

PROLOGUE

I have made some attempt not simply to revalue marginal elements . . . but to reinvest them in the dynamic of identity formation and to restore to them some of the critical force for which in the first place they had to be expunged as “unrepresentative.”

—DAVID LLOYD¹

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the politics of aesthetic taste in the time of nation-building by examining the ideologies and practices of inclusion and exclusion in an emerging national culture. Looking at the modern Hebrew canon as “the location, the index, and the record of the struggle for cultural representation,”² I aim to expose the reasons behind the survival or centrality of certain texts and the demise or marginalization of others. In the time of nation-building, the alleged value of literary texts is inextricably entangled with the processes of identity formation. Thus, this book explores the ways in which literary culture—as site and as tool—participates in the production of national identity by removing antithetical, oppositional voices.

The contemporary view of the canon as a reflection of an “ideological struggle rather than a natural aesthetic order”³ subverts the notion that texts attain high cultural status only by virtue of their intrinsic merit. In light of this insight, I advance the following questions: How did the modernist He-

brew canon, as we know it today, come into being? What were the aesthetic paradigms that informed a preference for certain texts or forms of writing over others? What were the political ideologies and social interests that shaped this period's conception of aesthetic value? What remained, and perhaps still remains, marginal or invisible in this modernist register?

Literature's role in nation-building—indeed, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, its “deep functional utility”—becomes increasingly visible in its constructions of aesthetic worth.⁴ This view of value as a function of communal needs, while grounded in contemporary theory, is already embedded in the history of the word *canon*, which derives directly from the Greek *kanon* (rod, reed), which in turn has its roots in the Hebrew word *kane* (or *kne-mida*, measuring stick). In his discussion of the history of the term, Gregory Jusdanis demonstrates that in classical Greek culture, the word *kanon* was consistently used in discussions of sculpture, architecture, music, and philosophy, denoting a rod, measure, or ruler. Although the word was first used to indicate precision, it “eventually acquired metaphorical meaning: as the right measure or proportion.”⁵

With the advent of Christianity, *kanon* assumed a rather different meaning. Following the emergence of the Hebrew Bible as the Jewish people's closed list of holy texts, Christianity formed its own canon of sacred scriptures. Consequently, the term *kanon* was increasingly used to mean a list or paradigm, referring not only to the truth in the holy scriptures but also to “the list of texts embodying this truth.”⁶ While this dual conception of the canon originated in a religious context, it gradually resurfaced in discussions of aesthetic worth. In both religious and aesthetic contexts the canon is not simply a list of worthy and inspired texts, but also an implicit narrative reflecting the shared beliefs of a community. By delimiting borders, the canon articulates communal regulations, needs, and concerns, thereby signifying the collective's boundaries of the permissible. Thus, in the process of canonization, “institutions of evaluative authority,” in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's words, “will be called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and procedures that validate the community's established tastes and preferences.”⁷

The instrumentality of literature in the time of nation-building—indeed, the effort to solidify the community's identity via literary texts—derives, as David Lloyd asserts, from the fact that “literary culture is conceived as offering not merely a path towards the resolution, but the resolution itself of the problems of subjective and political identity.”⁸ While this insight characterizes

the role of literature in many national movements, its relevance to Hebrew literature cannot be overstated, for Zionism emerged almost from the onset as a literary utopia.⁹ In the absence of both territory and self-government, the “Republic of Letters”¹⁰ was indeed the only means by which Diaspora Jews could promote national unity. The naturalized triad of nation, territory, and language—which gave rise to the European nation-state—was so far removed from Jewish reality during the nineteenth century that it first had to be created by the literary imagination.

