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Bassan, Eyal

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Gestures of Undoing:  
The Desire for the Neutral in Modern Hebrew Literature

by

Eyal Bassan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy

with the Graduate Theological Union

in

Jewish Studies

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Chana Kronfeld, Chair

Professor Naomi Seidman

Professor Anne-Lise François

Professor Robert Alter

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Abstract

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This dissertation traces throughout the history of modern Hebrew literature a fantasy of disengagement with systems of action and thought that are predicated on ideologies of achievement, oppositionality, or productivism. Through readings that range from the stories of Uri Nissan Gnessin in the first decade of the twentieth century to the bilingual fiction of Yossel Birstein in the 1980s, my project recovers the workings of a largely unacknowledged poetics of tacit refusal that operates at the heart of a predominantly strong, conflictual, and essentially opinionated cultural imaginary. Following the late work of Roland Barthes, I call this poetics “the desire for the neutral”—the desire to rid oneself of the burden of paradigms, to baffle any demand to occupy a predetermined position. This project thus traces a fantasmatic trajectory that often goes completely unnoticed in conventional critical and historiographical accounts. Taken together, the chapters of this dissertation argue for the persistence in modern Hebrew literature of a shared desire for the neutral, conceptualized neither as a fixed discursive position nor as a stance of direct resistance (which only reinstitutes the oppositional structure)—but rather as a category of historicized strategies of non-compliance, an ethos of minimal action that outplays the very logic of the paradigm.

Chapter 1 explores the emergence of the figure of the failed writer in Gnessin’s “Sideways” (1905) and in Elisheva’s *Side-Streets* (1929) as a fantasy of non-participation against the coercive discourse of imperative collectivist writing at that period. These narratives of failure, I argue, manifest not a self-deprecating anxiety but rather an affirmative “desire to retire” from the overdetermined task of the Hebrew writer. Chapter 2 focuses on the claim for a “freedom not to write” in Aharon Megged’s *The Living on the Dead* (1965). Through the lens of Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy of potentiality (in which any potentiality is always also *impotentiality*), I read this trope as indicative of what I describe as the *potential unconscious* of Israeli literature: a radical fantasy of retaining a state of literary and political impotentiality—and

thus, ultimately, of potentializing given political realities. Chapter 3 examines the pedagogy of nuance in the bilingual fiction of Yossel Birstein, from the 1950s to the 1980s. Responding to the crisis of Yiddish literature in Israel, Birstein's fiction, I argue, teaches an activism of nuance—an ethics and politics of action that, against historical conditions that hinder one's ability to act, consists in minimal, often nearly inconsequential yet nonetheless insistent tiny bits of difference.

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## Introduction

### The Terms of Writing: Failure, Potentiality, Inconsequentiality

This dissertation is concerned with acts that seem to have very little to offer, gestures that gesture toward nothing more than their own shortcomings. Such is the scene of action depicted in Dan Pagis's "The Runner Artist," a poem in which the willingness to linger at the site of failure allows the frustration of achievement to be experienced not as disappointment but as renewed possibility. Barely nothing happens in this poem, except for the suspension of action, and yet this very state of abeyance, this staying at the same place, encourages us, by the poem's last line, to recognize an impasse where we once saw progress, an openness in what seemed a futile dead-end:

#### The Runner Artist<sup>1</sup>

#### אמן המרוץ

The loneliness  
of the short-distance runner.

בדידותו של הרץ  
למרחקים קצרים.

His breath holds out only  
till the halfway mark.

נשימתו מספיקה רק  
עד קו הביניים.

Only his footprints  
follow him devotedly.

עוקבים אחריו בדריכות  
רק עקבותיו.

Go! Only two contestants:  
right leg and left leg.

קדימה! רק שני מתחרים:  
רגל ימין ורגל שמאל.

So there's no winner, no loser.  
He's allowed to sit down and rest,

ובכן לא מנצח, לא מנצח.  
מתר לו לשבת,

to go home, or, if he wants to, he's even  
allowed to run.

מתר לו ללכת הביתה,  
מתר לו, אם הוא רוצה, גם לרוץ.

<sup>1</sup> Dan Pagis, *Kol ha-shirim* (Collected Poems), 221; *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, 103. The poem was originally published in Pagis's 1982 collection *Milim nirdafot*.

Offering a running commentary on the state of the poem's athlete-protagonist, the speaker of "The Runner Artist" introduces in each of the six two-line stanzas a slight modification of the previous account. The poem begins with what seems like a title masquerading as a stanza, or rather a stanza taking the form of a subtitle: "The loneliness / of the short-distance runner"—a clear allusion to Alan Sillitoe's short story "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner." But, contrary to the rebellious act of protest at the heart of Sillitoe's story, whose protagonist deliberately and defiantly loses in a prestigious running contest, the runner in Pagis's poem, as we find out in the second stanza, stops running simply because he is out of breath. If he is only a "short-distance" runner, we are perhaps invited to assume, it might be because he can run no further than the halfway mark. Indeed, as the third stanza implies, he is now last in the race. Providing thus the general coordinates of the runner's position, the second and third stanzas deflate the potential allegorical charge suggested by the first, accentuating the concreteness rather than abstractness of its terms. By the end of the third stanza, the source of the runner's "loneliness," invoked in the very first word of the poem (*bdiduto*), turns out to be trivial rather than existential: he is alone simply because he is the worst runner, left behind by all the others.

Yet, within this move of deflation, it is the turn to figurative language in the third stanza—its strange, roundabout way of reporting that the runner is now behind everyone else—that introduces a radical reversal in the evaluation of the runner's situation: "Only his footprints / follow him devotedly." The somewhat unorthodox yet perfectly correct construction of this sentence in the Hebrew—the first line beginning not with the subject but with the verb, "*okvim acharav bi-drikhut*" (literally, "follow him excitedly")—might propel the reader to consider, at the line break, possible plausible agents for this act of following, such as "his fans," "his competitors," or "the TV viewers," before proceeding to reveal the surprising, touching subject of the sentence in the next line: "*rak ikvotav*," only his footprints. Highlighting the runner's failure while already beginning to revisit this failure's meaning, this stanza suggests that being last might mean being *free*, since the last runner is neither followed by any other runner nor watched (or followed) by any spectator—it is only (and merely) his own footprints that follow him, excitedly.

But the tonal and syntactical resonance of *okvim* (follow) and *ikvotav* (his footprints), repeating the sounds of their shared Hebrew root (ג.ק.ע) while framing the stanza as its first and last words, also highlights the surreal directionality of this image, for the noun *ikvotav* would normally serve as the object of the verb *la-akov* (to follow), not its subject. To put it simply, footprints are usually what one follows, not the following agent. This incongruity of grammar and image, as the footprints that the man leaves behind him are described to be actively following him, invokes here a potential reversal of the image, inviting us, in accordance with the proper direction of following, to imagine the man following his own footprints. It is as if the runner, who is already last and barely moving, is about to turn around and start walking after his own footprints in the opposite direction, tracing back his own traces.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This stanza's powerful image of the animated *akevot* (footprints, traces) may invoke a possible allegorical interpretation that takes its cue from Pagis's earlier cryptic poem "Akevot" and his poetry of the Shoah more broadly (on "Akevot" in this context, see Hannan Hever, "'Mi-shamayim li-shmey ha-shamayim': Tra'uma ve-edut be-shirat Dan Pagis [From the Sky to the Skies of the Sky]: Trauma and Testimony in the Poetry of Dan Pagis]). On this line or reading, "The Runner Artist" would be interpreted as depicting the haunting presence of the past, the inability of the survivor (here, the runner artist) to run away from what was supposedly left behind—a line of reading I acknowledge here only to set it aside, in favor of a more concrete or "surface" understanding of "The Runner Artist" as, indeed, a poem about no more than an unsuccessful runner and his singular art of failure.

As though warning against this very possibility, the fourth stanza begins with the imperative “Forward!” (“Go!” in Stephen Mitchell’s translation; *kadima*, with its explicit forward directionality, in the original Hebrew). The figure of the two racing legs re-introduces the competitive element into the poem only to draw from it the surprising yet fitting conclusion at the beginning of the next stanza: “So there’s no winner, no loser.”

The poem’s depiction of this failed runner, competing in a failed race that yields no winner or loser, may thus be read as corresponding to a certain critical fascination with failure (and, specifically, with the figure of the failed athlete) as a trope of political resistance. Jean Baudrillard, for example, has singled out the disruptive effect of failure, which he demonstrates through “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner” and a famous case of a French 400 meter runner who, not unlike the “runner artist,” could not bring himself to cross the finish line first. For Baudrillard, this kind of athlete acquires a “meaning of denial and resistance”: “by running to win, athletes reactivate the competitive value system [...] It is this bogus exchange mechanism that failure unconsciously causes to break down.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Jack/Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* has laid out an emphatic theoretical and political case for an embrace of failure, openly celebrating it as a form of queer resistance to hetero-normative and capitalist ideologies. Drawing on a very large and diverse archive of failures, including athletes who finish fourth in the Olympic Games, Halberstam claims that such instances of failure, “like those athletes who finish fourth, remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet Pagis takes his athlete a step further (or perhaps a step back) in comparison to Baudrillard’s and Halberstam’s exemplary failing athletes. The runner artist does not “finish fourth”—he does not finish at all, and finishing fourth has no meaning in the non-competitive order created in this poem. For “The Runner Artist” does not quite stop with the seemingly decisive “So there’s no winner, no loser,” and this statement, assuming as it is a rhetoric of conclusion (introduced with *u-vkhen*, “So” or “Thus”), is soon revealed as only occasioning *inconclusiveness*. If indeed there is no winner and no loser, it is not exactly because the rules of the race have been completely annulled (or subverted or “brought down”) but because somehow a shift has taken place in the runner’s relation to them. Commenting on this shift, the last three lines of the poem break for the first time the congruence between stanza and sentence units, signaling formally an openness of choice in lieu of a previously imposing binary structure: the race’s “either/or” dynamics (you can either win or lose) is now answered not only by the dual negation of “no winner, no loser” but also, affirmatively, by a subsequent series of non-binary alternatives to both winning and losing. In other words, the poem (or the competition that it depicts, for that matter) does not end with a total disavowal of the terms of the race but rather with a renegotiation of their exhaustiveness, situating them only as a part—and, quite remarkably, also as the origin—of a broader horizon of possibility.

Echoing three times the phrase “*mutar lo*” (he’s allowed), the last three lines mark a conceptual move from a logic of competition to a logic of permission (what he is allowed to do, what he is free to do), a logic that has nothing to do with winning or losing, success or failure, being first or last. The gesture that “The Runner Artist” dramatizes, in other words, is not simply one of “denial and resistance”; it is a double gesture that simultaneously undoes itself as a gesture of resistance. Only thus can it truly elude the strong oppositional logic of

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<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, “Concerning the Fulfillment of Desire in Exchange Value,” 208.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 120.

winning/losing—a logic that still seems to dominate, for instance, Halberstam’s rhetoric. For Pagis’s runner, the aim, if there is any, is not to find “something powerful” but rather to undo one’s relation to power; it is not “to bring down the winner” but to bring down the very notion of winning. The runner does not rebel or resist exactly; he is not completely outside the race (for he can still run if he wants to) and he is certainly not inside it anymore. Somehow, he manages to be *beside* the order of competition while engaging with it in a kind of non-exclusive relationality that turns its logic on its head. The art of the runner artist thus seems to lie precisely in his utter failure as a runner. He is out of breath, he is last, he is not watched—and all this makes him the freest runner possible: “He’s allowed to sit down and rest, // to go home, or, if he wants to, he’s even / allowed to run.” These final lines emphasize at once both the runner’s freedom to run and his freedom to not run, marking not only the completion of the poem’s conceptual shift but also what finally appears to be its desire, its fantasy: the fantasy to fail, and in spite of failing—or rather, precisely through failing—claim one’s potentiality, but also the impotentiality, to run differently.

I open with this rather lengthy discussion of Pagis’s scene of suspended movement not only because it dramatizes a unique mode of (non)action but also because it models a mode of reflection, even of interpretation: more than the runner’s failure, it is the speaker’s willingness to slow down the judgmental instinct and set aside the conventional terms of evaluation that allows for the poem’s insightful reversals. Following in the footsteps of “The Runner Artist” in both these respects, the readings that make up this dissertation trace throughout the history of modern Hebrew literature a parallel fantasy of doing away with systems of action and thought that are predicated on ideologies of achievement, oppositionality, or productivism. What emerges through these readings is a fantasy of disengagement with strict, decisive discursive paradigms by means not of a direct resistance that only replicates the oppositional structure but of an action so non-emphatic or self-effacing as to outplay the very logic of the paradigm. As I show in chapter 1, the history of modern Hebrew literature is decidedly marked by explicit discursive demands to take a national stand. Considering this inherently conflictual discourse, I examine throughout this dissertation the works of writers who choose to experiment with various forms of tacit refusal to rigid, predetermined writerly positions. Not unlike the runner artist, they perform, in and through their writing, a gesture of undoing, negotiating the very terms of their activity. At the same time—and again like the runner artist, who stops running only to affirmatively establish that after all, as nobody watches and nobody cares, he can still run if he wants to—these gestures of non-compliance also *undo themselves* as actions that carry meaning, demand response, make a change, or even leave a mark. In this sense, they are gestures of a double undoing, or of undoing to the power of two, in which the second moment of undoing does not quite cancel out the first, but rather complicates it, supplements it with nuance, frees it from a politics of mere oppositionality, and, in its indecisive manner, frees its subject from the burden of mandated positionality.



As its subtitle indicates, my project proposes to conceptualize this cultural attitude as a paradoxical “desire for the neutral,” inasmuch as *the neutral* is understood to designate, following Roland Barthes’s late work, a “refusal to dogmatize,” a “category of discourses with no outcome; or, better, that do not censure effects but [also] do not care about results.”<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, 10, 11.

neutral, writes Barthes, is a “polymorphous field of paradigm and conflict avoidance,” and it is this insistence to describe it in terms of “avoidance” (or elsewhere, “suspension”) that renders the *desire* for the neutral inherently paradoxical: “As a general rule, desire is always marketable: we don’t do anything but sell, buy, exchange desires. The paradox of the desire for the Neutral, its absolute singularity, is that it is nonmarketable.”<sup>6</sup> Aspiring for “the neutral”, the gestures that I am interested in sidestep the violent possessiveness that is constitutive of desire, and yet are animated by something like an active and persistent will, directed towards a mode of action that, like in the runner artist’s final wavering between sitting down, going home, and running as equally insignificant choices, “does not censure effects but does not care about results.”

The chapters of this dissertation explore different *modes* of the neutral: the scene of failure, the stakes of ontological impotentiality (the potential not to be or do something), and the ethos of inconsequential action are all read here as different manifestations of a singular desire that I contextualize against the history and discourse of modern Hebrew literature. But if, as Barthes claims, any active pursuit of the neutral continually stages a theoretical paradox, then to speak about a persistent desire for the neutral in modern Hebrew literature—a literary tradition whose history is fraught with conflict, struggles, and strong discursive demands to position oneself—may come across as a doubly paradoxical, if not utterly naïve, critical project. Against this background, however, it may be precisely the willingness to harbor such paradoxicality, to entertain such naïveté in face of the strong order of Hebrew literature, that can allow us to find the neutral where it is least expected.

Still, why try to find it there to begin with? And why search for something like “the neutral” at all? One possible though perhaps counterintuitive answer is that, at least for Barthes, who dedicated his entire 1977-78 lecture course at the Collège de France to the subject of “*le neutre*,” following this desire may carve out a singular way of becoming political.<sup>7</sup> If such a claim may indeed seem counterintuitive, it is not only for the obvious conceptual reason (the apparent antagonism of the neutral and the political) but also because the evolution of Barthes’s career readily submits itself to a trajectory of depoliticizing: from the early engaged social critic of the 1950s, the author of *Mythologies*, to a thinker distancing himself from immediate politics who in his late work sets out to pursue dreams of withdrawal from the demands of sociality. Yet, as Yue Zhuo suggests in her essay on the “political” Barthes, this simplistic view obscures a more complex narrative of a continuous, tenuous engagement with the political. Thus, for example, in a passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*—in which Barthes refers to himself in the third-person as R.B.—a quotation from Brecht serves to illustrate Barthes’s own political discomfort:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7, 13; translation slightly modified. For the most part, Barthes capitalizes the term “the Neutral” (*le Neutre*). Following the prevalent practice among most scholars of Barthes’s late work in English, I use the lowercase “the neutral” throughout this dissertation, except in direct quotations.

<sup>7</sup> *The Neutral (Le Neutre)* was the second of three lecture courses that Barthes gave at the Collège de France during the period between his appointment to the Collège in 1976 and his death in 1980. It was preceded by *How to Live Together (Comment vivre ensemble, 1977)* and followed by the two-part course *The Preparation of the Novel (La Préparation du roman, 1978-79, 1979-80)*. These lectures are a relatively recent addition to the corpus of Barthes’s writing, having been first published in book form only in 2002-3, more than twenty years after his death. *The Neutral* appeared in English translation in 2005, and the two other courses followed in 2011 and 2013. Indeed, as Anca Parvulescu writes, “*Le Neutre* reaches us late. Like an echo, it needed time, and it took its time to come” (“The Professor’s Desire,” 32). On the broader contexts of these courses and the history of their delayed publication, see the introduction to Lucy O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 1-25.

R.B., it seems, always wants to *limit* politics. Doesn't he know what Brecht seems to have written especially for him?

“For instance I want to live with little politics. Which means that I do not want to be a political subject. But not that I want to be the object of a great deal of politics. Now one must be either the object or the subject of politics; there is no other choice; [...] hence it seems indispensable that I should engage in politics and it is not even up to me to determine how much I should do so.”<sup>8</sup>

Barthes, as Zhuo claims, identified with Brecht's predicament and “recognized in the life trajectory of such a man a threatening paradox he felt he himself *could have lived*: someone who originally wanted to have as little to do with politics as possible, ended up dedicating his life to it.”<sup>9</sup> But while Brecht, acknowledging that “there is no other choice,” actively though reluctantly cast himself as a subject rather than an object of politics, Barthes could not adhere to such a determination, and his relation to politics remained uneasy, partly detached, affected by what he describes in the passage above as a will “to limit politics.” A suggestive distinction he offered in a 1975 interview may not only shed light on the source of this uneasiness but be read as a sort of conceptual axis, generative of much of Barthes's late thought in its relation to politics:

I would first like to make a distinction which may seem somewhat specious to you, but is alive within me: between “*le*” *politique* (the political) and “*la*” *politique* (politics). To me, *le politique* is a fundamental order of history, of thought, of everything that is done, and said. It's the very dimension of the real. *La politique*, however, is something else, it's the moment when the political changes into the same old story, a reiterative discourse, a discourse of repetition. My profound interest in the attachment of the political is equaled only by my intolerance of political discourse. Which doesn't make my situation very easy. My position is somewhat divided, and often guilt-ridden.<sup>10</sup>

The problem, then, is how to be political without being in politics—how to think politically without subjecting oneself to the *doxa* of *la politique*, the repetitive, formal, all too decisive and opinionated discourse of professional politicians. According to Zhuo's alternative narrative, this unsolved, uneasy problem has troubled Barthes's thought from the outset but finally “crystallized” only in his 1977 course *How to Live Together*. Here, he discovers the concept of “idiorrhymy,” an archaic model for the communal organization of monks, in which “Barthes's long term fantasy of a community that does not sacrifice the singularity of the individual” could finally find its form.<sup>11</sup> But, I would like to suggest, the tension between *le politique* and *la*

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 52-3; emphasis in the original. Throughout this dissertation, all emphases in quotations are in the original unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> Zhuo, “The ‘Political’ Barthes,” 57.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, 218, translation modified.

<sup>11</sup> Zhuo, “The ‘Political’ Barthes,” 67. Her narrative of the “political” Barthes runs, as the subtitle of her article indicates, “From Theater to Idiorrhymy”—from *Mythologies* and Barthes's early, overtly political writings on theater, through his dazzling encounter with the originality of Brechtian theater, to his late seminars and the discovery of idiorrhymy. O'Meara's study *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* takes on a similar revisionary task with regards to the common view of Barthes's intellectual evolution and the status of his late work within it: “It is the argument of this book that the *Collège de France* lectures represent an important addition to Barthes's corpus which allows us to arrive at a new reading of his thought. This new reading involves opposing those perceptions of Barthes according to which the potency of Barthes's work diminishes towards the end of his life as it becomes more subjective and aesthetic in focus. [...] All of Barthes's work as cultural and literary theorist, including his

*politique*, the aspiration of being political without being sucked into politics, may also be said to find its expression in a concept broader than idiorrhythmy, and more flexible and fluid at that: the neutral.<sup>12</sup> During the introductory session of Barthes's course, this aspiration is casually folded into a personal aside, whose unimposing, modest tone rehearses its essence: "I add: A reflection on the Neutral, for me: a manner—a free manner—to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time."<sup>13</sup> Conceptually, then, the neutral is informed by a will to bypass while keeping "alive within oneself" the tension between "*le*" and "*la*" *politique*, as well as by an awareness of the constant danger of slipping from one to the other. As Anne-Lise François points out, Barthes's course is motivated to a large extent by "an appetite for minimal variations and an active seeking out of the nuance, the precise and delicate difference."<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is not only the distinction between *le* and *la* but also its minimality that marks the neutral in its relation to *politique*.

Barthes's choice to posit "the neutral" as the title of his course, a course whose lectures would be riddled with references to *The Infinite Conversation*, can be read as an intellectual and personal gesture of admiration and acknowledgement towards Maurice Blanchot's thought, which at the same time also betrays a will to engage with the notion of neutrality beyond the scope of the Blanchotian perspective.<sup>15</sup> In the first session of the course, Barthes provides what at least initially looks like a straightforward definition of his course's primary subject:

I define the Neutral as that which outplays the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm. For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing: I gather under a name, which here is the Neutral.

The paradigm, what is that? It's the opposition of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning.<sup>16</sup>

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increasingly creative late work, involves, ultimately, the complex relationship between the individual and ideology, and an imagining of how this relationship might change for the better" (2).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, though the clear focus and crystallizing point of her narrative is the exploration of idiorrhythmy in *How to Live Together*, Zhuo also acknowledges, if only in passing, that Barthes was later to give this idea a more conceptual name in "the neutral" ("The 'Political' Barthes," 71).

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> François, "Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives," 39.

<sup>15</sup> Though the inspiration of Blanchot's work is explicitly acknowledged in the course, critics differ widely in the assessment of its extent. While O'Meara, for example, maintains that "lexically, the term ['the neutral'] has Blanchotian resonances, though these are not explored by Barthes in any detail" (*Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 11), Parvulescu goes as far as arguing, somewhat hyperbolically, that "the course could have been subtitled *How I Learned to Read Blanchot*": "This is precisely what Barthes does: read and reread Blanchot in his own style. In the same way his *Pleasure of the Text* is a reading of Bataille and yet Bataille's name appears only sporadically in it, the course on the neutral is an exercise in reading Blanchot, and yet Blanchot drifts in and out of Barthes's course, nonetheless punctuating some of its most intense points. Barthes and Blanchot walk together, alongside each other, sometimes following the same path, at points stepping on each other's toes, at points vagabonding on neighboring terrains" ("The Professor's Desire," 36). Christophe Bident, who follows the intricacies of Blanchot and Barthes's ambivalent and convoluted decades-long relationship as it is refracted through their respective conceptions of the neutral, suggest that "between Blanchot and Barthes there was more of a passing nod than an encounter," a nod that he describes in terms of "dissimilar similarity" and "discordeme": "naming the different moments or epochs of the neuter in their works entails bringing out what should perhaps be called the *discordemes* of a field of vision" ("R/M, 1953," 67, 69). See also O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 23n37.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 6-7.

The neutral, in other words, outwits structural oppositions. In this, it crosses disciplinary boundaries and operates in the field of ethics:

Transposed to the “ethical” level: injunctions addressed by the world to “choose,” to produce meaning, to enter conflicts, to “take responsibility,” etc. → [bring about a] temptation to suspend, to thwart, to elude the paradigm, its menacing pressure, its arrogance.<sup>17</sup>

But the operation of the neutral, the temptation to baffle the production of meaning, is arguably visible already in Barthes’s initial definition, which as soon as it is formulated as a definition (“I define the Neutral...”) is unraveled and itself redefined as no more than a gathering: “I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing: I gather under a name.”

Indeed, the structure of the course—“the Neutral in thirty figures”—in which every session presents one to three figures in a fragmentary, discontinuous manner, reflects this impulse to gather rather than define, to theorize by simply grouping together and putting on display. “The Neutral as such,” says Barthes, “requires that the sequence of figures be unstructured, inasmuch as it embodies the refusal to dogmatize: the exposition of the nondogmatic cannot itself be dogmatic.”<sup>18</sup> It creates a conceptual movement “in a state of continuous flux” and a relation of a loose, not fully committed attachment between concept and figure, which Barthes’s casual formulations playfully demonstrate: “To prepare this course, I took the word ‘Neutral’ [...] for a series of walks along a certain number of readings”; “I don’t construct the concept of Neutral, I display Neutrals.”<sup>19</sup>

What might be misconstrued as a lack of theoretical rigor creates in fact a kind of conceptual flexibility particularly fitting not only for Barthes’s thought on the neutral but also for any attempt to take the neutral for a walk along a reading landscape quite different from that in which it was originally conceived for the course at the Collège de France. And so, in searching for the neutral in works of modern Hebrew literature, my aim is not exactly to apply some rigid theoretical perspective to these Hebrew works, but rather to offer the neutral as a principle of gathering, embracing its capacity to tease out a certain non-aggressive desire that by its very nature tends to be overlooked, subsumed into other, stronger discourses and hierarchies. Thus, in their relation to Barthes’s thought, the readings that follow would attempt to mimic the neutral’s own looseness, learn from it how to draw insight from the fleeting, fragmentary, nonexhaustive relation between concept and figure.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the key is the figure of the figure: if “each figure is at the same time search for the Neutral and performance of the Neutral,” then a search for the neutral in modern Hebrew literature should yield its own singular figures of the neutral—in relation to the cultural, historical, or political contexts, the particular paradigms and particular *la politique*, of this literature.<sup>21</sup> The figure, says Barthes, is a “fragment not on the Neutral but in which, more vaguely, there is some Neutral”;<sup>22</sup> and in the parallel, vague conviction that there is indeed at least some neutral in Hebrew literature, and that, paradoxically, though fleeting and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10, 8, 11.

<sup>20</sup> And, for that matter, learn just as well from Anne-Lise François’s unpacking of Barthes’s lightness of touch— itself spread out in an ongoing teasing out of delicate nuances throughout her “Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives.”

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10.



nonmarketable it is still worth searching for, this dissertation finds and begins to pursue its own desire for the neutral.



