

## Introduction

# Under Construction

### *A Kind of Festschrift for Israeli Literature*

NANCY E. BERG AND NAOMI B. SOKOLOFF

Festschriften persist and multiply. Why? Because they are not just retrospective, but prospective. That is to say the Festschrift is a Beruf, a call to further work, effort, and energy, a call to the improvement of learning, of a discipline, a science, an artistic vision, or an intellectual position. Even in this age of mass Festschriften, they remain a special literary genre.

—Irving Louis Horowitz, *Communicating Ideas:  
The Politics of Scholarly Publishing*

## Building and Being Built

Until recently, Israeli literature has been viewed as Hebrew literature and as a well-defined corpus of works established by a limited number of writers. Even into the late twentieth century, a generally accepted historiography stipulated a mostly agreed-upon set of must-reads. In the last few decades, though, an explosion of writing has altered the scene. New creative voices have proliferated since the 1990s, as have new approaches to reading their work and the work of their predecessors. Diversity has

replaced consensus, and agreement about the past is itself up for question and revision. Multiple languages vie for recognition. New genres, such as the graphic novel and science fiction, demand consideration. In addition, greater attention to voices from the margins has led both to discovery and recovery of literary works, as well as a rethinking of literary history. Now, on the occasion of Israel at seventy, we have produced this volume to think about and reevaluate the startling trajectories of Israeli literature. At the seventy-year mark, a time that scholars often honor their teachers with a *festschrift*, we have the opportunity to reexamine Israeli writing, to gain new perspectives through a retrospective, and so offer a kind of *festschrift* to a now venerable yet still dynamic and ever-changing literature.

Our work here explores the opening up of Israeli literature to definitions that do not insist on linguistic, religio-ethnic, political, or even territorial correlations. Rather than limiting Israeli literature to work written in Hebrew by Jews living in the State of Israel, we take into account texts written in Hebrew and in other languages as well, texts by Israelis abroad as well as in Israel, texts by both Jews and non-Jews. And, even as the category “Israeli literature” stretches linguistically and geographically, we are mindful of the complexities that emerge from ideological and aesthetic implications of creativity in Hebrew—a new-old language with a remarkable history, remarkable richness, remarkable limitations (of size and number of native speakers), and no less remarkable political entanglements. It is important to keep all of this in mind when assessing the ways that artistic conventions have exhibited rupture and continuity. While the essays here tend to highlight peripheries, that which is innovative or has been overlooked, they do not neglect the center. Rather, the commentary offered uses observations about outliers to enrich, complement, and reinterpret canonical texts. Furthermore, as we take up implicit questions of canon, master narrative, and predominant motifs that are crucial for examining a national literature, we also reconsider the implications of defining a body of writing *as* a national literature.

The idea of a unified single narrative of Israeli literature has never been more than a myth. There have always been Israeli authors working in languages other than Hebrew, as well as authors undervalued by the literary establishment (some of whom later became major figures). Alternative artistic cross-currents and undercurrents have circulated in diverse Israeli communities. As with most myths, though, there is an element of truth at the core of the idea that Israeli culture once enjoyed considerable cohesion. For many years, broad agreement prevailed regarding the

boundaries of the literature, whom and what to read, and even—to large degree—how to read it. So too, there was a reigning history: a sense of changing generations. It was generally accepted, for instance, that the New Wave and Young Poets of the 1960s shook up the convictions held in the 1950s by the State Generation, that poet Natan Zach challenged the conventions of Natan Alterman. In short, the dominant perception was of the center holding even as new, rebellious, and subversive trends worked their way from marginal to central positions. Well into the 1990s, it seemed that everyone shared the same media experiences—for example, that everyone watched the Mabat news program at 9 p.m. daily on the sole Israeli television station. Before that time, in an era of much more unified and homogeneous cultural production, ideas and values circulated through even more centralized media: a few publishing houses (all affiliated with ideological movements); a limited number of radio stations; educational curricula and public ceremonies shaped by establishment institutions.<sup>1</sup> So, too, it appeared that everyone interested in literature shared the same reading list and, for the most part, similar ways of reading and of thinking about what everyone was reading. At least, they were all part of a shared conversation. General agreement reigned regarding which books and cultural values had been enshrined in communal debate. Today things are different. It is not just that a fractured literature now prevails along with many readerships; in addition, the corpus of texts by Israelis—transnational in production and written in multiple languages—defies categorization. To take an example: Is Dina Rubina, who writes in Russian and is famous among Russian language readers throughout the world, part of the Israeli canon or the Russian canon? Both or neither? What about Shahar Bram, who publishes in English in Israel, or Shani Boianju, who writes in English and publishes in America?<sup>2</sup> Consider, too, the emerging Hebrew literary scene in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> These cases indicate how difficult it is to delineate the boundaries of Israeli literature.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the very idea of canon has shifted. Canon as a topic of study has held high visibility for well over a half-century, but it has undergone a sea change during that time. In 1948—the same year, coincidentally, that Israel achieved statehood—F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* appeared in Britain. Its stringent pronouncements of what belonged in the category of great English writing, and what didn't, were highly influential. However, as time went by, such narrow gatekeeping was widely mocked.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, canon turned from a noun into a verb, from product to process. Scholarship shifted from defining what is in the canon to asking

how it got there. Questioning the canon then continued to gain momentum as a topic of academic inquiry. It peaked sometime in the 1980s, as various scholarly approaches—feminist studies, identity politics, gender studies, ethnic studies, etc.—called attention to and scrutinized hierarchies of power.<sup>6</sup> Debate on such topics has been ongoing in Europe and North America ever since. Israeli literature should be understood within this context of global inquiry, but Israel presents a particularly acute case: because it is a cauldron of multilingualism and different cultures, because its demographics have evolved at breathtaking speed, because the sheer number of publications is stunning.

