language. Butler draws a link between the injurious power that we ascribe to language and the understanding that our subjectivity is constituted within it.¹⁶ Her discussion is based on the assumption that "speech is always in some ways out of our control."¹⁷ She writes:

If the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression. This means that the subject has its own "existence" implicated in a language that precedes and exceeds the subject, a language whose historicity includes a past and future that exceeds that of the subject who speaks. And yet this "excess" is what makes possible the speech of the subject who speaks.¹⁸

That language differs from the life of speaking subjects, that it necessarily evades their control, is what makes the speech of subjects possible. But if language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, if an *act* in language is only possible from within the constraints of that

¹⁵ Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano," 203.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–2.

¹⁷ Butler, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

condition, then what possibilities are there for an utterance that exceeds the limitations of that condition? For Butler, the possibility of such an act or an agency in language, what she calls the performative, is largely based on the Derridian notion that any sign (any linguistic mark), by means of its iterability, could break from its prior use or context and assume new signification.¹⁹

However, for Butler, unlike for Derrida, the “force” of the performative also stems from the fact that speech is a bodily act. Following Shoshana Felman, Butler argues that every speech carries with it an incongruity of the speaking body, a discrepancy between body and speech in which “the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation.”²⁰ Unlike writing, speech is produced simultaneously with the delivery of its expression, and therefore always communicates a bodily excess that is imparted alongside the content of what is said.²¹ One example of this incongruity, I would like to argue, could be found in speech disorders such as a stutter and stammer. These forms of dysfluency, which deviate from the conventions of “normal talk,” affect all aspects of communication.²² In stammer, the delivery of speech is accompanied by involuntary bodily sounds and gestures. Stammer therefore demonstrates a gap between the content of speech and its bodily performance, a gap that is latent in all forms of talk. In other words, stammer displays the bodily excess of

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

²⁰ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 156; Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²¹ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 152.

²² For a critical discussion about the categories of “normal talk” and “dysfluency,” see the essays in the edited volume, *Literature, Speech Disorders, and Disability: Talking Normal* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

speech, an excess which always supplements what is said with an additional, unintended meaning.

One of the trajectories that this dissertation seeks to illuminate is the discursive transition from revival as a question of writing to revival as a question of speech. While bodily metaphors are invoked throughout the discourse of revival, the realization of spoken Hebrew adds yet another layer to the discussion. With the spread of Hebrew speech in early twentieth-century Palestine, the revival of Hebrew gradually becomes a problem that concerns the Hebrew speaking body. Within the written debates of revival, and particularly in the writing of prominent Hebrew authors, the reality of spoken Hebrew is often contemplated as a distorted mimicry and a menace to the language. Hebrew speech is depicted as inauthentic or mechanistic, and it is often given the name “stammer” (גמגום). In the work of Y.H. Brenner, for instance, the characters’ dialogue is represented as a form of stammering, which, in Brenner’s narrative, is inherently related to either a reckless or a damaged body.²³ In his letter to Rosenzweig, Scholem stresses that Hebrew speakers are blind to what it is they are *doing* when they speak Hebrew.²⁴ Similar references to a “blind” or unknowing enactment of the language could be found in the works of Bialik and Rachel Katznelson.²⁵ With the emergence of Hebrew speech, the question of revival is thematized anew within Hebrew literature, and what it often highlights is precisely the fissure

²³ See, for example, the novel *Mehathala (From the Beginning)* in Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Ketavim (Writings)*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po’alim: Ha-kibuts ha-me’uhad, 1977).

²⁴ “We do live inside this language, above an abyss, almost all of us with the certainty of the blind.” See Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language,” 226.

²⁵ See Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon (Revelment and Concealmnet in Language)” in *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik (The Complete Works of H.N. Bialik)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1939), 191–93; Rachel Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon (Language Insomnia),” in *Masot u-reshimot (Essays and Sketches)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946).

between the language and the body that speaks.

Modern Hebrew literature, which views itself as responsible for the constitution of a new Hebrew subjectivity, is confronted with a problem: What happens when the subject in question opens her mouth and speaks? Most of the texts examined in this study demonstrate the assumed sovereignty of prominent writers who see themselves or are commonly seen as national and literary authorities—cultural prophets. Hebrew literary scholarship has long stressed that their writing marked the emergence of individual consciousness in Hebrew literature. And yet all of them simultaneously exhibit an anxiety that reverberates the tensions between the pretense of sovereignty and the uncontrollable effects of acting (heretically, violently, frivolously, or manipulatively) in language. That open-endedness of Hebrew is what set in motion the discourse of revival and what makes Hebrew speech possible.

Within the literary discourse of the revival of Hebrew, what emerges as at once alluring and threatening is the ability to enact language anew, to initiate a break with a prior usage of language, and make the ancient words (and the bodies who speak them) speak differently. However, this uncanny speech of revival is itself haunted by the faint recognition that in this reenactment of language *something* necessarily evades the control of its speakers. This type of “revival” of the language may be carried out in the name of ideological and political projects such as Zionism. It may attempt to make the language speak the nation-state, or cleanse it from a religious or diasporic resonance. Indeed, as I will show throughout the dissertation, revival often conceals a violent act. And yet, every such attempt to recast the language, manipulative and violent as it may be, necessarily depends on an “excess” or an unexpectedness that inheres in language. This “excess”—which makes the speech of revival possible—bears both the promise and the threat to always become different from itself; that is, it always bears the potential to

strike back.

A Multilingual Landscape

Over the past decade, modern Hebrew literary scholarship has become increasingly engaged with questions of multilingualism, bilingual authorship, language politics, world literature, translation, autotranslation, and untranslatability.²⁶ In dialogue with current trends in the fields of comparative literature and literary theory, and in transnational and global studies, Hebrew literary studies have become deeply preoccupied with and conscious of the multilingual condition from which modern Hebrew literature (like other modern Jewish literatures) emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although scholarly preoccupation with these issues has taken various forms, research is largely organized around the endeavor to challenge

²⁶ The following is but a partial list of publications from the past decade: Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*; Maya Barzilai, "Translation on the Margins: Hebrew-German-Yiddish Multilingualism in Avraham Ben Yitzhak and Yoel Hoffmann," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7, no. 1 (February 2, 2014): 109–28; Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Liora Halperin, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Chana Kronfeld, "The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish," in *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Anita Norich and Joshua L. Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, "A Non-Universal Global: On Jewish Writing and World Literature," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 36, no. 1 (2017): 1–26; Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Anita Norich and Joshua L. Miller, eds., *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Michigan Studies in Comparative Jewish Cultures (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Na'ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013); Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and critique the teleological Zionist historiography of modern Hebrew literature, the monolingual-nationalist paradigm on which it is based, and the exclusionary language politics which derives from it. Attuned particularly to the hegemony of Hebrew literature and to the privileged place of the Hebrew language in the context of Zionism and in the state of Israel, some projects have engaged in recovering and canonizing marginalized literatures as well as understudied works and writers, while others have focused on reconstructing the linguistic and cultural multiplicity that endured despite and against the constraints of Zionism.

In a recent article published in a volume dedicated to the “Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures,” Chana Kronfeld presents the motivations behind her longstanding call for a joint literary historiography for modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures. Kronfeld argues that this joint historiography is part of a wider, long-term project, which aims at calling into question the isolationism of the historiography of modern Hebrew literature, and opening the field to further consideration of Hebrew’s repressed cultural and linguistic elements, and to the study of the close reciprocal contacts between Hebrew and other literatures, such as Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Ladino. Kronfeld highlights the importance of asking not only what is there to be gained from this opening of the field, but also, what is it at stake ideologically in keeping apart languages such as Yiddish, Hebrew, and Arabic, or in considering their components separately even when they converge in the oeuvre of one author.²⁷ Kronfeld thus proposes a model for the study of Jewish literatures that, by questioning the assumptions underlying canonical literary histories, allows for the coexistence of multiple, alternative, and contesting narratives. Such multiplicity enacts an ongoing critical engagement with the very category of Hebrew literature; not a fixation of its identity, but rather as a constant reexamination and rearticulation of its

²⁷ Kronfeld, “The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish.”

relationality.

My dissertation joins this scholarly effort. Although focusing, for the most part, on texts written in Hebrew, I take as my point of departure the recognition of the multilingual condition of modern Hebrew literature, and of the discourse of revival. The literary debates on the revival of Hebrew cannot be understood in isolation from the multilingual reality in which they took place. All of the writers who participated in these debates were either bilingual or multilingual, and their thought on Hebrew was immersed in this socio-linguistic context. Hebrew's interaction with and proximity to various languages and literatures was a crucial issue in the discourse of revival. With the consolidation of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, the mission of language revival gradually came to signify a conscious attempt to abandon that multilingualism and to standardize Hebrew as a single language of the future nation-state. If language revival is indeed entwined with mourning, separation, and betrayal, as this dissertation will argue, then the lingering losses of Hebrew play a formative role in its "revival."

This study, however, does not attempt to reconstruct or expose the sediments of cultural and linguistic components that have been repressed, erased, or excluded as part of the mission of the revival of Hebrew. Acknowledging multilingualism as the condition of modern Hebrew literary discourse, it aims instead at a critical analysis of the concept of revival itself, from a literary perspective. Rather than presupposing that a revival has in fact occurred, or evaluating revival as a discrete historical event, this dissertation offers a critique of revival by exposing its ideological premises and asking what revival *is* within the imagination of modern Hebrew literature. How is it thought of by different writers, in different places and moments? How is it being narrated? What are the primary tropes and figures employed in its narration? And finally, according to these narratives, what does revival *do*, how does it act, and how might it be

enacted?

The texts placed at the center of this study, written by prominent authors, provide particularly compelling instances of engagement with the question of revival. One thing that these writers share is an affiliation with cultural Zionism (whether or not they emigrated to Palestine). Their discussions are therefore fraught with the tensions and discrepancies involved in the attempt to realign Hebrew with Zionism.²⁸ My reading is particularly attuned to the nuanced understandings of language and to the recurring tropes and figures these texts employ. Following the reiteration of these tropes across the different texts, I seek to evoke attentiveness to the alternative narratives they conceal. Although these texts by no means encompass or represent the discourse of revival in its entirety, put together, they form a collection of key moments in the life of Hebrew as a “reviving” language.

The first chapter sets the ground for the discussion by dwelling on a moment in which modern Hebrew literary discourse became increasingly conscious of and concerned with its own preoccupation with language. This reflective turn was largely marked by the rise of the thinker and Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha’am during the 1890s. The chapter focuses on the literary dispute between Ahad Ha’am and Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky. Tracing the disagreement between these two major writers over the establishment of the Hebrew journal *Ha-shiloah*, and, by extension, over the role of literature and aesthetics in the national project of revival, the chapter explores the ways in which revival and aestheticization are construed in their texts. I show that for both Ahad

²⁸ It is perhaps worth stressing that the participants in the literary discussions on the revival of Hebrew were not all affiliated with Zionism. The central critic and poet David Frishman is one salient example of a non-Zionist Hebrew writer. Other examples include such writers as U.N. Gnessin and David Fogel, who played crucial roles in the formation of a Hebrew modernist poetics.

Ha'am and Berdichevsky, aestheticization is understood as a violence directed at its objects. Hence, insofar as revival is entwined with aestheticization, it entails a violent act against the language, the nation, the people, and the "self." Drawing on Berdichevsky's concept of "the tear in the heart," I show that this process entails the constitution of a subject at war, torn between contradictory ends, and vacillating between life and death. Within this understanding of revival, Hebrew literature draws its "life" from mourning what it has concurrently produced as non-living. The figure of the non-living indeed emerges and reappears throughout *Ahad Ha'am* and Berdichevsky's texts.

Departing from the question of aestheticization, the second chapter attends to the work of the Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik. After reviewing his status as a crowned "national poet," as well as his general philosophy of language, I focus more closely on Bialik's approach to the mission of poets within the project of the revival of Hebrew. The bulk of the discussion is devoted to a close reading of Bialik's essay "Language Pangs" ("חבלי לשון"), first published in 1905. In this essay, Bialik lays out his vision and practical plan for the recuperation of what he depicts as the sick body of Hebrew. Although Bialik attributes the illness of the language to its being unspoken and detached from common, everyday life, I argue that the "treatment" he offers departs from that realm. Bialik's solution consists, instead, in the envisioned transgressive collaboration of linguists and poets. He proposes that by composing an all-encompassing Hebrew dictionary, linguists and poets will at once constitute the language as a dissectible body of knowledge and imbue it with life through poetic creation. In my reading, I show that the figurative dimension of the text contains a mythic narrative, in the framework of which the plan to "heal" Hebrew is depicted as a violent, sexual attack on its body, which results in a problematic linguistic pregnancy. Through the act of impregnating the body of Hebrew, poets

will institutionalize the language as historical, and thereby confine it to a proper national narrative. At the same time, I show that Bialik's text alludes to the necessary failure of this plan. By portraying Hebrew as an abnormal pregnant body that "maintains her fetuses in her womb,"²⁹ he underscores precisely that which remains concealed in language and refuses revealment, a bodily remainder that is unpredictable and unforeseen.

The third chapter focuses on the perspective of Hebrew speakers, recent immigrants to Palestine, who struggle to adjust to a belatedly acquired language. This chapter attends to the early work of Hebrew literary critic Rachel Katznelson, particularly to her essay from 1918, "Language Insomnia" ("נדודי לשון"). Katznelson's essay accounts for the conscious attempt to "abandon" Yiddish, and instead adopt Hebrew as a sole spoken language of the *yishuv*. From her position as a Second Aliyah immigrant, a laborer, and a woman Hebrew essayist (who, like the majority of women writers of her generation, did not receive an Orthodox Jewish education in Hebrew), Katznelson frames the transition from Yiddish to Hebrew as a desirable revolutionary turn against the "self." My reading shows that according to Katznelson, what makes Hebrew revolutionary is that it evokes a sense of alienation, inaugurating a space in which its speakers can no longer recognize their own "self." Organizing her discussion around the maternal, loving figure of Yiddish, Katznelson alludes to the non-maternal characteristics of Hebrew and presents it, in reverse, as an unloving mother: it is through the iterated betrayal of Yiddish, and through the conscious and disorienting shift between languages that a revolutionary linguistic option emerges. However, following the trajectory of Katznelson's account, I argue that the self-alienating encounter with Hebrew is quickly translated in her work into an isolationist narrative

²⁹ "משהה ולדותיה במעיה". Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Hevley lahon (Language Pangs)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 18 (1907): 16.

of linguistic seclusion and self-defense which, in turn, directs the violence of self-alienation outwards, onto the *yishuv*'s others.

The final chapter delves deeper into the question of Hebrew speech. Drawing on both literary and pedagogical linguistic debates within the *yishuv*, it examines the question of spoken Hebrew through the evocative category of stammering. Equipped with the insights of critical dysfluency studies, I show that throughout these debates, stammering is employed as a descriptive title that seeks to capture early attempts at spoken Hebrew in Palestine. In the work of Yosef Hayim Brenner, stammering takes an interesting turn; it becomes a way to explore modernist poetic possibilities, while indulging in its liminality as a not-yet-fully-formed vernacular. After tracing Brenner's ambivalent, and often dismissive approach to the reality of Hebrew speech, I offer a reading of his 1921 novel *From the Beginning* ("מהתחלה"). In this novel, which portrays the life of Hebrew-speaking youth in a Jewish colony in Palestine, stammering is presented simultaneously as a playful, frivolous enactment of language, entwined with emerging sexuality, and as corruptive and degenerate. Although the novel's narrator brutally denigrates the young speakers for their artificial Hebrew stammering, the work's rhetoric and poetics gesture towards an alternative view of stammer as a critical tool, which exposes an inherent failure of all speech, and shatters the illusion of normal talk. Stammering, I further argue, provides a way to discuss Hebrew as coming into being, as an iterated enactment of transition, a constantly deferred beginning-to-speak. However, in this late work, Brenner also signals the possibility that, within the borders of the future nation-state, Hebrew speech will change its face and overcome its foreignness. This will be its ultimate disaster.

Chapter 1: The Birth of a Lifeless Creature – Ahad Ha'am and M.Y.

Berdichevsky Between Revival and Mourning

A prevailing sentiment of modern Hebrew literature written in Eastern Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century was one of unease with the current state of the Hebrew language. That unease was reiterated in the work of almost all major writers of the time, and became an identifying mark of its literary debates. Hebrew literary scholarship has named this period “the revival literature” (ספרות התחייה), and crowned it as a renaissance of modern Hebrew literature, a period of poetic innovations and unprecedented growth, in which the most prominent figures of the Hebrew literary canon, such as H.N. Bialik, made their debut. This period indeed saw a dramatic increase in publication and distribution of Hebrew press, including the establishment of some of its most central publication platforms.¹ That increase was accompanied by a proliferation of a meta-literary discourse. More than ever, Hebrew literature was preoccupied with grasping its own identity, capturing the essence of what was at once the ideal goal of its labors and the presumed reflection of its “self.” Amidst the disagreements about the nature of that identity or the means by which it should be constituted, a shared hesitation about the capability of the modern Hebrew language and Hebrew literature to sustain themselves traversed these various debates. This hesitation instigated, at the turn of the century, the production of a rapidly growing literary discourse, whose core activity was organized around questioning the validity of its own existence.

¹ Alongside daily newspapers such as *Ha-melitz* and *Ha-tsfira* were annual literary journals such as *Luah Ahiasaf*, as well as periodicals, collections and reviews such as *Ha-eshkol*, *Ha-dor* and *Ha-shiloah*. For a detailed overview of the increase in publication and distribution of Hebrew press during the turn of the century, see Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam: Li-deyokanah shel ha-republikah ha-sifrutit ha-ivrit bi-tehilat ha-me'ah ha-esrim* (*When Loaners Come Together*) (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1987), 31–36.

Asher Ginsberg (1856-1927), a prominent thinker and Hebrew essayist known by the pen name Ahad Ha'am (literally: one of the people), drew attention to this hesitation in his 1893 essay "The Language and Its Literature" ("הלשון וספרותה"). In this essay, Ahad Ha'am criticized the growing reflective discourse of language in modern Hebrew literature, and presented that reflective turn as the result of Hebrew literature's deficiency.²

"To whom and to what end do we write in Hebrew? How and what should we write in Hebrew? Could we, and to what extent, revive Hebrew?" . . . Why haven't these questions arisen before? . . . Although many have complained about the "insufficiency of our language," we've never heard this kind of disrespect [towards our language], or this fiddling around with such inquiries and demands.³

That these questions were asked at that time, Ahad Ha'am argued, attested to an essential distortion in modern Hebrew literature, which had long abandoned the virtue of its national spirit, encapsulated in abstract, theoretical thought. "Our new literature, of the past one hundred years," he contended, "perceives thought as subordinate to the emotion of beauty (רגש היופי), and [perceives] language as if it was created for the purpose of serving beauty alone."⁴ This reversal of hierarchy between aesthetics and thought had deformed the language, and thus brought about the hyper-reflective literary debates of the time. The peculiar inquiries about the status of the language were, according to Ahad Ha'am, a symptom of that distortion. Yet by means of his own

² Ahad Ha'am expressed similar critique on different occasions. His important essay, "Tehiyat ha-ruah," for instance, opens with a similar query. See Ahad Ha'am, "Tehiyat ha-ruah (The Revival of the Spirit)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 10 (November 1902): 385.

³ "למי ולמה אנו כותבים עברית? איך ומה צריך לכתוב עברית? אם ובמה אפשר להחיות את העברית?" . . . מדוע לא נתעוררו שאלות כאלה לפני? . . . אע"פ שהתאוננו פעמים רבות על 'קוצר לשוננו', לא שמענו מעולם שיקלו בכבודה ושיתעסקו בחקירות ודרישות כאלו" Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-sifruta (The Language and Its Literature)," in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma'amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921[1893]), 185. (All translations from Hebrew in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise specified.)

⁴ Ahad Ha'am, 186.

critique, Ahad Ha'am not only took an active part in these debates, but became one of their major motivators. In the 1890s, Ahad Ha'am swiftly came to be one of the most central and influential voices of the modern Hebrew literary discourse. His essays appeared in the important Hebrew journals of the time, and his cultural work culminated in the foundation of the monthly literary journal *Ha-shiloah*, which he edited between 1896 and 1902.

Against Ahad Ha'am's call to restore the hierarchy and suppress aesthetic aspirations, new voices within modern Hebrew literature were promoting a change of values, a break with the past and a renewed relation to language and aesthetics. At the forefront of this contesting literary movement was Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky (1865-1921), a Ukraine-born writer and thinker who grew up in a Hasidic environment but soon abandoned his religious background in favor of Haskalah culture and Western European education. Berdichevsky had published extensively in the Hebrew press, and by the 1890s, after completing his doctoral degree at the University of Bern, experimented with writing in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German. His career as a fiction writer was launched by the end of that decade.

Berdichevsky, who was initially Ahad Ha'am's disciple, challenged his mentor's vision. In a series of polemical essays published in *Ha-shiloah*, the two continuously argued over the identity of modern Hebrew literature and its role in nationalization. These essays gave rise to an ongoing discussion that reproduced precisely the type of queries about and questioning of language that Ahad Ha'am had previously denounced. Ahad Ha'am critiqued the new Hebrew literature for its reflective discourse on language while at the same time establishing a journal that would serve as the ultimate locus for these debates. In fact, Ahad Ha'am's commentary on the self-reflectiveness of the discourse on language in "The Language and Its Literature" was in itself a reflective view of reflectiveness, which marked a crucial moment in the formation of the

national Hebrew imagination. A declared mission of Hebrew literature of the time was to find within itself the national ideal it had already set out to realize. Its aim was to educate itself, as well as the people, about its own inner world and obtain a better grasp of its sense of selfhood.

Theorist and Armenian literary scholar Marc Nichanian argues that the inauguration of national imagination in the nineteenth century was entwined with “the autoscopic phenomenon constituted by the ethnography of the self by the self, in which the subject’s vision and knowledge (*le voir and le savoir*) are turned on himself as an object.” According to Nichanian, this auto-ethnographic project, which was brought about by the rise of philology, established “the necessity for a voyage toward the self.”⁵ Nichanian shows that the invention of philology and literature as modern institutions in nineteenth-century Europe was modeled on an early romantic formulation, in which art was understood at once as the origin of mythology (mythological religion) and as presupposing mythology by mourning its loss.⁶ This circular notion of creating something as already lost and by the same token mourning it became a defining principle of both philology and literature; two modern institutions that are “complicit” in their service of nationalism, according to Nichanian.⁷

⁵ Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 67; For an elaborate discussion of the notion of autoscopic mimicry see Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 122–54.

⁶ Nichanian cites Schelling, who argued at once that “the basic law of every figuration of the gods is the law of beauty” and that “mythology is the necessary condition and raw material for all art.” Nichanian interprets these statements as forming a circular relationship between mythology and art. See Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 1–2.

⁷ Throughout his book Nichanian establishes the claim that philology is “an institution of mourning,” as its work is founded upon restoring that which is lost and thereby reaffirming the loss. At the same time, he argues, it is literature, in practice, which expresses itself in the form of mourning.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, modern Hebrew literature was deeply invested in a similar “voyage toward the self.” Attempting to uncover *and* constitute that “self,” it engaged in a discourse of vitalism, which called for the awakening, revitalization, and birth of both the language and the nation. At the same time, the mission of language revival produced a speech that was equally preoccupied with mourning, annihilation, and death. As scholars have pointed out, this literary discourse was filled with seemingly contradictory gestures.⁸ Grandiose statements declaring the establishment of a new cultural structure were oftentimes accompanied by laments and cries of catastrophe. The momentum of regeneration was wrapped in an atmosphere of crisis and disaster. This chapter explores the relationship between revival and mourning as it is refracted through the polemics between Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky. Focusing primarily on their different approaches to language and aestheticization, I closely examine how “revival” is construed in their texts.

The chapter begins with an overview of the dispute over the establishment of *Ha-shiloah*, pointing to the issues that were at the center of the debate and outlining the cultural background against which they emerged. It then delves into an analysis of Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s different understandings of the role of belles-lettres in nationalization. Presenting Ahad Ha’am’s position against the aestheticization of Hebrew and Berdichevsky’s contesting response, I show how both writers are concerned with the notion of an artistic creation rooted in a violent gesture, which produces its object as a lifeless creature. I then move on to trace the dominant metaphor of

⁸ For instance, Dan Miron devotes an extensive discussion to what he sees as the most crucial paradox of early twentieth-century Hebrew literature. Following Shimon Halkin, Miron names this paradox “תחייה ותהייה” (literally: revival and wonderment), referring primarily to the tension between an extremely energetic literary activity on the one hand, and a sense of despair and disbelief in the future of this literature on the other hand. See Miron, *Bodedim be-mo’adam*, 23–111.

“the tear in the heart” (הקרע שבלב),⁹ which recurs as an organizing principle throughout Berdichevsky’s oeuvre. I show that at the core of his literary project, Berdichevsky establishes a model of the split subject who is in a constant state of war. Finally, I turn to Berdichevsky’s later series of essays gathered in the collection “Language Matters” (“ענייני לשון”) and examine how the notion of the split self is translated into his thought on multilingualism and the differentiation between Yiddish and Hebrew. Focusing on his growing concerns in light of recent developments in both languages, I point to his ironic return to the *Ahad Ha’amic* position.

The chapter illustrates the different ways in which the discourse on language revival produces a restrained motion of parallel affirmation and withdrawal. This discourse repeatedly alludes to its own failing attempt to realign the project of Jewish nationalism with respect to its own liminal position in an ethnocentric European nationalist discourse. The endeavor to revive Hebrew thus inaugurates an ever ambivalent movement, in which Hebrew literature constantly evades and denies its own creation.

1. The Dispute over Ha-shiloah

The establishment of *Ha-shiloah* was indeed a defining moment in the life of modern Hebrew literature. The journal would soon become a major platform for the publication of Hebrew polemics and essayistic writing, and the most prestigious stage for Hebrew belles-lettres. But the establishment of *Ha-shiloah* was also crucial in that it gave rise to what is often seen as a major divergent literary and philosophical tradition in the history of modern Hebrew literature. Its main

⁹ The Hebrew word “קרע” could be translated into English as either a rip, a tear or a rift. Berdichevsky’s phrase “the tear in the heart” (which I will further discuss later in this chapter) echoes at once a metaphorical wound, a rupture, and a state of split: being torn between conflicting attachments.

representatives, Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky, and their ongoing debate, shaped and redefined that entire literary discourse. The figurative language that recurred in their texts, and their distinct Hebrew styles, percolated into the expanding terrains of modern Hebrew writing; and their seemingly divided views, along with the philosophical, poetic, and political assumptions that informed them, were to be reiterated and echoed in modern Hebrew literature and Zionist thought for the decades that followed.

In August of 1896, Berdichevsky had accepted Ahad Ha'am's invitation to serve on the editorial board of his newly founded journal. The proposal to establish the journal was raised by Ahad Ha'am several years earlier, in 1893, but the plan was repeatedly delayed. Berdichevsky himself persistently pleaded with Ahad Ha'am to fulfil his idea and launch the journal, which Berdichevsky believed would serve as the ultimate platform for a new wave of Hebrew literature and thought. Such innovative ideals were promoted by a group of writers who had surrounded Berdichevsky at the time, a group later known by the name "the young ones" (צעירים).¹⁰ The group, led by Berdichevsky, was eager to change the face of modern Hebrew literature and infuse it with the current developments of Western thought and aesthetics, without compromising what they saw as its particular national character. They met with Ahad Ha'am several times during his visits from Odessa to Berlin (where the new journal was soon to be published, due to censorship restrictions in Russia) and were enthusiastic to hear of his plans to found a new literary journal that would respond to the sensations of a "national awakening" that

¹⁰ The members of the group were young Jewish men who came from across Eastern Europe to Berlin in pursuit of Western higher education. Most of them met during their studies in Berlin. Among them were figures such as Mordechai Ehrenpreis, Jehoshua Thon and David Neumark. For further elaboration on the *Tse'irim* group see Yosef Oren, *Ahad Ha'am, M.Y. Berdichevsky va-havurat "tse'irim" (Ahad Ha'am, M.Y. Berdichevsky, and the Group of "The Young Ones")*. (Rishon Le-Tsion: Yahad, 1985).

were stirring within European Jewish society. They initially adopted Ahad Ha'am as a spiritual leader and developed high expectations for his project, hoping that it would manifest their desire to expand the horizons of Hebrew literature and imbue it with "new life, new opinions and a new language."¹¹

The first volume was eventually published in October, 1896. It opened with a brief manifesto-like introduction titled, "*Ha-shiloah's Mission*" ("תעודת השילוה"), signed by Ahad Ha'am. In "*Ha-shiloah's Mission*," Ahad Ha'am clearly defined the duties of the Hebrew literature to come; it was its role to "teach us about [our nation's] inner world . . . Only then [will the nation] understand what it could further be and recognize its appropriate place in the world, and only then might it find its way and fully repair its life."¹² The mission of modern Hebrew literature, according to Ahad Ha'am, was to obtain a recognition of the self by the self, so that it would better understand what it should and could aspire to further be. Ahad Ha'am contended that Hebrew literature of the past several generations, namely the Haskalah literature and its successors, was faulty in that its gaze was turned outwards instead of inwards. By contrast, *Ha-shiloah* was created for the purpose of enabling a deliberate investigation of the "self," the end of which was "to know ourselves, to understand our life and to constitute our futures with reason."¹³

¹¹ See Berdichevsky's letter to Ahad Ha'am, dated from August, 1894 in Oren, *Ahad Ha'am, M.Y. Berdichevsky va-havurat "tse'irim*," 82.

¹² Ahad Ha'am, "Te'udat ha-shiloah (*Ha-shiloah's Mission*)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 1 (October, 1896): 2.

¹³ Ahad Ha'am, 3.

According to Ahad Ha'am, the mission of understanding the self necessitated a set of rules and restrictions to which modern Hebrew literature had to conform. The journal, he declared, aimed to include texts of specific genres that would adhere to certain thematic and stylistic demands and, in doing so, set up a clear hierarchy. First and foremost, the journal sought nonfiction essays from various fields of the humanities, insofar as these fell within the realm of Judaism.¹⁴ Next, the journal invited the writing of *publistika* (פובליציסטיקה), namely articles dealing with topics that are at the center of public interest, and the writing of literary criticism. Belles-lettres (בללטרסטיקא) came last on that list, and not without reservations. Ahad Ha'am had agreed to include *some* Hebrew fiction and poetry in the journal, but demanded that these works stick to an articulation of "the life of our nation."¹⁵ Poetic writing whose focus was merely aesthetic or individual was not without value in itself, Ahad Ha'am argued, but maintained that in its current state, Hebrew literature must not waste its very limited energy on such matters. Hebrew literature, he stated, lacked the strength to be at once poetic and thoughtful, and the aesthetic need was secondary within the hierarchy of necessities dictated by the climate and conditions in which the language operated. Hence, those among "our young men" who were in need of the aesthetic, were invited by Ahad Ha'am to search for it elsewhere, in other languages and literatures.¹⁶

The brief text of "*Ha-shiloah's* Mission" was met with outrage, and immediately inaugurated a wave of responses by the members of "the young ones." Many of these responses,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

in which different writers commented on Ahad Ha'am's statements and articulated their own versions of the national literary project, were published as essays in the subsequent volumes of *Ha-shiloah*. Each response made its own argument for the adjustments and revisions Hebrew writing must undergo in order to become the "self" that it already endeavored to reflect.¹⁷ Those responses, particularly Berdichevsky's, prompted Ahad Ha'am to publish his own response, and so the heated conversation continued for several years.

What had enraged Berdichevsky and "the young ones" group, who initially saw themselves as Ahad Ha'am's natural allies, was both the hesitant tone of his text, which they thought should have been more decisive and visionary, and the series of restrictions he had placed on the type of literary contents that were welcome in *Ha-shiloah*. As I will explain in the subsequent sections, writers such as Berdichevsky saw the aesthetic and the universal aspirations of modern Hebrew literature as crucial for the project of nation building. Yet different as Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky's positions may seem, they shared similar underlying assumptions and participated in the same ideological discourse that constantly negotiated its own terms.

Menachem Brinker claimed that a similar philosophical infrastructure informed all of these writers, what he calls "the European fin de siècle, with its atmosphere of fundamental crisis, moral doubt, aestheticism, radical individualism and decadent world view."¹⁸ A close examination of their disagreements shows that these often stemmed from tensions inherent in the

¹⁷ See, for instance, Jehoshua Thon, "Sifrut le'umit (National Literature)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 1, no. 4 (January, 1897): 344–49; Mordechai Ehrenpreis, "Le'an? (Whither?)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 1, no. 6 (March, 1897): 489–503.

¹⁸ Menachem Brinker, "Nietzsche ve-ha-sofrim ha-'ivriyim (Nietzsche and the Hebrew Writers)," in *Nietzsche ba-tarbut ha-'ivrit* (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at sefarim 'a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, ha-universitah ha-'ivrit, 2001), 133.

fraught discourse of European nationalism which was absorbed by them and translated into the Hebrew discourse of the nation. The multiple, often contradictory, inspirations of romantic, symbolist, and existentialist thought shaped modern Hebrew culture at the turn of the century. Different scholars have shown that this cultural scene was steeped in an anti-rationalist discourse that highlighted creativity, as well as unconscious drives and instincts, and grounded the possibility of a “national revival” in their acknowledgment.¹⁹ Hebrew literary scholarship has long attributed a particularly powerful impact to the ideas of thinkers such as Freud, Schopenhauer, and most prominently, Nietzsche.²⁰ As Mikhal Dekel argues, although Nietzsche’s reception within modern Hebrew culture was often indirect, relying on translations, citations, or the internalization of his ideas within Hebrew literature, his thought informed Hebrew culture and played a major role in the emergence of its national fantasies.²¹ Berdichevsky, who is often referred to as “the Hebrew Nietzsche,” was undoubtedly one of the most fervent mediators of Nietzsche into Hebrew culture.

Some scholars have referred to the disagreement between Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky as rooted in a philosophical dispute in which Berdichevsky represented a revolutionary Nietzschean perspective, whereas Ahad Ha’am, who moderately advocated for a gradual

¹⁹ See Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im shel dekadens: Bialik, Berdichevsky, Brenner (Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature)* (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1997); Brinker, “Nietzsche ve-ha-sofrim ha-ivriyim;” Dan Miron, *Bo'ah, lailah: Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit beyn higayon le-i-gayon be-mifneh ha-me'ah ha-esrim: Iyunim bi-yetsirot H.N. Bialik u-M.Y. Berdichevsky* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1987).

²⁰ See, for instance, Jacob Golomb, *Nietzsche ba-tarbut ha-ivrit (Nietzsche in Hebrew Culture)*; Jacob Golomb, *Nietzsche and Zion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

²¹ Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity, and the Zionist Moment* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 171.

development that would lead to a harmonious synthesis of the Jewish “national spirit”, represented a Hegelian-idealist perspective.²² However, others have argued that even writers who were explicitly anti-Nietzschean—Ahad Ha’am and Bialik, for instance—were deeply affected by that anti-rationalist discourse.²³ Just like their opponents, their writing was filled with corporeal metaphors, narratives of sickness and health, and recurring imagery of subjugation and power. Brinker explains that such an approach was appealing to modern Hebrew writers, as it offered further grounding for the prevailing motivation of renewal and change of values within Eastern European Jewish society. The negation of the secluded ghetto culture, which was seen as repressive, passive, and subjugated to the Book, as well as the demand for a renewed relation to literature, the aesthetic, the body, and nature, were at the foundations of this literary project.

According to Dekel, a crucial aspect of the Nietzschean influence on modern Hebrew literature lies in its particular investment in tragedy. The return of tragedy as a feature of modernism in Nietzsche’s writing, Dekel shows, deeply affected modern Hebrew literature “alongside and in the service of its nationalist turn.”²⁴ Dekel argues that the aesthetics of tragedy, and its renewed understanding within major philosophical trends of the time, informed Hebrew literature in different ways. It allowed for the elevation of suffering and the articulation of national feelings and sensibilities in the spirit of Nietzsche’s notion of a collective Dionysian existence. And it “provided a paradigm through which the daily disappointments of young,

²² Jacob Golomb, *Nietzsche ha-‘ivri (The Hebrew Nietzsche)* (Tel Aviv: Sifrey hemed, 2009), 212–14.

²³ Brinker, “Nietzsche ve-ha-sofrim ha-‘ivriyim,” 138; Dekel, *The Universal Jew*, 176.

²⁴ Dekel, *The Universal Jew*, 133.

assimilation-aspiring Jews could be understood within a larger, more politicized framework.”²⁵

Within that framework, Dekel claims, the depiction of autobiographical tragedies—most commonly, the biography of a young Jewish man torn between the world of Orthodox tradition and its European surroundings—birthed “a new collectivist, mythical-historical consciousness.”²⁶

As we shall see, suffering, mourning, and the notion of a split self indeed play central roles in modern Hebrew poetics. In what follows, I will focus particularly on the ways in which these sentiments prevail in Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s approaches to the Hebrew language and shape their thought on language revival. I will attend in greater detail to their disagreement over the establishment of *Ha-shiloah* as it is reflected throughout different texts written between the 1890s and 1910s. Drawing attention to the narratives unfolded in these texts, my reading is particularly attuned to their articulations of the modern Hebrew literary project as a national creation.

2. “*Artificial Creations Made to Move by an External, Mechanical Push*”: Ahad Ha’am
Against Aestheticization

In order to better understand Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s conceptualizations of the national literary project, we must closely examine their articulations of the role of aesthetics in nationalization. Both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky devoted extensive portions of their discussions to weighing the possibility of Hebrew aesthetics. They contemplated the “will” and “capability” of modern Hebrew literature to fulfil the latent potential in the language and

²⁵ Dekel, 135.

²⁶ Ibid., 136.

become, in itself, a proper national asset. The question was whether or not aestheticization could be the means by which Hebrew literature *becomes* national. Could aesthetics—or, more specifically, poetic language—be the lens through which “our people” observes and recognizes its “self”? Or does aestheticization necessarily distort such observation? Would aestheticizing Hebrew realize its national character or would it, instead, dissolve it? At stake was the preservation of particularity within the universal horizon of European nationalism.

In both Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky's texts, revival is often depicted as an unstoppable motion, an ongoing stream or flow, whose inauguration cannot be undone. For Ahad Ha'am, the establishment of *Ha-shiloah* was first and foremost an attempt to tame or moderate that flow. The name he had chosen for the journal referenced the biblical stream, *Ha-shiloah*, whose waters were said to “flow slowly” (Isaiah 8:6; “מי השילוח ההולכים לאט”). Implicit in that choice was the assumption that something was already flowing too fast. In “*Ha-shiloah's* Mission,” Ahad Ha'am indeed invoked “the mighty ‘flow’ that rends us organ by organ and carries [our organs], one by one, into the ‘big sea.’”²⁷ Against that gushing stream, which threatened the coherence of the nation and the integrity of its body, Ahad Ha'am positioned *Ha-shiloah* as an apparatus whose aim was not to stop or resist the flow, but rather to slow it down. In “*Ha-shiloah's* Mission,” Ahad Ha'am expressed a wish to oversee the manner in which *it* was proceeding and taking shape. The tension between the acknowledgment of a transformation that was already underway and the desire to control and navigate that transformation is evident throughout the discussion. The question of control (or lack thereof) would reemerge as a crucial one. For now, suffice it to say that *Ha-shiloah*, in its early form, offered a place for Hebrew

²⁷ “השטף העז, הקורע אותנו אברים אברים ונושאים אחד אחד לים הגדול” Ahad Ha'am, “Te'udat ha-shiloah,” 3.

literature to deliberate its identity “slowly,” while asking to limit the scope of these deliberations, and lower the expectations of what it may aspire to be.

Within that framework, Ahad Ha’am demanded that Hebrew literature pace itself by waiving its aesthetic aspirations. But what was so threatening about the aesthetic? Why did Ahad Ha’am perceive it as a foreign element, dangerous for the life of the language? Understanding Hebrew as detached from the aesthetic realm reinforced Ahad Ha’am’s broader project of redefining the “Jewish spirit” in terms of prophetic morality.²⁸ For Ahad Ha’am, prophetic morality, and the different ways in which it manifested itself throughout Jewish history, was encapsulated in a textual tradition that was essentially divorced from aesthetics. In this respect, Ahad Ha’am echoed a common conceptual opposition that differentiated beauty (and the beauty of language) from ethics, cognition, and thought. The former was identified with Hellenistic culture (“Japheth”), whereas the latter was emblematic of Judaism (“Shem”). That opposition reverberated within Jewish tradition from the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud.

At the same time, Ahad Ha’am’s articulation of Hebrew as not (yet) capable of bearing poetic qualities also corresponded to a more recent philological tradition, in the framework of which Hebrew was classified as a Semitic language incapable of aesthetic creation. As Maurice Olender and others have shown, the nineteenth century’s newly established science of comparative linguistics gave rise to the core binary opposition between two multitudes of tongues: Indo-European languages (also known as Aryans and Indo-Germans) and Semitic languages. Olender argues that this opposition was meant to impose, in the name of science, “a

²⁸ See, for instance, Ahad Ha’am, “Kohen ve-navi (Priest and Prophet),” in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma’amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921).

Christian providential meaning on the new comparative order.”²⁹ Within that comparison, Semitic languages, and by extension the Semitic peoples, were characterized as stagnant and static as opposed to the dynamic, culturally developed, and imaginative Indo-Europeans. While Indo-Europeans were credited with the invention of mythology, science, and art, Semites, who were said to hold the secret of monotheism, were thought of as primitive, non-productive, and lacking imagination and sensibility.³⁰ Olender shows that in the work of philologists such as Ernest Renan (one of the founding fathers of Orientalism and a prominent formulator of the Aryan/Semite binary), the two sides of the opposition formed a dual scheme that was conceptualized as the origin of human civilization.³¹ That myth of a dual origin or a two-headed civilization, which was inscribed in the difference between languages, was inherent in the self-definition of Western modernity.

It is within this context that the debate on the aesthetic potentials of Hebrew should be understood. At the turn of the nineteenth century, discussions about the modernization of

²⁹ Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 136.

³⁰ Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 63–68. For further discussion on the Orientalist invention of the Semitic category see Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

³¹ Olender, 53. Within the Hebrew literary discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the common responses to such evaluations of the Semitic category were ambivalent, but not altogether dismissive. The work of Ernest Renan, for instance, was widely read and commented upon in Jewish and Hebrew circles. As Ya’akov Shavit shows, writers such as Yosef Klausner, Shimon Brenfeld and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda addressed Renan’s popularity and the role he designated for “the ancient Israelites” in his work. The first volumes of *Ha-shiloah* included a detailed article in sequence by Shimon Brenfeld devoted to Renan’s work and his relation to the Jews. See Ya’akov Shavit, “Ha-yesh la-yehudim dimyon? Tkhunot bney shem u-tkhunot bney yefet: Shemiyim ve-ariyim ba-polemika ha-yehudit ha-modernit (Do the Jews Have Imagination?),” in *Beyn israel la-umot* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot israel: Hevrah ha-historit ha-yisre’elit, 1987), 215–41.

Hebrew, which attempted to reclaim it as the language of the Jewish nation involved the internalization of that Orientalist discourse. Writers who debated modern Jewish nationalism and were concerned with the national quality of Jewish languages had to accept at least some of the premises of a philological-nationalist discourse in the framework of which the Semitic category was inferior. Within that conceptual framework, the capability of Hebrew to fulfil the role of a modern national language was necessarily in doubt. Whether consciously or not, modern Hebrew literature articulated a range of responses to this inherent tension; accommodating some assumptions while rejecting others, often by redirecting the terminology of this philological discourse in order to charge Hebrew with nationalistic values.

Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky's disagreement over Hebrew aesthetics indeed echoed these tensions. In his essay "The Language and Its Grammar" ("הלשון ודקדוקה"), for instance, Ahad Ha'am cites Renan's work, affirming his claim that the greatest error of the Semitic peoples was their establishment of "a narrow and meager [linguistic] mechanism," limited in its ability to express tenses and nuanced actions.³² This unchallenged acceptance of a seemingly neutral scientific evaluation attests to the extent to which a philological discourse, which was rooted in a Western Christian paradigm, had informed the way modern Hebrew thinkers perceived the language and themselves.

In his rejection of Hebrew aesthetics, however, Ahad Ha'am did not maintain that lack of sensibility was an essential quality of Hebrew, or that Hebrew was inherently incapable of aesthetic creation. Rather, he explained, the detachment of Hebrew from aesthetics was a result of historical circumstances. In "The Language and Its Literature," he wrote:

³² Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-dikduka (The Language and Its Grammar)," in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma'amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921 [1895]), 200.

From the moment that our national language began to be forgotten from the mouth of our people, so did the spirit of poetry cease to rest upon it, and as [the language] developed through its written life, it by necessity tended towards theoretical thought. The language of Mishnah and Midrash is a big step forward in regards to clarity of thought and the clarification of concepts, but it is a big step backwards in regards to the subtlety of feeling.³³

According to Ahad Ha'am, the loss of political Jewish autonomy, which was entwined with the loss of the spoken function of Hebrew, is what gradually distanced the language from aesthetics. As Miron points out, Ahad Ha'am drew a crucial link between aesthetics and spoken tongue. His assumption was that poetic language could only exist within a connotative framework, that is, within a linguistic system, in which words bore idiosyncratic associations that exceeded their fixed lexical meaning.³⁴ Since Hebrew was not a spoken language, Ahad Ha'am argued, it did not produce the connotative quality that was essential for poetry, and was limited in its aesthetic linguistic expression.³⁵

The binding of political autonomy with aesthetic potential indeed echoes some of the assumptions of nationalist nineteenth-century philology. Yet while asserting that Hebrew was distant from the aesthetic realm, Ahad Ha'am presented the intellectual tradition of Jewish thought as a source of strength. Refined, lucid thought, Ahad Ha'am contended, was a Jewish asset. Rather than neglecting or looking down upon it, he claimed, modern Hebrew literature should have embraced and employed it as the driving force for the revitalization of the language.

³³ "משהתחילה לשוננו הלאומית להשתכח מפי עמנו, חדלה גם רוח השירה לשרות עליה, ובהתפתחותה בחייה שבכתב נטתה בהכרח לדרך המחשבה העיונית. לשון המשנה והמדרשים היא צעד גדול לפנים, ביחס אל בהירות המחשבה. . . . ובירור המושגים וצעד גדול לאחור, ביחס אל דקות הרגש. . . ." Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-sifruta," 188.

³⁴ Ahad Ha'am, 187; Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 74.

³⁵ Ahad Ha'am, 187.

The emphasis on thought as opposed to aesthetics also revealed Ahad Ha'am's own evaluation of the former as a more significant form of cultural production. His argument often shifted to the domain of personal preference.³⁶ At times, Ahad Ha'am suggested that the "Jewish inclination" towards theoretical thought was not so much a necessity, but an obvious choice. The Jewish people, he maintained, was simply more interested in thought than in belles-lettres. Even when attempting to account for the fact that Hebrew literature had practically doubled its reading audience in the past decades, Ahad Ha'am insisted that for the Jewish reader, fiction and poetry were merely an entertainment and not a serious spiritual need:

The Jew too senses beauty and takes pleasure from it, but it is, in his view, merely one of the pleasures of this world . . . and not something that evokes feelings of awe and subservience. Hence, it is no wonder that while these pretty "chapbooks" are indeed sold by the thousands nowadays, it is only on condition that they cost a penny.³⁷

In his ambivalent rhetoric, Ahad Ha'am once again vacillates between admitting a big change (Hebrew belles-lettres are sold by the thousands) and denying the authenticity of that development (it does not reflect the true feelings of the people).