One of the biggest problems with the neutral—both as a desire and as a critical term—is that it suffers from bad reputation. This is as true today and in the context of my own research as it was for Barthes at his time. “Except for certain philosophers and for Blanchot, which is to say everywhere in the *doxa*, the Neutral has bad press”—with this sentiment Barthes opens his discussion of the “images of the Neutral,” before going on to survey the various “depreciative,” stigmatic images that circulate within the *doxa* (the neutral is thankless, muffled, irresponsible, indifferent).<sup>23</sup> During Barthes’s course itself, some of these charges come up forcefully and directly when a letter from a student points to the apparent contradiction between Barthes’s teaching of the neutral and his earlier attack, in *Mythologies*, on what he has called “neither/nor criticism,” the kind of criticism that emphatically declares its impartiality, aligning itself with neither side, boasting a petit-bourgeois “ideology of the balanced account.”<sup>24</sup> Responding to these charges, Barthes admits that “the Neutral has all the appearance of being a form of neither-norism,” but in a dialectic manner is nevertheless “absolutely different from it.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, he claims, the position of neither-nor is nothing but a “grimace of the Neutral,” its distorted mask, or, as in Marx’s famous formula, “the farcical copy of the Neutral.”<sup>26</sup> Its pretense of impartiality only paves the way for the passing of judgement, for the “great moral figure of the judge”: “the neither-nor speaks the discourse of the master: it knows, it judges [...] the Neutral doesn’t know,” the neutral “is good for nothing, and certainly not for advocating a position, an identity.”<sup>27</sup>

The trap that both proponents and critics of the neutral might face, then, is that of confusing the desire for the neutral with a stance of either irresponsible indifference or self-serving and authoritative impartiality. But, as Anca Parvulescu reminds us, “one of the most important things about the neutral is that it is not useful, it cannot be recuperated by a utilitarian program, it cannot identify a position, it has no place of its own. This is why the neutral cannot be assimilated to something like Switzerland’s ‘neutrality’ during WWII or the often invoked ‘neutrality’ of scientific discourse. In fact, such ‘neutrality’ is a function of the very arrogance the neutral wants to baffle.”<sup>28</sup> Reading the neutral as “neutrality,” then, is reading it still from well within the *doxa*. Against “neutrality,” the neutral emerges, as I have suggested above, as at once both a relation to *le politique* and rejection of *la politique*: though on a superficial level a turn away from politics, at its heart the neutral’s refusal is essentially political, precisely by virtue of its noncompliance with any hegemonic form of politics. The neutral, in other words, is far from being a simplistic stance of resignation; rather, in its very elusiveness, it offers itself as a strategy of a non-dogmatic, non-emphatic critique. Its ethos, as Christophe Bident has put it, is that of “the just measure of a relation to the world which seeks constantly to free itself of all

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>24</sup> See “Neither/Nor Criticism,” in *Mythologies*, 161-64.

<sup>25</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 79-80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Parvulescu, “The Professor’s Desire,” 34.

aggression and all oppression, which displays differences without hierarchy, which touches by dint of not touching and maintains by means of restraint.”<sup>29</sup>

Insisting on a conception of the neutral as the gathering of gestures that are political yet not judgmental, critical yet not masterful, I argue that against the background of the strong, demanding writerly paradigms of modern Hebrew literature, a cultural counter-force emerges: one that takes the form of a collective fantasy of failure, narrativizing Hebrew literature’s wish of withdrawing from itself, of undoing the very conditions that make it possible. Extending from Uri Nissan Gnessin’s work in the first decade of the twentieth century to Yossel’s Birstein’s fiction of the 1980s, this dissertation thus tells a story, or rather a counter-story, fragmented and unassertive by the very nature of its subject matter, of a shared desire for the neutral: a shared poetics of passive resistance that runs through modern Hebrew literature and turns out to be much more prevalent than one would suppose.

Chapter 1, “Failing Critically: The Value of Not Writing in Gnessin’s ‘Sideways’ and Elisheva’s *Side-Streets*,” examines the emergence of the figure of the failed writer, the-writer-who-doesn’t-write, as a fantasmatic response to the explicit imperatives of the Hebrew literary discourse. Showcasing a protagonist who is a failed literary critic and constructing its plot as a deflated drama of continuous non-writing, Gnessin’s short story “Sideways” (1905) is singled out here as the first Hebrew text to introduce a social fantasy of a retreat from writing, a fantasy of undoing literature’s own conditions of possibility. Contextualized both in relation to Gnessin’s own development as critic and writer, and against the impossibility of being neutral in Hebrew literature at the time, the story’s fascination with non-writing is read here as manifesting, implicitly and somewhat ironically, a desire to retire from this literature itself. Gnessin’s protagonist, I argue, is a first installation in a long series of failed writers who would somehow turn up time and again throughout the history of modern Hebrew literature—each practicing his or her own art of failure, his or her own desire to retire, his or her own undoing.

The chapter then moves on to trace the evolution of this trope in Elisheva’s 1929 novel *Side-Streets*, in which the Gnessinian figure of the failure to write is supplemented with a scene of a weakening attachment to Hebrew. Through this trope, I argue, Elisheva renegotiates—and excuses—her own attachments and her own biographical mythology as the sensational “Ruth from the banks of the Volga,” the complete foreigner who chose to tie her fate with that of Hebrew culture. Against this type of narrative, informed as it is by the inescapable political-theological overdetermination of Hebrew at the period, *Side-Streets* channels a desire for the neutral through the structure of the excuse (i.e., a form of non-essential, provisional causality), scandalously recasting the Hebrew writer’s attachment to *Hebrew* as accidental and under-determined, as fleeting as an excuse.

Chapter 2, “Writing Retreats, or The Potential Unconscious: Entanglements of Potentiality in and around Megged’s *The Living on the Dead*,” examines the recurrence of the figure of the “writing retreat” in the fiction of the 1960s and shows how the idea of a retreat dedicated to writing becomes, in practice, a retreat *from* writing. I unpack the intricacies of this figure by focusing on Aharon Megged’s *The Living on the Dead*, a novel whose protagonist is put on trial for insisting on exercising what he calls his “freedom not to write.” Through the lens of Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy of potentiality (in which any potential is always also a potential-not-to, an impotentiality), I read this novel, alongside works by S. Yizhar, A. B. Yehoshua, and Aharon Amir, as indicative of what I term *the potential unconscious* of early Israeli literature. In the wake of the successful accomplishment of national sovereignty, I argue,

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<sup>29</sup> Bident, “R/M, 1953,” 76.

Hebrew literature, now devoid of some of its previous import, entertains an unconscious political fantasy of resisting the telos of writerly productivism; the gesture of purposefully not realizing literary potentials becomes in these texts a philosophical and political experiment in potentializing given realities.

Chapter 3, “Yossel Birstein’s Pedagogy of Nuance,” examines the fiction of Yossel Birstein as an ongoing negotiation with what I describe as the economic crisis of Yiddish literature in Israel: its predicament as a literary production that, in the absence of audience and cultural capital within a Hebrew-dominated literary scene, finds itself virtually valueless. Through a series of close readings in some of his Yiddish and Hebrew stories, grounded in a broader account of the development of his oeuvre from his early Yiddish work of the 1950s to his 1986 Hebrew collection *A Drop of Silence*, I show how Birstein repeatedly dramatizes gestures that cancel themselves out in a way that produces no surplus but, at most, only inconsequential nuance to what there already is. Reading such gestures as tracing a mode of action both ethical and political—however inconsequential—this chapter argues for an activism of nuance that, against historical and cultural conditions that hinder one’s ability to act, consists in the making of nearly imperceptible yet nonetheless insistent tiny bits of difference. This ethos of ineffectuality constitutes Birstein’s pedagogy, as his fiction offers its readers a prospect of active historical “patience,” of becoming a patient of history: a manner of acting within and against a history that is indifferent to one’s actions.

The three chapters of this dissertation thus trace not only a historical trajectory but also a critical progression in relation to the terms of action: moving from the acting out of failure, to the impotentiality of any activity, to a kind of activism that consists in acts that, even when realized, are inconsequential. Taken together, all these rather elusive gestures combine to exemplify the workings of a largely unacknowledged desire that operates at the heart of a predominantly strong, conflictual, and essentially opinionated cultural imaginary. This desire for the neutral is thus revealed as a force both idiosyncratic and collective, both ethical and political; a historically shared desire that operates, in each and every case, out of a seemingly singular motivation to find one’s own “just measure of a relation to the world,” to liberate oneself from the pressures and arrogance of paradigms.



In one sense at least, this dissertation should not have been written. One may argue, that is, that only by itself failing, by not being carried into completion, could such a project remain true to its protagonists and desires, particularly the desire to retreat from writing. Yet on the other hand, precisely by virtue of being accomplished, this project finally aligns itself with the narratives of failure that it explores. After all, the stories and novels by Gnessin, Elisheva, and Megged (and to a lesser extent, Birstein), revolving as they are around figures of failed writers, are themselves successful pieces of writing, the fruitful materializations of a writerly effort that, on my readings, imagines and desires its own frustration. This inevitable irony is indispensable to this project’s argument regarding the form that the fantasy of withdrawal takes in modern Hebrew literature. Providing an interpretive framework for each of my readings, it points not, as in the popular idiom of self-improvement, to a triumphant achievement of success-through-failure, but rather to a desiring of failure from within the scene of success. Methodologically, it leads to a critical engagement in which the close reading of a text is interweaved with a historicized account of the text’s conditions of accomplishment, asking what it means for these writers, in their respective contexts, to actually write a Hebrew (or Yiddish in the case of Birstein) literary work.

Theoretically, this irony parallels the paradoxicality of the desire for the neutral, which, while distinguishing itself from what Barthes calls the “will-to-possess” nonetheless affirms itself as a desire, as a “will-to-live.” The transformation depicted in “The Runner Artist” captures the openness of such a will-to-live, “which is not absence or refusal of desire, but possible wavering of desire outside of the will-to-possess”<sup>30</sup>—a kind of wavering made possible through what I’ve been describing as the runner’s logic of permission, beyond (and beside) the limitedness of being in competition: “He’s allowed to sit down and rest, // to go home, or, if he wants to, he’s even / allowed to run.” Like the runner artist, albeit perhaps not as explicitly, the failed writers I discuss in the following chapters ultimately perform in their successfully narrated failures a concept of desire not as a possessive and determined pursuit but as a gesture of wavering—indeed, a wavering between desires—that is indecisive, inconclusive, and for the most part inconsequential.

This intimacy of writing and failure, however, is where my own account of the desire for the neutral most diverges from that of Barthes, the great proponent of the free and freeing play of *écriture*. Not only does Barthes not take much interest in the figure of failure—certainly not the failure to write—he also at various occasions posits the activity of writing itself as the domain of the neutral. Already in 1968, the first paragraph of “The Death of the Author” announces that “writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter [*neutre*], that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees”;<sup>31</sup> and though the fascination with this kind of *écriture* no longer takes central stage in *The Neutral*, Barthes still declares towards the end of the course, echoing his basic definition of the neutral, that “writing is the very discourse that unfailingly baffles the arrogance of discourse.”<sup>32</sup> In chapter 2, I show how even in the midst of the ongoing experimentation with fantasies of retreat that is *The Neutral*, Barthes still maintains a straightforward, positive, and even productivist conception of the act of writing. For Barthes, the writing retreat never really veers towards a retreat *from* writing. This theoretical disposition stands in stark contradiction to the ironic fantasy that I trace throughout the history of modern Hebrew literature: the fantasy, in the words of Megged’s protagonist, of a “freedom not to write,” a release from the relentless, tiring, and indeed arrogant discourse of useful, serviceable writerly productivism. This dissertation’s desire, in this sense, is almost counter-Barthesian, substituting an art of failure for the promises of *écriture*. For, as the runner artist teaches us, the flipside of failure may well be a new order of freedom. Not quite a critique of Barthes, though, but an attempt to attend to the particularities of the desire for the neutral as it emerges in modern Hebrew literature, this dissertation proposes to read failure, potentiality, and inconsequentiality as figures of the neutral, allowing the strange runner artists that populate its pages to find, in a paraphrase on Barthes’s own words, their own style of being present to the struggles of their times.

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 15; translation slightly modified.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 162. For a detailed account of the evolution of Barthes’s understanding of the neutral throughout the years, see Bident, “R/M, 1953.”

## Chapter One

### Failing Critically: The Value of Not Writing in Gnessin's "Sideways" and Elisheva's *Side-Streets*

#### I. Weariness: The Demand for a Position

At the very end of the first session of his course, by way of concluding the discussion of "Benevolence" and "Weariness" as figures for the neutral, Barthes leaves his students with one last form of the latter:

Another form of weariness: that of the "position," of the "relation to": "How do you situate yourself with regard to Marxism, Freudianism, to *x*, to *y*?" "What is your position in this debate?" Weariness: the demand for a position. The present-day world is full of it (statements, manifestoes, petitions, etc.), and it's why it is so wearisome: hard to float, to shift places.<sup>1</sup>

With the figure of weariness, then, the desire for the neutral is reconceived in terms of affect, taking the form of an affective response to the seemingly ubiquitous demand for a position. As such, weariness may prove to be a particularly relevant if rarely acknowledged prism for thinking affectively about the discourse of modern Hebrew literature, a discourse in which the paradigmatic structure of the demand for a position has always played a constitutive role. Thus, for example, in a personal letter written in January 1900 by the eighteen year old Yosef Haim Brenner to his close childhood friend Uri Nissan Gnessin this kind of wearisome demand is expressed with accentuated conviction:

As to your theory expressed in that letter regarding "art for art's sake," the purpose of Man, etc., I don't agree at all. My outlook on life is completely different; in short: we must 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. [...] 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 is dying? Do you know that *the world is sick*? Do you know that this despair is destroying the soul? Do you have eyes?! Uri Nissan!!!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Brenner, *Kol Kitvey Y. H. Brenner* (Collected Works), vol. 3, 222. English translation cited from Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 7; translation slightly modified.

להתיאוריה שלך במכתבך ההוא על דבר "הספרות למען הספרות", תכלית האדם וכו' אין אני מסכים כלל. השקפתי על החיים היא שונה לגמרי; ובקיצור: עלינו להקריב את נפשותינו ולהמעיט את הרע שבעולם, רעה של רעבון, עבדות, ביטול, צביעות וכדומה. נחוץ להבין הכל, להבין ולהתרחק ממיסטיקות ומדמיונות; נחוץ להגביר הריאליזם והקדושה בעולם; נחוץ לתקן את חיי עם ישראל כי יהיו נורמאליים. [...] אתה כותב פואימה היסטורית—ודבר זה אינני מבין. האומנם אנחנו יכולים להסיח דעתנו אף רגע מההווה? היודע אתה מצב-צעירינו? היודע אתה, כי הננו המוהיקנים האחרונים? היודע אתה, כי עמנו הולך למות? היודע אתה, כי העולם חולה? היודע אתה, כי היאוש מכלה נפשות? היש לך עיניים?! אורי-ניסן!!!

Brenner's letter—both intimate and authoritative in tone—employs an array of increasingly imposing rhetorical forms in order to get its point across. It mildly begins with a mere expression of personal opinion, which is quickly supplemented by a series of imperatives (“we must” [*aleynu*], “it is necessary” [*nachutz*]), before ending with a sequence of vehement rhetorical questions that culminates with the ultimate interpellative call, “Uri Nissan!!!” As Michael Gluzman shrewdly points out, this letter manifests the former pole of “the tension between complicity and resistance” that has marked Brenner’s entire literary career.<sup>3</sup> And when considered from the point of view of its addressee, the letter’s “rhetoric of engagement,” which according to Gluzman “echoes Russian literary views of the period,”<sup>4</sup> demonstrates how the question of complicity might be bound up with an unwitting effect such rhetoric evokes. A heated, deeply personal version of the anonymous voice behind the demanding questions cited by Barthes (“How do you situate yourself with regard [...] to *x*, to *y*? What is your position in this debate?”), Brenner’s voice here is, in its essence, the voice of the demand to situate oneself, to take a position. From the theoretical perspective of the neutral, it is the voice that wearies. In other words, it would not be hard to imagine that, for its addressee, one plausible affective response to the demanding rhetorical thrust of Brenner’s plea may simply be a feeling of weariness: weariness as a disengagement with the task of self-positioning and the need to express that position. And though there is no evidence as to whether Gnessin actually replied to Brenner’s letter—if anything, there is evidence that at this period Gnessin himself held similar positions—his later fiction, and particularly his short story “Sideways” (“Hatzida,” 1905), can be read as delineating a unique position in response to the demand to occupy a position—a paradoxically non-positioning position informed by a desire for the neutral. This chapter follows the formation of such a fantasmatic disposition in Gnessin’s “Sideways” and in Elisheva’s *Side-Streets* (*Simta’ot*, 1929), where writer-protagonists appear at the center of the plot only, much like the runner artist, to not do what they are supposed to do, dramatizing in their incompetencies and failures a fantasy of disengagement with, and weakening attachment to, the task of the Hebrew writer.



Brenner’s assertive, ardent letter echoes, of course, a discourse that by the turn of the twentieth century has been operative in the field of Hebrew literature for more than a century: the conception of the Hebrew writer as a guide for the collective whose national duty is to watch over the Jewish world, account for its problems, and point to solutions. Indeed, the rise of this

<sup>3</sup> Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 7. And see his the discussion of the discrepancies between Brenner’s notion of the “urgent role of the Hebrew writer” in this letter and his later, resistant opinions on the question of national literature, *ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

national conception of literature is the main reason major historiographical accounts designate the literature that emerged in the circles of the German Haskala (the Jewish Enlightenment) at the end of the eighteenth century as the starting point of a new phase in the history of Hebrew culture—that of Modern, or “New,” Hebrew literature (*sifrut ivrit chadasha*). As Robert Alter suggests in his account of the emergence of modern Hebrew prose fiction, “the new movement that surfaced in Enlightenment Germany was [...] different in kind from its predecessor because of its fundamentally ideological character [...] What was at issue now in the act of writing Hebrew was not just an aesthetic pursuit but a programmatic renegotiation of the terms of Jewish collective identity.”<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of the rise of modern Hebrew poetry and fiction, Dan Miron elaborates further:

The thing that was truly new in the “new” Hebrew poetry as well as in the literature that would be termed “new Hebrew literature,” and that justified treating them as if they had indeed opened a new step in the cultural history of the nation, was the imprint of a new concept—a revolutionary one, in fact—that was inscribed deeply both in literary works [...] and in non-belletristic writings of various kinds. This concept, which determined the space, nature, and goal of writing literature in Hebrew, attributed to literature [...] a role of a national teacher and guide, and therefore demanded for literature a public status as if it were a kind of institution in charge of the nation’s good and its direction in the vicissitudes of modern life.<sup>6</sup>

The most emblematic expression of this national role of the Hebrew writer was the figure of “the watchman unto the house of Israel” (*ha-tzofe le-veyt yisrael*)—a phrase popularized by the maskilic writer Isaac Erter, who coined it as the title for his influential series of satirical sketches (written between the 1820s and 1840s).<sup>7</sup> As Miron notes, this phrase was perhaps an attempt to come up with a Hebrew parallel to the title of the English journal “The Spectator,” but its biblical origin—the verse “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me” (Ezekiel 3:17, *KJV* translation)—imbues this act of watching with a national-prophetic import far weightier than that of mere spectatorship.<sup>8</sup> Hebrew literature thus “claimed for itself a status of a political authority,”<sup>9</sup> and so, “about a hundred years before the appearance of Zionism and other kinds of new Jewish nationality, a new Hebrew literary culture took upon itself the role of designing a new Jewish national-political identity.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Miron, “Chetz barur: Al ha-memad ha-medini ha-ekroni ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-chadasha” (A Clear Arrow: The Essentially Political Dimension of Contemporary Hebrew Literature), 63. Miron has dedicated several essays over the years to the question of the newness of the “new” or “modern” Hebrew literature as it relates to different aspects of its historiography and of Jewish collectivity. See “Mi-yotzrim u-vonim li-vney bli bayit” (From Writers and Builders to Homeless Wanderers), “Hirhurim be-idan shel proza” (Thoughts in an Era of Prose Fiction), “Sifrut ivrit chadash” (Modern Hebrew Literature).

<sup>7</sup> See Erter, *Ha-tzofe le-veyt yisrael* (A Watchman Unto the House of Israel).

<sup>8</sup> Miron, “Chetz barur,” 66. In the Hebrew, the verse from Ezekiel reads:

בְּנֵי-אָדָם, צַפֵּה נֹתֵתִיד לְבַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְשָׁמַעַת מִפִּי דְבַר, וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אוֹתָם מִמֶּנִּי (יחזקאל ג, יז).

<sup>9</sup> Miron, “Chetz barur,” 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

The employment of the model of the watchman as a primary perspective for historiographical accounts has recently come under critical scrutiny in a comprehensive essay by Amir Banbaji and Hannan Hever titled “Literary History and Literary Criticism.” Inspired by Fredric Jameson’s work on the political unconscious, Banbaji and Hever seek to replace the kind of historiography delineated by Miron in his influential 1985 essay “From Writers and Builders to Homeless Wanderers”, in which Miron traces the complex historical relations between the institutions of Zionist politics and of Hebrew literature, with what they call its “materialistic mirror image.”<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly timely and important, this critique of the watchman as an exclusive *historiographical* principle should not preclude, however, a consideration of the appearance of this cultural model, broadly conceived, on the surface of the *discourse* in “real time” (a surfacing of which Brenner’s letter is a particularly vivid example). Indeed, Miron repeatedly emphasizes the functioning of “the watchman unto the house of Israel” as a discursive “*norm*” of “Jewish responsibility and identification with Jewish history,”<sup>12</sup> and, in fact, Banbaji and Hever themselves come close to making similar claims, albeit in Jamesonian terms. Thus, for example, they show how the critical discourse in the historical period that stretches from the Haskala to the establishment of the state conforms to the logic of Jameson’s first, imaginary horizon of interpretation, “in which the aesthetic craft is conceived of as exclusively responsible for the process of ‘the nation’s revival,’” and literature is charged with the task of imagining the political body.<sup>13</sup> As a discourse, then, modern Hebrew literature continuously constitutes its normativity as an assumption of a national, authoritative, responsible position.

In this context it may be worth noting, as a theoretical aside, that the application of the Jamesonian model and its adaptation into a chronological-historiographical scheme run Banbaji and Hever’s argument into a couple of theoretical slippages, most conspicuously—the slippage between the literary and the critical. While their explicit aim is to rethink *literary* historiography, in actual fact they end up writing a history of *literary criticism*, and specifically of how criticism has historically conceptualized literature. In other words, their narrative does not follow the ways in which history as an absent cause has made itself manifested in literature, but rather the ways in which literary criticism has theorized the manifestations of history in literature; to put it simply, whereas Jameson analyses literary works, Banbaji and Hever, though claiming to write a history of literature, analyze exclusively critical texts and manifestos. This unexplained displacement, a slippage to which their essay seems to remain blind, acts itself out time and again in its rhetoric and metalanguage. As will become clear in later sections of this chapter, what such a slippage masks—and thus negatively touches on—is a relation whose theorization has played a formative role in the way the cultural arena that Banbaji and Hever themselves both analyze and take part in—the arena of Hebrew literature—has historically defined itself. In other words, this slippage may already direct our attention to the significance of the functional difference between the literary and the critical—a difference that will soon turn out to be at the center of “Sideways”’s exploration of the desire for the neutral.

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<sup>11</sup> “Against Miron’s attempt to present the relations of literature and politics as a conscious, transparent negotiation between two subjects or two consciousnesses [...] the model offered here to our readers, which is taken through and through from the work of Fredric Jameson, is based on a ‘negotiation’—not always conscious and not always rational—between the conscious cultural layer (the superstructure) and the absent causality of the political unconscious” (Banbaji and Hever, “Mavo: Historya sifrutit u-vikoret ha-sifrut” [Introduction: Literary History and Literary Criticism], 20). And see Miron, “Mi-yotzrim u-vonim li-vney bli bayit” (From Writers and Builders to Homeless Wanderers).

<sup>12</sup> Miron, “Sifrut Ivrit chadasha,” 13; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Hever and Banbaji, “Mavo: Historya sifrutit u-vikoret ha-sifrut,” 36.



## II. “Sideways” and the Impasse of Criticism

Brenner’s letter to Gnessin thus speaks the familiar discourse that demands the (self-)positioning of the writer vis-à-vis the social-political reality. As its desperate final plea—“Do you have eyes?!”—vividly illustrates, when it comes to writing in Hebrew one must write with one’s eyes wide open; one must write of “the present” and of “the condition of our youth” with a sense of both urgency and collective responsibility—in short, one must write as a watchman unto the house of Israel. Gnessin himself, the addressee of this letter, held, in fact, similar opinions at that time: in the few critical essays he wrote in the early stages of his career he too demands of literature, for example, “to show the present and only the present” and announces that “the duty of literature at this age can be singled out with one word: to *live*, to live with the living generation (*ha-dor ha-chay*, i.e., the generation of the present).”<sup>14</sup> But while in and through these essays Gnessin takes an active part in the substantiation and dissemination of this discourse, his later fiction—and primarily “Sideways”—tells a story of an ambivalent detachment from the writerly position. “Sideways,” whose protagonist is an aspiring young writer who fails to write, offers both compliance with the “watchman” imperative, being a tale of the “condition of our youth” in the present, and deconstruction thereof—by way of imagining an act, and by extension, a politics, of non-writing.<sup>15</sup>

That this self-defeating (non-)position is much more prevalent in modern Hebrew literature than the dominant discourse surrounding it would have us suppose is not at all surprising from the point of view of the neutral. If the ubiquitous discursive demand for a position is indeed what wearies, it is little wonder that this weariness is answered by what can be called, following Barthes, a desire to retire. For Barthes, the figure of *La retraite* (with the double sense of both retirement and retreat) should be understood as a “gesture” of the neutral that involves a fantasy of circumscribing oneself:

By gestures, I mean acts of separation, of secession that imply [...] a *quantum* of phantasmatic brilliance, of desire, or of pleasure: whether the gesture obviously fulfills and comforts the subject, or whether the gesture of *retraite* performed by another makes us feel envious, phantasmatically.<sup>16</sup>

Such a gesture—as an act of retreat invested with a phantasmatic quality— may turn out to be quite appealing, if not necessary, for some Hebrew writers. Against the impossibility of being neutral in Hebrew literature, against, that is, the wearisome demand for a position, any vestiges of a will for neutrality would often find their expression, in one form or another, as a desire to retire from this literature itself. The figure of the failed writer, the non-writer—which in itself is written time and again throughout the history of Hebrew literature, beginning with Gnessin’s “Sideways”—can thus be read, precisely on account of its failure, as figuring a fantasy of a withdrawal from writing. As such, being successfully written after all, it is a figure that plays out the paradoxes and ironies not only of the art of failure but also of a failed desire to fail.

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<sup>14</sup> Gnessin, “Demon yehudi: Sipur me’et E. Goldin” (Jewish Demon: A Story by E. Goldin), 77, 78; translation mine. Unless otherwise indicated (either explicitly or by citing a published English translation), all translations from Hebrew throughout this dissertation are mine. For a discussion of Gnessin’s critical writings see section four below.

<sup>15</sup> “Hatzida” was first published in the journal *Ha-zman* 1, no. 8 (1905).

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 137-38; translation modified.