The fragmentation of Israeli literature and the copious amount of writing available is such that the notion of attempting an encyclopedic historiography is now considered passé. Yet, even as the idea of canon itself becomes less determinative, canon study persists in other guises. The quantity of literature coming out of Israel may feel overwhelming and consensus elusive, but formative forces at work still raise compelling questions: What is produced and consumed? Who gets published, reviewed, translated, adapted, taught, honored? What are the factors that shape bestseller lists, prizes, curricula, and scholarship? These are significant processes worthy of deliberation. Moreover, once upon a time, discussions of canon—whether constructive or deconstructive—necessarily acknowledged how the Zionist project was integral to understanding the evolution of Hebrew literature. It wasn't possible to talk about one without the other, whether that literature was allied with cultural endeavors expressed in the slogan "to build and be built" or, on the contrary, was critical of Zionism and Zionist discourse. Today it is clear that Israeli literature is still very much under construction. Indeed, it is experiencing boom times, expanding in many directions, gaining acclaim nationally and internationally, and it is not so closely linked to Zionism, either for or against. The idea of canon in these circumstances is very much a construct—that is, merely a concept and not a full, complex reality. Nonetheless, for all the limitations of canon-making, debate about canon still plays a crucial role as it provides conceptual frameworks to try to make sense of how things have developed, to decide what matters, and to consider why certain authors and works merit attention.

Any account, however brief, of the first seventy years of Israeli literature must surely deal with some fundamental tensions that persist over the decades. These include the construction of "Hebrewness (Ivrit) as an 'authentic' local culture" and "an act of national invention,"<sup>7</sup> along

with the ways that Israeli writing has pushed back against that idealized project, measuring gaps between dreams and realization; tensions between universalism and the particularities of Israeli experience; tensions between dominance of Ashkenazi, secular, male writers and other voices that long remained peripheral. What we offer here, much more modestly, as a lead-in to our collection of essays is a brief look at three moments of canon formation that are significant in both reflecting and influencing the development of Israeli literature. These three snapshots in time help trace the arc of a process that has transformed Israeli literature from a literature with an emerging common core to a literature that has prospered and expanded and splintered and become much more elastic. Along the way, we get a glimpse of multiple factors that have contributed to canon making—not only scholarship and education, but also the changing nature of the media; the role of publishing houses and their marketing strategies in shaping culture; the compilation of anthologies and awarding of prizes; artistic trends and influences from abroad; and the swiftly transforming demographics in Israeli society. The first moment, 1977, finds scholars and readers building a shared bookshelf (albeit not without dissent; alternative trends were already evident and had long been emerging). The second moment, 1993, features a highly acclaimed and influential TV series. While the show still argued for a cohesive narrative about Israeli literature, it was also adopting a new (and competing) medium to achieve popular outreach, even as it acknowledged more diverse content. This moment, too, was marked by competing claims—there was much that the show elided or overlooked, alternative literary developments that were gaining increasing attention in other forums. During the third moment, 2009–10, rival lists of recommended reading duel, making evident that one bookshelf no longer suffices. These events ushered in an era in which not just new authors but also multiple new genres and perspectives clamored for attention. These moments show the making and unmaking of the Israeli canon(s) to be rapid, intense, and palpably self-reflexive.

#### 1977—BUILDING A CANON

By this date, it seems, Israeli literature was well established, on the threshold of fulfilling thirty years. Significantly, 1977 marked the appearance of the first volume of Gershon Shaked's magnum opus, *Hasipporet ha 'ivrit, 1880–1980 (Modern Hebrew Literature, 1880–1980)* which, over the coming years, was followed by multiple further installments.<sup>8</sup> The idea was

to provide a grand overview, grounded in the fundamental Zionist value of return to the land and a concomitant revival of the Jewish people. According to Yaron Peleg, Shaked's concept of the "Zionist metanarrative" created "an overarching framework of references that encompassed all aspects of life in the new Jewish society in Erets Israel, including the creation of literature."<sup>9</sup> Shaked's first volume concentrated decidedly on precursors to Israeli literature (Hebrew writers of the diaspora and in the Yishuv, only a few of whom even lived till 1948), yet it proved foundational, for it envisioned what would become the most influential of interpretive frameworks for many years into the future.