In the final lines of "The Language and Its Literature," Ahad Ha'am famously called to "embellish thought, and [thought] will elevate the language."³⁸ By contrast, he considered the attempt to embellish (לסלסל) and aestheticize the language itself as a futile, even dangerous

³⁶ Ahad Ha'am's critics often accused him of imposing his own personal taste on the "Jewish national spirit." See, for instance, Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, "Al parashat drakhim: Mikhtav galuy el Ahad Ha'am (On a Crossroad: An Open Letter to Ahad Ha'am)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 1, no. 2 (November, 1896): 157.

³⁷ "אמנם גם היהודי מרגיש את היופי ומתענג עליו, אבל הוא בעיניו רק אחד מתענוגי העוה"ז . . . ולא דבר המעורר רגשי כבוד והכנעה. ועל כן אין להתפלא על כי 'מחברות' יפות באמת מוצאות להן בזמננו אמנם קונים לאלפים, אבל רק בתנאי שיהיה מחירן פרוטה" Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-sifruta," 190–91.

³⁸ "סלסלו את המחשבה, והיא תרומם את הלשון" Ahad Ha'am, 196.

undertaking, disconnected from the Jewish spirit. For Ahad Ha'am, the Haskalah literature, which for the past one hundred years had been invested in an aesthetic endeavor, was the source of that evil. He maintained that while the first generation of Haskalah in the late eighteenth century (the generation of Moses Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon, Naphtali Herz Wessely, and others) attempted "not to create new literature on a new basis" but rather "to continue the development of the old literature," their successors have chosen a different, more perilous path. The next generation of Eastern European Haskalah writers had caused Hebrew literature to deviate from its natural course, in that they "reversed the order, and began to embellish language at the expense of thought." Due to that reversal, "the new literature departed from the old literature, in its content and in its language, and moved further away from the spirit of the people until it divorced itself entirely."³⁹ Hebrew literature, Ahad Ha'am lamented, had barely produced anything of value in the field of Jewish thought in recent generations, and with the exception of a few (Nachman Ha-kohen Krochmal and Isaac Hirsch Weiss, for instance) the new Hebrew literature was meager, detached from the spirit of the nation, and not genuinely respected by the people.⁴⁰ His inevitable conclusion was that this literature is not a national literature, and that its effect on the language is devastating. The pretension of the new Hebrew literature to "educate [the people] anew on the basis of the emotion of beauty" by means of embellishing the language, in fact prevented the language from living "natural life."

Therefore this literature could not have created a broad and precise language according to the needs of the thought of our time, and so neither this literature nor its embellished tongue have risen to the level of national assets or natural lives. Instead, they have remained artificial creations, made to move by an external, mechanical push. And not only readers, but the majority of writers themselves cannot turn their gaze away from this

³⁹ Ibid., 189–90.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 190, 191.

spectacle that embitters their work, and they are driven toward strange inquiries, and they let the blame fall on the head of the “dead language” rather than admit to themselves that it is the fault of the dead literature that the language too will not be able to live or develop.⁴¹

By divorcing itself from its own Jewish “self,” Ahad Ha’am argues, Hebrew literature is producing artificial creations deprived of natural lives. Like marionettes in a puppet theater, the literature and its embellished language are governed by an external mechanism that strips them of their vitality. At the same time, Ahad Ha’am also describes their peculiar “movement” (מתנועעות) as a kind of “spectacle” (חזיון), one that mesmerizes readers and writers alike, a sight from which they cannot look away. That sight, painful as it may be, nevertheless seems to allure writers, perhaps affect them by means of a similar mechanistic power. Ahad Ha’am stresses that it is precisely the spell of that spectacle that drives them into the garrulous reflective discussions that, ironically, revolve around the question of language revival. Hence, according to Ahad Ha’am, the literary discourse of revival—those “strange inquiries” that again and again question the validity of Hebrew writing and reflect on the means by which the language should be “revived”—is nothing but the effect of the project of aestheticization, which deprives the language of its life.

In 1893, a moment marked in the historiography of modern Hebrew literature by the unprecedented growth of reading audiences, publications and Hebrew press; two years after the appearance of Bialik’s first poems and three years prior to the establishment of *Ha-shiloah*, Ahad Ha’am defined the Hebrew literary project of his time as a lifeless creation. It is important to

⁴¹ “לפיכך לא יכלה הספרות הזאת לברוא לשון רחבה ומדויקת לפי צרכי המחשבה בזמננו, ולא היא ולא לשונה המסולסלת לא הגיעו למעלת קנין לאומי ולחיים טבעיים, כי אם נשארו עד עתה בריאות מלאכותיות המתנועעות על ידי דחיפות מיכניות מן החוץ, ולא רק הקוראים, אלא גם רוב הסופרים עצמם אינם יכולים להסב עיניהם מן החזיון הזה, הממרר את עבודתם, ובאים על כן לידי חקירות משונות ונוטים יותר לגלגל החובה על ראש ‘השפה המתה’, מאשר להודות לעצמם, כי באשמת הספרות המתה לא תוכל גם השפה לחיות ולהתפתח” Ahad Ha’am, 187.

mention that Ahad Ha'am did not differentiate, at this point, the emerging literary trends of the 1890s from those that had preceded them throughout the nineteenth century, but rather considered them a part of the same literary tradition, which he perceived as essentially erroneous. For Ahad Ha'am, the recasting of Hebrew into the aesthetic modalities of Western European literature without allowing the language to develop from within its own organic basis led to its uncanny state as a lifeless creature. Hebrew has become frozen, confined to an ill-fitting garment. Its peculiar form, brought about by literature, had practically turned it into a machine. Captive within the constraints of this literature, Ahad Ha'am argued, Hebrew lived the odd life of the non-living.

The metaphor of the puppet, implied in Ahad Ha'am's reference to a spectacle in which "artificial creations" are "made to move by an external, mechanical push" appears precisely at a moment when he is discussing the repercussions of the attempt to "educate [the people] anew on the basis of the emotion of beauty."⁴² The emergence of the figure of the puppet in the midst of a discussion on (the dangers of) aesthetic education brings to mind Heinrich Von Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theatre" ("Über das Marionettentheater").⁴³ At the center of Kleist's text is a dialogue between K, a first person narrator, and C, a principal dancer at a local theatre. Their exchange, which functions as a frame narrative for a series of other narratives, revolves around C's proposition that mechanical puppets are more graceful than live dancers. In his essay "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," Paul de Man reads Kleist's text as revealing both the violence and manipulation hidden behind the romantic ideology of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3 (September 1972): 22–26.

aesthetic education. This violence is entwined with an assumed undisputed authority (of a teacher/narrator/narrative) which maintains and reproduces its own mastery. De Man shows that aesthetic education depends on the preconditioned acceptance of notions of idealization and sublimation, carried out by “aesthetic distance”—for instance, the representation of a wound in the form of a beautiful statue (as in the story of the ephebe in Kleist’s text). De Man writes:

Kleist’s story suggests however that this [aesthetic distance] may be a ruse to hide the flaw that marred aesthetic perfection from the start, or, in a more perverse reading, to enjoy, under the cover of aesthetic distance, pleasures that have to do with the inflicting of wounds rather than with gracefulness.⁴⁴

According to de Man, this model is revealed by the graceful dance of the marionettes. This dance, he argues, is also “a dance of death and mutilation,”⁴⁵ as the puppets “can rightly be said to be dead, hanging and suspended like dead bodies.”⁴⁶ The aesthetic effect of this dance stems neither from the marionettes’ ability to sway nor from the puppeteer’s movements that generate their motion. Rather, de Man argues, the “aesthetic power” is located “in the text that spins itself between them,” namely in the way in which the marionettes’ motions *relates* to those of the puppeteer.⁴⁷

According to Ahad Ha’am, modern Hebrew literature (whose inception he locates precisely in Kleist’s time) employed language in a way that distorted not only the relationship between language and literature, but also between readers and writers, and by extension, between

⁴⁴ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 280.

⁴⁵ De Man, 288.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

language, literature and the nation. These relationships now seem to involve a manipulative power structure; they have become mechanized. The “embellishment” of the language had turned it into an instrument in the service of European aesthetic ideals, dissociated from the spiritual world of Hebrew. In Ahad Ha’am’s articulation, the drama of Hebrew’s fraught relationship with its European surrounding is staged in a puppet-like “spectacle,” which vacillates between a frivolous and a macabre scene, the effect of which on its viewers is formative as much as it is manipulative. He therefore warns against the idealization of an aesthetic model which disguises itself as universal. Himself a prophetic educational figure, Ahad Ha’am draws attention to the danger of submitting oneself to an external authority.⁴⁸ He argues that modern Hebrew literature had attempted to educate the people anew “on the basis of the emotion of beauty,” but in so doing demonstrated “utter disregard for the taste and the historical habit of the people . . . and turned the embellishment of the language into its vehicle, as if it was dealing with a nation of *savages*, who had just learned how to read and write and whose heart and taste were a clean slate.”⁴⁹ Adopting a colonialist idiom, Ahad Ha’am “protests” against the auto-Orientalism which he detects in Hebrew literature’s endeavors to aesthetically educate the people anew. Ahad Ha’am alludes to the startling outcome of such an endeavor, which lies precisely in the attempt to create, give a voice, or give birth to the national Hebrew subject, to Hebrew literature’s imagined reader-to-be.

⁴⁸ In his biography of Ahad Ha’am, Steven Zipperstein underscores Ahad Ha’am’s complex understanding of the figure of the prophet as incapable of transmitting his message and as failing in shaping the people’s sentiments. See Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha’am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 65.

⁴⁹ “מבלי שים לב לטעם העם והרגלו ההיסטורי, בקשה [ספרותנו החדשה] לגדלו ולחנכו מחדש על יסוד רגש היופי, ועשתה 'סלסול הלשון' אמצעי לזה, כאילו היה לה עסק עם אומה של פראים, אשר זה עתה למדה קרוא וכתוב ולבה וטעמה עודנו נייר חדש” Ahad Ha’am, “Ha-lashon ve-sifruta,” 187. (My emphasis.)

3. *Killing the Beast: Berdichevsky's Response*

In his response to Ahad Ha'am's claims, Berdichevsky does not stray away from the imagery of submission and power. Yet Berdichevsky points to a potentially generative power that lies within Hebrew itself. He argues that it is precisely this governing, enticing power of language that must be acknowledged and appropriated within Hebrew literature. That power lies beyond reason and knowledge and it stimulates us whether or not we recognize it. In his open letter to *Ha-shiloah's* editor, published in November 1896, shortly after the publication of "*Ha-shiloah's* Mission," Berdichevsky addressed Ahad Ha'am directly:

You are thoughtful and knowledgeable, writer, sir! Logic is your guiding principle . . . But had you delved into the secret of your soul, you would know that not your thoughts necessitated your Hebrewness, but only the strong 'Hebrew [man]' within you, who acts subconsciously, deeply from within the secrets of your heart, he has created and birthed within you your Hebrew thoughts that are akin to the final outcomes of what you already are.⁵⁰

Berdichevsky imagines Hebrew as a form of power latent in the soul of its speakers. His response to Ahad Ha'am focuses on the importance of aesthetics, emotion and unconscious drives. What Ahad Ha'am presents as a trivial source of pleasure and entertainment is for Berdichevsky a condition for the constitution of the national consciousness.

Berdichevsky does not object to Ahad Ha'am's assertion that the role of national Hebrew literature is "to teach us about our inner world," nor does he refute the climate of crisis and disaster sketched by Ahad Ha'am.⁵¹ Rather, he opens his letter with the statement that "in this

⁵⁰ "חשבון ודעתן אתה, אדוני הסופר! ההגיון נר לרגלך . . . אבל לו התעמקת בסוד 'חשבון נפשך', כי אז ידעת, כי לא ⁵⁰ מחשבותיך אלה מחייבים עבריותך, רק 'העברי' החזק שבך, הפועל בלא יודעים עמוק עמוק במסתרי לבך, הוא יצר Berdichevsky, "Al parashat drakhim," 158. והוליד בך את מחשבותיך העבריות, שהן כתוצאות אחרונות ממה שכבר הנך"

⁵¹ Berdichevsky, 155.

hour of emergency, when our poor literature is in crisis, and the few remains of writers and readers drop off one after the other . . . the institution of such a literary project [*Ha-shiloah*] is a cornerstone to strengthen our falling sukkah.”⁵² In Berdichevsky’s view, however, it is precisely that hour of crisis, the state of emergency, which summons and enables the erection of a strong cultural structure that would regenerate Hebrew and constitute it anew. Berdichevsky would later use Nietzsche’s aphorism, “if a temple is to be erected, a temple must be destroyed,”⁵³ as an epigraph for his essay “Old Age and Youth” (“זקנה ובהרות”), which is yet another response to *Ahad Ha’am*. For Berdichevsky, regeneration is inseparable from destruction and annihilation.

According to Berdichevsky, *Ahad Ha’am* underestimates the consequences of sending “our young men” who are yearning for “poetics and the outcry of the soul” away from Hebrew to other languages and literatures. Berdichevsky is convinced that after feeding off of foreign literatures, these young men, who will have now observed Hebrew from a new perspective, “will not be ashamed to say to themselves, [either] secretly or openly, that Hebrew literature contains only dead things.”⁵⁴ For Berdichevsky, a young writer and reader himself, some parts of the Hebrew textual tradition—precisely those parts which he would later identify as “Jewish”—are indeed considered dead. Hence, to focus on what is “dead” within Hebrew while simultaneously absorbing the “life” of other languages and literatures would only maintain Hebrew’s problematic position. Instead of sending readers away from Hebrew literature, Berdichevsky

⁵² “בשעת חירום כזו, שבאה ספרותנו העלובה עד משבר, והסופרים גם הקוראים, המעטים, השרידים, נשמטים אחד אחד. Ibid., 154. . . יסוד מפעל ספרותי כזה הוא הנחת אבן-פנה לחזוק סוכנתנו הנופלת”

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 95.

⁵⁴ “בחורי ישראל . . . לא יבושו כלל לומר לעצמם, בחשאי או בגלוי, כי הספרות העברית כוללת רק דברים מתים” Berdichevsky, “Al parashat drakhim,” 155.

therefore asks to identify within it mythological and aesthetic qualities that would surpass and grapple with its own dead traditions.

What Ahad Ha'am fails to see, according to Berdichevsky, is that "the existence of any people, and especially the people of Israel (עם ישראל), is a thing that depends on poetry more than it depends on thought."⁵⁵ He further states that "it is the purpose of our work, surely, to become a people (עם), men who are united by a general national emotion and a great historical legacy."⁵⁶ Berdichevsky defines the project of nationalization as the aestheticization of both Hebrew and Jewish life. For him, the aesthetic plays a crucial role in the project of nation building. Its primary goal is precisely one of generating the "national emotion" by means of which the imagined national "self" becomes perceptible. This insight aligns with Nichanian's conclusion that "nothing 'national' exists prior to art or before the invention of art. There is, in particular, nothing 'national' about the productions 'of the people' . . . If it is true that literature has to be 'nationalized,' the 'national' itself comes into being only by way of art, particularly literature."⁵⁷

For Berdichevsky, the "voyage towards the self,"⁵⁸ is only possible through the practice of creation, which is governed by an aesthetic model. While in Ahad Ha'am's reading, this type of artistic creation of the self (disguised as sheer self-reflection) is implied to be manipulative,

⁵⁵ Berdichevsky, 156.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nichanian arrives at this conclusion following his reading of early twentieth-century modern Armenian literature, particularly the 1914 Constantinople monthly review *Mehyan* ("pagan temple") and its Manifesto. Nichanian shows how the founders of the review—who, like Berdichevsky and with a similar Nietzschean terminology in mind, proclaimed "the erection of a temple—" repeatedly called for the "nationalization" of literature via the employment of a pagan poetics. He reads that call as attesting to the fact that the "national" is produced through artistic creation. Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 27.

⁵⁸ Nichanian, 67.

Berdichevsky positions it as a necessary condition for nationalization; indeed, as nationalization itself. Throughout his literary, anthological and essayistic work, which involved the re-appropriation of popular Jewish sources, the confrontation of contesting traditions and the identification of mythological, even pagan patterns within Hebrew texts, Berdichevsky strove to generate an aesthetic turn, which by way of sublimation would voice the ongoing internal struggles of modern Hebrew subjectivity.

One example of these efforts can be found in Berdichevsky's fascination with Hasidism and the Hasidic tale. In 1900, alongside the publication of numerous stories, essays and no less than eight books, Berdichevsky published *The Book of Hasidim* ("ספר הסיידים"), a work which he had begun crafting six years earlier, in 1894. Various scholars have shown that the writing of *The Book of Hasidim*, which included rewriting and rearranging Hasidic tales from *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* ("שבעי הבעש"ט"), marked a significant transformation in Berdichevsky's poetics and paved the path for his fiction writing.⁵⁹ In his writing on Hasidism, Berdichevsky often highlighted the dynamism of the religious movement, and addressed it as an alternative, vital and ecstatic source of "life" within historical Judaism, in contrast to the atrophied tradition of rabbinic culture.⁶⁰ Scholars have also emphasized the autobiographical elements that

⁵⁹ Avner Holtzman claims that in this work, Berdichevsky initially experimented with the stylistic components that would later prevail in his fiction writing; and Shachar Pinsker argues that Berdichevsky's attempts to write in the spirit of the Hasidic text were crucial in his emergence as an early modernist. See Avner Holtzman, *El ha-kerav she-ba-lev: Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, shenot ha-tsemihah (Towards the Tear in the Heart)* (Tel Aviv: Beyt ha-sefer le-mada'ey ha-yahadut 'a. sh. Hayim Rozenberg, universitat Tel Aviv, 1995), 196; Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 291.

⁶⁰ See Mikha Yoseph Berdichevsky, *Sefer hasidim: Agadot, partsufim ve-hezyonot (The Book of Hasidim)* (Varsha: Tushiyah, 1900), 5–22; Galili Shachar, *Gufim ve-shemot: Keri'ot be-sifrut yehudit Hadashah (Bodies and Names: Readings in Modern Jewish Literature)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2016), 59.

Berdichevsky incorporated into his reworking of the Hasidic tale. In his introduction to *The Book of Hasidim*, Berdichevsky posited an individual protagonist whose biography resembled his own. Holtzman claims that this work was Berdichevsky's "first conscious attempt to artistically utilize the materials of his own biography, and position them as a junction of national and mythic significations."⁶¹ The biographical materials imbued the book with a confessional tone, that continues to be felt throughout Berdichevsky's early literary works. Hannan Hever argues that this biographical mode, which reorganized the Hasidic text around the experiences of an individual subject, was one means through which Berdichevsky had transformed the Hasidic text into a work of national literature.⁶² According to Hever, in *The Book of Hasidim*, Berdichevsky had "nationalized the Hasidic text and inserted it into the national Zionist culture," in the spirit of fin de siècle neo-romanticism.⁶³

It seems that Berdichevsky interpreted aestheticization not only as the appropriation of popular sources, but also as an autobiographical gesture of rewriting the "self"—individual or collective—by way of aesthetic sublimation. As noted above, de Man draws attention to the violent trail that sublimation, by means of its aesthetic distance, tends to cover up.⁶⁴ Similarly, Nichanian stresses that the project of national literature, with its artistic appropriation of the "self," necessarily involves violence, since the "coming to one's self, a coming of the self to the

⁶¹ Holtzman, *El ka-kerá 'she-ba-lev*, 196.

⁶² Hannan Hever, *Be-khoah ha-el: Te'ologya u-politika ba-sifrut ha-'ivrit ha-modernit (With the Power of God)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me'uhad, 2013), 21.

⁶³ Hever, 18.

⁶⁴ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 289.

self, which is thought under the name of ‘art’ and carried out by means of art . . . presupposes, at the origin, a radical alienation of the ‘self.’”⁶⁵

On different occasions, Berdichevsky in fact positions violence at the forefront of his literary work. Rather than concealing it, his writing often declares itself as consciously violent. Such a violent gesture is at the center of one of Berdichevsky’s most well-known stories, “Red Heifer” (“פרה אדומה”). The story, published in 1906, follows a group of drunken Jewish butchers (contrasted with certified ritual slaughterers), who, in a spontaneous outburst, abduct a heifer from their fellow townsman’s cowshed, kill it (her), dismember its body and devour it in a horrifying feast. Mikhal Dekel, who reads this story as a “depiction of an orgiastic Dionysian state in the Hebrew language,”⁶⁶ argues that its radical statement lies in its focus on the unexplained violent act, an act which Berdichevsky grounds, by means of his language, within Jewish traditional sources. Dekel writes:

“Red Heifer” is modeled precisely after Nietzsche’s portrayal of Dionysian festivals. . . Berdichevsky, however, traces the roots of the violent, ecstatic cruelty of the butchers to biblical rather than pagan culture, as the story’s title, and its very action, refer to a sacrificial ritual described in Numbers 19 . . . The ritual slaughter, understood under the sign of atonement for the sins of Israel against their God, is turned in Berdichevsky’s story into a tale of rebellion against institutional religion and a crime with no causality or meaning.⁶⁷

Dekel points to the transformation of ritual slaughter in Berdichevsky’s story. The act of slaughter is rebellious not because of the violence or the theft it involves, but first and foremost

⁶⁵ Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 27.

⁶⁶ Dekel, *The Universal Jew*, 177.

⁶⁷ Dekel, 178–80.

because it mimics the ritual practice while depriving it of meaning, thus turning it into an empty gesture, a meaningless sin.

Dekel further concludes that in its shocking effect, the story joins the cause of “revival” in its appeal to the will, the power, and the unconscious drives of the butchers. Their exhibited vitality, as well as their indulging in the violent act, unleash the human sensations and desires, which, according to Berdichevsky, had become repressed under years of a diasporic rabbinic existence. The butchers’ behavior is horrifying, but in their act of spontaneous violence they also mark a strand of “life,” a possibility for renewal and reawakening of the latent drives in the ecstatic moments of Jewish tradition. Dekel claims that Berdichevsky’s literary project aims to “arouse, to wet, to stir up, to awaken what he perceived as the dried-up Jewish political body and individual bodies of Jews, to revitalize the well of energies, bodily fluids, and the emotions.”⁶⁸

Building on Dekel’s analysis and going beyond it, I wish to draw attention to another level in which revival and violence interact in the story. “Revival,” in the sense that Dekel reads it, is signified in the story in at least two interrelated ways. The first has to do with the dismantling of meaning. That is, the reterritorialization of the language of ritual, its transmission to a scenery in which it becomes devoid of its former religious signification and turns into an empty gesture. The second is the very killing of the beast, which marks the affirmation of will and primeval desires. This killing enfolds an enlivening potential. What is described is a collective battle with an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful female animal, in the end of which the animal is overpowered and defeated. The heifer is dead, but the butchers, who struggle with it and feed on its flesh, become animalistic themselves and thereby display an alternative model of a vital Jewish existence.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 188.

The two practices—dismantling meaning and killing the beast—mirror one another. The killing, which is narrated in the language of religious ritual, realizes within the narrative the violence which is inscribed in the re-appropriation of the language. In this respect, revival, as it emerges in Berdichevsky, is entwined with a violent act, which is directed, at least in part, towards the language in which (and by means of which) the act of killing is told.

Once again we can see that aestheticization, in Berdichevsky, marks an enlivening possibility which is rooted in a violent gesture. Such an understanding of the aestheticization of Hebrew is not utterly different from Ahad Ha'am's. If Ahad Ha'am argues that in its utilization of the language, modern Hebrew literature had created nothing but lifeless artificial creations, then for Berdichevsky, that mode of creation bears an enlivening potential, which may reveal itself as the effect of Hebrew literature. Whereas Ahad Ha'am envisions an organic model of language revival, which underscores the integrity of both language and identity and involves an authentic growth from within, Berdichevsky proposes a ruptured approach, which emphasizes struggle, war and violence as forms of revitalization. Throughout his literary and essayistic work, Berdichevsky displays the splits, wounds, and tears within both tradition and language. These are perhaps best captured by the figure of "the tear in the heart," which becomes a defining experience in his writing.

4. *The Tear in the Heart, The Song of the Dead*

The figure of "the tear in the heart," which recurs throughout Berdichevsky's work both as a poetic model and a purported description of the current state of modern Hebrew subjectivity, first emerges in his response to Ahad Ha'am as part of the debate over the establishment of *Ha-shiloah*. In his open letter, Berdichevsky protests against Ahad Ha'am's demand that modern

Hebrew literature limit itself to the “narrow circle” of Judaism, arguing that such seclusion would further distance Hebrew from the realm of “the human.” Advocating for a Hebrew literature that would pertain to a more varied and nuanced array of human experience, Berdichevsky accused Ahad Ha’am of widening an already existing internal divide “in the heart of our youth.” That divide, he explains, is caused by the expulsion of whatever may be referred to as “non-Judaism” (לא-יהדות) from the realm of the self.

When we limit our circle in the name of “Judaism,” it necessarily implies that there is also non-Judaism, that the life outside of our border is something other and different from the life within. And in this, in rending life into two authorities—ours and that which surrounds us—we widen the internal tear that is in the heart of our youth, who even without this now experience an eternal war in their heart between the beauty of Japheth and the tents of Shem.⁶⁹

Berdichevsky presupposes an “internal tear,” as existing “even without this” (גם בלעדי זה), namely, as preceding the attempt to limit Hebrew literature to “Jewish matters.” Although initially the divide is between “the life outside of our borders” and “the life within,” the effect of the divide is “internal,” as is the “war” it evokes. According to Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha’am’s restrictions would inflict further injury on this already torn heart. Berdichevsky describes the infliction of injury (the widening of the tear) in the present tense first person plural, thus including himself in the act of “rending,” and pointing to a process that is already underway. Hebrew literature, he argues, affects its audience in an injurious way, and Ahad Ha’am’s approach accelerates the damage and enhances its intensity.

⁶⁹ “באותה שעה שנגביל חוגנו בשם ‘היהדות’, שמע מנה דאיכא לא-יהדות, שהחיים שם מחוץ לגבולנו הם דברים אחרים ושונים מאלה אשר בפנים. ובדבר זה, בהקריעה שאנחנו קורעים את החיים לשתי רשויות, לשלנו ולאשר מסביב לנו, הרי אנו מרחיבים את הקרע הפנימי שבתוך לב צעירינו, אשר גם בלעדי זה מלחמה תמידית עתה בלבם בין Berdichevsky, “Al parashat drakhim,” 155. יפיפותו של יפת ובין אהלי שם”

Berdichevsky then refers to Ahad Ha'am's earlier essay "The Man in the Tent" (האדם באהל), in which Ahad Ha'am advocated for an incorporation of "the human" within the realm of Jewish life. Berdichevsky questions what he sees as Ahad Ha'am's sudden change of heart:

You demanded there [in "The Man in the Tent,"] "a complete harmony between humanism and nationalism;" whereas now, you yourself are causing the rending of nationalism away from humanism, in that you are making our literature Jewish, while leaving the human part for other literatures. You aim to build, to mend the tears, but the waters of *ha-shiloah* will want to rend the heart of any person of Israel into two separate pieces: a Jewish part and a human part . . . ⁷⁰

In this second articulation of "the tear in the heart," the "two authorities—ours and that which surrounds us" are translated into the opposite categories of "Jewish" and "human." Both Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky respond to the paradigmatic dichotomy of nineteenth-century Haskalah, which was largely invested in an effort to reconcile Jewish society with its middle-class, "enlightened" European non-Jewish surrounding. This effort was famously captured in the catch phrase "be a person when you go out and a Jew in your tent," the Haskalah ethos which presupposed a discrepancy between the categories "Jew" and "person/man (אדם)" while surfacing a need to preserve their difference and at the same time maintain a commitment to both. Although Ahad Ha'am and Berdichevsky accepted that basic division, they rejected the *maskilic* assumption that Jewish life in Europe can be seamlessly divided between the two realms, namely that one can be "a man" in some moments and "a Jew" in others. In "The Man in the Tent," Ahad Ha'am suggested an alternative to this splitting approach, stressing that rather than dividing themselves between "Judaism" and "humanity," Jews should learn how to become

⁷⁰ "דרשת שם 'הרמוניא גמורה בין האנושיות והלאומיות'; בעוד שעתה הרי אתה בעצמך גורם לקריעת הלאומיות מן האנושיות, במה שעושה אתה את ספרותנו ליהודית ואת החלק האנושי הרי אתה מניח לספריות אחרות. לבנות, לאחה את הקרעים אתה בא, ומי 'השלח' יחפצו לקרוע לב כל אדם מישראל לשני גזרים נפרדים: לחלק יהודי ולחלק אנושי" Berdichevsky, 155.

“human” *as* Jews: “be a man in the tent—that is the great wisdom [literally: “Torah”] that we’ve lacked so far, and that is the current mission of the literature.”⁷¹ Berdichevsky, however, contends that Ahad Ha’am’s call for a literature that is exclusively “Jewish” marks a shift in his view and reinstates the divide. According to Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha’am’s “new” approach entails the “rending” of the two.

What gradually becomes clear is that whereas Ahad Ha’am asks to reclaim Judaism based on a dynamic model that suggests its transformation and development, for Berdichevsky, “Jewish” and “human” remain static categories that form an irreconcilable dichotomy. When Berdichevsky asks to imbue the “self” with human emotions and instincts and acknowledge “our personal and spiritual needs;” when he insists that “beyond our national and social world, we are still living beings,”⁷² he renders these needs and the life they encapsulate as a priori opposite to anything “Jewish.” At the same time, in his articulation, the “self” is inhabited by and torn between both categories: it is at once Jewish and non-Jewish. Therefore, it is in a constant state of war.

Accordingly, the attempt to sustain and nurture “Jewishness” within Hebrew literature is interpreted by Berdichevsky as infusing this literature with death. As mentioned earlier, Berdichevsky warns that the younger generation will view such a literature as containing “only dead things.”⁷³ In an essay titled “Will and Capability” (“צורך ויכולת”), Ahad Ha’am responded to Berdichevsky’s claim, arguing that even if the literature is considered “dead,” it is still likely that

⁷¹ Ahad Ha’am, “Ha-adam ba-ohel (The Man in the Tent),” in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma’amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921), 91.

⁷² Berdichevsky, “Al parashat drakhim,” 155.

⁷³ Berdichevsky, 156.

“the living generation” would “love and honor the dead, who was once worthy of love and honor in her life. But they would never love and honor a literature . . . that is called dead even during her lifetime.”⁷⁴ Ahad Ha’am once again draws attention to the deadening mode that modern Hebrew literature seems to perpetuate, invoking its awkward liminal existence as a living-dead woman. At the end of this essay, he addresses Berdichevsky’s notion of “the tear in the heart,” arguing that had Berdichevsky and the rest of the young writers “truly understood the nature of this ‘tear’ and the internal war it generated, they would have realized that this ‘narrow circle, into which I wish to bring them’ is precisely what they need . . . in order to mend the tear in their heart and bring peace into their souls.”⁷⁵

A major part of the discussion between Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky is devoted to debating the nature of “the tear” and mutually accusing one another of causing or “widening” it. Although the two thinkers promote a narrative according to which “the tear” is a given condition, which, each of them, in turn, sets out to “mend,” their continuous renditions of this figure complicate the linearity of the narrative and challenge the reliability of the endeavors to repair it. In his open letter, Berdichevsky echoes the image of a mighty flow that threatens to tear the nation’s body to pieces, the same image against which Ahad Ha’am posited *Ha-shiloah* as a slow-flowing alternative. Berdichevsky asserts that in contrast to Ahad Ha’am’s declared intention “to build, to mend the tears, . . . the waters of *ha-shiloah* will want (יהפצו) to rend the

⁷⁴ “גם אלה מבני הדור החי החושבים את הספרות היהודית ל’דברים מתים שכבר אבד עליהם כלח’ . . . גם הם עוד אפשר שיאהבו ויכבדו את המתה, שהיתה ראויה לאהבה וכבוד בחייה לפנים; אבל לעולם לא יאהבו ולא יכבדו ספרות . . . שגם בחייה קרויה מתה” Ahad Ha’am, “Tsorekh ve-yekholet (Will and Capability),” *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada’ u-le-‘inyaney-ha-hayim* 1, no. 3 (December, 1896): 273. Ahad Ha’am personifies and genders “Hebrew literature,” referring to it as a dead woman, based on the feminine grammatical gender of the Hebrew word: “literature” (ספרות).

⁷⁵ Ahad Ha’am, 274.

heart of any man of Israel.”⁷⁶ This *will* to rend, which Berdichevsky locates not in Ahad Ha’am, but rather in the “flow” inaugurated by the foundation of *Ha-shiloah*, traverses both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s declared objectives. It extends “the tear” and displays it as an essential attribute of modern Hebrew literature.

Holtzman has shown that throughout Berdichevsky’s oeuvre, “the tear in the heart” is gradually framed as an explicit creative drive, which is translated into the poetic structure of many of his literary works.⁷⁷ The figures of a split self, a torn heart, and a mutilated body, along with the sentiments of eternal sorrow, constant struggle and self-alienation come together in his work to mark an aesthetic model which corresponds to the particularity of a modern Jewish experience, and to both the Jewishness and non-Jewishness of its literature. In this respect, Berdichevsky’s assertion that “the waters of *ha-shiloah* will want to rend the heart of any man of Israel,” which is seemingly directed at Ahad Ha’am, might be read not so much as a warning but rather as a description of the wills and wants that are stirring in the background of current Hebrew writing.

By the turn of the century, as part of his extensive literary work, Berdichevsky had begun to formulate his poetics and stylistics, which he elaborated in a series of essays. On different occasions, he indeed bound together sorrow with beauty and explicitly referred to “the tear” as a poetic catalyst:

Our long sorrow that has passed from generation to generation, all of our spiritual wars, both internal and external, everything we have suffered and all that we will suffer, all of it grants our literature the color of a worldly sorrow and an endless beauty.

And the great tear within us, the internal opposition between our past and our present, our destruction of what is sacred to us and our sanctification of what is profane

⁷⁶ Berdichevsky, “Al parashat drakhim,” 155.

⁷⁷ Holtzman, *El ha-kerav she-ba-lev*, 278–79.

his creation.”⁸⁰ At times, the speaker is depicted as an enraged prophet calling for a complete annihilation of diasporic Judaism, with its perished textual tradition:

We are to blame for our poverty, for our state, and for everything we face. We have deadened within ourselves everything that is living and every breath of life. We have scattered (הפרחנו) our soul completely, by means of the written, by means of fractured things that lie in the bookcase (בארון). Sometimes I want to yell, a bitter, great yell in the camp of Israel, to blow and hail with all my strength and all my spirit: remove the diaspora from yourselves, remove from yourselves what you have given to yourselves.⁸¹

Yet at other times, the speaker confesses his own inability to do away with the dead, to dismantle the deadening effect of a diasporic Jewish existence, inscribed in the book and in written texts. He wishes to give the people a new “living heart” and a “living soul,” but instead, he remains stranded among the dead.

There, among our graves, I want to plant the oaks of Bashan, fruit bearing trees. I want to destroy our graves and to bring to our soil a new life, beautiful and pleasant to look at; but at the same time, precisely at the time of catastrophe, I feel the poetry of the dead, buried skeletons, and even their maggots are uttering poetry.⁸²

In a language of mourning and lament, Berdichevsky articulates an understanding of the aesthetic power of the split self. The very negation of a languishing textual tradition in itself becomes a poetic principle, and gives rise to a proliferating poetic speech. Hebrew, for Berdichevsky, is a locus in which a deadening of the impoverished Jewish past begins, but is never fully completed. That which is assumed and constituted as dead is always already haunting

⁸⁰ Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, *Arakhin (Values)* (Warsaw: Hotsa'at tse'irim, 1899), 94.

⁸¹ “אנחנו אשמים בענינו, במצבנו ובכל אשר לנו, אנחנו המתנו בקרבנו כל החי וכל נשמת החיים. אנחנו הפרחנו את נשמתנו ע”י הכתב והמכתב לגמרי, ע”י שברי דברים המונחים בארון. יש אשר צעקה גדולה ומרה חפץ אנכי לצעוק במחנה ישראל, לתקוע ולהריע חפץ אנכי בכל כחי ונשמת: הסירו את הנכר מקרבכם, הסירו מכם את אשר נתתם לכם.” Berdichevsky, 95.

⁸² “שם בין הקברות שלנו חפץ אנכי לנטוע אלוני בשן, עצים עושי פרי. להחריב את הקברות שלנו אני חפץ, ולהביא באדמתנו חיים חדשים יפים ונחמדים למראה; אבל באותה שעה, דוקא באותה שעת חרבן, אני מרגיש שירת שלדי המתים הקבורים וגם הרמה שלהם אומרת שירה” Ibid.

and gripping, and the ongoing gestures of killing, burying or destroying the grave are always halting; they begin but never reach an end. As we have seen, within Berdichevsky's idiom, depriving of life in itself contains vital powers and evokes forces of revitalization. But for Berdichevsky, both revival and the act of violence in which it is grounded remain open-ended. The state of incompleteness becomes an immense driving force for artistic creation, one which generates an almost superfluous, repetitive speech, in itself a perpetuation of mourning that is never properly concluded. In this respect, Berdichevsky's mourning is always also melancholic; the loss is never fully processed because the lost object is never fully dead.⁸³

Hebrew writing thus becomes the song of the dead. A song that is sung *by* the dead ("I feel the poetry of the buried dead skeletons") but is simultaneously a lament *for* the dead, because what is considered dead is inherent in the "self" who laments it. "To destroy graves, I want, and to till bones; but the bones are my own bones, and the graves are the best of my graves," Berdichevsky declares in yet another lamenting text.⁸⁴ Like the figures of a heart or a body that are torn and cannot be mended, revival too, for Berdichevsky, aspires to, but cannot bring new life. It maintains instead an oscillation between life and death, and is fed precisely by that ongoing tension. The term "revival" thus obfuscates that cluster of affects and gestures. It conflates lamenting and mourning with assuming one is dead, killing, and creating new life. It is all of these things but also none of them. That liminality, and the suspension and delay it

⁸³ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1995), 243–59. Also see Yoav Ronel's discussion of the melancholic Eros in Berdichevsky's work in his dissertation: "A Small Crypt, Deep in the Ground – Love, Gloom and Loss in the Work of Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky: From a Melancholic Eros to the Disaster of 'Miryam'" (PhD diss., Ben-Gurion University, forthcoming, tentative title).

⁸⁴ Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, *Nemushot (Wimps)*. (Warsaw: Hotsa'at tse'irim, 1899), 96.

imposes, is precisely what maintains revival as a poetic and ideological force. Berdichevsky proposes a poetic model that displays mourning and highlights the deadening of a part of the “self.” Yet a crucial element in his poetics is the deferral of the end of mourning. Although something *in* it is already understood as dead, Berdichevsky’s Hebrew nevertheless defers the full acknowledgment of its own loss.

5. *The Split Language: A Monstrous Horizon*

In a later collection of essays, published in 1911 under the subtitle “Language Matters,” Berdichevsky translates his understanding of “the tear in the heart” and the oscillation between radically different parts of the self into a series of theoretical reflections on language.⁸⁵ The essays, which are devoted mostly to a consideration of Hebrew and Yiddish, discuss some of the pressing issues raised within the contemporary discourse on language, from multilingualism and translation to colloquialization, lexical expansion, and pedagogy. These essays, initially written over the first decade of the twentieth century, largely differ in tone and style from Berdichevsky’s earlier work (particularly, from his essays written at the turn of the century). Most notably, the later essays are far less morbid, although they definitely gesture toward the possibility of a perilous horizon. While the basic notion of a “tear,” which governs and dictates the life of the nation, the people and the language(s), emerges as an organizing principle throughout these texts, it no longer functions as a torturous source of lamentation and mourning. Vacillating between an existentialist and an essentialist approach to language, Berdichevsky not only articulates his own position, but also records his observation of a linguistic permutation, one

⁸⁵ Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon” (Language Matters) in *Ba-shira u-va-lashon* (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1911).

that is both liable to occur and that is already underway. Berdichevsky's reflections on language pave the way for a conception of something that he simultaneously rejects, and from which he constantly looks away. Yet in the horizon of these texts, something is already about to be born, despite and yet due to the efforts of those laboring to create it.

In the different texts that consist "Language Matters," Berdichevsky presents a linguistic model based on duality. That duality takes different forms and variations, but the basic notion of a split self, now manifested in the form of two (or more) languages, or in contesting linguistic qualities, is maintained in all of the texts. The oppositions are familiar: there is the language of poetry and the language of thought; lyric language and epic language; prophetic language and common language; the language in which "our people" listens and the language in which it speaks. These are always read as diametrically opposite attributes of something that should have been one, but is inevitably double or even multiple.

In an essay titled "Regarding the Language" ("בדבר הלשון"), for instance, Berdichevsky introduces a rigid opposition between Hebrew and Aramaic. Both languages are understood as conveying the national spirit, but they are depicted as radically different from one another. While Hebrew is presented as lyric, heroic, sublime, and beautiful, Aramaic is said to be the language of fable, proverb and morality. Whereas Hebrew reflects sovereignty, force and battle, Aramaic is said to be the language of religion and subservience; "the language of the Jews."⁸⁶ Berdichevsky thus reiterates a dichotomy similar to the one that has informed his past work. While the category of "the human" is now substituted with "Hebrew," "Aramaic" designates its opposite, namely "Jewish." As before, Berdichevsky maintains both categories as essentially

⁸⁶ Berdichevsky, "Inyaney lashon," 39.

static, and his conceptualization of “Jewish” yet again rests on the shadow of a diasporic Rabbinic textual tradition. However, Berdichevsky insists: “we are Hebrew-Aramaic in our tongue.”⁸⁷ Despite the uneven comparison, in which Hebrew is apparently privileged over Aramaic, Berdichevsky refuses to let go of either side. The one thing that remains crucial for his argument (in this as well as the others essays in the collection) is not favoring one language over the other, but rather maintaining the binary.

When Berdichevsky begins to elaborate on the place of these languages within modern Hebrew literature, it becomes clear that “Hebrew” and “Aramaic” designate, for him, not the historical division between the ancient biblical language and the later Talmudic one, but rather an essential, more critical difference. Berdichevsky uses the names of the two languages in order to establish a difference between two sentiments or personalities that inhabit modern Hebrew literature simultaneously. In other words, Berdichevsky describes Hebrew itself as inherently split between two affiliations, to which he gives the names “Hebrew” and “Aramaic/Jewish.” Hebrew writers, he argues, are divided between these two affiliations according to their own natural inclination. Abraham Mapu (the well-known Haskalah romancier), for instance, wrote in Hebrew, while Yitzhak Erter (a well-known Haskalah satirist) wrote in Aramaic.⁸⁸ Despite the fact that both are considered Hebrew writers, Berdichevsky categorizes them as belonging to separate linguistic traditions. Moreover, he mentions different authors, both past and present, who actually write in both “languages” simultaneously.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Berdichevsky, 40.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Berdichevsky argues, for instance, that the writer Naphtali Herz Wessely wrote his scholarly work in “Aramaic” and his poetry in “Hebrew.” Similarly, he claims that Y.L. Gordon wrote his prose fiction in “Aramaic” and his poetry in “Hebrew.” Ibid.

What determines the categorization, according to Berdichevsky, is not “the idiom and the words” of each language, namely, not its historical layers or linguistic components. It is rather “the soul that is latent in them.”⁹⁰ A torn nation, he states, “we” are necessarily split between two souls and two languages: “A Hebrew man said this, and a Jewish man said that, and the difference between them is greater than the difference between Israel and Edom, Ammon or Moab,” he concludes.⁹¹ Berdichevsky contends that this internal difference must not be blurred or overlooked. On the contrary, it must make itself visible. Hebrew, which is understood as always already double, must sustain the linguistic tension that constitutes it as internally split.

In other essays, Berdichevsky substitutes the opposition between Hebrew and Aramaic with the more current opposition between Hebrew and Yiddish. Similar but not identical to Aramaic, Yiddish then occupies the “Jewish” category, against which Hebrew is measured. In fact, Berdichevsky never uses the word “Yiddish,” but consistently refers to the latter as “Jewish” (יהודית), stating that this language most accurately embodies the folkloric essence of Judaism. When the opposition between Hebrew and Yiddish is introduced, Aramaic is “pushed back” into Hebrew, and Berdichevsky addresses the dichotomy between Yiddish and Hebrew while acknowledging that Hebrew itself is internally split. An extensive part of “Language Matters” is devoted to establishing the particular, essential character of both Hebrew and Yiddish. Here too Berdichevsky’s stance against “the mixing of the turfs” is highlighted. A multilingual writer himself, Berdichevsky does not object to writing in multiple languages or to the cohabitation of multiple “Jewish” literatures. It is rather the blurring of the borders between these different languages and literatures that he persistently resists. Over and over again, he

⁹⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁹¹ Ibid., 40.

struggles to assert the coherent and stable character of each language, presenting the difference between them as a law that must be obeyed.

His ardent attack against the writer Y.L. Peretz, and anyone else who had apparently crossed that strictly defined border, demonstrates that approach. Berdichevsky rejects the attempts to modernize Yiddish or turn it into a “literary” language, denouncing the current celebration of its purported literary renaissance. For Berdichevsky, Yiddish literature must stay low and capture the life of the people. It must reflect the people’s speech and absorb the simplicity of everyday life. The “real life” of Yiddish, he claims, “is an oral matter,”⁹² and its defining principle is “the life revealed in it.” In Yiddish, he further argues, “it is not only the tongue that speaks, but the entire body, all of the organs.”⁹³ This is why, according to Berdichevsky, Yiddish literature could never express a lyrical utterance. Much like liturgical poetry, it conveys a collective utterance that comes from the people as a whole, while capturing an oral (bodily) quality. Berdichevsky states that “some lives are grasped by the hand and do not require a vessel.”⁹⁴ The trouble with writers such as Peretz is that they attempt to turn Yiddish into “a literary vessel” (“שפופרת ספרותית”). They exploit the language and turn it into a mediating instrument, in order to “address the people and educate it, instead of learning from the people’s soul.”⁹⁵ In so doing, Berdichevsky warns, they are in fact erasing the particularity of Yiddish.

⁹² Berdichevsky, 63.

⁹³ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁴ “יש חיים נתפסים בידיים ואינם צריכים לשפופרת” Ibid., 62.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 63.