Unaware of the failures that lie in store for him, Nachum Hagzar, the protagonist of “Sideways,” is thoroughly optimistic when we first meet him at the beginning of the story:

The first time that Nachum Hagzar set foot in that beautiful house at the far end of the quiet street was due to some trivial reason that was forgotten by him no sooner than it had occurred. Much to his surprise, he met there his stout neighbor, young Hanna Heller, with her unnaturally loud staccato laugh, and conversed with her for the first time, too. Yet he didn't stay long on that occasion, for he was dreaming of other things; feverishly, his coattails flapping behind him, he hurried home to await the new work and the challenging life that would begin the next day, here in this provincial town to which he had chosen to move from Vilna. The next morning, however, turned out to be leaden and dull. The walls were cheerless, the ceiling was low, and the windowpanes were streaked as though with sweat. He sat chin in hand for a long while, biting his lips; then suddenly he roused himself, found some excuse to call on his neighbor, and went together with her to that beautiful house at the end of the quiet street.<sup>17</sup>

בפעם הראשונה בא נחום חגזר לאותו הבית היפה, אשר בקצה הרחוב השוקטה, לרגלי סיבה אחת טפילה, שלפרקים היא עולה על לבו והוא חוזר ושוכחה מיד. לתמהונו, פגש אז שם את שכנתו השמנה, העלמה חנה היליר, המשחקת תמיד בקול רם ולמקוטעים, שלא כדרך הטבע, ושם בא עמה גם בדברים בפעם הראשונה. אז דווקא לא שהה שם הרבה, כי היה לבו הפעם אל חלומותיו, והוא מיהר הביתה וכנפי אדרתו פזורות ולבו קודח והוא מחכה ליום מחר ואל העבודה הקבועה ואל החיים המלאים עניין, המתחילים לו בעיר הקטנה החדשה, אשר בחר לו לשבתו אחרי צאתו את וילנה. אולם למחרת דווקא היה יום עופרת עגום קצת ושמשות החלונות היו מזיעות והכתלים היו קודרים והתקרה נמוכה, והוא ישב עת רבה אל השולחן ולחיו על כפו ושפתיו בין שיניו, ופתאום נייעור וימצא לו תואנה, ויקח לו את שכנתו, ויחדיו הלכו לאותו הבית היפה אשר בקצה הרחוב השוקטה.

As we soon find out, the new work that Hagzar is so eager to begin is a “literary work” and the beautiful house—the home of three young sisters, Rosa, Mania, and Ida, who become the center of Hagzar’s social life. Gradually he hangs about more and more with the sisters and their friends, often at the expense of his work; they spend most of their time at the beautiful house, leisurely conversing, reading together, drinking tea, or going for walks outside—all in an atmosphere replete with erotic innuendos and all sorts of implicit romantic triangles.

The spatial pattern set in the first sentences of the story—the movement between Hagzar’s home as a site of writing and the beautiful house as a site of pleasure—thus extends throughout the entire plot. Gnessin’s insistence on repeatedly using the noun *avoda* (work, labor) to describe Hagzar’s writerly endeavors and the adjective *yafe* (beautiful) to render the impressions and experiences associated with the sisters’ house provides the basic terms for this oppositional pattern. Yet if a clear distinction between the realms of productive work and unproductive aesthetics seems to be formed here, the logic of this binary economy of production is almost immediately complicated by the very nature of Hagzar’s work.

Hagzar’s occupation, described first simply as “work” (*avoda*) and then as “literary work” (*avodato ha-sifrutit*), turns out to consist mostly of critical writing. At different phases of

<sup>17</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav* (Complete Works), 135; “Sideways,” 3. In quotations from “Sideways,” here and throughout this chapter, I have occasionally revised Hillel Halkin’s translation—most of the time by leaning towards a more literal rendering of Gnessin’s prose, in order to make visible more accurately some of its singular lexical and stylistic features, especially where they bear particular relevance to my argument.

his stay in the new provincial town his writing plans include “a long article on Hebrew belletristic literature with plenty of quotations from various authors”; a subsequent article for the same journal (with the hope that he would be paid for both contributions together); an outline for “a large series of articles [...] on the history of Hebrew literature in the past century”; notes for a series of “literary essays”; and, finally, “a long critical article that he decided to write on one of the new stories that had been published in the beginning of that winter. In this article he intended to point, at last, to all those things that concern the best of Jewish youth, but the literature unaccountably overlooks.”<sup>18</sup> As these short descriptions make clear, Hagzar’s planned writings, though quite diverse in genre, scope, and subject matter, are all writings “on” literature—that is, they all occupy the basic position of literary criticism. Hagzar, then, is not simply a failed writer but more specifically a failed critic, and the problem of not writing in “Sideways” is principally a matter of critical failure.

In this context, “Sideways,” as a literary text itself, generates a strange effect on its own scene of criticism. Most readers have traditionally construed the story as a psychological tale that revolves around the psychic life of its protagonist; Hagzar’s literary and erotic failures, his inhibitions and inability to fulfill his duties, wills, or destiny, have all been treated by critics of diverse periods and schools as signs—or symptoms—of his peculiar psychological state. Gershon Shaked’s survey of the story in his historiographical study *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880–1980* is in many ways exemplary:

The complex relations between sexual potency and creative power, erotic attraction and erotic dread (Rosa), as well as the escape to a realm of pure sexuality (Hanna Heller)—all these form his character; Hagzar is a creative writer unable to create, a lover not capable of loving, a man who cannot live.<sup>19</sup>

With this short account of the story’s main themes, Shaked also unintentionally summarizes a dominant interpretative thread that runs through critical accounts of “Sideways” from the time of its initial publication to this day: namely, its conception as a predominantly psychological narrative of deterioration and failure.<sup>20</sup> Miron, for instance, arguably the most prolific and influential of Gnessin scholars, leaves no doubt as to the place of failure in the text:

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<sup>18</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 136, 139; “Sideways,” 4-5, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Gershon Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880-1980* (Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980), vol. 1, 412.

<sup>20</sup> Though diverse in their details, theoretical perspectives, conclusions, scope, and rigorousness, these accounts share several common interpretative presuppositions: the text is conceived as a predominantly psychological story, its plot as delineating a process of gradual deterioration, and the erotic and literary failures are tied together as symptoms of a more fundamental problem (though this problem is understood by different critics as a phenomenon of different orders—sociological-generational, universal-existentialist, or uniquely individual). See, for example, Fishel Lachower’s introduction to the first edition of Gnessin’s collected works (1914), later reprinted in his *Rishonim ve-acharonim: Masot u-ma’amarim* (First Ones and Latest Ones: Essays and Articles), 335-57; Benzion Benschalom, *Uri Nissan Gnessin: Monografya* (Uri Nissan Gnessin: A Monograph); Yisrael Zmora, *Ha-mesaper kav le-kav: Uri Nissan Gnessin* (Telling Line by Line: Uri Nissan Gnessin), 44-70; Chaim Brandwein, *Meshorer ha-shki’a: Uri Nissan Gnessin u-masekhet yetzirato* (The Poet of Deterioration: Uri Nissan Gnessin and his Oeuvre), 111-60; Isaiah Rabinovich, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit mechapeset gibor: Kivunim be-hitpachuta ha-omanutit shel ha-siporet ha-ivrit ha-modernit* (The Hebrew Fiction in Search of a Hero); and Ada Zemach, *Ba-emtza: Kri’a bi-shney sipurim shel Uri Nissan Gnessin* (In Between: A Reading of Two Stories of Uri Nissan Gnessin), 11-36. Socialist-Zionist critics, such as Azriel Ukhmani and A. B. Yoffe, who were part of the second wave of Gnessin criticism in the 1940s, analyzed the failures, despairs, and psychological inhibitions of Gnessin’s protagonists as symptoms of the social reality of the Jews at that period and as reflections of the broader degeneration of modern bourgeois

The fact that [Hagzar's] intentions are not realized, and that during his years in the town he sinks into the provincial atmosphere [and] neglects his literary work [...] is revealed to him as a sign of his total failure, which is a human and literary failure at one and the same time. The awareness to this failure gradually cumulates throughout the story [...] This process of cumulation, ending with breakthrough and revelation, determines, in fact, the plot of "Sideways" and dictates its structure, arrangement of time, analogies [...] etc.<sup>21</sup>

But as a text of "total failure" whose main figure for failure is the *critic*, "Sideways" locks its own critics into a specific sort of the "double bind" that Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus* as "an oscillation between two poles: the neurotic identification, and the internalization that is said to be normative."<sup>22</sup> The double bind of the exclusive either/or distinction—either neurosis or normativity, either a problem or a solution, either failure or success—translates here into the sphere of literary criticism and makes "Sideways" function as a mirror-text. A literary critic approaching the story can't help but find himself facing his own image in Nachum Hagzar, the literary critic; but if "Sideways" is a story of "degeneration which is revealed primarily in the deterioration of [Hagzar's] capacity to 'work'—in a gradual loss of his ability for literary writing,"<sup>23</sup> then merely writing about the story paves the way to ridding oneself of the unpleasant mirror image it presents.

In this, "Sideways" initiates the reverse effect of the one Shoshana Felman locates in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*:

The scene of the critical debate is thus a *repetition* of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*. Through its very reading, the text, so to speak, acts itself out. As a reading effect, this inadvertent "acting out" is indeed uncanny: whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but *perform* it by *repeating* it.<sup>24</sup>

In "Sideways" the critical interpretation is not just a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text but a repetition marked by inversion; what the critic performs by (necessarily successfully) writing about "Sideways" is his own *non-participation* in its scene of failure. This performative gesture—highlighting no longer only the identity but primarily the reversal of the mirror image—is inherent to the accomplishment of writing and thus precedes its content. The very act of writing salvages the critic from the danger of degeneration by already situating him outside the bounds of the incapacity to write; before being a statement about the text, any interpretation of "Sideways" is an act of self-constitution—by way of contrast—of the critic vis-à-vis the text: 'I write, therefore I'm normative.'

"Sideways" is thus overdeterminedly informed by a seemingly unavoidable version of the double bind: the impasse of either imperative writing or degenerative non-writing. But only, of

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society. See Ukhmani, "Be-aspaklariyat ha-yamim" (The Mirror of the Times); Yoffe, "Yetzirato shel Uri Nissan Gnessin" (Uri Nissan Gnessin's Oeuvre).

<sup>21</sup> Miron, "Chachim be-apo shel ha-netzach" (Posterity Hooked), 324.

<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 88. "On either side," they add, "is Oedipus, the double impasse" (ibid.).

<sup>23</sup> Miron, *Chachim be-apo shel ha-netzach* (Posterity Hooked), 145.

<sup>24</sup> Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," 101.

course, if non-writing is understood under the aegis of failure. One way to begin questioning this paradigmatic presupposition is by reformulating it as a political problem of participation that is played out on at least two levels of the text. Both in its thematics and in its reading-effect, in other words, “Sideways” is troubled by the relationality of participation and the fate of the non-participating. And as the stakes of this kind of relationality in and around “Sideways” are grounded in the specific practice and discourse of Hebrew criticism, I propose to approach the problematics of participation in this text by reopening a basic question: What does it mean to participate in this discourse? Or rather—what does it do, what is its function? What exactly is it that the story’s critics and protagonist do or don’t do when they write or don’t write criticism?

How the figure of the failed writer functions in Gnessin is thus bound up with the function of criticism in the Hebrew literary system. A theoretical detour through the history of Hebrew literary criticism in the second half of the nineteenth century may thus be in order—only through such a consideration of the systemic role of criticism, I argue, can the critical edge of the critical failure in “Sideways” be fully appreciated.

### III. Literary Utility and the Function of Criticism

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the “Radical Haskala” in Russia and with it the advent of a new, formative phase in modern Hebrew criticism.<sup>25</sup> A young generation of upcoming Hebrew critics—among them S. Y. Abramowitz, A. U. Kovner, A. Y. Paperna, and M. L. Lilienblum—introduced a new mode of writing and new conceptions of literature heavily influenced by the radical school of criticism that flourished in Russia at that period. Vissarion Belinsky, Russia’s first professional critic and one of the prominent figures of this radical intelligentsia, along with his disciples Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, and Dmitry Pisarev, promoted a socio-political critical agenda that was informed, especially in its later stages, by positivistic, materialistic, and utilitarian ideas; socially progressive and reformative in its essence, their critical philosophy asserted life’s supremacy over art and consequently conceived the role of literature first and foremost as reflecting reality in a politically instrumental manner. According to René Wellek, the young Russian radicals (Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Pisarev) can be described as “materialistic monists” influenced by “English Utilitarians.”<sup>26</sup> Their strand of materialism, claims Wellek, “is paradoxically combined with great fervor for social reform: and even with a spirit of sacrifice, unexplainable by the hedonism, enlightened egoism, and utilitarianism of their theories.”<sup>27</sup> Following in the footsteps of their Russian contemporaries, the radical maskilim established a critical enterprise which was founded on positivistic and utilitarian principles. As Einat Baram Eshel points out, “the [Hebrew] literary criticism written in the second half of the century can be viewed as the first articulation of critical standards that integrate a coherent aesthetic ideal with consistent, reasoned social

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<sup>25</sup> Yosef Klausner famously singled out this period as the beginning of proper criticism in Hebrew, though this historiographic assertion has quickly become a source of dispute and controversy among historians. See, for example, Simon Halkin, *Zramim ve-tzurot ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-chadasha* (Trends and Forms in Modern Hebrew Literature), vol. 1, 279-85; Morris Neiman, *A Century of Modern Hebrew Literary Criticism 1784-1884*, 1-3.

<sup>26</sup> Wellek, “The Russian Radical Critics,” 238.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. See Also Neiman, *A Century of Modern Hebrew Literary Criticism 1784-1884*, 69-73; Baram Eshel, *Milchemet ha-re’alizm al nafsho: Yitzugey metzi’ut be-sifrut ha-haskala ha-ivrit 1857-1881* (Representations of Reality in Hebrew Haskalah Literature 1857-1881), 49-52.

positions.”<sup>28</sup> They demanded of literature, in the words of Moshe Pelli, “to serve life, to provide material utility and not necessarily—or primarily—aesthetic pleasure.”<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the discourse that emerges at this period would have a long lasting influence on the Hebrew literary and critical discourse; decades later, in the beginning of the twentieth century, writers such as Gnessin and Brenner would still repeatedly cite and refer to the Russian and maskilic critics in their fiction and non-fiction writings.<sup>30</sup>

In the context of my discussion here, the most revealing aspect of the critical discourse that emerges in Hebrew during the second half of the nineteenth century is its conspicuous need to justify and define its own activity. As time and again the new critics lament the absence of proper criticism in the larger system of Hebrew literature and assert the crucial need for such an institution, it is precisely the reflexivity of this discourse that may provide—for the most part unwittingly—an insight into the fundamental systemic function of criticism. Thus, for example, as late as 1865 Kovner announces: “Now let us direct our attention to two major sections of all literatures, of which there is no trace in Hebrew literature; these are: stories (belletristic) and criticism.”<sup>31</sup> Writing in 1872, Lilienblum similarly claims that “[only] the stories and the criticism together” can contribute usefully to society, as he points to the insufficiencies and inefficiency of the kind of criticism that is being written at that time.<sup>32</sup>

The full implications of this reflexive call for criticism may come to light when placed in a comparative theoretical context. As Baram Eshel notes, “any examination of the various critical reviews published in the sixties would immediately identify the centrality of the utilitarian-positivistic demands”<sup>33</sup>—and the two short articles by Kovner and Lilienblum quoted above are no exception, as even a cursory survey of their vocabulary confirms: The noun “utility,” the adjective “useful,” and the verb “to use” appear as much as twenty times in Kovner’s “Zman Mendelssohn” and fifteen in Lilienblum’s “Olam ha-tohu.” Yet, as committed as this discourse is to what may appear a rather vulgar version of utilitarianism, in its most theoretical moments it finds a surprising parallel in some recent attempts within literary theory to (re)establish the notion of literature’s usefulness. Though they do not quite form a distinct critical trend, the past decades have seen a number of such major theoretical projects—among which are Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Contingencies of Value*, John Guillory’s critical response

<sup>28</sup> Baram Eshel, *Milchemet ha-re'alizm al nafsho*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Pelli, *Haskala u-modernizm—Hatchalot ve-hemshekhvim: Hitkablut ha-haskala ha-mukdemet ba-me'a ha-yod-tet u-ve-shilhey ha-ikufa* (Haskalah and Modernity—Beginnings and Continuity: The Reception of the Early Haskalah in the 19th Century), 135. Similarly, in her account of the Russian critics’ influence on the radical Haskala, Janna Tsuzner argues that “the critics of the ‘new generation’ demanded that Hebrew writers be useful for the Jewish society by distributing [through their literary works] radical and productive ideas among the Jews of Russia” (“Hashpa’at Belinsky al ha-haskala ha-radikalit: Iyun be-kitvey Kovner ve-Paperna” [The Impact of Belinsky’s Writings on A. U. Kovner and A. Y. Paperna], 258).

<sup>30</sup> On Gnessin’s reliance on the theories of the Russian radicals, see Laor, “He’arot le-ma’amarey ha-bikoret shel U. N. Gnessin” (Remarks on U. N. Gnessin’s Critical Articles), 179, 185, 191; see also section four below. Some of the characters in Brenner’s novels, as representatives of Brenner’s own generation, are well-immersed in this critical discourse and occasionally refer to Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, and Pisarev. See, for example, such references in his novels *Ba-choref* (In Winter, 1903), in *Ktavim*, 121, 171, and *Misaviv la-nekuda* (Around the Point, 1904), in *Ktavim*, 471.

<sup>31</sup> Kovner, “Zman Mendelssohn” (The Time of Mendelssohn), 36. The decisiveness of this statement notwithstanding, Kovner does not deny the evident existence of Hebrew novels and literary criticism at this period, but intends to point to—and critique—the relative scarcity of these two genres compared to other, more developed modes of writing (see *ibid.*, 36-37).

<sup>32</sup> Lilienblum, “Olam ha-tohu” (The World of Chaos), 511.

<sup>33</sup> Baram Eshel, *Milchemet ha-re'alizm al nafsho*, 114.

to Smith in “The Discourse of Value,” Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature*, and the special issue of *New Literary History* on the subject of “Use”—that aim to reintroduce and rethink the utility and uses of literature against a discourse of aesthetics that presupposes the uselessness of art.<sup>34</sup> Kovner’s and Lilienblum’s argumentations are, on the one hand, certainly not nearly as theoretically refined or politically sophisticated as these late twentieth and early twenty-first century critical projects. On the other hand, perhaps because of their reflexive character—their heightened self-consciousness regarding the nature of their own activity—they can be read comparatively as an intriguing contribution to a somewhat overlooked area in these newer theories—namely, the function of criticism.

For Lilienblum—the more thoughtful of the two—the role of literature is to “bring utility [*to’elet*] to the world” by providing knowledge of natural and human life; this knowledge, in turn, enables readers “to make proper use [*le-hishtamesh ka-hogen*]” of their own lives.<sup>35</sup> What makes the turn to the language of utility here more than a simple observation about a particular use of a particular type of object—and renders it susceptible to reconceptualization in economic terms—is the indirectness and mediateness in the extraction of the object’s utility:

*But these stories in themselves are still not enough to bring the required utility. Firstly, because there are many talentless authors, and the life and forces that they paint are not at all in accordance with reality; there are a lot of prejudiced authors, who, when trying to describe for us the good and bad sides of life and of human actions, mix things up and call the bad ‘good’ and the good ‘bad.’ And secondly, because there are many stories in which the lives and forces described demand nuanced analysis—and most readers are not able to analyze these lives and forces by themselves, whether due to lack of knowledge or because of the bother of reading and the desire to know the ending, and they cannot observe and judge each and every scene.*<sup>36</sup>

אבל אותם הסיפורים בפני עצמם אינם מספיקים עוד להביא את התועלת הדרושה; באחת יען כי הרבה סופרים חסרי כשרונות יש, שהחיים והכחות שהם מציירים אינם מסכימים כלל עם המציאות; הרבה סופרים בעלי משפטים קדומים יש שבשעה שהם רוצים לתאר לפנינו צדדים טובים ורעים שבחיים ובפעולות האדם מחליפים הם הדברים ואומרים לרע טוב ולטוב רע; וזאת שנית כי הרבה ציורים יש שהחיים והכחות המתוארים בהם צריכים עוד לנתוח דק, ורוב הקוראים אי אפשר להם לנתח בעצמם אותם החיים והכחות אם ממעוט ידיעה או מטרדת הקריאה והתשוקה לדעת אחרית הספור, ואינם יכולים להתבונן על כל מחזה ומחזה ולשפוט עליו.

The problem that Lilienblum’s utilitarian agenda runs into, then, is that of ensuring the object’s *proper* usage (and determining how and by whom it can be ensured). In other words, it is no longer merely a problem of use but of *use value*—at least in the sense proposed by Terry Eagleton’s recent interpretation of this Marxian notion. “Use value,” says Eagleton, “involves putting an object to work with a regard for its sensuously specific properties.”<sup>37</sup> This yields a line of argument particularly close to Lilienblum’s:

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Contingencies of Value*; Guillory, “The Discourse of Value”; Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature*; “Use,” special issue, *New Literary History* 44, no. 4 (2013), especially Felski’s Introduction, v-xii, and Terry Eagleton, “Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values,” 561-73.

<sup>35</sup> Lilienblum, “Olam ha-tohu,” 508.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 510-11; emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Eagleton, “Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values,” 570.

We can make use of [things], to be sure; but we must do so in accordance with their inherent properties. It is this that Karl Marx was to call “use-value.” Genuine use is not a question of arbitrary manipulation. There is a sense in which things guide our hand when it comes to getting something fruitful out of them.<sup>38</sup>

When applied to the literary arena, adds Eagleton, “it does not mean that *The Divine Comedy* cannot be used to throw light on Mitt Romney. It is just that you have to demonstrate it. You cannot simply claim that the former invariably generates images of the latter in your mind.”<sup>39</sup> Though Eagleton is interested primarily in conceiving of an ethical praxis of use, his conceptual move has far reaching implications for our context. Casting thus the question of the proper (or “genuine”) use of literature—the very question that Lilienblum’s analysis tries to tackle—in terms of use value may imply that this problem cannot be limited to (proper or improper) instances of individual uses; the fact that “these stories in themselves are still not enough to bring the required utility” is rather a problem of a systemic function, governed by a literary-economic logic.

From a theoretical perspective, Eagleton’s articulation of the literary text in terms of use value follows—notwithstanding the difference in conceptual goals—the thrust of Smith’s proposal, in *Contingencies of Value*, to theorize the aesthetic realm as an economic value system that revolves around use. Yet, as Guillory shrewdly notes, “one may begin to question this apparent embrace of economic discourse by noting that [...] Smith makes no distinction between ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value.’ The one concept is interchangeable with the other.”<sup>40</sup> This is not just a matter of insufficient theoretical precision, says Guillory; the problem with Smith’s model is that the primacy of use value excludes in actual fact any real consideration of exchange value—and therefore of what constitutes the economic:

In this scenario it is precisely exchange in the *economic* sense—as what takes place only *between* subjects—that disappears. It is not when the fruit is plucked from the tree for one’s private consumption but when it is exchanged between subjects as a quantifiable “value” that there exists something called the “economic.” To collapse the latter into a special case of the former is finally to collapse all exchange value into a version of use value.<sup>41</sup>

This conceptual collapsing contradicts the very essence of economic analysis and, moreover, goes against the distinction on which political economy is founded: the defining principle, initially instituted in the writings of Adam Smith and later formalized by Ricardo and expanded by Marx, of political economy as a discourse of exchange value rather than use value.<sup>42</sup>

This rather abstract theoretical polemic between Smith and Guillory might take a more concrete shape once Lilienblum reenters the picture. For, as convincing as an economic model of literature that is based on use value—such as Smith’s or Eagleton’s—may be, it is clear that for

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 566.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 570.

<sup>40</sup> Guillory, “The Discourse of Value,” 297.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 300-301.



Lilienblum the use of literature must necessarily be mediated and supplemented by an additional operation—the operation of criticism:

Therefore, [literary] criticism is needed in order to remark on the authors' errors, analyze the human forces that are revealed in their stories, and point to the good and bad sides, which the readers might misunderstand or leave unexamined. The stories and the criticism together can truly elucidate life, the human forces, the true and false needs, and anything related to life, which any man should know; and they, the authors of the stories and of the rightful criticism on them, truly brought great utility for human beings in the knowledge of life.<sup>43</sup>

לפיכך צריכה היא הבקרת להעיר על שגגות הסופרים, לנתח את כחות האדם המתגלים בספוריהם ולהראות על הצדדים הטובים והרעים שהקוראים יכולים לטעות בהם או לעזבם בלי התבוננות. הספורים והבקרת ביחד יכולים הם באמת לברר את החיים, כחות האדם, צרכיו האמתים והמדומים, וכל דבר הנוגע בחיים, שכל אדם צריך לדעת אותו, והם, בעלי הספורים והבקרת הנכונה שעליהם הביאו באמת תועלת גדולה לבני האדם בידיעת החיים.

The critical function is established here as an indispensable component of the process of production and extraction of utility through literature. In a system that now turns out to be triangular, criticism performs a mediating function, which takes place *between* literary works and their audience and enables the relation of use. The activity of criticism appears therefore not only as an inseparable supplement to literature's use value (“[only] the stories and the criticism together,” as Lilienblum puts it) but also as the force that, in Kovner's apt phrase, “moves the literatures of each and every people.”<sup>44</sup> The function of criticism, in short, is one of *exchange* in this literary-economic model: it is precisely, in Guillory's terms, “what takes place only *between* subjects,” what facilitates the circulation of knowledge and utility. Implicitly, then, the literary object turns out to be the bearer not only of use value (its potential utility to its readers) but also of exchange value. The latter marks the literary work's exchangeability, its susceptibility to the operation of interpretation by—or in the “market” of—literary criticism as an integral part of the process of being put into use and fulfilling its utility.

Consequently, the economic model implicit in the essays of Lilienblum and Kovner may yield radical theoretical implications with regard to the hierarchy of literary values. The introduction of criticism-as-exchange into an account of the functions of literature may suggest that their position is closer to Guillory's critique than to Smith's theoretical model—i.e., that in the last analysis it adheres, despite the consistent emphasis on a terminology of “utility,” to the

<sup>43</sup> Lilienblum, “Olam ha-tohu,” 511. Theoretically, this is where Lilienblum and Eagleton differ, in spite of having seemingly departed from a similar notion of the proper use (that is, use value) of the literary text. Eagleton interprets Marx's concept of use value as a (utopian) way to mediate between utilitarianism and Romantic or modernist autotelism in order to salvage morally and politically a certain praxis of using objects; Lilienblum, on the other hand, as the quote above demonstrates, conceives of the problematics of the proper literary use as an occasion for the necessary supplementary operation of criticism.

<sup>44</sup> “But it would be redundant to pour forth many flowery phrases in order to show the utility of criticism—who wouldn't see that this is what moves the literatures of each and every people, and in this inheres indeed the life of the whole people” (Kovner, “Zman Mendelsohn,” 37).