The cataclysms that swept through the Jewish world at this time pulverized its entire structure: the old religious beliefs, which had persisted for two millennia, as well as the protective self-containment of the Jewish community, were challenged by the new concepts of modernity, humanism, and secularism. In the wake of modernity, the fate of the Jew and of the Jewish people became an urgent existential issue, one explored through literary texts that proposed various potential solutions for what has come to be known as *tsarat ha-yehudim* (the affliction of the Jews). Consequently, Hebrew literature became instrumental in imagining a Jewish national revival and in inducting its readers into the ideology of the “imagined community.”¹¹ The “national poet,” Chaim Nachman Bialik, was well aware of Hebrew literature’s historic role in shaping the nation, and of its ability to create a sense of unity and continuity in a time of crisis:

And indeed, only through Hebrew literature did we arrive at revival and Zionism. Without it, we wouldn’t have arrived at this point. All of the [Hebrew] literature of the last hundred and fifty years has been a preparation for our revival. He who doesn’t understand this, his feet did not stand on the Mount Sinai of Hebrew literature. Even the writers of the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment], who are viewed as nationalists, prepared us and brought us to the present. This cannot be denied: that from Smolenskin on, it was Hebrew literature alone that refined the nation and brought us to revival because she [Hebrew literature] was the guide.¹²

Bialik’s observation that Hebrew literature “refined the nation” not only negates the perception of literature as autonomous, but also anticipates contemporary theory’s observations on the role literature plays in nation-building. Bialik suggests that modern, secular, Hebrew literature replaces

traditional religious texts in unifying the nation, as is clear from his reference to Mount Sinai, the biblical site of national birth. Bialik's reference to the nation's coming-into-being at Mount Sinai creates an analogy between two textual sites of national birth: inasmuch as the Bible narrates the birth of Israel as a nation, modern Hebrew literature narrates the nation's revival in modern times.¹³ Bialik's description of Hebrew literature as a laboratory in which national identity is refined should be read against the background of Anthony Smith's characterization of nationalism: "Nationalism must be seen as a form of historicist culture and civic education, one that overlays or replaces the older modes of religious culture and familial education. More than a style and doctrine of politics, nationalism is a *form of culture*—an ideology, a language, mythology, symbolism and consciousness."¹⁴

However, these constitutive aspects of national culture—ideology, language, mythology, symbolism, and consciousness—were the subject of fierce debate within the Jewish world at the turn of the century.¹⁵ The production of Zionism as a form of civic culture that was to replace religion as the unifying characteristic of the nation demanded the resolution of questions concerning the nature of the would-be modern Jewish culture. First among these was the question of the national language. Theodor Herzl, for example, imagined in his 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland* that German would become the official language of the new society in Palestine. However, Hebrew rapidly came to be identified as the mythic language of Zionism, violently ousting Yiddish, which had been the predominant language of European Jewry.

The function of language as an ideological tool in the emergence of modern nationalism has been emphasized time and again. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, says, "For Germans and Italians, their national language was not merely an administrative convenience or a means of unifying state-wide communication. . . . It was the *only* thing that made them Germans or Italians, and consequently carried a far heavier charge of national identity than, say, English did for those who wrote and read that language."¹⁶ While there are perhaps similarities between Hebrew and these languages with respect to the central role they play in national identity formation, the revival of the Hebrew language presents a marked deviation from this normative European model. The choice of Hebrew, a language that had not been spoken for two millennia, was in more ways than one an "artificial" choice, a radical invention of tradition.

It is in light of this ideologically motivated, "artificial" choice that Ben-

jamin Harshav proclaims that Israel is the result of “an ideology that created a language that forged a society that became a state.”¹⁷ Harshav’s astute formulation of the process of Jewish national revival emphasizes the reversal of the naturalized triad of territory, nation, and language that characterizes the emergence of most European nation-states.

The engineering of national culture, which was one of Zionism’s primary concerns, involves a continuous process of selection and combination, binding and separating, inclusion and exclusion. My analysis of the correlation between aesthetic worth and national ideology in Hebrew modernist culture pays special attention to sites of exclusion. Following Jonathan Culler’s assertion that “what is marginal or taboo turns out to be essential to the system that excludes it,”¹⁸ I uncover sites of exclusion that reveal the underlying ideology of cultural production and consumption in an emerging nationalist context. Culler’s emphasis on the importance of the excluded acquires significant relevance in the context of nation-building, for national cultures are formed around repression, forgetting, and exclusion. This idea was first articulated by Ernest Renan in his 1882 essay “What Is a Nation?” where he contends that “forgetting . . . is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” Since “unity is always affected by means of brutality,” the nation must repress its violent beginning in order to establish and retain a sense of harmonious unity. Thus, says Renan, “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. . . . every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.”¹⁹