Also in 1977, the journal *Modern Hebrew Literature* was launched by the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature and two significant English-language anthologies made their debut;<sup>10</sup> these publications represent efforts to set the canon (though in a less deliberate way than that of the literary historian), and they suggest a calculated effort to reach an Anglo-American audience.<sup>11</sup> Most of these endeavors unsurprisingly posit the land—and often the nation—at the center of Israeli writing. Even writers who place characters in other settings seem to reinforce the centrality of Israel, and even texts that question the Zionist narrative respond to it as a central preoccupation. These collections helped introduce readers outside of Israel to S. Y. Agnon, Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Yoram Kaniuk, David Shachar, Haim Gouri, Yitzhak Orpaz, Uri Orlev, Pinchas Sadeh, Yehuda Amichai, Aharon Appelfeld, Yizhak Ben-Ner, and Dan Tsalka. (Readers of today might notice the minimal diversity; almost all these authors are male and Ashkenazi)

Alongside the model of the Zionist metanarrative and consensus building, in 1977 Itamar Even-Zohar presented an alternative model of literary study: a dynamic, layered model of sociocultural systems that affect the world of literature.<sup>12</sup> While Shaked took into account many genres of prose, Even-Zohar's ideas about the "literary polysystem" opened space to consider multiple additional kinds of literary production and genres, from highbrow to lowbrow, thus opening possibilities for shaking up assumptions and complicating the picture. Mainstream fiction at the time was itself shaking up assumptions and exploring new paths. Note, too, that 1977 was a year of political upheaval, when Likud defeated the long-dominant Labor party in national elections and Mizrahi voters gained new clout, and societal cataclysms were beginning to manifest in Israeli novels as well. The year 1977 saw the publication of A. B. Yehoshua's *Hame'aveh* (*The Lover*), Sami Michael's *Hasut* (*Refuge*), Yaakov Shabtai's *Zikhron*

*dvarim* (*Past Continuous*), and Amalia Kahana-Carmon's *Sadot magnetiyim* (*Magnetic Fields*). *The Lover* reflects on the trauma of the 1973 war. The novel is still very much grounded in the Zionist metanarrative, yet interrogates it by featuring multiple characters' perspectives, including that of the young Arab, Naim. In *Refuge*, Michael goes farther in giving voice to the hitherto unrepresented, introducing Arab and Jewish characters, each with his—and her—own perspective. His roman à clef of a communist cell in Haifa presents an alternative to the Zionist metanarrative. That foundational framework of reference is still present, but the author highlights relations between Jews and Arabs in ways that are distinct from mainstream views. In turn, Shabtai's tale of disillusionment presents itself through scenes of disintegration of family and societal values in Tel Aviv. Though this author is preoccupied with the dreams and experiences of Israel's founding generations, his novel suggests that what was once the center is no longer holding. Kahana-Carmon, for her part, moves outside the metanarrative parameters altogether. She formulates a "personal and original discourse of love" that features women characters and emphasizes the significance of individuals and relationships.<sup>13</sup>

These deviations from and variations on the Zionist metanarrative are harbingers of more radical changes to come. Shaked's comprehensive overview of Hebrew literature—which would eventually come to foreground such Israeli writers as S. Yizhar, Moshe Shamir, Aharon Megged, Natan Shaham, Benjamin Tammuz, Amos Kenan, Nisim Aloni, Yotam Reuveni, Ruth Almog, David Schutz, along with all those named above—was by design limited to a hundred-year span: 1880–1980. As that end date was approaching, the literary scene was rapidly changing and soon to veer off into post-Zionist and postmodernist directions.

## MOMENT TWO: THE CANON IN THE MIRROR

In 1993, Shaked's series *Leshon hamar'ot* (*The Language of Mirrors*) premiered on Israeli television on the new Channel Two. Informed by his multivolume history and its conclusions, this enormously ambitious project proved to be a major cultural event. The programs aimed to present an overview of modern Hebrew literature in seventeen 35–45 minute episodes comprising three dozen novels and a handful of shorter fictional pieces. Dramatizations of excerpts were interspersed with remarks by Shaked, occasional stills, bits from documentaries, and scenes from previous cinematic adaptations.

The criteria for inclusion seem to balance aesthetics, and the significance of the writer and specific work, with the thematics of the individual episodes and the series as a whole. There were also, as ever, extraliterary factors to take into account—technical considerations such as the ease of dramatizing, excerpting, and adapting works, as well as copyright and budgeting. The series focused on the relationship between literature and Israeli society, and especially the conflict between the individual and the collective in Israel. Each episode was organized by a topic, and—except for the one on women writers—contributed to the overall thematic flow of the entire program. Commentary on Y. H. Brenner frames the series, and S. Yizhar's *Yemei Tziklag* (*Days of Ziklag*) sits at the center of the inquiry: What does it mean to be Israeli? What are the social implications of the status of Zionism? The series sought to demonstrate how literature reflects these questions, and what kinds of answers it offers.

Shaked's series has been read as a fascinating experiment to counter television's threat to literature. It approached the relatively new medium as a potential partner instead of as competition,<sup>14</sup> and, at the time it aired, *Leshon hamar'ot* was received with excitement and enthusiasm. Despite its dismal placement on Saturday mornings, the reception was positive and the reviews were strong. They labeled the series quite an achievement, an exceptional experience, and they remarked on its good sense and good taste. The only criticism at the time was that the program offered "too much richness."<sup>15</sup> *Leshon hamar'ot* was to Hebrew literature as *Pillar of Fire* to Israeli history (or Alex Haley's *Roots* to the African American story).

And yet, missing from the program is much of what was emerging in Israeli literature during the 1980s—perhaps because the process of bringing the series to the air purportedly took ten years. From today's vantage point, it is clear that the *Leshon hamar'ot* presented a rather conservative canon. The 1980s was a decade in which exile, not homeland, gained overt dominance as a theme, while the stories of Jews from Arab and Islamic lands gained greater audiences. Fissures in the national hegemony were becoming visible to the naked eye, whether due to the trauma of '73 or the political upheaval in its wake, the coming of age of different immigrant communities, military scandals that threatened idealism, or all of the above and more.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1990s, when the series was broadcast, change was well underway; this new decade was dominated by women writers, and hyphenated identities and ethnic writing flourished—not to mention LGBT themes, religious subject matter, and personal writing. In the television series, though, these developments went largely unremarked.