In other essays collected in the volume, Berdichevsky expresses a similar concern with what he sees as a misguided use of Hebrew, but his concerns regarding Hebrew signal an opposite development. Berdichevsky attacks the recent attempts to transform Hebrew into a language spoken in everyday life. Referring to the pedagogical debates about Hebrew education within the *yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in Palestine), he rejects the idea that Hebrew could be taught *in Hebrew*, that is, without the necessary mediation that characterized traditional Orthodox Hebrew education. Berdichevsky insists that Hebrew must be taught in translation, and by means of the book (rather than through speech). He states that such a distance, which consciously maintains Hebrew's "bookish" character, is necessary when approaching this language.⁹⁶ Whereas Yiddish is a language that demands no mediation, Hebrew, in fact, requires it. As opposed to Yiddish, Hebrew does not emanate from the body of the people. On the contrary, it is the language by which the singular, individual prophet addresses the people from above. Hence for Berdichevsky, the peculiar experiment in which Hebrew is forced into the mouths of ordinary people, is a dangerous precedent. "The book was our mother tongue . . . and wherever the mother and the teachers speak Hebrew, we have but a shadow of a Hebrew language with no language," he asserts.⁹⁷

The conclusion is twofold: while those who attempt to modernize Yiddish and turn it into a literary language risk obliterating its unique character, those who advocate for the colloquialization of Hebrew in Palestine rob the language of its life. The two languages must be

⁹⁶ Ibid., 43–45. Berdichevsky's argument against spoken Hebrew will be further discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

⁹⁷ "הספר היה לנו לשפת האם . . . ובמקום שהאם והמורים מדברים עברית, יש לנו רק צל שפה עברית בלי שפה" Ibid., 44.

kept separate. They must remain loyal to their own essence, and stay distinguishable from one another. As we have seen, it follows from Berdichevsky's argument that the language in which the people is addressed must be distinct from the language in which the people speaks. Throughout the texts he clarifies that "when we are talking *to* the people," Hebrew is appropriate, but "when we are talking *from* the people, the Jewish [Yiddish] language has the upper hand."⁹⁸ This discrepancy demonstrates the gesture of self-alienation that is at once the fulfillment and the effect of national literature's "voyage toward the self."⁹⁹ At the heart of this autoscopic project lies a moment of miscommunication. The production of aesthetic knowledge about and for the self is differentiated from the self's own capacity to speak. It is a "conversation" in which one is forced to listen in a language one is prevented from speaking. Indeed, in Berdichevsky's articulation, Hebrew seems to be reserved for the outstanding few. It is the language of great poets and thinkers; a language that necessarily changes its form when imparted to the people. Berdichevsky insists on the stability of both Hebrew writing and Yiddish speech and denies the possibility to conflate the languages or change their prescribed roles. But in attacking those who aspire to change the character of each language, he simultaneously admits the occurrence of that transformation.

More than once, Berdichevsky mentions that this type of linguistic multiplicity is inherent in Jewish languages. As Miron points out, Berdichevsky often addresses multilingualism as an expression of the particular circumstances of Jewish history.¹⁰⁰ At one

⁹⁸ Berdichevsky, 47. (My emphases.)

⁹⁹ Nichanian, *Mourning Philology*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 95.

point Berdichevsky argues that while proper nations are only able to find true expression in one language—their mother tongue—the Jewish people is not bound to that law.

For us, this is no longer a necessity. At once we are torn into two or three tongues. Here is the Hebrew language, and here is the Jewish [Yiddish] language, and here is the language of the people among whom we live, or the language of the people from whom we learned how to think. Two or three nations (גויים) are in our soul, and each demands its own and finds its own.¹⁰¹

And yet, there are moments in the text in which Berdichevsky mentions, as if incidentally, that such a split linguistic model in fact characterizes other peoples and languages too:

Even a people who lives on its land, whose soul is not torn between two utterly different languages, bears a type of linguistic doubling; namely the language of the book that includes the urban, spoken language, which is sophisticated and totalizing, and the language of the village, spoken in a specific area of that land (dialect).¹⁰²

As an example, Berdichevsky then refers to German. He contrasts the high register of Herder, Goethe, and Schiller with the “common richness” in the language of the brothers Grimm. That example, which invokes the European language of a proper nation-state, once again serves Berdichevsky to stress the split within language, which enables the interaction between its different parts. This example is followed by a reiteration of the multiplicity of Jewish languages. In this respect, the multiplicity inherent in the Jewish position may not be so exceptional after all. It rather appears as merely an extreme version of a basic condition of all national languages. As Berdichevsky subtly implies, even the most proper national language is always already internally divided.

¹⁰¹ “אצלנו כבר הדבר אינו מוכרח כך. באחת, אנו קרועים לשתים או לשלש לשונות: הרי שפת עבר, והרי שפת יהודית, והרי שפת העם, אשר אנו יושבים בו, או שפת העם, אשר ממנו למדנו לחשוב. שנים או שלושה גוים בנשמתנו, וכל אחד מבקש את שלו ומוצא את שלו” Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon,” 46.

¹⁰² “יש גם לעם, היושב על אדמתו ואינו קרוע בנפשו לשתי שפות שונות יסודיות, מין כפל שפה, הלא היא שפת הספר, ביחד עם שפת הדבור העירונית, המשוכללה והכוללת, ושפת הכפר, זו השפה המדוברת בחלק מיוחד באותה הארץ (דיאלקט)”. Ibid., 60.

In maintaining that divide—in sustaining at once an internal war and an interplay—what is at stake for Berdichevsky is the preservation of categories that are at risk of being dismantled. He is particularly concerned about the possibility that Yiddish/Jewish might be engulfed or overpowered by the major languages that surround it. Berdichevsky warns that the attempt to modernize and aestheticize Yiddish will eventually result in its dissolving into either German or Hebrew.¹⁰³ According to him, the particularity of Yiddish lies precisely in its difference from these languages. The attempt to make Yiddish *seem* more like Hebrew or like German, threatens the very existence of the category of the Jewish. Once again it becomes clear that for Berdichevsky, every part of the split self, even those parts who are defined as the most despised and abject, must be safeguarded. While the internal war itself is desirable, it must never be allowed to lead to complete annihilation. The violent gesture is hindered; it must always halt midway. According to Berdichevsky, conflating Yiddish and Hebrew and bringing both languages closer to the linguistic realm of a proper nation-state necessarily obfuscates the liminal, precarious, unnamed particularity of the self.

This claim against universalism locates Berdichevsky in an unexpected position. In taking a stand against the transformation of the languages, he is no longer able to ground his position in an existentialist approach. As Miron has argued, Berdichevsky's romantic essentialism ironically situates him in close proximity to Ahad Ha'am: "clinging to abstract and pure essences, falling into the trap of setting the rules, being restrictive, pontificating, and expecting of objectively unstoppable developments to somehow fall in line and correct themselves."¹⁰⁴ As part of his debate with Ahad Ha'am during the 1890s, Berdichevsky accused

¹⁰³ See, for instance, Berdichevsky, "Inyaney lashon," 62, 73.

¹⁰⁴ Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 97.

Ahad Ha'am of widening the internal tear "in the heart of our youth."¹⁰⁵ Over a decade later, when witnessing what he perceives as the convergence of the two languages that, in their difference from one another embody this "tear," Berdichevsky, just like Ahad Ha'am before him, calls for the suspension of these processes.

As a rhetorical device, "the tear in the heart" could only fulfil its motivating role if it evokes mourning. The notion of "the tear" could function as a creative force insofar as it stimulates a lamenting discourse, or a discourse of pain and suffering. But if it was no longer possible to frame "the tear in the heart" as an inevitable traumatic experience inscribed in language, then the affirmation of "the tear" as a creative force was bound to gradually diminish too. Berdichevsky, who seems to have sensed that approaching "danger," had to awkwardly vacillate between presenting the split language as the tragic premise of the modern Jewish experience, *and* as a condition of its proliferation. He had to articulate a justification for the preservation of "the tear in the heart" while still experiencing it as a loss. Throughout his essays on language, he constantly navigates between the loss and the gain of this split linguistic condition. In "Regarding the Language," for instance, he argued that "the doubling in our language originates in the rending of the people into two halves that cannot be rejoined, but have nevertheless begun to rejoin. That separation mostly prevented the development of our language, but it also enriched it."¹⁰⁶ In a different essay titled "From Tongue to Tongue" ("מלשון אל לשון"), he referred to the biblical story of Babel, arguing that the multiplicity of languages was not a

¹⁰⁵ Berdichevsky, "Al parashat drakhim," 155.

¹⁰⁶ "הכפל בלשוננו בא מקריעת העם לשני חצאים, שאינם מתאחים, ואף על פי כן החלו להתאחות. הפירוד הזה עצר
Berdichevsky, "Inyaney lashon," 41. בעד התפתחות לשוננו ברוב, והוא גם העשיר אותה"

downfall but rather an ascent: “it is not a punishment for man . . . but rather a gift, a gift of God.”¹⁰⁷ And in yet another essay, titled “Duality” (“שניוּת”), he claimed:

The fact that the forces explode and divide within us, that rather than working and developing a whole literature, we have several, incomplete literatures, has not escaped us; we also do not cover up the losses created in the spirit of an author, who is belonged to several authorities and forced, in his poverty, to use the different authorities. But we would go too far if we said that there is no light to be found among these shadows; for with the different pushes and pulls here and there is born also something multicolored, and with the changing of horizons comes the broadening of the horizon.¹⁰⁸

As each of these examples demonstrates, Berdichevsky was eager to show that linguistic multiplicity was valuable despite the fact it was rooted in an inherent “tear.” Although it was accompanied by a sentiment of mourning, that multiplicity bore the potential for a vital renewal. In it, something new was about to be born. To put an end to the internal war between multiple languages and “authorities” of the self, which gave rise to that gestation, was for Berdichevsky, to put an end to revival.

¹⁰⁷ Berdichevsky, 54.

¹⁰⁸ “כי יתפוצצו ויתפלגו הכוחות בנו על ידי אלה, כי תחת פיתוח ועבודה בספרות אחת שלמה לנו ספרויות שונות לא שלמות, לא נעלם מאתנו; לא נכסה גם כן על הפחתים הנעשים ברוחו של סופר, שהוא בן כמה רשויות ואנוס הוא להשתמש בענין ברשויות שונות. אבל נפריז אם נאמר, שבין הצללים האלה לא ימצא גם מעט אור; כי הן עם הדחיות והנטיות השונות לכאן ולכאן נולד גם איזה דבר של ריבוי-צבעים, עם שינוי-האופק יבוא גם הרחב האופק” Ibid., 58–59. Translated by Na’ama Rokem (translation slightly modified). In her reading of this collection of essays, Rokem elaborately discusses the metaphors of “linguistic horizon” and its “broadening.” Rokem argues that the logic of a broadening horizon, which substitutes that of a linear progression, informs Berdichevsky’s late literary work and affects his narrative modes. According to Rokem, that horizontal logic allows Berdichevsky to explore the notion of a movement between languages as producing uncertainty and a multiplicity of possibilities. To that insight I would like to add that for Berdichevsky, a movement between languages is possible insofar as the languages are distinct, separate and identifiable from one another. In this respect, conflating the languages, not being able to tell them apart, marks a risk not only for the languages, but for the existence of multilingual authorship as such. See Na’ama Rokem, “‘With the Changing of the Horizon Comes the Broadening of the Horizon:’ Multilingual Narrative Modes in M.Y. Berdichevsky’s *Miriam*,” in *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 227–51.

Berdichevsky's essays on language reveal that beyond what he sees as a broadening, creative and "multicolored" possibility, entwined with the multiplicity of languages and the continuous self-transformation of the multilingual poet, another type of "birth" is lurking on the horizon; the birth of something that is at once being deprived of life. This development is inevitable and unstoppable insofar as its end is that of the nation-state. And so, ironically, Berdichevsky's reflections on language reproduce an "Ahad Ha'am" argument, as well as the vocabulary that was once directed at Berdichevsky himself. In his plea against the conflation of Yiddish and Hebrew, Berdichevsky invokes a "spectacle" almost identical to the one depicted by Ahad Ha'am years earlier.

For Ahad Ha'am, the attempt to aestheticize Hebrew meant producing "artificial creations, made to move by an external, mechanical push."¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Berdichevsky attacks the mock-revivers of Hebrew and Yiddish, denouncing their "creation of an unnatural and embellished (מסולסלת) language."¹¹⁰ When he criticizes the elevation of Yiddish, he maintains that "the embellished Jewish [Yiddish] literature . . . is entirely influenced, influenced by external forces."¹¹¹ And when he refers to the youth of the *yishuv* who are "forced" into Hebrew speaking, he declares that, for these youth, "everything will be like golems, golems with a beautiful form, but without life."¹¹² Berdichevsky claims that an enactment of Hebrew in

¹⁰⁹ Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-sifruta," 187.

¹¹⁰ "ובכל אלה הניסיונות, שנעשו באחרונה לעשות [את השפה העברית] נוחה לנערים, עם כל הכונה הישרה והעמל" Berdichevsky, "Inyaney lashon," 42.

¹¹¹ "[ה]ספרות היהודית המסולסלת . . . היא כולה בת השפעה, בת השפעה הבאה מן החוץ" Berdichevsky, 65.

¹¹² "הכל יהיה כגולמים, כגולמים בעלי צורה יפה, ואולם בלי חיים" Ibid., 45.

everyday speech renders it a mere instrument and robs it of “any source of life.”¹¹³ In both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s articulations, then, the attempt to appropriate language and subject it to pedagogical, ideological, political, and aesthetic means, turns language into a lifeless creature governed by an external force.

Whether an instrument, a golem, or a puppet made to move by an external push, the figure of the lifeless creature who is the offspring of an unnatural creation, subjected to an external power while maintaining the appearance of autonomy, emerges in both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s depictions of language. Always hinting at a gap between what language *is* and what it is distortedly *made to be*, these articulations of language also allude to the possibility of a monstrous horizon. Mentioning the golem indeed implies that this type of unnatural creation might come back to haunt its creators.

This Frankensteinian moment, with its sustained ambivalence, is bound to shape and define the modern Hebrew literary discourse of revival throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. An ever hesitant movement, the proclamation of revival always involves a withdrawal, a progression and a turning back, a rising and falling, a birth and a loss. That moment is perhaps best captured by Ahad Ha’am in his 1890 essay, “The Man in the Tent.”

Indeed, strange and marvelous is the fate of Hebrew literature with regard to the way [Hebrew literature] relates to life. It is a worldly custom for writers to create in their mind a specific ideal and think before they act, and to later endeavor to see that ‘end’ in practice, to realize the ideal in the actual life of their people . . . But in the literature of Israel this is not the case. Here, every time life gets closer to the literature, the literature strays further away, as if it has been startled by the sight of its own creation . . . When the ideal is realized, we begin to observe this new creature with worry and suspicion, and with every day that passes we see that its face is different from that of the “national movement” we had wished for and imagined in our minds.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid., 57.

¹¹⁴ “ובאמת, זר ונפלא גורל הספרות העברית ביחוסה אל החיים. בנוהג שבעולם, הסופרים בוראים להם ברוחם אידיאל ידוע, רואים סוף מעשה במחשבה תחלה ומתאמצים אחרי כן לראות את ‘הסוף’ הזה גם בפועל, להפוך את האידיאל

לחיים מוחשיים בתוך עמם . . . אבל בספרות ישראל אין הדבר כן. פה, כל מה שהחיים הולכים וקרבים אל הספרות, כן תשוב הספרות ותרחק מהם, כאלו תבהל בעצמה למראה יצירי כפיה . . . כאשר התגשם האידיאל במעשה, הננו מתחילים להביט בדאגה וחסד על הבריה החדשה הזאת, ובכל יום אנו רואים יותר ויותר, כי פניה שונים הרבה מאותה Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-adam ba-ohel," 86–87. 'התנועה הלאומית' שאנו רוצים בה ושוינו לנגדנו ברוח . . .

Chapter 2: Pregnant Hebrew – Hayim Nahman Bialik and the Uncontrollable Body of Language

“My son, where is your soul?” asks the angel in the beginning of Hayim Nahman Bialik’s poem “If the Angel Asks” (“וואס ישאל המלאך”) (1904).¹ The speaker then answers slowly, narrating the trajectory of his soul ever since it departed his body as a young child. The soul was drawn to a cloud, saved by a ray of light, and later sank into the speaker’s own tear. Kept in a tear, which then dropped into a sacred page of the Talmud, the soul “[fluttered] in the womb of dead letters.”² There, in the body of the Talmudic text, the soul sang poems that enlivened the dead letters (“it fluttered and sang, my angel! / In the dead letters living songs awoke, / and in my grandfather’s bookcase / the dead of the world shook).”³ Yet the soul lacked one poem, we are told, the poem of youth and love. Without it, yearning “to come out,” “it fainted till it was consumed / and was confined so close that it thought it would die.” Once again, however, the soul does not die, but instead keeps wandering the world, clinging “with its wings to the gates of love.”⁴

The angel in “If the Angel Asks” is traditionally read as the angel of death coming to take

¹ Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Ve-im yishal ha-mal’akh (If the Angel Asks),” *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik (The Complete Works of H.N. Bialik)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1939), 41; Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Songs from Bialik*, trans. Atar Hadari (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 24–25.

² Bialik and Hadari, *Songs from Bialik*, 25. (Translation slightly modified.)
“... בְּמַעַי אוֹתִיּוֹת מְתוֹת / בְּדָד פְּרָפְרָה נִשְׁמָתִי . . .” Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 41.

³ Bialik and Hadari, *Songs from Bialik*, 25. (Translation slightly modified.)
“וַיִּתְחַנֵּן? – / לֵא, פְּרָפְרָה וַתְּשׁוּרֵר, מְלֶאכִי! / בְּאוֹתִיּוֹת הַמְּתוֹת שִׁירֵי חַיִּים הַקְּרוּ, / וּבְאֶרֶץ סִפְרֵי זְקֵנֵי מְתֵי עוֹלָם נִדְעָעְזוּ.” Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 41.

⁴ Bialik and Hadari, 25.
“וַיִּתְחַבֵּל לְיֵצֵאת, וַתְּהַמָּה, וְלֵא-מְצָאָה תְּנַחֲוּמִין, / וַתְּתַעַלֵּף עַד-כְּלוּתָהּ, וַיְהִי צַר-לָהּ עַד-מָוֹת.”
“הִיא מְתַרְפָּקָה בְּכַנְפֶּיהָ עָלֵי שַׁעַר הָאֵהָבָה” Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 41.

the speaker's soul.⁵ Yet the speaker is neither dead nor alive, since his soul has departed from the body. In this liminal state he keeps escaping the grip of the angel of death. Separated from the body, his soul seeks to enter into a sensual, emotional world, without which it is rendered non-living. At the same time, it is precisely that externality, perpetuated by the soul's capacity to "sing" and write poems (to awaken the dead letters), which prevents it from dying. When in the third stanza the speaker's tear trickles into the pages of his grandfather's old *Gemara*, the text is revealed as a bodily figure. The scripture has a belly (כרס) and in it "many drops of tallow and candle grease."⁶ The sacred text is marked in Bialik's poem as an abject body, and the holy tongue (*lashon kodesh*) is figured at once as gestational and dying. The dead letters, which in their womb carry the bodiless soul of a poet, serve as a source of life while simultaneously described as "deadening." They protect the soul even as they threaten to suffocate it.

The anticipation of entering the realm of the living and the vacillation between life and death are recurring themes in Bialik's work. The experience of being neither dead nor alive typically appears in his poetry as emblematic of the Jewish nation, Jewish tradition or the Hebrew language.⁷ At certain moments in his writing, however, the figure of the living-dead becomes intertwined with conceiving, pregnancy and procreation. This striking figure of a body that simultaneously gives life and withdraws from life lies at the heart of his most pragmatic discussion of the revival of Hebrew. In an essay titled "Language Pangs" ("חבלי לשון"), published

⁵ See, for example, Dan Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Milford: Toby Press, 2010), 112; Zvi Luz, *Tashtiyot shira: Ikarim ba-po'etikah shel Bialik (Foundations of Poetry)* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po'alim, 1984), 63–64.

⁶ Bialik and Hadari, *Songs from Bialik*, 25.

⁷ See, for instance, "Akhen hatzir ha-'am (Indeed, this People is Grass)," "Metey midbar (Dead of the Desert)," and "Megilat ha-esh (The Scroll of Fire)," in Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik.*, 15, 80, 89, respectively.

first in 1905 in the journal *Ivriya* (“Hebrew Woman”), and then again in 1907 in *Ha-shiloah*, Bialik discusses the stakes and prospects of the revival of Hebrew as a national language.⁸

Unlike many of his other writings on language, which do not pertain particularly to Hebrew, in this early text Bialik deploys his program and vision for the future of Hebrew as a “revived” language.

Throughout the essay Bialik refers to Hebrew as “semi-dead” (“חצי מתה”) or “seemingly alive” (“כמו חיה”),⁹ pointing to its “illness” and offering ways in which it could be “healed.” Alongside and through the pragmatic linguistic discussion, the figurative dimension of the text refracts an additional, mythic narrative of language revival. This chapter follows the figurative account offered in “Language Pangs,” exploring Bialik’s narration of Hebrew as a life-giving organism. My reading will excavate the myth of revival elaborated throughout the essay, while focusing on the drama of pregnancy and birth that is implied in the title and reappears towards the ending. I shall address the economic, biological, and creaturely terminology that Bialik employs in order to discuss Hebrew, and pay particular attention to the erotic and violent dimensions of these reflections. At the heart of this chapter, then, lies the question, what is the myth through which Bialik narrates the revival of Hebrew as a national language, and what is the role given to the Hebrew poet within that mythic narrative?

While supporting the colloquialization of Hebrew and encouraging its “natural” growth as a spoken language, Bialik also makes it clear that due to exceptional linguistic circumstances,

⁸ See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 248.

⁹ Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Hevley lahon (Language Pangs),” *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada‘ u-le-‘inyaney ha-hayim* 18 (1907): 14, 16. (All translations from Hebrew in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise specified.)

Hebrew must be revived via the intervention of poets. In “Language Pangs,” poets are summoned to participate in the creation of a unique Hebrew dictionary that would not only encompass Hebrew in its entirety, but also assist or hasten its revival. This is Bialik’s indirect response to Ahad Ha’am’s restrictive claims against current Hebrew poetics. By inviting poets to partake in the creation of “the ingathering Hebrew dictionary” (alongside and with the help of philologists), Bialik positions poetry at the top of the hierarchy of national revival.

In the aforementioned poem, the “dead letters” are figured as a temporary refuge for the wandering soul of the poet. At the same time, the soul infuses the dead letters with life, and this act of creation prevents the soul from dying. Similarly, in “Language Pangs,” the soul and the letters appear to be dependent upon one another, bound up in a circle of birth, life, and death. In both cases, Bialik portrays a symbiotic relationship between the poet and language. It is often unclear where one begins and the other ends, and who, or what, within that relationship, generates the very “life” implied by the notion of revival. The idea that life (and death) is somehow latent in language is heightened by the constitutive metaphor of “Language Pangs,” which figures Hebrew as a pregnant body who “maintains her fetuses in her womb” without giving birth.¹⁰ This metaphor opens up a series of questions that further problematize the relationship between the language and its purported makers.

In order to trace that fraught relationship with respect to the question of nationalization, I begin the chapter with a review of Bialik’s own reception as “the national poet,” reexamining the prophetic mode in his work and the ways in which his poetics constituted Hebrew poetry as “national.” I show that in Bialik’s work, the elevation of the figure of the poet-prophet (the emergence of the lyrical “I”) is entwined with a struggle to depart and differentiate himself from

¹⁰ “משהה ולדותיה במעיה” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 16.

either nature, the nation, the mother, or language. I later discuss Bialik's philosophy of language, showing that his later dialectical approach to language largely stemmed from his initial paradoxical understanding of Hebrew as a linguistic anomaly (and an ill body) that requires the assistance of the poet. The main part of this chapter is devoted to a close reading of "Language Pangs." In my reading, I argue that in Bialik's figurative narrative, the mission of language revival—which is explicitly entwined with its nationalization—is portrayed as a sexually violent act. This act, which is performed by masculine Hebrew poets, results in the pregnancy of the feminized language (a barely living being).

My reading further shows that throughout the text, the fantasy of fully mastering Hebrew and knowing it from within, is repeatedly confronted with the inherent uncontrollability of the language. I make this argument in three steps, proceeding chronologically from the beginning of the essay to its end. First, I point to a consistent tension in Bialik's simultaneous use of monetary and organic metaphors in his discussion of language, examining his approach to spoken tongue and linguistic pragmatics. Next, I turn to the feminization of Hebrew and the depiction of the "sexual encounter" between the language and the poet, addressing Bialik's envisioned project of the "ingathering Hebrew dictionary," which operates as a mechanism of discipline and control. Finally, I attend to the pregnancy metaphor and show that within Bialik's narrative of mastery, the language that does not give birth appears to bear an untamable remainder, which threatens those who claim to have created it.

1. The Birth of a New Hebrew Self: A Prophecy of National Poetics

It is largely agreed among scholars that Bialik's appearance on the Hebrew literary scene at the turn of the nineteenth century marked a new era in the history of modern Hebrew literature.

Within just a few years, his writing would “change the face of Hebrew poetry and leave its forms and contents in a new, modern state of repair.”¹¹ Bialik’s swift reception as “the national poet” demonstrates the extent to which his poetry fulfilled the ideological and aesthetic needs simmering in the intellectual discourse of Eastern-European Jewish society at the time.¹² The recognition of Bialik’s work and the evaluation of the “national” status of his poetry were debated as part of the Hebrew meta-literary discourse that was flourishing with the increase in Hebrew publication towards the end of the century.¹³

Earlier attempts were made, during the 1880s, to crown as national poet first, Haskalah poet Y.L. Gordon, then Simon Shmuel Frug.¹⁴ These attempts were later overshadowed, however, by the overwhelming recognition of Bialik as the one and only national poet, a sole representative of the nation within the framework of New Hebrew poetry.¹⁵ According to Judith Bar-El, previous candidates for the title were either seen as too critical of Jewish life, or they

¹¹ Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 40.

¹² It is important to mention, however, that not everyone accepted the canonization of Bialik as “the national poet.” The influential critic David Frishman, for instance, rejected this title, maintaining that a strict association of Bialik’s poetry with the national mission was misleading and obfuscated Bialik’s aesthetic achievements as a lyric poet.

¹³ Hebrew literary activity was largely based within the Russian Empire (Odessa and Warsaw were the principal centers), and Hebrew journals circulated widely and reached additional Jewish cultural centers in Europe, including Vilna, Lwów, Vienna, Berlin, and London. Additional Hebrew literary activity was centered in the United States and in Palestine. The ongoing discussions of the national identity of Hebrew literature were accompanied by a discussion of the figure of the national poet.

¹⁴ Judith Bar-El, “The National Poet: The Emergence of a Concept in Hebrew Literary Criticism (1885-1905),” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 6, no. 3 (1986), 205–20.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Ketavim (Writings)*, vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po’alim: Ha-kibuts ha-me’uhad, 1985), 1404; Shmuel Leib Zitron, “Tzror mikhtavim (A Packet of Letters),” *Ha-eshkol: Me’asef sifrut u-mada’i* 3 (1900): 153–60.

wrote in languages other than Hebrew (Frug wrote mostly in Russian and Yiddish). In the 1880s, some critics viewed the role of the national poet as expressing unequivocal support of the national project. There was an assumed dichotomy, among critics, between aesthetic quality and the demand for nationalist content.¹⁶ Hence Jewish poetry that was considered “national” was not necessarily written in Hebrew nor was it tied to a specific poetic model.

This changed significantly by the beginning of the twentieth century, with the proliferation of modern Hebrew literature (its emerging sense of “renaissance”) and the consolidation of the Zionist discourse. Within the trends of cultural Zionism, Hebrew gradually became a central, privileged language.¹⁷ The former dichotomy between aesthetic achievements and nationalist advocacy had started to dissolve, and the “national” gradually came to inhabit aesthetic values.¹⁸ National Jewish poetry now began to adopt specific poetic modalities—in particular the lyric poem, with its subjective, personal themes. The equivalence between lyric poetry and nationalist ideology was by no means coincidental. Reflecting an affinity for romanticism and symbolism of both German and Russian literatures, Hebrew lyric poetry of the

¹⁶ This was, for instance, Moses Leib Lilienblum’s formal approach, to which Frishman firmly objected. See Bar-El, “The National Poet,” 205–8. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Ahad Ha’am would gradually articulate his own version of that dichotomy, arguing that purely aesthetic writing was foreign to Jewish nationalism and to Hebrew, as opposed to abstract, theoretical thought.

¹⁷ This was not typically the case within the circles of political Zionism, whose linguistic and cultural affiliations at the time were different, and whose understanding of the Zionist undertaking was grounded in concrete attempts to fulfil the idea of a Jewish nation-state. By contrast, cultural Zionism, which was led by Ahad Ha’am, perceived the movement as responsible first and foremost for a cultural transformation.

¹⁸ Bar-El argues that critics such as Joseph Klausner, who started referring to lyrical poetry in terms of national poetry in order to legitimize its new themes and forms, were simultaneously redirecting the meaning of “the national” in a way that ultimately identified it with lyric poetry. Bar-El, “The National Poet,” 212.

time demonstrated some of the fundamental assumptions of nineteenth-century nationalist thought; first and foremost the articulation of individual subjectivity.¹⁹ This poetry introduced a new Hebrew poetic voice, which claimed the complexities of an emerging, individual subject, and thereby also referred to this subject in “universal” (namely European) terms, clearing the path for a new type of national Hebrew poetry.

Just as Y.H. Brenner would later argue in an essay dedicated to Bialik, the nationalism of the new generation of “revival poets,” which centered around Bialik, was sung to the people as “the poetry of the Hebrew individual.”²⁰ It was this emerging poetry of the individual that constituted European Hebrew literature as “universal,” “modern,” and “national.”

By the time Bialik’s first volume of collected poems was published in 1902, major critics described his poetry as speaking in the name of the nation.²¹ The canonization of Bialik’s writing as “national” marked a convergence of the thematic nationalist perspective with the aesthetic signification of the concept of the national poet.²² Unlike the poetry of his contemporary Shaul Tchernichovsky, the speaking voice in Bialik’s early poems still echoed, to a large extent, an allegorical “I” reminiscent of the earlier Haskalah poetry and the poetic trends of the late

¹⁹ Stathis Gourgouris has shown that “the nation exemplifies the predicament of the Enlightenment insofar as it bears its central philosophical paradox: it is at once particular and universal. The exclusivity of nationality is spoken through a universalist anthropological utterance.” Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3.

²⁰ Brenner, *Ketavim*, 4:1404.

²¹ See, for instance, Shmuel Leib Zitron, “Tzror mikhtavim,” 153–60; Joseph Klausner, “Sifrutenu (Our Literature),” *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada’ u-le-‘inyaney-ha-hayim* 8 (1901): 354–68; Klausner, “Sifrutenu (Our Literature),” *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada’ u-le-‘inyaney-ha-hayim* 10 (1902): 536.

²² Bar-El, “The National Poet,” 215–16.

nineteenth-century *Hibat Zion*. But the speaker in Bialik's poetry was nonetheless different. According to Miron, Bialik's allegorization of the first-person speaker took the form of a sublimation of the individual self, a way for Bialik to rewrite his personal story as the national story.²³

But there was an additional way that Bialik's writing was differentiated from much of the Hebrew poetry that was written before him. Bialik introduced into Hebrew poetry the qualitative syllabo-tonic meter, which echoed the Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation, and in so doing engendered a dramatic shift in the cadence and musicality of the Hebrew poem. Uzi Shavit describes this shift as a "rhythmic revolution," in which Bialik played a determining role.²⁴ Bialik himself communicated in a letter to Ravnitzky from 1894 that he had started writing poems whose musicality could only be heard by those "ignorant readers" ("קוראים עמי הארץ") who maintained in their reading the particular Ashkenazi intonation. Yet if these poems were to be read in the "correct" Sephardi pronunciation, Bialik maintained in that letter, they would lose any trace of musicality.²⁵

This point is of particular importance. The fact that Bialik's poetry had to be read aloud

²³ Miron, *Ha-preidah min ha-ani he- 'ani: Mahalakh be-hitpathut shirato ha-mukdemet shel Hayim Nahman Bialik, 1891-1901 (Taking Leave of the Impoverished Self)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-universitah ha-petuhah, 1986); Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 49–51.

²⁴ Uzi Shavit, *Hevley nigun (Evolution and Revolution in Bialik's Prosody)* (Tel Aviv: Mekhon kats, universitat Tel Aviv, 1988); Shavit, *Ha-mahpekhah ha-ritmit: Le-sugyat ha-ma'avar ha-me'uhar la-mishkal ha-toni-silabi ba-shirah ha- 'ivrit ha-hadashah (The Rhythmic Revolution: On the Threshold of Modern Hebrew Prosody)* (Tel Aviv: Mekhon kats, universitat Tel Aviv, 1983), 743.

²⁵ Bialik, 1894, quoted in Shavit, *Ha-mahpekhah ha-ritmit*, 13. Almost needless to note, this statement, with its quasi-apologetic tone, should be taken with a grain of salt. A Hebrew reader who was fluent enough to have access to Bialik's poetry could hardly be considered "ignorant." Additionally, Bialik obviously took pride in having achieved this poetic effect.

in the particular tonality with which his immediate readers were familiar, enabled a new type of Hebrew expressivity with an ephemeral effect. Ariel Hirschfeld argues that for readers who were versed in Ashkenazi pronunciation, Bialik's poems summoned a sensual experience encapsulated in the invitation to perform the poem orally.²⁶ According to Hirschfeld, this invitation to embody the poem and participate in the evocation of its expressivity was a formative principle in Bialik's writing. Hirschfeld identifies in this principle an erotic dimension, and argues that in Bialik's poetry, Eros lies not in the themes, but rather in the linguistic occasion of speech and sound, that is, in (the anticipation of) the oral enactment of the poem. The erotic poetic speech in Bialik's poems therefore signifies the threshold of fulfillment. The poem summons a scene that could only be fulfilled once it is read aloud.²⁷ Just as in the poem "If the Angel Asks," the speaker's soul clings "with its wings to the gates of love,"²⁸ Bialik's poetic project, to follow Hirschfeld's argument, gestures toward a possibility of a Hebrew love discourse.

Once again, we see, it is the "poetry of the Hebrew individual," with its emotive function and imperative to activate the sensuality of the Hebrew language, which makes Bialik an ideal representative of Hebrew national poetics. The gradual consolidation of the speaker's voice in his subsequent poems, which necessitated the iterated articulation of its coming into being, further grounded Bialik's status as a Hebrew poet-prophet. For Miron, a constitutive element of Bialik's poetry lies in that articulation, that is, in the narrative of a "self" who struggles to affirm his own individuality and distinguish himself from his surroundings. Throughout this process of

²⁶ Ariel Hirschfeld, *Kinor arukh: Leshon ha-regesh be-shirat H.N. Bialik (The Tuned Harp: The Language of Emotions in H.N. Bialik's Poetry)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2011), 29.

²⁷ Hirschfeld, 50.

²⁸ Bialik and Hadari, *Songs from Bialik*, 25.

detachment (be it from nature, the mother, or the nation), the lyrical I is caught up in a danger (as well as a temptation) of being swallowed by that from which it struggles to separate. And it is at once the fear of engulfment that motivates the effort of separation. In Bialik's poems, extricating the self entails a specific mode of deciphering the self's surroundings. The endeavor to trace the borders of the self coincides with a symbolist approach that posits whatever is beyond these borders as the object of intellectual knowledge.²⁹ Miron argues that in poems such as "The Pool" ("הברכה"), a long lyric poem of contemplative reflection, the first-person speaker learns how to read the silent signs of nature by conceptualizing them and turning them into a language.³⁰ The poet alone has access to that language, and therefore he becomes its exclusive mediator. In other words, that which is differentiated from the self is read as something that could only be heard via the privileged voice of the poet.³¹ The emergence of subjectivity, in Bialik's world, involves the dubbing of alterity.

For Miron, this is in fact where Bialik's "prophetism" starts:

The prophetic element is revealed here as much, if not more, than it is in the poet's public utterances that are actually written in the form of biblical prophecies and addressed at the plural "you" or "them," i.e. at the national collective . . . It is in poems such as "The Pool" that the poet tells how he learned to decipher God's "silent language."³²

²⁹ In this respect, Bialik's romanticism is already entwined with a Russian symbolist approach which complicates the relationship between the supposedly differentiated categories of individuality and collectivity. For further discussion of romanticism, symbolism, and decadence in Bialik's work see Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im shel dekadens: Bialik, Berdichevsky, Brenner (Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature)* (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 60.

³¹ In his reading of Ernest Renan, Edward Said shows that philology often perceived itself in very similar terms. Said argues that according to Renan, "science gives speech to things; better yet, science brings out, causes to be pronounced, a potential speech within things. The special value of linguistics . . . is not that natural science resembles it, but rather that it treats words as natural, otherwise silent objects, which are made to give up their secrets." See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 140.

³² Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 59–60.

There is a fundamental connection between the symbolist notion of deciphering the silent language of nature and the brutal, raging prophecies that are hurled in the face of the “national collective” in poems such as “City of Killings” (“בעיר ההרגה”).³³ The latter is Bialik’s well-known response to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903.³⁴ “City of Killings” is structured in the form of a Biblical prophecy, imparted from a furious god to his silent, witnessing prophet. Infamously, the poem condemns the victims of the pogrom in a terribly denigrating manner. Yet, it is precisely by means of this denigration that a collective national addressee is formed and becomes expressible.³⁵ As many scholars have pointed out, the enthusiastic reception of “City of Killings” upon its publication, despite its brutally critical content, reinforced Bialik’s status as a cultural and national authority.

In both cases (poems such as “The Pool,” on the one hand, and “City of Killings,” on the other hand) the prophecy involves the elevation of the distinct speaking self and his differentiation from his surroundings. In the “City of Killings” the speaker (God) addresses his silent prophet over the head of the victims, eventually commanding him to seclude himself in the desert, where his scream will be lost in a storm.³⁶ The prophetic mode in Bialik’s poetry, which

³³ Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 82–87.

³⁴ In April of 1903, a major anti-Jewish pogrom broke in the city of Kishinev in the Russian Empire. Following numerous blood libel accusations in local press, a violent mob attacked the Jewish population in the city, killing forty-nine people and destroying 1,350 Jewish houses. The events were widely publicized in international media and drew attention to the persecution of Jews in Russia.

³⁵ See Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity, and the Zionist Moment* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 150–58; Hannan Hever, *Be-‘ir ha-harega: Bikur me’uhar bi-melot me’ah shana la-po’ema shel Bialik (In the City of Slaughter: A Visit at Twilight: Bialik’s Poem a Century After)* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 44–46.

³⁶ Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 87.

grounded his poetry as “national,” entailed a radical separation from the nation. And it was precisely this prophetic mode, according to Miron, which “allowed him to both separate himself from the people and to engage them as a mentor and a leader.”³⁷

Recent feminist readings of Bialik’s work have shown that a crucial dimension of the struggle for individuation in his poetry concerns a threat that is associated with a feminine or a motherly domain. Mikhal Dekel challenges previous readings of the maternal in Bialik’s work, arguing that contrary to the view of motherhood as a monolithic representation of misery, the maternal often emerges in Bialik as a “feared and murderous ‘bad object,’ an Otherness that exceeds the limits of rationalization and that cannot be absorbed into the narrative history of the incipient individual or national self.”³⁸ Addressing different accounts of Bialik’s archetypal birth story in poems such as “Night Thoughts” (“הרהורי לילה”), “My Poetry” (“שירתי”), and in the novella “Aftergrowth” (“ספיח”), Dekel points to the recurring motif of an inadequate mother. The birth of the speaker in these works is intertwined with an experience of expulsion or exile. In “Night Thoughts,” for instance, the speaker recalls: “From the womb to a garbage heap I was thrown.”³⁹ The mother in these formation narratives feeds the infant from her poisonous milk or teary bread, infusing his body with the material of her own sorrow.⁴⁰ Dekel draws attention to the

³⁷ Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 83.

³⁸ Mikhal Dekel, “From Where Have I Eaten My Poetry?: On Bialik and the Maternal,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 31, no. 1 (December, 2012): 95.

³⁹ Bialik and Hadari, “Night Thoughts,” *Songs from Bialik*, 13.

⁴⁰ In the poems “Hirhurey layla (Night Thoughts)” and “Shirati (My Poem)” respectively. In “Night Thoughts:” “a withered breast bared to me by a mother wound in mourning clothes/ and from it I sucked the poison cup.” Ibid. Similarly, in “My Poem” the poet swallows the bread his mother baked for him, internalizing her tear, which had dropped into the dough. Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 21.

poisonous, even murderous appearance of the maternal in Bialik's work. She argues that "beneath the poet's explicit empathy with the mother's pain lie sadomasochistic interpersonal dynamics that underlie not only his relations with her but with all other objects: 'the people,' the nation, his poetry, himself."⁴¹

Similarly, Hamutal Tsamir points to a link between a feminine threat and an anxiety that concerns national desire in Bialik's poetry. In her reading of the libidinal economy in early twentieth-century Hebrew "revival poetry," Tsamir focuses on the recurring figure of Lilith (a feminine, sexually wanton and demonic figure of Jewish mythology) in Bialik and others' work.⁴² She argues that the danger posed by the seductive figure of Lilith lies in her disruption of the continuation of both the nation and its privileged masculine subject. Lilith, who notoriously steals babies and men's semen at night, is traditionally contrasted with the subordinate biblical Hava, who appropriately conceives and gives birth. In her insubordination, Lilith subverts the patriarchal order of masculine mastery over wife and offspring. According to Tsamir, early twentieth-century Hebrew poetry reconfigures this threat as aimed against the preservation of the nation. Tsamir alludes to the nationalist masculine fantasy of giving birth to a new collective identity and argues that this fantasy reverberates throughout the revival poetry. She shows that a fundamental drive in this poetry is the wish to constitute a yearning masculine national subject who shall direct his desire towards the foundation of the nation and overcome his diasporic

⁴¹ Dekel, "From Where Have I Eaten My Poetry?" 95.

⁴² Among the examples Tsamir provides are "Eineya (Her Eyes)," Ha-einayim ha-re'evot (The Hungry Eyes)," and "Hava ve-ha-nahash (Eve and the Snake)." Hamutal Tsamir, "Lilith, Hava ve-ha-gever ha-mitapek: Ha-kalkala ha-libidinalit shel Bialik u-vney doro (Lilith, Eve, and the Self-Restraining Man: The Libidinal Economy of Bialik and His Contemporaries)," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 23 (2009): 134.

femininity by productively participating in this “birthing.”⁴³ At the same time, Tsamir claims that this desire is often depicted in terms of either the failure or the envy of he who is unable to give birth.

The ambivalent identification with an inadequate mother figure on the one hand, and the torturous efforts to redirect sexual desire towards nation building on the other hand, point to moments of incoherence and disintegration in Bialik’s narration of the consolidation of individual subjectivity. At the background of the elevation of the poet-prophet and his struggle for individuation lie complex dynamics of fear, hatred, desire, longing and restraint. Shira Stav has recently suggested that in Bialik’s well-known essay “Revelment and Concealment in Language” (“גילוי וכיסוי בלשון”), language emerges as a horrifying mother figure. Stav points to a series of key words in the text that activate a gendered and eroticized signification and portray language as “an enormous and intimidating mother, attractive and seductive.”⁴⁴ Stav argues that the anxiety of the essay is largely organized around an incestuous wish to observe the abyssal essence of the mother-language, through the practice of poetry. As my reading will show, a similar wish is at work in Bialik’s earlier essay, “Language Pangs.” However, as opposed to his ambivalent and cautious tone in “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” in “Language Pangs” Bialik portrays a violent and sexual fantasy in which the Hebrew poet attempts to master and subjugate language, in what appears as the mythic embodiment of national revival.

⁴³ Tsamir, 140.

⁴⁴ Shira Stav, “Giluy (arayot) ve-kisuy ba-lashon: Bialik, Wallach, Wieseltier (Incest and Intertext: Bialik, Wallach, Wieseltier),” *Israel Studies in Language and Society* 10, no. 2 (2017): 160.

2. Bialik's Philosophy of Language and the Paradox of Language Pangs

A dialectical struggle between contesting forces is evident throughout Bialik's writing. A rationalist, intellectual inquiry that works by way of clarification on the one hand, and a desire to break through categories of reason and be in touch with abyssal, spiritual domains on the other.⁴⁵ Within the fin de siècle neo-romantic conceptual framework in which Bialik was operating, the first tendency was usually associated with law, communication, rationalist thought, and prosaic style. The second was attributed to creativity, sensuality, unconscious drives and mysticism, and it was emblematic of poetic language and poetry. Bialik's work, including his essayistic writing, was deeply embedded in this dialectic. He returned to it whenever he discussed questions of genre and style, and also when attending to matters such as nation-building; and this tension definitely played a central role in his conception of language.

The complexity of this dialectic movement is perhaps best captured in two of Bialik's most well-known essays, written around the same time period: "Revelment and Concealment in Language" (1915) and "Halakha and Agada" (1916). Tracing Bialik's philosophy of language in these later works will allow a better understanding of the intricacies of his early essay, "Language Pangs" (1905). Turning back from the complex dialectic movement of his general language theory to his contradictory articulation of the particular state of Hebrew in "Language Pangs," will provide a glance at Bialik's trajectory of thought about language.

In "Revelment and Concealment in Language," Bialik begins by lamenting the decay of language as such. He argues that at the height of its power, language emerged out of a moment of self-recognition in which man strove to express primal human impressions. It was therefore "a

⁴⁵ Dan Miron, *Bo'ah, lailah: Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit beyn higayon le-i-gayon be-mifneh ha-me'ah ha-esrim: Iyunim bi-yetsirot H.N. Bialik u-M.Y. Berdichevsky (Come, Night: Hebrew Literature Between the Rational and the Irrational)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1987), 28–29.

lofty victory of the spirit.”⁴⁶ However, Bialik continues, language is destined to become an empty instrument in the service of mundane, social life. There, language loses its expressive value and is transformed into a vehicle of transmission, which abstracts and generalizes. Bialik then points to the concealing function of language, arguing that rather than “introducing us . . . into the inner area, the essence of things,” language in fact “stands as a barrier before them.”⁴⁷ Where there is nothing but horror of the abyss, where “stripped of its husk of speech, the spirit of man wanders ceaselessly,” language comes to cover up and substitute for that nothingness.⁴⁸ Thereby, in its pretension to speak positively, language falsely distances and divides man from the world. Yet poetic language emerges here as potentially providing a way out. Unlike the language of prose, which correlates with “that which is established and constant in language,” poetry seeks “the vital and mobile in language.” Poetry therefore sustains an element in language that evades its concealing function. In other words, poetry is capable of enacting a revealing, inexplicable remainder, an abyssal presence in the midst of language’s concealment.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” trans. Jacob Sloan, in *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 12; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 191.

⁴⁷ Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment*, 15; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 191.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15–16; Ibid. As different scholars have shown, Bialik’s rhetoric throughout this essay is saturated with a mystic terminology that references the kabbalistic origin narrative. Bialik simultaneously alludes to, transgresses and complicates the kabbalistic categories he employs. For further discussion see Rachel Elijor, “Giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon ve-sfat ha-ayin ve-ha-yesh” (Revelment and Concealment in Language and the Language of Being and Nothingness); Ariel Hirschfeld, “Metey olam mizda’aze’im: Al yahaso shel Bialik el mekorotav be-‘giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon’ (The Dead of the World Are Shaken)” in *Al “giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon”: Iyunim bemasato shel Bialik (On “Revelment and Concealment in Language”)* (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 2001), 113–28, 145–50 respectively; Galili Shahar, *She’erit ha-hitgalut: Ha-hok, ha-guf, u-she’elat ha-sifrut (Remnants of Revelation)* (Yerushalayim: Mosad Bialik, 2011).

⁴⁹ Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment*, 24–25; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 193.

