

The Novel and the Nation:

The Case of David Grossman's *See Under: Love*

The formative role of the novel genre in the emergence and the consolidation of modern nation states has become nearly axiomatic in the field of literary studies. In *Imagined Communities*, his classic study of the emergence of the nation, Benedict Anderson famously argued that “the historical appearance of the novel-as-popular-commodity and the rise of nation-ness were intimately related” (Anderson 1998, p. 334). Anderson’s thesis about the close affinities between novel, nation, and culture applies both to the nineteenth-century European nation-state and to the later development of non-Western, postcolonial nations (Cheah 2003, pp. 235-248). Yet while the novel genre has amply demonstrated its capacity to consolidate a national imaginary, the history of the novel has also shown its power to *criticize* such an imaginary. Through its various modernist and postmodernist mutations, the genre has often intervened in the imagining of the nation in a way that destabilized rather than fortified national unity. Anderson himself conceded as much when in 1998, fifteen years after the first publication of his thesis, he noted that while the link between novel and notion is “rather easy to make for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” except for “some recently decolonized parts of Asia and Africa,” the affinities between the two have become “visibly strained” in the second half of the twentieth century (1998, pp. 334-335).

In the first section of this article, I return to Anderson’s seminal analysis in order to emphasize two crucial aspects that are often obliterated in the frequent invocations of his work. First, Anderson does not claim that the novel genre can inculcate a particular nationalist ideology, but rather that the novel is a technology that makes it possible to imagine “the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (1991, pp. 24-25); second, this imagining consists in a particular “apprehension of time” (p. 22) that is particularly conducive to imagining a

sense of national community. By retrieving these vital dimensions of Anderson's analysis, it becomes possible to see that the novel genre's capacity to critically intervene in a national imaginary is not only situated on a thematic or formal level, but also on the level of its temporal organization.

The rest of this article applies this insight to the case of Israeli author David Grossman's 1986 novel *'Ayen 'erekh: ahavah* (translated as *See Under: Love*, the title I use in the rest of this article). Grossman's novel is routinely recognized as a major intervention in Israel's national imaginary. The first of the novel's four sections, which is situated in 1959, chronicles the social pathologies that beset the nation's exclusion of the Holocaust from the national imaginary at that time, an exclusion that was informed by a Zionist discourse that regarded the Holocaust as "the ultimate manifestation of a pathological diasporic mentality," and that rejected the alleged passivity of the victims of the Holocaust in its celebration of the heroic resolve of the "New Jew" (Moragh 1999, p. 459). By representing the horrors and the afterlife of the Holocaust in an unusually blunt and imaginative way, *See Under: Love*, according to much of the scholarship on the novel, helped the nation to finally "assimilate the legacy of the Holocaust into the communal narrative" and to own up to the untenability of Zionist visions of national identity (Bernstein 2005, pp. 78-79). *See Under: Love* "was perceived as both a literary and societal event" (Bernstein 2005, p. 65); "it has revolutionized the conventional Israeli attitude to the major trauma of Jewish history" (Shaked 1989, p. 313); it "has taken an important step toward subverting the exclusionary conceptions of Israel's conventional view of the Holocaust" (Moragh 1999, p. 475). On the strength of Anderson's case for the importance of the apprehension of time for the novel genre's ability to intervene in the national imaginary, I argue that *See Under: Love*'s critical intervention in a national tradition that downplayed the nation's connection to the Holocaust not only operates on a thematic and a formal level, but is made possible by its reorganization of the temporal logic of the

traditional novel. An analysis of the novel's temporal organization explains why it not only constitutes a major event in Hebrew literary history, but also in the Israeli national imaginary; moreover, it makes it possible to address another major challenge in the scholarship in the book: the question of the relation between the novel's four stylistically very diverse and seemingly discontinuous sections.

There is a further reason why *See Under: Love* provides a good testing ground for the relation between novel and nation. While the link between the two is well-established in the cases of nineteenth-century Europe and of postcolonial nations, the state of Israel cannot simply be reduced to either of these cases. Even if it is clear that "Israel's nation-state format derives from the nationalist movements that flourished in the nineteenth century" (Susser & Yehiya 1994, p. 197), it is impossible, or at the very least irresponsibly reductive, to consider Israel as either a straightforward colonial imposition or as the outcome of anti- or postcolonial practices. Indeed, much of the scholarship that is not excessively biased in either of these directions ends up with one version or other of the observation that "Zionism was historically and conceptually situated *between* colonial, anticolonial and postcolonial discourse and practice" (Penslar 2001, p. 85, emphasis mine). At the same time, the "intensity and stubbornness" of Israeli nationalism that *See Under: Love* confronts is profoundly out of sync with the decline of the idea of the nation-state in most of the Western world in the 1980s and 90s (Susser & Yehiya 1994, p. 189). While the role of cultural, memorial, and literary practices in Israeli nation-formation has been well established (Zerubavel 1995; Zerubavel 2005), this process cannot be coordinated with contemporaneous developments in the West nor with complex processes of nation-formation in the decolonizing world. In this way, *See Under: Love* confronts Anderson's thesis, and the scholarship it has inspired, with a historical case they have not yet addressed.