Mizrachi writers, like women writers, were confined to their own episode. Shaked did attend to the second generation to the Holocaust (concentrating primarily on David Grossman's *See Under: Love*), but he did not delve into works by many of the prominent writers on this topic (Nava Semel, Savyon Liebrecht, Amir Gutfreund) nor did he underscore the year 1986 as a watershed moment. Later scholarship has emphasized the innovations and turning points associated with that year, in response to Anton Shammas's novel *Arabeskot (Arabesques)* and Yehoshua Kenaz's *Hitganvut yechidim (Infiltration)*, along with Grossman's *See Under: Love* and groundbreaking short story collections such as Ruth Almog's *Nashim (Women)* and Savyon Liebrecht's *Tapuchim min hamidbar (Apples from the Desert)*.

Shaked at one time or another penned reviews and analysis of all those writers and many other contemporary authors as well.<sup>17</sup> The fact that not all made it into *Leshon hamar'ot* indicates that canon setting is a matter of perspective and of making space for and conferring value on a chosen few artists and texts. As the '90s continued and literary production grew, scholars paid attention to a wide variety of authors and poets, including—to name just some examples—Amnon Shamosh, Batya Gur, Shulamit Lapid, Ronni Someck, Yona Wallach, Yehoshua Sobol, but literary critics were also attentive to new genres, introducing serious analysis of the family saga, the mystery novel, and chick lit to the more panoramic view of the literary scene. So, while this second moment that we've highlighted in some way continues or echoes the first, it does so in a way that embraces new media and branches out in multicultural directions. It anticipates the third moment, in which another deliberate attempt to produce canon is undercut not only by fragmentation and diversity, but by heightened awareness of the inevitable limitations of canon making.

### MOMENT THREE: DUELING CANONS

In 2009, in honor of the seventieth anniversary of the newspaper *Yediot aharonot*, its publishing house decided to reissue twenty novels. This was a deliberate attempt to designate a sealed canon by creating a list of significant Hebrew books. The initiative, called "Am hasefer—prozah yisraelit," was a sister project to the earlier publication series "Jewish bookcase" (*Aron hasefarim hayehudi 2007*).<sup>18</sup> A few months later, in parallel, publishing house Hasifriyah Hechadashah reached its twentieth anniversary, and editor Menachem Perry marked the occasion by publishing twenty-two volumes of choice selections.

Clear differences set this list apart from the one produced by *Yediot*. *Yediot*'s list spans the years 1948–2008, is limited to novels, and consciously sets out to establish “the essential bookshelf.” The approach was conservative and, indeed, the effort covered much the same material and many of the same writers as Shaked's earlier work.<sup>19</sup> Perry's collection, on the other hand, was drawn from the backlist of publishing house Siman Kri'ah. Novels dominated, but poetry, translation, drama, and shorter fiction were also included. At the time, most of the works had been newly revised and edited. The complete set of books purports to comprise landmark works of Israeli literature, volumes that “changed the face of Hebrew [literature] in their time.”<sup>20</sup> Some of the titles overlap with the canon presented in *Leshon hamar'ot*, as well as with the competing list from 2010, but Perry's choices skew more recent. They are slightly edgier and, in some ways, make for more challenging reads.

Each list, of course, is informed by the personal knowledge, taste, and agenda of its respective editor, and each list is shaped by its missions—both stated and unstated—as well as by market forces. *Yediot*, for example, wants to offer an overview of Israeli literature, choosing the most representative works. Hasifriyah Hechadashah is conscious of “attracting new readers and challenging new writers.” That helps explain why *Yediot* begins with Shamir's *Hu halakh basadot* (*He Walked in the Fields*) and Pinchas Sadeh's *Hachayim kemashal* (*Life as a Parable*)—books whose time, by then, may have passed—and Hasifriyah Hechadashah's includes two titles each from Shabtai, Yehoshua, and Grossman. Together, however, the two lists suggest that Shaked's historiography still dominated thinking about Israeli literature. The regnant views focused mostly on male, Ashkenazi writers who had contributed to the so-called Zionist narrative, even when contesting it. This way of constructing the canon barely nodded toward the unraveling of the master narrative, which had already begun to take place a generation before, and, it did not foresee the very dynamic, innovative literary arena that has been materializing since the turn of the twenty-first century.

However, between the time of the 1993 television series, *Leshon hamar'ot*, and the more recent rival canons, many scholarly works appeared that directly undertook analysis of canon formation and questioned the processes by which canons become fixed. A special issue of the journal *Teoria uvikoret* (1991) provided a forum for scholars interested in the influence of identity politics on the canon.<sup>21</sup> In addition, clusters of scholars began to debate at length the limits of writing literary history and mapping

canons, demonstrating the need to recognize careful negotiations between centers and peripheries.<sup>22</sup> Dan Miron's important book *From Continuity to Contiguity* (2005) pointed out the complexities of the relationship between "Jewish" and Israeli literatures, where the two overlap, and how both test the meaningfulness of the term *national literature*.<sup>23</sup> By the time the dueling lists were produced, they followed more than a decade of fevered research and discussion in the area of canon formation in Hebrew and Israeli literature. In addition, other studies offered partial correctives to the national narrative by redefining and expanding the canon to include, respectively, writing by women; writing by Israelis who hailed from the Mediterranean region; Israeli writing in Yiddish, Russian, and English; American Hebrew literature; and the concept of minor literature.