In “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” poetry is privileged over prose. Yet in “Halakha and Agada,” published shortly after, we receive an almost opposite account, for it is eventually the prosaic *Halakha* that is favored over the poetic *Agada*. Here, Bialik expands the discussion to include an analogy between modern Hebrew literature and the contemporary state of Jewish national life. He concludes that both must adopt a greater commitment to *Halakha*, not in the simple sense of Jewish law, but as a universal category that marks engagement in action and life’s duty as opposed to the prevailing tendency of the generation to be hung “by the gossamer thread of some kind of love—love of the land, love of the language, love of the literature.”⁵⁰ Instead of this “love-in-the-air,” as Bialik calls it, what is truly needed is a grip of mundane reality, grounded in “action which is hard as iron and obeys the stern behests of duty.”⁵¹

Many critics have pointed out that strikingly, the two essays present a similar (albeit not identical) opposition, yet each essay advocates for a different side of that opposition.⁵² At the same time, it would be misleading to read each of these essays as merely favoring one side over the other, since a major gesture of both lies in challenging (or relativizing) the very distinction. In “Halakha and Agada” in particular, the two Talmudic categories are depicted as interdependent, mutually constitutive, and even as incarnations of one another. Bialik states

⁵⁰ Ibid., 86; Ibid., 213.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See, for instance, Yaakov Fikhman’s discussion in “Musagey ha-shira ve-ha-proza lefi masotav shel Bialik (The Concepts of Poetry and Prose according to Bialik’s Essays),” in Zvi Luz and Ziva Shamir, eds., *Al “giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon,”* 15.

clearly that they are “two things which are really one, two sides of a single shield.”⁵³ Similarly, in “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” the general suspicion towards human language as such presents both sides (the lofty, poetic dimension of language on the one hand, and its instrumental, prosaic fate on the other) as examples of language’s inability to truly express, due to its concealing function. There is something appealing about the rigid, fixed forms attributed to the language of prose, because their “emptiness” is a condition of poetry. This emptiness allows the poet to “fill the husk, or supply it constantly from his own substance and pour his own inner light into it.”⁵⁴

The two realms of poetry and prose clearly feed off one another and can hardly be thought of separately, thus the favoring of one over the other is never absolute. Bialik’s philosophy of language is rooted in this type of dialectical understanding, which heavily draws on romanticist and symbolist ideas.⁵⁵ For instance, Bialik shares Wilhelm von Humboldt’s assumption that language is at once an involuntary activity and a creative activity.⁵⁶ Similarly, he

⁵³ Hayim Nahman Bialik, “Halakha and Agada,” trans. Leon Simon, in *Revelment and Concealment*, 46; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 207.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14; *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁵ Bialik corresponds here with the work of Alexander Potebnja, and, by extension, with Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. For an elaborate discussion of Bialik’s deployment of romanticist and symbolist notions see Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Maga’im shel dekadens*, Zvi Luz, *Tashtiyot shira*, 157–58; Esther Natan, *Ha-derekh le-“metey midbar:” Al poe’ma shel Bialik ve-ha-shira ha-rusit (The Way to “The Dead of the Desert”)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts ha-me’uhad, 1993); Rina Lapidos, “Ha-masa ve-zikata le-torato ha-balshanit shel A. Potebnja (The Essay and its Linguistic Affinity to the Thought of A. Potebnja)” in *Al “giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon,”* 129–44.

⁵⁶ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 26.

adopts the premise that language is always infused by the mental power of individuals, but at the same time bound and dependent on the nation to which it belongs.⁵⁷ Following the Russian philosopher and linguist Alexander Potebnja, Bialik describes language as an interplay between prosaic and poetic forms, which manifest themselves as incarnations of one another. That interplay enables the cyclic process, in which poetry may shatter what has become numb within language.⁵⁸ Bialik's perception of language therefore consists of numerous oppositions. Language can be thought of simultaneously as static and dynamic, mechanic and ever-changing, generative and generated. And although the poet emerges in Bialik's account as a god-like figure and creative authority, he seems to also be dangerously exposed to what is threateningly unknown and uncontrollable in language, to its inexpressive abyssal dimension.

This understanding underlies much of Bialik's earlier essay "Language Pangs" (1905). Unlike the two later essays discussed above, "Language Pangs" grapples directly with the cultural and linguistic problems facing Hebrew in the midst of its attempted "revival." It attends not only to human language in general, but specifically to Hebrew in its current state. As opposed to the two later essays, which continue to draw massive scholarly interest and generate commentary to this day,⁵⁹ "Language Pangs" is more rarely referred to in the overall study of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 44, 24. For Humboldt, the idea that languages can belong both to individuals and to nations marks a "mystery," see *ibid.*, 38–42.

⁵⁸ See in Fikhman, "Musagey ha-shira ve-ha-proza lefi masotav shel Bialik," 13–18.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, the essays collected in an edited volume dedicated to this text, Luz and Shamir, *Al "giluy ve-kisuy ba-lashon"*; as well as Stav, "Giluy (arayot) ve-kisuy ba-lashon: Bialik, Wallach, Wieseltier"; and Hamutal Tsamir, "Beyn tehom le-ivaron: Te'ologya politit ve-hilun ha-ivrit etsel Gershom Shalom ve-H.N. Bialik (Between Abyss and Blindness: Political Theology and the Secularization of Hebrew in Gershom Scholem and H.N. Bialik)," in *Mi-kan* 14 (2014): 82–119.

Bialik. While the later essays reveal Bialik's thought on language as fraught with oppositions, and show that his rhetoric oftentimes wears the form of contradiction in a carefully crafted dialectics, "Language Pangs" presents the reader with an unresolved paradox.

The two main parts of "Language Pangs" contest one another. In the first part, Bialik points to the necessity of reviving Hebrew not only as a written, but also as a spoken language. Citing *Ahad Ha'am*, Bialik stresses that there is no real point in debating Hebrew (as it is indeed widely debated within the modern Hebrew literary discourse) unless the ultimate end of these debates is the full vernacularization of the language, namely the emergence of Hebrew as a spoken language used naturally within the realm of social, everyday life.⁶⁰ Yet in the second part of the essay, Bialik goes on to debate the indispensable role that writers, as opposed to "ordinary" speakers, play in the revitalization of Hebrew. He suggests that the possibility of Hebrew speech is dependent on the work of poets. Whereas the first part of the essay lays the groundwork for a linear understanding of revival, which locates speech as its crucial condition, in the second part, a different temporality emerges. Bialik proposes establishing an institutionalizing Hebrew dictionary, whose role would be to discipline, foresee, and enable the internal growth of Hebrew. The establishment of that dictionary "must precede all types of other attempts and acts of 'expansion,' for the sake of our language."⁶¹

In her reading of the essay, Chana Kronfeld has pointed to Bialik's diagnosis of Hebrew as an ill linguistic system, which could only be cured through a total revival in both writing and speech. Kronfeld argues that Bialik understood early on that Hebrew must be fully developed in

⁶⁰ Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 9–11.

⁶¹ Bialik, 14.

all of its strata in order to become a living language. She therefore mentions Bialik's insistence on the importance of routine use (שגרה), as the language's "faithful guardian angel," which enables it to successfully establish its norms. These linguistic norms, which include clichés and fixed expressions (מטבעות לשון), are important in the sense that "all creative deviations and deautomatizations are measured [against them.]"⁶² Kronfeld therefore highlights Bialik's dynamic conception of language as an open-ended interplay between different linguistic layers.⁶³

However, as Barbara Mann points out, throughout Bialik's discussion, an additional darker strain is at work, a concern that "language may become spoiled, contaminated or even 'crippled' through this constant contact and usage within the public sphere."⁶⁴ And so while encouraging the revival of Hebrew speech and speaking in favor of the supposed public contribution to the making of the language, Bialik is also quick to adopt a series of strict hierarchical reservations, clearly determining what is allowed and forbidden within these practices, and who are the ones permitted to perform them.

On the one hand, Bialik's philosophy of language is grounded in the appreciation of linguistic pragmatics, stressing that language (and belles-lettres as its derivative) can exist only insofar as it contains a normative linguistic basis, constantly iterated in day-to-day conversation. On the other hand, Bialik advocates for the establishment of a dictionary that would lead the way to, and provide the guidelines for, the revitalization of the language, including the very spontaneity of everyday Hebrew speech. The two statements are almost mutually exclusive. It

⁶² Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 84.

⁶³ Kronfeld, 85–86.

⁶⁴ Barbara E. Mann, "Visions of Jewish Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no. 4 (2006): 683.

might be that the entrance of Hebrew into the broader, “universal” debate on language is what evokes this salient contradiction. Perhaps it is precisely Bialik’s clinical diagnosis of Hebrew as “ill,” “semi-dead” or “seemingly alive” which also prescribes the peculiar “treatment” that leads either to the subjugation of speech to a poetic linguistic creation, or to the “hallucination” of the colloquial registers of Hebrew as if they already existed.

Indeed, hallucination plays an important role throughout Bialik’s analysis. Early on in the essay, he argues that only those who “hallucinate” (“בעלי ההזיה”) are permitted to contemplate the revival of Hebrew, and that they shall do so “not out of ‘the existing state of being,’ but out of faith in a complete and final ‘linguistic revival’ in both speech and writing.”⁶⁵ This attempt to think about language not as it is, but rather as it could or should be, attests, once again, to a latent ambiguity in the temporality of Hebrew, as well as in its narration as a national language. If national languages are usually understood as fulfilling a promise concealed within a pre-existing spoken vernacular, Hebrew lacks that type of vernacular and can only expect it from a desired future. However, in order to exist as a national language, Hebrew must imagine this future as its past, and assume the form it prefigures. This temporal leap might explain Bialik’s insistence that the only intelligible way to discuss Hebrew entails complete faith in what it will become, namely, supplying a foundation necessary for its own nationalization.

Yet another way to think about the possibility of colloquial registers in Hebrew requires a broader consideration of the socio-linguistic realm within which Hebrew is thought of here: namely, alongside and in constant dialogue with the colloquial character of Yiddish.⁶⁶ While at

⁶⁵ “ואולם אלו מבעלי ההזיה . . . הם רשאים לדון גם בשאלה זו לא מתוך ‘המצב כהיותו’, אלא מתוך האמונה ב’תחית’” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 9.

⁶⁶ I thank Chana Kronfeld for drawing my attention to this point.

some moments in the essay Bialik dwells precisely on the non-spoken as a defining feature of Hebrew's current state (i.e. its "illness"), at other moments, he alludes to normative colloquial Hebrew forms as if these already existed.

Could it be that in alluding to a supposedly available colloquial Hebrew register what Bialik has in mind is the conversational forms of Yiddish? Does Bialik view the colloquial dimension of Yiddish as an inseparable, internal part of the multilayered Hebrew? This very ambiguity accompanies one of Bialik's strongest assertions throughout the essay: the idea that the revival of Hebrew should not stem from "external" sources, but rather from within its own interiority.⁶⁷ How might we understand this heterogeneous interiority? And what might be its relationship to the present-absence of the colloquial, which functions as a persistent reference throughout Bialik's discussion? Does this internal multiplicity precede "New Hebrew" (as its "past?") or does it function as its imagined "future?" Is it contained within the body of Hebrew, or does it somehow exceed or even threaten it?

These tensions are ultimately embodied through Bialik's powerful metaphor, which, toward the end of the essay, portrays the Hebrew language as an ill pregnant body, unable, or unwilling, to give birth to its fetuses. Not only does Bialik take this metaphor seriously, but he

⁶⁷ Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 14–16. This focus on interiority will later expand and develop in Bialik's thought into his "project of ingathering" (מפעל הכינוס): a plan to collect, reorganize, and edit texts of the Jewish tradition and thereby institute a Hebrew canon that would serve as the foundation for contemporary Hebrew writing. The ideal of "the project of ingathering" was at the center of a famous disagreement between Bialik and Frishman. As opposed to Bialik, who following Ahad Ha'am advocated for a movement "inwards," into the textual corpus of Hebrew, Frishman promoted an expansion "outwards," by means of translation and the writing of new Hebrew novels. For an elaboration of Bialik and Frishman's dispute over the ideal of ingathering see Iris Parush, *Kanon sifrut ve-ide'ologyah le'umit: Bikoret ha-sifrut shel Frishman be-hashva'ah le-vikoret ha-sifrut shel Klausner u-Brenner* (Be'er Sheva: Hotsa'at ha-sefarim shel universitat Ben-Gurion, 1992), 130–43.

also animates it figuratively into a complex myth.⁶⁸ Hebrew, it appears, is expected to give birth to its own determining essence—the condition of revival, which is at the same time the very end of revival. But as we shall later see in detail, this pregnancy involves surgical complications that call for the heroic, and transgressive, intervention of the poet. In what follows, I will offer a reading of the different sections of the essay, focusing on the ambiguities and tensions evoked by the paradox outlined here.

3. From an Inanimate Object to a Living Creature

Throughout “Language Pangs” Bialik deploys both monetary and organic metaphors to discuss language. These metaphors, which evolve into sophisticated implicit narratives, are invoked simultaneously, and Bialik often shifts between them. Hence, alongside the depiction of language as a pregnant body, which mostly emerges towards the end of the essay (and is implied in the title), Bialik’s discussion repeatedly evokes the realm of assets, property and coinage on the one hand, and that of anatomy, biology and living organisms on the other. The constant passage between these two realms demonstrates a crucial tension, typical of the linguistic paradigms which inform Bialik’s thought. Language is seen at once as an object that “belongs” to the nation and as an organism, generative and transforming, containing its own force of life. Language is simultaneously what we own, but its organic power might also transform us. However, in Bialik’s discussion, Hebrew seems to fail on both counts. As a linguistic asset, it is inadequate, and as a body, it suffers from dysfunctional metabolism.

In the beginning of the essay Bialik stresses that “the main disaster of the Hebrew

⁶⁸ Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 16.

language” consists in the fact that “it is not spoken by the majority of the people.”⁶⁹ He then adds that “the mere existence of linguistic assets alone, as plentiful as they may be, still will not suffice, rather [these linguistic assets] need a turning and overturning, [they require] the perpetual, cyclical motion of life.”⁷⁰ Bialik explains that linguistic assets derive their value from the “motion of life” entwined with market exchange, that is, through their constant “routine use (*shigra*)” in daily conversation.⁷¹ Hence the component of “life” is attributed to language inasmuch as it is “commonly traded, handled and touched” within a living socio-linguistic community.⁷² In other words, the more language is passed from one “trader” to the next (as if it were a still-life merchandise), the more vital it becomes. For Bialik, the mercantile characterization of language involves the materiality and physicality of the traded object. In his articulation, the monetary metaphor is centered on the concrete coin, namely on an object that can be touched and felt, as opposed to abstract currency.⁷³

Yet midway through the passage the metaphor transforms and the “linguistic asset” is suddenly depicted in organic terms. It is as if enhanced by the mere notion of cyclical, routine use, language has now been given a life of its own. Still praising the organic power of speech,

⁶⁹ “עיקר אסונה של הלשון העברית . . . מה שאינה מדוברת בפי רוב העם” Bialik, 10.

⁷⁰ Translated by Kronfeld and Zakim; cited in Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 83; “מציאותו של רכוש לשוני בלבד, אפילו מרובה ביותר, אינה מספקת עדין, אלא הוא טעון הפיכה והפיכה, תנועה שאינה פוסקת ומחזור תמידי בחיים” Bialik, 10.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Translated by Kronfeld and Zakim. Ibid

⁷³ In the original Hebrew, the materiality of language as property is highlighted even more. It is described as an object that is touched, lifted, moved and squeezed: “הולכה והבאה, עקירה והנחה, מעוך ומשמוש” Bialik, 10.

Bialik asserts that “no absurdity of grammar or logic exists which the stomach of the living language cannot digest and cannot turn into its own ‘blood and marrow.’” However, Hebrew, which is not properly traded in the public sphere and whose “life” is therefore necessarily in doubt, “its power of digestion weakened . . . and thereby the dry bones of its philological skeleton begin to show.”⁷⁴ Drawing on Humboldtian terminology (according to which grammar is nothing but the dead skeleton of language),⁷⁵ Bialik points to the perils of a language whose body is incapable of receiving and processing: it becomes skeletal, and its life is endangered as a result. This diagnosis of Hebrew as an ill body, in danger of being reduced to its grammatical skeleton, will later bring Bialik to argue that unlike normative “living languages,” a “semi-dead” language such as Hebrew requires “fattening” (“הלעטה והמראה”),⁷⁶ namely it requires an artificial intervention in its lexical “growth.”

Bialik further claims that the illness of Hebrew is worsened by the fact that Hebrew writers do not live their daily lives in Hebrew: “the Hebrew author . . . lives and grows and talks in a *different* language.”⁷⁷ According to Bialik, this mode of “living” in one language and writing in another distorts the appropriate relationship to language. Any author who “translates” his

⁷⁴ Translated by Kronfeld and Zakim (translation slightly modified), cited in Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 83.

“אין לך 'אבסורד' - מן הצד הדקדוקי או גם ההגיוני - שלא תעכל אותו קיבת הלשון החיה ולא תהפכהו ל'חלבה ודמה' . . . וכנגד זה לשון שאינה חיה, כח עכולה נחלש, אור חייה נדעך, ו'חלבה ודמה' מתמעטים - ועל ידי כך מתחילות להתבלט יותר העצמות היבשות של שלדה הפילולוגי”

Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 10.

⁷⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1903), 147.

⁷⁶ Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10–11. (My emphasis.)

thought from one language to another, instead of thinking in the very language in which he writes, is inflicting further injury on a body that is already ill. Bialik stresses that “the spirit of man always unites in complete union with the spirit of his language, and every departure from one language to another entails a departure of the soul (יציאת נשמה).”⁷⁸ It is not quite clear whether this deadening effect, caused by the transition between languages, is attributed to the language or the author. This ambiguity is further enhanced by Bialik’s implication that the linguistic divide in which Hebrew authors live may in fact “cripple” them: “a person wants his language to walk in tandem with him, a ‘straight leg’ and not dragging behind him or turning into a load on his shoulder.”⁷⁹ For an author who writes in a language different from the language in which he lives, language becomes akin to an organ disconnected from the body. Whereas the “illness” of Hebrew was initially attributed to the body of the language, it now seems to contaminate the body of those writing in Hebrew.

At first glance, then, Bialik utterly rejects the idea of writing as a form of translation. He objects to the notion of consciously importing the concepts and phrases of one language while writing in another. In line with his emphasis on interiority and ingathering, Bialik opposes to the idea of “external” or “translational” writing, maintaining that there should be a correlation between the language in which one *lives* (which is at once the type of language that is considered

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Translated by Na’ama Rokem. Rokem discusses Bialik’s essay in the context of his argument against bilingual authorship. She stresses that according to Bialik, the crippling condition of Hebrew will end once the language becomes a spoken vernacular privileged over all other languages. “‘With the Changing of the Horizon Comes the Broadening of the Horizon:’ Multilingual Narrative Modes in M.Y. Berdichevsky’s *Miriam*,” in *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 235; Bialik, 11.

“living,” due to its cyclical motion of life) and the language in which one *writes*. He declares the necessity to “destroy entirely the divide between our soul and our language.”⁸⁰ At the same time, Bialik is well aware of the fact that in 1905 such a linguistic divide is a necessary condition of Hebrew writers. His reassertion that Hebrew should be fully revived in both speech and writing once again creates the impression that revival is only possible in the course of a linear future. But if that is the case, according to Bialik, and if Hebrew authors are trapped within a linguistic divide that contaminates both the Hebrew language and themselves, how could current Hebrew literature exist?

Unlike Ahad Ha'am, Bialik does not suggest that Hebrew writers should refrain from poetic writing. He does not reaffirm Ahad Ha'am's statement against aestheticization. On the contrary, from the beginning of the essay, Bialik responds to Ahad Ha'am's essay, “The Language and Its Literature” (“הלשון וספרותה”) in an ironic tone, systematically disputing Ahad Ha'am's claims. As elaborated in the previous chapter, just a few years earlier, Ahad Ha'am had maintained that Hebrew writing must suspend its poetic aspirations, stressing that Hebrew belles-lettres could emerge only *after* a natural and gradual revival of Hebrew speech. For Ahad Ha'am, the vernacularization of Hebrew was indeed a necessary condition for the renaissance of Hebrew literature. Any attempt to hasten that transformation artificially was considered by Ahad Ha'am a premature intervention that threatened to deprive the language of its life.⁸¹

Bialik, however, is writing from the perspective of a celebrated Hebrew poet at the height of his literary career. In many ways “Language Pangs” is his response to his adored mentor.

⁸⁰ “להרוס כליל את המחיצה שבין נפשנו ולשוננו”. Ibid.

⁸¹ Ahad Ha'am, “Ha-lashon ve-sifruta (The Language and Its Literature),” in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma'amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921).

Whereas Ahad Ha'am strictly objected to the notion of artificially "expanding" the vocabulary of Hebrew, Bialik states that "expansion" ("הרחבה")—the intentional institution of new Hebrew vocabulary—is legitimate as long as the "expanders" ("מרחיבים") are talented, tasteful, and knowledgeable about Hebrew. This type of artificial lexical innovation, Bialik argues, is justified and could in fact fill the denotative gaps of Hebrew.⁸² However, Bialik also asserts that only "some people" are qualified for the task of "expanding Hebrew," loudly ruling out Eliezer Ben-Yehuda as an optional contributor.⁸³ Dismissing Ben-Yehuda's methods, Bialik accuses him of working his way into Hebrew externally rather than internally, "translating" foreign vocabulary instead of employing the internal forms of the language.⁸⁴ Hence Bialik's approval of the practice of "expansion" involves a series of reservations. "Expansion" is acceptable only under certain circumstances and it may be carried only by *some* people.

Bialik renders "expansion" a relatively marginal practice within the overall project of revival, whose justification lies in its negligible practicality.⁸⁵ He explains that "expansion" involves very little, if any, creativity, because it is an inferior form of translation that draws on existing phrases latent in "foreign" languages.⁸⁶ Therefore, "expansion," he contends, is only welcome to the extent that it is framed as a craft, aware of its limitations. What is strictly forbidden, however, is to mistake the craft of expansion for "creation" ("יצירה").⁸⁷ From here on,

⁸² Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 12–13.

⁸³ Bialik, 13, 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

“expansion” is contrasted with Bialik’s somewhat romanticist notion of “creation,” which is attributed particularly to Hebrew poets. While “expansion” belongs to the practical, static and instrumental side of language, associated with spoken tongue and social life, “creation,” with its artistic, literary resonance, corresponds to what Bialik sees as the dynamic side of language, which is linked, first and foremost, with the individual consciousness of singular creators. Bialik argues that Ahad Ha’am fails to understand this divergent function of language, namely that he fails to realize that the contemporary discussion on the state of Hebrew does not necessarily concern the creative and dynamic side of language:

When one plainly says “language,” one does not mostly mean, of course, its raw, crude side, nor its melting, ebullient element, always in a dynamic state and bound to change at any hour . . . Finally [one does not mean] all of the aspects of language that are its own works of creation and works of Merkabah, known only to creators and artists or to the best of linguists; instead, one means, for the most part . . . its frequent and static dimension, namely, its minted coins, its cash, handed from one person to another while their values remain permanent and fixed, and therefore convenient for the frequent use of *ordinary men*, who are neither “creators” nor linguists, but are fed from whatever is available.⁸⁸

Bialik suggests separating the discussion of poetic language from the discussion of its spoken function. The realm of the spoken, that just a few paragraphs earlier was described as enacting the organic existence of language, is now understood, in itself, as its fixed, static layer. It is described as the reduction of language to its communicative, instrumental value, which lacks the fundamental dynamism that is associated, instead, with “creators and artists.”⁸⁹ Similarly to the

⁸⁸ “כשאומרים ‘לשון’ סתם – עיקר הכונה, כמובן, לא לצד ההיולי ולצד הגולמי שבה, לא אל יסודה המהותך, התוסס, שנמצא תמיד במצב דינאמי ועומד להשתנות כל שעה . . . סוף דבר, לא אל כל אותם הצדדים בלשון, שהם ממעשה בראשית וממעשה מרכבה שלה ורק היוצרים והאמנים או חכמי הבלשנים מצויים אצלם; אלא עיקר הכונה הוא, על-פי רוב . . . אל התדיר והסטאטי שבה, כלומר, אל ‘מטבעותיה’ היצוקים וה‘מזומנים’, שעוברים מיד ליד וערכיהם קבועים ומסוימים, ובשביל כך הם נוהים לשימוש תדירי של **סתם בני אדם**, שאינם ‘יוצרים’ ואינם בלשנים, אלא נזונים מן ‘ההפקר ומן המוכן’ Bialik, 12. (Quotation marks and emphasis in the original.)

⁸⁹ The Hebrew noun *yotzer* (translated here as “creator”) has multiple meanings. In its modern use it has acquired a romantic tone, which could refer simultaneously to a poet, a fiction writer or

way in which he presents the decayed language of prose in “Reavealment and Concealment in Language,” Bialik employs the monetary metaphor to refer to the transformation (and fall) of language from “ebullient” matter to traded currency. According to this metaphor, the fluid, ever-changing matter of language is destined to eventually fixate into the static “minted coin” traded between “ordinary men,” who are suddenly somewhat diminished and seen as parasitically “fed from whatever is available.” Everything that is flexible and exuberant about language now belongs to a linguistic dimension which Bialik deems irrelevant to his current discussion.

Yet, already in making this claim Bialik dwells quite elaborately on what one does *not* mostly mean when one plainly says “language.” Pretending to temporarily focus his discussion on the static dimension of language, Bialik in fact delves into “its melting, ebullient element, always in a dynamic state and bound to change at any hour.”⁹⁰ While discussing language as “static” and “frequent,” underscoring its instrumentalization, Bialik demonstrates a hyper-awareness of its constant effervescence. That awareness already challenges the assumption that language could ever be thought of as static or standing still. As Kronfeld shows, Bialik redirects the phrase for lexical coinage (מטבע לשון)—a “dead metaphor”—turning it into a complex metaphoric image.⁹¹ In his own writing, Bialik does not maintain the static linguistic norms as they are, but rather enacts their alteration, performing in his own text what he suggests is not yet

an artist in a very general sense (Bialik often uses it as a synonym for the word “artist”). But the word also has a theological sense, which goes back to the ancient *Sefer Yetzira* (the Book of Creation), where the Hebrew words and letters are instrumental in the formation of the world. In using the word “creator” instead of “poet” or “writer” Bialik mythologizes the figure of the poet and supplements him (the creator is gendered and is described here only in the masculine inflection) with a divine role.

⁹⁰ Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 12.

⁹¹ Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 84.

possible in Hebrew, and subverting his stated intentions to discuss merely the static dimension of language.

The assumption that language could be reduced to its functional essence, that its dynamism could somehow be suspended, is what grounds Bialik's legitimizing of the practice of "expansion." But the recognition of an ever-changing element in language, of an abyssal essence which is revealed only to singular poet-prophets, is what grants this "legitimizing" its ambivalent tone. Bialik clarifies that although "expansion," as a form of artificial "fattening," might assist the language from time to time, it will not fully "heal" the language, and will not redeem it from its disaster. Only the creative intervention of poets will manage to cure the Hebrew language of its disease.

As we have seen, it follows from Bialik's account that the vital power of language is linked to its static state as a traded object. The more language is touched, transmitted from one hand to another, turned and overturned—that is, the more it is instrumentalized and treated as a fixed, inanimate object—the more vitalized it becomes. However, within that economy, Hebrew emerges as an anomaly. A non-spoken language, it is akin to an untradeable asset, a useless property. Lacking that cyclical motion of life, it therefore becomes a sick, moribund body. At the same time, Bialik seems quite reluctant to "impart" Hebrew to the marketplace of everyday conversation. His exclusive approach sets hierarchies of language users, reserves the role of "expansion" for the privileged few, and repeatedly asserts the authority of individual poets. This reservation also explains the gradually diminishing status of "ordinary speakers" in the essay. They are marked as indistinct masses, "fed from whatever is available," whereas opposed to them Bialik posits the singular "creators" and "artists."⁹² The spoken element in language is

⁹² Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 12.

presented as a mere static condition out of which national language and literature could be sublimated into actual “revival.” The revitalization of the ill body of Hebrew depends on poetic creation.

Bialik’s frequent digressions into long descriptions of the dynamism of language reveal the extent to which, in contrast to what it initially says, the text is deeply concerned with poetic creation. Both “creation” and “the creator” gradually occupy central roles. Strikingly, what is mostly atrocious for Bialik, what marks for him the contamination of language, is not “expansion” per se, but rather mistaking “expansion” for “creation.” He goes on to argue that those conflating “expansion” with “creation” are being imprecise in a manner that harms language (“אינם מקפידים הרבה על לשונם”), and must therefore be forbidden from taking part in its revival. Opposed to “the complete creator (היוצר הגמור)” Bialik positions

those ‘mute prophets’ . . . whose mouths stammer, those who grapple with the ‘Og’ language, and contemplate it not out of knowing and choice but on the contrary, out of lack of knowing, because they did not *recognize* its entire force, those who never measured in their own eyes (not to mention, in their steps) . . . its country and Kingdom . . . they are not permitted.⁹³

Reclaiming his title as a great prophet of modern Hebrew poetry, Bialik reproaches the false Hebrew prophets whose mock, artificial speech, carried out in the name of “revival,” is but a pale shadow to genuine Hebrew creation. Already in this denigration of the misguided attempt to participate in the project of language revival, Bialik hints at an unexpected force that is enfolded in Hebrew. The language is referred to, as if inadvertently, as an *Og*, a giant, or a great biblical Kingdom that must be conquered and defeated by those who are capable.

⁹³ “אלו ה'נביאים האלמים' . . . ופיהם מגמגם, שמתגוששים עם הלשון ה'עוג' ומתלבטים בה לא מתוך ידיעה ובחירה, אלא, אדרבה, מתוך חסרון ידיעה, מפני שלא הכירו את כל כחה; אלו שלא מדדו מעולם במלוא עינם, וכל-שכן Bialik, 13. (Emphasis in the original.) . . . מדינת מלכותה . . . אלו אינם רשאים”

4. *The Ingathering Dictionary: Knowing Language from Within*

While in the early parts of “Language Pangs,” language is mostly described in terms of a property or a semi-living organism, as the essay unfolds, the feminization of Hebrew becomes evident as well. This gendering of the language could be read as what links the two earlier metaphors: as a feminine body, language can be seen at once as a living being and as a property of the national masculine subject. The feminization of the language echoes a long tradition in Hebrew Literature, in which, based on the grammatical femininity of the Hebrew noun לשון (language/tongue), Hebrew is repeatedly figured as a woman.⁹⁴ Such feminizing personifications appear already in Yehuda Alharizi’s *Tahkemoni*, which dates to the 1200s, and they reemerge as particularly popular tropes in the works of Haskalah writers such as Isaac Erter, Abraham Mapu, Y.L. Gordon, and Reuven Asher Braudes. Bialik, who is well aware of these traditions, echoes them somewhat ambivalently. He adopts some conventions, but renounces the allegorical personification of language as a lamenting, deserted mistress. Instead, as Shmuel Werses has argued, Bialik emphasizes the biological being of Hebrew, and its struggle for vitality.⁹⁵

Concurrently, in Bialik, the feminization of Hebrew is inseparable from the exclusive masculinity of the Hebrew poet. In addition to the fact that Bialik only addresses “the creator” in the masculine inflection (היוצר), the affinity between the poet and the language is often eroticized or portrayed in terms of gendered power relations. Sexual difference is stated in the text

⁹⁴ For an elaborate discussion on the figurative feminization of both Hebrew and Yiddish see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹⁵ Shmuel Werses, *Beyn giluy le-kisuy: Bialik be-sipur u-ve-masah (Between Revealment and Concealment: Bialik in Fiction and Essay)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me’uhad, 1984), 86.

inasmuch as it differentiates the masculine poet from the feminine language. Within that order, the possibility of a female creator, or a feminine creation, is unthinkable.⁹⁶ This staging of gender dynamics between the language and the poet corresponds to a foundational metaphor: that of Nation as Woman. In a forthcoming book, Kronfeld traces the genealogy of this metaphor, whose origins she locates in the prophetic books of the Bible. Kronfeld tackles the heterosexual model of biblical prophecy, in the framework of which a male speaker (God, a prophet, or, in its modern poetic incarnation, a masculine lyrical “I”) addresses the nation (and by extension, the city and the land), as a beloved woman. She shows that as this metaphorical system evolves, the feminine body of the nation is regarded as something that must be disciplined and controlled via a masculine gaze.⁹⁷

Bialik extends the metaphor of Nation as Woman to the Hebrew language. His depiction of the relations between “the creator” and language thus coincides with the prophetic mode in his work. In “Language Pangs,” the figure of the prophetic, masculine Hebrew poet interacts with the feminine, bodily language, which in turn, becomes emblematic of the people, the nation and the land. The problematics of these relations are reexamined in Bialik’s text. He employs this figurative model in order to narrate it anew, while enacting the national, gendered and theological tensions that have settled into it.

When Bialik addresses the mythical figure of “the creator,” the transgressive nature of his relations with language is revealed:

One must not conflate the “language pangs” discussed here with the “creation pangs” of he who aims to reveal, for the first time, a real, new “revelment” (גילוי), a creation ex nihilo. The latter is obviously a “creator” . . . who requires heaven’s mercy and “the holy

⁹⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁹⁷ Chana Kronfeld, *The Land as Woman: The Afterlife of a Poetic Metaphor* (forthcoming).

spirit” . . . In such moments of creation, the creator ascends above language, becomes her master and king, subjugates her to her own will, breaks through her wall while no one protests against him.⁹⁸

The “divine” intervention of the poet-creator, the process of his original creation, is described in terms of a battle; a violent encounter by the end of which language is defeated. The (masculine) poet comes to master the (feminine) language following a continuous struggle that results in her subjugation. This encounter brings to mind a rape scene. Within Bialik’s narrative, the act of creation *in* and *of* language evokes sexual violation, violence, and destruction. He soon adds:

Furthermore, [the creator’s] very own “transgressions” (עברותיו) sometimes become a law or a commandment – great is the transgression of a “creator!” From the dynamic side of language, such moments are certainly the most crucial. Whenever a complete creation of a real, new proper name enters the language . . . it is akin to a strike of lightning, over which one blesses “the maker of works of creation” (עושה מעשה בראשית) even if the lightning hits an ancient tree. However, from the static side [of language]—with which we are dealing here—language can only be fixed and standing still.⁹⁹

Despite the reassertion that the issue “with which we are dealing here” is simply the static mode of language, it is once again clear that the essay does not do what it says. In affirming that “one must not conflate” “language pangs” with “creation pangs,” Bialik does just *that*. In an appropriative gesture, he substitutes the subject of the conversation, and the “birth pangs” attributed to language are transformed into the “creation pangs” of the masculine poet.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ “אין לערבב יחבלי הלשון מן הסוג האמור כאן ביחבלי היצירה של זה הבא לגלות גלוי חדש ממש, בפעם הראשונה, בריאה חדשה, יש מאין. זה בודאי יוצר הוא . . . צריך לרחמי שמים ולרוח הקדש’ . . . ברגעי יצירה כאלה Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 13. (Quotation marks in origin.)

⁹⁹ “ולא עוד, אלא ש’עברותיו’ גופן נעשות לפעמים חוק או מצוה – גדולה עברה של יוצר! מן הצד הדינאמי שבלשון, רגעים כאלה בודאי הם החשובים עליה ביותר; כל שם או כנוי חדש ממש מסוג היצירה הגמורה שנכנס בה . . . הריהו בעולמה בחינת ברק, שמברכים עליו עושה מעשה בראשית, אפילו כשהוא פוגע בעץ עתיק. אבל מן הצד הסטאטי – Bialik, 13. ובו אנו עסוקים כאן – הרי אין לשון אלא זו הקבועה ועומדת”

¹⁰⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar critique this common type of substitutions in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000).

“Creation” is now infused with both a divine and a sexual dimension, entailing the questionable presence of “the holy spirit.” Not only does Bialik attribute to “the creator” divine (and gestational) qualities, but he in fact celebrates the creator’s heretical behavior. “Creation” is entwined with destruction, and the creative destruction carried out by a poet is perceived as blessed and indispensable for the “revival” of the language.

The notion of creative destruction, along with its simultaneous erotic and theological significations, marks a messianic tendency in Bialik, which emerges at different moments in the essay. In fact, Bialik’s coined phrase, “Language Pangs,” implies, in Hebrew, not only birth but also pre-Messianic suffering (חבלי משיח). Bialik’s messianism is mostly evident in the idea that a type of redemption (whether linguistic, national, or cultural) may be obtained through transgressive or sinful activity, or that some types of transgression can be thought of as a sacred form of devotion. The poet’s transgressive destruction, his violent act in language, is depicted as a form of “redemption through sin.”¹⁰¹

Bialik grants the privilege to “creatively destroy” to those singular artists who are deemed entirely and fully versed in the language. “Creation” necessarily involves deep and thorough knowledge: “a complete, clear knowing of the quantity and quality of the linguistic assets in all generations.”¹⁰² This is the type of “knowing” that would unveil language and make it possible to gaze at its historicity. Like an adventurous traveler, the “complete creator”

initially measures and knows the entire force of language, without leaving any remnants, to the end of its most distant domains. And if he steps out of that domain—his departure is at this hour a one-step expansion of the domain. If he defeats language, because he had

¹⁰¹ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); For further discussion of a messianic tendency in Bialik see Hirschfeld, *Kinor arukh*; Shahaar, *She'erit ha-hitgalut*.

¹⁰² “דיעה שלמה וברורה על דבר כמותו ואיכותו של הרכוש הלשוני מכל הדורות” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 15.

seen and realized that his power was greater than hers in that moment, then his victory also becomes a new victory for language, and his own new force settles in her and joins her previous force.¹⁰³

Creation, Bialik stresses, could only be the result of excessive, totalizing knowing. The true creator *knows* language. He measures it, travels in it and reaches its most distant domains. His knowledge is twofold. It is definitely a scientific, philological knowledge. But it is also an incredibly intimate knowledge, which activates the biblical sexual significance of the Hebrew verb “to know” (לדעת). Following a conflictual encounter in which the creator is said to master language, the two then amalgamate into one productive force. Hence, expansion in its true creative sense stems not from an external importation, or from contact with foreign languages (translation), but rather from an intimate (but also violent) encounter between “the creator” and language, an internal bodily strain that evolves into a pregnancy.

Although the pregnancy metaphor only appears at a later point in the essay, we could nonetheless trace the figurative trail that eventually leads to this blunt image. “Knowing” language, in the all-encompassing manner Bialik invokes, means expanding it not externally, but rather “from within.” Bialik stresses that:

The “expansion” [of the language] from the outside, by means of translating into our language those concepts that are common to all languages, crucial as it may be, is nevertheless of secondary importance. The gist of language, its very essence, lies in its growth and internal development, and in its *creaturely* (יצירי) side.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ “היוצר הגמור מודד תחלה ויודע את כל כחה של הלשון, בלא שיור כל-שהוא, עד סוף תחומיה הרחוקים ביותר, ואם הוא יוצא מחוץ לתחום פסיעה אחת – יציאתו גופה הרי היא באותה שעה הרחבת התחום כדי פסיעה; אם הוא מנצח את הלשון, מפני שצפה וראה, שכחו גדול מכחה ברגע זה – הרי נצחונו הוא גם נצחון חדש ללשון, וכחו שלו החדש משתקע בה ומצטרף לכחה משלעבר” Bialik, 13.

¹⁰⁴ “ה'הרחבה' מבחוץ על-ידי תרגום ללשונונו אותם המושגים, שהם משותפים לכל הלשונונו, עם כל חשיבותה של זו, אינה אלא טפל. עיקר הלשון הוא – עצם מהותה בגדולה והתפתחותה הפנימית ובצד ה'יצירי שבה'” Ibid., 15 (My emphasis.)

Bialik returns, once again, to the opposition between the two realms of language with which he had started. The translational craft of “expansion,” associated with that which remains static and fixed within language, is contrasted with a dynamic, but also organic, creaturely and productive side.¹⁰⁵ The essence of language lies in its growth, its internal development and its power to procreate: “the full wealth of language is its internal, vital force, and its multiple options to develop and create . . . to similarly birth, to be fertile and to procreate (לפרות ולרבות).”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, language generates. In line with Humboldt’s famous statement that language must “make infinite employment of finite means,”¹⁰⁷ Bialik attributes to language infinite possibilities to multiply, create and compound. In his figurative terminology, this generative quality is translated into biological procreation. Through a series of active verbs, the actions of creating and birthing (fathering) are ascribed to language herself. In other words, language procreates “from within herself and by herself.”¹⁰⁸

Almost immediately, however, the knowing gaze of the poet returns to the scene: “therefore we must first and foremost know the language, a complete and clear knowing of the following aspects: what does she have on its own, what has she already given, and what else

¹⁰⁵ The unusual Hebrew word יצירי can be translated as both “the product of” and as “creaturely.”

¹⁰⁶ “אבל עשירותה הגמורה של הלשון היא כחה הפנימי, החיוני, ואפשריותיה המרובות להתפתח וליצור, לצרף צרופים ולהוליד בדומה, לפרות ולרבות ולהתפצל” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 15. The Hebrew word “להוליד” literally means “to father,” or “to cause to conceive.” It refers almost exclusively to the masculine part of procreation and is only rarely used to describe giving birth by a woman. Yet Bialik uses this verb in reference to Hebrew’s generative force, even when explicitly describing Hebrew as a feminine pregnant body. This queering of a feminine body who “fathers” should be read in conjunction with the masculine fantasy of giving birth.

¹⁰⁷ Humboldt, *On Language*, 91.

¹⁰⁸ Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 15.

would she be capable of giving when demanded to.”¹⁰⁹ He also stresses that “what is in the power [of the language] to give – she will eventually give, when demanded to.”¹¹⁰ The generative power of language is subjugated to a collective need voiced by the masculine poet. Its “internal, vital force” is instrumental in the making of the nation. But in order for the language to become the vehicle that forms “us” as a living nation, it must first and foremost be fully *known* from within. According to Bialik, not everyone can know language. There is an inward movement that is demanded specifically of “the creator” in order to realize the process by which language becomes “our” national language. As shown before, the “complete creator” is required to penetrate the language, to explore and expand it internally. At the same time, language grows and procreates. It may multiply, create new invigorating combinations or even “birth.” How, then, could “the creator” come to know, master and discipline this embodied, independently generating language? How could he overcome and navigate its generative power of “life”?

Bialik’s notion of the “ingathering Hebrew dictionary” (מילון מכנס),¹¹¹ to which the second half of the essay is largely dedicated, may be one such junction. What is figuratively depicted throughout the essay as a sexual and bodily drama of mythical dimensions is

¹⁰⁹ “עלינו אפוא לדעת קודם כל את הלשון ידיעה שלמה וברורה מצד זה: מה יש לה משלה, מה נתנה כבר ומה היא”
יכולה עוד לתת לנו לכשתִּבְעֵ” Ibid.

¹¹⁰ “ומה שבכחה ליתן – סופה ליתן, לכשתהא נתבעת” Ibid.

¹¹¹ The notion of an “ingathering dictionary” (מילון מכנס), which literally invokes the compiling of existing resources, while emphasizing the interiority of the language, foreshadows what will later become Bialik’s broader “project of ingathering” (מפעל הכינוס). As mentioned above, during the 1910s Bialik had dedicated a large portion of his literary activity to the project of gathering and rearranging classical Hebrew texts, thereby redefining the Hebrew canon. Similar to his earlier plan to establish an “ingathering dictionary,” the “ingathering project” was based on the notion of a gaze turned “inwards” rather than “outwards,” drawing on an assumed intimacy with the Jewish bookcase as opposed to “translation” from “foreign” traditions.

simultaneously translated into pragmatic terms. Bialik proposes a seemingly realistic project – constituting a new Hebrew dictionary: “a complete and revised dictionary that would gather the linguistic assets of all generations, in its entire growth and development, fully compiled and folded within it.”¹¹² Yet the plan for creating the ingathering dictionary, as Bialik elaborates it, is often unwieldy. It gradually becomes clear that for Bialik, the dictionary should not simply collect lexical interpretations of normative vocabulary, but also “widely reveal some ‘treasures of darkness’” that are assumed to be latent in the language.¹¹³ At times, it is in fact hard to determine whether Bialik depicts the ingathering dictionary as a feasible project or as a utopian goal. The trace of a messianic approach, which gestures toward a redemptive end but at the same time envisions its realization in practical terms, is evident here as well.

Bialik asserts that the dictionary should be composed of every single layer of Hebrew. It should be a map of its history, a retelling of every piece of its tradition up to Bialik’s time, which obviously marks a turning point. The task of the creator is akin to that of an explorer. He is bound to reveal some dark, hidden treasures that have yet to be exposed, and therefore yet to have acquired significance. It is the very gaze of the creator—which gathers, organizes, and historicizes Hebrew—that endows the “hidden treasures” of Hebrew with meaning. Additionally, the dictionary shall “open up for us some entrances . . . to expand the language from within itself and in its own spirit and will show us some new paths that cannot be imagined in advance, paths

¹¹² “מלון שלם ומתוקן, שיהא הרכוש הלשוני מכל הדורות במלוא גדולו והתפתחותו מכונס בתוכו כנוס גמור” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 15.

¹¹³ Ibid. The phrase “treasures of darkness” (אוצרות חשך), which Bialik leaves in quotation marks, is taken from Isaiah 45:7. While in the biblical verse it is god who reveals to man the “treasures of darkness,” in Bialik’s version the revelation is ascribed to poets.

that sometimes flicker from afar . . . to creators and artists alone.”¹¹⁴ The dictionary is not a strictly scholarly project, rather it involves a creative dimension. The objective is not only to collect and store Hebrew’s past traditions, but also to envision (and thereby create) its future. The dictionary shall lay the ground for the perceptibility of the future of Hebrew as a national language. It is therefore expected “to conquer and clear the way for the new Hebrew grammar, an entire grammar that should and will be written.”¹¹⁵ The colonial language of discovery and conquer and its Orientalist resonance are not coincidental. The purpose of the dictionary, as the numerous spatial metaphors reveal, is to measure Hebrew, map her as if she were a territory, determine her borders, and thereby constitute her as a national asset. In that sense, the project of “ingathering” is also a project of inserting the Hebrew language into history, normalizing and universalizing Hebrew.

The constitution of Hebrew as historical makes its future as a national language imaginable. The dictionary is meant to enact the very transformation of Hebrew, to inaugurate a knowing of the language that simultaneously historicizes and nationalizes it and thereby creates it anew. This process as described in the essay is not only transgressive, but also violent. This is precisely the type of conquering, fragmentizing knowledge, which according to Bialik, belongs to the realm of scientific, philological inquiry. Bialik stresses that the dictionary will only serve its true purpose if it is to be composed by both linguists and “the best of creators, the artists of language and style within the Israeli nation.”¹¹⁶ Only the alliance between linguists and artist will

¹¹⁴ “שיפתח לנו כמה פתחים . . . להרחבת הלשון מתוכה ומרוחה, ונראה לנו כמה שבילים חדשים שאין לשערם” Bialik, 16. מראש, שבילים שמנצנצים לפרקים מרחוק רק ליוצרים ואמנים”

¹¹⁵ “מלון שלם ומתוקן כזה . . . יכבוש ויפנה את הדרך גם לפני הדקדוק העברי החדש, דקדוק שלם, שעתיד וצריך” להכתב. Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

fulfil the objective of the ingathering dictionary:

The scientists will contribute to the dictionary from their scientificity, from their expertise and from their meticulous research, and the artists – from their subtle feeling, their refined taste and their power of fertilization. And from all of them together something complete and repaired would come about.¹¹⁷

Poets are read here as capable of reenacting within Hebrew the very motion of life it so crucially needs. According to Bialik, poets feel the living breath of the language, whereas linguists only “hear the rattle of [its] grammatical skeleton.”¹¹⁸ However, what is additionally invoked in this paragraph is that the mission of poets will only be complete if they conspire with philologists. It is the “expertise” and “meticulous research” of linguists that turn language into a body of knowledge, whose organs can be dissected, fragmented and viewed from above. Bialik asserts that “grammar... must first see the entire body and organs [of the language] as they are disassembled and rejoined, and the dictionary will show that.”¹¹⁹ This visibility of the anatomy of the language appears as a condition for its poetic revitalization. In Bialik’s narrative, then, the ‘revival’ of Hebrew, its institutionalization as national, requires laying the body of the language on the operating table of “the philological laboratory,” and fertilizing it.