אך למותר לנו לשפוך מליצות רבות להראות את תועלת הבקרת, מי לא יראה, כי היא, היא המניעה את ליטעטורוי כל עם ועם, ובזה הלא חיי העם כלו.

core logic of political economy's theory of value. In other words, the insistence on the indispensability of critical mediation can be read as a way to shift the theoretical focus from the "uses of literature" (and the question of its usefulness or uselessness) to the *exchanges of criticism*.

As mentioned above, Guillory critiques Smith's model primarily for subsuming the principle of exchange into that of use. This privileging of use value over exchange value, he claims, contradicts the "virtual irrelevance of use value to economic discourse," already found in Ricardo.<sup>45</sup> "Utility is not the measure of exchangeable value," declares Ricardo, before immediately qualifying: "although it is absolutely essential to it."<sup>46</sup> Similar assertion and qualification can be found, as Guillory shows, in Marx as well, who "can argue ... that by 'value' is properly meant exchange value, even if the usefulness of an object must be considered an enabling condition of its exchange."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in the first volume of *Capital* Marx, having earlier dismissed the centrality of use value in favor of exchange value, is nonetheless careful to add that "nothing can be of value without being an object of utility."<sup>48</sup> What these theoretical nuances point to is the necessary role of utility as a pretext or "an enabling condition" in Guillory's words—or an "alibi" in Baudrillard's—for the circulation initiated through exchange.

All this may shed light both on the general common mistake of taking use to be at the heart of economics and, as in our particular case, on the excessive discursive foregrounding of utility. In fact, as both Guillory and Baudrillard before him seem to suggest, something like an ideological reversal takes place here, which conceals the real relations between use and exchange. Thus, according to Baudrillard, "what isn't mediated by the abstraction of exchange value cannot exist as a 'spontaneous' and 'concrete' value either – such as utility, for example [...] There is no use value without exchange value."<sup>49</sup> And Guillory summarizes:

To put this in the simplest terms, the use of an object can be represented as a kind of "value" only if there is already a discourse of exchange values, that is, an economy of generalized commodity exchange. Exchange value is thus the condition for the retroactive construction of the use of an object as an expression of its value.<sup>50</sup>

Reading Lilienblum's and Kovner's insistence on the function of criticism in terms of exchange value may thus rearrange—just as political economy has done for the relations between economic use and exchange—the way we think about the relations and hierarchy of criticism and literature. In this—that is, by designating criticism as something like an operation of extracting value—these two maskilic thinkers may add a curiously absent component to our contemporary theories of literature's utility. If it is exchange—and in our case, criticism—that motivates the whole economic system then criticism's function is far from simply performing a subsidiary role in the service of literary utility. Quite to the contrary, the discourse of utility is revealed to be conditioned by an always-already operative discourse of criticism. Utility in this sense is no more than an "alibi" that allows criticism to disseminate itself, the thing through which criticism justifies itself. This may go a long way toward explaining the urgency, in both Lilienblum and

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<sup>45</sup> Guillory, "The Discourse of Value," 301.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Guillory, "The Discourse of Value," 301.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 131.

<sup>49</sup> Baudrillard, "Concerning the Fulfillment of Desire in Exchange Value," 205.

<sup>50</sup> Guillory, "The Discourse of Value," 301.

Kovner, to institute the functioning of criticism at the very moment they call for a regeneration of literature. Most importantly, it allows us to see this urgency as concerning what Baudrillard calls “the fulfillment of desire in exchange value”—that is, an expression not of a desire for useful literature but of a desire for criticism and its exchanges as what sets and keeps the system of literature in motion.

#### IV. The Critic’s Undoing

I have taken this rather lengthy digression from my discussion of “Sideways” in order both to situate Hagzar’s (and Gnessin’s) attempts at writing criticism in relation to a critical genealogy that begins with the critics of the Haskala and to flesh out the theory of criticism embodied in this genealogy. What I have been describing as the fulfillment of desire in critical exchange value thus turns out to be the driving force behind “Sideways” and its protagonist. In spite of what appears initially as a problem of writerly productivity, the economy of literature in the story is centered, in its essence, not around production, and certainly not around consumption or utility, but rather around the function of criticism, the function of exchange. To the extent that it can be read as an inquiry into the stakes of writing in Hebrew, “Sideways”—being a text haunted by the problem of participation in criticism—seems indifferent to the prevalent discourse of literary utility at the same time that it acknowledges the primacy of exchange implicit in this supposedly utilitarian model.

By introducing a character of a critic who doesn’t write, then, Gnessin dramatizes not merely a failure to write, but more specifically a failure to take part in the role of the critic, a failure in the operation of exchange situated at the heart of the literary mechanism. Gnessin himself, as mentioned above, began his literary career by writing criticism. In 1900, at the age of twenty one, he moved to Warsaw, one of the two “capital cities” of Hebrew literature at the time, where he sought to fulfill his artistic aspirations and, under the mentorship of Nahum Sokolov, published three long critical articles about contemporary Hebrew literature (the first two, as well as an obituary for Nietzsche, were published in Sokolov’s daily newspaper *Ha-tzifira*, and the third in the weekly *Ha-magid*).<sup>51</sup> More than mere reviews, these were lengthy, thoughtful analyses of the literary works in question, accompanied by and rooted in theoretical reflections on the nature of literature and its role in the present reality—where the influence of the Russian school of social critics, as well as, presumably, of their Hebrew maskilic counterparts, was clearly evident.<sup>52</sup> His critical career, however, was short-lived. After his departure from Warsaw in the winter of 1901 he never turned to writing criticism again, and his article in *Ha-magid* would turn out to be his last critical piece. By the time Gnessin began publishing his stories, then, certainly by the time he wrote “Sideways,” he was already well into a process of a retreat from criticism; or rather, he was already—at least *de facto*—a retired critic. His return to the

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<sup>51</sup> Gnessin, “Sicha be-olam ha-sifrut—Y. Bershady: Tipusim u-tzlamim” (A Literary Conversation— Y. Bershady: Characters and Shadows), *Ha-tzifira*, August 28 and 29, 1900; “Friedrich Nietzsche,” *Ha-tzifira*, August 29, 1900; “Demon Yehudi: Sipur me’et E. Goldin” (Jewish Demon: A Story by E. Goldin), *Ha-tzifira*, December 12 and 13, 1900; “Shivrey luchot” (Tablet Fragments), *Ha-magid*, March 7, 14, and 21, 1901. Gnessin’s only publication prior to these articles, apart from some teenage experiments in crafting a hand-written literary newspaper with his friend Brenner, was a poem titled “Matan torah” (*Ha-tzifira*, June 1, 1900). His first work of fiction was to appear only in March 1904.

<sup>52</sup> See Laor, “He’arot le-ma’amarey ha-bikoret shel U. N. Gnessin,” 179.

sphere of criticism in “Sideways” should thus be understood from the perspective of this retreat—as a return already tainted by a desire to retire.

As many scholars point out, Hagzar’s planned critical projects are modeled to a large extent on Gnessin’s own articles from his 1900-1901 Warsaw period. Hagzar’s article “on one of the new stories,” for example, in which “he intended to point, at last, to all those things that concern the best of Jewish youth, but the literature unaccountably overlooks” is, according to Miron, first and foremost an echo: “with this definition of the article that Hagzar intends to write, Gnessin *repeats precisely* his own intention in writing his early article on the story ‘Jewish Demon’ by Ezra Goldin.”<sup>53</sup> Gnessin, then, “repeats precisely”—and thus the scene of writing in “Sideways” is revealed not only as generating another scene of critical repetition (the scene of the story’s interpretations) but also as itself predicated on biographical repetition. But while the former scene of repetition leads, as we have seen, to a critical double bind, the latter takes us a step further toward unraveling this impasse.

According to Miron, who writes from well within the interpretative framework of “total failure,” the content of Gnessin’s own articles is imported into the story only as a means to fashion a character who is completely occupied with “the literary context of literature”; it is designed to present Hagzar’s “failure [...] as a result of his inability to persist in his relation to the Idea of literature as a norm of purity.”<sup>54</sup> Keen to distance himself from a “simplistically ‘autobiographical’” manner of reading, Miron diminishes the importance of Gnessin’s own writerly history for understanding the vicissitudes of writing in “Sideways.” Yet, it is precisely the “autobiographical” that not only turns the scene of writing into a scene of repetition but also, by introducing into it an element of difference, lends its art of failure a certain kind of backwards turn.

For this scene of repetition is in fact—and “precisely”—a scene of non-repetition. Hagzar plans—and fails—to do precisely what his author has already—and successfully—done. The article never written by Hagzar has, in reality, already been written; or, conversely, the article written several years earlier by Gnessin is now being (not) written (again) by Hagzar. The autobiographical modeling thus initiates a *temporal reversal* and shifts the scene of writing in the story from a paradigm of failure to one of *undoing*: by not doing what his author has already done, the figure of Hagzar—the writer who does not write, the critic who does not read—undoes some basic attachment to a critical ethos.

This ethos, to which Gnessin himself has wholeheartedly subscribed in his critical writings, consists of a commitment to the Lilienblumian principle of criticism’s serviceable indispensability (“[only] the stories and the criticism together can truly elucidate life”). Little wonder then that Hagzar’s plan—which is a repetition of Gnessin’s, of course—“to point, at last, to all those things that concern the best of Jewish youth, but the literature unaccountably overlooks” echoes a familiar Lilienblumian agenda: “criticism is needed in order to remark on the authors’ errors, analyze the human forces that are revealed in their stories, and point to the good and bad sides, which the readers might misunderstand or leave unexamined.” More than

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<sup>53</sup> See Miron’s note in Gnessin, *Kol Ktavav*, 588; emphasis added. Laor too points out this similarity, which, for him, fits perfectly the reconstructive agenda of his own survey, aimed to weave the early phases of Gnessin’s career into a clear, broad narrative of an intellectual-artistic development; the critical articles could thereby provide us, according to Laor, “valuable” insights, “with which it would be possible to restore some of the presuppositions of Gnessin the artist, even before he started composing his first story” (“He’arot le-ma’amarey ha-bikoret shel U. N. Gnessin,” 178).

<sup>54</sup> Miron, “Chachim be-apo shel ha-netzach,” 325.

anything, this ethos is driven by a profound understanding that it is criticism that “moves the literatures of each and every people.”

The attachment to this ethos informs both Hagzar’s personal life and the literary discourse he imagines himself to be a part of. Like all attachments, as Lauren Berlant’s famous argument goes, it is optimistic:

All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever.<sup>55</sup>

Hagzar’s attachment to the occupation of writing criticism indeed involves a whole cluster of promises: by publishing critical articles he hopes to gain reputation and recognition and make inroads into the Hebrew literary world; in the process he hopes to earn and save enough money to allow him to enroll in the near future at one of Western Europe’s universities—which, in turn, would further his intellectual development and promote his literary career. For Hagzar, being a critic holds the promise of a trajectory of progress and improvement. But writing Hebrew criticism is also imbued with optimism in a broader sense, as evident in the optimistic outlook that colors Lilienblum’s and Kovner’s argumentations, however polemical their rhetoric. As an operation of exchange and circulation, criticism promises the proper functioning and further prospering of Hebrew Literature writ large—it carries a promise of progress and improvement on a national-cultural scale.<sup>56</sup>

“Sideways,” then, is a story of a weakening attachment to—or even detachment from—what Baudrillard terms “the fulfillment of desire in exchange value,” and Berlant, in discussing a story by Charles Johnson—“the promise of exchange value.”<sup>57</sup> This dynamics of weakening, I argue, becomes in “Sideways” not only a narrative of a failure to sustain one’s attachments but also a fantasy of freeing oneself from both their promises and their demands. In this fantasmatic formation, the fulfillment of desire through the process of exchange is countered with what Barthes describes in one of his definitions of the neutral as a desire “that is nonmarketable,” or a

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<sup>55</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> This formulation can be read as a suggestion to recast, in terms of an economic theory of value, the near obsession of the discourse of Hebrew literature at that period with its own growth and dissemination (a preoccupation astutely described by Miron in *Bodedim be-mo’adam: Li-dyokana shel ha-republika ha-sifrutit ha-ivrit bi-tchilat ha-me’a ha-esrim* [When Loners Come Together: A Portrait of Hebrew Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century]).

<sup>57</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 36. In Johnson’s story, itself titled “Exchange Value,” the two young protagonists, underprivileged African American brothers in Chicago of the 1970s, revert to a strategy of hoarding after they surprisingly come across and get possession of abundant wealth (they do it because, as one of the brothers declares, “As soon as you buy something you *lose* the power to buy something” [quoted *ibid.*, 40]). Berlant describes this strategy as a way to hold off the promise of exchange value: “Hoarding controls the promise of value against expenditure, as it performs the enjoyment of an infinite present of holding pure potential” (*Ibid.*, 42). While the figure of hoarding as a holding on to potentiality may indeed turn out to be analogous to some manifestations of the figure of the writer who doesn’t write, neither Gnessin nor Hagzar is invested in the hoarding of literary potentiality—and this analogy would have to remain for the time being a promise to be taken up only in the following chapters. A slightly different analogy between Gnessin’s and Johnson’s protagonists does consist, however, in their relation to circulation. “Under capitalism,” says Berlant, “being in circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy” (*ibid.*, 42). And just as in “Exchange Value,” Gnessin cuts his protagonist off circulation, off the dynamics of extracting (literary) exchange value, in favor, as I go on to argue in what follows, of a fantasy of withdrawal.

desire *for* the nonmarketable, a desire to liberate oneself from the dynamics of the market.<sup>58</sup> Hagzar, however, the protagonist of this fantasy, does not and cannot articulate a program for his withdrawal, he does not and cannot explicitly voice this desire to detach from the marketability of writing. And thus throughout the text the reason for his not writing remains hard to explain. The story's critics, of course, provide all sorts of explanations, most of them indeed plausible and convincing.<sup>59</sup> But Hagzar himself cannot really put it into words, even when toward the end of the story he tries to explain it all to his friend Carmel:

[...] And Hagzar would sit at his place, or pace back and forth in the room, and converse in an excited stutter and laugh loudly [...] and he would begin to interrogate his friend about life in Western Europe, and in his heart would begin to flicker a trembling, urging haste to finish all the work he needs to do and finally go to Western Europe. And he would mention incidentally the small obstacles that have detained him here all this time, and would grow agitated with his inability to detail them clearly, especially while he himself feels them, it seems, so clearly—simply, feels...<sup>60</sup>

[...] וחגזר היה יושב אצלו, או שהיה מתהלך בחדר הנה והנה ומספר בגמגום הבא מתוך התלהבות, ומשחק ברמה [...] והיה מתחיל חוקר ודורש את חברו על דבר החיים שבמדינת הים, והיתה מתחילה מנצנצת בלבו איזו חופזה רועדת ומאיצה, לגמור את כל המוטל עליו וללכת סוף סוף למדינת הים. והיה מזכיר בשיחתו אגב-אורחא את המעצורים הקטנים, אשר עצרוהו פה כל העת, והיה בא לידי גירוי, כשלא היה יכול לפרטם ברור, בשעה שהוא גופו מרגיש אותם, כמדומה, ברור כל כך — פשוט, מרגיש...

As this is the last time that Hagzar's writerly work is referred to in the text, Gnessin not only leaves us with an unexplained reason for the failure, but also makes sure to dramatize the sense of its inexplicability, the inability to articulate it. Hagzar, then, is not at any point of the story an explicit ideologue of non-writing or of the neutral. His non-writing is far from being conceived or experienced as a deliberate or programmatic act of refusal or spite. He is nothing like Herman Melville's *Bartleby* who can famously declare: "I would prefer not to." On the contrary, for the most part Hagzar would prefer to write, to succeed, to progress (which is precisely what makes the paradigm of failure so ubiquitously appealing for the story's readers). In this sense, it is fair to say that Hagzar does consider himself a failure. Gnessin, in other words, is careful not to turn his protagonist into a straightforward hero of passivity, an opinionated proponent of a refusal to publish, or an anti-writing activist.

Only by placing Hagzar's critical non-writing in the multiple contexts of the economic-critical discourse of the period, the uncannily repetitive scene of the story's own criticism, and the biographical shadow of his author's past writings, can the protagonist of "Sideways" be read as a figure for the neutral. Only thus can the scene of failure, reconceived now as a scene of undoing, be understood as a fantasy of a retreat to a state of non-compliance with the national political economy of criticism. And only in these contexts can the stakes of the double bind be finally inverted: it is not the critic who by writing his interpretation redeems himself from

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<sup>58</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> See note 20 above.

<sup>60</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 161; my translation.

participating in Hagzar's scene of failure; it is rather Hagzar who by not writing presents himself as a figure of non-participation, of a tacit refusal to take part as an agent of exchange.

"Sideways" thus acts out a biographical reversal that turns into a gesture of political withdrawal. In this context, Laor's rhetoric in summarizing Gnessin's early experiments as a critic is particularly telling:

Reading these critical articles seems to reveal that Gnessin, though he hasn't exhausted his ability in this field, had an undeniable critical temper: his few remarks on writers of his time testify not only to the existence of a strong sense of involvement in the literary world but primarily to his will and willingness to determine decisively his position "for" or "against" [...] his concrete positions on current literary questions [are] expressed with great self-confidence and a clear recognition of his judgmental authority.<sup>61</sup>

Remarkably, Laor reproduces here the exact terminology of Barthes's account of weariness, and Gnessin is depicted as if he were the perfect subject of the demanding, interpellative questions: "How do you situate yourself with regard [...] to x, to y?" "What is your position in this debate?" Demonstrating the coercive and classifying force of the paradigm at work, descriptions such as "undeniable critical temper," "will and willingness to determine decisively his position 'for' or 'against'," or "great self-confidence and a clear recognition of his judgmental authority" seem not only very far from the character of Hagzar as we've come to know it;<sup>62</sup> they also seem to form a very tiring discursive position. Out of this affective burden "Sideways" emerges as a fantasy of a desire to retire.

Yet, as I've now come full circle back to the affect of weariness with which I began, what weariness has been slightly displaced, its scope extended from a particular imperative regarding the content of national literature (the imperative to embody the position of a "watchman") to the broader issue of participation in its dissemination. The demand to write as the watchman unto the house of Israel, to write, in the terms of Brenner's letter, of the present and with one's eyes wide open, has been in recent decades the target of a rigorous political critique that has consistently exposed and traced the complex relations between Hebrew literary production and Zionist ideology. But even ideological criticism, broadly conceived, while in content it practices a critique of literature's use value and its usefulness for power (e.g., literature's ideological-national utility), in its own activity it participates in literature's exchanges. Within and against this matrix, and by virtue of the mirroring reading-effect of "Sideways," Gnessin's failed critic teaches a singular and particularly humbling lesson. As what weariness turns out to be the attachment not only to the writerly imperative but also to the role of criticism, Hagzar's lesson makes us aware, for one, of the way the critical itself—not in content but in function—emerges first and foremost as a form of participation in the market of national literature; it turns our attention to the way in which we are all driven in our writing, including this writing on "Sideways" that takes place right here, by a will to participate and by the fulfillment of our desire in exchange value. More importantly, though, it provides us with a figure: the figure of non-writing, in which there is undoubtedly a decent amount of failure but there is also "some neutral," some refusal to participate in dull, wearisome politics, some temptation to baffle the

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<sup>61</sup> Dan Laor, "He'arot le-ma'amarey ha-bikoret shel U. N. Gnessin," 202.

<sup>62</sup> And yet Laor insists on finding continuities between Gnessin and his protagonist: "We can definitely learn from ["Sideways"] about the level of Gnessin's dedication and identification with the critical vocation in the first period of his work" (ibid., 176).

arrogance and menacing pressure of the paradigm. It provides us with a figure, then: the figure of the writer who doesn't write, Nachum Hagzar, a first in a gallery of failed writers who would somehow find their way time and again onto the stage of Hebrew literature—each failing in his or her own singular way, each, as I begin to show in the following sections of this chapter, enacting his or her own desire to retire, his or her own undoing.

## V. *Side-Streets*: On Not Dealing with Literature

While “Sideways” still begins with a sense of hopeful optimism as regards Hagzar’s writing prospects, Elisheva’s 1929 *Side-Streets* (*Simta’ot*), famous for being the first Hebrew novel written by a woman in Palestine, opens right into a scene of writerly failure. Late one night, Daniel Reuter, one of the novel’s two main protagonists, a Hebrew writer who lives in Moscow with his wife and young daughter, returns home from a meeting of the local Writers’ Association, excited and eager to work:

He had no desire to sleep. Despite his great physical fatigue, his spirit was aroused and excited after being out so late. For a moment he thought: How good it would be to turn on the lamp, sit at the desk, and delve into work, to write and write until dawn, to erase and rewrite, to stop for a moment and go over what he’s written, and then to write and write again...<sup>63</sup>

לא היה לו שום חפץ לישון. למרות לאות גופו הגדולה, היה רוחו ניעור ונרגש ביותר אחרי ישיבתו המאוחרת. רגע חשב: מה טוב היה עכשיו להדליק את המנורה, לשבת אל שולחן-הכתיבה ולהתעמק בעבודה, לכתוב ולכתוב עד עלות השחר המאוחר, למחוק ולחזור ולכתוב, לעמוד רגע ולעבור על מה שכתב, ושוב לחזור ולכתוב...

Yet, as Daniel considers picking up his work where he left it off, this sudden outburst of the familiar, productive, and positivistic urge “to write and write” is implicitly exposed as continuously frustrated:

There, the nice story that he had begun writing two years ago, into which he poured so much of his personality and the secrets of his soul, still lies in the desk drawer, and he hasn’t taken it into his hands for so long...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Elisheva, *Simta’ot* (*Side-Streets*), 9-10. The novel’s plot, which takes place in post-revolutionary Moscow and spans approximately one year (presumably 1922-23), charts the social and ideological contradictions of the period as they are reflected in the lives of a group of young, bohemian Russian intellectuals, Jews and non-Jews, men and women. Composed between 1925 and 1929, *Simta’ot* was first published in 1929 by the Tel Aviv based publishing house Tomer Press. Since then, it has been republished twice: in 1977 by Hadar Press (with an afterword by Hillel Barzel) and in 2008 by Ha-Sifriya ha-Chadasha / Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad (with an afterword by Dana Olmert). All references throughout this chapter are to the 2008 edition.

<sup>64</sup> Elisheva, *Simta’ot*, 10.



הנה סיפורו החביב, אשר התחיל עוד לפני שנתיים, ואשר כלל בו כל-כך הרבה מאישיותו ומגנזי-נפשו, מונח במגירת השולחן, וידו לא נגעה בו כמה זמן...

As it turns out, on this occasion too the urge “to write and write until dawn” soon subsides, and Daniel, “annoyed and depressed,” promptly gets up from his chair and heads to bed, having again not even taken the story’s manuscript out of the drawer and into his hands. From its very first scene, then, Elisheva’s *Side-Streets* presents its protagonist as a frustrated writer oscillating between a deep urge to write and a habit of procrastinating the actual writing. Having declared in 1926, in the midst of working on her novel, that “of the Russian poets I was most influenced by Fet and Alexander Blok; of the Hebrew writers—by Gnessin and Shofman,” and having herself translated Gnessin’s “Sideways” into Russian, Elisheva indeed seems to cast her protagonist, though a fiction writer and not a critic, as a late, slightly older, and more settled version of Nachum Hagzar, the aspiring writer who does not—and perhaps cannot—actually write.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, only in chapter 29, months after the novel’s opening episode, is Daniel able to break his writer’s block; finally fulfilling his own vision of relentless work, he sits down at his desk in a nocturnal burst of productive creativity that, however, ends in bitter disappointment:

He himself could not really tell what drove him that night and compelled him to such an extraordinary thing: to sit past midnight over his manuscript, while everyone in his household has long been asleep. For hours he sat there, bent over the scattered sheets of paper, reading and erasing, cutting out some passages, inserting new chapters, and making important corrections... But in astonished desperation he felt how all those things that used to flow from the depths of his heart and used to be so close and clear and dear to him [...] are now becoming vague and pale in his mind, dissociated from him and his creative powers, as if vaporizing in the empty air, almost gone... At the end, a great pain filled his insides, he could feel it almost physically, and a ceaseless, weary hammering kept beating in his brain, completely confusing his thoughts.<sup>66</sup>

[...] ובעצמו לא ידע אל-נכון מה דחף אותו בלילה הזה והכריחו לדבר בלתי-רגיל כל-כך: לשבת עד אחרי חצות על-גבי כתב-ידו, עת שכל בני-ביתו כבר היו מזמן שקועים בשינה. שעות רצופות ישב כפוף על הגליונות המפוזרים, קרא ומחק, השמיט פרקים והכניס פרקים חדשים ותיקונים חשובים... ובהשתוממות-יאוש הרגיש איך הדברים שלפנים יצאו מעומקי לבו והיו לו כל-כך קרובים ומובנים וחביבים [...] – הולכים כעת וכאילו מיטשטשים בדמיונו, הולכים ומחווירים, נתלשים ממנו ומכוח יצירתו, פורחים ומתנדפים כביכול בחלל האוויר הריק, עוד מעט ואינם... בסוף ישיבתו מילא את קרבו כאב עצום, שחש בו כמעט באופן גופני, והלמות פטישים לאה ובלתי-פוסקת נשמעה במוחו ובילבלה לגמרי את מחשבותיו.

<sup>65</sup> Elisheva, “Toldotay” (My Life), 7. This short autobiographical essay was first published in the journal *Ktuvim* in August 27, 1926 and was subsequently reprinted as the opening piece of the collection of essays dedicated to Elisheva’s work that came out in Tomer press a year later, *Elisheva: Kovets ma’amarim al ha-meshoreret Elisheva* (Elisheva: A Collection of Essays on the Poet Elisheva), edited by her husband, Shimon Bichovsky, a close childhood friend of Gnessin’s and Brenner’s. On Elisheva’s intimate familiarity with Gnessin’s work, see also her incisive and praiseful article commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gnessin’s death, “U. N. Gnessin—tkufato velolamo” (U. N. Gnessin—His Times and His World).

<sup>66</sup> Elisheva, *Simta’ot*, 224.

Recreating initially one of Hagzar's rare moments of successful writing ("As [Hagzar] began to write, the round, curlicued, carefully formed letters raced handsomely across the page, and his face grew intense and excited. [...] With dizzying speed he filled lines and whole pages"), this nocturnal episode, which ends with a sense of helpless futility, accentuates both Daniel's unwillingness to forgo his literary aspirations and his inability to successfully pursue them.<sup>67</sup> In its emotional charge, however, this scene stands out as a singular moment of intense creative outpouring against the background of an otherwise gradual and only semi-dramatic waning of Daniel's investment in the stakes of his writerly vocation. Indeed, from an affective point of view, for Daniel, a typical procrastinating writer, the issue becomes particularly pressing only when faced directly with the dreadful question, "Are you writing something?" Thus, when at a fairly early stage in the plot this question ("*ha-kotev ata dvar-ma?*") is posed to him by his old friend Berta Segal, a crippling sense of shame takes over Daniel:

Daniel felt deep shame in his heart as he remembered his lone story, which has been lying in the desk drawer for two years, dragging on yet never-ending. Still, he tried to give his answer a semblance of importance: 'Hmm... Yes. A little... You see, it's hard to work when you don't feel the right environment, when you don't see the reader in front of you...'<sup>68</sup>

דניאל נכלם בלבו בזוכרו את סיפורו היחיד הנמשך ואינו נגמר ומונח במגירת השולחן זה כשנתיים.  
בכל-זאת השתדל לתת לתשובתו מראה של חשיבות:  
— הָמָּ... כן. מעט... את מבינה, קשה לעבוד כשאין אתה מרגיש את הסביבה הדרושה לזה, אין אתה  
רואה את הקורא לפניך...