1. The Novel and the Timing of the Nation

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* puts forward a double thesis on the relation between the nation and media such as the novel: first, it holds that the very possibility of "thinking" a nation depends on a particular way of "apprehending the world"; and second, this apprehension is in its turn enhanced by the operations of particular technologies and media (Anderson 1991, p. 22). In order for the nation to be imagined, citizens needs to apprehend that they belong to the same community as thousands or even millions of people whom they can never hope to meet in real life (p. 6). This community can never be perceived in a concrete shape, and can therefore only ever be imagined. Yet what makes it possible to imagine the nation as "a bounded intrahistorical entity," to imagine the reality of "large, cross-generation, sharply delimited communities" (Anderson 1998, p. 334)? For Anderson, this requires the ability to apprehend one's simultaneity with the other members of one's community—one's simultaneous belonging to the same community as other people. Such a sense of simultaneity, he argues, is promoted by "two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper," which "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (1991, pp. 24-25). Anderson notes that the traditional realist novel projects a community of people who may not even be aware of each others' existence; even if Charles Bovary does not suspect the existence of Rodolphe Boulanger, they yet belong to the same community that Flaubert's novel writes into existence and thereby allows his readers to imagine and apprehend. Such an imagining of simultaneity is a condition of the nation: Anderson writes that "[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (1991, p. 26). Anderson borrows the phrase "homogeneous, empty time" from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of

History” in order to refer to a sense of time determined by clock and calendar, a time made up of identical and interchangeable moments, none of which is inherently more significant than the next. The novel trains citizens’ ability to imagine that this emptiness is filled with the idea of the (their) nation; it is, in Anderson’s words, “a complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile’” (1991, p. 25).

Anderson’s thesis is counterintuitive in that it does not primarily connect the nation to a diachronic imagining of heroic roots and historical origins, as is commonly done, but instead underscores the vital importance of a *synchronic* imagining of togetherness, without which these roots and origins could not possibly be imagined as those of a particular collective. For Anderson, national history is not irrelevant, as it supplements synchronicity “with a diachronic form of narrative,” a teleological narrative of which the established nation is the consolidated last stage (Anderson 1998, p. 334). Indeed, to the extent that the nation also relies on legitimizing historical narratives, these narratives are marked by the unshakeable continuity of the nation, not by its openness to chance and otherness. As Etienne Balibar writes, representations of the nation’s coming-into-being present the nation “as the fulfilment of a ‘project’ stretching over centuries,” in which successive generations “have handed down to each other an invariant substance” (1991, p. 86).

So what does the nation’s reliance on both a myth of diachronic continuity and a sense of synchronic stability mean for the potentiality to critically intervene in the national imaginary? It suggests that there are at least two possible strategies, both of which have been exploited by novelists and others. As for the diachronic dimension, especially revisionary historiography—a project in which the novel form has been deeply involved—can lay bare the contingency and the constructedness of the national narrative, and point to elements that have been left out of that story. In the case of Israel, which concerns us in this article, the so-called New Historians have started this project in the 1980s when they began to challenge received

accounts of Israeli history. Still, it is the nation's dependence on synchronic stability that has offered a peculiarly fruitful avenue for novelistic critiques of the nation, in that it allows novels (such as *See Under: Love*) to address the national imaginary by reconfiguring the genre's traditional consolidation of "homogeneous, empty time." When Anderson reassesses his original thesis on the affirmative relation between novel and nation in 1998, and notes that their relation has become "visibly strained" in the second half of the twentieth century, he links this development to literature's increasing attention to questions of temporality: "the attempt to transcend or disrupt 'homogenous, empty time'," he writes, "was 'a crucial aspect of the innovations of early modernism'" (Anderson 1998, pp. 334-335).