In *Orientalism*, Said discusses at length Ernest Renan’s concept of the “philological laboratory,” which according to Said, designates the transition of linguistics from a science that was previously invested in excavating a providential, universal “language of origin” to the “secularized” study of language as it is, and in comparison to other languages. Said shows that

¹¹⁷ “אנשי המדע יתנו למלון ממדעותם, מבקיאותם ומחקירתם המדויקת, והאמנים – מהרגשתם הדקה, מטוב טעמם ומתוקן” ומכח הפראתם, ומבין כלם יצא דבר שלם ומתוקן” Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “הדקדוק . . . צריך לראות תחלה את כל גופה ואיבריה כשהם מפורקים וכשהם מצורפים, ואת זה יראה לו” Ibid.

although Renan asserted that comparative linguistics marked “the end of the age of creation,” he nevertheless attributed to the linguist “creative” qualities, while proclaiming “Semites” and “Semitics” as the “*creations* of Orientalist philological study.”¹²⁰ Said writes:

In its first sense, *creation*, as Renan used the word, signified the articulation by which an object like *Semitic* could be seen as a creature of sorts. Second, creation also signified the setting—in the case of Semitic it meant Oriental history, culture, race, mind—illuminated and brought forward from its reticence by the scientist. Finally, creation was the formulation of a system of classification by which it was possible to see the object in question comparatively with other like objects.¹²¹

These different significations of creation resonate with Bialik’s equivocal use of the word, particularly in respect to the project of the ingathering dictionary. Despite the fact that in Bialik’s articulation, poets are singled out as those who exclusively own a creative force, by stressing the collaboration between poets and linguists, Bialik instates a proximity between them, implying that the “creation” entwined with the institutionalization of the language as a historical, national asset/creature must be carried out through a philological prism.

It often seems that Bialik situates himself somewhere in between these two ways of “knowing” language. An exemplary Hebrew poet, whose knowledge of the language does not fall short of any Hebrew linguist’s and who gradually becomes engaged in different projects of ingathering and collection of Hebrew traditions, Bialik’s relationship to the language employs both a “scientific” and an “artistic” role. To that extent we can say that in Bialik’s work, philology and literature converge. They become not only two sides of the same coin, but also co-conspirators.¹²² Recalling the earlier description of the figure of the creator, whose creation

¹²⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 139–40.

¹²¹ Said, 140.

¹²² Bialik’s account thus challenges Michel Foucault’s premise in *The Order of Things* that literature is the contestation (albeit also the twin figure) of philology. The approach outlined here

appears as a form of “redemption through sin,” we can now observe that Bialik’s own mythic persona as the prophet (and the messiah) of Hebrew poetry, inscribes itself into the history of the language through the transgressive act of impregnating Hebrew.

5. *A Refusal to Give Birth*

Indeed, the pregnancy of the language, which is implied in the title, reemerges towards the end of the essay. Bialik first explains that a normative, “living” language, “does not maintain her fetuses in her womb, but always procreates by herself on her own time.” The dictionary of such a language should therefore merely register the genealogy of the language’s newborns *after* their birth.¹²³ By contrast, Bialik asserts, the dictionary of a “dead language” is “nothing but the inscription on gravestones.”¹²⁴ However, according to Bialik, Hebrew belongs to neither side of that dichotomy. He writes:

Our language, which is “seemingly alive,” much more than what she births, remains enfolded in her womb (מקופל במעיה) after a while and needs to be delivered. And therefore the role of her dictionary should not be a mere *ingathering of the assets*, but an *ingathering* that combines *fertilization* and added force to the language, a sort of assistance in her labor.¹²⁵

is in line with Marc Nichanian’s argument, presented in the previous chapter, according to which literature and philology are inherently related and must be examined side by side. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 299; Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 33.

¹²³ “לשון חיה ממש . . . זו אינה משהה ולדותיה במעיה, אלא פרה ורבה תמיד בזמנה ומאליה . . . מלונה שלה – עיקר” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” תפקידו אינו אלא רשימת כתבי יוחסין ולידה . . . בשביל כל ולדות הלשון **לאחר** לידתם” 16. (Emphasis in the original.)

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ “לשונונו, שהיא בבחינת ‘כמו חיה’, זו הרבה יותר ממה שתוליד – נשאר מקופל במעיה לאחר זמן, וצריכים לילדה.” ומלון שלה – תפקידו צריך להיות לפי זה לא **כנוס הרכוש** סתם, אלא **כנוס שיש עמו הפראה** ותוספת כח ללשון, מעין “סיוע לילד”. Ibid (Emphases in the original.)

The inability of the Hebrew language to *birth* (להוליד) on its own mirrors the status of the language as “seemingly alive.” The body of the language is at once pregnant with life and not entirely living. A feminine body, its agency is already in doubt. This dysfunctional pregnant body necessitates the heroic assistance of the (masculine) dictionary, and by extension, of its masculine authors. A call is therefore extended to the imagined laborers of the ingathering dictionary: whatever is enfolded within the language “needs to be delivered.”¹²⁶ This “delivery,” which peculiarly involves the fertilization of the language and its infusion with “added force,” implies that power must be wielded over language in the process. Yet the demand to “deliver”—a demand that is maintained unfulfilled throughout the essay—is confronted with a passive refusal of the body of language to impart what is enfolded within it.

In her monumental work *In Spite of Plato*, Adriana Cavarero asks to reread female figures by way of stealing them from their literary context (first, in the work of Plato and then in Greek philosophy writ large). Cavarero seeks to illuminate in her reading the memory of an initial act of erasure contained in the patriarchal order, a memory embodied by these female figures.¹²⁷ When addressing the mythological Demeter, Cavarero draws attention to the fact that in the traditional readings of the myth, this mother is perceived as a nurturing creature, but not as the source of life.¹²⁸ Whereas the story of Demeter is commonly understood in terms of a resolved conflict evident in the symbology of seasonal cycles, Cavarero draws attention to the

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

¹²⁸ Cavarero, 57.

traces of the unresolved conflict that can be read in the myth. She argues that “the central theme of the myth . . . is the power of the mother, which is inscribed in all of nature as the power both to generate and not to generate.”¹²⁹ That power is revealed in the myth following Hades’ abduction of Demeter’s daughter, which breaks the order of birth. When the daughter is taken from her, the mother stops generating and thus invokes a threat, which is inherent in maternal power. “The myth of Demeter,” Cavarero asserts, “reveals a sovereign figure of female subjectivity who decides . . . whether or not to generate.”¹³⁰ And her choice “carries within it something truly dreadful: the possibility of nothingness, the annihilation of humankind.”¹³¹

Drawing on Cavarero’s method of stealing figures from their context, and following her reading of the myth of the Great Mother, I suggest dwelling on a moment in Bialik’s metaphor in which the language (or something *in* it) does not lend itself to the creator’s violent impositions. In the previous section we saw that for Bialik, “revival” is entwined with a philological-literary scheme in which language is constituted both as an object of knowledge and as creation. Within that collaboration it is the role of the poet to infuse the language with life. Bialik had stated throughout the essay that when a language functions “properly,” the role of poetry is to shatter the clichés created by the everyday use of spoken tongue, and thus “supply” language, from time to time, with a sense of revelatory dynamism. But in his articulation of the abnormality of Hebrew, Bialik renders the role of poetry even greater. Hebrew poetry not only breaks through the fixed and static forms of the language, it also simulates these forms to begin with. Simulating the vernacular, it imbues the language with an illusion of the spoken, insofar as this imaginary

¹²⁹ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹³¹ Ibid., 65.

speech has already sublimated into a poetic utterance. In this peculiar scenario, what is deemed as the generative force of language originates not in its actual spoken use, but rather in its poetic simulation. To that extent, Bialik attributes to Hebrew poets complete generativity over the life of the language; they grasp the language from all sides. This is Bialik's unequivocal reply to Ahad Ha'am. Poets are returned to the top of the hierarchy. They are claimed as the highest authority of national revival.

However, this fantasy of absolute mastery is repeatedly hindered by the limits of the poet's dependency on the uncontrollability of language. The poet's vital creative force hinges on a language whose "life" cannot be identical to his own. Amidst the cloak of sovereignty that is evident throughout Bialik's discussion, this difference in language reemerges as the condition for poetic utterance. In "Revelment and Concealment in Language," Bialik appears to be lamenting the fall from grace of language: its decay from "a lofty victory of the spirit" to a merchandise in the marketplace.¹³² However, in this essay Bialik also acknowledges that it is this decay of language in its social capacity, its "emptying" from its originary core, that enables creation: "who knows if it is not for the best that man should inherit the husk of a word without its core—for thus he can still fill the husk, or supply it constantly from his own substance."¹³³ Similarly, in "Language Pangs," the poet inherits "the husk" of the Hebrew language, so as to "supply her from his own substance." But this gendered and eroticized terminology, and the strict power relations it evokes, at once demonstrates the dependency that lies at their foundation. Throughout Bialik's poetry, the process whereby the individual identity of the poet-prophet comes into being

¹³² Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment*, 12; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 191.

¹³³ Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment*, 14.; Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik*, 191.

is faced with the counter force of that which appears to be governed or suppressed, which continues to reverberate. The poet is as much “enlivened” by the filling-of-the-husk as the language which he claims to be enlivening.

In their capacity as the avant-garde of the ingathering dictionary, poets are invited to shape the New Hebrew in their own image. And yet, their ability to truly create is founded upon an element in language which they cannot see, unexpected and unforeseen:

The dictionary of a language such as our own—with her special conditions—is permitted and also required to allude to and evoke the nearing possibilities that are anxious to be revealed . . . New ways of use that would enrich the language . . . a complete and real prosperity that marks a beginning of a new chain, a hope for a new thread of life.¹³⁴

This “new thread of life” is necessary for the possibility of Hebrew creation. But as we have seen, Bialik simultaneously presents creation as a condition for the “life” of language. This circular relationship is complicated by the metaphor of a delayed pregnancy. Hebrew poets are called upon to both assist the language in her labor *and*, once again, fertilize. Yet it is unclear who or what needs to be fertilized at this point: is it the language, who is already pregnant, or that which is being born? Moreover, if the participation of poets in the conception of the language is at once read as infusing the semi-dead language with “life,”¹³⁵ it follows that they “parent” not just the newborn but also the body that carries it: the Hebrew language herself. It becomes less and less clear who is “assisted” by this “fertilization.” Is it the pregnant body, the newborn, or the poet who “fertilizes”? Who revitalizes whom? Who gives life and who gives

¹³⁴ “המלון של לשון כשלנו, בתנאיה המיוחדים, רשאי וגם חייב לרמז ולעורר על האפשריות הקרובות המתרגשות להתגלות . . . על דרכי שמוש שמעשירים את הלשון . . . עושר גמור וממשי, שיש בו התחלה לשלשלת חדשה, לתקות חוט חיים חדש” Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 17.

¹³⁵ In another place Bialik states that “creators-artists . . . drizzle life into what is ‘counted as dead.’” Bialik, 16–17.

birth?

Earlier in the essay, the sick, semi-dead body of the language was said to have been impregnated by the Hebrew poet. This body is now compelled to give birth via the “assistance” of poets. In what seems to be yet another act of “redemption through sin,” the demand to forcefully extract what is folded in the body of the language (and at the same time “fertilize” it), evokes an image that borders on insect. As mentioned above, Stav argues that in Bialik’s later essay, “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” the language of revelation emerges in the form of a horrifying phallic mother, whose seduction flickers from the abyss. Stav reads this anxiety as deriving from an incestuous threat.¹³⁶ I argue that in the earlier essay “Language Pangs,” Bialik articulates the incestuous fantasy of “fertilizing” the language as an embodiment of the project of revival. This act is incestuous because within the economy of “life” outlined in Bialik’s narrative, the poet is invoked at once as “giving life” and “enlivened.” In this respect, what he claims to “fertilize” could be either the body he originates from or the body he creates. At the heart of a myth that narrates the institutionalization of Hebrew as a national language, then, lies a sin of incestuous violence. This violent act *in* language, which is framed throughout the essay in redemptive terms, is executed, first and foremost, by Hebrew poets.

By introducing into his narrative the possibility of a pregnancy that never comes to an end, Bialik invokes a notion preserved in the Hebrew idiom “הרת עולם” (literally: eternally pregnant). The phrase is taken from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet curses his day and regrets having been born: “because he didn’t kill me in the womb, so that my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever pregnant” (Jeremiah, 20:17).¹³⁷ However, the phrase

¹³⁶ Stav, “Giluy (arayot) ve-kisuy ba-lashon: Bialik, Wallach, Wieseltier.”

¹³⁷ “אשר לא מותתני מרחם ותהי לי אמי קברי ורחמה הרת עולם”. Jeremiah, 20:17.

assumed additional significations in its different uses in liturgy and in Jewish mysticism. In some instances, it came to designate the Day of Judgment, or alternatively, an apocalyptic scenario in which the nation may remain forever pregnant, and shall never be redeemed. In Bialik's text, then, the authors of the dictionary are presented as responsible for preventing what may also be read as an eschatological catastrophe of the Jewish nation. Similar to the danger posed by Demeter, a lasting pregnancy of the Hebrew language resonates with the possibility of an apocalypse. Its implication would be a disruption of the circular relations of "life" and "creation" in language. It would mean, in other words, an elimination of the possibility of poetic utterance.

There is a remainder within language, both inherent and foreign. It is at once the creation of the poet and something he cannot grasp or control. According to Humboldt, "however much in [language] we may fix and embody, dismember and dissect, there always remains something unknown left over in it, and precisely this which escapes treatment is that wherein the unity and breath of a living thing resides."¹³⁸ Throughout the essay, Bialik expresses a wish to encompass language in its entirety. However, that recurring wish demonstrates at once the desire and its unfulfillment. Towards the end of the essay, this wish becomes compulsive. Bialik writes:

The dictionary should exploit the Hebrew language in all its revealed and concealed forces, to the limits of all knowledge and "sense." That is, all of the linguistic matter, from all generations, with all of its different uses, must be completely exhausted in the dictionary from every possible angle. All parts of speech and all collocations . . . must be clarified [in the dictionary] not only in their fixed, familiar uses, but also in their potential uses . . . And such a thing would only be possible thanks to the participation of creators-artists, those who observe, with an inner sense, the innermost, hidden chambers (חדרי חדרים) of language and drizzle life into what is "counted as dead."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Humboldt, *On Language*, 51.

¹³⁹ "המלון צריך לנצל את הלשון העברית לכל כחותיה הגלויים והנסתרים עד מקום שהדעת ו'החוש' מגיעים, כלומר, כל החמר הלשוני שבו, מכל הדורות, עם כל אופני שמושיו צריכים להתמצות מצוי גמור מצדי צדדים. כל חלקי הדבור וצרופיהם וצרופי צרופיהם צריכים להתבאר בו לא לבד בהוראותיהם ובדרכי שמושם הקבועים, אלא גם האפשריים, הגלומים בתוכם; ודבר כזה לא יעשה, כמובן, אלא בהשתתפות יוצרים אמנים, שצופים בחושם הפנימי לחדרי חדרים של הלשון ומטפטפים חיים במה ש'חשוב כמת'". Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 16–17.

The demand to exhaust the language from all sides, which radicalizes as the essay proceeds, exposes an increasing anxiety. This is a haunted fantasy, that is fed from the desire to obtain mastery over something that keeps on evading control. The crux of Bialik's narrative lies in the tension between the proclaimed all-encompassing gaze of the poet and the inaccessible remainder in language, which is the condition of possibility for poetic utterance.

The desire to master gradually overtakes Bialik's narrative, turning it, at some points, into a narrative of exhaustion, exploitation and control. In his frantic chase after that which remains unknown in language, Bialik invokes the notion of the Hebrew dictionary as a means to confine and discipline the language. In order for there to be a revitalization, in order for the poet to become the exclusive force that enlivens the language, Hebrew must be constituted as the "semi-dead" pregnant body that cannot, in itself, be the source of life. But it is precisely this liminality which engenders the double evocation of language as incapable—but also unwilling—to generate on its own. The claim for the poet's mastery is repeatedly confronted with a resistance of language to let go of the remainder, "enfolded in her womb."¹⁴⁰ The attempt to forcefully deliver, or hasten the birth of Hebrew, is simultaneously the cause and the effect of that persistent remainder.

The mission of revival, which would entail the finite birth of the language, remains unfulfilled in Bialik's narrative. The utopian project of circumscribing Hebrew in its entirety, leaving no stone unturned, is destined to failure. And indeed, the dictionary—whose role is to delineate and enhance, expose and create, segregate and decipher—is left unwritten. What remains, instead, is the promise (and threat) of the unborn.

¹⁴⁰ Bialik, 16.

Chapter 3: Abandoning the Good Mother – Rachel Katznelson Between Yiddish and Hebrew

So far we have discussed texts that examine the cultural and political ramifications of the revitalization of Hebrew within a discourse whose core intellectual activity and cultural production emerged from Eastern Europe. These texts, written between the 1890s and 1910s, were largely concerned with the revival of Hebrew as a written, literary language. Even when contemplating the stakes and possibilities of a revived Hebrew speech, Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha'am, and Bialik are less focused on the practical, everyday colloquialization of Hebrew. The idea of spoken Hebrew only appears in their writing hypothetically or as a future mission yet to be fulfilled, and their debates return Hebrew to its familiar locality within the bounds of the printed text. These three writers, who are major representatives of the intellectual polemics on the question of modern Hebrew, approached it first and foremost as a question of writing, to be settled and negotiated among the elite of individual Hebrew writers.

The subsequent chapters will follow the migration of the discussion—as well as some of its interlocutors—to Palestine. Apart from being a geographical movement charged with nationalistic and colonial sentiments, this migration also marks the reterritorialization of Hebrew in the mouths of immigrants and the efforts to render colloquial the language in practice. Texts written in Palestine by Rachel Katznelson and Y.H. Brenner already discuss Hebrew as a spoken tongue. These texts are concerned with the emergence of a Hebrew-speaking subject and with the implications of speaking Hebrew on the body and the mind of the speaker as well as on the Hebrew language itself. They explore spoken Hebrew as a mechanism for transforming identity and attend to the transition from a multilingual socio-linguistic sphere to Hebrew as a single language, highlighting the difficulty and awkwardness involved in Hebrew utterance.

For Rachel Katznelson, the most significant aspect of this transition lies in the conscious “betrayal of Yiddish” and the choice to abandon Yiddish in favor of Hebrew by adopting Hebrew as the sole national language and the formal spoken language of the *yishuv*.¹ In her essay “Language Insomnia” (נדודי לשון), published in 1918, Katznelson accounts for that choice.² In the background of her discussion are the political debates of the socialist Zionist movements in Palestine, particularly the arguments within the *Po’aley Zion* movement over its official language. In this context, supporters of Hebrew had to justify their choice against the claim that Yiddish was the language of the Jewish proletariat; a colloquial language, associated with the masses and with socialist values. Katznelson confronted this claim by elaborating on what she considered to be the revolutionary quality of Hebrew. From her position as a Second Aliyah immigrant, a laborer, and a Hebrew essayist (who, like the majority of women writers of her generation, lacked thorough Hebrew education) Katznelson articulated the transition from Yiddish to Hebrew as a revolutionary turn against the “self.”

This chapter offers a close reading of Katznelson’s essay, tracing the trajectory of her argument from the initial account of the separation from Yiddish to the ultimate call for linguistic segregation and a monolingual turn. In between these fervent monolingual ends lies an alternative view that validates the possibility of shifting between languages. By conceptualizing

¹ Rachel Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon (Language Insomnia),” in *Masot u-reshimot (Essays and Sketches)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946), 9.

² The Hebrew title of the essay, “Nedudey lashon,” literally means “language wanderings.” However, the collocation *nedudey lashon* also evokes the common Hebrew phrase *nedudey sheyna*, literally meaning insomnia (sleep wanderings). Barbara Harshav translates the title as “Language Insomnia,” thus maintaining the second meaning. It is important to remember, however, that “wanderings” play an equally significant role in Katznelson’s narrative, particularly in light of the question of migration and the linguistic shift it involves. See Rachel Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” in *Language in Time of Revolution*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

Hebrew as a revolutionary language, Katznelson draws attention to an experience of estrangement involved in adjusting to a language one does not “master.”³ This chapter will illuminate the shifts in Katznelson’s tone and follow the nationalistic anxiety that takes her from a position that ascribes omnipotent agency to Hebrew to eventually locating an existential threat *outside* of Hebrew, which in turn shores up her defensive, purist mode.

“Language Insomnia” is written in a passionate, self-reflective narrative, steeped in guilt and ideological pathos. The sense of guilt marks Katznelson’s tone from the very beginning and lingers throughout her text. Yet the terminology of betrayal and abandonment is used as part of a narrative of justification that not only accounts for the exclusion of Yiddish but also produces it. What appears to be, in the first passages of the essay, a guilty, painful separation from a beloved language and an entire cultural world, gradually turns to explicit aggression towards the forsaken Yiddish. This range of emotions is articulated in the text through the notion of a collective relationship to a mother figure. Drawing on the stereotypical gendering of Hebrew and Yiddish, and the common understanding of Yiddish as the *mameloshen* (mother tongue),⁴ Katznelson narrates this Hebraic transition as a detachment from a mother and motherly love and a self-imposed entrance into a severe symbolic law, in the framework of which the “self” is no longer recognizable.

Unlike previous readings of this text, I will read “Language Insomnia” as a response to Bialik’s essay, “Language Pangs,” discussed at length in the preceding chapter. Katznelson’s

³ Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 10.

⁴ See Naomi Seidman’s discussion of the gendered socio-linguistic relationship between the two languages, in *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

relation to Bialik's text is reflected not only in the similar title she chose for her essay,⁵ but also, as I will show throughout this chapter, in her frequent allusions to Bialik's arguments and phrases. In organizing her claim against Yiddish around the "motherly" character of the language, Katznelson adds yet another layer to an ongoing discussion on language that repeatedly employs gender, and particularly the feminine metaphors of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, to discuss the stakes of national and linguistic revival. As opposed to Bialik's pregnant Hebrew, in Katznelson's essay the metaphor matures into that of an aging mother. Whereas in Bialik's essay the pregnant language "maintained her fetuses in her womb,"⁶ in Katznelson's essay the mother is forsaken by sons who have come of age. And while Bialik attributes the pregnancy metaphor to Hebrew, in Katznelson's work it is first and foremost Yiddish that embodies the mother whom "we had to betray" in adopting Hebrew as the national language.⁷

This chapter focuses particularly on that transformation. It asks, what happens to Hebrew when Katznelson reiterates, over a decade later, the tensions raised by Bialik? In what ways are the Hebrew language and its new speakers affected by the path that was paved for them in modern Hebrew literature? In "Language Pangs," Bialik called for writers and linguists to establish a dictionary that would institutionalize Hebrew, and thereby inaugurate a "knowing" of the language from within. Such a knowing of the language was supposed to fulfil the mission of

⁵ The titles of both essays consist of original Hebrew collocations that built on existing Hebrew phrases, in which the second noun is substituted by the word "language." Yael Chaver mentions the similarity of the two titles in *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 39.

⁶ Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Hevley lahon (Language Pangs)," *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada' u-le-'inyaney-ha-hayim* 18 (1907): 16.

⁷ Rachel Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 185; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 10.

modern Hebrew literature, namely to provide a better understanding of the internal life of the nation, and of the national “self.” Katznelson’s essay is written from the perspective of a community of speakers for whom Hebrew is still largely foreign and new. Attempting to account for the choice to limit oneself to Hebrew, Katznelson’s thematizes that foreignness as bearing a revolutionary potential. In contrast with Bialik’s assertion, then, in Katznelson’s analysis Hebrew emerges as a disorienting site of identification in which “we” no longer know who “we are.”

I begin the chapter by outlining the background for the discussion, drawing attention to Katznelson’s own multilingualism and to the political linguistic debates to which Katznelson responds. After reviewing previous scholarly engagements with Katznelson’s work, I draw attention to the problematics of “mother tongue” in the context of Hebrew’s revival and frame the discussion around the foreignness that Katznelson identifies in Hebrew. I then offer a close reading of “Language Insomnia,” which dwells on the metaphoric figuration of Hebrew and Yiddish as opposite mother figures. I show that in Katznelson’s narrative, Yiddish stands for a good, loving mother whereas Hebrew, as its mirror image, emerges as an unloving mother. Throughout my reading, I argue that it is this identification with the figure of an unloving mother that Katznelson portrays as revolutionary. Referring to some of Katznelson’s later work, I show that the self-alienating encounter with Hebrew is quickly translated in her writing into an ethnocentric narrative of linguistic seclusion and self-defense, which, in turn, directs the violence of self-alienation outwards, onto the *yishuv*’s others.

1. Multilingualism and Language Wars

Katznelson was one of the first Hebrew women literary critics, and was therefore an exceptional figure in a literary discourse dominated by men.⁸ Her entrance into the world of Hebrew literature was not devoid of obstacles. Katznelson often noted (in her published essays and in many diary entries) the difficulties involved in the relatively late arrival of women writers, such as herself, to the Hebrew language.⁹ Unlike the majority of male Hebrew writers of her generation, she did not receive an Orthodox Jewish education, which was almost a condition for the writing of Hebrew literature prior to the widespread vernacularization of the language. Despite the privilege of coming from a wealthy home and receiving general education, Katznelson had to actively compensate for the lack of early-age, thorough Hebrew and Aramaic education, just like most Hebrew women writers of her time. Only after her graduation from

⁸ In a study devoted to the contribution of women essayists to Hebrew criticism in the early twentieth century, Dana Olmert mentions Katznelson among roughly thirty women who published essays in Hebrew journals, newspapers and anthologies in the first three decades of the century. Katznelson was one of the few who had produced a relatively large body of works and one of only two women for whom literary criticism and essay writing were primary genres. In 1934 Katznelson established *Dvar ha-po'elet*—a Hebrew journal devoted to women laborers. The journal, the first of its kind, provided a steady platform for women essayists writing in Hebrew. Katznelson was the journal's editor for twenty-five years. See Dana Olmert, *Me'ezot lits'od al sade hadash? Al toda'atan ha-migdarit ve-ha-le'umit shel ha-mevakrot ha-rishonot ba-sifrut ha-ivrit (Dare to Walk in a New Field? On the Gender and National Consciousness of the First Women Critics in Hebrew Literature)*, *Ot: ketav et le-sifrut u-le-te'oryah* 1 (2010): 195–96.

⁹ In a short essay written following Bialik's death, Katznelson argues that while many thousands have mourned Bialik after his death, "small was the part of the woman reader in those debates, in which the public endeavored to explain what Bialik had meant to it. It is well known – almost all of us weren't fortunate enough to study Hebrew in childhood, and it wasn't our fault. Due to impatience and hard labor, we barely learned how to read afterwards." Katznelson, "Evel Bialik (Mourning Bialik)," in *Masot u-reshimot (Essays and Sketches)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946), 163. (My translation.) See also Rachel Katznelson-Shazar, *Adam kemo she-hu: Pirkey yomanim u-reshimot (The Person as She Was)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1989), 86, 88.

Russian high school in Kremenchuk in 1903 did she learn to read and write in both Hebrew and Yiddish. It was then that she acquired her knowledge in Hebrew and Yiddish literatures.¹⁰

Prior to her renewed interest in Hebrew and Yiddish in 1903, it was first and foremost the Russian culture that Katznelson claimed as “her own.”¹¹ From early childhood Katznelson spoke Russian and Yiddish, but she only mastered reading and writing in Russian.¹² In her diary, Katznelson frequently quotes Russian authors and states that her love of reading grew out of an encounter with Russian literature.¹³ At the same time, she mentions that the language spoken among her family members at home was Yiddish.¹⁴ Although Katznelson claims that speaking Yiddish was exceptional among Jewish families of her socioeconomic status (the language spoken on the street and among friends was Russian), she refers to her early bilingualism as neither forced nor the result of a conscious decision. Rather, she stresses “it was natural for us, just as not lying is natural.”¹⁵

Following her graduation from high school, Katznelson devoted all of her time to the study of Yiddish and Hebrew, and soon became a Hebrew teacher herself and led Yiddish literature reading groups for Jewish women of the working class. It was around that time that she

¹⁰ Katznelson-Shazar, *The Person as She Was*, 51, 87.

¹¹ “I used to call the Russian culture ‘my own’ and at sixteen, it was as if Nekrasov was my own private poet.” Ibid., 41. (All translations from Katznelson’s diaries are my own.)

¹² A skill she had managed to acquire by the age of six, before entering Russian elementary school a year later. Ibid., 40–42.

¹³ Ibid., 38–41.

¹⁴ Ibid., 38, 49.

¹⁵ Ibid.

also joined the Zionist-Socialist movement in her town, led by Berl Katznelson (a friend, not a relative of Rachel). Retrospectively, Katznelson described this period in her life in terms of an infatuation with the “world of the poor” in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish street, a world that was both foreign and attractive to her.¹⁶ She claimed that after learning to read and write in Yiddish, she began writing her letters and personal notes almost exclusively in this language and addressed Jews solely in Yiddish.¹⁷ She continued to read in Russian, however, and learned German while studying in Berlin in 1908. Katznelson was fluent and active in at least four languages by the time she started her academic studies in Saint Petersburg in 1909.¹⁸

However, “Language Insomnia,” her first published essay, was dedicated, to justifying the embrace of monolingual life. The essay accounts for the cultural and political choice of Hebrew as a single spoken tongue, particularly in the milieu of Second Aliyah immigrants, and members of the *Po’aley Zion* movement, to which Katznelson belonged. What drove Katznelson, and many of her generation, to cut themselves off from the varied cultural and linguistic environment they have experienced in their lives? What, moreover, motivated them to consciously force themselves to break the bonds with Yiddish, a language which they often came to regard as emblematic of their social, ethnic, and political identity?

Katznelson wrote “Language Insomnia” several years after emigrating to Palestine in 1912, from within the communal settlement Kineret, and as a member of the first cultural committee of the Galilee workers. She saw herself as a representative of the *yishuv*. By the time she wrote the essay, the Palestinian branch of the labor movement *Po’aley Zion* had already

¹⁶ Ibid., 51, 87.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

resolved to make Hebrew, not Yiddish, its official language. The essay was written after what Katznelson refers to as the “betrayal” of Yiddish had already taken place. “Language Insomnia” largely echoes the internal linguistic debates that preoccupied the movement a few years earlier. In her discussion, Katznelson reflects on the main issues that were at stake. The dispute largely concerned the contesting ideological affiliations of the movement to a universalist democratic socialism on the one hand, and to Zionist and nationalist ideals on the other hand. Despite the general consensus that the language of the future nation-state should be Hebrew, the movement’s ties to the Jewish working class in Russia, and to its main ideologist, Ber Borochov (a Marxist-Zionist leader, and a fervent Yiddishist), had led to the legitimization of the use of Yiddish within the *yishuv*.¹⁹ Whereas Yiddish was largely seen as the language of the Jewish proletariat—accessible, common, colloquial—Hebrew was thought of as a classical resource of the nation, but also as a distant, elitist language of intellectuals.²⁰

In a 1907 convention, the leaders of *Po’aley Zion* argued over whether the official periodical of the movement should be published in Yiddish (the first two volumes were published in Yiddish earlier that year, under the title *Der Anfang*), or in Hebrew. While David Ben-Gurion argued for the national character of Hebrew, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi stressed the importance of maintaining connections with the Yiddish-speaking masses in Eastern Europe, who could not read Hebrew. Ben-Zvi writes, retrospectively, that during this time, Hebrew was far from being a natural choice. The *yishuv* lived in multiple tongues, including Yiddish, Ladino, Arabic, Russian, German and French. He notes that within this mixture of tongues, it was

¹⁹ Unlike the opposing movement, *Ha-po’el ha-tsa’ir*, which supported the use of Hebrew.

²⁰ Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten*, 93–98.

difficult to believe that Hebraism would prevail.²¹ Nevertheless, Ben-Gurion's approach was favored, and it was decided that the movement's Yiddish periodical would be reestablished in Hebrew. This decision marked a nationalist turn in the ideological and cultural affinities of the Palestinian branch of *Po'aley Zion*. The favoring of Hebrew as an official language was accompanied by the resolutions to found a Jewish militant defense force (*Ha-shomer*), and to further ground the ideology of "the conquest of labor" (כיבוש העבודה), also known as "Hebrew labor."²²

The disagreement over language, however, as well as the conflict between the socialist and nationalist fractions of the movement, continued to occupy its members well into the 1920s. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 further enhanced the sense that the Zionist labor movement in Palestine should address and welcome the masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who were believed to soon inhabit the Jewish settlement. Hence, the ideological debates on language vacillated between the wish to address the masses, and the choice to narrow the means of this address to a largely non-spoken language, a language that had to be learned, and which was formerly associated, in terms of class, with Jewish petite bourgeoisie.²³

Katznelson entered that discussion consciously from both a theoretical standpoint and as someone who had lived these transformations as they were taking place. Aware of the political

²¹ Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, "Reshit po'aley zion be-erets Israel (The Beginning of Po'aley Zion in Erets Israel)," in *Sefer ha-'aliyah ha-sheniyah*, ed. Bracha Habas (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946), 597.

²² Ben-Zvi, "Reshit po'aley zion be-erets Israel." The ideological concepts of "the conquest of labor," or "Hebrew labor," were used as codes for the practice of taking over agricultural labor in Palestine by rejecting Palestinian labor and employing only Jews.

²³ See Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam: Li-deyokanah shel ha-republikah ha-sifrutit ha-'ivrit bi-tehilat ha-me'ah ha-'esrim (When Loaners Come Together)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1987), 74–85.

problematics, she therefore set out to articulate the ideological grounds for privileging Hebrew over Yiddish and for rejecting multilingualism. For that purpose, she framed the debate from a simultaneously individual and collective perspective, a tension demonstrated, in part, by her constant shifts between the first person singular and first person plural. Additionally, in this essay, which revolved around issues of speech, language choice, collective identity and self-recognition, Katznelson's reflections pertain to the meta-discursive aspects of her own ability to insert herself into the conversation. Rather than assuming her stance as a Hebrew speaker and writer, Katznelson repeatedly questions and explores this point of departure. Employing some of the rhetorical-political norms of the time, such as the mode of self-criticism, or speaking from the heart of a collective experience, Katznelson tested her ability to express herself within the cultural framework of the *yishuv*, in the language she defined as revolutionary. It is within this nexus that "Language Insomnia" was written.

2. Hebrew as a Foreign Language

Although Katznelson's work did not attract as much scholarly attention as that of many of her male counterparts, several scholars have commented on her work.²⁴ Notably, among the studies that refer to her work as a critic, "Language Insomnia" is the most cited of her essays. Dov Sadan

²⁴ See, for instance, Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten*; Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*; Tamar Hess, *Hek ha-em shel zikhronot: Nashim, otobiyografyah ve-ha-'aliyah ha-sheniyah (Memory's Maternal Embrace: Women, Autobiography and the Second Aliya)* (Be'er Sheva: Heksherim, 2014); Dan Miron, *Imahot meyasdot, ahayot horgot (Founding Mothers, Stepsisters: The Emergence of the First Hebrew Poetesses and Other Essays)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me'uhad, 1991); Olmert, "Me'ezot lits'od al sade hadash?"; Dov Sadan, *Beyn din le-heshbon: Masot al sofrim u-sefarim (Essays on Writers and Books)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1963); Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*; Tamar Shechter, *Li-khebosh et ha-lev: Sipura shel Rachel Katznelson-Shazar (The Life Story of Rachel Katznelson-Shazar)* (Yerushalayim: Mikhlelet Beyt-Berl, 2011).

read “Language Insomnia” as manifesting the generation’s collective biography and as giving a rare expression to the biography of women. He suggested that Katznelson’s impetus for writing the essay and choosing Hebrew over Yiddish was a prevailing sense that the space allocated for women within the study of Jewish tradition was extremely limited. For Sadan, “Language Insomnia” was therefore Katznelson’s attempt to appropriate the national culture that women were deprived of for generations.²⁵ Miron, on the other hand, has stressed that Katznelson’s conceptualization of Hebrew as the single national language was driven by essentially spiritual motives. According to Miron, Katznelson saw the choice of Hebrew (as well as the Hebrew language in and of itself) as the epitome of radical independence that enabled, in turn, the liberation from the *idée fixe* of nationalism, as represented by Yiddish.²⁶

Naomi Seidman combines both of these views when she discusses Katznelson’s work in the context of the sexual politics of Hebrew and Yiddish. Seidman mentions Katznelson as a critic who had noticed, and explicitly expressed, the unique position of women Hebrew writers within the *yishuv*. According to Seidman, “Jewish women’s historical exclusion from traditional Hebrew education became, in the first decades of the Hebrew revival, something of a blessing in disguise, since it enabled women writers to introduce . . . a flexible idiom free from the ‘echo chamber’ of the traditional Hebrew library.”²⁷ Seidman points out that in a 1934 essay devoted to

²⁵ Sadan, *Beyn din le-heshbon*, 368.

²⁶ Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*, 252–53.

²⁷ Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*, 111. For further discussion of the particular stance of women writers in the debate on modern Hebrew see Michael Gluzman, “The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1991): 259–78; Dana Olmert, *Bi-tenu‘at safah ikeshet: Ketivah ve-ahavah be-shirat ha-meshorerot ha-‘ivriyot ha-rishonot (Predicaments of Writing and Loving: The First Hebrew Women Poets)* (Tel Aviv: Sifrey hemed, 2012); Miryam Segal, *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010). For an elaborate study of

the work of the Hebrew poet Rachel, Katznelson indeed highlighted that free idiom as a poetic trait identified with women Hebrew writers. An earlier articulation of women's unique position in the framework of Hebrew culture could be found, albeit indirectly, in "Language Insomnia." There, Katznelson does not refer specifically to women Hebrew writers, but rather highlights the experience of laborers and immigrants who read and speak Hebrew. Dwelling on the experience of those who arrive to the language late, Katznelson identifies a unique linguistic potential in the traditional cultural position of women.

Some scholars have commented on Katznelson's insistence that the commitment to national literature entails forced separation from all other cultural and linguistic affiliations. Olmert criticizes Katznelson for adhering to a national narrative that demanded cultural exclusivity, and draws a link between Katznelson's commitment to this trend of nationalist thinking and the apparent neglect of a gender consciousness in her essay writing, despite her extensive feminist work in the socio-political realm. While Katznelson's preoccupation with nationalism is charged with tensions around gender relations, according to Olmert, these tensions are sublimated and absorbed into a narrative of nation building.²⁸

Along similar lines, Yael Chaver challenges Katznelson's evaluation of Yiddish literature as "inert and reactionary," arguing that at the time "Language Insomnia" was written, Yiddish literature was undergoing vibrant transformations, celebrating its innovative modernism. Chaver doubts that the well-read Katznelson was unaware of these developments. Instead, she suggests

the role that women readers played in shaping nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish literature, see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004).

²⁸ Olmert, "Me'ezot lits'od al sade hadash?" 204.

that Katznelson internalized the stereotypes concerning Yiddish, and ignored Yiddish modernism as a deliberate strategy, justifying her own language choice.²⁹ Chaver posits Brenner as an alternative figure, more forgiving to both Yiddish literature and Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism. She argues that authors such as Brenner were “major voices of difference in the cultural consensus” of the *yishuv*, who, unlike Katznelson, stood for a liminal linguistic space marked by ambivalence and continuous dilemma.³⁰

While these critiques are justified and make invaluable contributions to the study of Katznelson’s work, they overlook several crucial points. First, Katznelson’s stance as a writer was very different from Brenner’s. Whereas he enjoyed the prestige of writing from the heart of the modern Hebrew literary canon and could afford advocating for Yiddish, Katznelson was an unknown writer, who was entering, for the first time, into a literary realm dominated by men. Despite this fact, in some parts of “Language Insomnia” Katznelson directly confronted the elitism of modern Hebrew literature and pointed to how disconnected it was from the growing readership of newly Hebrew-speaking immigrants within the *yishuv*. Invoking “the painful and difficult alienation we feel toward the literature of our time,”³¹ Katznelson did not present the relationship between national Hebrew literature and “the people” as essentially natural or harmonious. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Katznelson’s account lies in uprooting the assumption that the relationship with either Yiddish or Hebrew stemmed from an originary connection. While Katznelson deploys many of the biological metaphors common in the national

²⁹ Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten*, 40–41.

³⁰ Chaver, 42–44.

³¹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 191; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 18.

language discourse, the narrative she produces nevertheless locates both Yiddish and Hebrew as sites of identification that had to be actively reconstructed, because they evidently lack this natural, biological connection. Most importantly, Katznelson describes the Hebrew language as alienated from and foreign to those immigrants who were striving to master it. In so doing, she deviates from the Zionist norm of presenting Hebrew as a language that is natural or obvious to Jews, or as a language capable of uniting the different elements of the *yishuv*. Instead, much like Brenner, Katznelson comments on the awkwardness and artificiality of current Hebrew speech.³²

Moreover, Katznelson's essay casts light on the gaps between Hebrew writers such as Bialik and Brenner, who were thoroughly trained in the tradition of Hebrew texts, and the majority of Hebrew literature readers within the *yishuv* during that time. Katznelson was a Hebrew teacher to immigrants for whom Hebrew was challenging and new. Her correspondence with Berl Katznelson reveals that she herself often felt insecure teaching a belatedly acquired language.³³ The grievance over the lack of access to the religious Jewish textual tradition is a recurring theme throughout "Language Insomnia." Katznelson made clear that there was a dramatic difference in the way Hebrew was experienced and employed by the canonical Hebrew writers of her time and the average immigrant Hebrew learner. Though not explicitly stated as such, this difference contained a strong gendered dimension. In articulating this difference and its implications for the Hebrew-speaking subjects of the *yishuv* in an essay that attempted to advocate for the choice of Hebrew as an exclusive national language, Katznelson voiced a rare understanding of the political role Hebrew played within the ideological formation of the Jewish

³² Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 10–11.

³³ "It's impossible to compare me to a real teacher who studied in the 'heder'," Katznelson-Shazar, *The Person as She Was*, 95.

settlement in Palestine. For Katznelson, Hebrew's revolution stemmed from its difference from Yiddish, a difference that constituted Hebrew as both familiar and radically foreign to many of its new speakers. Katznelson's own deployment of the term "foreign" (זר, זרה) throughout the essay should therefore be read with particular caution. Arguing that for Katznelson, "the affinity between literature and nationalism was articulated in terms of a detachment from *foreign* languages and literatures"³⁴ ignores both the foreign dimension that Katznelson identifies in Hebrew and the familiarity and intimacy she attributes to some of the languages and literatures from which she demands to be detached. In other words, to accept Katznelson's use of the term "foreign" uncritically is to anachronistically accept the precedence of Hebrew as a given.

I suggest reading the essay from a perspective that does not presuppose Hebrew's primacy over other languages. Instead, I adopt the theoretical lens that Yasemin Yildiz calls the "postmonolingual condition," which, according to Yildiz, "refers to a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist to reemerge."³⁵ My reading is therefore focused on the fissure that Katznelson locates at the heart of the relationship between Hebrew and its non-native speakers. Supported by Seidman's claim that class, education and gender are essential categories in the discussion on Hebrew and Yiddish, I show that Katznelson's point of departure as a woman writer, as well as her affiliation with the labor movement and engagement with the everyday life of laborers, plays an important role in her understanding of Hebrew and Yiddish. Following Yildiz's claims, I seek to emphasize the already visible tension between Katznelson's extreme monolingual approach and the

³⁴ Olmert, "Me'ezot lits'od al sade hadash?" 197. (My translation, my emphasis.)

³⁵ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 5.

multilingual context in which she operated. This multilingual context, I argue, enables Katznelson's conceptualization of Hebrew as revolutionary. Since for Katznelson, the revolutionary quality of Hebrew is entwined with the symbolic "betrayal" of Yiddish (a betrayal that is enacted through Hebrew speech), then paradoxically, Katznelson's conceptualization of Hebrew as revolutionary is understandable *only* within the framework of a bilingual practice.

It is first and foremost the difference that constitutes Hebrew as a particular site of identification and belonging that is at the center of my reading. In Katznelson's essay, this difference is refracted through the recurring tropes of motherhood and mother tongue, which are strikingly attributed to the forsaken language, not the "chosen" one. The attentiveness to the recurring tensions between monolingualism and multilingualism helps to reveal the discrepancy of categories that, within the nationalist imagination, are assumed to be continuous with one another. Whereas "mother tongue" is usually understood as designating a realm of biological, national, and ethnic belonging, the narrative Katznelson creates for the purpose of advocating Hebrew monolingualism disrupts this very continuity. In what follows, I shall trace Katznelson's reasoning in her attempt both to justify and produce this conscious linguistic and cultural "betrayal" as a revolutionary act, organized around the trope of motherhood.

3. *"Would We Abandon What Was Natural and Choose What Was Artificial?" On Language Wanderings*

In the opening passage of "Language Insomnia," Katznelson recalls the train of thought that had led her to her current reflections:

In the Kineret commune, there were discussions of the crisis in Socialism. From these discussions, I clarified for myself the concepts of *Revolutionary Movement* and *Literature*. I realized the revolutionary nature of Hebrew literature as opposed to Yiddish,

and thoughts arose in my mind about our betrayal of Yiddish and about the difference between those two languages.³⁶

Katznelson differentiates the realm of collective, communal debates from that of her own processes of thinking, clarifying and realizing. The latter is presented as an individual endeavor (“*I clarified*,” “*I realized*,” “thoughts arose in *my mind*”), as opposed to the discussions in the Kinneret commune. These shifts, as well as the cataloging of private and collective practices of thought and creation, point to a pivotal tension in Katznelson’s essay, which is evident in her evaluation of the charged relationships between Hebrew writers and readers.

The difference between Yiddish and Hebrew is presented as the object of the discussion. This difference is implied to be the reason for the “betrayal,” which is already described as both a collective (“our betrayal”) and a deeply private experience that Katznelson is urged to clarify for herself. Katznelson then moves on to narrate an encounter with Yiddish language and culture, which is, again, articulated in the plural. This plural “we” addresses the small group of ideologically motivated Jewish immigrants who have recently arrived to Palestine from the Pale of Settlement. Within this framework of Second Aliyah Zionism, Katznelson begins to trace a double narrative of language acquisition: “At the beginning of the Jewish Labor movement in the Pale of Settlement in Russia, Jewish youth began to return from Russian to Yiddish,” she claims. “This started with a free choice, as later on we chose Hebrew.”³⁷

³⁶ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 183. (Translation slightly modified, emphasis in the original.)