These efforts, together, greatly raised awareness of Diaspora writers (such as David Vogel) and new appreciation for others who wrote about Jewish experience outside of Israel (for instance, Aharon Appelfeld, who often wrote about the European past; Eleonora Lev; and Sami Berdugo, particularly in his evocation of Moroccan life in *Zeh hadvarim*). Critical attention to new genres and to previously marginal ones—diaries, genre fiction (e.g., detectives, romance, sci fi), flash fiction, and the graphic novel—contributed to widening conversations about literature and to a concurrent opening of the canon.<sup>24</sup> Recognition now went to any number of authors—including Eshkol Nevo, Nir Baram, Vaan Nguyen, Alex Epstein, Rutu Modan, Alon Hilu, Asfu Beru, and Assaf Gavron—who were virtually unknown a decade before, and who introduced or reintroduced genres and modes of writing to Israeli literature. It became a widely accepted assumption that young Israeli authors were likely to strive for highly personal and individual art, to "shun political relevancy, whether as writers or activists" and to decline to serve as "spokesmen for the collective."<sup>25</sup> They differ qualitatively from writers of the '60s who wrote about the individual to counter the narrative of the collective, or who wrote from the perspective of sons who cannot live up to their fathers' self-sacrifice. Those writing from a generation later chose not to engage with questions of the collective, of self-sacrifice, and of heroic fathers. Such questions were not even part of their vocabulary.

This third moment, then, like the earlier ones, displays a central tension between attempts to designate a canon and a lively, messy, expansive, and rapidly changing literary scene that overpowers and defies efforts at canon building. The result is not just cultural fragmentation—which was emerging already in 1977—nor the flourishing of multiculturalism,

which has itself attained the status of metanarrative. More to the point: any number of writers in the 2000s no longer felt a need to engage with the Zionist metanarrative. The rise of a literature that no longer sets the nation at its center gives rise to a crisis of canon. That crisis is a symptom of challenge to the very idea of a national literature.

### To Be Determined

Nevertheless, even while the borders of national literature are being breached, people are still trying to make sense of the literary scene and to assign priorities. While canon remains an elusive entity, as slippery as soap in a bathtub, reports of the death of the canon have been greatly exaggerated. The canon represents “that which is assumed to be ‘good’ literature, in fact the ‘best’ literature: that which is worth preserving and passing on from one generation to the next”<sup>26</sup> or “the limited field we criticize and theorize about.”<sup>27</sup> Multiple canons are constantly in the process of forming and re-forming themselves. The scholarly canon is likely to differ from popular and commercial ones; the academic bookshelf differs from best-seller lists. Yet, while scholarship neither determines nor is determined by market forces, it informs and is influenced by them. In addition, overseas canons are necessarily distinct from the Israeli, homegrown canon, but they have been growing in recent years.<sup>28</sup> Consider the Israeli list of the Dalkey Archives, begun the same year as the Hebrew bookshelves of Hasifriyah Hechadashah and Proza Yisraelit discussed above: starting with Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City* and Eshkol Nevo’s *Homesick*, Kaniuk’s, Asaf Schurr’s, and Gabriela Avigur-Rotem’s works quickly followed. Toby Press has brought ever more Israeli writers to the attention of the world in English translation.<sup>29</sup>

Fishel Lachower’s early history of modern Hebrew literature (1946–48) has been described as part of a “conscious Zionist effort to establish a Hebrew literary tradition where there was none before.”<sup>30</sup> That project was, in concert with the spirit of the Zionist slogan “To build and be built,” an act of determination to forge a new culture. Now, by contrast, the canon remains “to be determined”; it is fluid and multifaceted and as yet unknowable.

In the midst of this complicated scene, our volume *Since 1948* offers interim assessments of and commentary on how this remarkable literature has evolved and is evolving. This project includes reports from the field

of literary studies and provides state of the art readings, but also aims for rereading, recovery, and reinterpretation. The essays take a look back over seventy years and reconsider some of the ways we have gotten to where we are today.

The contributors, who include a mix of established and new scholars and writers from both sides of the Atlantic, address a wide range of issues. They present diverse viewpoints, topics, genres, and approaches. Approximately half of us are Israeli, half American, although in keeping with the central assumptions of this book, it could be argued that national categories are neither as significant nor as fixed as they were once thought to be. In every case, the contributors have each had experience in the Israeli academy as well as in American academia. We hope that our variously transnational backgrounds help us bring discussion of Israeli literature in the making to an English-speaking audience.