This modernist challenge is not restricted to one particular historical moment and locale, as the tendency to critique the nation by intervening in its temporal organization and its imagined homogeneity even today figures prominently on the agenda of critical projects that aim to open up the nation to global, postcolonial, or planetary dimensions. Perhaps the most famous instance of this tendency is Homi Bhabha's classic essay "DissimiNation," in which Bhabha notes that there is "always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present" (2002, p. 143). For Bhabha, "the homogenous empty time of the nation's 'meanwhile' is cut across by the ghostly simultaneity of a temporality of doubling" (p. 160). In a recent book, Vilashini Cooppan reconceptualizes the nation as an entity harboring a crypt containing "the global world, the nonnational *them*, the time before or after nation-time, the other languages that split the national 'we,' even the several genres of national narration that install other times than nation-time and ghost the plot of national becoming with national dissolution, decomposition, and displacement" (2009, p. 28). In a similar vein, Peter Hitchcock notes that the idea of the nation as a continuous subject is inevitably betrayed by the narration of its development. Narration always "destabilizes the logic of nation form, calling into question every manifestation of narrative appropriateness";

for Hitchcock, there is a “waywardness in narration itself that cannot guarantee the integrity of the nation form” (2010, p. 143). It is by looking at the strategies that novels use to interrupt the empty “meanwhile” of the nation, then, that it becomes possible to understand the way they can intervene in the national imaginary. While critical studies of *See Under: Love* simply assume its successful reorganization of the nation’s relation to its past and its future, this approach makes it possible to substantiate that claim.

23. *See Under: Love* and ‘the synchronicity of the non-synchronous’

The first section of David Grossman’s 1986 novel *See Under: Love* recounts a few months in the life of a ten-year-old boy, Momik, who grows up as the only son of Holocaust survivors in Beit Mazmil, Jerusalem in the 1950s. The section is consistently focalized through the boy’s eyes, and it makes clear that his life is lived in the shadow of a past that he can neither escape nor understand, as the grown-ups around him are unwilling or incapable to address the traumatic past. One of these survivors is Momik’s great uncle Anshel Wasserman, a once famous writer of children’s adventure stories; linked to both the realm of the imagination and the [world of the concentration and extermination camps](#)~~concentrationary universe~~,

Wasserman comes to serve as the vehicle for the novel’s audacious imagining of life in the camps in its third part (out of a total of four), in which Wasserman entertains “Camp Commander Obersturmbannführer Neigel” by inventing stories featuring “The Children of the Heart,” the familiar cast of characters from his erstwhile bestsellers. The novel reformats these stories in its fourth and final section, in which it narrates the afterlife of the heroes of Wasserman’s adventure stories as the unlikely curators of the Warsaw zoo between 1939 and 1943 in the non-linear form of an encyclopaedia.

The formal innovations of Grossman’s novel are routinely linked to postmodernism and to magic realism, developments that were at the forefront of the international novel production

in the eighties, when the book was published. While *See Under: Love* is clearly in tune with contemporaneous international developments, the novel is also undeniably affected by a modernist impulse. For one thing, the book's second section is dedicated to the life story and the work of the Jewish Polish modernist writer and artist Bruno Schulz; its formal decision, moreover, to bring four stylistically diverse and discontinuous sections together between the covers of the book is reminiscent of modernist innovations in the novel form. Anderson's revision of his thesis on the novel and the nation suggests that the book's non-traditional organization is a crucial aspect of its intervention in the national imaginary. While for Anderson the traditional novel, like the newspaper, connects events and individuals through nothing more than simple "calendrical coincidence" (Anderson 1991, p. 33), *See Under: Love* signals that the genre leaves room for a more complicated temporality that is not made up of identical and interchangeable moments.

In an essay written in 1998, Grossman remarks that books "are the place in the world where both the thing and the loss of it can coexist" (Grossman 2008, p. 13). In Israel, this coexistence of the present and the past, of a European history of a Diaspora that failed to avoid the Holocaust and an emerging nation-state, was forcefully denied in the immediate postwar period up to the Eichmann trial in 1961. Instead of recognizing the continuity between the diasporic past and the challenges of the future, a robust Zionism developed a "national myth that predicated the formation of a new people upon its departure from the ways of the Diaspora" (Bernstein 2005, p. 66), a Diaspora it took to task for its alleged passivity in the face of the threat of the Nazis. The phrase "like sheep to the slaughter" recurs throughout *See Under: Love* as a constant reminder of its intent to confront this ideological legacy (Grossman 1991, pp. 357-358). This foreclosure of the diasporic past, moreover, went hand in hand with "a powerful new code of Holocaust sanctity," which held that the experiences of the Holocaust victims were "deemed inaccessible and incomprehensible to

those who did not actually live through them” (Moragh 1999, p.460). While Nava Semel’s short story collection *Glass Hat* (1985) had for the first time given voice to the generation of children of survivors, Grossman’s 1986 novel even more forcefully rewrote that code: born in Jerusalem in 1954, Grossman is the son of parents neither of whom are survivors. In this way, *See Under: Love* made an unprecedented claim for the recognition of the ongoing afterlife of the Holocaust in the present. The violent discontinuities between the novel’s four sections embody the recognition that a triumphant national myth that remains deaf to the voices of the Holocaust needs to be replaced by an awareness that, as Jed Esty remarks on modernist form more generally, “both national and individual histories unfold as sequences of rupture and loss, of separate and disjunctive states” (2007, p. 144).