The unpleasant—even "dangerous"—situation is repeated later in the novel, as Daniel meets at a Jewish writers club an acquaintance of his, known only as "the little critic":

[The little critic] seemed at first satisfied with mundane questions and banal small talk on Daniel's livelihood, his family members, and so forth. [...]

But the dangerous question came nonetheless:

— And what about your literature?

Daniel's face grew dark, his eyebrows squeezed together involuntarily. Surely he's not going to tell this arrogant little rascal about his ongoing, never-ending story or about his ridiculous attempts to associate with that loafer Mitrofanov, who's getting on his nerves—about all these things which do not interest him anymore, which no longer make him feel the bitterness of humiliation. He replied briefly:

— I don't deal with literature at the moment.<sup>69</sup>

[המבקר הקטן] הסתפק בראשונה בשאלות סתמיות ובהחלפת דברים על פרנסתו של דניאל, על בני-משפחתו, וכיוצא בזה. [...]  
אך השאלה המסוכנת באה בכל-זאת.  
— ומה עם הספרות שלך?

<sup>67</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 144; "Sideways," 12-13.

<sup>68</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

פני דניאל קדרו וגבות עיניו התכווצו בעל-כורחו. ודאי לא יספר לו, לקטן הפוחז הזה, המלא ביטחונו העצמי, על סיפורו המחולל ההולך ואינו נגמר, על גישויו המגוחכים מסביב למיטרופנוב הבטלן, המבלבל את מוחו – על כל הדברים שבעצמו כבר חדל להתעניין בהם ולהרגיש את מרירות ההשפלה שבהם. ענה קצרות: – בספרות איני מתעסק עכשיו.

To the extent that by adopting a Hagzar-like character of a failed writer as its protagonist *Side-Streets* can be read as rehearsing Gnessin's fantasy of non-writing, the repeated staging of the annoying, prying inquiry on the state of writing—in the form of such questions as “Are you writing something?” or “And what about your literature?”—adds to this scenario a conspicuous interpellative dimension. These questions operate both symbolically and affectively: by forcing Daniel to give an account of his own failure, they not only interpellate but in fact make him interpellate himself into the subject position of the unproductive writer. Forcing thus the subject to confront (and account for) his own failure, these affectively charged scenes of interpellation dramatize a typical dynamics of shame, which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in her work on affect, always involves a disruption or estrangement of identificatory communication at the same time that “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity.”<sup>70</sup> Here, while it is the disrupted identification with the image of the successful writer that initiates feelings of shame and humiliation once Daniel is faced with the most basic questions about “his literature,” these two episodes also evoke a palpable if implicit sense that Daniel's shame in failure not only interrupts but also “makes identity”—that, as Sedgwick remarks following Silvan Tomkins, “one is *something* in experiencing shame, though one may or may not have secure hypotheses about what.”<sup>71</sup>

In the earlier of these episodes, Daniel goes on to mimic Berta's gesture: “He was quiet for a moment before proceeding to ask: ‘And you? Did you give up poetry completely?’ Berta's face darkened. She lowered her head and replied with a tone of exaggerated indifference: ‘I gave it up a long time ago. Now I only teach...’”<sup>72</sup> What may appear to be a rather childish act of retaliation on Daniel's part, directing the shaming question back to his interlocutor, can also be read as establishing an intersubjective alliance through a shared sense of shame, which, after all, as an affect “is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating.”<sup>73</sup> Daniel's “and you?”—the “and” following up on his own answer, suggesting a potential relationality between him and her, the “I” and the “you”—seems to ventriloquize the more personal implicit question, “Are you like me?” inviting Berta into the sphere of failure and shame, thereby demonstrating how “shame both derives from and aims toward sociability.”<sup>74</sup> Through this short exchange between Daniel, who feels “deep shame in his heart,” and Berta, whose face darkens as she lowers her head, Elisheva dramatizes what Sedgwick calls “the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality”—mobilizing this double movement in order to establish, even if only for a brief moment, the scene of failure as occasioning a shared affective experience between these two non-writing writers.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

On another level, however, it is precisely out of his experience of shame vis-à-vis the prevalent ideology of writerly productivism that Daniel feels compelled in his replies to revert to excuses rather than admit failure. Specifically, though Berta's and the little critic's questions evoke for Daniel first and foremost the nagging image of his never-ending story, his answers, as excuses, deliberately circumvent this scene of originary (and ongoing) failure. Yet while his answer to Berta excuses his incompetence through a rhetorical "semblance of importance" and a self-acquitting displacement of failure onto the surrounding cultural "environment," his reply to the little critic, delivered with a sense of weariness and revulsion with both subject and interlocutor, seems to take the other extreme and assumes a pretense of utter dismissiveness: "I don't deal with literature at the moment."

For all its air of decisive indifference, though, this excuse does not quite suffice to hold off the little critic's nosiness; rather, it only provides him with an opening to engage in a long and judgmental discussion of Daniel's supposed preference for the Christian literary circles over the Jewish ones: "This is precisely what's so strange for me. With such unfounded stubbornness you distance yourself from every literary center, from every field of work where you could find your place. [...] Shouldn't you agree that a Jew is better off working among the Jews, in the Jewish street, and in favor of the broad Jewish community? And yet I've heard lately that you associate with the Christians, trying to join their supposedly 'great' literature..."<sup>76</sup> Even though Daniel is quick to respond that his affiliation with those circles is "completely private" and has nothing to do with the better good of the Jewish community, the little critic, explicitly assuming now a collective point of view (and using collective pronouns), does not give up: "Still... the question is to what extent you even have a right for such 'privacy' [...] You could have at least used your connections in a beneficial manner (*kedey le-hotsi me-hem to'elet*; literally, to get some utility out of them), to promote a collaboration between the circles of the Christian writers and our own writers."<sup>77</sup> The little critic thus invokes here both the utilitarian conception of literature and the hegemonic discursive demand, of the kind expressed in Brenner's letter, that the Hebrew writer be fully engaged with the collective project and invested in its interests. A variation on what I have been describing as the voice that wearies—the relentlessly positioning voice—the critic's reproaches represent the view (and the historical process) whereby, in Alter's words, "the act of writing Hebrew" has become and is conceived of as "not just an aesthetic pursuit but a programmatic renegotiation of the terms of Jewish collective identity."<sup>78</sup> Unwilling to subject himself to such expectations, Daniel responds by attacking this collectivist discourse itself:

I'll say one more thing [...] If you want to know why I hang around among the "goyim" even though it is not my place—listen to this. A "goy" acquaintance of mine asked me once, straightforwardly and very naively: "Why aren't you going to your Palestine?" – Don't panic now, I've no intention to talk about this "unkosher" subject, and to the Land of Israel I'm not going, of course. Only one thing I wish to say: If you'd heard this question, so naive and simple, asked by a man *who doesn't even understand* what's so "unkosher" about it, maybe you'd understand why I don't really feel like going back here from there, yet again into this suffocation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 196-7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>78</sup> Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 197-8.

ועוד דבר אחד אגיד לך [...] אם רוצה אתה לדעת לשם מה אני מסתובב בין "הגויים", אף-על-פי שאין זה מקומי, תשמע. "גוי" אחד ממכירי שאל אותי פעם ישר בפני ובתמימות רבה, ככה: "מדוע אינך נוסע לפלשתינה שלך"? — אל תיבהל, אין בכוונתי לדבר על נושא "טרפה" זה, ולא רץ-ישראל, כמובן, איני נוסע. רק דבר אחד חפצתי להגיד לך: אילו שמעת את השאלה הזאת, התמימה והפשוטה כל-כך, בפי בן-אדם שאינו מבין מה היא ה"טרפה" שבדבר, אולי היית מבין מפני מה אין לי כל-כך חפץ לשוב משם הנה, שוב פעם אל תוך המחנק.

Thus, Daniel's excuse, originally intended to avoid this charged exchange altogether, ends up leading to one of the most explicitly political moments in the novel—a moment whose political edge consists not so much in articulating a position as in problematizing the relation between the question of the political and the conversion of this question "into a reiterative discourse," the discourse of *la politique*.<sup>80</sup> For Daniel, whose actual political views remain quite vague throughout the novel, the problem with the Zionist question—articulated here as "Why aren't you going to your Palestine?"—lies first and foremost in the way the question is asked. Or rather, in the ways it is *masked*, in the ways in which the discourse precludes any direct engagement with the political question. But Daniel's dialogue with the little critic demonstrates not only his sense of weariness with a "suffocating," repetitive, and predictable political discourse (the discourse of "the same old story," in Barthes's words) but also, most importantly for my argument here, how this sense of "suffocation" initiates an impasse of writing.

Indeed, this scene of dialogue is constructed around a logic of causality that is revealed only at its end and in reverse, as Daniel's supposedly blank excuse—made up initially only as an evasive strategy, a pretense of indifference—is eventually substantiated as a principled, politically motivated stance. Ironically, what Daniel (and the readers) initially regard as a "completely private" failure is reconceptualized, precisely by passing through the collectivist discourse that the little critic forces on it, as a critical gesture of tacit resistance to this very discourse. Daniel's non-writing, in other words, turns out to be an effect of the political, an effect of a refusal to a certain kind of politics. The excuse, masking as it is a deep sense of shame and a "bitterness of humiliation," can also be read by the end of this scene as an almost prideful, even spiteful, political gesture—a gesture of withdrawal in spite of and against the suffocating discourse of (literary) politics:

— And what about your literature? — I don't deal with literature at the moment.

## VI. Elisheva's Excuses: The Contingency of Attachment

Daniel's assertion, uttered initially only half seriously, thus acquires a weight of intentionality that suggests a desire to not deal with literature, restaging Gnessin's fantasy of non-participation. But, as mentioned above, *Side-Streets* features not one but two main protagonists, and the failure of the Hebrew writer is counterbalanced through the character of Lyudmila Vivien, a fairly successful Russian poet. A single, independent, and sexually liberated woman, insistently and skillfully navigating her literary career, Lyudmila's character—especially in its relation to the prospect of literary success—has in the past decade been the focus of a number of feminist works of criticism. Indeed, as Dana Olmert convincingly claims, one of the major thematic lines of the

<sup>80</sup> Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 218; translation modified.

novel “is built around the question whether and how Lyudmila can succeed, as an accomplished poet and an unmarried, sexually independent woman who has intimate relationships with several men, to find her way as a writer and an intellectual in a new, allegedly revolutionary world that is nonetheless filled with prejudice against women.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, in her comprehensive study of “the intellectual heroine” in the fiction of Elisheva and Leah Goldberg, Rivka Elinav argues that through the character of Lyudmila, who represents, in the words of her married lover in the novel, “the new type of the ‘literary woman’” (*ha-tipus he-chadash shel ha-isha ha-sifrutit*), “Elisheva sounds a clear, radical feminist voice.”<sup>82</sup>

For Elinav, the thrust of this feminist agenda relies to a large extent on a biographical correspondence between Elisheva and Lyudmila: “it seems that the novel and its protagonist are invested with an autobiographical charge, which develops into a narrative of struggle on the place and recognition of the intellectual woman in society. Through her heroines, Elisheva confronts the question of her own autonomy as a woman writer and intellectual and of the right to live her life according to her will, views, and choices.”<sup>83</sup> But if *Side-Street* can thus be classified, according to Elinav, as a “fictionalized-autobiographical novel,” and the character of Lyudmila, as Hillel Barzel suggests, presents a “mirror image” (*bavua*) of its author—this image is in fact both inverted and partial, and it is precisely the *discordance* between the fictional and the biographical that allows for a reading of the novel as (also) fantasmatic.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, Elisheva’s own biography is far more sensational than her protagonist’s. Born Elizaveta Ivanova Zhirkova in the Russian town of Riazan in 1888 to a father who belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church and a catholic mother of English decent, both of whom with no special relation to Jewishness or Jewish culture, she invented herself as the Hebrew writer Elisheva, and appeared on the stage of Hebrew literature as a veritable sensation, the miraculous success story of a complete outsider who chose to bind her fate to that of the marginal and still

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<sup>81</sup> Olmert, “Konformiyut migdarit ve-hashlakhoteyha ha-poetiyot: Sipura shel Elisheva” (Gender Conformity and Its Poetic Implications: Elisheva’s Story), 206.

<sup>82</sup> Elinav, ‘*Ki mara me’od ha-da’at*’: *Et ha-gibora ha-intelektualit-yotzeret ba-siporet shel Elisheva (Bichovsky) and Leah Goldberg* (Women and the Tree of Knowledge: The Intellectual Heroine in Hebrew Women’s Prose—A Literary and Feminist Study in the Prose of Elisheva [Bichovsky] and Leah Goldberg), 270. *Side-Streets*, according to Elinav, is thus “the harbinger of [Hebrew] women writers’ engagement with the ‘woman question’ from their own point of view as women, emphasizing the figure of the heroine as a creative writer-intellectual” (ibid., 104). Lyudmila’s lover Kravatzov refers to her—in a mix of admiration, defensiveness, and paternalism—as “the new type of the ‘literary woman’” in his chat with Daniel in chapter 10 of *Side-Streets* (Elisheva, *Simta’ot*, 64). Both Olmert and Elinav read this labeling as accurately pointing to a new and significant cultural and political phenomenon; but, as Olmert emphasizes, Kravatzov’s words also betray his (and Daniel’s) repressed anxieties in face of the emergence of these independent “literary women” (Olmert, “Konformiyut migdarit ve-hashlakhoteyha ha-poetiyot,” 206-7; Elinav, ‘*Ki mara me’od ha-da’at*’, 84-85). As part of the renewed critical and feminist interest in Elisheva’s fiction, Hila Shlomit Kinel-Limoni discusses the “feminist protest” and the “hidden authentic feminine identity” in Elisheva’s short stories (see chapter 3 of her 2016 study *Tlushot u-mordot: Siporet nashim be-sifrut ha-tchiya ha-ivrit—Hava Shapiro, Dvora Baron, and Elisheva Zhirkova-Bichovsky* [Aliens and Rebels—Female Fiction in the Hebrew ‘Revival’ Literature: Hava Shapiro, Dvora Baron, and Elisheva Zhirkova-Bichovsky]). In a short, suggestive essay titled “What Do Women Want,” writer Ronit Matalon declares: “What is so captivating in Elisheva’s *Side-Streets* is the way in which she understands femininity and puts it on paper without putting too much—that is, without pressuring the narrating voice. Elisheva’s modus of femininity, as it is expressed for example in her protagonist, the Russian poet Lyudmila Vivien, is made up almost entirely of open ends, which are diffuse and all but escape definition” (“Ma nashim rotzot” [What Do Women Want]).

<sup>83</sup> Elinav, ‘*Ki mara meod ha-da’at*,’ 265.

<sup>84</sup> Elinav, ‘*Ki mara meod ha-da’at*,’ 269; Barzel, “Elisheva ve-ha-roman shela” (Elisheva and Her Novel), 280.

nascent Hebrew culture.<sup>85</sup> Though she started her literary experiments at age nineteen by writing Russian poetry, she soon took interest in Jewish and Hebrew culture and, after initially teaching herself Yiddish, in 1913 she started attending Hebrew classes at the Society of Lovers of Hebrew (*Agudat chovevey sfat ever*) in Moscow. Having studied there and with private tutors for several years, she composed her first Hebrew poem in 1920, at the age of thirty-two, and from that moment on wrote exclusively in Hebrew. Around that time she married one of her Hebrew teachers, the Zionist activist and literary entrepreneur Shimon Bichovsky, a close childhood friend of Gnessin and Brenner, and in 1925, shortly after she began working on her novel, they moved to Palestine together and settled in Tel Aviv. There, Bichovsky dedicated himself to promoting his wife's career and founded Tomer Press, with which Elisheva published several books of poetry and fiction, including *Side-Streets*, her first and only novel, in 1929.

If my own reading of *Side-Streets* has thus digressed into a rather lengthy biographical survey, this digression seems to be dictated by Elisheva's text itself—the turn to the biographical being, in Felman's terms, “a reading effect” not so much of the novel's contents but of its very accomplishment, of its very existence as a Hebrew novel. Indeed, participating in and acting out this reading effect, almost every reader of the novel (and of Elisheva's oeuvre more generally) seems compelled to rehearse—and often to open with—such a biographical summary, emphasizing the unpredictable, improbable rise of Elizaveta Ivanova Zhirkova as a Hebrew writer.<sup>86</sup> The biographical compels itself on the reading of *Side-Streets* not because, as in Elinav's interpretation, “the novel and its protagonist are invested with an autobiographical charge,” but because the novel itself appears as the implausible yet successful materialization of a narrative of attachment to, immersion in, and mastery of Hebrew writing, a narrative so exceptional it seems not only to provide and delineate the enabling conditions of the text but also to remain its always present, and to some extent primary, referent.

It is this irresistible narrative that has made Elisheva into “an exotic figure surrounded by a glamorous aura” and endowed her with “a status of a star in the skies of Hebrew poetry” in the second half of the 1920s.<sup>87</sup> As Yaffah Berlovitz points out, the literary community “received her with great enthusiasm, arranging readings of her works, which were published in every possible forum, to the point where her popularity aroused the resentment of the young poets.”<sup>88</sup> In *Elisheva: A Collection of Essays on the Poet Elisheva* that Bichovsky published in 1927, the various writers repeatedly narrate with a tone of amazement her exceptional story as “a daughter

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<sup>85</sup> The biographical survey in this paragraph is based primarily on Elisheva's short autobiographical essay “Toldotay.”

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, the readings by Barzel, Olmert, Elinav, and Kinel-Limoni mentioned above. Most remarkably, Shaked opens his discussion of Elisheva's prose in the third volume of *Hebrew Narrative Fiction* by declaring that “her biography is a story unto itself,” before immediately going on to quote *in full* Elisheva's essay “My Life” (see Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880-1980* [Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980], vol. 3, 87-93).

<sup>87</sup> The quotes are from Miron, *Imahot meyasdot, achayot chorgot: Al shtey hatchalot ba-shira ha-eretzyisre'elit ha-modernit* (Founding Mothers, Stepsisters: The Emergence of the First Hebrew Poetesses & Other Essays), 26; and Olmert, “Konformiyut migdarit ve-hashlakhoteyha ha-poetiyot,” 201.

<sup>88</sup> Berlovitz, “Elisheva Bichovsky.” Shimon Bichovsky himself played an active and influential role in promoting and nourishing the myth of Elisheva. In addition to publishing in Tomer Press a volume of essays that celebrated her poetry (which I discuss below), he also initiated what some have regarded as a massive PR campaign, advertising aggressively her books and poetry readings. These events were promoted as “Elisheva soirees” (“*neshef Elisheva*”) and included performances of live music, short lectures on Elisheva's work, and poetry readings by the poet herself. The “resentment of the young poets” that Berlovitz mentions was manifested, for example, in a satirical poem composed by Avraham Shlonsky, in which he mocks the talentless poet who succeeds only thanks to her husband-publicist's efforts (see Olmert, “Konformiyut migdarit ve-hashlakhoteyha ha-poetiyot,” 200).

of a foreign people who fell in love with the Hebrew people and its culture”; time and again they refer to her as “a miracle” (*pele*), “an enigma” (*chida*), a modern day version of the biblical Ruth the Moabite—“Ruth from the banks of the Volga,” in M. Neviaski’s catchy phrase—and describe her dramatic rise as “an extraordinary historical event that has the makings of a riddle, a psychological conundrum,” “a fact that has no precedent in our history—that a person of a foreign people would merge so organically and spiritually with the Hebrew language, to the point of being able to write in this language such intimate, hearty, and tender poems as Elisheva’s.”<sup>89</sup> Already in her time, then, Elisheva’s biography has been cast as a Barthesian myth of an unexplained, mysterious and thus miraculous attachment to Hebrew. *Side-Streets*, Elisheva’s first attempt at the novel form, may thus seem to offer itself as a further consolidation of its author’s mythological aura, proof of Elisheva’s mastery of yet another form of Hebrew writing. Yet this very novel—whose writing, which began in Moscow in 1925 and has continued through 1929, paralleled the emergence of the myth of “Ruth from the banks of the Volga” and Elisheva’s rise to stardom—can also be read, through the figure of Lyudmila, as responding to this myth by setting aside the desire for mastery, by backing down from the kind of passion that Barthes describes as the “*vouloir-saisir*,” the “will-to-possess.”<sup>90</sup>

A few months after their first meeting, Lyudmila decides, almost spontaneously, to take up Hebrew lessons and hire Daniel as her private tutor. This plan first comes up in one of her conversations with her lover Kravatzov, as he teases her about her feelings for Daniel, whom he perceives to be a romantic rival of sorts and jokingly calls “the last romanticist”:

- What can be more romantic than a man who cannot find his place? [...]  
 — Let me tell you. Sometimes it’s good to have romanticism in your life, at other times outside of it. Daniel Reuter will be for me, certainly, nothing more than... a tutor, whom I’d invite to give me Hebrew lessons.  
 Kravatzov stared at her with astonished eyes.  
 — What do you mean? What do you need Hebrew for, all of a sudden?  
 As Lyudmila replied, he kept his eyes on her, but her face was pure and quiet, showing no signs of embarrassment.  
 — First, I have the impression he could use one more student. And second: Why not Hebrew? It’s interesting to learn any language, even a little bit. And here’s an opportunity... of course, I don’t intend to dedicate a lot of time to this: until the summer, at most.  
 — Well, well...<sup>91</sup>

— מה לך יותר רומנטי מבן-אדם שאינו מוצא את מקומו? [...]  
 — אני אגיד לך. פעם טובה הרומנטיות בתוך החיים, ופעם מחוץ להם. דניאל רויטר לא יהיה בשבילי, בוודאי, אלא... מורה שאזמין אותו לתת לי שיעורים בעברית.

<sup>89</sup> Bichovsky (ed.), *Elisheva: Kovets ma'amarim al ha-meshoreret Elisheva*, 15, 16, 20, 21, 26-7, 29, 30. The comparison to the biblical Ruth was first suggested by Elisheva herself in one of her Russian poems, written after she began to immerse herself in Jewish culture but before she embraced Hebrew as the language of her poetry. On this poem, see for example *ibid.*, 18, 22.

<sup>90</sup> “It will be necessary to understand [...] that there is a passion of the Neutral but that this passion is not that of a will-to-possess”; “the first question, the first Neutral, announced subject of the course, is the difference that separates the will-to-live from the will-to-possess: the will-to-live being then recognized as what transcends the will-to-possess, as the drifting far from arrogance” (Barthes, *The Neutral*, 13, 14).

<sup>91</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 71.



קרצוב נתן בה עיניים תמהות.  
 — מה פירוש הדבר? למה לך פתאום עברית?  
 בשעת תשובתה של ליודמילה לא גרע עיניו מפניה, אולם פניה היו צחים ושלווים, ושום סימני מבוכה  
 לא נראו בהם.  
 — ראשית כל, יש לי רושם שעוד שיעור אחד לא יזיק לו כלל וכלל. ושנית: למה לא עברית? מעניין  
 לדעת כל שפה ושפה, ואפילו במקצת. והנה הזדמנות... כמובן, אין בדעתי להקדיש לזה הרבה זמן: עד  
 ימי הקיץ, לכל היותר.  
 — ככה, ככה...

Dismissing an implied romantic attraction by substituting it with a practical linguistic interest, Lyudmila's answer can be read as an ironic commentary on the romanticist politics of Hebrew, a comment whose full significance would be revealed only towards the end of the novel, when her lessons with Daniel finally come to an end. Kravatzov's surprised question, however, "What do you need Hebrew for, all of a sudden?" continues to resonate more immediately as Lyudmila's plans begin to materialize—troubling even the intended teacher, Daniel: "The whole business seemed a little strange to him. Like Kravatzov, upon hearing the news he wanted to ask: Why Hebrew of all things (*lama davka ivrit*)? And why her?"<sup>92</sup>

By channeling the relationship between Daniel and Lyudmila through the scene of Hebrew tutoring, Elisheva not only mobilizes a familiar theme from the fiction of the period but also, to the extent that Lyudmila's character can indeed be read as Elisheva's "mirror image," restages an important part of her own biography.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the seemingly inevitable question *Why?*—"Why Hebrew of all things?" "What do you need Hebrew for, all of a sudden?"—which appears as the immediate effect of Lyudmila's strange decision, the almost instinctive reaction it solicits from the people around her, echoes Elisheva's own experience a young Russian woman who chose to dedicate herself, all of a sudden and of all things, to Hebrew learning. For Elisheva, however, the answer to this *Why?* seems much more complicated, as a series of emotional and touching letters she wrote to her friend M. Neviaski in 1919-20 emphatically reveals. These letters—written in a somewhat awkward style, strewn with minor spelling mistakes, and burdened by hyper-awareness of her then limited writing abilities in Hebrew and, consequently, by a deep sense of shame—provide fascinating insight into the psychological drama behind her acquisition of the language, a drama of "two souls," as she writes in an oft-quoted passage from the first letter, "one Russian and one Hebrew."<sup>94</sup> In a letter from January 1920, Elisheva addresses the inquiries she often faces: "As most people who know me, you too wonder how I got into the Hebrew world and became myself 'Hebraic.' I told you that it was actually quite simple, that everything happened by chance (*be-derekh mikre*). There's a lot of truth in this, but there are a few more things that aren't so easy for me to tell and elucidate."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, rather than explaining the reason directly, she refers Neviaski to "a small story" she once wrote, which contains "part of the

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>93</sup> The scene of Hebrew tutoring is repeated numerous times throughout Gnessin's fiction, for example. See his stories "Sideways," "Meanwhile" (Beynotayim, 1906), and, especially, "Genia" (1904), in which, just like in Elisheva's *Side-Streets* (and even more so, as will become clear below, just like in Elisheva's *life*), a young non-Jewish woman (*Genia*) takes a sudden interest in Hebrew culture and hires one of her friends (the narrator Friedin) as her Hebrew tutor. In "Genia," as in *Side-Streets*, as the plot progresses the lessons gradually become a site not only of learning but also of romantic and erotic tension.