As editors, we considered many possible ways of constructing the table of contents. The numerous options reflect the many facets of Israeli literature, and, indeed, the difficulties we encountered indicate the very reason for writing this book: so as to present an enlarged view of the diversity and heterogeneity of Israeli literature now and also so as to rediscover the past. New perspectives on the past call for reclaiming it, recasting or reconfiguring the historiography in order to allow for a wider lens and consideration of more voices. We entertained the possibility of including one section oriented to a chronological arc, focusing on developments from early to more recent texts; we thought about thematic divisions; we weighed the idea of pairing texts with similar critical approaches, or just placing essays in a random order. The upshot of this process is that we have arranged the pieces into four sections. All four in one way or another point to the question of voice: which voices have been sounded, which have been silenced in Israeli literature? In which ways do they connect, emerge from another, quarrel, contradict, or stand independently? The notion of canon—as that word is used in the musical sphere—comes to mind, and we cannot help but think of how the multiplicity of voices we are dealing with is *not* canonic. In music, a canon is a contrapuntal composition in which “each successively entering voice presents the initial theme usually transformed in a strictly consistent way.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the voices in Israeli literature are neither rigidly structured, nor are they strictly in counterpoint; that is, they do not combine “two or more independent melodies into a single harmonic texture.” Rather, they are polyphonic—sometimes complementing, sometimes harmonic, often contrasting, at

times filled with tensions or discordant, certainly independent but also part of a complicated weave of interconnected expression. Together, the essays in this volume illustrate a primary observation that challenges the model of a national literature: in the case of Israeli writing land, literature, and people do not line up neatly.

For Part One, “Through Time: Silences, Voices, Echoes,” we have singled out three essays that most boldly highlight how new voices have succeeded old ones and emerged in subsequent generations, as well as how they have reverberated with one another and built on intertextual references. Our second section, “Across Language and Territory: Literature and Identity,” emphasizes the point that the words *Hebrew*, *Jewish*, *Israeli*, *Erets Yisraeli*, and *Zionist* are not coterminous. Sometimes they overlap, but not always, and often in startling configurations. This section takes into account Israeli authors who write in languages other than Hebrew, Hebrew-speaking Israeli citizens who are not Zionists, and Israelis writing outside of Israel. Part Three, “Between the Lines: Rethinking Genres,” turns to genres that were long seen as outside of the canon but that have become more central in recent years: children’s literature, memoir of childhood, and pulp fiction geared to teen readers. It is a sign of the maturity of Israeli literature that scholars now can see how such once-marginalized genres fit into the grand scheme of literary productivity in Israel. The essays aim to show how these genres rejuvenate, energize, and contribute original approaches to mainstream literature. Finally, in Part Four, we have placed the three essays that deal most directly or most self-consciously with questions of constructing canon. Grouped under the title “Concerning Canons,” these pieces raise questions with regard to established canon even as they acknowledge consternation over the conundrums of canon building. Canons, like the boundaries of national literature, are constantly and continuously being prodded, provoked, and imploded.

The volume opens with “Not One, but Five Moments of Silence” by Eran Tzelgov. Looking at poems that overtly call for silence, beginning with Nathan Zach’s famous line “One moment, silence” (1960) and ending with a poem from Tehila Hakimi’s debut collection (2015) that calls for one day of silence, this essay highlights shifts and changes in the making of an authentic speaker in Israeli poetry. Tzelgov’s historiography derives not from a top-down theory, but from a series of texts, each of which constitutes its own *ars poetica* and each of which responds to another that preceded it. This analysis thereby uncovers a chain of voices that assert themselves in evolving fashion. The essay also provides new readings of

classic texts while introducing texts that are most likely altogether new to English-reading audiences.

In the next essay, Michal Raizen also identifies a chain of literary creativity—one that links together song and story, Hebrew and Arabic. Raizen explores the emergence of Mizrachi voices in Israeli literature by examining the trope of the *hafla*, a kind of traditional musical and story-telling performance widely popular throughout the Arab world. One of Raizen's key insights here is that this Arabic literary genre has been incorporated into recent Hebrew fiction in a way that enables cultural transmission across generations. Her analysis makes accessible several novels that make accessible the *hafla*, a cherished part of the culture of Middle Eastern Jews before they came to Israel, and so the novels make that heritage more legible to Hebrew readers. The written, printed word aspires to retrieve and express an art form of the past, to sound the sounds of the *hafla* through a non-sound medium, and thereby also to introduce innovative themes and style into Hebrew prose.

Wendy Zierler's essay on "Anthological Poetics" points out resonances generated by placing modern poems side by side with traditional prayers. Her essay is grounded in the nascent Israeli phenomenon of *Hitchadshut Yehudit*—a contemporary Israeli religious renaissance that makes extensive use of secular song and poetry within synagogue liturgy. Zierler argues that conscious editorial juxtapositions of varied materials in newly compiled prayer books produce new meaning, encourage new readings of texts, and continue the tradition of *piyyut* in an innovative way. With the recent rise of liberal Judaism, new worship communities, and the secular *beit midrash*, *siddurim* are disseminating Hebrew verse in significant, energizing ways, showing how ancient and modern texts speak to one another.

While the majority of the literature we consider in this collection is Hebrew literature, the second section of essays here readily acknowledges the multilingual landscape. Shachar Pinsker examines the place of Yiddish writing in our evolving understanding of what constitutes Israeli literature and its history. His essay argues for including Yiddish in our reading of Israeli culture, showing how bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish writers strengthen his case. At the heart of the chapter is an analysis of Yiddish poems, stories, and a novel written between 1948 and 1966, by Avrom Sutzkever, H. Binyomin, Mendel Mann, Tzvi Eisenman, and Yossl Birshteyn. These texts deal with questions about the relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew, the authors' encounter with the Israeli landscape, and the traumas suffered by those uprooted from their homes. Against

the prevalent notion that Israeli literature is synonymous with Hebrew literature, Pinsker demonstrates a better understanding of Israeli literature by attending to the “Yiddish that lurks behind.”