”בקבוצת כנרת התנהלו שיחות על המשבר בסוציאליזם. מתוך שיחות אלה ביררתי לי את המושגים: תנועה וספרות רבולוציונית. נתברר לי האופי הרבולוציוני של הספרות העברית בניגוד לאידיש, ובלבי נתעוררו מחשבות על בגידתנו באידיש וההבדל שבין שתי השפות האלה” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 9.

³⁷ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 183.

”עם ראשית תנועת הפועלים היהודית בתחום המושב ברוסיה התחילה בתוך הנוער היהודי השיבה מרוסית לאידיש. התחילה מתוך בחירה חופשית, כשם שבחרנו אחר כך בעברית” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 9.

Katznelson's narrative places the encounter with Yiddish in "the beginning," stating that it had preceded two major events in the life of the group: the immigration to Palestine and the choosing of Hebrew. At the same time, Yiddish is not presented simply as a source or a native language, but as a language that required a return. It is not entirely clear whether, according to Katznelson, Yiddish was previously "owned" or voluntarily forsaken. While the young Katznelson herself spoke Yiddish but had to learn to read and write in this language at an older age, other members of the movement had different levels of fluency in the language. Katznelson does not consider these differences but rather consolidates them into the unified narrative of return, with the immediate acceptance and belonging found in Yiddish.

She additionally does not privilege Russian, the language that had to be returned *from*, but instead refers to it as merely a temporary transition stop. Despite its apparent precedence, Russian is far from designating a native language or a mother tongue. In fact, in forming the beginning itself as return, Katznelson obscures the question of the language of origin. It is difficult to deduce from her account which language (if any) actually came first. After all, the ambiguous return from Russian to Yiddish only prefigures a much more dramatic return, around which the essay revolves: the "return" from Yiddish to Hebrew.

The earlier return to Yiddish, however, marks for Katznelson a belated, chosen identification and self-recognition. Katznelson depicts Yiddish, and its rediscovery, as providing a substitute for a homeland, a metaphorical place in which a distinct identity can repeatedly reaffirm and recognize itself. "The first word we read in Yiddish, or which was read to us, revealed [the Jewish] street for us, and whoever lived there discovered himself in [Yiddish]."³⁸

³⁸ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 183.

"המלה הראשונה באידיש שקראנו, או שקראו לפנינו, גילתה לנו את הרחוב הזה, ומי שחי בו גילה בה את עצמו". Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 9.

The emphasis on reading further stresses the importance of literature in this process. “We also found our writers,” Katznelson continues, “we gratefully accepted every word that was written or said in Yiddish . . . It was a greeting to us from ‘our land.’”³⁹ It is the spoken language, with and alongside literature written in that language, that creates the space for identification. This space resembles a homeland but at the same time is defined precisely by not being an actual territory. In fact, Yiddish functions as a substitute for a land insofar as it is located in the midst of other languages and cultures. Katznelson discusses the particular cryptic value of Yiddish in the context of Jewish European multilingualism:

It was perhaps the only period in our lives when there was truth in our speech. The language was poor, many of us knew one or perhaps two other, richer languages; but without seeking it, we found in Yiddish an expression for the totality of our inner lives. Then, we felt proud and happy to hear in speech the music of every word, to know that only you and your people understood its tone and value and that for everything that stirs in you, ‘somebody’ has prepared an expression and it is latent in your soul and responds to you whenever you call it.⁴⁰

The return to Yiddish enabled a long missing homology between Jews and their language, Katznelson argues. While the “other languages” spoken by Jews in the Pale of Settlement may have been “richer,” it was only the “poor” Yiddish that could have expressed inner life in its fullness. Katznelson points to an immediate intimacy found (“without seeking it”) in Yiddish. She describes Yiddish speech as fluent and natural, with particular musical nuances accessible only to “you and your people (ולעמדך לך).” The shift to the second person feminine

³⁹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 183–84; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 9.

⁴⁰ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 184.

”זו היתה אולי התקופה היחידה בחיינו, שהיתה אמת בדיבורנו: השפה היתה דלה, רבים מאתנו ידעו עוד שפה אחת, או אפילו שתיים, ועשירות יותר, אבל לכל חיינו הפנימיים מצאנו בה ביטוי בלי לחפש אחריו. אז הרגשנו הרגשת גאווה ואושר לשמוע בדיבור את המוסיקה של כל מלה, לדעת שרק לך ולעמדך גלויים הטון והערך שלה, וכי לכל מה שמתעורר בך הכין ‘מישהו’ ביטוי והוא גנוז בנפשך ונענה לך בכל פעם שאת קוראה לו” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 9–10.

singular reveals a strong personal affiliation, designating Yiddish as a cultural realm in which individual, feminine and national facets of identity coexisted. The secretive value of Yiddish, presented as a cause for both happiness and pride (at the time), is necessarily related to the fact that Yiddish was spoken within a multilingual world by a distinct minority. That this minority adopted, in addition to other languages, a cryptic language of its own, enacted what Katznelson calls “truth in our speech.”

Such a power to speak truth, Katznelson implies, related precisely to the “poorness” of the Yiddish language. The congruence of Jews and their language appears to be the result of giving up the attempt to become Russian and returning to a language that, according to Katznelson, was in accordance with “Jewish nature.” And since, for Katznelson, “the mystery of Judaism dwelled only in the small and poor houses,”⁴¹ no language seems to have been more suitable to capture Jewish experience than Yiddish, in its own “poverty.”⁴² Truth in speech, according to Katznelson, is not a function of the content of speech, nor is it an effect of the quality or richness of the language. Rather, speech could be truthful only if the language in which it is uttered is homologous to the ethnicity and national identity of its speakers. This essentialist view, which reaffirms Herderian, monolingual principles, is reinforced later in the essay when Katznelson, largely drawing on romantic German language philosophy, claims,

⁴¹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 183; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 9.

⁴² Katznelson’s identification with the image of the poor street echoes the poetics of early modernist women’s Hebrew poetry. Various scholars have discussed poverty as a key element in the poetics of writers such as Esther Raab and Rachel. See Gluzman, “The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History”; Michael Gluzman, *Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003); Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 71–78; Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*.

“every language is a treasury of national energy. The chronicles of the nation . . . the feelings, the desires, and the life event of every individual—all those live and exist forever in the language.”⁴³

In arguing that language encapsulates a quality particular to the national energy of its speakers, Katznelson also significantly echoes Bialik’s writing on language. Using a terminology strikingly similar to Bialik’s, Katznelson continues: “those expressions created or used in moments of emotional upheaval (זעזועי נפש עמוקים), of religious revelations, of national danger, at the appearance of a chastising prophet or a beloved hero, are etched forever in the national memory.”⁴⁴ In “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” published just three years prior to the publication of Katznelson’s essay, Bialik uses the exact same phrase, “emotional upheaval” (זעזועים נפשיים עמוקים) to describe the creation of language as an individualistic moment of spiritual revelation that might reemerge in the writing of poetry.⁴⁵ In her own rearticulation of Bialik’s formula, Katznelson revealingly inserts the poet-prophet himself—“a chastising prophet or a beloved hero”—into the description. While accepting Bialik’s notion that language is the creation of chosen individuals, Katznelson simultaneously dismantles Bialik’s obscure tone and points to the “appearance” of the national poet himself in this mythic narrative of language creation. Then, engaging in a dialogue with this “chastising prophet,” Katznelson adds: “And even if, at first, [those expressions] are heard only by individuals – from the mouths of those

⁴³ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186.

“כל שפה היא אוצר של אנרגיה לאומית. תולדות העם . . . ההרגשות, המאויים, ומאורעות החיים של כל פרט, חיות
וקיימות בשפה לנצח” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 13.

⁴⁴ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186. (Translation slightly modified.)

“בזכרון העם נחרתים לעולם אותם הביטויים, שנוצרו או שהשתמשו בהם ברגעים של זעזועי נפש עמוקים, של
גילויים דתיים, של סכנה לאומית, עם הופעת נביא מוכיח או גיבור אהוב” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 13.

⁴⁵ Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Kol kitvey H.N. Bialik (The Complete Works of H.N. Bialik)* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1939), 191.

individuals, these sounds will be heard by everyone.”⁴⁶ In her careful addition to Bialik’s statement, Katznelson draws attention to the hierarchy embedded in his romantic language philosophy. At the same time, she emphasizes that even if the creation of language is initially the work of individuals, the collective “hearing” of the language plays an equally important role in its formation.

To go back to Katznelson’s gradual articulation of the difference between Yiddish and Hebrew, in the passage quoted above, Katznelson reminisces about the time when speaking Yiddish was a positive, reaffirming experience, accompanied by a feeling that “for everything that stirs in you, ‘somebody’ has prepared an expression.” Katznelson states that the phenomenon of a readymade, adequate phrase, available at all times, is a characteristic of Yiddish, not of Hebrew. For Katznelson, the sense that an expression is “latent in your soul and responds to you whenever you call it” is precisely what is absent from the experience of speaking Hebrew and a part of what differentiates Hebrew from Yiddish.

In his 1905 essay “Language Pangs,” Bialik suggested that Hebrew writers and linguists establish a Hebrew dictionary so rich and total that it would encompass not only existing uses, but even potential phrases and collocations. In a sense, this form of intervention in the development of language resonates with Katznelson’s idea that language could be activated to benefit a-priori “everything that stirs in you.” In Bialik’s essay, the one to assert himself as the “somebody” who shall prepare these expressions in advance is the Hebrew poet. Yet for Katznelson, the power of Hebrew is that it does not lend itself to such impositions. In fact, it is

⁴⁶ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186.

“ואפילו שמעו אותם מתחילה רק יחידים – מפי היחידים האלה ישמעו הכל אותם הצלילים”. Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 13.

precisely the existence of a ready-made expression that, for Katznelson, justifies the betrayal of Yiddish.

“These were the strong connections we betrayed when we came to Eretz-Israel,” she argues shortly after discussing the love for Yiddish. “For here, we no longer feel like the sons of Yiddish and are no longer impressed by its beauty and intimacy . . . We are masters of that language, but it no longer masters us.”⁴⁷ This quotation suggests a desirable relationship between language and its speakers, in which mastery over the language is no longer a target. As opposed to Bialik, Katznelson alludes to the power of Hebrew precisely as a language that unlike Yiddish, we do *not* master, and might in fact master us. She gradually marks the very lack for which Bialik sets out to compensate as a crucial component of the revolutionary character of Hebrew.

In the first parts of the essay, then, Katznelson presents the choice of Hebrew in terms of an unresolved question. She mentions that back in the Pale, “the awakening to Hebrew came with the awakening to Yiddish,” since both languages were acknowledged as bearing a national energy. “This was during the period of Bialik, in the years of ‘City of Killings’ and ‘The Pool,’” she notably stresses, highlighting the poetic function of Hebrew. “It never occurred to us to speak Hebrew,” she immediately adds. “Would we abandon what was natural and choose what was artificial?”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 184 (Translation slightly modified.)
“ובקשרים החזקים האלה בגדנו בבואנו לארץ-ישראל. כי פה שוב איננו מרגישים את עצמנו כבנים לאידיש ואיננו מתפעלים עוד מיפיה ומקרבתה. . . שולטים אנחנו בשפה זו, אבל היא אינה שולטת עוד בנו”
Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 10.

⁴⁸ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 184.
“היה זה בתקופת ביאליק, בשנות ‘משא נמירוב’ ו‘הברכה’. . . לדבר עברית לא עלה על דעתנו. האומנם נעזוב את
הטבעי ונבחר במלאכותי?”
Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 10.

Hebrew was first and foremost the language of modern Hebrew literature (identified with Bialik's poems of raging prophecy and self assertion) and was not initially thought of as a spoken language. There is a necessary artificiality in Hebrew speech, a forced, unnatural quality. "The fact that the Hebrew language was the language of our forefathers could not return us to it. Such facts could never compel people to desert their living language," she explains.⁴⁹ The reality of Hebrew speech in Palestine is presented as yet another reason to question that choice:

What happened in Eretz-Israel to the wealth of the Hebrew language? How did we use it? Wasn't our Hebrew bereft of the movement of life, and for the little bit of picturesqueness of our speech, did we not use foreign expressions, influenced by the wisdom of a foreign spirit, not a Hebrew one?⁵⁰

The difficulty that speaking Hebrew imposes on its non-native speakers, the deadening effect of speaking it, and the use of "foreign expressions" it inadvertently entails seemingly offer further reason to doubt the decision to speak Hebrew. And yet at the same time, there is something extremely appealing for Katznelson in the very confrontation with Hebrew as a non-native, with facing its barriers.

In the beginning of the essay, Katznelson asks not one, but two crucial questions. The first has to do with the abandoning of Yiddish. The second, with the decision to speak Hebrew. But Katznelson does not separate these questions. In her account, the two converge into one. Adhering to the monolingual formula, Katznelson does not consider the possibility of maintaining the two languages at once. Although the earlier return to Yiddish, as Katznelson

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 185.

"ומה היה בארץ לעושר השפה העברית, איך השתמשנו בו? כלום לא היתה העברית שלנו נטולת תנועת חיים, וכלום אין אנו משתמשים לשם הציוריות המעטה של דיבורנו בביטויים זרים, שרוח אחרת, לא עברית, האצילה עליהם מחכמתה?" Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 11.

described it, did not require such a strict monolingualism, speaking Hebrew in Palestine is presented ideally as a transition into monolingualism. But most of all, for Katznelson, speaking Hebrew signifies not-speaking-Yiddish, that is, it is a speech that constantly manifests the conscious choice to abstain from Yiddish. That is precisely what constitutes speaking Hebrew as a form of betrayal. “We had to betray Yiddish even though we paid for this as for any betrayal. And we need to justify ourselves and explain how we could so quickly abandon what has become the content of our lives,”⁵¹ Katznelson persists. But the suggested explanation that follows focuses on the reason for choosing Hebrew, as if the gesture of abandoning were a necessary feature of this choice. Hebrew becomes the epitome of that abandonment, of the betrayal of Yiddish that is simultaneously read as a betrayal of the self.

By the end of the first section of her essay, Katznelson gives away her “answer” to the double question of abandoning Yiddish and retaining Hebrew:

The essential thing was that, even though Yiddish is a living language, the language of the people and of democracy, there is a trend of thought, which for us was revolutionary, that expresses itself in Hebrew; whereas Yiddish literature is ruled by narrow-mindedness, mostly inert and reactionary in our eyes and, at best—only a weak echo of what was revealed in Hebrew.⁵²

The essentialist nature of this answer does not take away from the fact that the essence of each language—the trend of thought that is necessarily expressed in that language, and in literature written in that language—is measured and determined against the other language. As much as

⁵¹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 184 (translation slightly modified).

”לבגוד ביידיש היינו מוכרחים, אף כי שילמנו בעד זה כמו בעד כל בגידה. ויש לנו צורך להצדיק את עצמנו ולברר, איך
עזבנו כל כך מהר את מה שהיה לתוכן חיינו?” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 10.

⁵² Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 185.

”העיקר היה, שאף על פי שאידיש היא שפה חיה, שפת העם והדמוקרטיה, היה זרם המחשבה, שבשבילנו היה הוא
הרבולוציוני, מתבטא בעברית; ובספרות האידיש שלטה מחשבה מצומצמת, לרוב אינרטי וריאקציונרית בשבילנו,
” ובאופן הטוב ביותר – רק הד רפה של הגילויים בעברית.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 11.

Yiddish and Hebrew are mutually exclusive, according to Katznelson, each of them is also vital for the understanding of the other's identity. Responding to the ideological linguistic debates in the *yishuv*, Katznelson attributes Hebrew with a truly revolutionary quality. Yiddish, that in Katznelson's narrative preceded Hebrew, is now read as an echo of Hebrew, whereas Hebrew fulfills the initial promise of Yiddish. Katznelson, who participates in a stereotypical discourse that already views Yiddish and Hebrew as negative images of one another, demonstrates precisely the process whereby Yiddish is constructed as Hebrew's other. Hebrew is thus defined by relation to Yiddish and by the iterated betrayal of Yiddish.

4. *Revolution of the Dead Mother*

“Revolutionary,” Katznelson explains in the following section of the essay, “usually means what stimulates war against the environment, against others.” Then, in what appears to be a contesting manner, she continues: “we mean that blessed revolutionary thought that stimulates an *internal* war, inside yourself, which can then lead to the clash with the environment.”⁵³ At first glance, it appears that Katznelson shifts from invoking a war on the *environment* and *others*, to a war on the self. The last clause in the sentence, however, establishes continuity between the two

⁵³ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 185. (Translation slightly modified, emphasis in the original.)

“רבוֹלוציוֹנִי” פִירוֹשׁוֹ עַל הַרֹב מֵה שְׁמֵעוֹרֵר לְמַלְחָמָה עִם הַסְּבִיבָה, עִם אַחֵרִים. כּוֹוֹנָתָנוּ לְבִרְכַת הַמַּחְשָׁבָה הַרְבּוּלוצִיוֹנִית הַמְעוֹרֵרָת בְּקִרְבָנוּ מִלְחָמָה פְּנִימִית, שְׁמֵתוּכָה יְכוּלָה לְבוֹא הַתְּנַגְשׁוֹת עִם הַסְּבִיבָה” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 11. It is interesting to note that Katznelson uses the “foreign” word *revolutzyoni*. Drawing connections to the labor movement in Russia, she maintains the Russian vocabulary largely familiar to the members of this movement. And yet she does so while justifying the transition to Hebrew, a language she seeks to protect by way of rejecting precisely such “outside influences.” This example (in which a non-Hebrew word is used in a discussion whose purpose is, in part, to encourage the use of *only* Hebrew words) attests to the ambivalence in Katznelson's attempt to signify categories of foreignness and familiarity.

types of war. An internal war, according to this logic, does not prevent or substitute for a war with the environment, but rather enables and enhances it. In this formulation of the revolutionary, self and other are equally perceived as sites of reform, and, to some extent, of annihilation. “Revolutionary activity demands our constant renewal,” Katznelson adds.⁵⁴ The war against others must be preceded by a war against the self, which is already viewed as other, and yet expected to transform and become constantly different from itself.

Although Katznelson makes it clear that it is the *internal* war she is interested in, her gesturing towards the combative future of Zionist Hebrew subjectivity, within the context of the early twentieth-century Jewish settlement in Palestine, is revealing. Without dwelling on this moment, almost incidentally, Katznelson discloses the ultimate end of these language wars, that is, violence directed outwards, “a clash with the environment.” According to Katznelson, Hebrew, as the revolutionary vehicle of Zionism, constitutes Jewish subjectivity anew so that it might later (at an unspecified time) be able to fight its “environment.” The Hebrew speech that in Palestine, Katznelson argues, is “bereft of the movement of life,” in part because it is filled with “foreign expressions,” is in constant proximity to Arabic and is necessarily affected by Arabic. Brenner’s novel *From Here and There* (“מכאן ומכאן”), which Katznelson mentions as a major literary model, is filled with such Arabic expressions (alongside Russian and Yiddish ones). By “environment” Katznelson alludes to an imaginary border that purportedly differentiates the milieu she addresses from its others. But whatever this border excludes—be it Yiddish, Arabic, Eastern Europe, or the Levant—is also already implicated in the identity she attempts to delineate. Katznelson inadvertently invokes an “environment” in which Palestinian Arabic is prevalent, drawing attention to otherness that is almost unthinkable for her and remains

⁵⁴ Ibid.

unidentifiable by name. Despite the fact that Arabic is not mentioned even once in the text, or perhaps precisely as a result of that glaring absence, it emerges here vaguely and out of focus, as if in the background. Although according to Katznelson, the revolutionary “opens our eyes to see reality and saves us from delusions and conventions,”⁵⁵ it is precisely the gaze inwards, and the restlessness that Hebrew entails, which blurs whatever is beyond the “self,” both validating and invalidating its other by restating the possibility of waging war against it. In his detailed critique of the paradigmatic concept of “Negation of Exile” (שלילת הגלות) in Israeli culture, Amnon Raz Krakotzkin has shown that Zionist ideology is based on “a consciousness that negates itself (its ‘self’ according to its own definition), and thereby negates its others.”⁵⁶ This argument seems to coincide with Katznelson’s formula. There is an inherent connection between the denial of the language that is emblematic of the Jewish self and the expulsion of languages deemed “foreign” or “external.” According to Katznelson, the war against *oneself* is both a condition of and an instrument in the war against others.

This internal war, Katznelson states, “the revolt of our generation against itself—we found it in Hebrew literature.”⁵⁷ The turn against oneself is the effect of modern Hebrew literature. It is the effect, according to Katznelson, of Bialik’s prophetic poems, of the critique in Brenner’s novels, and of Mordekhai Ze’ev Feierberg’s protagonist’s call “to the East!” But it is also, simultaneously, the effect of the Hebrew language itself. “The writers who were youths

⁵⁵ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 185; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 11.

⁵⁶ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Galut betokh ribonut: Le-bikoret ‘shelilat ha-galut’ ba-tarbut ha-isreleit (Exile within Sovereignty: A Critique of the Concept ‘Negation of Exile’ in Israeli Culture),” *Theory and Criticism* 4 (1993): 29 (My translation.)

⁵⁷ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186.

”את התקוממות הדור נגד עצמו, מצאנו בספרות העברית”. Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 1.

from one street, sometimes friends, and mostly knew both languages—split: into Hebrew and Yiddish writers. Why was one talent drawn to one language and another to the other? Why did the war of languages occur?”⁵⁸ This split, Katznelson continues to argue, had “profound reasons.” The choice to write either in Hebrew or in Yiddish was never coincidental, she stresses, but rather reflected political, emotional, and spiritual affiliation. The two languages pointed their proponents in opposite directions. Hebrew literature had to be revolutionary *because* it was written in Hebrew, and writers who confined themselves to Hebrew did so because they were drawn to that revolutionary quality. As Katznelson asserts, “every language has its own magic circle. And he who enters it surrenders to the influence that breathes on him from every word.”⁵⁹ Straying from Bialik’s tendency to restrain and domesticate Hebrew, Katznelson emphasizes, instead, the submission to the language, its capacity to produce revolutionary subjectivity. Hence for Katznelson, Hebrew (literature, but also speech) excites a particular affective space in which speakers and listeners, writers and readers alike, are interpellated as alert others ready to clash with their “environment.”

But what is it about Hebrew, as opposed to any other language, as opposed to Yiddish first and foremost, that allows it to affect its speakers in this way? And is Hebrew essentially revolutionary, or is the revolutionary effect of Hebrew on its speakers a result of the circumstances in which it is encountered? Katznelson’s position seems to shift on that point, and in some moments she in fact argues the latter:

⁵⁸ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186.

“הסופרים שהיו נערים בני רחוב אחד, לעתים חברים, ועל הרוב ידעו את שתי השפות – נפלגו: לסופרי עברית ואידיש. מדוע נמשך כשרון זה לשפה האחת, וזה אל השפה האחרת? ולמה באה מלחמת השפות?.. הלא היו לה גם סיבות עמוקות.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 12.

⁵⁹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 187; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 13.

The Bible could be a source of revolution in Germany only in Luther's time and by him, and in the modern period of our nation—only in the nineteenth century. And how can something that reveals the error of his life to one person not mean anything to someone else? Why would one man get a revolutionary impulse from a tune and another man—from some occurrence in the street?⁶⁰

The revolutionary effect of Hebrew literature is implied to be temporal and subjective. The trend of thought “that expresses itself in Hebrew,” Katznelson stresses, was revolutionary “for us,” and at a specific point in time. Further, according to Katznelson, “something” can have a revolutionary effect on one person but evoke indifference in another. And what stimulated revolution in the past might have a completely opposite influence in the future.

So why, according to Katznelson, was Hebrew so effective in producing revolutionized subjects during the moment of the Second Aliyah? And what form does Hebrew take in impressing itself onto its speakers in this way? How can we think of that space, that “magic circle,” to which one must submit and “surrender” when one enters Hebrew? The answer seems to lie, once again, in the maternal embrace of Yiddish. More than anything, it is the motherly figure of Yiddish as it emerges in the text that allows us to portray, to draw in reverse, the mirror image of Hebrew as unloving mother.

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, Yildiz dwells on the imagined proximity between the categories of “mother” and “language.” She argues that behind the notion of a mother tongue lies a fantasy according to which “the mother tongue emanates from the mother's body. This notion indicates that, within the monolingual paradigm, ‘mother tongue’ is more than a metaphor.

Instead, it constitutes a condensed *narrative* about origin and identity.” Yildiz then proceeds to

⁶⁰ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 186.

“התנ”ך יכול היה להיות מקור לרבולוציה בגרמניה רק בימי לותר ועל ידו, ובתקופת עמנו החדשה – רק במאה התשע עשרה. ומדוע דבר המגלה לאחד את שגיאות חייו אינו אומר כלום לאחר? מדוע לאחד נותנת מנגינה את הדחיפה “הרבולוציונית ולאחר – איזה מקרה שקרה ברחוב?” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 12.

read these types of narratives as a form of “linguistic family romance” in the framework of which different types of imaginary familial and bodily bonds to language are produced.⁶¹ Yet Yildiz also shows how narrating language in this way often allows for the rewriting of such stories of origin, while offering alternative family romances and alternative affective ties to language. In Katznelson’s essay, such a linguistic family romance is evident in the complex fantasized kinship to both Yiddish and Hebrew, and the relation to these languages within Zionism, which forces a severance of the two and a choice between them.

Despite the fact that Katznelson presents neither Yiddish nor Hebrew as exclusive mother tongues, she utilizes the metaphor of language as mother to tell a story of doubled or split motherhood. At the center of her narrative lies a moment of division that will have crucial implications for the self that is thus produced. The monolingual paradigm demands not only the radical distinction and delimitation of languages but also that the nation only have one primary language. Within that conception, the one language is understood simultaneously as the exclusive property of the nation and as containing the genus of the nation. It *belongs* to but already organically inscribed in what specifies and distinguishes a national community. It is something we *own* but also something that owns *us*. By radically dividing Yiddish from Hebrew, Katznelson takes this view to an extreme but also challenges it. In her account of the split, Yiddish becomes a passive, stagnant property whereas Hebrew is overwhelmingly powerful and formative. By prioritizing Hebrew, she shows that a national language understood in this way does not have to be transmitted by the mother but could in fact be actively and consciously

⁶¹ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 12. Yildiz employs a Freudian terminology in order to discuss origin fantasies embedded in language discourses.

chosen. She further reveals that the character of the national body can be transformed by choosing a language one does *not* master, by surrendering to its realm of infliction.

Returning once again to the past attachment to Yiddish, Katznelson claims:

When we wanted to name the special line of the original Yiddish literature, we sometimes said “this literature is more national than Hebrew.” We said that because we felt a warmth in it that was lacking in Hebrew. There we were loved as we were. Us, our street and our little town.⁶²

At first, a proclamation of language and literature as “national” is portrayed in terms of feelings of warmth and love. Yiddish is initially said to be more national because in it “we were loved as we were.” But it is precisely this perception of ourselves “as we were” that Katznelson rejects. According to Melanie Klein, feelings of hostility toward the self prompt the defense mechanisms of splitting, distancing and fragmentation.⁶³ Yiddish is here designated as an endlessly good mother who bestows upon her speakers unconditional love. But precisely because Yiddish is nothing but a good mother, it must be rejected and expelled. Yiddish literature, Katznelson adds, conveyed “admiration for our nation in Diaspora,” and yet, with the migration to Palestine, this admiration and love have become obsolete and intolerable.

Both the relation to Yiddish and the relation to “ourselves” transform. It is not only Yiddish, but also the feeling of love it sustains, that are now understood as contaminating. Katznelson continues to argue, “there was something in Yiddish literature reminiscent of a mother. The writers who wrote in this language could not *see* or *penetrate* artistically into the

⁶² Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 188. (Translation slightly modified.)
“כשביקשנו לקרוא שם לקו המיוחד של הספרות המקורית באידיש, היינו אומרים לפעמים: ‘הספרות הזאת היא לאומית יותר מן העברית.’ אמרנו כך מפני שהרגשנו בה חום, שהיה חסר לנו בעברית. שם אהבו אותנו כמו שהננו – אותנו, יותר מן העברית. את הרחוב ואת העיירה שלנו”
Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 14–15.

⁶³ Melanie Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 27 (1946): 99–110.

internal life of our exhilarated comrades.”⁶⁴ Yiddish writers, as extensions of the motherly figure of Yiddish, are marked as castrated both in their blindness and in not being able to penetrate the life of the community. Mother here gradually comes to designate castration, weakness and passivity rather than the love and life it generated in the past. That which was once loved is now a sign of abjection. Yiddish has lost its charm precisely because it has been exhausted, subjected to our excessive and total mastery. “We” have outgrown it, and now “there is bitterness in our judgment of Yiddish, the bitterness after a disappointed young love.”⁶⁵ A disappointing lover and a rejected mother, Yiddish no longer has the capacity to save us from ourselves, because “a mother cannot see in her son’s soul all his internal struggles, all his sins; for after all, he is her son and she is only a mother.”⁶⁶ Drawing attention to some of the problematics that lie in the mother-language metaphor, Katznelson reiterates the common view of motherhood within the patriarchal framework of Western thought: it is perceived as nurturing but not generative, containing life but not a source of life. In this respect, a language understood in terms of a mother is “only a mother,” that is, shortsighted, disabled, and devoid of any creative powers of her own.

⁶⁴ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 188.

“בספרות אידיש היה אז דבר המזכיר אם. הסופרים שכתבו בשפה זו לא יכלו לראות ולהדור חדירה אמנותית אל הייהם הפנימיים של אנשינו המסוערים.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 15. (My emphasis.)

⁶⁵ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 188.

“יש מרירות במשפטנו על האידיש, המרירות שלאחר אהבת-נעורים שנכזבה.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 15.

⁶⁶ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 188.

“אם איננה מסוגלת לראות בנפש בנה את כל מלחמותיו הפנימיות, את כל חטאיו, כי סוף סוף הוא הבן שלה והיא רק אם.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 15

Hebrew, on the other hand is implied to be the radical opposite of Yiddish, that is, phallic, hostile and desirable, and it is appealing precisely because it is not mastered. Hebrew emerges in Katznelson's text as both feminine and masculine, phallic and castrating on the one hand and threatening in its lack of nourishment on the other hand.⁶⁷ As already mentioned, Katznelson states that the warmth found in Yiddish "was lacking in Hebrew."⁶⁸ In not lending itself to its speakers, in its non-responsiveness, Hebrew emerges as inaccessible and cold.

André Green identifies coldness as a symptom of what he calls the dead mother complex, which pertains not to the consequences of the real death of the mother, but rather to "an imago which has been constituted in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate."⁶⁹ Sensations of coldness accompany the dead mother complex because they conserve, in cold, the mother's "frozen love" and the inability to love that derives from it. The type of identification that thus emerges captures the absent-presence of the mother, "transforming positive identification into negative identification, i.e. identification with the hole left by the decathexis."⁷⁰

Maintaining liminality between life and death and signifying the permutation of what was once a source of vitality, Hebrew in Katznelson's narration is a "dead mother" to many of its

⁶⁷ Earlier in the essay, Katznelson briefly acknowledges the view of Hebrew as a masculine "language of our forefathers." However, she immediately argues that this paternal quality does not suffice in explaining the deep revolutionary effect of Hebrew. See Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 184; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 10.

⁶⁸ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 188; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 15.

⁶⁹ André Green, *On Private Madness* (London: Karnac Books, 1996), 142.

⁷⁰ Green, 155–57.

speakers. In this respect, Katznelson's text speaks in the name of those who have been deprived of the privilege of studying Hebrew in the *heder* as young children. That social position was traditionally occupied by women, who were perhaps able to read the Hebrew alphabet but seldom understood what the words meant, and to whom Hebrew was always simultaneously present and absent. It is these particular "circumstances" of encountering Hebrew that makes it revolutionary.

Katznelson was not the only one to describe Hebrew in negative affective terminology. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda had mentioned the coldness of Hebrew in the context of his discussion on the much-needed contribution of women to the revival of Hebrew. In Ben-Yehuda's formulation, women are summoned to shape the language as more "feminine," for only women "can bring warmth, softness, flexibility, subtle, delicate and shifting hues into the dead, forgotten, old, dry and hard Hebrew language."⁷¹ Unlike Ben-Yehuda, Katznelson rearticulates the "feminine" relationship to Hebrew as bearing a revolutionary potential precisely because it does not abolish, but rather maintains the negative confrontation with the language.

In her discussion of the betrayal of Yiddish and the entrance into the magic circle of Hebrew, Katznelson dramatizes a linguistic-familial scene in which the encounter with Hebrew as a dead mother becomes intertwined with the detachment from Yiddish. The "frozen love" of Hebrew reverberates in the relationship with Yiddish, which in turn is rejected and deserted, to use Katznelson's words. "The vehicle of revolutionary thought was the 'dead' language and not the living one,"⁷² Katznelson stresses again and again. The possibility to become different only

⁷¹ Ben-Yehuda, quoted in Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*, 111.

⁷² Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 189; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 16.

emerges on the cold terrain of Hebrew, while actively distancing oneself from the love of Yiddish and from “what was invested in its sounds: motherhood, childhood, the history of our nation in Diaspora, the life of the national soul.”⁷³ In the revolutionary quest for a new Hebrew subjectivity, it is negative identification, one that drains and dwindles the self, that is sought after.

In a different text, written in 1919 (only a year after the publication of “Language Insomnia”), Katznelson employed again a terminology of submission and control to discuss the revolutionized subjectivity of laborers of “the new *yishuv*.”

One image, which I have seen on stage as a child, doesn't let go. It was a young woman who had no voice and a Svengali hypnotist artist controlled her with his powers and compelled her to sing. And she became a great singer. Although her torments while being hypnotized were great, he stood behind her on stage and she sang. Some people among us are fit for a life of labor just as that woman is for singing – and yet they labor, and even do wonders . . . A magical power—nation's fate, the imperative of the generation—commands us, and we “sing.”⁷⁴

Katznelson perceives her generation as adhering to a greater power that manipulatively coerces them to dedicate their lives to the cause of nation building. The piece, initially published in the collection *Divrey po'alot*, devoted to memoirs of women laborers in the *yishuv*, is a powerful statement on ideological submission and collective identity that simultaneously translates these tensions into a gendered terminology. The voiceless woman, dominated by a male artist, is read

⁷³ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 187.

“מה שהושקע בצליליה – האמהות, הילדות, תולדות עמנו בגולה, חיי הנפש והעם”
lashon,” 14.

⁷⁴ “תמונה אחת, אשר ראיתיה בילדותי על הבמה, איננה מרפה ממני. היתה זו אשה צעירה שלא היה לה קול ואמן-ההיפנוזה סבנגלי שלט בה בכוח השפעתו והיה מכריח אותה לשר. והיא היתה למזמרת גדולה. יסוריה בשעות ההיפנוזה היו נוראים, אך הוא עמד מאחוריה על הבמה, והיא שרה. יש אנשים בינינו המסוגלים לחיי-עבודה כמו האשה ההיא לשירה – ובכל זאת הם עובדים, וגם מראים נפלאות . . . כוח קסמים – גורל-עם, צו-הדור – עומד עלינו ומצווה, Katznelson, “Svengali,” in *Masot u-reshimot (Essays and Sketches)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946), 255. (My translation.)

in Katznelson's own interpretation as emblematic of the people, whereas the "Svengali artist" is seen as the ambiguous power that ventriloquizes them. This understanding of the operation of the *yishuv*'s ideological apparatus in terms of a song that is forced into the mouth of a voiceless people is revealing. It is first and foremost an artist, a male artist, who produces and controls the nation-woman's song. Yet it is only through the woman's hypnotic response to the manipulative (tormenting) enactment of her body that an artistic creation comes into being. The song is at once the means of domination and its aesthetic effect. Language emerges here as the instrument of an artistic mechanism which is simultaneously a manipulative, violent mechanism of control.⁷⁵

To some extent, Katznelson echoes Bialik's formula, according to which it is none other than the prophetic poet, with his divine powers, who generates national and linguistic revival and bestows speech upon the people. The image is also reminiscent of Ahad Ha'am's critical assertion in "The Language and Its Literature" that, in the effort to aesthetically educate the people, nineteenth-century Hebrew literature had only managed to produce "artificial creations, made to move by an external, mechanical push." In Ahad Ha'am's account, the site of this theatrical scene is described as mesmerizing and gripping: "not only readers, but the majority of writers themselves cannot turn their gaze away from this spectacle."⁷⁶ Katznelson similarly states that the image of the singing woman, which she had witnessed as a child, "doesn't let go."

Unlike Ahad Ha'am and Bialik, however, what Katznelson displays is her own identification

⁷⁵ In the first chapter I have discussed Paul de Man's reading of Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, in which, de Man argues, both the violence and the manipulation hidden behind the romantic ideology of aesthetic education are revealed. See Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁷⁶ Ahad Ha'am, "Ha-lashon ve-sifruta (The Language and Its Literature)," in *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma'amarim (On a Crossroad)* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921), 187.

with the hypnotized woman. She is able to see that spectacle while also placing herself (as part of a collective “we”) within the scene. In an almost neutral tone, Katznelson draws attention to the horrifying dimension of the act. The hypnosis, the lack of resistance, the blind obedience of the woman and her terrible torments while being hypnotized lay bare the violence and violation inherent in the practice of giving a voice.

Nightmares of muteness and paralysis haunted Katznelson throughout her childhood.⁷⁷ In her diaries, these nightmares (“I want to yell and I can’t, I want to speak and I’m mute”) are bound up with another recurring childhood terror: the fear of a pogrom and of “what might happen to a girl!” during a pogrom.⁷⁸ Katznelson’s projection of another childhood memory—the Svengali artist and the singing woman—onto the drama of Zionist labor life in Palestine, establishes a link between those two sets of anxieties. In her diaries, Katznelson referred to her first years in Palestine as “the mute period.”⁷⁹ The experience of muteness that in the child’s mind reflected the sense of racial and gender persecution was transferred into the space that was meant to offer a shelter from that very persecution. The landscape of the Hebrew spoken in Palestine and the life of labor in the *yishuv* do not provide a refuge from those early sensations of paralysis. Rather they mobilize these feelings and activate them in the service of an ideological, nationalist cause.

⁷⁷ Muteness and paralysis as gendered experiences recur in the works of other women writers of this period, first and foremost in the prose of Dvora Baron. Many of Baron’s works are inhabited by silence or paralyzed feminine protagonists (stories such as “The Thorny Path” and “Shifra,” for example). However, as Orly Lubin argues, in Baron’s writing, feminine paralysis appears as a form of resistance. See Orly Lubin, *Isha koret isha (Women Reading Women)* (Haifa: Hotsa’at ha-sefarim shel universitat Haifa, 2003), 138–60.

⁷⁸ Katznelson-Shazar, *The Person as She Was*, 32–34.

⁷⁹ Katznelson-Shazar, 96.

Olmert argues persuasively that Katznelson uses the Svengali artist anecdote to enhance a narrative, which allows her to escape the inferiority of women within normative gender power relations. In this narrative, the collective national identity substitutes that of the mute woman, and the drama of gender power relations is replaced with the national drama, in which hypnosis and muteness are attributed not only to women, but to the nation as a whole. And yet although this narrative obfuscates the particular inferiority of women in the discourse of the nation, it simultaneously preserves the gendered dimension of these tensions and imports them into the national story. In her identification with the hypnotized woman, Katznelson inserts a feminine perspective into a discussion in which “nation,” “language,” and “land” are traditionally articulated as feminine. This perspective exposes the traces of violence that normally remain hidden under the “song” of the nation. By citing feminine metaphors and poetic models in which the possibility to create or address the nation is portrayed as an exclusively masculine privilege, Katznelson points to the power structure, the hierarchy, and the manipulation embedded in these models.⁸⁰

At the same time, when viewed alongside Katznelson’s reflections in “Language Insomnia,” the Svengali fragment may be read in an additional way. In “Language Insomnia,” the Hebrew language is portrayed as a catalyst, which might incite writers and speakers alike to action, all the while molding them in her own image. As we have seen, Katznelson argues that “every language has its own magic circle. And he who enters it surrenders to the influence that

⁸⁰ Chana Kronfeld elaborates on this prophetic-poetic model in which the relations between God/prophet/artist and nation/people/land are portrayed as erotic heterosexual relations. Kronfeld discusses the different ways in which women poets, from Rachel Morpurgo to Adi Keissar, offer radical reinterpretations of this metaphors in their writing. See Chana Kronfeld, *The Land as Woman: The Afterlife of a Poetic Metaphor* (forthcoming).

breathes on him from every word.”⁸¹ The “magical power” produced by the Svengali artist could be read as continuous with the “magic circle” into which one enters when adopting Hebrew as a primary language. In this reading, then, it is Hebrew writers who are rendered powerless and mute, ventriloquized by the greater powers of a revolutionary language.

In the final sections of “Language Insomnia,” Katznelson identifies a chasm between modern Hebrew literature and its reading audience. After portraying Hebrew as the embodiment of an exciting unknown, yet to reveal itself, she addresses the threat that is latent in the submission to this unknowability. In this final analysis, Katznelson implies that Hebrew writers, including the major writers of the time, are themselves alienated from the language in which they operate. In its inaccessibility, the endless tradition of Hebrew as a source of recognition of the self, remains distant and ambiguous. Katznelson then locates a danger of not-knowing-oneself at the heart of modern Hebrew literature.

5. The Dangers of Not Knowing

As we have seen, Katznelson concludes that the Hebrew language enacts the revolt of the generation against itself. As uncensored and merciless, Hebrew evokes an inner struggle which is in turn “liberating” from the constraints of Jewish nationalism “as an *idée fixe*.”⁸² The Hebrew spoken in Palestine, Katznelson explains, inaugurates its speakers into the realm of the universal. As a “proper” national language associated with a territory and a national movement, Hebrew provides its speakers with a normative national identity and thereby “liberates” them from the

⁸¹ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 187; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 13.

⁸² Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 189; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 17.

concerns of a national minority in the diaspora. And yet according to Katznelson, what makes Hebrew revolutionary is precisely the fact that it evokes a sense of alienation, that in it “we” are no longer loved “as we were.” Hebrew is revolutionary in that it constitutes a site in which “we” become different and can no longer recognize “ourselves.”

But what does it mean to be exposed to the negative gesture, which, according to Katznelson, the betrayal of Yiddish entails and Hebrew inevitably summons? What does it mean to speak—to willingly submit oneself to—a language that instigates an alienating transformation of the self? Instead of tackling these questions directly, in the final sections of “Language Insomnia” Katznelson identifies problems of miscommunication in modern Hebrew literature. She begins by reiterating that the revolutionary essence of Hebrew literature lies in its capacity to both “affirm and negate.” She illustrates this dual capacity by referring briefly to two major figures: A.D. Gordon⁸³ as an “affirmative” authority, and Brenner as a “negating” one.⁸⁴ By way of either affirmation or negation, Katznelson argues, Gordon and Brenner both signal, in Hebrew, a cause not yet fulfilled. Their writing is oriented towards the future; it hails its readers with the possibility of imagining their becoming different.

In the following paragraph, however, Katznelson turns to a less expected representative in order to discuss the type of writing that is oriented not only towards the future, but also towards the present and the past. She devotes a longer, more elaborate discussion to the work of an earlier writer, Mordechai Ze’ev Fayerberg (1874-1899), presenting him as the exemplary literary figure of her own time:

⁸³ A.D. Gordon was an influential Zionist leader and ideologue of the *yishuv* and the founding father of the movement *Ha-po’el ha-tsa’ir*.

⁸⁴ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 190; Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 17.

A light we didn't find in others we found in Fayerberg, who was more than a guide for us, even though we didn't understand him properly then. For if Bialik had written for only three years like Fayerberg—would we know much about him? But it was impossible not to sense that in this stammering . . . of one who was almost a lad, there is something without parallel in the new Hebrew literature. These stories have a natural attraction, and the basis of that attraction is that Fayerberg was even more himself than other great writers of his generation. There were connections between him and Hebrew history which others lacked. If only he had had time . . . he could have given us a new revelation of the new Hebrew history and of ourselves.⁸⁵

Fayerberg, who grew up in a Hasidic environment and, like many other Hebrew writers, received a traditional Orthodox education before turning to *haskala* and modern Hebrew literature, died of tuberculosis in 1899, only twenty-four years of age. He had thus managed to produce only a few works during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Katznelson views this young author as an exceptional force in modern Hebrew literature, who overshadows even the greatest writers of her time (the mentioning of Bialik in this regard is hardly coincidental). For Katznelson, Fayerberg signifies a (now lost) potential to maintain the connections between the present of new Hebrew and its long history; to mend the rips and tears that emerge along the age-old tradition of Hebrew and to reveal these affinities to the rest of “us,” who are unable to recognize them on our own:

There are very few to whom the past and the present will be revealed in both their creative achievements and their weaknesses . . . And one person to whom both good and bad, weakness and heroism, the uplifting and the degrading were revealed—was Fayerberg. He had an unmediated relation both to the Talmud and Rabbinic literature on the one hand, and to our generation on the other; and many secrets were buried with him when he died; for a man with such a sense of history is like a prophet among us.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 190. (Translation slightly modified.)

“ואור שלא מצאנו באחרים מצאנו בפייארברג, שהיה בשבילנו יותר ממורה-דרך, אף כי טרם הבינונו אותו כראוי. כי אילו היה ביאליק כותב רק שלוש שנים, כאשר כתב פייארברג – כלום הרבה היינו יודעים על אודותיו? אבל אי אפשר היה לבלי להרגיש כי בגמגום הזה . . . של כמעט נער יש דבר-מה שאין דוגמתו בספרות העברית החדשה. לסיפורים האלה יש כוח משיכה טבעי, והיסוד של המשיכה הוא, כי פייארברג היה עוד יותר עצמי מאשר סופרים גדולים אחרים בני דורו. בינו לבין ההיסטוריה העברית היו קשרים, אשר חסרו לאחרים. ואם היה לפחות מספיק . . . בידו היה לתת בני דורו. לנו גילוי חדש של ההיסטוריה העברית החדשה ושל עצמנו” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 17–18.

⁸⁶ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 192. (Translation slightly modified.)

“אך מעטים הם אלה אשר העבר וההווה, על יצירותיהם וחולשותיהם, יהיו גלויים לפניהם . . . ואדם שהיו גלויים לפניו הטוב והרע, החולשה והגבורה, המעלה והמשפיל – היה פייארברג. לו היה יחס בלתי אמצעי גם לתלמוד, גם לספרות

Katznelson anoints the dead young author as a prophet, while pointing to a lack that is defining of the current state of modern Hebrew literature. Instead of invoking Bialik, the national poet, as a living prophetic presence, prophecy emerges in her argument as available only through the dead. In his essay “Language Pangs,” Bialik encourages Hebrew poets to “exploit the Hebrew language in all its revealed and concealed forces, to the limits of all knowledge and ‘sense,’” thus exhausting “all of the linguistic matter, from all generations, with all of its different uses.”⁸⁷

Katznelson, by contrast, points to the failure of Hebrew literature of the present moment to execute those tasks:

Indeed, there are still untrodden paths in the chronicles of our nation and there are internal aspects Fayerberg envisioned, and that source of knowing our nation remains close to us . . . There are outside influences that prevent us from seeing the essence . . . We lack the self-knowledge and the full life within the Hebrew circle that Fayerberg had.