See Under: Love interrupts the empty time of the nation by its retrieval of “repressed memories of coming from somewhere else” (Boyarin & Boyarin 1993, pp. 715-716): first of all, of course, through its imaginative exploration of life in the camp (especially in the third section), but also through its self-conscious evocation of the literary example of Bruno Schulz, who died in 1942 at the hands of the Nazis, and through which the novel forges a European—and thus diasporic—genealogy for itself. In what follows, I argue that Grossman’s novel exploits the novel-[genre](#)’s generic potential to allow the apprehension of simultaneity only to insert non-synchronous elements within that simultaneity. It proposes such a ‘synchronicity of the non-synchronous’ (*die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, the phrase was coined by Ernst Bloch) as a different way of apprehending a sense of community. At the same time, it dismisses two competing ways of apprehending time: the first section of the novel, focusing on the life of the young Momik, diagnoses the baleful consequences of a national imaginary that cashes in on the precarity of the nation’s existence by emphasizing the imminence of ever new disasters; the second part negotiates (only to ultimately dismiss) the terms of a messianism that wishes to transcend historical reality altogether. Against these two

temporal logics, *See Under: Love* attempts to re-imagine the nation by occupying it with the memories of a diasporic past.

The novel's ambition to exploit its generic capacity to evoke a sense of simultaneity, even of seemingly incompatible elements, becomes clear when we note that, in spite of the impressive diversity of the formal tricks and devices it deploys, all four sections are clearly marked by a movement of *synchronization*, i.e., by an overarching strategy to draw discordant and incongruous historical elements and perspectives into the novel's empty time. The novel's first part, which is focalized through the young Momik, consists in a continuous free indirect speech. Through this device, we lack a distinctive first-person voice as well as a clearly recognizable narrator who is separated from Momik; instead, the use of free indirect speech blends narrator and focalisor and simulates their coexistence on the same narrative plane. The novel's second section fuses the dialogue between Shlomik (the grown-up Momik from the first section) and a strangely anthropomorphized Sea with the same Shlomik's conversations with his wife and his mistress. These dialogues are further interwoven with the phantasmagoric story of a Bruno Schulz who has morphed into a salmon (about which more later), who magically manages to escape death by jumping into the sea, and who is thus forever contemporaneous with the Shlomik who is talking to the Sea in which Schulz survives. This movement of synchronization is made even more explicit near the end of the section, where the actualization of one of Bruno's messianic fantasies—which is in its turn fantasized by Shlomi—finds Bruno and Shlomik together as members of the same imagined community.¹ Here as elsewhere, the novel is indifferent to customary distinctions between narrative levels.

¹ I use the name 'Bruno' to refer to novel's imaginative reconstruction of Bruno Schulz rather than to the historical figure of that name. I am not making any claims about Schulz's own positions here. See Brown (1990) and Sokoloff (1988) for Schulz's literary afterlives.

This tendency is even more marked in the third section. While it initially seems like it is Shlomik who tells the story of the relation between Neigel and Anshel Wasserman in the camp, Shlomik is impossibly situated on the same narrative plane as the story he is ostensibly telling. This is a device that narrative theory calls ‘metalepsis’: the present in which the story is told and the past in which Shlomik imagines Neigel and Wasserman are presented as contemporaneous with each other. The book’s fourth section, entitled “The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik’s Life,” finally, is ordered like an encyclopedia. This “framework of arbitrary classification” (Grossman 1991, p. 303) disables all sense of teleology or even linearity in the account of Kazik’s life, and it invites the reader to conceive of this life as a brief, instantaneous whole, as a monad in which the energies of past, present, and future are condensed. Kazik is a foundling adopted by the characters of Wasserman’s adventure stories, in a strange sequel to these stories that brings the Children of the Heart together again in old age in the Warsaw zoo; Kazik’s life is exceedingly brief, as he moves from infancy to old age in less than twenty-four hours; during this life, Kazik has the ability “to view simultaneously the processes of growth and decay in every object and person,” and to see “each plant and animal as the cruel battlefield of a never-ending struggle” (p. 388). The figure of Kazik emblemizes the novel’s work of synchronizing incongruous moments, and thus its ambition to reconfigure the empty “meanwhile” of traditional novel space.² By intervening in the temporal organization of the novel, it recalls the national imaginary to a diasporic past that it