Yael Dekel’s article on short fiction from the 1950s also directs attention to formative times in Israel, to territory, and to languages in contact. She focuses on largely overlooked stories published in *Alef*, the magazine of the Canaanite movement—an ideological and cultural movement from the pre-State era that aimed to create a Hebrew nation disconnected from the Jewish past. Her close look at a story from 1950, Eitan Notev’s “Praise Be to God,” offers fresh perspectives on the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and on fictional representation of encounters between Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers. Engaging with theories of translation to elucidate relations between Canaanite and Zionist ideology, she argues that Notev’s story poses critical questions concerning the very definition of Hebrew literature and Israeli literature. Dekel’s translation of this story—the first English translation of it—appears in the appendix to this volume.

In “Hebrew Unbound: Alternative Homelands in the New World,” Melissa Weininger further explores the boundaries of Israeli literature by addressing Hebrew works and English language works by Hebrew speakers, largely written and published outside of Israel. Both linguistically and geographically, this body of work challenges what we think of as “Israeli” or “Hebrew” literature, complicating the linear narrative of Israeli literary history from Statehood Generation onward. Focusing on Ruby Namdar’s 2015 novel *Habayit asher nechrav* (*The Ruined House*) and Nava Semel’s 2006 *Iysra’el (IsraIsle)*, this essay explores fiction that, in the wake of globalization, imagines alternative histories and entertains visions of alternative homelands.

The following section treats literature for and about children and teenagers, delving into genres that fall outside the conventional boundaries of canon. Shai Ginsburg examines the (relatively late) emergence of fantasy and make-believe in Israeli children’s literature through works by Yigal Mossinsohn, Avraham Shlonsky, Devorah Omer, Nurit Zarchi, and Yanetz Levi. Rather than categorizing these stories and poems of imaginary travel as escapism, this chapter reads between the lines to analyze political contexts and nuance that only adults would discern, not child audiences/readers. Children’s literature is an especially rich area of inquiry, not only because of its significance in formulating a national narrative, and its paradoxical capacity for experimentation, but also because Israeli children’s literature was consciously and deliberately developed in large

part by established, canonical writers Here, Ginsburg looks at the ways in which fantasy is employed in children's literature as a response to politics of the here and now by use of "there" and "then." Even while timeless and universal, these works are grounded in Israeli place and time.

Naomi Sokoloff's essay focuses on memoir by Alona Frankel, a renowned Israeli children's author. In a trilogy aimed at adult readers, Frankel incorporated conventions of juvenile fiction in order to present the story of her own childhood experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland. Sokoloff posits that Frankel's autobiographical writing can help put into relief a whole strain of Hebrew literature, from the 1960s till today, that approaches the topic of the Holocaust through animal themes. By challenging and dismantling the notion of the "dumb" animal, narratives dealing with trauma signal that their verbal art ventures into a realm of extremes beyond ordinary human language. Drawing on the field of critical animal studies, Sokoloff draws a noncanonical genre firmly into the canon.

Eric Zakim looks at the *stalagim*, stories—published as pulp fiction—about World War II POW camps. Generally considered a vulgar curio, or at best as examples of popular culture geared to the pubescent male, these stories are treated here as serious literary works. This approach adds to (and complicates) our understanding of the role of the Holocaust in literary history as Israel transitioned to statehood. The masquerade that these texts were imported—the very fiction that these texts were translations—allows the works their initial entry into Israeli writing, and Zakim shows how the noncanonical nature of the *stalagim* allows the writers to give expression to taboos, to test the very limits of acceptable literature, and to contest the repression of individual desire. He argues that the distinctiveness of the *stalagim*—and part of what brought them so much opprobrium—relates to the ways subjects in these texts float freely, detached from national identities; so too, shifting narrative points of view destabilize subjectivity. Indeterminability, and not simple vulgarity, is what makes these texts so unsettling and controversial a phenomenon.

Having moved outside the canon to a marginalized subgenre, we then turn in our final section to essays that directly consider issues of canonicity and the challenges of historiography.

In "Disruptive Nativity: The Poetry of Rina Shani and the Sixties in Israel" Riki Traum recovers an almost forgotten poetic voice, analyzing Shani's aesthetics of resistance to the idea of belonging. In countering tensions between home and exile, Shani employed nomadism as a strategy in both her life and her art. This essay puts her poetry in dialogue

with that of the more canonical Leah Goldberg, her teacher, mentor, and friend, noting that where Goldberg offers the solution of two homelands, Shani questions the option of even one.

Yaron Peleg brings us to the present and beyond in his piece on Israeli millennial literature. He returns our focus to the Zionist meta-narrative in the twenty-first century, an age that is at one and the same time post-nationalist and post-globalist. By looking at the work of Asaf Schurr, who published five novels in quick succession between the years 2007 and 2014, Peleg addresses the attempts of more contemporary Israeli works to overcome the limitations of postmodernism. Read together, Schurr's novels invoke the crisis of representation in the postmodern age while at the same time offering a tentative solution. His project eschews the idea of an "imagined national community" in favor of smaller but more cohesive social units.