Hence, too, the painful and difficult alienation we feel toward the literature of our time. The writer must reveal to the readers what has been revealed to him, and, to a certain circle of readers, everything must be revealed—and good Hebrew readers indeed relate to other literatures in this way. The good reader evaluates writers by what he gets from them, and where there is esteem, there is also genuine respect and love.⁸⁸

Katznelson argues that contemporary Hebrew literature is estranged from its readership and consequentially does not fulfill the primary role of a national literature: it fails to reveal the essence of the nation’s spirit and in that sense also fails at evoking genuine love. A decade after

הרבנים, גם לדורנו, ורבים הסודות שנקברו עמו במותו, כי איש אשר לו רגש היסטורי כזה הוא כנביא בינינו”
Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 19–20.

⁸⁷ Bialik, “Hevley lahon,” 17.

⁸⁸ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 190–91.

“אמנם, עוד יש שבילים בתולדות עמנו שלא דרכנו בהם ויש דברים פנימיים, אשר פייארברג חזה אותם, ולנו מקור זה של הכרת-עמנו נשאר סתום . . . יש השפעות חוץ המפריעות לנו לראות את העיקר, כי חסרה לנו ההכרה העצמית והחיים המלאים בתוך המעגל העברי שהיו לפייארברג. ומכאן גם הזרות המכאיבה והקשה ביחסנו לספרות זמננו. על ידי הסופר צריך להיגלות לקוראים מה שנגלה לו, ולחוג ידוע של קוראים צריך להיגלות הכל – ויחס כזה ישנו בין קוראים עברים טובים לבין ספרויות אחרות. הקורא הטוב מעריך את הסופרים לפי מה שהוא מקבל מהם, ובמקום שיש “הערכה יש גם כבוד ואהבה אמתיים” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 18.

Bialik's enthusiastic call for writers to establish a dictionary that would "widely reveal some 'treasures of darkness'" concealed in Hebrew,⁸⁹ Katznelson, a devoted reader, contends that Hebrew literature does not keep its promise. She argues that readers who can cope with many literatures struggle when they encounter Hebrew. It is particularly Hebrew literature that remains foreign to them:

People with discernment in European literature fumble in Hebrew literature. Sometimes we love the Hebrew poet who grants us something, but we won't know for sure to answer who he is, if he really does have great talent or if he does grant us something because we came to him empty-handed and he touched the romantic chord in our hearts . . . And as the enigma of our nation is closed to us, so is our literature, and there is no real appreciation and there is no faith in the writers.⁹⁰

The love "we" feel toward the Hebrew poet who grants us something is a love devoid of recognition. "We" love the Hebrew poet blindly, without knowing who he is. This love is implied to be inauthentic, as if elicited in dubious ways. Much like the Svengali artist, who manipulatively hypnotizes the mute woman, forcing her to sing, Hebrew literature affects the people hypnotically rather than inspiring real appreciation. Readers "fumble" in Hebrew literature, in blindness. This relation to Hebrew literature, Katznelson further argues, mirrors "our" relation to "our nation," that is, to "ourselves":

There is something that stands like a demon between us and our individual writers, as there is, so it sometimes seems to us, something dividing them from the historical soul of our nation. This is the curse of a person not understanding his own spirit. A curse that weighs on our nation—we see it only in the assimilationists and their negation, but it lies in all of us.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Bialik, "Hevley lahon," 15.

⁹⁰ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 191.
"אנשים בעלי הבחנה בספרות אירופית מגששים בספרות העברית. יש שאנו אוהבים את המשורר העברי המעניק לנו, אבל לא נדע בבטחון לענות מי הוא, אם באמת בעל כשרון גדול הוא, או שהוא מעניק לנו, מפני שבאנו אליו ובידינו אין דבר, והוא ידע לנגוע בנימה הרומנטית שבלב . . . וכחידת עמנו הסתומה לפנינו כך סתומה ספרותנו, ואין הערכת אמת, וזאת אמונה ביוצרים" Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 19. (Translation slightly modified.)

⁹¹ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 192. (Translation slightly modified.)

Katznelson describes the entire cultural system of modern Hebrew as fraught with ruptures and divides. The disconnection between readers and writers is echoed in the writers' own detachment from the national spirit. Hebrew writers and readers alike, it is now clear, fumble within Hebrew blindly, in miscommunication, proceeding by way of not knowing. And what they do not know and cannot see, according to Katznelson, is precisely their national selves. This not knowing of the self is a "curse that weighs on our nation," Katznelson asserts, invoking assimilationists, no less, to stress her point. Within Hebrew, "we" no longer know who or what "we are."

In Katznelson's account, this realization follows from the portrayal of the "linguistic family romance" in which the loving mother figure of Yiddish is abandoned in favor of Hebrew. In other words, not-knowing-ourselves is the result of the revolutionizing encounter with Hebrew. In liberating "us" from the former identity of a minority in the diaspora, Hebrew in fact strips "us" of everything that is familiar and known, constituting "our" identity anew as unrecognizable. Hebrew therefore becomes a site of forgetfulness in which one wanders, as if in the dark. Gershom Scholem will articulate a strikingly similar notion only a few years later, in his famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig: "We do live inside this language, above an abyss, almost all of us, with the certainty of the blind."⁹² Blindness, which is central to Scholem's analysis, seems to play an equally important role in Katznelson's narrative. The blinding effect of Hebrew is entwined with its castrating gesture. The trope of mutilation that is latent throughout the final sections of "Language Insomnia," and is echoed in many of Katznelson's writings, figuratively

"יש דבר-מה העומד כשטן בינינו לבין סופרינו היחידים, כמו שיש, כך נדמה לנו לפעמים, איזה דבר המבדיל בינם לבין נפש עמנו ההיסטורית. זוהי הקללה של אי-הבנת האדם לרוחו-הוא הרובצת על חיי עמנו, קללה שאנו רואים אותה רק במתבוללים ובשליחתם, והיא בכולנו" Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 19.

⁹² Gershom Scholem, "Confession on the Subject of Our Language," in *Acts of Religion*, Jacques Derrida, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226.

demonstrates the effects of Hebrew on the body. Speaking Hebrew—and the seemingly inevitable detachment from Yiddish inscribed in it—is claimed to be injurious.

We can therefore say that what on the one hand makes Hebrew appealing and desirable bears a dangerous, demonic effect on the other hand. This junction is where Katznelson's hopes for a revolutionary horizon of Hebrew joins with her anxiety over the implications of such horizon. What is revolutionary about Hebrew is precisely what is threatening in "our" relationship to it. The danger of not knowing ourselves is read as a danger to the coherence of national identity and to the wholeness of the self. In other words, what helps "us" break from "ourselves" in the name of nationalism is one and the same with what threatens "us" as a nation.

That conclusion obliquely slips into the trajectory of Katznelson's argument and is manifested in her position against "foreign languages." Instead of dwelling on the moment in which the encounter with Hebrew is revealed to be uncanny and disorienting, Katznelson soon displaces the threat, projecting it onto the supposedly distorting presence of "other" languages and literatures. Katznelson declares that "the danger for [Hebrew's] existence" was revealed, "when we reached the possibility that a Hebrew person who can read will read a foreign book and not a Hebrew one."⁹³ It is the possibility of favoring "the foreign" over Hebrew that is menacing. Katznelson rearticulates the problem of not understanding oneself as a problem of distraction: "There are outside influences that prevent us from *seeing* the essence."⁹⁴ Not being able to see is now attributed to "outside influences" rather than to the reflective undermining experience of immersing oneself in Hebrew, and the "danger" thus becomes "external."

⁹³ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 193; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 21.

⁹⁴ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 191; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 18 (My emphasis.)

Yiddish in particular is seen as threatening in this regard, and Katznelson soon addresses the question of the translatability between Hebrew and Yiddish.

A few years ago, there was a lot of talk in Russia and America about the need to translate the Bible into Yiddish. Those who were opposed to it harbored a vague and illogical feeling: Can the Hebrew Bible be translated to all languages and not Yiddish, the language of the Jews? . . . But how can the Bible be translated into Yiddish? How can it be translated—for us? . . . You can translate the Bible into German or English, because there is an equality between those languages and the language of the Bible, an equality that does not exist between that language and Yiddish; because no two languages have such different programs as those two, because we divided the contents of our lives between them.⁹⁵

Like M.Y. Berdichevsky, Katznelson argues for a radical division between Hebrew and Yiddish, which renders them untranslatable into one another. The Hebrew Bible should not be translated into Yiddish because, according to Katznelson, unlike Western European languages, Yiddish is unequal to Hebrew. Katznelson differentiates Yiddish from the languages of “all cultured people,” stressing its inferiority while at the same time referring to it as synonymous for “us.” The difference-from-ourselves that Hebrew embodies cannot be contained in Yiddish, and cannot be returned to “us” in this way. Yiddish is at once too similar *and* radically different from Hebrew. It is therefore particularly threatening to the existence of a revolutionary, ever-changing Hebrew subjectivity.

“It is not the open war against Hebrew that burdens it,” Katznelson continues, “but the war that is fought, with an invisible weapon, by Yiddish, by foreign languages, and by all the

⁹⁵ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 192–93.

“לפני שנים אחדות דיברו הרבה באמריקה וברוסיה על הצורך לתרגם את התנ”ך לאידיש. אלה אשר התנגדו לדבר היה בלבם רגש סתום ובלתי-הגיוני: האומנם מותר לתרגם את התנ”ך העברי לכל השפות ולא לאידיש, שפת היהודים. . . . אבל איך אפשר לתרגם את התנ”ך לאידיש? לנו, בשבילנו – איך אפשר לתרגם אותו? אפשר לתרגם את התנ”ך לגרמנית, לאנגלית, מפני שבין השפות האלה ובין שפת התנ”ך יש שוויון, אשר אינו בינה ובין אידיש; כי אין עוד שפות בעלות מצע שונה כשתי השפות האלה, מפני שאת תוכן חיינו חילקנו ביניהן.” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 20.

conditions of our lives.”⁹⁶ The trope of war, which was previously employed to discuss the revolutionary as stimulating “an *internal* war, inside yourself,” is now converted into a conflict with Yiddish and other languages. Katznelson designates these languages as “foreign,” even though the one language that repeatedly emerges as the least accessible is Hebrew itself. What is threatening and foreign in Hebrew, the internal struggle it evokes, is transformed into “a clash with the environment,” which is coded reference to the Arab Middle East. As a result, the exclusivity of Hebrew in the public sphere becomes a primary cause. Paradoxically, Katznelson’s narrative, which outlines a program for a radical transformation of the self, gradually turns into a narrative of self-preservation and self-defense.

That defensive approach becomes more extreme in Katznelson’s later writings. In an essay she wrote in 1934, “The Conquest of Language” (“כיבוש השפה”), Katznelson no longer discusses the shift between languages as a possibility, but strictly denigrates multilingual initiatives as undermining threats to the exclusivity of Hebrew. She criticizes the establishment of Hungarian, Russian, Polish and German libraries in the *yishuv*, pointing to the sacrifice her own generation had to suffer in its uncompromising submission to Hebrew. The ultimate target of her attacks, however, is “Levantinism.” Katznelson forms a link between the instances of multilingual practice in the *yishuv* and what she views as the essence of Levantine Judaism: “a mob with no God, a mixture of languages, nudity, rebellion against any commandment, lack of roots in any culture whatsoever.”⁹⁷ Flustered by this babel of languages and identities,

⁹⁶ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 193. (Translation slightly modified.)
“לא המלחמה הגלויה בעברית, לא היא בעיקר המקשה על מצבה, כי אם המלחמה שנלחמים בה בנשק בלתי-נראה,
האידיש, השפות הזרות וכל תנאי חיינו” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 20–21.

⁹⁷ “המון ללא אלוהים, בליל שפות, עירום, פריקת עול של כל מצוה, חוסר שורשים באיזון תרבות שהיא”
Katznelson, “Kibush ha-safa,” in *Masot u-reshimot (Essays and Sketches)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1946), 160.

Katznelson calls for a protest against Levantinism in terms of a strict seclusion within the borders of Hebrew: “we shall entrench ourselves in language, as we entrench ourselves in agricultural production. We shall protect ourselves against Levantinism as we would protect ourselves against unemployment.”⁹⁸

In her title, Katznelson invokes “the conquest of language” (כיבוש השפה), a concept which was in use within the Hebraist discourse of socialist Zionism in the *yishuv*. This concept developed in parallel with that of “the conquest of labor” (כיבוש העבודה), or “Hebrew labor,” which, as noted earlier, was a major principle of the *Po’aley Zion* movement. In her call for linguistic seclusion, Katznelson underscores the already visible analogy between the two concepts. Just as entrenching oneself in agricultural production designates the rejection of Palestinian Arab laborers, entrenching oneself in language marks the protest against Levantinism. Levantine Jews and Palestinian Arabs are linked here as one consecutive enemy. The segregated approach to both language and labor coincides with notions of ethnic and territorial purity. Land, language and ethnicity converge in this idiom to a centralized objective of conquest and control, manifested in aggressive and violent terms. In contrast to “Language Insomnia,” in which Katznelson ambivalently narrates a story of transition and wanderings between languages, in “The Conquest of Language,” Katznelson’s entire attention is devoted to prohibiting multiplicity, and she cannot bear the thought of a fluid identity that resides in between traditions.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ “נתבצר בשפה, כאשר אנו מתבצרים ביצור המשקי. נגן על עצמנו מפני הלבנטיניות כמו שאנו מגינים על עצמנו” Katznelson, “Kibush ha-safa,” 161. חוסר-עבודה”

⁹⁹ For an elaborate discussion of the Levantine as a borderline figure, see Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 44–72.

Despite the purist conclusion of “Language Insomnia,” this earlier text still contains the possibility of an alternative transition between languages. In locating power *in* Hebrew itself—particularly in speech as a democratic, pluralistic operation of language—Katznelson designates the language as independent from the demands and dictates of its speakers. As opposed to some common views, Katznelson contends in “Language Insomnia,” Hebrew is subjected neither to “our” protection nor to “our” needs. “Outside the debating rooms,” she asserts, “in all the space of our world, Hebrew fights the war herself.”¹⁰⁰ Katznelson insists on the agency of language and its ability to operate independently. Hebrew, she argues, exceeds the intention and knowledge of its speakers, thus maintaining a transformative effect. As we have seen, that is precisely what makes Hebrew revolutionary, according to Katznelson. Hebrew is revolutionary *because* it bears the potential to turn against its speakers, because it is foreign and unforeseen.

The multilingual realm within which Hebrew operated at the time the essay was written is a condition for that conceptualization of the revolutionary. In this respect, isolating Hebrew threatens the radical role it plays in the life of its speakers. For how could Hebrew maintain its revolutionary character when it is no longer chosen as a radical alternative, but is instead imposed upon its speakers as a solitary “mother tongue?” How would this imagined future Hebrew escape the troubled faith of being “only a mother?” It seems that the more isolated Hebrew becomes, the more endangered it is. And yet as the essay unfolds, Katznelson preaches monolingualism as a defensive apparatus that constitutes Hebrew as a weapon. Similarly to the paradoxical dynamics revealed towards the end of Bialik’s “Language Pangs,” the drive to

¹⁰⁰ Katznelson, “Language Insomnia,” 193.

“מחוך לחדרי ויכוחים, בכל חלל עולמנו, לוחמת העברית את מלחמתה בעצמה” Katznelson, “Nedudey lashon,” 21.

confine and protect Hebrew as an exclusive national property, in Katznelson's text, becomes increasingly compulsive with the recognition that something *in* Hebrew remains radically foreign. In both essays, the experience of the unknown triggers an increasing anxiety, which results in a purported "preservation" of the language through its isolation. Unlike Bialik, however, Katznelson's narrative ambivalently shifts between this protective mode and the contention that Hebrew does not need protection.

Monolingualism emerges in both of these accounts as a form of fetishism. For Katznelson, Hebrew, which continues to be desired as an exclusive national language, marks at once a danger for the unity of a national subjectivity and the protection against it. This dual signification defines the fetish and instigates the paradoxical relationship to Hebrew. It also reverses the "foreignization" of the languages that surround it. The more intimate the relationship with these "other" languages is, the more threatening they are. The love of Yiddish, the proximity to Arabic, the westernizing allure of German, Russian, and French, must be avoided at any cost. Monolingualism is conceived as safeguarding that which protects—but also threatens—"us."

What is lost as a result is the nomadic option of shifting between languages, which is crucial to Katznelson's own conceptualization of the revolutionary. While celebrating, in her narration, the transition between languages as a triumphant revolution, Katznelson paradoxically concludes that the practice of transition must be prohibited. And yet the title Katznelson chose for her essay dwells precisely on that transition. Katznelson's conjunction of the words *nedudim* (wanderings) and *lashon* (language) literally means language wanderings. The phrase simultaneously echoes, as I mentioned earlier, the Hebrew collocation *nedudey sheyna* (insomnia), potentially linking the insomnia to the effect of these linguistic wanderings. The fact

that the title stresses wanderings—or the insomnia they evoke—instead of the final destination of these excursions, alludes to a possibility of continuous non-arrival found in the disorienting transition between languages. In advocating for an increasingly rigid and dense monolingualism which fetishizes Hebrew as a threatening, desired object, Katznelson abandons that option.

The ethos of the one language marks in Katznelson's work the end of language wanderings, which entails not only the loss of Yiddish as a loving mother figure, but also the abolition of an element inherent in new Hebrew itself: its multilingual existence. What remains is the phantasmatic pursuit of an unattainable, original connection to Hebrew, one that would evoke a sense of recognition, as demonstrated in the writing of the dead author Fayerberg, with whom in death "many secrets were buried."¹⁰¹

According to Katznelson, Fayerberg's unique relation to the language was performed in a particular way. When turning to Fayerberg towards the end of her essay, she describes his work as a form of stammer: "It was impossible not to sense that in this stammering . . . of one who was almost a lad, there is something without parallel in the new Hebrew literature."¹⁰² This "something without parallel" in Hebrew literature, which Katznelson laments, echoes the option which she simultaneously constitutes as lost; the nomadic condition of Hebrew, a Hebrew stammering.

¹⁰¹ Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 192; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 20.

¹⁰² Katznelson, "Language Insomnia," 190; Katznelson, "Nedudey lashon," 17.

Chapter 4: Stammering Hebrew – Y.H. Brenner’s Deferred Beginnings

In his book *Stutter*, exploring the phenomenology of speech disorder through a series of encounters with stuttering cultural figures ranging from Hamlet to Porky Pig, Marc Shell dedicates an extensive discussion to biblical Moses. In order to adequately perform his role as the Hebrews’ monotheistic legislator and alphabetical scribe, Shell argues, Moses had to be a stutterer.¹ In Shell’s account, stuttering serves as a way of negotiating the contradictory divine imperative to reproduce the tablets of the law while at the same time obeying the prohibition (included within this very law) against graven images. According to Shell, the multilingual Moses had to maintain both the pictographically hieroglyphic Egyptian and the non-written Hebrew in order to inscribe the law and, in the process, to formulate the Hebrew alphabet.² The paradoxical nature of this act lies in the contrast between an assumed dynamic, ever-changing oral law and a static, eternal graven image. Shell suggests reading Moses’ alleged stutter—for its repetitions, hesitation, and delay—as evidence that captures and displays this very theological tension.

Modern Jewish thought has long been engaged in an ongoing discussion of the relationship between these two forces within Jewish tradition, their opposition as well as their proximity, as reflected in the similarity of terms often used to designate this tension, *harut* (engraved law) and *herut* (freedom). The traditional premise that oral and written Torah were given to Moses on Mount Sinai simultaneously evokes various questions regarding the complex dynamics between the two. Could the principle of interpretative innovation, fundamental to oral law, be maintained alongside the concept of a predetermined, rigid written law? And how can these two

¹ Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 107.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

contradictory systems coexist?

The discourse of the revival of Hebrew in the early twentieth century resonates with similar questions, though in a somewhat inverted fashion. Here, the discussion pertained to the language's ability to be at once the remnant of an ancient ideal expression of Jewish life and the herald of an agile new Jewish subjectivity. These contradictory facets had to be contained within Hebrew, in order for it to be designated as a national language.³ As we have seen in previous chapters, for many writers, that liminality of Hebrew was perceived as what generated its enormous poetic potential and therefore had to be safeguarded. At the turn of the century, revival writers had already managed to harness Hebrew for the purpose of creating modernist literature precisely by way of exploring the tensions latent in the idiom's displacement, and its migration between contexts. Modern Hebrew, which emerged out of a multilingual environment and largely drew from the languages that surrounded it, bore a foreign quality, an alienating dimension that was often exploited in literature as a modernist tool itself. That Hebrew was gradually becoming a national, territorial language, a language of institutions and bureaucracy, spoken in everyday life, put this foreign, creative potential at risk.

Beginning in 1887, schools within the Jewish settlement in Palestine (the *yishuv*) started to employ what they called “the natural method” (השיטה הטבעית), or “Hebrew in Hebrew,” namely, using Hebrew pedagogically to teach both Hebrew and a variety of other subjects, while

³ As many critics of nationalism have noted, such a peculiar coexistence of tradition and rupture is one of the primary marks of nationalist thought. The series of paradoxes around which the nationalist imagination is organized entails the dual enunciation of continuity and discontinuity and the imperative of cultural memorization and collective forgetfulness. See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991); Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

abandoning the more traditional way of teaching Hebrew in translation.⁴ This was an innovation advocated by the organization *Safa Brura* (Clear Speech) and the Committee of Literature, who declared their aspiration to turn Hebrew into a single, formal language of the *yishuv*, and by extension, into a native language for future generations.⁵ With the Second Aliyah, the second wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine, teaching Hebrew in Hebrew became even more widespread, accompanied by an active effort to also teach Hebrew to adults.

Within the Hebrew literary discourse, questions and concerns were raised regarding these developments and their potential implications. Could Hebrew become a language of colloquial conversation? Should the language be “forced” into the classroom as a spoken language? In part, what was at stake was the vulnerability of Hebrew’s poetic registers, that might dissolve once the language was put in the service of a nation-state, as the sole language of an entire generation. The responses to this debate were diverse, and often ambivalent. From the perspective of the intellectual elite, entrusting the “national treasure” of Modern Hebrew—which until recently was accessible only to a minority—to a public domain, was a threatening precedent. In the discussion about Hebrew’s vitality—about the “life” component of its revival—colloquial Hebrew spoken

⁴ Nurit Govrin, “‘Ha-dalut ha-nora’ a ba-bituy’ (Y.H. Brenner: ‘Mehathala’) 150 Shana le-huladeto shel Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (The Dreadful Poverty of Speech [Y.H. Brenner: *From the Beginning*] 150 Years to the Birth of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda),” *Moznaim* 81, no. 2 (February, 2008): 3. Shlomo Haramati, “Brenner ke-more u-manhil lashon li-mvugarim (Brenner as a Teacher and a Language Instructor for Adults),” *Mahut* 16 (1995): 65, 74–75. Shlomo Haramati, *Reshit ha-hinukh ha-‘ivri ba-arets ve-trumato le-hahya’at ha-lashon 1882-1914* (The Role of the Hebrew Teacher in Reviving the Hebrew Language 1882-1914) (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1979).

⁵ Early on, the organization *Safa Brura*, led by Ben-Yehuda, announced that one of its major goals was to “eradicate the corrupted languages spoken by Jews living in Erets Israel, the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jargons etc., languages that divide the hearts of their speakers and make them appear as if they were members of different nations.” Cited in Eisenstadt: Samuel Eisenstadt, *Sefatenu ha-‘ivrit ha-hayah* (*Our Living Hebrew Language*) (Tel Aviv: Tekuma, 1967), 38. (All translations from Hebrew sources in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise specified.)

in schools was often perceived as an obstacle. Ironically, it was this image of a premature, artificial spoken language, taught by dysfluent teachers (lacking in vocabulary and quick to adopt “foreign” idioms), that was attributed a static mode, while true dynamism was believed to lie in the poetic realm.⁶ In a sense, then, within the revival discourse, the oral sphere was constructed as a rigid, limited and limiting utilization of the language, whereas a very particular type of literary written utterance occupied vital and creative potential.

This crucial debate was largely reflected in the literature of the time. A particularly striking response can be found in the work of Yosef Hayim Brenner. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Brenner’s writing demonstrates an ambivalent attentiveness to Hebrew speech. I begin by sketching the typical intellectual debates on the question of the emerging Hebrew speech within the *yishuv*. I then focus on Brenner’s relation to spoken Hebrew, first in his essays, then through a reading of his novel *From the Beginning* (“מהתחלה”). Dwelling on Brenner’s poetics and his approach to spoken Hebrew, I show how on the one hand, Brenner condemns Hebrew speech for being meager and dysfluent, and on the other hand, he exploits dysfluency via his rhetoric, style, and narration modes, in order to ground his understanding of literary representation and articulate his own response to revival. Eventually, I suggest reading Brenner’s poetics as a poetics of stammering that display an incongruity between language and self, and gestures towards an inherent failure of normal talk.

⁶ See, for instance, Y.H. Brenner’s 1913 article, in which he writes of the singular translators of belles-lettres into Hebrew (himself included): “Those individuals keep deluding themselves that although the Hebrew speech will always be a mechanical creation, Hebrew literature contains, despite everything, some elements and signs of an organic creation, and that even now it is considerably an organic creation, gradually evolving . . .” Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Ketavim (Writings)*, vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po’alim: Ha-kibuts ha-me’uhad, 1985), 1062–3.

A major part of this chapter is dedicated to the trope of Stammering Hebrew.⁷ Within the discussions of Hebrew's revival, and particularly within Brenner's oeuvre, stammer is commonly employed as a descriptive category—at times explicitly metaphoric, at other times apparently literal—attempting to capture a shared relation to language.⁸ Studies in literary theory that discuss stammer have recently been gathered under the title Dysfluency Studies. In a recent edited volume, literary theorist Chris Eagle broadly defines Dysfluency Studies as a field that seeks to challenge the normalization of fluent talk and destabilize rigid notions about language and speech, such as the assumption of mastery over one's language.⁹ Various theoretical references to stammer can be found in the work of many prominent thinkers, both within literary studies and beyond. For instance, Gilles Deleuze famously uses this category to characterize a poetic operation, describing stammer as a way of placing language in a state of constant disequilibrium. Deleuze argues that great writers make “language as such stutter,” by way of becoming foreigners in their own language. They thus enact the language's own powers of

⁷ It is important to note that the Hebrew term for stammer is somewhat different from the English one. The Hebrew word *gimgum* (גמגום), which is traced back to medieval Hebrew literature, designates, in its modern use, a garbled tongue, a speech disorder, a difficulty of pronunciation that may be caused by different factors and an expression of doubt or hesitation. Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Milon Even-Shoshan: Be-shishah kerakhim be-hishtatfut hever anshey mada'* (*Even-Shoshan Dictionary*) (Israel: Ha-milon he-hadash, 2003, 351). *Gimgum* might be translated to English as either stutter or stammer. While some of the theory of dysfluency I refer to throughout this chapter focuses on stutter rather than stammer, I chose to translate *gimgum* mostly as stammer, since it seems to encompass a broader variety of phenomena associated with speech disorder (much like *gimgum*).

⁸ For an elaborate discussion of stammer in the work of U.N. Gnessin, an important modernist Hebrew author and Brenner's beloved friend, see Eyal Bassan, “Elef ha-mishorim shel Uri Nissan Gnessin” (The Thousand Plateaus of Uri Nissan Gnessin) in *Ot: ketav et le-sifrut u-le-te'oryah* 2 (Spring, 2012), 55–89.

⁹ Chris Eagle, *Literature, Speech Disorders, and Disability: Talking Normal* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 5–7.

bifurcation and variation.¹⁰

Other thinkers of dysfluency place greater emphasis on the phenomenology of stammer, and point to the many ways in which stammer involves a series of gestures that can be thought of as literary techniques. Marc Shell, himself a stutterer and a polio-survivor, mentions the use of synonymy, a transition between languages, or a play of “identity exchange” (playing a role, singing a song, or using some kind of a dummy or proxy), as substitution techniques inevitably employed by stutterers.¹¹ These substitutions, which are summoned precisely to “overcome” stuttering, call into question the coherence of both speech and identity, as well as the very continuity between the two.

Haviva Pedaya similarly refers to stammer as designating a type of split within the self. Pedaya discusses the Hebrew word *gimgum* (stammer/stutter), pointing to its distinct four-letter root and breaking it down to the two syllables *gam ve-gam* (literally: both). Stammer, she argues, embodies at once two extreme states of the self. It opens and reflects an experience of otherness within the self, a different utterance that traverses one’s “own” speech, causing an interruption, and in so doing also pointing to the mechanism and raw material of speech itself.¹² In an essay dedicated to glossolalia,¹³ Michel de Certeau invokes similar notions. According to de Certeau,

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered” in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 107–9.

¹¹ Shell, *Stutter*, 190–6.

¹² Haviva Pedaya, “Gamvegum (gimgum) (Both: Stammer),” *Daka: Journal of Poetry and Criticism* 001 (January, 2007).

¹³ “Glossolalia: a class of deviant linguistic behaviors characterized by discourse that is fluid and mobile, divisible into phonemic units, and entirely or almost entirely constituted by neologisms.” André Roch-Lecours, “La Glossolalie dans l’asphasie de Wernicke, dans la shizophasie, et dans les états de possession” (Conference paper delivered at Urbino, 11 July 1978, quoted in de Certeau, 1996).

glossolalia isolates and enhances a phenomenon that is in fact inseparable from any ordinary conversation: “bodily noises, quotations of delinquent sounds, and fragments of others’ voices punctuate the order of sentences with breaks and surprises.”¹⁴ De Certeau identifies this “waste” of language within the realm of conversation, which, he argues, “reopens the surface of discourse to these *noises of otherness*.”¹⁵ He thus focuses on the kind of speech that is open to an addressee. Some studies on speech disorder indeed stress the fact that stammer necessarily involves an interpersonal interaction; that it is, in fact, an experience shared by both the speaker and the hearer.¹⁶

However, de Certeau also points out that glossolalia authorizes a space in which a simulation of speech is produced. It inaugurates speech as imitation; a repetitive enactment of the very transition from muteness to speech.¹⁷ The same thing can be said about stammer. Stammer could be read as a type of theater embodying a *beginning to speak*, and marking simultaneously a lack of words or an inability to speak, a need to speak, and the very passage between the two. The repetitions, breaks, prolonged syllables and superfluous sounds manifested in stammer, gesture to this type of iterated beginning. They crack the surface of ordinary conversation, discharge language of its communicative attribution and point to the imitative dimension of speech.

These reflections on dysfluency will prove particularly helpful in the reading of Brenner’s

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, “Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias,” trans. Daniel Rosenberg, *Representations* 56 (October, 1996): 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ Joshua St. Pierre, “The Construction of the Disabled Speaker,” *Literature, Speech Disorders, and Disability*, 14.

¹⁷ De Certeau, “Vocal Utopias,” 30, 40–41.

novel *From the Beginning*, a portrayal of the life of a new Hebrew-speaking generation in a Jewish colony in Palestine. Stammer, it is suggested throughout this chapter, does not only capture early hesitant attempts to “revive” a non-spoken language. Nor does it function solely as a derogatory name expressing the revulsion of an intellectual elite from an irresponsible, premature attempt to revive Hebrew speech. It rather stands for an experience of an iterated enactment of transition, negotiating contradictory drives within the attempt of a national and linguistic revival.

1. The Chains of Hebrew Speech: Early Responses to “Hebrew in Hebrew”

Before attending to Brenner’s complex relationship with spoken Hebrew, it is important to examine some other common reactions to the early appearances of colloquial Hebrew speech. As we have seen in former chapters, among the intellectual circle of Hebrew writers who advocated for Hebrew’s revival, there was a strong objection to the Ben-Yehudian approach, which advanced “expanding” the language by way of systematically instituting new vocabulary. Central writers who radically differed in their approach to language and literature nevertheless shared a common contempt for Ben-Yehuda’s work. Ahad Ha’am, Berdichevsky, Ravnizky, and Bialik, for instance, openly criticized his methods and technique, expressing their different reservations about Ben-Yehuda’s “factory of words.”¹⁸ Similar doubts were heard in regard to the notion of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, and the gradual increase of Hebrew speakers throughout the *yishuv* was often perceived as a curse rather than a blessing.

In 1893, Ahad Ha’am published the second essay in his series of essays “A Truth from

¹⁸ See, for instance, Ravnizky’s famous phrase from an essay published in 1890, “Don’t call them the expanders of the language, but rather its expungers” (quoted in Govrin, 2008). Govrin, “Ha-dalut ha-nora’a ba-bituy,” 4.

Erets Yisrael” (“אמת מארץ ישראל”). Like his first essay in the series (which in 1891 introduced to the Zionist population in Eastern Europe the existence of an “Arab problem,” assessing the stakes of Palestinian Arab presence in Palestine for the Jewish settlement), the second essay contains the structure of an assumed gap between expectations, as they appear “from afar,” and a truth rooted in the land, revealing a different narrative:¹⁹

From afar, it is all beautiful and pleasant. But as one hears in his own ears how teachers and students alike stammer together, for lack of words and accents, one senses immediately that this ‘speech’ will not be able to awaken in the heart of either the speaker or the listener, any respect or love for the limited language; and the young mind of a child . . . would sense, with even greater strength, the artificial chains of Hebrew speech coerced upon him.²⁰

Ahad Ha’am’s view—which framed Hebrew speech as a pale, reduced and prosaic version of Hebrew, one that had a restrictive effect on its young speakers—became largely accepted among many who considered themselves active participants in the project of revival. Unlike pedagogues such as Yitzhak Epstein, who constantly advocated for ways of teaching Hebrew through lively experiences, Ahad Ha’am’s formula conditioned the development of the language on the precedence of a truly honed, discursive theoretical thought.

As we have seen in the first chapter, even the greatest opponents of Ahad Ha’am’s approach to Hebrew belles-lettres shared similar sentiments when it came to the newly evolved

¹⁹ This is not the only time when the “Arab question” and the “question of Hebrew speech” appear in such proximity and are described in similar terms. As shown in the previous chapter, such proximity appears in the work of Rachel Katznelson, and it is evident in the correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Franz Rosensweig as well. See Galili Shahar, “‘A Third Reading’: The German, the Hebrew and (the Arab),” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 33, no. 1 (2013): 133–39.

²⁰ “מרחוק כל זה יפה ונעים, אבל השומע באזניו, איך יגמגמו בלשונם המורים והתלמידים יחד, מחסרון מלים ומבטאים, הוא מרגיש מיד, כי ‘הדבור’ הזה לא יוכל לעורר בלבו של המדבר או השומע רגש של כבוד ואהבה אל השפה המצומצמת, והשכל הרך של הילד . . . ירגיש עוד ביתר עוז את הכבלים המלאכותיים אשר ישים עליו הדבור העברי.” Ahad Ha’am, “Emet me-erets yisrael: Ma’amar sheni (A Truth from Erets Yisrael: A Second Essay),” *Ha-melits* (August, 1893).

Hebrew speech. Berdichvesky strongly argued against the method of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, accusing its advancers of completely abandoning any trace of “the language’s spirit.” He understood this sort of interpretation of revival as terribly misguided, and perceived the language that was produced as a result as artificial, disconnected from its origin and utterly lifeless: “everything that has grown within the realm of Hebrew and is all-Hebrew is lacking a living heart and living words. It lacks the thought of life and the ways of life; nothing but birds speaking the language of man.”²¹ Berdichevsky supported, instead, the kind of method that prevented students from immersing themselves in Hebrew.

Whereas for Yitzhak Epstein, the only reasonable way to teach Hebrew was first, to establish Hebrew speech, and only then move on to read classic Hebrew texts,²² Berdichevsky insisted that in Hebrew alone, the book must be learned first. This was the only way in which the true spirit of the language could be captured:

Those people who learned Hebrew without “methods,” without systems, those who learned to know the Hebrew book before learning the Hebrew language and who were remote from Hebrew in Hebrew, they are the ones who later penetrated into the language’s depth and into the language’s spirit.²³

In other words, a certain distance between the language and its users had to be maintained. A true recognition of Hebrew entailed struggling through the classic text without learning, first, to

²¹ Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon” (Language Matters) in *Ba-shira u-va-lashon* (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1911), 44.

²² Epstein asserted that “one who knows how to speak a language, knows how to use it lively, naturally.” See Yitzhak Epstein, “Ivrit be-‘ivrit” (Hebrew in Hebrew), *Ha-shiloah: Yarhon le-sifrut, le-mada’ u-le-‘inyaney-ha-hayim* 4 (December, 1898): 388.

²³ “אותם האנשים שלמדו שפת עבר בלי ‘מיתודות’ ובלי שיטות, אותם שלמדו לדעת את הספר העברי עוד קודם שלמדו את השפה העברית ושהיו רחוקים מאד מעברית בעברית, הם הם הדרו אחר-כך לעומק השפה ולרוח השפה.” Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon,” 43–44.

enunciate basic Hebrew words. For Berdichevsky, the language had to remain foreign, at least to some extent.

Epstein found this approach to be bizarre and unnatural. For him, teaching Hebrew in Hebrew was fundamental to the future of the nation, as it meant favoring praxis over abstraction, bringing Jews closer to the realm of practical life by abolishing the “iron wall” which stood between them and their language, and thus turning what used to be a “foreign language” into a familiar, living tongue that could be used naturally and immediately.²⁴ By contrast, Berdichevsky, like many other Hebrew writers at the time, believed this familiarity to be destructive.

Whereas Epstein maintained that stammering was a mere phase in the process of learning Hebrew in Hebrew (“A few weeks will pass, and your students will start to stammer in the taught language, several months will pass – and they shall speak”),²⁵ Berdichevsky warned that such Hebrew stammering would lead to the decay of thought, and would eventually result in muteness:

As the boy wishes to utter to his friend . . . one of his thoughts, or depict a vision that impressed his soul, and he lacks the words to express it all, he begins to stammer, etc. And when he realizes his work was in vain, he smothers his thought and restrains himself from speaking. Thus, his thought gradually atrophies and his speaking competence turns mute.²⁶

The vocabulary of stammer and muteness, speech disorder and silence, around which this debate

²⁴ Epstein, “Ivrit be-‘ivrit” 390.

²⁵ Ibid., 386.

²⁶ “ברצות הנער להביע לחברו . . . אחת ממחשבותיו, או לתאר חזיון, שעשה רושם בנפשו, ואין לו די מלים לבטא את כל זה, הוא מתחיל לגמגם וכו', ובראותו כי תם לריק עמלו, הוא מחניק מחשבתו בקרבו וישם מחסום לפיו; וכך תלך המחשבה של הנער הולכת הלוך ומתנונית, וכשרון הדיבור הולך ונאלם. . . .” Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon,” 44. Berdichevsky is quoting here an article that was published in *Ha-boker*.

so often centers, is crucial to the understanding of the notions at work within the discourse of Hebrew's revival. As we begin to discern in Berdichevsky, stammering Hebrew functions as a twofold figure. It renders a flawed reality and at the same time demands suspension or break in the ongoing effort to turn everyday spoken Hebrew into concrete reality. Almost a speech act, the description of spoken Hebrew in Palestine as a form of stammer affixes Hebrew speech as insufficient and questions its authenticity while demanding its delay.

2. Brenner's Tongue and the Question of Spoken Hebrew

Yosef Hayim Brenner, an influential writer of fiction and essayist, and a renowned cultural leader, was both an active participant and a witness to the processes of the colloquialization of Hebrew. Upon first immigrating to Palestine in 1909, he was rather skeptical about Hebrew's prospects for becoming a spoken language.²⁷ In the years to follow, however, he noticed the sociolinguistic changes that the *yishuv* had undergone, especially due to the intensifying efforts to turn Hebrew into a formal language. Despite recognizing this change, Brenner never seems to have embraced the spread of spoken Hebrew throughout the *yishuv*. Whenever referencing spoken Hebrew in his essays, he either stresses the fact that, for the majority of Jews living in Palestine, Hebrew was not a natural spoken language and they in fact lived their everyday lives in other languages, or he highlights the contrast between the supposedly large Hebrew readership (and many Hebrew speakers) and the disappointing lack of great Hebrew literature produced within the *yishuv*. In an essay published in 1913, he writes:

Although, supposedly, one cannot deny—and I indeed don't deny—that Hebrew speech and Hebrew literature have greater presence here than in all the ghettos [the Jewish centers in Europe] . . . However, when we ask for the essence, the internal, the roots, upon which a

²⁷ Haramati, "Brenner ke-more u-manhil lashon li-mvugarim," 68–69.

language and a literature are fed and from which they draw life – the difference is not so significant. The language of those living in the land, of the prime, simple immediate life, of everyday life . . . this language is not Hebrew.²⁸

While seemingly dismissing the binary opposition between Jewish life in “Erets Israel” and in Europe, Brenner in fact validated this opposition, rendering the “Erets Israeli” failure unique. Although the difference between the essential cultural production in Palestine and in Europe was, according to Brenner, not as significant as many tried to present it, he nevertheless implied that it definitely *should have been* different. For Brenner, the impact of such insufficient Hebrew literature—a lack of both a satisfactory readership and a worthy literary production—was much greater within the discursive realm of the *yishuv*. So much so that in an earlier essay he warned that “even the Hebrew writers from abroad who come hither might turn mute.”²⁹ For within the landscape of “Erets Israel,” the diasporic experience and the unfulfilled potential of Hebrew creativity were no longer tolerable. “Here,” Brenner argued, a new, lively expression was necessary, and if the Hebrew writer could not attain it, if he “cannot find a place to renew his youth – he better sit alone and be silent.”³⁰

But Brenner was critical not only of the lack of great Hebrew literature and Hebrew speech in Palestine. He also rejected the type of Hebrew that *was* spoken there: “Only men of letters and younger students speak Hebrew sometimes. And their Hebrew, for the most part, lacks any

²⁸ “אמנם, לכאורה, אין להכחיש – ואני, אמנם, איני מכחיש – שהדיבור העברי והספרות העברית תופסים פה מקום גדול לאין ערוך מזה שהם תופסים בכל הגיטאות . . . ברם, כשאנו מבקשים את העיקר, את הפנימיות, את השרשים, שמהם יינקו ועליהם יחיו שפה וספרות – אין ההבדל גדול ביותר. שפתם של החיים בארץ, של החיים העיקריים, הפשוטים, הבלתי אמצעיים, של חיי כל רגע . . . שפה זו אינה עברית” Brenner, *Ketavim*, 4:1060.

²⁹ Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Kol kitvey Y. H. Brenner (The Complete Works of Y.H. Brenner)* (Shtibel, 1924), 132.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

natural phrases of a living tongue. Foreign, insipid Hebrew, that lacks any spirit, any basis in the soul, any intimacy.”³¹ Even when Hebrew was actually spoken, Brenner found it to be insufficient. His description of this restricted speech echoes his brutal criticism of the Jerusalem literary style (associated primarily with the Ben-Yehuda family), which was found in most daily Hebrew newspapers published in Palestine at the time. In both cases, Brenner considered the Hebrew that was apparently most common in the Jewish settlement to be inauthentic, unnatural and detached from its origins. It follows, then, that in Brenner’s view, natural, living spoken Hebrew did not stem from the people who actually spoke it. The notion of the “natural,” or “authentic” seems to have lay beyond the everyday experience of ordinary people. Hence, according to this logic, when it came to a literary representation of spoken Hebrew, the dialogues in the book were considered more authentic and genuine than the language heard on the streets.

This precise idea is raised by Ya’akov Fikhman, who claims that Brenner’s writing contains “perhaps the most *natural* Hebrew at a time that preceded the Hebrew speech.”³² Fikhman’s argument touches on an unresolved tension between Hebrew speech and Hebrew literature. He asserts that Brenner’s literary style expressed “a thirst for the *ephemeral* utterance, for the first slip of the tongue he happened to encounter, provided that it will contain the vivaciousness of a colloquial *conversation*.”³³ On the one hand, Fikhman stresses that Brenner

³¹ “עברית ידברו לפעמים רק אנשי-הספר ותלמידי ותלמידות בתי הספר – ואלה, לרוב, עברית, שאין בה כל צירופים” Brenner, *Ketavim*, 4:1060–1. טבעיים של לשון חיה, עברית תפלה, שאין בה כל רוח, כל יסוד בנפש, כל אינטימיות”

³² Ya’akov Fikhman, “Brenner ha-mesaper (Brenner the Narrator)” in *Yosef Hayim Brenner: Mivhar ma’amarey bikoret al yetsirato ha-sipurit (Yosef Hayim Brenner: A Selection of Essays on His Literary Work)* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1972), 103. Fikhman was a contemporary of Brenner. His essay was first published about a decade after Brenner’s death.

³³ Fikhman, “Brenner ha-mesaper,” 102. (Emphases in the original.)

was highly attentive to the spoken tongues of his generation and that his work often sought to mimic them. On the other hand, what Fikhman recognizes as the vivacious and ephemeral in Brenner's style somehow surpasses the realm of the contemporary, concrete conversation of everyday life.³⁴ The resulting "Brennerian tongue," as Fikhman calls it, seems to involve an elusive negotiation whereby the author's own vernacular traverses concrete spoken Hebrew, absorbs it, and at the same time transcends it. Hence, the notion of "natural Hebrew" is molded as an ideal that is beyond the reach of the public, beyond everyday speech, and something that must be given to the people from above.³⁵

We can therefore say that after arriving at what *should have been* the promised land of Hebrew creativity but which was in fact revealed to be yet another figuration of the diaspora, Brenner did not become "mute." Instead, he found "a place to renew his youth," via a simultaneous appropriation and creation of what was gradually becoming the ambiguous concept of an authentic, natural Hebrew tongue.³⁶ The nature of this unattainable authentic tongue whose trace might only be found in literature remains a question. In what follows, we shall further explore its aesthetic and ethic principles, as well as its embodiment or absence. For that purpose,

³⁴ Ibid. Fikhman also stresses that Brenner's style was packed with idioms and phrases that echo the depth of Hebrew's most ancient layers. Hence, when he refers to Brenner's conversational style, he does not suggest that Brenner had limited himself to a temporal present.

³⁵ In *Mourning Philology*, Marc Nichanian describes the circular mechanism that operates within the heart of modern national literature. He extensively shows how national literature "speaks" in the name of an imagined collectivity that it simultaneously evokes as mute or silent (not being able to hear its own voice or speak for itself). It understands itself as if hailed in order to give this silent collectivity a voice, a recognizable aestheticized identity, without which the experience of nationality is intangible. Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 42–46.

³⁶ See footnote 29.

it is imperative to turn to Brenner's literary work, where his excessive sensitivity to accents, speech impediments and different forms of talk are embodied in their full complexity.³⁷

Brenner's ambivalent relation to spoken Hebrew is perhaps most evident in the short novel *From the Beginning*, a late work published posthumously. The novel is often associated with Brenner's experiences as a teacher.³⁸ Despite his reservations concerning spoken Hebrew, in 1915 Brenner accepted a position teaching literature at the Hebrew high school Gimnasya Herzeliya in Tel Aviv.³⁹ The institution was renowned for its radical Zionist tendencies and its devotion to the "Hebrew in Hebrew" method.⁴⁰ For a couple of years, Brenner taught eighth- and ninth-graders. When he later wrote *From the Beginning*, he attempted to incorporate into the novel some of his students' awkward, colloquial Hebrew phrases. Within the vast arena of Brenner's scholarship, which has devoted a lot of attention to novels such as *From Here and There* ("מכאן ומכאן") and *Breakdown and Bereavement* ("שכול וכשלון"), *From the Beginning* remains fairly neglected. I argue, however, this late novel provides a particularly compelling example of Brenner's complex attitude toward the Hebrew speech that was gradually evolving within the *yishuv*.