² By looking at the novel’s synchronization of discordant elements, we can also recognize—rather than gloss over—the remarkable and seemingly irreconcilable diversity of the novel’s four parts. Several available accounts of the novel tend to avoid this problem by focusing on only one of the sections (Bernstein 2005), or by reducing the different sections to stages in a Hegelian dialectic (Eistenstein 1999), despite the formidable resistance of formal features that warn against such a linear, teleological reading.

had resisted in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and which it had still not fully integrated when the novel appeared in the early 1980s (Bernstein 2005, pp. 65-67). As Grossman remarked in 1998, while in *See Under: Love* he attempted “to write about a Jewish existence in an *Israeli* idiom,” this effort is continuously counterpointed by the simultaneous attempt “to describe Israel in a ‘diasporic’ language” (2008, p. 13).

34. The Critique of “The Sense of Calamity” and of the Messianic

See Under: Love not only promotes a less homogenizing timing of the nation through its formal construction; in the book’s first two sections, it also scrutinizes and ultimately dismisses two alternative ‘timings’ of the nation; both in the Momik-section and in the section devoted to Bruno Schulz, the novel diagnoses ways of imagining simultaneity that it sees as detrimental to social life. As I noted, the first part of the novel chronicles the social and psychological damages that follow from Israel’s failure to recognize the memories of the disasters of its diasporic past in the 1950s. As there are no cultural codes that can help Momik make sense of the silences and taboos that affect his life, he turns to the only cultural framework he has at his disposal to give shape to the rumors about life “over there” (the phrase the novel uses to refer to the [world of the concentration and extermination campseoncentrationary universe](#)): myths of action and adventure that he adopts from the children’s books he reads, but that also more invisibly permeated Israeli life in the 1950s through the prevalent Zionist ethos of heroic action (Moragh 1999, p. 458). This emphasis on heroic action informs his conviction that “the Nazi Beast” is not a thing of the past, but rather a threat that is always about to break loose again. His self-appointed task to defeat the beast soon deteriorates into a paralyzing obsession with the imminent return of the disaster. By adopting this perspective, the boy’s life is henceforth overshadowed by a sense of terror and

imminent doom, and his youthful innocence makes way for an overpowering sense of responsibility—the responsibility to save the lives of the people around him.

Grossman’s depiction of the plight of young Momik diagnoses the pathologies of Israeli society at large. In a 2004 lecture to the Levinas Circle in Paris, Grossman notes that “a significant element” in the Jewish people’s self-definition “is the sense of impending annihilation, of the calamity hovering over its head” (1998, p. 90). Elsewhere, he notes that his own encounter with the stories of Sholem Aleichem as a young boy already instilled the sense of “calamity, the calamity that always hovered over everyone’s head so that its imminence was never in doubt” (p. 10). *See Under: Love* diagnoses how what Grossman calls a “perpetual state of preparation” (p. 47) has historically served as a powerful catalyst of national consent, and has gone hand in hand with the promotion of an ethos of heroic action as well as with a downplaying of the resonances of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. This position reduces the future to a threat of imminent destruction, while it at the same time disconnects the present from the disasters of the past. According to this ideology, the emergence of the Israeli nation is not essentially connected to the events of the Holocaust, but is first of all a form of defense against the always imminent repetition of doom and disaster.³

³ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Foreign Policy Speech from June 2009 offers a compelling illustration of the persistence of this timing of the nation. Netanyahu’s speech was delivered only a couple of days after Barack Obama’s Cairo speech, which had underlined the connections between the Holocaust and the state of Israel, an association to which Netanyahu objects: “The right of the Jewish People to a state in the Land of Israel does not arise from the series of disasters that befell the Jewish People over 2,000 years—persecutions, expulsions, pogroms, blood libels, murders, which reached its climax in the Holocaust, an unprecedented tragedy in the history of nations. There are those who say that without the Holocaust the State would not have been established, but I say that if the State of Israel had been established in