Homi Bhabha, who pays considerable attention to Renan’s formulation of nationhood, argues that “it is through this syntax of forgetting—or being obliged to forget—that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible. . . . the identity of part and whole, past and present, is cut across ‘the obligation to forget,’ or forgetting to remember.”²⁰ Bhabha’s emphasis on Renan’s “syntax of forgetting” is crucial to my understanding of exclusion as a form of cultural forgetting. Bhabha extends Renan’s formulation to show that the nation represses not only traumatic moments of internal conflict, but also cultural representations of difference. The canon is the site in which we witness the repressive removal of cultural moments that appear to threaten national unity. This removal translates into “institutional forgetting”²¹ and “symbolic violence,”²² both of which are consti-

tutive forces in the organization of national culture. If implicit violence is indeed at the center of cultural engineering, it is because, as David Lloyd contends, “the formation of identity requires the negation of other possible forms of existing.”²³

By performing “rites of purification and exclusion,”²⁴ Hebrew culture negated other possible forms of existing, thus advancing a new hierarchy of cultural and aesthetic values. First among the exclusions was the negation of exile. In seeking to create a new, secular, national culture, Zionism advanced a fierce critique of—indeed, waged a war against—diasporic existence, thereby negating traditional Jewish life almost in its entirety. This negation of exile was disseminated via Hebrew literary texts that played a vital role in structuring the textual field into ideological polarities: Zionist/diasporic, Hebrew/Yiddish, productive/unproductive, masculine/feminine. By condemning and rejecting one pole of the binary divide—that is, the diasporic, Yiddish, unproductive, and feminine—Hebrew culture engineered a new aesthetic order that demanded an identification with Zionist ideals.

While the “extreme demand for identification with the nation that nationalism imposes”²⁵ underlies the production of modern Hebrew texts, it would be erroneous to suggest that all Hebrew writers reacted similarly to this demand.²⁶ In fact, many literary texts resisted, explicitly or implicitly, this national imperative, thereby problematizing literature’s participation in nation-building. In this context, Rosemary Marangoly George notes: “Literature (even that which is written at the height of nationalist struggles) does not relate the exact same story that nationalism does. Nationalist movements narrate one story, literature creates its home through tangential locations. Literature may thus serve also as a site for resistance to dominant ideologies like nationalism.”²⁷ The story narrated by national movements is itself a site of conflict between opposing versions and is thus more nuanced and contested than George’s formulation would allow us to think. However, her observation that literature—even one produced in the height of nationalist struggle—may *also* offer a site for resistance to nationalist ideology is pertinent to my analysis of Hebrew modernist culture. Moments of resistance can often be located at the very heart of literary nation-building. In Hebrew literature, however, the boundaries between complicity with and resistance to nationalism cannot always be marked easily, because writers who identified wholeheartedly with the national project often rejected the outright demand for engaged literature (*sifrut meguyeset*).²⁸

Indeed, the extent to which Hebrew literature participated in nation-building and was politicized cannot be overstated. The literary and political worlds, especially after the shift to Palestine, were entirely intertwined: writers addressed political questions and political leaders in turn expressed their views on literary and aesthetic issues. However, despite the engaged nature of Hebrew modernist culture, many proponents of modernist aesthetics rejected the demand to subordinate their literary production to Zionist ideology, although they identified wholeheartedly with the Zionist project, and perceived the goals of Hebrew letters in nationalist terms.²⁹

Such an oscillation between an ideological commitment to Zionism, on the one hand, and an insistence on upholding the autonomy of the artist, on the other, is apparent, for example, in the writings of Yosef Chaim Brenner. Brenner's entire literary career is marked by the tension between complicity and resistance; his total devotion to the idea of reshaping Jewish identity was only matched by his fierce critique of the emerging national culture in Palestine. In a 1900 letter to his close friend the Hebrew modernist Uri Nissan Gnessin, for example, Brenner denounces his friend's attraction to the idea of "art for art's sake." Gnessin's affinity with European cultural trends of the *fin de siècle*, and especially with impressionist poetics, disappointed Brenner, who accused his friend of disinterest in the larger, pressing concerns of the Jewish people:

As to your theory expressed in that letter regarding "art for art's sake" . . . I don't agree at all. My outlook on life is completely different; in short: we have to sacrifice our souls and diminish evil in the world, the evil of hunger, slavery, idleness, hypocrisy, and so on. It is necessary to *understand* everything, to understand and to distance ourselves from mysticism and illusion; it is necessary to increase reality and holiness in the world; it is necessary to mend the life of the people of Israel so that they become normal. The great suffering of my soul stems from my doubts in general. Is there a remedy? Are we moving forward?—You write a long historical poem—and that I cannot understand. Can we turn our attention away for even one moment from the present? Do you know the condition of our youth? Do you know that we are the last of the Mohicans? Do you know that our people are dying? Do you know that the world is sick? Do you know that this despair is destroying the soul? Do you have eyes?³⁰

This set of heated rhetorical questions negates Gnessin's theory of "art for art's sake" in the name of moral responsibility. In a time of national disaster, Brenner argues, the role of literature is to mend the life of the people of Israel so that they become normal. In Brenner's view, Gnessin's impressionist poetics, his focus on the self and his disengagement from the collective sphere, amount to blindness. When Brenner asks, "Can we turn our attention away for even one moment from the present?" he gives succinct expression to the urgent role of the Hebrew writer.

However, this rhetoric of engagement, which echoes Russian literary views of the period, is rendered ironic in light of Brenner's later essays, in which he ridicules Hebrew criticism's demand that writers blatantly subordinate their production to national ideology. In his 1911 essay "Ha-zhaner ha'-erets israeli ve'-avizarehu" (The genre of Erets Israel and its devices), Brenner advances a scathing critique of the tendency of Hebrew prose fiction to produce sentimental representations of life in Palestine:

When I hear one writer asking another, "Is your new piece on life in Erets Israel?" a feeling of derision awakens within me: as if writing were something external, as it were, and what is written is "From the Life of the Jews in Lodze," "From the Life of the Galicians," "From the Life of the Karaites," "From the Life of the Sephardic Jews," "From the Life of Erets Israel" . . . rather than something internal, the exposure of the inner life and its essence . . . at a specific time and place.³¹

Without delving too deeply into this fascinating, polemical essay, which attracted a great deal of critical attention,³² we can see that Brenner—who wrote this critical piece in defense of his own controversial novel *Mikan u-mikan* (From here and from there)—parodies Hebrew criticism's criteria of aesthetic worth and rejects its narrowly defined nationalist demands. Yet, Brenner's parody of "engaged literature" in the novel and his position in the essay seem to conflict with the collective and nationalist concerns voiced in his letter to Gnessin. This is not only due to the decade that elapsed between the writing of these two texts, or to the different genres in which they are written, but also to Brenner's dual, indeed ambivalent position vis-à-vis the writer's role in nation-building.

In 1925, a similar debate erupted between the poet Avraham Shlonsky, the leader of the emerging literary coterie of the *moderna*, and Berl Katznelson,

the revered and powerful editor of the daily newspaper *Davar*. Following the example of Russian literature after 1917, Katznelson minimized the importance of literary talent and emphasized instead sincerity in writing; his was an antimodernist stance that rejected linguistic experimentalism and favored social realism in writing. Thus, he claimed, literature should not necessarily be written by professional writers, but rather by pioneers who are able to provide firsthand testimony of their experiences in Eretz Israel.³³ Shlonsky—whose literary career began with depictions of pioneer life in the Jezreel Valley—bitterly rejected Katznelson’s approach, which marginalized the writer’s position and judged literature solely on the basis of its social usefulness.³⁴ Although Shlonsky himself admired Vladimir Mayakovsky for his role as the poet of the Revolution, and although he fully identified with socialist Zionism, he could not accept such simple-minded perceptions of literary production. Shlonsky did announce time and again, however, that Hebrew literature had a major role in Jewish national revival; he believed that the writing of every good translation into Hebrew and the writing of every good original poem is a Zionist gesture.