³⁷ See Dan Miron, "Al be'ayot signono shel Y.H. Brenner be-sipurav" (On the Problems of Y.H. Brenner's Style in His Stories), in *Kivun orot: Tahanot ba-siporet ha-'ivrit ha-modernit* (Yerushalayim: Shoken, 1979).

³⁸ Gershon Shaked, "'Al miftan ha-hayim': Al be'ayot mivnniyot be-'Mehathala' le-Y.H. Brenner (Structural Problems in Brenner's 'From the Beginning')," *Sadan: Mehkarim be-sifrut ivrit* 4 (2000): 265–6; Govrin, "'Ha-dalut ha-nora'a ba-bituy,'" 6–7.

³⁹ Anita Shapira, *Brenner: Sipur hayim* (Brenner: A Life) (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2008), 276.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

3. *From the Beginning: "Youngsters with No Language At All"*⁴¹

The novel *From the Beginning* is set in a Jewish colony in Palestine, where a group of students at a Hebrew high school live and study in an exclusively Hebrew environment. The narrative follows the course of one school year, from late summer to early spring, and revolves around the tensions between boys and girls, students and teachers, "immigrants" and "native residents." Those depicted in the novel as "native residents" are neither Sephardic Jews of the old yishuv, nor Palestinian Arabs. Instead, they are the sons and daughters of Eastern European Jews who are themselves recent immigrants to Palestine. They all have "modern" Hebrew names (Evyatar, Hulda, Drori) and they speak no language other than Hebrew. However, the narrator often points out that their Hebrew is woven with foreign idioms. The immigrant students, on the other hand, are youngsters who, for the most part, immigrated to Palestine from Eastern Europe, leaving their families behind. They have ironic names, such as Ben Zion (son of Zion) and Nehama 'Litayit' (Nehama the Lithuanian, or "Lithuanian consolation"), and their Hebrew is far from being fluent, but receives a more empathetic treatment from the narrator.

The latter could also be read as the protagonists of the novel. The narrative opens with Ben Zion, a devoted boy who, in the beginning of the school year aims to be an exceptional student. Soon after, however, he announces his wish to become a laborer but then quickly changes his mind and acts as an aspiring poet and literary editor. Ben Zion wanders between different "stations" in a sequence that could be considered a typical experience of a Second Aliyah immigrant. Yet in childishly mimicking this experience, swiftly shifting from one aspiration to another, Ben Zion also ridicules and parodies the Zionist immigrant archetype.

⁴¹ Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Ketavim (Writings)*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po'alim: Ha-kibuts ha-me'uhad, 1977), 1777.

Imitation plays a crucial role throughout the work. To the eyes of the external narrator, the young protagonists seem to enact a theater of adulthood. Their behavior is often described in terms of mimicry or mechanical repetition. In this late work, Brenner finally turns his gaze from the character of the young Jewish intellectual, who comes from a traditional background into a modern secular world where he is bound to wander incompetent and aimless (a figure known in the historiography of modern Hebrew literature as the *talush*). Here, the focus changes, and in center stage stands a subsequent generation, the early embodiment of a supposedly new, Zionist Hebrew subjectivity grounded in Palestine.⁴² Unlike Brenner's earlier heroes, these characters are significantly younger, and the formative years of their adolescence occur in a Jewish settlement in Palestine, and even more importantly, in Hebrew.

The novel explores what Brenner refers to again and again as their "beginnings,"⁴³ marked first and foremost by their evolving sexuality. Sexuality and gender are portrayed in the novel as unstable grounds of confusion and torment, where experiment, imitation and violence are in constant play. In a Purim masquerade, for instance, the thirteen-year-old Yael, who is not wearing any costume, spontaneously decides to disguise herself as a boy. The nuance of her

⁴² Menachem Brinker argues that in this late novel, Brenner marks the beginning of a new strand in his own literary work (a strand that might have been further developed, had he not murdered in 1921). After examining the narrative of the diasporic Jew who immigrated to Palestine, whose biography coincides with his own, Brenner now turns to deal with the questions that bother the adolescence of a new generation. Menachem Brinker, *Ad ha-simtah ha-teveryanit: Ma'amar al sipur u-mahashavah bi-yetsirat Brenner* (Narrative Art and Social Thought in Y.H. Brenner's Work) (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 1990), 236.

⁴³ These "beginnings" may also be read as the many stammered beginnings of Hebrew speech, undoubtedly a major issue in this work, to which the narrator is almost obsessively alert. In this regard, we should have in mind de Certeau's evocative comment about glossolalia—a phenomenon not unrelated to stammer—as manifesting a somewhat infantile *beginning to speak*. See de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias," 39–41.

boyish look attracts Ben Zion's attention. Similarly, Nehama the Lithuanian, whose appearance "leaves the impression of a proselyte [*giyoret*],"⁴⁴ keeps repeating verses from the canonic modern Hebrew literature and copying them into her diary, while changing the gender of the narrators from male to female.⁴⁵

The youths' awkward, clunky Hebrew speech, which is a central theme in the novel, reveals yet another dimension of beginning: a beginning to speak Hebrew, as well as a beginning of a new stage in the life of Hebrew as a modern, spoken vernacular. Throughout the novel, sexuality seems to be embedded in the practice of Hebrew speech. Speaking Hebrew is inherently intertwined with an expression of Eros, albeit stammering. Similarly to the way in which sexuality is experienced, spoken Hebrew too appears to be a site of confusion and fluidity. However, while often a source of frustration, it simultaneously functions as a fertile plain for experiment and play.

The fact that Hebrew is "lacking," in both vocabulary and grammar, as well as the fact that both students and teachers often hesitate and get entangled in their own clumsy choice of words, provides the youngsters with a repertoire of possibilities to charge the language with erotic overtones. Their dialogues are filled with sexual references. Here is a clownish dialogue that takes place in geography class. One student imitates the geography teacher, while another student interferes and uses the confusion of terms (the uncertainty as to which verb and preposition are appropriate) to insert a "dirty joke:"

"Tur-ke-y... The European? She [Turkey] borders... Between... Dropped?... On... Placed?... With... The Black Sea!"
"She *lies!*" Drori interferes.
"With?..."

⁴⁴ Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1749.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:1782, 1792.

“The Black Sea!”
“Cut it out!” Ben Zion tells him off.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, Yael unsuccessfully recites Bialik’s poem “Between the River Prat and Stream Hidekel” (“בין נהר פרת ונהר חידקל”):

“A pomegranate bright... I have... And there is no one...” She got entangled in the poem.
“There is or there isn’t?” Drori asked, “I need to know!”
“And there is no one to say over its blessing” Yael cried, insisting.
“And you want to give me the honor... with a blessing?” Drori batted his eyelids “I pine for you!” He concluded with a poisonous scorn.⁴⁷

Confusion and dysfluency are exploited in these dialogues not only for the purpose of joking or teasing. The youngsters often tend to dwell on their own choice of words, turn each word and examine it closely, taste and unpack it, while stumbling and stammering in their conversations. This constant play often leads to awkward compounds, but at the same time it signifies possibilities of expression that appear to be almost beyond the reach of an experienced and well-articulated writer such as Brenner.

It is perhaps surprising to discover that Brenner, who worked in the Gimnasya Herzeliya only for two years, kept with him a myriad of personal letters, diaries, and even notepads and scraps of papers written by his former students. These, for the most part, were not addressed to

⁴⁶ “– תור-פ-יה... האירופית?.. גובלת?.. בין... מוטלת?.. על... מונחת?.. עם... הים השחור! –
– שוכבת! – מתערב דרורי
– עם?..
– הים השחור!
– עזוב! – גוער בו בן-ציון”

Ibid., 2:1747. (Ellipses in the original.)

⁴⁷ “– רימון-פז... יש לי... ואין מי... – הסתבכה בשיר.
– יש או אין? – שאל דרורי – אני צריך לדעת!..
– ואין מי שיברך עליו!.. – קראה יעל כמתעקשת.
– ואת רוצה לכבד אותי... בברכה? – מצמץ דרורי בעיניו – אני מחנחן לך!.. – גמר בלגלוג של ארס”

Ibid., 2:1790. (Ellipses in the original.)

the esteemed teacher, but were instead personal property of the students, which somehow found their way into Brenner's archives, and, as it were, became an important resource for him as he was working on the novel.⁴⁸

While Brenner seems to have been fascinated by these experimental forms of speech, the narrator in the novel expresses deep suspicion towards such spontaneous linguistic behavior. It is often presented as holding destructive implications. About halfway through the novel, the reproaching intervention of an external voice is suddenly heard. The interruptive speech of a narrator, who up to that point remained a silent observer, presents the characters' spoken Hebrew in a new, severe light:

Evyatar's gang speaks Hebrew, the language spoken at school. But it doesn't speak: it stammers. This is a gang of almost mute youngsters, youngsters with no language at all. Their mouths mechanically evoke chimes of syllables, similar to New Hebrew, but disconnected, meaningless. A Hebrew word, if they know it, they use it, alone or joined with another word, but without being able to structure from these fractured sentences a complete expression. Development... For development... No development... The time when development began...⁴⁹

There is something interesting about the stance from which this speech is uttered. In this moment, the narrator's scrutinizing gaze and heightened attentiveness to the youth's garbled expression are revealed. He is akin to an ethnographer recording the behavior of tribe members. The group of youths is emblematic of an entity utterly foreign to him, and his description is

⁴⁸ See the Y.H. Brenner archive in the *Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labour Research*; Shaked, "Al miftan ha-hayim," 265–6; Govrin, "Ha-dalut ha-nora'a ba-bituy," 6–7; Shapira, *Brenner: Sipur hayim*, 280.

⁴⁹ "החבריה של אביתר היא דוברת עברית. השפה השוררת בבית-הספר, אבל היא אינה דוברת; היא מגמגמת. זוהי חברה של צעירים אלמים כמעט, צעירים בלי לשון כלל. יוצאים מפיהם מיכנית איזו צלצולי הברות, הדומים לעברית החדשה, אבל בלי קשר, בלי טעם. מלה עברית, שיודעים אותה, משתמשים בה, בה בלבד או בצירוף עם עוד מלה, אבל מבלי לבנות מן המשפטים הקטועים שום מאמר שלם. התפתחות... בשביל ההתפתחות... לא היה התפתחות... הזמן... שהתחיל ההתפתחות...". Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1777. (Ellipses in the original.)

stricken with dismay. The narrator names the collective pathology that characterizes this group: stammer.⁵⁰ His sudden appearance in the middle of the story, along with his severe tone, serves as a reminder that far beyond the amusing atmosphere of adolescence, what is at stake here is the future of the Zionist vision.

The group's stammer is presented as a type of social disease; clearly a pathological disorder, but at the same time almost a cultural state of mind. More than an individual psychological struggle, stammer is at its full destructive force when they all come together as a group: "Each one of them on its own is sometimes slightly a person of quality (seldom), or ordinary, or bad. However, all of them together, and particularly in their 'Hebrew' mumbling, make the impression of complete unimportance."⁵¹ According to the narrator, the youngsters' stammer is devoid of any significant content. Stressing the potential multiplicity that lies in each and every word, their use of the language disrupts meaning and sabotages the fluency of communication. But the narrator also implies that the Hebrew they converse in gets them further and further away from an ideal pure language, a language whose words bear the weight of presence. Yet, interestingly, this emptiness—"the dreadful poverty of expression,"⁵² as he calls it—is somehow the result of a movement of surplus proximity, which once again echoes an erotic implication. Here too, a discussion that at first glance appears to revolve around the

⁵⁰ Marc Shell points out that the word stammer is etymologically associated with the term barbarian, which, according to Shell, often comes down to mean "a person who cannot speak *our* language 'properly,'" or "a people whose language 'we' do not understand." (Shell, *Stutter*, 66, 73). In the novel, the narrator's relation to the youngsters' Hebrew stammer seems to waver between these two meanings.

⁵¹ "כל אחד ואחד מהם כשהוא לעצמו הוא או בעל-נפש קצת (לעתים רחוקות), או רגיל, או גרוע. ואולם כולם ביחד, בצותא, ובפרט במילולם ה'עברי', הם עושים רושם של אי-חשיבות גמורה." Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1781.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2:1778.

question of Hebrew speech, very quickly turns into a manifesto against reckless sexual behavior. The narrator shifts between the two issues almost seamlessly, complaining that while the kids' language skills are utterly lacking, their "inexpressible emotions" are much too developed: "The book is foreign—but the sexuality it contains is depleted, sucked dry to the very last drop."⁵³

The narrator does not seem to differentiate between the youngsters' stammering Hebrew speech and their faulty relationship to Hebrew literature. These two negative facets seem to coincide. On the one hand, the narrator accuses the members of the group of not being able to penetrate the language of Hebrew poetry, asserting that "the Hebrew word remained foreign to these gentiles: it doesn't connect, doesn't elevate, doesn't say a thing."⁵⁴ On the other hand, there is a sense of a hasty, premature immediacy reflected in their affinity to the language and their peculiar spoken tongue. The narrator describes an ongoing struggle between the students and the teachers, in which "the teachers want to fully exercise their authority, to withhold giving a diploma for as long as they can: demanding 'exams,' 'learnings,' 'repetitions,' while they, the stammerers, want to 'tear the ropes' (that is, to unleash the chains)."⁵⁵ Ironically, it is the teachers who demand "repetitions" and delay, while the actual "stammerers" are the ones described as breaking loose.

When the narrator's speech about the youngsters' Hebrew stammer diverts into the issue

⁵³ "הספר זר – אבל המיניות שבו דלוייה, דלוייה עד הטיפה האחרונה" Ibid., 2:1779.

⁵⁴ "המלה העברית נשארה זרה לנכרים הללו: אינה מקשרת, אינה מרוממת, אינה מגידה כלום" Ibid., 2:1778.

⁵⁵ "המורים, רוצים להשתמש בכוח נתינת הדיפלום עד כמה שידם מגעת, למנוע את הנתינה עד כמה שאפשר: דורשים 'בחינות', 'ידיעות', 'חזרות', בשעה שהם, המגמגמים, היו רוצים לקרוע את החבלים' (כלומר, לנתק את הכבלים)" Ibid. The narrator demonstrates here, as in other places, the irony of the reassured speech of the youth by inserting a clunky, non-idiomatic phrase ("tearing the ropes"), and providing the "correct" phrase in brackets.

of their sexual deviance, he cites a few examples of their literary interest, including some highly misogynistic remarks (supposedly translated from Russian literature): “Love should be grabbed forcefully! No hesitations, no fingers groping, no hovering like a cat around the warm fat, no! It should be overcome with pride and recognition.”⁵⁶ These are the kind of literary sayings that captivate the imagination of the youngsters. They prefer the immediate, somewhat violent approach to the hesitant delay so typical of Brenner’s former protagonists. When later in the novel Ben Zion wants to kiss Yael, he is torn between this hesitation and the will to overpower. He ends up kissing her anyway, leaving her with an ambivalent feeling of mixed thrill and emptiness, described in the very same phrase used to capture the youths’ Hebrew stammer: “בלי” “טעם (meaningless/distasteful).”⁵⁷

Hypersexual desire is devalued in the narrator’s speech. But what is truly disastrous, he asserts, is the role verbal depiction plays in stimulating this desire. The real disaster is located in the realm of language: “This sexuality in script . . . heightens and assists, diverts the heart from everything else, evokes mimicry and takes real life away.”⁵⁸ An assumed appropriate balance is distorted through this relation to language, to literature and to sexuality. The youngsters are awkwardly straightforward, but at the same time cannot obtain control of their spoken language. Their linguistic behavior appears as an empty mechanical repetition, which is simultaneously

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2:1779.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2:1801–2. Compare with the quote on page 19: “Their mouths mechanically evoke chimes of syllables, similar to New Hebrew, but disconnected, *meaningless*.” (Ibid., 2:1777, my emphasis.) The Hebrew phrase that Brenner uses in both cases is בלי טעם, and the repetition of the phrase hardly seem coincidental. At a later point in the story, Ben Zion ceases to hesitate and attacks Yael violently. He is interrupted only by a roommate who suddenly enters the room.

⁵⁸ “המיניות שבכתב . . . מסייעה לדבר ומחדשת את הדבר, מפנה את הלב מדברים אחרים, מעוררת לחיקוי ונוטלת את החיים” Ibid., 2:1780.

theatrical and eccentric.⁵⁹

Throughout the entire narrative, there appears to be a recurring tension between this movement of immediacy and surplus proximity, and the request to delay and suspend, or keep a safe distance. The latter is mostly demonstrated by the immigrant students, particularly in the behavior of Nehama the Lithuanian, an outsider to this group. Nehama, with her appearance “of a proselyte” and her deep interest in Hebrew literature, stays away from the “gang” and does not participate in their shenanigans. She is introverted and barely ever speaks: “her silence seems to derive from fear of desecrating the sacredness of speech.”⁶⁰

The rest of the students, however, i.e. “Evyatar’s gang,” are wild and obscene. Those “natives”, born in Palestine, who speak no language other than Hebrew but whose Hebrew is equal to “no language at all” are particularly troubling for the narrator. Their Hebrew stammer is spread and scattered not only in speech, but also in endless notes and scraps of papers constantly passed from one to the other.⁶¹ A sense of careless defilement accompanies their dialogues and actions.

The native Drori (whose name, derived from the Hebrew *dror*, means freedom), for instance, inadvertently inserts Arabic and Russian words into his colloquial Hebrew.

“Although he is one of the natives, he had learned from the older students, the ‘Muscovites,’

⁵⁹ Examples of the youngsters’ theatrical gestures are found throughout the work. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 2:1796, 1797, 1805.

⁶⁰ Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1749.

⁶¹ See, for instance, *Ibid.*, 2:1761, 1786. These examples clarify that the students also “stammer” in their writing: “these scraps of paper, where the word *shalom* is not fully uttered, only ‘sh...’ followed by ellipsis” (*Ibid.*, 2:1786).

some Russian words, which he pronounces in an Arabic accent.”⁶² The narrator describes this native Israelite’s expression as “foreign,”⁶³ and his appearance as “resembling a Georgian, or a small Armenian held captive among another people.”⁶⁴ Drori’s sense of liberation, which allows him to appropriate both Russian and Arabic, is presented as unconstrained and dangerous. Having been born in the *yishuv*, he lacks the type of cautious inhibition that seems to largely determine the characters of the immigrant students. Early on, it is said “the east has left its marks on him.” Drori, as the entire “native” gang, is an embodiment of what Brenner imagines as the inevitable—somewhat startling—outcome of a Zionist, Hebrew-speaking settler society grounded in Middle-Eastern Palestine. Here it becomes clear that what Brenner considers a perverted, surplus proximity, designates—at least to some extent—a proximity to both Arabic and “the east.”

And yet the fact that “the east” has left its marks on Drori also reveals that the narrator surely does not perceive this so-called native as “an eastern.” Drori, the son of the former East European Yeshiva student Mendel Frieman, represents a type of mixed identity—neither “eastern,” not quite “western,” a settler who is not an immigrant. What mostly differentiates him from characters such as Nehama are an exaggerated self-confidence and a sense of ownership that conceals a potential violence, at once despicable and alluring for the characters that surround him.

Up until here, the binary opposition traced throughout the novel is typical of Brenner’s

⁶² “למרות היותו מילידי הארץ, למד מפי התלמידים הגדולים יוצאי ‘מוסקוב’ איזו מלים רוסייות, שהוא מבטא בהברה ערבית.” Ibid., 2:1753.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2:1768.

work; an opposition between the cautious and the careless, the silent and the boisterous, those who are weak and ask to delay, repeat, maintain distance, and those who exercise ownership and sovereignty. It is largely agreed among Brenner's scholars that for Brenner, truth usually lies on the side of the former, that is, with the uncertain and the hesitant, with that which is whispered, stammered, or can hardly be put into words.⁶⁵ And yet, in *From the Beginning*, we may discern a slight deviation from that familiar dichotomy. First, there is a sense of contradiction in the kind of accusation directed at the students. While self-assured, confident speech is usually a clear notorious characteristic in Brenner's conception, here the students are attacked for *not* truly owning or penetrating the language. But even more striking is the fact that in *From the Beginning*, both sides of the divide seem to lead to a very similar end. All attempts to speak Hebrew fluently result in stammer. That is, hesitation and delay prompt stammer just as the pretension to speak the language confidently, without any hindrances. As fluent Hebrew speech ceases to be attainable, we are left with nothing but a Hebrew stammer. And while fragmentary tongue is usually elevated in Brenner's work, in *From the Beginning*, the narrator presents the students' stammering Hebrew as a distorted trace, an echo of a language that is said to be full and complete but is never actually revealed as such.

Throughout the novel, communication never appears smooth or goes unnoticed. The pathos attributed to the youths' utterance has to do precisely with that opaque dimension of communication. Very often, words themselves become a source of frustration for them. Yet, for the most part, it is not the meaning of a word, but rather the elusiveness of meaning that causes them suffering: "What is the difference between sadness and sorrow?" . . . She talks and talks

⁶⁵ Hanna Nave, "Nora: Le-ofyo shel mishpat ha-emet etzel Brenner" ("Awful": On the Nature of the Judgment of Truth in Brenner)," *Sadan: Mehkarim be-sifrut ivrit* 4 (2000).

and neither she nor her addressee understand clearly what she says,”⁶⁶ “‘precedent’ . . . this ambiguous word—she would have asked Ben Zion for its meaning were they still talking—ruined her world,”⁶⁷ “words got intermingled in his mind.”⁶⁸ Words are powerful, but their power is enigmatic, as they cannot be pinned down or controlled. Speech therefore reflects a dissonance, and language is experienced as disconnected from the self, and from the body that speaks.

As previously mentioned, the category of stammer is deployed in the novel to capture a collective experience, or better yet, a shared relation to language. This relation impoverishes speech, deprives it of its usual privileges. Devoid of its precedence, speech is rendered in the novel as necessarily imitative (and therefore derivative) activity. Spoken language is seen as neither authentic nor natural. On the contrary, in the very pretention to speak freely, the youths’ gestures are revealed as *already* mechanical. As Haviva Pedaya argues, stammer constantly points to the mechanism of speech.⁶⁹ While stammer reflects the disassociation of language from the self, it also materializes language, displacing speech from the sphere of the spirit to that of the body and the senses. Within the tradition of Western thought, features such as the bodily and the material are traditionally attributed to writing as a category opposed to speech. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida repeatedly points to this dichotomy: “Writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter

⁶⁶ Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1797.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:1808.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:1813.

⁶⁹ Pedaya, “Gamvegam (gimgum).”

external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos.”⁷⁰ Yet in Brenner’s novel, it is the newly evolved Hebrew *speech* that seems to embody this externality and activate the so-called perverse attributes it entails. A threatening enactment of speech as a form of “writing” (in the sense described above) prevails throughout the narrative. Derrida shows how thinkers such as Saussure and Rousseau have described the inversion of the hierarchy between speech and writing not only as a theoretical error, but also as “a sort of stain” and primarily “a sin:”

Sin has been defined often—among others by Malebranche and by Kant—as the inversion of the natural relationship between the soul and the body through passion. Saussure here points at the inversion of the natural relationship between speech and writing. It is not a simple analogy . . . the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems—conversely—to borrow its metaphors.⁷¹

The twofold drama portrayed in *From the Beginning* similarly pertains to an inversion of a relationship—a disruption of hierarchy—that occurs both in the realm of sexuality and within language. The two inversions are not simply analogue, they are intertwined and affect one another. Through passion, body prevails the soul (“the empty flirt . . . consumes the flesh, robs the soul”⁷² or “takes real life away”).⁷³ Similarly, the passionate attempt to force and enact Hebrew speech, subsequently to the rise of Hebrew literature, transgresses the natural relations of representation within language. The anarchic result is perversion, indeed a sin.⁷⁴ Spoken

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

⁷² Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1810.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2:1780.

⁷⁴ In his essay “Ha-janer he-erets isre’eli ve-avizrayehu (The Genre of Erets Israel and Its Devices)” Brenner argues against a type of harmonious literary representation that characterizes Hebrew literature written in the *yishuv* (“the isre’eli genre”). Hannan Hever points out that the

Hebrew is stammering.

Yet the novel does not suggest a simple inversion between speech and writing. Writing does not fully occupy the privileged space formerly attributed to speech within that equation. If writing is slightly favored in the novel, it is only because speech marks an even greater degree of distance and mediation within representation. But in fact, the everlasting split latent in the notion of the derivative Hebrew speech seems crucial for Brenner's poetics. It opens a path for representation in which the possibility of an original, fluent speech is always deferred; always already thwarted: "In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable . . . no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image."⁷⁵

As we shall soon see, this notion of split in the self is a quintessential device within Brenner's poetics. The following section will focus on some of the techniques and modes of narration frequently employed in Brenner's oeuvre. It will explore the apparent contradiction between the rejection of stammering in *From the Beginning* and what could be described as Brenner's own poetics of stammering.

4. The Split Narrator: Brenner's Poetics of Stammering

Discussions on rhetoric, poetics, literary style or lack thereof, have played an important part in

word Brenner uses in the title, *avizrayehu*, is a Talmudic phrase, associated with Halakhic prohibition. It seems that Brenner's relation to the "isre'eli genre" literature coincides with the narrator's relation to Hebrew speech; both are depicted as sinful. See Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om: Kri'ot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-'ivrit* (The Narrative and the Nation: Critical Readings in the Canon of Hebrew Fiction) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 49.

⁷⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 36.

the commentary and scholarly research on Brenner from their earliest days. What was initially considered enthusiastic writing in a fairly “sloppy style,” was gradually interpreted, ever since the 1950s, as a carefully crafted artistry of modernist literature.⁷⁶ A particular emphasis on Brenner’s complex approach to language is evident in Dan Miron’s pioneer essay on Brenner’s style. Miron draws attention to Brenner’s “excessive sensitivity” to both language and the literary medium, arguing that Brenner’s narration demonstrates an alert attentiveness to the reverberating surplus meanings of each and every word.⁷⁷ This attentiveness, which also reflects deep suspicion, creates the impression that Brenner’s use of the language is constantly accompanied by a haunting doubt as to what is being said. Ariel Hirschfeld demonstrates a similar argument in his close reading of Brenner’s novella *Nerves* (“עצבים”). Locating the narrative’s drama at a linguistic level, Hirschfeld shows how Brenner inserts words foreign to their linguistic context, in order to ridicule any tendency for an overly ideal romanticization. Such ridiculing moments, however, never fully abolish the effect of the romantic sentiment that preceded them. They call it into question only to bring it back as an option at a later moment, thus manifesting a sense of constant wavering.⁷⁸ These readings into Brenner’s style already point to a somewhat hesitant tendency in his writing, a movement of saying and negating, which could be read as a form of stammer.

⁷⁶ Among the famous critics of Brenner’s style, one can name Yosef Klausner, M.Y. Berdichevsky and H.N. Bialik. See Avner Holtzman, “Poetics, Ideology, Biography, Myth: The Scholarship on J.H. Brenner, 1971–96,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 18, no. 1 (January, 1998): 83.

⁷⁷ Miron, “Al be’ayot signono shel Y.H. Brenner be-sipurav,” 359.

⁷⁸ Ariel Hirschfeld, “Retet tsamarot ve-dagim meluhim: Al milim ve-dvarim be-‘atsabim le-Y.H. Brenner (Trembling Treetops and Salty Fish: On Words and Things in Y.H. Brenner’s *Nerves*),” *Sifrut ve-hevra ba-tarbut ha-‘ivrit ha-hadasha*, 2000, 71–81.

For Menachem Brinker, this hesitant tendency, along with other expressions of Brenner's poetics, centers around one principle: the intentionally driven tension between "rhetoric" and "sincerity." In his monumental study on Brenner, Brinker points to the contradiction in Brenner's attempt to create the impression of a sincere, non-rhetorical utterance throughout his writing. This very attempt, argues Brinker, renders Brenner a clear rhetorician. The many autobiographical allusions, the fragmentary style and the repeated presentations of the text as a "citation of real life" (a diary entry, a letter, a gushing speech or a cry), all serve as examples of this "rhetoric of sincerity," as Brinker calls it.⁷⁹

Boaz Arpali similarly attempts to capture the complexity of Brenner's work within an organizing oxymoronic principle. He shows how by confronting opposing ideologies and exposing their stagnant nature, Brenner negates each and every one of them. Arpali, who explores the notion of truth throughout Brenner's belletristic writing, argues that Brenner's continuous striving for truth is riddled with negation. However, Arpali maintains that through this constant negation, a primary truth does emerge in Brenner's thinking, a truth whose essence is negative: "the negative principle."⁸⁰

Relying on both of these accounts and pointing to the ways in which they complement one another, Hanna Nave contends that truth in Brenner's work is marked by "negativity" which is manifested both philosophically and poetically. She shows how the negative is favored and grounded as truthful by way of boisterous mediations that are simultaneously exposed as empty

⁷⁹ Brinker, *Ad ha-simtah ha-teveryanit*, 15–17.

⁸⁰ Boaz Arpali, *Ha-'ikar ha-sheleli: Ide'ologiya u-po'etika be-"mikan u-mikan" u-ve-"atsabim" le-Y.H. Brenner (The Negative Principle: Ideology and Poetics in Two Stories by Y.H. Brenner)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me'uhad, 1992), 20.

and false. Hence, within Brenner's stories, what is considered "truthful" also reflects a voice that is barely discernible: "this is the rhetoric of sincerity in its ultimate manifestation: not only garbled language and spirit, not only stammer and failure of expression, but even complete silence or silencing designate the place of definite and final sincerity; and it therefore appears in close proximity to extreme suffering, evil and death."⁸¹ In other words, Nave suggests that Brenner's work sophisticatedly produces its truths not only as stammering, but also as mute. The voice of the representative of truth is only available through its distancing or silencing, through a series of violent mediations.⁸²

It is this notion of distancing that is particularly crucial to my reading of Brenner. Taking the interpretations presented above as a point of departure, I suggest turning the gaze from the so-called attempt at sincerity, from the notion of a negative silent truth concealed within Brenner's work, to the very visible act of its distancing. As we will see, this shift of perspective might also call into question the very category of the truthful, a category that remains largely uncompromised in the readings of Brinker, Arpali, and Nave.

The awkward mediation of a sincere, originally spoken truth is a recurring theme both in Brenner's work and throughout the various interpretations of it. A major component in Brenner's writing which evokes this view is the apologetic, fictional "publisher's note," which opens many of his later works.⁸³ These notes usually have a similar argumentative structure. They prepare the

⁸¹ Nave, "'Nora:' Le-ofyo shel mishpat ha-emet etzel Brenner," 187.

⁸² Ibid., 205–206. A good example for that in *From the Beginning* is the character of Nehama the Lithuanian, whose sincerity is represented precisely by her silence.

⁸³ Among these works one can mention *Shana ahat* (One Year), *From Here and There*, *Breakdown and Bereavement*, and *From the Beginning*.

reader for a flawed text, presenting it as lacking both in terms of literary composition and style, and in its ability to authentically reflect the voice of its “original author.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, it is claimed that the text was found in (or taken from) the personal belongings of its initial author. Crucially, these apologetic forewords split the utterance of the narrator. Prior to the beginning of the story, they designate an additional agency (to the one who is fictionally identified as the author of the text), and thus divide the narrating voice, rendering at least two (if not three or four)⁸⁵ levels of mediation.

Michael Gluzman elaborately reads the “publisher’s note” that opens the novel *Breakdown and Bereavement*. Here, the text is presented as a sort of reminiscent journal originally written in the first person. However, in the foreword, the publisher-narrator confesses that he has converted the text from the first to the third person. Hence Gluzman contends:

The central drama of the text . . . [is] a drama of expropriation. The fragmentariness and sloppiness of *Breakdown and Bereavement* attest to the constant mediation of the external narrator who expropriates Hefets’s [the protagonist] notes and does with them as he pleases. The sloppiness and fragmentariness frequently make manifest the uprooting of Hefets’s story from the first person of the “I” and its transfer to the third person’s space of otherness. The foreword therefore changes the standing of the text, for by means of it . . . Brenner manages to cast doubt on the “authenticity” and reliability of the speaker’s voice.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Arpali shows how these two types of argument in fact contradict one another, and therefore challenge the reliability of the narrator. Arpali, *Ha-‘ikar ha-sheleli*, 101–3.

⁸⁵ The opening “publisher’s note” in *From Here and There*, for instance, depicts a conversation between a publisher and an editor, neither are the original producers of the text. They discuss the pros and cons in publishing this semi-literary work of an actual writer, who later appears as one of the protagonists in the novel. Throughout the novel, this writer himself constantly (and revealingly) interferes in the dialogues of the characters he purports to represent. Hence the text bluntly reveals these multiple interferences of a writer, an editor and a publisher. Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1265–440.

⁸⁶ Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni: Le’umiyut, migdar u-miniyut ba-sifrut Ha-‘ivrit ha-hadasha* (The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature) (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts ha-me’uhad, 2007), 161.

In its very inception, the novel is marked by a violent expropriation. Throughout the narrative, this external narrator will manifest his interruptive interventions in everything “authentic.” As Gluzman points out, in this early confession, the narrator explicitly defines the nature of the text as inauthentic, derivative, even parasitic. Its attempt at sincerity is therefore doomed to failure from the very beginning. That is because sincerity is only produced within it by way of a violent distortion. In other words, the attempt to represent truth truthfully is always already contaminated with falsity.⁸⁷ Sincerity is therefore revealed as distorting, and truth a necessarily unstable category, since it is available only through distorting mediation.

It seems, then, that the rhetoric of sincerity involves another layer. It is not a mere pretention to present the text as sincere utterance, rather: it says something about sincerity itself. The very attempt at sincerity is repeatedly presented in Brenner’s work as a distorting process. Sincere representation is *not* transparent (and transparency is an insincere illusion). It is an apparent mediation, whose form is fragmentary, “wretched and ugly.”⁸⁸ It is never fluent, but rather stammering and excessive. It constantly points to its own wretched visibility, announces

⁸⁷ In his reading of Brenner’s “The Genre of Erets Israel and Its Devices,” Hever argues that Brenner does not advocate for a more accurate or truthful representation of reality (as commonly assumed), but in fact summons a different type of lie, that is, a diminishing representation instead of an overly flattering one. Hever then moves on to argue that Brenner’s main purpose in this essay is to demand literary representation that would constitute reality in a contemporary state of “coming into being,” and thus maintain a continuous tension of desire between representation and reality. Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le’om*, 50–54. While I agree with Hever that Brenner consciously insists on depicting reality (as well as the literary work itself) as “coming into being,” I suggest that Brenner does not assume that a simple, authentic representation of reality is in fact possible. For Brenner, representation necessarily involves distortion and violence.

⁸⁸ This is how Yehezkel Hefets, the “original narrator” of *Breakdown and Bereavement*, is described in the “publisher’s note.” Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1443.

its own failures and always already reflects a split in itself. This is how representation is framed throughout Brenner's work.

In a sense, Brenner's poetics of stammering could be read as the effect of this split in the narrating voice. "Noises of otherness"⁸⁹ constantly traverse and interrupt narration, scatter haunting doubts and hesitation throughout the text. The works manifest themselves as being in the process of creation. The apologetic forewords usually introduce them as no-longer-a-memoir, not-yet-a-proper-literary-work. They are described as scripts imparted to the readers in the midst of the process of editing. This incompleteness, which exceeds any genre ascription, conveys a demand for a stammering-like form. But this insistence on the incomplete, the resistance to bring speech to an end, also promotes an ethics of stammering.

Going back to Brenner's peculiar relationship with spoken Hebrew, we can now reconsider his notion of the authentic, natural spoken tongue.⁹⁰ For Brenner, this ideal Hebrew is available only through its constant deferral, only by way of stammering mediation. As we saw earlier, in the novel *From the Beginning* everyone stammers. And yet in this novel, an angry narrator makes cruel accusations against the new generation of Hebrew stammerers. Their stammer is presented as sinful, lifeless imitation, as the emptying of a vivid creative language. But to a large extent, it seems as if in this late work, the narrator struggles to keep up with the uncontrollable developments that Hebrew is undergoing.

Let us look back to the narrator's enraged speech against the students' stammer. As previously mentioned, the narrator attacks the youths: "this is a gang of almost mute youngsters,

⁸⁹ De Certeau, "Vocal Utopias," 29.

⁹⁰ See section 2 of this chapter.

youngsters with no language at all.” However, his narration itself assumes a stammering form: “A Hebrew word, if they know it, they use it, alone or joined with another word, but without being able to structure from these fractured sentences a complete expression.”⁹¹ Constructing the sentence into short units divided by commas, Brenner infuses the text with a stammering (but also clearly poetic) rhythm. The commas force the reader to stop and take a breath after each unit. Any vocal phrasing of this line necessarily results in a sort of halting speech. Brenner breaks up the very sentence whose content is the inability of Hebrew-speaking youngsters to “structure a complete expression.” The content of the sentence is opposite to the way in which it is performed.

At the end of this paragraph, the narrator’s speech peculiarly dissolves into awkward, meaningless half sentences, revolving around one word: “Development... For development... No development... The time when development began...”⁹² In the paragraph that follows, we are provided with a series of examples of the students’ clunky dialogues. However, before delving into these examples, the narrator’s own words seem to crumble. No graphical sign in the text differentiates these amputated lines from the rest of the narrator’s monologue. Hence, they can hardly be read as direct quotations the students’ speech (which is indeed quoted in the following, separate paragraph). Instead, it seems that stammer infects the narrator as he speaks. The word “development” (התפתחות) is iterated in three fragmented sentences, immediately following the assertion that the students are unable “to structure from these fractured sentences a complete

⁹¹ “מלה עברית, שיודעים אותה, משתמשים בה, בה בלבד או בצירוף עם עוד מלה, אבל מבלי לבנות מן המשפטים” הקטועים שום מאמר שלם” Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1777

⁹² Ibid.

expression.”⁹³ Development could be read here as referring simultaneously to the permutations of Hebrew, to the students’ evolving sexuality, or to the newly established Jewish settlement in Palestine. Either way, the iterated word equivocates the sentence, creating ambiguous, awkward speech, a textual noise in the midst of narration. These half-sentences, which are only anchored through the word “development” cannot stand on their own or come to an end, as if erasing the very occurrence they were describing, or at least suspending the becoming of that occurrence.⁹⁴

We should take a closer look at the elusive figure of the narrator in *From the Beginning*. The subtitle to the novel is “Shadows of Impressions by Someone.”⁹⁵ This arbitrary “someone” is the narrator, and the novel ostensibly consists of the notes he has left behind, containing his scattered “impressions.” The novel opens with a typical Brennerian “publisher’s foreword,” of the sort discussed above. In this foreword, an undisclosed “publisher” claims he has found these “unsigned feuilletonic-belletristic notes” among the ruins of a deserted house.⁹⁶ Upon discovering these notes, the publisher is faced with a moral dilemma; he is concerned that publishing them might result in corrupting younger readers.⁹⁷ But he eventually concedes to

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ See Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le’om*, 54.

⁹⁵ “צללי רשמים של מאן-דהר” Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1745.

⁹⁶ According to the fictional publisher, the script was found in a deserted house after the Ottoman government had expelled its residents with the break of the First World War. In reality, the script for Brenner’s novel (including this fictional opening note) was actually found among the ruins of his Jaffa apartment following his murder in 1921.

⁹⁷ In fact, Brenner echoes here a concern that has been voiced in reality regarding his own script of *From the Beginning*. In a letter dated from 1919, Brenner writes that Menahem Poznansky had told him that he thinks *From the Beginning* should not be published at the moment, since it might have a bad influence on the youth. See Yosef Hayim Brenner, *Kol kitvey Y. H. Brenner (The Complete Works of Y.H. Brenner)* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me’uhad, 1955), 421.

publish them while omitting only some of the “dubious parts.”⁹⁸ The text is therefore defined from the very beginning as personal impressions, which have already been edited (and censored) by another agency. At the same time, the narrator’s impressions conceal another layer of mediation, since, as previously mentioned, the narrator records, represents, and even emulates the speech of the youngsters in his text. We are left with nothing but a series of mediations. “The beginning” itself—the reality that the narrator mimics—is already imitative. According to the narrator, the youngster’s speech is derivative. It does not reflect the type of primary, originary truth—an innocent childish sincerity—that an aspiring ethnographer might have expected to encounter. Instead, it is an obscene, bodily speech, reckless and distorted, which evokes the threat that reverberates throughout the discourse of revival: that of a mechanized language and a mechanized society.

We barely know anything about the narrator throughout the novel. But on one rare occasion, towards the very ending, he does reveal himself. Quite abruptly and without any former mention, it is implied that the narrator is in fact a guest at the colony, a forty-year-old sick man, nursed by Nehama the Lithuanian. From his sick bed, it now becomes clear that he had passively followed the tormented young students, especially Nehama and Ben Zion (the two immigrants), to whom he shows special regard. In his single moment of expression in the first person, he regrets that he cannot assist or warn them, that he in fact cannot do anything to prevent their “disaster.”⁹⁹ This statement echoes the short dedication that accompanies the novel. Brenner had dedicated it to his son (“To my far away son, to Uri Nissan”), urging him to read the

⁹⁸ Brenner, *Ketavim*, 2:1745.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:1810.

text when he grows up and apologizing for his meager tribute, stating that he had “yearned to give more.”¹⁰⁰ In his mind, the sick narrator addresses the two immigrants, Nehama and Ben Zion, in what appears to be a fatherly gesture. Brenner had inserted into this paragraph his son’s middle name (the name of a month in the Hebrew calendar):

It is Nissan. Soon the burning sun will rise from above, the burning sun of the east, and your faces, my children—you are the children who were brought hither from there—will be dry and pale.¹⁰¹

Soon after these words, the speaker bursts into tears, and the narrative continues in the third person. This final lamentation of the narrator, which conveys the immigrants’ experience of otherness under the burning sun of the east, could also be read as a lamentation for the transitional state of Hebrew, for the Hebrew that had flourished in the multilingual environment of Eastern-European modern Jewish culture. For Brenner, whatever awaits after this stammering Hebrew is of disastrous dimensions.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2:1744.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 2:1810.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that Hebrew revival literature gave rise to an experience of language which revolved around an ambivalent suspension of transition. That transition, at once political, social, and poetic, was largely framed through concepts that pertained to the life and death of the language and to the life and death of those purporting to revive the language, or to be revived by their enactment of the language. The vacillation between life and death shaped the discourse of revival as uncanny, particularly because it left open the question of whether the end of revival meant the life or the death of Hebrew and whether revival was preventing a nearing disaster, always in sight, or rather, it was the disaster itself. In my readings, I have shown that within the Hebrew literary imagination, revival is neither a linear process nor a discrete event. What defines and enables it is its open-endedness. The life of Hebrew as a reviving language depends on this non-living condition, which is perpetuated throughout these literary debates.

Approaching revival through close readings of various texts that both reflect on and participate in a reviving effort has provided me with an alternative framework for an analysis of this major key concept in the history of modern Hebrew literature and Jewish nationalism. I have shown that revival is articulated through iterated tropes, which conceal contesting narratives that are in constant dialogue. Put together, the texts examined in this dissertation tell quite a different story from the one that is traditionally told (or is rather left untold) within the historiography of modern Hebrew literature.

A crucial element in this story is the violence that inheres in the project of revival. The relations between language and the nation, or language and its speaking subjects, even language and literature, are repeatedly narrated in this discourse via the dynamics of submission and

control in which both the language and the national “self” are found in a state of war. In all of the texts read here, language revival, insofar as it speaks to the mission of nationalization, involves a violent struggle which often leaves its mark on the body of the language, or on the bodies of those who speak it. As we have seen, mutilated, crippled, or sick bodies are common metaphors within these debates. But more crucially, the discourse of revival, with its passionate vitalism and organic terminology, is also deeply preoccupied with lifeless figures that are said to be animated by an external force. Golems, puppets, ventriloquized mutes, or otherwise mechanically speaking figures inhabit the discursive realm of revival and remerge throughout its reflective discussions. Such non-living creatures, who are manipulated into vitality, are depicted as both the motive for and the products of revival. Revival should therefore be understood as a mechanism of creation which constitutes its objects as living-dead. In this respect, it corresponds, and often finds common ground, with nineteenth-century European discourses of nationalism, colonialism, Orientalism, and philology.

Following the work of Marc Nichanian in *Mourning Philology*,¹ I have argued that revival could be read as a form of mourning. Hebrew revival literature laments what it simultaneously constitutes as living-dead, and this ongoing lamentation generates and sustains its superfluous literary discourse and its poetic and ideological force. But since the lost object is never fully dead, revival is always also melancholic. Insofar as mourning is sung and uttered, it is never fully concluded; rather it maintains and performs the process of mourning, while already perceiving the living-dead as implicated in the lamenting “self.” This question of the melancholy

¹ Marc Nichanian, *Mourning Philology: Art and Religion at the Margins of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

of Hebrew, which seems to prevail in later periods of Hebrew literature as well, should be further explored and developed in future research.

Recently, Hebrew literary scholarship has been engaged in reframing the poetics of some of the literary generations that followed the revival literature, particularly since the 1940s, as melancholic. Contemporary studies by Michael Gluzman, Hannan Hever, and Nizan Lebovic suggest that this melancholy is entwined with the newly established sovereignty of the Israeli nation-state.² These important critical interventions should be measured not only against the utopic visions and desires of pre-state modern Hebrew literature, but also against the deferred mourning of the revival of Hebrew. The politics and poetics of mourning and melancholia in Hebrew literature should be studied with respect to its shifting experiences of language following the establishment of Israel and the becoming of Hebrew a language of the nation-state. In this respect, it would be particularly fascinating to reexamine the constitutive metaphor of the living-dead in Zionist Hebrew poetry since the 1940s (in works by Natan Alterman and Hayim Guri, among others) in comparison with the trope of the living-dead in the discourse of Hebrew revival literature.

The creation of a lifeless creature always comes at a price. That which appears to be dead bears the potential to break out against its makers. Therein lies the monstrous horizon of revival—the catastrophe it foreshadows. But in this horizon also lies its political promise. Could the latent

² Michael Gluzman, *Shirat ha-tevu'im: Ha-melancholya shel ha-ribonut ba-shira ha-ivrit bi-shnot ha-hamishim ve-ha-shishim* (The Poetry of the Drowned: Sovereignty and Melancholia in Hebrew Poetry after 1948) (Hotsa'at yediot aharonot, 2018); Hannan Hever, *Anahnu shivrey haruzim (We are broken rhymes)* (Yerushalayim: Hotsa'at sefarim 'a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, ha-universitah ha-ivrit, 2017); Nitzan Lebovic, *Tsiyonut u-melankholyah: Ha-hayim ha-ketsarim shel Yisra'el Zarhi* (The Short Life of Israel Zarchi: A Melancholic Zionist) (Yerushalayim: Karmel, 2015).

forces of Hebrew be reenacted against—or in subversion of—the sovereign speech that engendered them? How might this creative power of Hebrew reveal itself under its current conditions? The key to this question, it may be argued, lies in an embodied failure of Hebrew speech, in what was often described in early twentieth-century Hebrew literature—and is framed in the final chapter of this dissertation—as Hebrew “stammer.”

Stammer displays a failure to reproduce sovereign speech. In not being able to properly cite or mimic proper language, stammer exposes the manipulation of speech and gestures towards the possibility of dismantling the norms and social residues embedded in the language one speaks precisely at the moment of speaking. Could this critical understanding of stammer provide a way out of the constraints of the national idiom? Is it at all possible to become dysfluent in one’s language, to unlearn the laws and conventions of the language, and instead, make the words speak differently?

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