See Under: Love shows that the upshot of the cultural codes that silence the claims of the past and reduce the future to an apocalyptic specter of imminent doom is a drastic impoverishment of everyday life; they lead to a voiding of the present, of what Grossman elsewhere calls “the whole spectrum of possibilities that a full, normal, peaceful life can offer a human being” (1998, p. 46). Momik sees himself as a prophet, and he always tries to be ahead of himself. At school, “he likes to be three chapters ahead,” because, “you have to be prepared, because the Beast can come from anywhere” (1991, p. 43). This life-denying attitude persists in the grown-up Momik who narrates the second section of the novel, and who also wants “to be ready next time it happens. Not just so I’ll be able to break away with a minimum of pain from others, but so I’ll be able to break away from myself” (p. 154). His interlocutor notes that, with such an obsessive fear of imminent death, “you might as well have been dead to begin with” (154). *See Under: Love* indicates that an ethic of eternal vigilance and proleptic haste has, in effect, overwritten the realities of the Holocaust in Israel’s national imaginary; when we read that “[p]rophecy runs in the family, because it seems to have started with Grandfather Anshel and passed down to mama and now Momik.

time, the Holocaust would not have taken place. (Applause) The tragedies that arose from the Jewish People’s helplessness show very sharply that we need a protective state.” Netanyahu’s downplaying of the passivity and “helplessness” of the victims of, especially, the Holocaust, is entirely in line with the Zionist cultivation of Jewish heroism. Remarkably, he argues for the legitimacy of an Israeli state by asking his audience to imagine what could have happened—or what could have been avoided—had it existed before 1948. For Netanyahu, this thought experiment confirms the present need to prevent a repetition of what the state’s earlier non-existence allowed to take place. Netanyahu’s speech sets free the specter of an imminent repetition of the disaster, which in its turn helps to mobilize national consent for a violent suppression of vulnerability and helplessness.

The way diseases pass down” (p. 40-41), the novel codes such a panicked withdrawal from the present as Israel’s inadequate answer to Nazi discourses that infamously identified the blood as a site for the transmission of degeneracy rather than prophecy. This answer perversely ends up perpetuating the Nazi’s assault on Jewish everyday life, and continues to deny Israelis the possibility of “a full, normal, peaceful life.”

The nation’s cult of heroic action and its fear of imminent destruction together lead to a collective disavowal of the realities of the Holocaust. The novel stages this diagnosis through Momik’s obsessive attempt to “find the [Nazi] Beast and tame it and make it good” (pp. 30, 68). This fateful combination of an emphasis on action and a fear of the future duly culminate in the dismissal of diasporic passivity: when the “stinky Jews” that Momik has gathered to bait the Nazi Beast start telling stories, young Momik expresses his disgust with their passivity, as according to him “you can’t kill the Nazikaput with a story, you have to beat him to death” (p. 85). Disavowal of the past, reduction of the future, impoverishment of the present—this, the novel implies, is not the way the “homogeneous, empty time” of the nation is to be occupied.

The book’s second section, dedicated to the imaginary afterlife of Bruno Schulz as a fish, dissects a very different timing of the nation that similarly ends up impoverishing the historical present. In this section, the grown-up Momik fantasizes an intimate connection to the Polish-Jewish modernist artist and writer Bruno Schulz, a victim of the Nazis, if not of the Holocaust, and an avowed influence on Grossman. Schulz, who was forced to live in the ghetto of Drohobycz, was gratuitously shot in 1942 by a German officer, a rival of Schulz’s protector. In the last year of his life, he was allegedly working on a novel entitled *The Messiah*, of which no traces remain. *See Under: Love* constantly refers to the known facts of Schulz’s life, but it adds the imaginative twist that instead of being shot, Schulz miraculously escapes by diving into the Baltic, after which he morphs into, of all things, a salmon. The

account of Schulz's phantasmagoric afterlife is interwoven with Shlomik's dialogues with the Sea and with his wife and his lover. Shlomik suffers from the same disconnect from his own life that the first part of the novel diagnoses in the life of the young Momik, and it is this dissatisfaction that tempts him toward Bruno's messianic beliefs: his conviction that truth and authenticity are not to be achieved *in* human language, but rather through a radical release *from* human language and limitation. [While](#) ~~¶~~ this a-historical, messianic time is emphatically not the clock time in which the novel and the nation [normally](#) operate, [the novel diagnoses that this messianic timing fails to offer yet it does, as the novel diagnoses, not far all that offer](#) a tenable alternative to [it](#) ~~customary timings of the nation~~. *See Under: Love* dramatizes this inadequacy by staging Bruno Schulz primarily as the author of the unwritten novel entitled *The Messiah*—a work that, given Bruno's messianic impatience with what the novel calls “a frozen secondhand world of exact science, classified language, and tame clock time” (p. 138), could never really fit the pedestrian label of ‘a novel.’ In this sense, it is unsurprising that the novel remains unwritten. Bruno holds that “the Messiah could never come in writing, would never be invoked in a language suffering from elephantiasis”—which is a neat self-characterization of *See Under: Love*'s maximalism—instead, “[a] new grammar and a new calligraphy had first to be invented” (p. 89). As Shlomik's wife reminds him, such a radical release from the bounds of human language and time is not available in the novel form: unlike a poem, which “is like a love affair,” “a novel is more like marriage: you stay with your characters long after the initial passion has worn off” (p. 150).