<sup>94</sup> Eight of her letters to Neviaski, alongside two letters to Shofman, were printed in G. Kressel (ed.), *Gnazim: Kovets le-toldot ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ba-dorot ha-achronim* (Gnazim: A Collection in the History of Hebrew Literature in Recent Generations), 151-62. The quote is from a letter sent on June 15, 1919 (ibid., 152).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 158.

truth—that is, one of the many reasons that brought me into the Hebrew world and why it became my own world”; if he would read the story, she concludes, it will become evident that “before I was aware of Hebraism [...] I had no other world, no world of my own; then you’ll perhaps be able to understand why my heart was so attached to this [Hebrew] world that I found.”<sup>96</sup> But while in this letter the “chance” explanation is brought up only to be supplemented by a deeper psychological reasoning, her autobiographical essay “My Life,” written in 1926—that is, while Elisheva was composing *Side-Streets* and long after she’s become an accomplished and celebrated Hebrew writer—tells a much lighter version of the story. “At first,” she writes, “I studied how to read Yiddish, almost as a joke (*kim’at be-tor halatza*); it wasn’t hard, because I knew some German. And I learned the letters from a Hebrew Grammar book (in German) that my brother owned (my brother is a linguist, an expert in Eastern languages). Reading through Yiddish books, I would come across unclear Hebrew words, which drew my interest and made me curious to know them in the original.”<sup>97</sup> The simplicity and lightheartedness of this passage’s narration parallel its contents, as Elisheva reimagines the primary scene of her life-changing attachment to Hebrew—the origin of the “enigma,” the “miracle,” the “extraordinary historical event” that “has no precedent in our history,” the drama of her “two souls”—as “almost a joke,” nothing more than a spontaneous whim, aided by the chance availability of a Hebrew grammar book and some naïve, youthful curiosity. And though the difference in emotional register, tone, and content between the earlier personal letters and the rather formal autobiographical essay may be partly explained away as no more than a difference in genre, I propose to read it (also) as indicative of Elisheva’s ongoing reflection on and negotiation with her own linguistic attachment—a reflection that finds an extended fantasmatic expression in her deceptively autobiographical *Side-Streets*.

I argued above that Gnessin’s “Sideways” models its plot of failure on a biographical repetition that is revealed, in fact, as a gesture of non-repetition: Gnessin’s own scene of critical writing returns in “Sideways” as Hagzar’s continuous attempts to compose his articles—yet, as it returns, it is marked by a fantasy of incompleteness after the fact, in a way that undoes the very paradigm of failure and turns failing into a gesture of temporal reversal, indeed of undoing past attachments. And like Gnessin, Elisheva too sets the stage initially for a performance of biographical repetition, fashioning her protagonist, the Russian poet who takes up Hebrew lessons, as her own “mirror image” through which she allegedly “writes herself”—only to subtly and gradually deflate the semblance of repetition into a scenario of being and writing—and attaching—differently.<sup>98</sup>

When Daniel first hears of Lyudmila’s intentions to study Hebrew, as he struggles to understand “Why Hebrew of all things? And why her?” he entertains the idea that the whole plan is in fact a concealed form of a romantic advance:

As for the possibility that the lessons are just a pretext for something else altogether—he found that hard to believe. Why would she use such roundabout paths when the main road is wide open before her, and she can see that? Only one hypothesis remains: her

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Elisheva, “Toldotay,” 4.

<sup>98</sup> The quotes are from Barzel, “Elisheva ve-ha-roman shela,” 280; and Elinav, ‘*Ki mara meod ha-da’at*,’ 264 (“Behind a semi-transparent curtain Elisheva writes herself [*kotevet Elisheva et atzma*]”).

true, sincere interest in the Hebrew language itself. But for some reason this idea too didn't seem satisfying to him...<sup>99</sup>

וכי יכול להיות שהשיעורים אינם אלא אמתלה המכוונת כלפי דברים אחרים לגמרי – גם בדבר כזה לא יכול להאמין. איזה צורך יש לה להשתמש בדרכים עקלקלות, כשהדרך הישרה פתוחה לפניה, והיא יכולה לראות את זה? נשארה רק השערה אחת: התעניינותה האמיתית, הבלתי-מעושה, בשפה העברית כמו-שהיא. אך גם המחשבה הזו לא השביעה משום-מה את רצונו...

Undecided as it is—wavering between these two competing notions, which would remain possible yet non-conclusive explanations for Lyudmila's interest in the lessons throughout the novel—the tutoring project doubly fails. Romantically, though Lyudmila and Daniel do grow closer, this closeness leads to nothing more than a few awkward kisses that only bring about a lingering sense of bitterness and strangeness (“—You could have loved, Reuter, that's the great beauty in you... It's only a shame that you don't love me... [...]—Am I truly a complete stranger to you [Lyudmila], forever?”).<sup>100</sup> Pedagogically, Lyudmila gradually loses interest in the lessons (“lately he started feeling that his student is not treating her studies with the same seriousness as before. [...] Their readings progressed lazily, and it was evident that the lessons are not appealing to her anymore”) before she decides to give up on them completely, after only a few months of study.<sup>101</sup> And so, while Elisheva ended up marrying her Hebrew tutor, immigrating with him to Palestine, embracing Zionism, and becoming a popular and critically acclaimed Hebrew writer, her protagonist, her supposed “mirror image,” traces an alternative trajectory—a trajectory in which the Russian, foreign poet remains exactly that: Russian and foreign.

In the autobiographical essay “My Life,” what begins “almost as a joke” turns into a profound cultural and political commitment: “The Hebrew national idea, followed by the Zionist idea, had such a vast influence on me, that, with time, I decided to dedicate myself to creative writing [...] exclusively in the Hebrew language and to settle in the Land of Israel. [...] As a Hebrew poet, I can point out only one goal to my work: to be as useful as possible to the development of Hebrew poetry in the new Hebrew language that is spoken daily among us [in Palestine] in the Sephardic accent.”<sup>102</sup> Rehearsing the idiom of literature's utility to national revival, Elisheva here casts herself as the perfect subject (and serviceable agent) of the classic narrative of Zionist culture, the narrative that binds language, territory, national identity—and literature. But it is precisely from within and against this personal/political narrative that Elisheva's supposedly autobiographical novel dramatizes a series of fantasmatic reversals. Indeed, *Side-Streets*, which ends as Lyudmila boards a train from Moscow to Paris, is signed by Elisheva, at the bottom of the last page of the text, “Moscow – Tel Aviv, 1925 – 1929,” as though to suggest, as an overdetermined closure to the text, a line of interpretation that reads Lyudmila's trajectory as a diversion from and commentary on Elisheva's.

Lyudmila leaves for Paris in order to unite with the famous poet Galvitz, with whom she had had an affair in the past and has now fallen back in love. She confesses this “betrayal” to

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<sup>99</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 87.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>102</sup> Elisheva, “Toldotay,” 6-7.

Daniel only a few days before she departs—and only, importantly, after he demands to know why she stopped scheduling Hebrew lessons with him:

— Tell me, why did you drive me away then?

Lyudmila glanced at him and smiled, and for a moment an expression of wonder crossed her face, as though his words were very surprising to her. But soon she lowered her eyelashes and replied with the same smile; judging by this smile and by the tone of her voice, it was clear to Daniel that her answer *is nothing but an excuse*, and she herself wouldn't want him to accept it as truth.

— First, I knew that soon I was going to be very busy, and you, as well, weren't as available as before. And second, since I decided to go, what need do I have for your Hebrew? What would I do with it there, in the capital of France?

For some reason the lie in her words annoyed him more than he expected. Irritated, he didn't even bother to address her with the obvious question: if so, what need did she have for "his Hebrew" all that time before? But Lyudmila seemed to have sensed his annoyance, and perhaps was also ashamed by her all too clear lie, and after a moment she added in a more serious voice, although the smile was still flitting about her face:

— There was one more thing. I was preparing for a very important event in my life, the event of my first betrayal... And one betrayal was enough for me; I didn't want to have more than one "opposition" at the same time. To tell you the truth, it was perhaps easier for me to betray the man called my "husband" [i.e., Kravatzov] than betray you.<sup>103</sup>

— הגידי: למה גירשת אותי אז מפנייך?  
ליודמילה הציצה אליו וחייכה, וברגע הראשון חלפה מעין הבעת תימהון על פניה, כאילו דבריו הפתיעו אותה מאוד. אך תיכף הורידה את ריסי עיניה והשיבה מתוך אותו חיוך, ועל-פי החיוך הזה ועל-פי קולה ברור היה לדניאל כי דבריה אינם אלא תירוץ ובעצמה אינה רוצה שיקבלם בתור אמת.  
— ראשית, ידעתי כי אהיה עסוקה מאוד בזמן הקרוב, וגם אתה לא היית פנוי כקודם, ושנית, כיוון שהחלטתי לנסוע, מה היה לי צורך בעברית שלך? מה הייתי עושה איתה שם, בבירת צרפת?  
משום-מה הרגז אותו השקר שבדברים האלה יותר מאשר ציפה. מתוך רוגז לא רצה אפילו לפנות אליה בשאלה הניכרת כל-כך: ואם כן, מה היה לה צורך ב"עברית שלך" כל הזמן קודם? אך ליודמילה הרגישה כביכול במחשבתו המרוגזת, ואולי גם נכלמה במקצת משקרה הגלוי יותר מדי, וכעבור רגע הוסיפה בקול יותר רציני, אף-על-פי שהחיוך עוד ריפרף על פניה:  
— והיה עוד דבר. התכוונתי למאורע חשוב מאוד בחיי, מאורע של בגידתי הראשונה... והיה לי די בבגידה אחת; לא רציתי שיהיה לי יותר מ"מתנגד" אחד בבת-אחת. אגיד לך את האמת: אפשר שהיה לי יותר קל לבגוד בזה הנקרא "בעלי" מאשר בך.

Like so many scenes of dialogue in this novel, the exchange between Daniel and Lyudmila is constructed around the formulation of an excuse as a tactics of conversational evasion and diversion—the same pattern to which Daniel habitually reverts, as I have shown in the previous section, whenever asked about his writerly failures. Indeed, this habit of Daniel's may well be the reason he is so quick to recognize this very same pattern in Lyudmila's initial answer, judging it to be a mere excuse ("*terutz*") before it is even articulated. But it is precisely Lyudmila's all too obvious excuse (and her subsequent backing down from it) that exposes the larger structure of excusing that is at play in the novel, corroborating unknowingly and retroactively Daniel's prior prescient conjecture that the lessons are in fact "a pretext (*amatla*)

<sup>103</sup> Elisheva, *Simta'ot*, 327-8; emphasis added.

for something else altogether.” Thus, the question that Lyudmila’s first answer casually formulates—“what need did I have for your Hebrew?”—raises again the familiar problem of *Why?—Why Hebrew?*—while hinting, through the emphasis on “*your* Hebrew,” to the open secret of their relationship, which her second answer then implicitly reaffirms: that she needed “his” Hebrew in order to get close to *him*, that the Hebrew lessons were always primarily an occasion for romance, that Hebrew was all along just an excuse. Projecting thus the logic of the excuse onto the plane of actions, Elisheva conceptualizes the gesture of excusing not only as a local speech act but also as a theory of attachment. More than simply unveiling the truth about their relationship—which, after all, was quite obvious from the outset to both readers and characters—the effect of the exchange between Daniel and Lyudmila lies in dramatizing the easiness with which the excusing relation can be dissolved, unveiling, if anything, only the fragility of Lyudmila’s attachment to Hebrew—the fragility of what is revealed to be no more than an excuse.

Indeed, partaking in this rhetoric of excusing that informs not only the characters’ typical way of speaking in *Side-Streets* but also the novel’s structure of attachment, the romantic and the pedagogic *mutually* excuse each other. For, what questions like “Why do you need Hebrew all of a sudden?” or “Why Hebrew of all things?” perform is not only how the Hebrew lessons provide an excuse for romantic advances but also how, conversely, the budding romance excuses the studying of Hebrew—that is, how through it (and because of it) an opportunity presents itself, almost arbitrarily, to take up Hebrew. In other words, whereas Elisheva’s own self-dedication to Hebrew has often been construed in romantic and erotic terms as the story of a complete outsider “who *fell in love* with the Hebrew people and its culture,” in *Side-Streets* the romantic-erotic attraction is reframed not as a metaphor for the relation to language but rather as its circumstantial excuse.<sup>104</sup> The attachment to Hebrew is established incidentally and contingently—and, once its excuse loses its relevance, is given up just as casually. And, against the myth of Ruth from the banks of the Volga and Elisheva’s own stated desire “to be as useful as possible to the development of Hebrew poetry in the new Hebrew language,” it is this contingency of attachment that marks *Side-Streets* as a political fantasy of withdrawal, precisely in a historical time when the choice of Hebrew is an act more ideological than ever.

In other words, I propose to read *Side-Streets* and its biographical reversals in the context of the political (and political-theological) double discourse of Hebrew at this period: its overdetermination as at once both Zionism’s language of secular, national revival, and, to quote Gershom Scholem’s famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig from 1926, “the most fruitful in our sacred traditions,” the “language of the ancient books” whose words are “full to bursting” with “the power of the sacred.”<sup>105</sup> This overdetermination, as Hamutal Tsamir argues, is unique to the state of Hebrew in its process of revival: “if in Christian Europe secularization was manifested in, among other things, the decline of Latin and the rise of the spoken languages, in Hebrew both processes take place within *the same language*: the revival of Hebrew as a national spoken language was bound up with its secularization, the denial of its sacredness—and at the same time with its re-sacralization as a spoken national language within the new national reality of Zionism as political theology.”<sup>106</sup> Quite apart from any such pathos of attachment—the kind of pathos

<sup>104</sup> Bichovsky (ed.), *Elisheva: Kovets ma’amarim al ha-meshoreret Elisheva*, 20; emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language (A Letter to Franz Rosenzweig, December 26, 1926),” 226-27.

<sup>106</sup> Tsamir, “Beyn tehom le-ivaron: Te’ologya politit ve-chilun ha-ivrit etzel Gershom Scholem and Ch. N. Bialik” (Blindness and the Abyss: Political Theology and the Secularization of Hebrew in Scholem and Bialik), 88-89.

that often resounds through Elisheva's own letters and essays—her novel, supposedly emblemizing in its very coming into being the great triumph of Hebrew, not only posits at the heart of its plot the almost heretical question “Why Hebrew of all things?” but also answers it with its own figure of the neutral, in a way that outplays any desire for mastery: it was all just an excuse, just an occasion for a flirt (with Daniel and with the language). Acting out a “temptation [...] to elude the paradigm, its menacing pressure, its arrogance,” *Side-Streets* thus introduces two gestures of the neutral, complementing the Gnessinian figure of the writer who doesn't write (Daniel's “I don't deal with literature”) with the uniquely Elishevan figure of Lyudmila, the poet who turns away from Hebrew.

Casually setting aside what is for her author a life-determining attachment, Lyudmila emerges as Elisheva's excuse. With and against Lyudmila, in other words, Elisheva excuses herself as a Hebrew writer. But not only herself: restaging both Hagzar's scene of failure and “Sideways”'s textual effect of biographical mirroring, Elisheva's novel aligns itself with and expands on Gnessin's politics of non-participation. Forming thus a discordant alliance between Hagzar's, Daniel's, and Lyudmila's gestures—and, by extension, also Gnessin's and Elisheva's gestures—*Side-Streets* intervenes in a shared fantasy of renegotiating the terms of writing. Within this fantasmatic dynamics, it offers a weakening of Hebrew literature's attachment to its own promise, rewriting it as contingent, under-determined, and non-arrogant, investing it with the fleeting logic of the excuse.

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Opening her essay with a close reading of the convergence of the political and theological in Avraham Shlonsky's 1927 poem “Amal” (Toil), written around the same time as Scholem's letter to Rosenzweig, Tsamir emphasizes the complexity, intensity, and centrality of the question of Hebrew in Palestine of the 1920s—the decade in which Elisheva immigrates to Palestine and, on my reading, writes *Side-Streets* as (at least in part) a fantasmatic negotiation with her own relation to Hebrew.

## Chapter Two

### **Writing Retreats, or The Potential Unconscious: Entanglements of Potentiality in and around Megged's *The Living on the Dead***

The potentiality that interests [Aristotle] is the one that belongs to someone who, for example, has knowledge or an ability. In this sense, we say of the architect that he or she has the *potential* to build, of the poet that he or she has the *potential* to write poems. It is clear that this *existing* potentiality differs from the *generic* potentiality of the child. The child, Aristotle says, is potential in the sense that he must suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning. Whoever already possesses knowledge, by contrast, is not obliged to suffer an alteration; he is instead potential, Aristotle says, thanks to a *hexis*, a “having,” on the basis of which he can also *not* bring his knowledge into actuality by *not* making a work, for example. Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems.

—Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality”<sup>1</sup>

I now begin the story of the book. I imagine that few authors in this country have had as much publicity for books they have written as I got for a book I did not write.

—Aharon Megged, *The Living on the Dead*<sup>2</sup>

#### **I. Narratives of Writing Retreats**

In the colloquial and concrete sense of the term, Gnessin's “Sideways” is a narrative of going on a writing retreat. Nachum Hagzar's relocation to the “provincial town to which he had chosen to move from Vilna”—the move that initiates the story's plot—is first and foremost an attempt to establish for himself a space of writerly seclusion in which he can dedicate himself to his literary work:

At the time, Hagzar's large wicker trunk, which was filled with books and manuscripts, still stood unopened by the door, exactly as it had arrived from Vilna two weeks before, for he had not yet finished arranging his room. He had come to the provinces hoping to

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, 179.

<sup>2</sup> Aharon Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 39; *The Living on the Dead*, 41. Here and throughout this chapter, I have slightly modified Misha Louvish's translation.

find the leisure to carry out his many literary projects, and afterward to travel in Western Europe, as had always been his plan.<sup>3</sup>

בימים ההם ותיבת הנצרים הגדולה של חגזר, המלאה לה ספרים ו"כתבים" שונים, עומדת עדיין חבושה ליד פתח החדר, כמו שהביאה אתו מווילנה לפני שני שבועות, והוא בעצמו היה עוד עסוק לפרקים בקביעת דירתו. כי אמר אמר לכוונן את מצבו בעיר הקטנה הזאת, בשביל שתהא לו הרווחה להגשים את מחשבותיו הרבות, אשר חשב על העבודות הספרותיות אשר לפניו, ואולי גם ללכת אחרי כן למדינת הים, כאשר חשב מאז.

The room as an arranged space of work, imbued with a sense of determinacy by the Hebrew noun *kvi'a*, is thus established from the outset not only in opposition to the "beautiful house" and its temptations, as argued in the previous chapter; on a more fundamental level, it is also the localized destination of the largescale movement to the provincial town as a site of a retreat dedicated to the "leisure" of writing.<sup>4</sup>

Structurally, this narrative movement, which motivates the central plotline of "Sideways," shares the organizational logic of Barthes's figure of *la retraite*, the most famous and extreme example of which is the myth of Marcel Proust's retreat from worldly life in his last years in order to write his great novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. Much more dramatically than in the case of Hagzar, this retreat too is constructed around the figure of the room: "[a] bedroom lined in cork, nightly work, only a few friends."<sup>5</sup> The meaning of this Proustian myth is summarized by Barthes in four succinct points that can be taken to represent the major components of any writer's retreat, including that of Gnessin's protagonist:

(1) entry "into work," as into a convent; (2) the price one must pay for the work → certainly that it will be completed and important; (3) enjoyment of both a phantasmatic and "practical" sovereignty; (4) credibility of the myth because of its internal articulation: to amass materials (observations, experiences) = [of] worldly life, then to close oneself off so as to compose them.<sup>6</sup>

The life of Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish 18<sup>th</sup> century scientist-turned-theologian, provides Barthes with two additional models for such a retreat: One, very similar to Proust's routine, is Swedenborg's withdrawal to the bedroom of his Stockholm apartment as a space of total

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<sup>3</sup> Gnessin, *Kol ktavav*, 135; "Sideways," 4.

<sup>4</sup> The plot of "Sideways" thus isolates one moment in the typical career trajectory of Hebrew writers of the "turn of the century generation." According to Miron, this hypothetical shared generational biography included an initial move, at a young age, from the writer's small hometown to one of the large urban literary centers of the period (primarily Warsaw and Odessa but also cities such as Homel and Vilna); then, sometimes, subsequent moves between those centers; a period of studies at a Western European university (in, for example, Bern, Geneva, Berlin, or Paris); and, more often than not, a phase of occasional, tentative "wandering" between these literary centers, the writer's hometown, and other, random small towns that provided temporary opportunities for residence, work and some sort of literary activity. See Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 296-429. In many cases, including Gnessin's, this movement of wandering—tentative and almost capricious yet driven by a strong sense of literary vocation—seems to have taken over the writers' entire life trajectory (Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 402-5).

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



writing.<sup>7</sup> The other is his occasional habit to rent an additional room, separate from his living place, in order to meditate—a practice of “double rental” that leads Barthes to articulate a more generalized version of the fantasy of a writer’s retreat, which he recognizes first and foremost in himself: “The miracle idea (true fantasy) that in leaving to barricade myself for several weeks in a place (hotel room at the seaside, little beach during winter) I would be able to work intensely: write a book, a novel, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

In Hebrew literature, the literary form that can be termed “the writing retreat narrative,” in which the contours of the “miracle idea” described by Barthes are taken up as the plot’s framework, and of which Gnessin’s 1905 “Sideways” is arguably the earliest example, curiously reemerges in the 1960s: A. B. Yehoshua’s “Facing the Forests” (“Mul ha-ye’arot,” 1963), for instance, is a tale of a graduate student who takes a job as a national forest-watcher with the hope that in the secluded forest he’d be able to concentrate and finally complete his last paper; similarly, in Aharon Megged’s novel *The Living on the Dead* (*Ha-chay al ha-met*, 1965) the protagonist withdraws from his familial and other worldly obligations to a small room on a roof in Tel Aviv in order to produce a biographical manuscript he’s been hired to write. In these narratives—as in “Sideways”—the retreat appears both fantasmatically and structurally: that is, both as an ideal fantasy of the protagonist and as a narrative structure that frames and organizes the entire plot (a structural logic that relies on a basic opposition between the space of retreat, with all its peculiar characteristics outlined above, and the spatial outside of the retreat). However, as we will see later on, the meaning of these narratives in the context of Hebrew literature, and in particular the meaning of their failure (for they all eventually fail), hinges precisely on the complexities of the relation between the fantasmatic and the structural—or in other words, on the relation of the neutral to both writerly fantasies and writerly structures.

This chapter, then, will turn to narratives of writing retreats in the fiction of the 1960s—with particular focus on the work of Megged—in order to unpack the unique shape the desire for the neutral takes in early Israeli literature. The neutral, however, may not only take different shapes—or figures—in different historical contexts, but also encounter different kinds of resistance, different types of forces that aim to tame or appropriate it. While the poetics and cultural subject positions of authors such as Gnessin, Elisheva, and Birstein (whom I will discuss in the next chapter) may readily render their work a likely site for an inclination towards the neutral, this chapter directs its attention to the more contested appearance of a desire for the neutral at the committed center, the heart of the canon of national literary production. Megged, after all, has been “the bread and butter of Hebrew literature [...] located at [its] correct, precise center (*ba-merkaz he-meduyak, ha-nakhon*).”<sup>9</sup> In such cases the desire for the neutral, when it does make its appearance, may not prevail, may indeed seem tamed, denied, even defeated—except that, as is probably clear by this stage of my argument, it is precisely this kind of conflictual terminology that the neutral invites us to bypass and baffle. In this context—the context of the neutral at the center, the neutral vs. the center—that is, in addressing a much more overtly committed and opinionated kind of literature, I aim to exercise in this chapter my own version of what Daniel Boyarin has suggestively termed *generous critique* (as his take on Franz Rosenzweig’s notion of *apologetics*): the kind of critique that seeks to criticize without reifying

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<sup>7</sup> “Worked night and day. Slept ‘when he felt himself open to sleep’” (ibid., 143). The similarities between Proust’s and Swedenborg’s routines lead Barthes to hypothesize the “possibility of a typology of spaces of retreat” (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>9</sup> The quote is by the writer Chaim Be’er; see Shany Littman, “Ha-sofer Aharon Megged met be-gil 95” (Writer Aharon Megged Dies at 95).

its object or passing judgment over it;<sup>10</sup> without, in my case, categorizing or evaluating it, being “for” or “against” it. For, ultimately, at stake here is not a stable, decided state of affairs but rather the transitory and fleeting (but also fleetingly resistant) nature of the neutral, and the problem, or the potential, of its persistence.

As mentioned in passing above, writing retreats in Hebrew literature end, more often than not, in failure, and in this regard as well “Sideways” can be read as an proleptic paragon.<sup>11</sup> This, of course, is very different from such successful retreats as Proust’s, Swedenborg’s, or even Barthes’s.<sup>12</sup> In Hebrew literature an initial fantasy of “being able to work intensely,” in Barthes’s words, turns into *an intense fantasy of being able not to work*. And thus what follows addresses the first part of this chapter’s title, “Writing Retreats,” in all three possible senses of the phrase: it traces the way the fiction of a writer’s retreat turns into a fantasy in which writing itself retreats, recedes into non-existence; as this second retreat is also fictionalized and made into a literary text, the problem that arises, ultimately, is that of the writing of these two kinds of retreat. Writing writing’s retreat, the texts addressed in this chapter capture, somewhat unwittingly perhaps, the elusive political potential of a writing that refuses to fulfil its own potentiality.

## II. *The Living on the Dead and the Freedom Not to*

The fantasy of “being able to work intensely” is further theorized in Barthes’s *The Preparation of the Novel*, a course constructed around his own plan to take up writing a novel. This late discovery of a personal “*vouloir-écrire*” leads Barthes to reconsider his earlier conception of the verb *to write* as intransitive;<sup>13</sup> rather, he now emphasizes writing’s need for an object, the presence of which enables the formation of fantasies:

There would be *Writing Fantasies*: note the desirous force of the expression, that is to say, think of it on the same footing as so-called sexual fantasies. A sexual fantasy = a scenario with a subject (me) and an object (a part of the body, a practice, a situation), where pleasure is produced by that conjunction → Writing Fantasy = me producing a “literary object.”<sup>14</sup>

In sexual as well as writerly desires, the formation of fantasy as a “scenario” is dependent on a dynamics of object-directed cathexis. In other words, the (fantasmatic) existence of a “literary object” is what gives the desire to write a form—specifically, a narrative form.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> On the notion of literary paragons, see Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*, esp. 67, 159-60, 184-88, 229.

<sup>12</sup> As Barthes tells his students in the first session, he prepared the course *The Neutral*, at least partially, while spending time in his vacation home in Urt, in the southwest of France, and the texts he repeatedly refers to throughout the course are taken from his personal, “familial” library there (*The Neutral*, 9). *The Neutral* itself may thus be read as the object—and product—of Barthes’s own successful writing retreat.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of the intransitivity of writing was developed and presented by Barthes in his paper “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” delivered at the famous 1966 symposium at The Johns Hopkins University, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man.” See Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?”

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 10.