In the concluding essay, "‘And the winner is . . .’: The Economy of Literary Awards," Nancy E. Berg observes that prizes for Israeli literature have proliferated. While recognizing the largely reactive nature of literary prizes, this chapter reads such competitions as expressions of national identity and values, as discussions of changing times and tastes, and as opportunities for dissent. Berg presents the Sapir Prize as a test case, examining its triumphs, its scandals, and its impact on the economics of the book markets and publicity in Israel. Recent controversies have revealed significant fissures between society and culture and speak to the concerns in a number of this volume's other essays; so too, the overtly political aspect(s) shed light on both the Israeli literary landscape at seventy, and on literary prizes in general.

We hope that the order of our table of contents—as the prepositions in the titles of the sections suggest—will indicate relationships among the essays as well as cross-connections among the multiple factors that converge in shaping Israeli literature. Emerging out of those entwinements are possibilities for constructing new understandings of Israeli literature. A very different order for these essays is possible. For instance, Zierler deals with cultural exchange between North America and Israel, noting that American Jewish thinkers have joined with Israelis to redesign prayer books. She asks not only what is going into the Israeli prayer canon, but also which aspects of Israeli writing will enter the American prayer canon. Her piece, then, might well be compared with Melissa Weininger's—which similarly deals with America as well as Israel—to spur reflection on contemporary interactions between the two major Jewish populations in

the world today. Another example: Tzelgov, Pinsker, and Traum all comment on poetry and poets who have responded to their precursors. Joint consideration of those essays could contribute to an enhanced sense of intertextuality and implied conversations within Israeli literature. Ginsburg and Peleg, for their part, both raise questions about the political and the personal, pulling us to think about shifting trends in Israeli literature that place varying emphasis, over time, on the collective versus the individual.

Yael Dekel's piece, in particular, lends itself to various alternate pairings, because it highlights multifaceted qualities of Israeli writing and one of the basic issues our volume confronts: the rather complex ways in which land, language, and national identity do and do not overlap. In that regard, it makes sense to group her essay with Melissa Weininger's, which similarly focuses on geography and language and raises questions about who is counted as an Israeli writer. Distilling out those nuances and complexities is central to the task of redefining the scope of Israeli literature. However, Dekel also analyzes how Canaanite prose stretches the boundaries of Hebrew so as to allow Arabic voices to be heard, and in that regard her work is closer to Michal Raizen's acknowledgment of Arabic song within Israeli culture. Note, too, that Dekel and Sokoloff both call attention to voices that once were suppressed in Hebrew literature—Holocaust survivors and Arabs. In the literature they consider, the silencing of such voices has been connected to animal themes. Arab characters in early Israeli literature often were presented by Jewish authors as mute, as animals, and remained that way for some decades until the 1980s and after, with the prominence of writers Anton Shammas, Siham Daoud, Sayed Kashua, Ayman Sikseck, Salman Masalha, Ayat Abou Shmeiss, and others. Sokoloff shows how Alona Frankel approaches animal themes to work through and break out of the traumatic silences of her childhood during the Holocaust—a time when Jews were viewed as subhuman. Finally, the pairing of Dekel's and Zakim's essays is thought-provoking, for both grapple with representations of language itself. Dekel shows how Notev imports Arabic dialogue into his prose by translating it into varying registers of Hebrew. Zakim reports on a faux translation: he examines Hebrew fiction that pretends to have been written originally in English. These essays together put into relief ways that Israeli literature has reckoned with its own linguistic boundaries.

We hope our readers will combine and recombine these essays, mix and match them, consider how they speak to one another, and realize that Israeli literature is wonderfully flexible and elastic. It can contain

many challenges—of language, geography, and genre. Israeli literature is multifaceted and that makes it harder to grasp the contours of a canon, but understanding these dimensions yields an enriched overall picture of this exciting and dynamic literature. Given these considerations, at the end of this volume we have provided a combined list of authors mentioned in the essays. The purpose is to give readers some indication of the literature we are covering here and what we have focused on, out of the myriad possibilities that presented themselves to us. This select sample of Israeli authors can provide some sense of the scope of the phenomena in question.

This volume aims to provide a meaningful range of perspectives on Israeli literature, indicating its ongoing vitality and the need to reread and reconsider aspects of what has come before. It should be clear that we are not necessarily endorsing the phenomena we describe, and we are not aiming to replace the so-called Zionist metanarrative with an alternative, unified narrative—nor do we advocate attempting that. We do, however, hope to open up conversation about Israeli literature to multiple narrative strands. The essays here are in conversation with one another and with larger conversations in comparative literature contexts. We invite the reader to join in those conversations. While these essays will interest and challenge scholars of Hebrew literature along with those readers who have broad and deep knowledge of Israeli culture, we hope it will also speak to others, too: readers who follow modern Jewish literature; anyone who has a stake in the changing values of Jewish culture and identity; everyone interested in Middle Eastern writing or in transnational literary developments. At a time when Humanities are questioning the model of the national literature department and the frameworks that associate language with nation, Israeli literature provides an intense and illuminating example of efforts to construct a national identity as well as the pressures and complexities that deconstruct those efforts. It can serve as a test case for considering the relevance of the category “national literature.” Going beyond a national lens, this volume of essays aims to help reinvigorate the study of Israeli texts and culture and also create new audiences for them within the context of world literature. Israeli literature can no longer be defined by a homogenized national narrative; indeed, it never could. In fact, it offers an exemplar of a culture forged by both local and global forces and influences. Israeli literature is not a minor regional literature, but one that is transnational, multilingual, and worthy of global attention.