Bruno's poetics depends on a refusal of such formal containment, just as the political vision that it underwrites refuses to be contained by the borders of a particular historical community. His desire to escape from human language into a “singular, secret body language” corresponds to an attempt to escape from community: in the words of one of this section's insistent refrains, it bespeaks a desire to ‘say “I” without the tinny resonance of

“we” (p. 162). Bruno’s impatience with the confines of the novel and the nation is figured through his imagined survival as a salmon. The salmon lives in a borderless sea and this, the novel implies, is the only kind of territory that is acceptable to Bruno’s ahistorical messianism. His “salmonization” is figured as an escape from human form to the status of “a non-human human” (p. 130), and from the nation into the globe: “Bruno had to become thoroughly salmonized in order to learn about life. The barest life of all, as the salmon drew their tangible geometric design over half the globe” (p. 131).

Yet in spite of its outright refusal to be bound by man-made borders, Bruno’s messianism paradoxically holds on to a desire for a homeland—and this obviously strengthens the relevance of Grossman’s analysis for the state of the Israeli nation. For all its alleged disinterest in merely human affairs, Bruno’s messianism ends up underwriting claims for what Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin have referred to as “a sense of organic, ‘natural’ connectedness between this People and this Land” (p. 715). For the Boyarins, such “myths of autochthony” are only one aspect of the Jewish tradition, which also hosts a totally opposite diasporic awareness “of always already coming from somewhere else” (pp. 715-716)—the awareness that, as we saw, *See Under: Love* tries to make part of the national imaginary. And even if Bruno’s survival as a fish gestures toward such an acknowledgement of the diasporic past, it in the last analysis ends up confirming the problematic idea of Israel as an exclusively Jewish homeland. While the vast expanse of the sea seems to deny the claims of land and soil, the ideological countercurrent that ties Bruno’s trajectory back to the fantasy of a unique and unnegotiable claim to Jewish land surfaces when Bruno morphs into, of all fish, a salmon—into precisely the kind of fish that, after all its wanderings and diasporic struggles, unfailingly returns to the spawning grounds where its life began. Being constitutively unable to break its identification with its native ground, the salmon is not just any fish, but rather what one

commentator has aptly called “the ultimate late-Zionist fish.”⁴ The conceit of Bruno Schulz’s afterlife as a salmon allows the novel to explore the politics of an ahistorical messianism that, even as it registers its impatience with the empty time of the nation, still fails to achieve the integration of the diasporic past in the national present that *See Under: Love* as a whole attempts.

4. Grossman’s Secular Messianism

So what is the novel’s own alternative to such a messianic refusal of clock time (diagnosed in the Bruno-section) and to an obsession with the imminent repetition of the disaster (in the Momik-section)? How, that is, does it imagine the historical present without transcending or denying it? As I noted, recent tendencies in literary studies have begun to “question the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community,” and have instead begun to apprehend “the ‘double and split’ time of national representation” (Bhabha 2002, p. 144). We need to look no further than the work of Benedict Anderson, in which the link between the timing of the nation and the novel genre was first established, to find one way in which literary form can intervene in the national imaginary. When Anderson describes national time as “homogeneous, empty time,” he contrasts this with a different notion of simultaneity, an idea of “simultaneity-along-time,” which he again describes by referring to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” This is the idea of “what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” (1991, p. 24). Such a ‘historical’ messianism—historical in that, unlike that of the novel’s Bruno Schulz, it intends to replenish rather than transcend historical time—aptly describes the way in which *See Under: Love*’s work of synchronization manages to recast the

⁴ Ortwin de Graef. Torag, Dolgan, Ning, Gyoya, Orga: Diaspora Under the Sign of Salmon in David Grossman’s *See Under: Love*. Unpublished Manuscript.

present as such an “instantaneous present,” as a densely historically layered *Jetztzeit* (to use another of Benjamin’s key terms). This also explains why the novel so insistently summons Bruno’s messianic desire, which it eventually channels into a revitalization of historical time, rather than a transcendence of it. *See Under: Love* retrieves Israel’s diasporic past, Bruno Schulz’s modernist poetics, as well as the realities of the Holocaust (especially in its third part, which is entitled “Wasserman” and is situated in the camp), and it mobilizes these elements in order to valorize the present as more than an indifferent and interchangeable moment in the progression of clock time.