It is precisely this “desirous force” of the writing fantasy that animates the retreat narratives in Hebrew literature and lends them their textual form: at the heart of “Sideways,” “Facing the Forests,” and *The Living on the Dead* lies an object of a writerly desire—critical essays, an academic paper, and a biographical novel, respectively—the pursuit of which makes up the scenarios of both the protagonist’s fantasy and the text’s plot as fantasy. But, crucially, in these narratives the initial writing fantasy not only fails but is also flipped, reversed into a fantasy of a release from writing. Nowhere perhaps is this reversal more evident than in the opening paragraph of *The Living on the Dead*:

The third session ended a few hours ago. Whenever my attorney declared ‘Freedom of writing!’ I had a powerful impulse to shout him down. ‘No, not that! ‘Freedom *not* to write!’ That’s a freedom I absolutely refuse to sell out... You can’t coerce me, surely, for Heaven’s sake, you can’t...’ But no. I’ll never be able to say it there in the courtroom, for straight away the retort will shoot across from the prosecutor’s desk, sharp as the pen he keeps pointing at me: ‘But your signature! Your signature!’ Yes, he’s right, and the judge, it seems, thinks the same—the judge, who throws at me from time to time, from the shelter of his bat-wing robe, a sidelong look of dark skeptical suspicion that compels me to lower my eyes. So it appears to the few spectators, who gaze at me in wonderment that I should even try to fight a battle lost before it started. And, so I am sure, in his heart of hearts does my own attorney, that bespectacled baldpate, thick-headed and thick-fingered, wriggling and writhing in the web of his arguments, building up piles of bombastical speeches—at every embarrassing moment I blush to see him smoothing down his bald patch as if it were a lad’s untidy mane—the man who is to blame for most of these judicial tortures, with his foolish tactics of asking for repeated postponements in the hope that their ammunition will run out. Yes, they’re right, all of them. I confess. And if I now write down the following account, it is not in the illusion that it might serve as a brief for my defense one day, but so that Truth may conquer Justice.<sup>15</sup>

הישיבה השלישית הסתיימה לפני כמה שעות. כל אימת שהיה הפרקליט שלי קולע מפיו את הצירוף “חופש הכתיבה”, היה לי רצון עז להקהות את שיניו ולצעוק: “לא, לא זה! אלא החופש לא לכתוב! ואינני מוכן, בשום פנים אינני מוכן, למכור את חירותי זו תמורת... ובשם אלוהים, הלוא אי-אפשר לכפות עלי, אי-אפשר...” אבל לא. לעולם לא אוכל לומר זאת שם, בחדר בית המשפט, כי מיד יירה בי חץ מדוכן התובע, חד כקולמוסו הננעץ מול עיני: “אבל חתימתך! חתימתך!” כן, הוא צודק; וכך סבור כנראה גם השופט, המלכסן אלי מדי פעם, מסתר גלימת העטלף שלו, מבט של חשד כהוי, ספקני, שמכניע את מבטי ארצה. כך סבור כנראה גם הקהל המועט, התולה בי עיניים תמהות על עצם ניסיוני זה להתגונן בקרב שאחריתו חרוצה. וכך, בטוחני, סבור בלבן גם פרקליטי עצמו, אותו קירח ממושקף, עב ראש ועב אצבעות, המתפתל בין קורי טענותיו ותולה בהם הררי נאומים נבובים (מתוך הרגל שמימי תשחרתו הוא מעביר ידו בכל רגע של מבוכה על קרחתו, כמחליק בלורית סתורה – תנועה שאני מסמיק תמיד למראה); אותו פרקליט שרוב עינוי הדין באים לי מידו, מתכססיו הנואלים לדחות את המשפט שוב ושוב, עד שתאזל תחמושתם כביכול... כן, הם צודקים, כולם. אני מודה. ואם אני כותב עכשיו את הדברים הבאים, הרי לא מתוך אשליה כי ישמשו מסמך להגנתי ביום מן הימים, אלא כדי שתיקוב האמת את הצדק. כן, רוצה אני לראותו מובס לרגליה וחרבה נעוצה בגבו.

Megged’s novel thus opens with a remarkably explicit manifestation of a will-not-to-write. In its slightly grotesque descriptions, tendency to abstraction, and anonymity of narrative voice, this

<sup>15</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 5; *The Living on the Dead*, 1-2.

long paragraph lends itself to be read as a Kafkaesque parable that pits the desire not to write into and against a juridical apparatus. But while on the one hand this desire—or “freedom” in the words of the yet unnamed narrator—is put on trial and brought before the law, it remains, on the other hand, outside the law’s range of legibility. For this passage demonstrates not only the intensity of the will not to write but also its inability to speak itself or be claimed as a right, a freedom, or a line of defense: “But no. I’ll never be able to say it there in the courtroom.”

The narrator’s impulse to substitute “freedom not to write” for “freedom of writing” exposes the way in which, from a philosophical perspective, freedom is always also a freedom not-to. If that weren’t the case, the narrator seems to suggest, it wouldn’t be a question of freedom at all (but rather of coercion under an ideological façade of freedom). His assertion should thus be understood both philosophically, as a remark on the nature of freedom, and politically—as a critique of a coercive discourse of writing, which relies on a limited and productivist economy of desire.

To the extent that this paragraph is indeed something of a philosophical-political parable, its motor is the Aristotelian insight that “all potentiality is impotentiality.”<sup>16</sup> According to Giorgio Agamben, who would embrace this insight as the foundation of his own philosophy of potentiality, “for Aristotle, [...] the key figure of potentiality, the mode of its *existence as potentiality*” is “not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the view held by the Megarian School that potentialities exist only insofar as they pass into actuality, Aristotle insists that every potentiality to be or do something is intimately linked to a potentiality not to be or do this thing.<sup>18</sup> Otherwise—in a logical move very similar to the one implicit in the paragraph from Megged—all potentialities would necessarily actualize themselves in reality and there would be no essential difference between potentiality and actuality; that is, there would be only an unavoidable and unchangeable state of actuality. This is why Agamben insists, in the passage cited as an epigraph to this chapter, that being in possession of knowledge or ability means also being able *not* to actualize this knowledge or ability: “the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense all potentiality is indeed impotentiality: “Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential.”<sup>20</sup> As if representing these philosophical insights in the courtroom, Megged’s narrator wishes to claim freedom as designating not only what one *can* do but also what one *can not* (as distinguished from *cannot*) do.<sup>21</sup>

In the symbolic order of this parable, against the narrator’s (unspoken) insistence on the ontology of potentiality, the entire legal apparatus—not only the judge and the prosecutor but also the spectators and the narrator’s own attorney—holds the view that potentiality must pass into actuality. This is the presupposition within which the law operates here: Thus, the narrator’s

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 182.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-80. Agamben addresses the concept of potentiality most directly and elaborately in the essays “On Potentiality” and “Bartleby, or On Contingency” (both of which appear in the collection *Potentialities*), and in the third chapter of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, “Potentiality and Law.”

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 180.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>21</sup> On the difference between the two types of negation of the verb *can*, “can not” and “cannot,” as the difference between impotentiality and impossibility, see the Italian version of Agamben’s “On Potentiality,” quoted and translated in Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 96.

“signature”—signifying, presumably, an obligation to write—marks the entrance to the realm of the law at the same time that it robs the narrator’s potentiality of what Agamben terms “the mode of its *existence as potentiality*.” The contract that the narrator had signed, assumed to be a contract about writing, turns out to be, in its essence, a legally binding commitment to actualize. Under these discursive and juristic conditions, the view held by the agents of the law (the judge, the lawyers, the spectators) is undoubtedly right, as the narrator himself is quick to admit: “Yes, they’re right, all of them. I confess. And if I now write down the following account, it is not in the illusion that it might serve as a brief for my defense one day, but so that Truth may conquer Justice.”<sup>22</sup> But “they’re right” only insofar as what’s at stake is “Justice” and not “Truth”; this difference—between the justice of the court and the truth of impotentiality—cannot, of course, be brought to light in speech in the courtroom, but, ironically, only through an act of writing. And thus, the recurrence of the verb *to write* (*kotev*) toward the end of the first paragraph functions both as this little parable’s ironic closure and as its suggestive opening into the rest of novel.



The relative abstraction of the first paragraph of *The Living on the Dead* is soon replaced with detailed descriptive concreteness. The year is 1959, and the narrator is revealed to be a young promising writer named Yonas, who, two years prior to the narrative present, was commissioned to write a biographical novel on the life of Abrasha Davidov, a mythological Zionist pioneer. Though he does begin to conduct substantial research, including a series of twenty seven interviews with Davidov’s family members, friends, and acquaintances, and though he is being fully compensated for eighteen months of work, Yonas cannot bring himself to sit down and write the novel. For reasons that remain largely unclear, even to himself, he is utterly unable to carry out this task. Gradually, the planned novel acquires a tortuous, guilt-inducing presence in Yonas’s life: “Sometimes, late at night, I would open the drawer very cautiously, take out the file, lay it on the table in front of me, open it and begin to read what I had written. A deep depression would take hold of me. [...] I open my eyes to the sight of the open file and the rows of little letters on the pages, shut it with a bang, tie it up and lock it away swiftly.”<sup>23</sup> A self-perpetuating mixture of helplessness and guilt thus nips in the bud any sense of will or determination, and a life of idleness with “none of the pleasures of idleness” takes over what was supposed to be a period of intense productivity (“All of a sudden I would jump up, absolutely determined to open the drawer, pull out the file, lay it open on the table, pick up my pen... but no. While the key was still in the keyhole I would collapse again on the bed, my hands dropping impotently on my knees. I would gaze at the window [...] Slowly I would get up, dress, go down into the street”).<sup>24</sup> Idly, Yonas becomes a part of the bohemian, nihilist literary group known as “*ha-martef* group” (after their regular meeting place, the pub “The Cellar”); instead of writing, he spends most of his nights, and many of his days, with these decadent poets and critics in a supposedly hedonistic yet not particularly pleasurable—and for Yonas, thoroughly guilt-ridden—pastime: “I had my drowsing morning reveries, my siestas; read books in the evening, made love in the small hours—but where was the pleasure in any of these when I was always

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<sup>22</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 5; *The Living on the Dead*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 91; *The Living on the Dead*, 108.

<sup>24</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 92, 93; *The Living on the Dead*, 108-9, 110.

haunted by a reproachful, menacing eye?”<sup>25</sup>. This non-productive idleness does not prevent Yonas, however, from collecting his monthly payments for the labor he was not carrying out—until the publisher, on finally finding out that no work has been done, sues him for failing to fulfil his contractual obligations.

Unlike its protagonist, the author of *The Living on the Dead* has always been a consistently prolific writer. By 1965, Megged, who began his literary career in the 1940s, had already published five books of fiction and three plays, and was a central, well established member of the Palmach Generation in Hebrew fiction.<sup>26</sup> The publication of *The Living on the Dead*, though, was in many ways a breakthrough moment in the development of his career, and the novel is widely considered to be his “single most important work,” a “key to his entire oeuvre.”<sup>27</sup> As Avner Holtzman indicates, it has been received by most critics as “a document for grasping the spirit of the generation”:

Each of the critics pointed in his or her own way to the central subject of the novel: the tension between the pioneer past of the Land of Israel, on the one hand, and its present as reflected in a bohemian group of writers, on the other. All of them also noticed the ambivalent position toward that generation of giants (*dor ha-nfilim*), the land’s builders and settlers of the Second and Third Aliyas [the waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine, 1904-14, 1919-23]. This position, which combines admiration and irony toward the pioneer past, is expressed in a series of contradictions and tensions between past and present, which are evident in the design of each and every important topic in the novel.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 93; *The Living on the Dead*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> The Palmach was the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground military organization of the Jewish community in Palestine during the period of the British Mandate, of which most writers of this generation were members. Known also as “*dor tashach*” (1948 generation) and “*dor ba-aretz*” (generation in the land), the Palmach generation in fiction consisted of a group of mostly native-born writers who rose to prominence in the 1940s. In broad brush strokes, their work is usually described as stylistically realist and thematically committed to addressing the Zionist meta-narrative and the reality of life in Israel/Palestine in the formative decades of the struggle for independence. Megged was not only one of the central writers of this group but also, from the early 1950s on, the editor (and co-founder) of the influential literary journal *Masa*—at first as an independent publication and from 1954 on, still under Megged’s editorship, as the literary supplement of *La-merchav*, the daily newspaper of the *Achdut ha-avoda—po’aley tziyon* political party.

<sup>27</sup> The quotes are from Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880-1980*, vol. 4, 296, 309. Avner Holtzman dedicated an entire article to the novel’s function as a “key” to Megged’s work: “Ha-biyografya she-lo nikhteva: ‘Ha-chay al ha-met’—mafte’ach li-tsirato shel Aharon Megged” (The Unwritten Biography: *The Living on the Dead*—a Key to Aharon Megged’s Oeuvre), 446-62. See also Nurit Govrin, “Aharon Megged,” and Littman, “Ha-sofer Aharon Megged met be-gil 95.”

<sup>28</sup> Holtzman, “Ha-biyografya she-lo nikhteva,” 447. Already the title *The Living on the Dead—Ha-chay al ha-met*—establishes the relation between the present and the past—the living Yonas and the dead Davidov—as the main subject of the novel. In its efficient construction it can be read in two competing senses, the word *chay* functioning as either a noun (a living person) or a verb ([the one who] is living): in the first sense the title refers to the writing by Yonas (the living writer) on Davidov (the dead pioneer); and in the second to the way Yonas is living off the myth of the dead Davidov (a sense which in Hebrew would indeed be rendered with the preposition “on,” *al*, as in the expression “*chay al chesbono*”). On the critical reception of the novel see also Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit*, vol. 4, 293; Naomi Hanes, *Pney Sofrim ba-mar’a: Ha-mesaper ke-sofer – sifrut ve-sofrim muda’im le-atzvam ba-roman ba-siporet ha-ivrit mi-Brenner ad Grossman* (Faces Reflected in the Mirror: The Narrator as a Writer in the Self-Conscious Literature in the Hebrew Novel from Brenner to Grossman), 123.

Thus, with regard to the main interest of this chapter, Yonas's non-writing, critical attention has long placed the cause of his incompetence at the center of interpretation only to account for it from a generational—and for the most part oedipal—perspective. Eli Schweid, for example, claims that Yonas's confession “comes to explain why the original story could not have been written [...] The result is a representation of two generations, embodied in Yonas and in Davidov, and by examining the plot closely one would find that it is built as a precise analogy, character for character, event for event.”<sup>29</sup> This analogical structure, according to Schweid, highlights the complexity of the generational dynamics: “As the circuit closes you realize the fault of the fathers toward their sons, who are themselves guilt-ridden. [...] In the end we are required to understand the causes for Yonas's decline, which are apparently not entirely up to him. The generation of the fathers has a hand in the failure of its sons.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Shaked declares that “the problem of a fatherhood that produced sons like Yonas is one of the fundamental psycho-social problems of the novel. Whoever solves this Oedipus riddle will be able to take hold of the kingdom; otherwise, his fate is to live in the shadow of the fathers. What was the image of the fathers—this is the sphinxian riddle the sons must solve. But not only is the protagonist unable to know them, he also loses the notes that he collected in order to commemorate them [in his planned novel].”<sup>31</sup>

Apart from demonstrating an oedipal mode of interpretation at work, all these examples seem also to corroborate Holtzman's observation that “to the extent that the novel's techniques of narration (such as the device of writing a novel about an unwritten novel) have been discussed, they were presented as mere means to an end, which was the content and the ideas.”<sup>32</sup> One notable exception to this tendency, however, appeared already in April 1965 in an insightful review essay by the young writer Yehoshua Knaz, titled “On the Problem of the Unwritten

<sup>29</sup> Eli Schweid, “Eimat ha-hitmodedut ‘im yom etmol” (The Dread of Facing Yesterday), 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 54-55. “It is clear,” Schweid adds, “that Yonas's recurrent claim that he cannot write the book on Avram Davidov is related to this [generational] entanglement” (ibid., 55). The novel's shortcoming, however, according to Schweid, is that Yonas's failure, while certainly plausible, does not seem a convincingly *necessary* outcome of the generational circumstances, a fact which renders Megged's achievement incomplete.

<sup>31</sup> Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit*, vol. 4, 311. Many other critics share similar interpretative frameworks. At the beginning of his long chapter on *The Living on the Dead* in his book on heroism in Israeli fiction, Hillel Weiss declares: “the reasons for the narrator's failures are the subject of our discussion in this chapter. [...] The essence of the story is the guilt harbored by the narrator, who judges himself, cruelly”; at a later point Weiss develops this general observation into the oedipal claim that “Yonas's involvement in the case of Davidov and his failure in dealing with the theme of the hero are related as well to his biographical ‘father complexes’.” (Hillel Weiss, *Dyokan ha-lochem: Iyunim al giborim u-gvura ba-siporet ha-ivrit shel he-asor ha-acharon* [Portraits of the Fighter: Reflections on Heroes and Heroism in the Hebrew Prose of the Last Decade], 47, 81). In his 1976 monograph of Megged, Israel Cohen posits as his point of departure for discussing *The Living on the Dead* the problem of the cause for Yonas's inability to write, for which he then goes on to suggest four possible explanations (Israel Cohen, *Pirkey Aharon Megged* [The Times of Aharon Megged], 51-52). In Gitta Avinor's view, “the book is constructed of two circles: the circle of Davidov's life and the circle of Yonas's life. Between these two affairs there is an oppositional analogy”; “in the end,” she concludes, “the living does not live on the dead. The power of the dead trumps the living, the past is stronger than the present” (*Hashkef achora be-etzev: Ma'amarim be-vikoret ha-sifrut ha-ivrit* [Look Back in Sadness: Essays in Hebrew Literary Criticism], 112, 114. For Dikla Golomb as well, as she writes in her review of the novel, “the subject of Aharon Megged's new novel is the complex relation of the members of his own generation to the previous one [...] In these relations there is a lot of guilt, ambivalence, and nostalgic admiration” (“Ha-gibor ve-ha-anti gibor” [The Hero and the Anti-Hero], 79). On the way the characters' ambivalent relation to past traditions is manifested in the novel's language, see Maya Fruchtman, “Hashpa'atam shel ha-mekorot ha-kdumim ve-ha-sifrut ha-chadasha al leshono shel Aharon Megged be-‘ha-chay al ha-met” (The Influence of Ancient Sources and Modern Literature on Aharon Megged's Language in *The Living on the Dead*).

<sup>32</sup> Holtzman, “Ha-biyografya she-lo nikhteva,” 449.

Story.”<sup>33</sup> Approaching this problem—or “device” in Holtzman’s terms—as a philosophical-historical phenomenon in its own right, Knaz suggests that “the [specific] nature of the untold story is a secondary factor with respect to the essential impossibility of telling a story. [...] the story that serves as the object of the work [i.e., the Davidov story] was nothing but an excuse.” Following Mary McCarthy, Knaz locates this sort of paradoxical narrative in the context of a broad crisis of truth in Western culture.<sup>34</sup> “The truth is that it is no longer possible to tell the truth,” he claims, and out of this modern truth the story on the impossibility to tell a story is borne—whether in Israel, in *The Living on the Dead*, or in France, in Albert Camus’s *Jonas ou l’artiste au travail*.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, while most critics, examining the novel from a generational point of view, tend to undertheorize Yonas’s failure only to symptomize it as part of a socially determined oedipal complex, Knaz needs to marginalize the actual details of the plot in order to universalize—and thus depoliticize—the same failure. Read as a vector of a “freedom not to,” however, that extends throughout the novel (and beyond it, as we will see), the gesture of not-writing may turn out to embody a different relation to politics than these criticisms either affirm or deny. On this reading, it is precisely the particularities of the act of non-writing, the particularities of what is not being written, that make up both its rejection of *la politique* and embrace of *le politique*—as a political proposal independent of any gesture of symptomizing or universalizing, which would only render it illegible.

### III. Strategies of Narrative Containment: A Novel Is Being Written

The entire plot of *The Living on the Dead*, as its short summary above presumably makes clear, is both oriented towards and haunted by the prospect of writing the book about Davidov’s life. “The Preparation of the Novel,” then, could have been just as fitting a title for Megged’s novel as it was for Barthes’s course. Or rather, since Yonas does anything but actually preparing his novel, “The *Non-Preparation* of the Novel.” Indeed, in Barthes’s terms, *The Living on the Dead* dramatizes a prolonged “scenario” of a *failed* writing fantasy in which the subject (Yonas) is tormented by the inaccessibility of the object (the Davidov “biographical novel”); “I wanted the book but the book didn’t want me,” Yonas casually summarizes the affair, toward the end of the text, as a predicament of an unsuccessful writerly attachment.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Yehoshua Knaz, “Li-v’ayat ha-sipur shelo nikhtav” (On the Problem of the Unwritten Story). For another attempt to discuss the novel from a more purely literary perspective see Ada Zemach’s “Nusach acher.”

<sup>34</sup> In “The Fact in Fiction” (1960) McCarthy writes: “And here is the dilemma of the novelist, which is only a kind of professional sub-case of the dilemma of everyone: if he writes about his province, he feels its inverisimilitude; if he tries, on the other hand, to write about people who make lampshades of human skin, like the infamous Ilse Koch, he feels still more the inverisimilitude of what he is asserting. His love of truth revolts. And yet this love of truth, ordinary common truth recognizable to everyone, is the ruling passion of the novel. Putting two and two together, then, it would seem that the novel, with its common sense, is of all forms the least adapted to encompass the modern world, whose leading characteristic is irreality. And that, so far as I can understand, is why the novel is dying” (*The Humanist in the Bathub*, 190-91).

<sup>35</sup> Knaz, “Li-v’ayat ha-sipur shelo nikhtav.” Megged, Knaz presumes, borrowed the name of his protagonist from Camus’s story. Knaz also briefly compares Megged’s and Camus’s texts to Federico Fellini’s *8½*, Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger*, and Aharon Amir’s story “Prose,” which I discuss in section 5 below.

<sup>36</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 210; *The Living on the Dead*, 263.



In the case of *The Living on the Dead*, the idea for this book is from the outset fraught with politics. If, as Barthes suggests, the specificity of a concrete object is needed in order to give desire the form of a fantasy, then the details and circumstances of Yonas's planned novel (as his object) imbue his fantasy with explicit and unavoidable political ramifications. A biography of a widely admired mythological *chalutz* (pioneer), whose life trajectory is intertwined with the history of the Zionist movement from the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1950s, the book about Davidov's life is a text that takes upon itself the position of the "watchman unto the house of Israel" par excellence, a clear example of literature's participation in the task of writing the nation. In the words of Abraham Shai, who recruits Yonas to this project, "it is a national duty (*chova le'umit*). The duty of the present to the past. The duty of the treetop to the root!"<sup>37</sup> The writing fantasy in this novel, then, is an explicitly political one, and its failure—an immanently political failure. But the sort of straightforward writing fantasy imagined by Barthes seems to be inverted here in an additional way, in which not only the outcome but also the object of the fantasy is flipped: as already hinted at earlier, and in line with my argument in the previous chapters of this dissertation, failure, beyond its functioning as success's opposite, may also challenge productivist ideologies of success through a redirection of desire.

In the following sections of this chapter I will argue, first, that, predicated on Yonas's announcement in the first lines of the novel, the writerly fantasy in *The Living on the Dead* indeed becomes not merely a failed fantasy but a fantasy of failure; and second, that through the claim of a "freedom not to write" this figure may also turn out, much more radically, to have the potential for reconceptualizing the very ontology of desire. For now, however, let me point out that as far as failure is concerned, the very premise that Yonas has utterly failed needs to be problematized. Indeed, what my discussion of *The Living on the Dead* has thus far ignored is the striking fact that the novel about Davidov, the supposedly unwritten text, may actually have been written—if not formally, at least essentially.

In terms of its mode of narration, the text of *The Living on the Dead* is presented as the written account that Yonas begins to compose after the third session of the trial in order to explain, to himself as well as to others, how things turned out the way they did:

I don't need to dig up the words, I only have to roll them out like peas from a pile, and arrange them in rows. I must go back about two years and describe—sincerely—how it all happened, day by day, from the time I undertook that ruinous task until this moment when I am on trial for breach of trust, fraudulent conversion, affront to the dead and affront to the living, double dealing and theft.<sup>38</sup>

אינני צריך לחצוב את המילים. עלי רק לגלגלן, כאפונים מתוך הערימה, ולסדרן שורות-שורות. עלי לחזור כשנתיים אחורה ולספר—בכנות—איך נשתלשלו הדברים, דבר יום ביומו, מאז נתחייבתי באותה התחייבות הרסנית ועד הרגע הזה, בו אני עומד לדין על מעילה באמון, מעילה בכספים, בזיון המת, בזיון החיים, גניבת-דעת, גניבה.

As a narrative of "how it all happened," Yonas's account naturally includes detailed descriptions of his research process, of the numerous meetings and interviews he conducted, of the documents

<sup>37</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 19; *The Living on the Dead*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 5; *The Living on the Dead*, 2.

and letters he has either received or uncovered, and of his personal memories from his own two encounters with Davidov. In short, it includes almost everything that Yonas has learned about Davidov. In a fragmented yet surprisingly complete manner, it includes a biographical novel about the life of Abrasha Davidov.

This, then, is the open secret of *The Living on the Dead*: that it is at one and the same time both a novel about an unwritten book and a performance of the writing of that (no longer) unwritten book itself. As Schweid puts it, “in the confession that he sets down in writing during his trial, Yonas wishes to explain [...] why the book could not have been written, even though the outcome of the confession can be considered to be that requested book.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, Yonas himself comes close to realizing this ironic truth—though only as he is about to complete his confessional manuscript, some five months and two hundred pages after he first set out to delineate “how it all happened”:

As I already said—throughout the entire period of assembling the notes, and until the moment of losing them, I have not even begun to process them, that is, I have not even begun to write the book itself. But now, as I reread through the many pages of this “confession,” as I am about to finish, I find that the material included in it about the life of Davidov, written from my memory— [...] in spite of being fragmented and dispersed, and only a small part of everything I have collected, may in fact serve as a foundation for the book that so many look forward to its writing.<sup>40</sup>

כפי שכבר סיפרתי – כל אותה תקופה ארוכה בה ליקטתי את הרשימות ועד אבדי אותן, לא החילותי אפילו בעיבודן, כלומר בכתיבת הספר עצמו. אך עתה, כשאני חוזר וקורא את הדפים הרבים של “וידוי” זה, שאני עומד בסיימו, אני מוצא שהחומר הכלול בו על חיי דוידוב, שרשמתי מן הזיכרון [...] אף כי הוא רק מעט מן הרב שליקטתי, ומקוטע ומפורד, עשוי הוא לשמש יסוד לספר, שכה רבים הם המצפים כי יכתב.

As if to underscore what is still somewhat ambiguous in Yonas’s account, Megged, in his preface to the 2006 edition of *The Living on the Dead* as part of the volume *Three of Them*, explicitly lays bare the novel’s structural conceit:

*The Living on the Dead* is an ironic novel about the complex, ambivalent relation of the “statehood generation” to the pioneer, “heroic” generation that preceded the establishment of the state. Its plot framework is the trial of the writer Yonas, who committed to writing a biography of one of the heroes of the Aliyas, Davidov, and due to feelings of guilt and inferiority did not carry out this commitment, yet kept collecting advance payments for the unwritten book. The grotesque reversal of this plot is that the biography is written, as if by itself, through the accumulation of the writer’s confessions, initially intended to explain why he hasn’t written it.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Holtzman, “Ha-biyografiya she-lo nikhteva,” 446-7.

<sup>40</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 216; my translation. For some unexplained reason, the whole of chapter 37, from which this passage is taken, has been omitted from the English translation of the novel.

<sup>41</sup> Megged, *Shlosha me-hem* (Three of Them), 24.