As Shlonsky’s and Brenner’s positions manifest, nationalism’s demand for identification with the nation is answered in Hebrew modernism in intricate ways. Hebrew modernists such as Shlonsky and Brenner are confronted with an antimodernist demand for naive portrayals of national life. In rejecting these demands, they intercept the imposition of nationalist ideology as the sole criterion of aesthetic value, only to produce, I argue, more subtle forms of identification with the national project. Although it would be possible to advance a subversive reading of such canonical writers, a reading that would undo “the tendency to bracket the critical and even transformative potential of texts,”³⁵ this book focuses on writers who have resisted more profoundly Hebrew literature’s nationalist paradigms of worth.

Shlonsky and Brenner’s cultural centrality attests to the legitimacy of such positions, even at the height of nationalist struggle. In light of their elevated status within Hebrew modernism, a series of questions arises: Why were these two writers considered so central even as they advanced forms of resistance? Why were these instances of resistance acceptable? How were they different from other—more threatening and enraging—forms of resistance? If Brenner and Shlonsky rejected political pressures only to produce more subtle forms of national identification, the writers on whom I focus in this book advanced a critique that was often more difficult to ingest. Thus, my study of Hebrew

modernism does not center on such canonical figures, but rather on writers who remained, and perhaps still remain, on the margins of Hebrew culture. In promulgating a recovery project of suppressed cultural products, my study pays special attention to voices that have been marginalized, bowdlerized, and excluded from the records of Hebrew modernism. These marginal, undervalued writers, who were often subjected to hostile readings, are reread as important contributors to Hebrew modernist culture. This cross section of Hebrew modernism, while markedly atypical, sheds new light on the period's conception of aesthetic worth, on processes of inclusion and exclusion, and on the formation of national identity in the time of nation-building.

The Politics of Canonicity is organized in the following manner: The first chapter relates the story of the 1896–97 debate between Ahad Ha'am and Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky over the function of literature in the time of nation-building, thereby unveiling the intricate relationship between public and private in modern Hebrew letters. This debate, I argue, produced the *regulative* paradigm of Hebrew letters and contributed to the emergence of the national allegory as a dominant mode of writing and reading.

The second chapter offers an overview of the modern Hebrew canon vis-à-vis its relation to exile and diaspora. While international modernism often glorified exile, Hebrew modernism fiercely negated the exilic condition. Ironically, however, this negation was advanced by writers who left their European “homeland” for a new and unfamiliar land. When these canons are compared and contrasted, the Hebrew canon emerges as an inverted mirror image of the canon of international modernism, suppressing the cosmopolitan, polyglot, and international experience in favor of the local and indigenous.

While the first two chapters are panoramic in nature, the following three chapters focus on specific sites of exclusion. The third chapter focuses on David Fogel, a poet who produced his Hebrew writings in Vienna and Paris, away from the budding national culture in Palestine. Fogel distanced himself from Hebrew letters in general and from Zionist ideology in particular, thereby producing anationalist poetry in a time of heightened nationalist struggle. His withdrawal from national discourse and his marked emphasis on the language of selfhood are read as an example of minor writing.

The fourth chapter delineates Hebrew literature's reception of its first women poets. The belated emergence of women's poetry is read in light of Amalia Kahana-Carmon's resonant description of modern Hebrew literature as “a synagogue of the spirit.”³⁶ Just as women in the synagogue are ex-

pected to observe the ceremony passively, so were women writers expected to position themselves at the margins of the new national culture. However, women poets like Rachel, Esther Raab, and Anda Pinkerfeld often revolutionized the male-dominated language of their time, although their poetic revolution remained largely invisible.

The fifth chapter focuses on Avot Yeshurun's 1952 poem "Passover on Caves" and on the critical polemic that followed its publication. While the earlier chapters deal with nationalism in its prestatehood days, Yeshurun's text explores identity formation in the time of statehood. Resisting the Zionist construction of national identity and negating its xenophobic depiction of its national Other (the Arab), Yeshurun produces a radical, nearly unreadable text that intends to destabilize the very identity of the Zionist subject.

The epilogue of this book directs attention to questions of conspiracy and culpability in canon formation through a close reading of a story-cum-critical essay by Henry Louis Gates. The successful operation of exclusion depends on naturalizing a system of beliefs, and yet it is precisely this "naturalness" of beliefs that renders canonization "conspiratorial."