This idea of “redemption as a recaptured past” is not foreign to the Jewish tradition to which Grossman’s work belongs. Indeed, it is the crucial element in the tradition—with which *See Under: Love* has many affinities—of what Richard Wolin and others have analyzed as “Jewish secular messianism” (Wolin 1996, p. 50). This secular form of messianism is the form in which “the messianic idea” managed to find a place in the twentieth century; it testifies to the “peculiar resilience” of the messianic impulse in the face of new threats and demands (p. 45). In this secularized form, messianism does not aim at a transcendence of historical time, but rather at an active intervention in it; in the work of Walter Benjamin and others, messianism—what Benjamin called a “*weak*” messianic power—became less a matter of faith than a historical practice aimed at reorganizing the relation between past and present. In a description that also captures the logic of Grossman’s imaginative work in *See Under: Love*, Wolin notes that the aim of this secular messianism is not to restore the past to “its pristine, original condition”;

Instead, the very process of conjuring forth the past in a contemporary historical setting serves to activate and release dormant potentials that lie concealed in the past. The past is not merely recaptured; it is rendered dynamic—in the sense of a living tradition—as a

result of this fructifying contact with the utopian potentials that are secretly at work in the historical present. (p. 50)

The novel genre provides an 'empty' time that can be filled with the hidden affinities between the past and the present, and that in this way contributes to a re-imagining of the nation that eschews transcendent or demoralizing moves.

The novel specifically confronts Bruno's ahistorical messianism with its own secular messianism in a scene at the end of its second section—after which the novel, in the Wasserman-section, foregrounds the historical layering of the present by imagining the impossible simultaneity in the narrative "now" (p. 187) of the Nazi Neigel and the Jewish storyteller Wasserman, of Wasserman and his grandson Shlomik, and, ultimately, of all of these and the reader, who is structurally implicated in the chapter's different acts of storytelling. Just before this third section, Shlomik projects himself and Bruno into one of Schulz's stories. The scene is presented as the impossible actualization of Bruno's messianic longing for an escape from historical time; it consists in a social gathering of "all the townspeople, our acquaintances, all of Bruno's family, his classmates and teachers from the Gymnasium ... the neighbors with their children and their dogs," and so on (p. 171). This gathering is, moreover, marked by a "galloping backward and forward in 'time'" (p. 171), yet it is not for all that the result of a work of remembrance: instead, for Bruno, this gathering depends on a momentous forgetting of "[e]verything: the language they spoke, their loves, the passing moment" (pp. 172-173). In its failure to recognize the vital importance of memory for the imagining of the future, Bruno's messianism is unwittingly complicit with the severing of the connection between the past and the nation that the novel's first section exposes.

“There’s no longing for the past,” Bruno continued, only a passion for the future; there are no immortal works ... look at them, Shloma—they don’t remember anything beyond this moment, only this moment in the world of the square is not a single chime of the church clock; it is, shall we say, a time crystal containing one experience only, which can last a year or an instant, yes ... these are people without memory, firsthand souls, who in order to continue to exist must re-create language and love and each coming moment anew ...” (p. 175)

Bruno’s vision of redemption depends on a blatant indifference to the reality of the past. The novel voices its difference from this ahistorical messianism through Shlomik’s objections to Bruno’s hollowing out of historical time, which he calls “terribly cruel” (p. 175). *See Under: Love’s* momentous formal achievement mobilizes the resources of the novel in order to achieve the coincidence of the past and the present *within* history, *within* the present, *within* the time of the novel.

This reconfiguration of the present paradoxically locates the hope in redemption in the past, and as such restores to the past an open-endedness that normally only pertains to the future. In its last section, *See Under: Love* presents “the Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik’s Life,” a life that in the end generates “new buds of hope” (p. 452). Crucially, this hope is fostered by an imaginative recreation of the past, by imagining the afterlife of the heroes of Wasserman’s adventure stories as the curators of the Warsaw zoo between 1939 and 1943. The Children of the Heart collectively take up the care of Kazik, a foundling, and even if they cannot save his life—he dies before his allotted twenty-four hours are over—the story persists as an index of the novel’s power to restore past possibilities. In a 2007 lecture, Grossman notes that “[t]he power of memory is indeed great and heavy. Nevertheless, the act of writing creates for me a ‘space’ of sorts, an emotional expanse that I have never known before, where

death is more than the absolute, unambiguous opposite of life” (2008, p. 64). Grossman’s commitment to the force of writing is a secular reminder of the simultaneity of disaster and hope, of past and present that the novel proposes as a less disastrous timing of the nation.

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