In relation to the desire for the neutral, Megged's structural "grotesque reversal" operates as what Fredric Jameson has termed, in *The Political Unconscious*, "a strategy of containment."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, *The Living on the Dead* employs multiple such strategies on various levels of the text. On a first level, we may say that the critics were, in a sense, absolutely right in identifying and responding to the main interpretative framework that the novel invites: the generational paradigm. For characters and critics alike, it offers an explanatory mechanism that dissolves the mystery—and threat—of the unexplained, unwitting refusal to write. Notably, even Megged himself, in the quote above, endorses this paradigm and, moreover, decidedly designates "feelings of guilt and inferiority" as the cause for Yonas's failure. In other words, the desire for the neutral, embodied in an act of non-writing, is introduced into the novel only to be immediately buried under a deluge of oedipal discourse.<sup>43</sup> On another level, this thematic frame of containment is supported by a formal one—the elaborate construction of analogies, on which the novel, as well as its critics, relies heavily in producing the generational problematics as its meaningful bottom line. As Gitta Avinor asserts, "the book is built of two circles: the circle of Davidov's life and the circle of Yonas's life. Between these two affairs there is an oppositional analogy."<sup>44</sup> In his comprehensive analysis of the text's literariness, Holtzman describes a dense web of no less than ten analogical "systems," all constructed with respect to "the main plotline of the Yonas-Davidov affair and the unwritten book," and "most of which are overt and almost actively encourage their own deciphering."<sup>45</sup>

But the most ambitious—certainly the most global—strategy of containment is the *conservatively* ironic "grotesque reversal," in which the book about Davidov is revealed to have, in actuality, written itself through the very plot of its non-writing. Conservatively, because if *The Living on the Dead* initially seems to embrace a passively resistant desire not to write, this desire is at the end incorporated into an eventual victorious performance of writing. Asked in a 2006 interview to assess retrospectively the common characteristics of his literary generation, Megged replied: "If we had comradeship, it wasn't necessarily a literary one. [...] But we definitely shared a sense of responsibility for this land. We saw ourselves as responsible to everything that takes place here. [...] Mentally and idealistically we believed we carry a great responsibility."<sup>46</sup> It is this sense of responsibility that seems to necessitate that the bold, original position—both philosophically and politically—that is expressed in the first paragraph of the novel be subsequently contained in an ideological narrative frame that is informed, in a broad sense, by the prevailing discourse of productive, watchful, and responsible writing.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In the first chapter of *The Political Unconscious* Jameson introduces this notion in the context of Lukács's theory of totality: "We will suggest that such an approach posits ideology in terms of strategies of containment, whether intellectual or (in the case of narratives) formal" (52-53). The exposure of such strategies would thus form a major part of any critique of ideology: "Lukács's critical conception of the 'totality' may immediately be transformed into an instrument of narrative analysis, by way of attention to those narrative frames or containment strategies which seek to endow their objects of representation with formal unity" (54).

<sup>43</sup> I thank Michal Arbell for this wording ("ad she-miyad tzarikh li-kbor ota be-mabul shel milim edipaliyot").

<sup>44</sup> Avinor, *Hashkef achora be-etzev*, 112. See also Schweid's analysis, quoted in the previous section, of the generational representation in the novel, which is "built as a precise analogy" (Schweid, "Eimat ha-hitmodedut 'im yom etmol," 54).

<sup>45</sup> Holtzman, "Ha-biyografya she-lo nikhteva," 452.

<sup>46</sup> Megged, "Ma kara le-'gibor dorenu" (What Happened to "The Hero of Our Generation"), interview by Nir Baram.

<sup>47</sup> In a slightly different vein, and in a post-colonial critical idiom, the novel may be read now as a complex ideological textual formation that, on the one hand, re-presents what Hannan Hever describes as the constitutive "conflict between 'Jewish' historical continuity and 'Israeli' historical break" through its plot of a generational crisis

Reflecting on Megged's contribution to Hebrew letters after his death in March 2016, the writer Chaim Be'er remarked:

Megged is the bread and butter of Hebrew literature, a very skilled, balanced writer. A literature needs such authors. He is of the heart of the house, of the beams that hold it, the central pillars. Some authors could be described as exceptional (*yotz'ey dofen*). He is not exceptional, but rather a writer located at the correct, precise center (*ba-merkaz ha-meduyak, ha-nakhon*). In order for the exceptional ones to have room, we also need to have a center.<sup>48</sup>

Writing from the center means, in this case, first and foremost a commitment to an ideology of writing as, in the words of one of Megged's characters, Shai, "a national duty"; the formal equivalence of this central position is a containment strategy which, as Jameson puts it, "seek[s] to endow [its] objects of representation with formal unity"—here through an ironic inclusive structure that grants the activity of writing the upper hand by pulling even the will for neutrality into the normative central current of development and fulfillment. It thus not only guarantees that the order of the discourse is symbolically restored, but also robs the protagonist, in spite of himself, of his freedom not to.

In the final analysis, then—at least as long as we subscribe to a Jamesonian perspective—the novel's case for a "freedom not to write" is canceled out as this novel itself, revealed now not only as a tale of successful writing but also as a practical biography of Davidov, seems to fulfill the supposed "national duty" expected of literature on at least two levels. A more generous line of inquiry, however, while acknowledging these strategies of containment, may nonetheless ask whether, from a hermeneutic perspective, it is imperative to grant them the final word. This interpretative question is of particular relevance with regard to the neutral, given both its thwarting of paradigms and its shying away from them, its unwillingness to participate or enter into conflict. Theoretically and politically, it can be rewritten as the question of the neutral's relation to containment.

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of writing—a writing explicitly defined as the historical "duty of the present to the past." On the other hand, the text resolves or smooths over this conflictual rift by means of a strong, containing closure that involves an act of self-generating writing, and thus allows the continuous unfolding of the recovered (but also re-covered) national story. According to Hever, the effort to constitute Israeli identity demands and depends on the manufacturing of both a sense of historical continuity and a sense of historical break (See Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om: Kri'ot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-ivrit* [The Narrative and the Nation: Critical Readings in the Canon of Hebrew Fiction, 218-9]; and while the novel complicates Hever's schema a bit, as Davidov may be taken to represent both the past and the present, or rather a middle link between the diasporic past and the Israeli present, this complication may only reinforce, rather than invalidate, from the post-colonial-Jamesonian standpoint, the relevance of the schema's oppositional logic.

<sup>48</sup> Littman, "Ha-sofer Aharon Megged met be-gil 95."

#### IV. Extension: The Desire for the Neutral Out of Bounds

##### *Writing/Retreats: The Fantasmatic Ambivalence of Yonas and Barthes*

At this point it may be worth reiterating that before finally being contained in the structural reversal that reaffirms the order of writing, the main figure of the neutral in *The Living on the Dead*, that of the writing retreat, plays out its own ironic twist by becoming a fantasy of a retreat *from* writing. This twist, never explicitly acknowledged but, on my reading, conspicuously present throughout the novel, is implicitly brought up again, in a condensed, narrativized form, towards its ending. When, at a fairly late stage of the two-year period of his (non-)preparation of the novel, Yonas decides to spend some time at a kibbutz in a desperate attempt to finally get his project going, his plan exhibits all the familiar traits of the writing retreat of the kind I discussed in the first section of this chapter:

I thought Dr. Buchholtz's suggestion of "a trip to some quiet, beautiful place outside the city" was a good idea—not for the reason she gave: so that I should have a complete rest, but in the hope of changing my luck. Far from the city, I thought, cut off from my band of companions, away from my room [*parush me-chadri*; literally, retired from my room] with all the memories in which it was saturated, breathing a fresher air and living among men of the Davidov breed, the afflatus would finally descend upon me and inspire me to start the book. I wrote to my father's sister's daughter Judith, who belonged to the kibbutz of N. in eastern Galille, and asked if I could spend some time with her. Her reply came quickly: Of course [...] Judith gave me a joyful welcome, laughed at my beard, which was a novelty for her, and led me to the room she had prepared for me [...] "Here you can sit and write from morning to evening," she said, "and nobody will hinder you. You'll never find this kind of quiet in the city."<sup>49</sup>

הצעתה של ד"ר בוכהולץ "לנסוע לאיזה מקום שקט, יפה, מחוץ לעיר," נתקבלה על לבי; לא מטעם שאמרה היא – כדי למצוא מנוחה שלמה – אלא מתוך תקווה לשינוי מזל. הרחק מן העיר – חשבת – מנותק מחבל רעי, פרוש מחדרי, על כל הזכרונות הספוגים בו, נושם אויר צח יותר ושרוי בין אנשים מגזע דוידוב – תצלח עלי סוף-סוף הרוח להתחיל בכתובת הספר. כתבתי לבת אחות אבי, יהודית, חברת קיבוץ נ. בגליל המזרחי, ושאלתי אם אוכל להתארח אצלה כמה זמן. תשובתה מיהרה לבוא: כמובן [...] יהודית קיבלה את פני בשמחה, צחקה על זקני, שהיה חידוש בשבילה, והוליכה אותי לחדר שהכינה למעני [...] "כאן תוכל לשבת ולכתוב מבוקר עד ערב," אמרה, "ואיש לא יפריע לך. בעיר לעולם לא תמצא שקט כזה."

This episode, which makes up the thirty-sixth of the novel's forty chapters, as Yonas's confession is discernibly drawing to its end, can be read as offering itself as a synecdochic summary of the novel's larger dynamics of retreat, a repetition in a nutshell of its fantasmatic patterns. More than a mere synecdoche, however, the kibbutz episode puts forth a fantasy of a retreat from the retreat—as Yonas is already in an ongoing two-year writing retreat when he decides to go on this trip to the kibbutz. If normally the figure of the room in such fantasies—as Gnessin's, Proust's, or Swedenborg's—marks the favorite site for the retreat, here Yonas fantasizes that in being "retired from his room" (*parush me-chadri*) he would find his long-lost

<sup>49</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 211; *The Living on the Dead*, 265-6.

ability to work; and thus, in this retreat from the retreat, a room in the kibbutz, where he would be able to “sit and write from morning to evening,” is offered as a substitute for the room on the roof in Tel Aviv where he was able to do anything but. Sadly, though certainly not unexpectedly, the retreat to the kibbutz does not yield the hoped-for results. Inspiration does not come, “the white sheets remain immaculate,” and the kibbutz atmosphere becomes increasingly frustrating as the members seem to expect Yonas to play the role of a writer in residence.<sup>50</sup> And so, having arrived on a Sunday afternoon, Yonas departs less than four days later, on the earliest bus on Thursday morning; on the way back, as a definite seal of failure, he manages to lose the folder containing all his notes and interview records.

The scene of the short withdrawal to the kibbutz, then, dramatizes a failed retreat from a failed retreat; it seems to invoke, somewhat playfully perhaps, the rather Kafkaesque possibility of a synecdochic recursive pattern—a kind of *mise en abyme* structure in which one keeps retreating from one’s failed retreats, keeps withdrawing from one room to another, failing over and over again. What saves Yonas from this fate of an infinitely localized failure is, first, the loss of the notes and, not much later, the beginning of the trial, by the third session of which he is already inclined to claim his freedom not to write.

But, importantly, in the temporal ordering of Megged’s text the chronology of these events is inverted. No matter how strongly Yonas professes at certain points in the narrative his determined will and full intentions to carry his project through to its successful completion, no matter how sincere he seems in his retreat plan to the kibbutz, or how much regret he feels for having lost the notes—in the reader’s consciousness his attitude may always also be interpreted as attesting to that other, unspeakable will to exercise a freedom not to write—and precisely *as a freedom* and not as some reactionary psychological effect. The fact that this will is announced at the very beginning of the novel thus complicates from the outset the Barthesian notion of the neutral retreat as a positive fantasy of writing and allows the prolonged scenario of Yonas’s writerly failure *to host the two opposing fantasies at the same time*: the fantasy to write, which seems to fail, and the fantasy to fail to write, which seems to succeed—until the tables are turned and writing is revealed to have been accomplished after all, almost of its own accord.

Keeping in mind this re-formulation of the fantasmatic in the novel, and in a further effort to trace the stakes of the desire for the neutral—which might indeed appear, conceptually, to fluctuate between the two fantasies—it may be worth revisiting more closely, if somewhat critically and at some length, Barthes’s theorization of the retreat. For in a comparative context, the writing retreat’s eventual failure, which Megged’s text—and the Hebrew scene more broadly—bring so forcefully to the fore, exposes an unresolved tension in Barthes’s own attitude towards *la retraite*. As already mentioned above and in the previous chapter, in his spring 1978 course *The Neutral* Barthes develops the notion of the retreat as a figure for the neutral through the exemplary cases of Rousseau, Proust, and Swedenborg (although there is an important distinction to be made between the former and the latter two, a distinction that, not coincidentally, it seems, goes unnoticed in Barthes’s account of the retreat; I will return to this point later on). Through his engagement with these three exemplars of retreating, Barthes wholeheartedly embraces the idea of the retreat—it is the figure to which he dedicates the most time in his lectures, in fact—and confesses it as his own “true fantasy.”

However, in *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes’s subsequent and final course at the Collège de France, the figure of retreat, especially in its relation to writing, acquires a somewhat different, much more contested valance. The course, which was delivered in two parts (1978-79

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<sup>50</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 212; *The Living on the Dead*, 267.

and 1979-80), was planned as an ongoing inquiry into the stakes and practice—and the very possibility—of the new project that Barthes had decided to take upon himself: the writing of a novel. In the introductory session, explaining his decision to embark on this “Vita Nova” of novelistic writing, Barthes pits the path of the neutral against the path of writing:

Last year’s course [i.e., *Le neutre*] bears the trace of this temptation: the dilection of the Neutral, of the Retreat. Because, faced with the “daily grind” of management, two paths open up before us: (1) either to retreat into silence, rest, retreat (“Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes and the grass grows of its own accord.”); (2) or to start walking in another direction, that is, to battle, to invest, to plant.<sup>51</sup>

Barthes’s choice is indeed to start walking in a new direction, virtually turning his back on the path of “last year’s course.” Quite surprisingly, then, *The Preparation of the Novel* opens with an all but explicit renunciation of the desire for the neutral by introducing oppositionality into the figure of the “Writing Retreat”—a thrust of conflictuality that opposes the task of writing to the gesture of retreat, and, crucially, provides the condition of possibility and *raison d’être* for Barthes’s new course and new writing, that is, his new desire.

Even more surprising is the fact that the germ for this new project—a project which opens with a rejection of the idea of retreat—can already be found in Barthes’s course on the neutral, and specifically in the discussion of none other than the figure of the retreat. First, in the passage already quoted earlier, Barthes entertains, apropos Swedenborg, “the miracle idea (true fantasy) that in leaving to barricade myself for several weeks [...] I would be able to work intensely: write a book, a novel, etc.”<sup>52</sup> Later in the session, this idea is articulated more fully as a choice of a “Vita Nova,” a new life: “As a fantasy, retreat [is] obviously tied to the idea of a radical, total change of life: very active fantasy, especially when one is getting old.”<sup>53</sup> In *The Preparation*, this fantasy of “Vita Nova” takes central stage and becomes the driving force behind Barthes’s life, teaching, and writing:

All of a sudden, then, this self-evident truth presents itself: on the one hand, I have no time left to try out several different lives: I have to choose my last life, my new life, *Vita Nova* (Dante) or *Vita Nuova* (Michelet).  
[...] for someone who has written, the domain of the *Vita Nova* can only be that of writing: the discovery of a new writing practice.<sup>54</sup>

As if to underscore this last point, Barthes gives his future novel, the novel of which this whole course is nothing but a “preparation,” the title *Vita Nova*.

What happens, then, in the transition from *The Neutral* to *The Preparation*? Why does the attempt to realize some of the “radical” and “total” aspects of the fantasy of retreat come with the price of renouncing, on a more profound level, the very idea of the neutral retreat? One possible answer to this question has to do, I argue, with the elusively ephemeral yet strangely persistent nature of the neutral itself; broadly and theoretically speaking, this whole chapter can be described as an attempt to consider the intricacies and stakes such an answer may yield. More

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<sup>51</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 141.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 5-6.

concretely, though, it seems that for Barthes the transition between the two courses involves a fantasmatic shift. In the “Retreat” session of *The Neutral*, the two fantasies, of retreat and of writing, could co-exist since it was the idea of retreat that mainly interested Barthes in the context of the desire for the neutral. That is why the examples of Proust and Swedenborg, who go on retreats dedicated solely and properly to the task of writing, could appear alongside that of Rousseau, whose retreat, as Barthes emphasizes, involves a “suspension of writing”.<sup>55</sup> “[He] takes pleasure in unpacking nothing, in leaving the books in their crates... and no writing desk.”<sup>56</sup> But once the determined fantasy of writing takes over in *The Preparation*, the fantasy of retreat becomes a threat, or at least a path not to be taken: “two paths open up before us: (1) either to retreat into silence, rest, retreat [...]; (2) or to start walking in another direction, that is, to battle, to invest, to plant.”<sup>57</sup>

Barthes does address the possibility of not-writing in a section titled “Digression—To Not Write?” in the December 8, 1979 session of *The Preparation*, where he returns to the example of Rousseau and his idle retreat to the Saint-Pierre Island. As the title of the section clearly demonstrates, however, not-writing is framed here as a mere “digression,” an aside from the exploration of the opposite desire—“the desire to write”—which makes up the entire course. Even in Barthes, then, once our perspective extends from the minimal theoretical pursuits of *The Neutral* to the strong-willed *Vita Nova* that follows it, there emerges a force of resistance to the neutral in the name of another, more positive, active, and essentially productive desire—a desire in relation to which the neutral is but a digression. Thus, in this extension of Barthes’s thought, the retreat acquires a complex, ambivalent status (as that which enables but also threatens the fantasy of writing) and the possibility “to not write” appears as a marginal yet clearly still appealing digression, a renounced yet stubbornly operative trace of the desire for the neutral.

### *The Bookish Extension of The Living on the Dead*

As I am interested here less in assuming the familiar critical stance of exposure than in charting the potentialities of the neutral, I wish to emphasize in the context of the discussion above not the uncovering of inconsistencies in Barthes’s thought but rather how, in the theoretically tenuous move between *The Neutral* and *The Preparation*, something essential about the life and afterlife of the neutral is acted out. The comparative juxtaposition of Barthes’s *Preparation* with the much more contested yet otherwise quite similar “writing fantasy” in *The Living on the Dead* indeed complicates, on the one hand, Barthes’s straightforward, positive, and even productivist evaluation of the act of writing; but on the other hand, it allows insight into the ways in which the neutral may still operate—albeit perhaps differently—even when it is no longer the topic at hand, even after it has supposedly run its course. Key in this regard is the principle that I have termed above *extension*, by which I mean simply to draw attention to the shifts, transformations, or nuances that may take place in the stretching out of a conceptual or critical perspective beyond some predetermined scope. In Barthes’s case it was the extension of the concept of the neutral across courses and books (that is, beyond the pedagogical and textual space formally titled “The

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 139.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. Rousseau himself writes: “the precious *farniente* was the first and principal enjoyment I wanted to savor in all its sweetness, and all I did during my sojourn was in effect only the delicious and necessary pursuit of a man who has devoted himself to idleness” (quoted *ibid.*, 139).

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 6.



Neutral”); in the case of *The Living on the Dead*, as we will see, it is manifested in the stretching out of the desire to (not) write beyond the containing scope of the single book, a perspective made possible through the novel’s opening to historical reality and, in particular, to its own writerly history.

This extensive dimension surfaces at least partially in the critical discourse from very early on. A case in point is Dikla Golomb’s brief review of *The Living on the Dead* in the April-May 1965 issue of the journal *Amot*. Apart from laying out some general observations about the thematics of the novel, Golomb’s review consists mostly of a heated, almost personal attack on the moral character of Davidov (“a ludicrous, primitive ‘hero’”) and on the mythological status and general admiration people of his sort receive in Israeli consciousness (“When [...] the national heroes are like Davidov—how can one not feel natural revulsion?”).<sup>58</sup> At one point she grants that the protagonists are indeed skillfully drawn as literary “types” but immediately qualifies parenthetically: “(Although anyone who knows their ‘models’—including *the person who was the ‘model’ for Davidov’s character*—would admit that they are very easily recognizable).”<sup>59</sup> Megged did not let these insinuations pass unanswered. He responded, no less heatedly, with a rebuttal essay titled “Heroes and ‘Models’” in which he classifies Golomb’s attitude as part of a broader critical tendency: “In our environment, the temptation to identify literary protagonists with familiar figures from reality is great, of course. Everybody knows everybody, more or less. If not firsthand—then second- or third-hand.”<sup>60</sup> He then adds sarcastically: “If one writes ‘I’—apparently it’s him; ‘my wife’—it’s his wife; ‘my friend’—his friend; ‘Davidov’—yes, it’s well known... [...] [Golomb’s] familiarity with Davidov’s ‘model’ is so great that it is a shame she herself did not make it to the list of Yonas’s twenty seven ‘interviewees’.”<sup>61</sup> Though mocking the logic behind Golomb’s pretensions to knowledge, Megged too seems to know exactly—although, like Golomb, refrains from revealing to his readers—whom she refers to. But whereas in 1965 this polemical exchange could still be carried out in a coded form, in the following decades it became common knowledge that the supposed “model” for Davidov’s character was Yitzhak Sadeh (1890-1952)—a famous member of the third Aliya and a prominent figure of the socialist-Zionist movement, who was among the leaders of Gdud Ha-avoda and of the Haganah, the first commander of the Palmach, and one of the founders of the Israel Defense Forces.<sup>62</sup> Over the years this connection between Davidov and Sadeh has gained traction in both the critical discourse and the more popular literary sphere. In the fourth volume of Shaked’s influential *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880-1980*, for example, it is already mentioned offhandedly as a seemingly established hypothesis, and in the long obituary for Megged in Ha’aretz, when *The Living on the Dead* is singled out as Megged’s most famous work, the columnist promptly remarks that “it has been argued that [the novel] was about the figure of Yitzhak Sadeh.”<sup>63</sup>

The presumed identification of Davidov with Sadeh has thus increasingly become part of the novel’s structure of meaning, framing it discursively as a text defined not only by literary

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<sup>58</sup> Golomb, “Ha-gibor ve-ha-anti gibor,” 82.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Megged, “Giborim u-‘modelim’” (Heroes and ‘Models’), 80.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Gdud Ha-avoda (commonly translated as either The Work Battalion or The Labor Corps) was a communal labor organization of pioneers and workers, founded by members of the third Aliya in 1920, whose main goal was the building of the land through the establishment of a general commune of the Hebrew workers in Palestine. On the Haganah and the Palmach see note 26 above.

<sup>63</sup> See Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880-1980*, 116, 360n36; Littman, “Ha-sofer Aharon Megged met be-gil 95.”

parameters or by the name of its author but also by the name of its referent. On numerous occasions—in interviews and articles—Megged directly addresses these specific claims, which he denies not only factually but also in the name of fiction’s essential independence from real life. When, for example, he was asked in an interview about his novels as *romans à clef*, Megged replied:

There are some similarities between my protagonists and well known figures. The most famous case is Davidov, who was identified with Yitzhak Sadeh—but their respective biographies are very different. Alongside the similarities there are many dissimilarities. [...] There were quite a few absurdities in this matter. People “know” the protagonists. [...] You are surely aware how people probed for knowledge on who Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary were. People search for who is who. But fiction is fiction.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the common, age-old question of literature’s referential relation to reality, to which Megged’s reply implicitly harks back, and which such tautological refutations as “fiction is fiction” only seem to preserve as an open question, in fact obscures and displaces a more unique aspect in this novel’s relation to its historical outside—namely, its relation to its own history and own “model.”

In other words, far from rejecting the historical-referential frame, I propose to pursue it even further, perhaps to the point of its own unframing. For, as it turns out, the prospect of the biographical novel on Davidov, albeit under a different heading, has already been around—and this biographical novel has already *not* been written—long before *The Living on the Dead* came into being. In a chain of events that may sound rather familiar, in the mid-1950s Megged accepted an offer by Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad publishing house to write a biography of Yitzhak Sadeh. He conducted dozens of interviews with Sadeh’s friends, comrades, and family members, began composing the manuscript, and, on the occasion of the three-year anniversary of Sadeh’s death, even published a short fragment, framed as “a chapter from a biographical novel,” in the literary supplement *Masa*.<sup>65</sup> This “chapter,” however, would turn out to be the only part of the book to ever appear in print. Megged’s biographical novel on Yitzhak Sadeh was never written.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Megged, “‘Ha-ironya matziga et ha-adam be-orach ambivalenti’” (Irony Presents People in an Ambivalent Manner), interview by Moshe Granot (conducted in July 2001), 163-64. Similarly, in a programmatic essay on realist and surrealist literature, Megged writes: “Who of us Israeli writers did not have such an experience, when readers insist on identifying a character from one of our books with a well-known public figure—the difference, allegedly, being only its changed name. Isn’t Davidov from *The Living on the Dead* Yitzhak Sadeh? Certainly! And no evidence supplied by the author, in order to refute this hypothesis and show how little resemblance there is between the two, could ever change their minds!” (*Shulchan ha-ktiva: Kovetz ma’amarim be-inyeney sifrut* [The Writing Desk: Essays on Literature]), 36. See also his comments in “Ma kara le-‘gibor dorenu’.”

<sup>65</sup> Megged, “Pgisha rishona: perek mi-roman biyografi” (A First Meeting: A Chapter from a Biographical Novel), *La-merchav*, August 28, 1955.

<sup>66</sup> These circumstances are succinctly outlined in Holtzman, “Ha-biyografya she-lo nikhteve,” 456-57. Other than Holtzman’s article, the critical discourse on *The Living on the Dead* virtually ignores Megged’s earlier attempt to write a biographical novel on Sadeh. In a roundtable session about Israel’s first decade (held at Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi in Jerusalem in the summer of 1996) Megged partially described the affair as follows: “One of the figures that symbolizes, for me, what happened before the establishment of the state and after its establishment is the figure of the Palmach’s commander, Yitzhak Sadeh. I have a personal connection to the matter because already in his lifetime I started writing his biography, by his request; then, when he got sick, we stopped having our meetings, in which he had been dictating to me chapters from his life. After his death, I was asked to write this biography and interviewed dozens of people” (Zvi Zameret and Hanna Yablonka, eds., *He-asor ha-rishon 1948-1958* [The First Decade 1948-1958], 355). Megged does not mention on this occasion any reason for eventually not writing the biography.

Thus, not only the character of Davidov but also the book of which he is the prospective subject corresponds to an external historical “model”—here, the model of a writing that never took place. More than an ordinary *roman à clef* whose real subject is Yitzhak Sadeh, *The Living on the Dead* can be read as a return to Megged’s own scene of failure. To put it schematically, Megged, who initially cannot write the book, writes a book about this non-writing—which, finally, as I showed above, contains an accomplished version of that (no longer) unwritten book. Like Gnessin’s “Sideways,” then, Megged’s *The Living on the Dead* dramatizes a biographical repetition. Yet these two repetitions work in different directions with regard to the axis of success/failure: Hagzar, the protagonist of “Sideways,” fails in doing what Gnessin has already successfully done; and thus, not exactly a repetition and not merely a failure—the gesture at the heart of Hagzar’s scene of non-writing is, in relation to his author past successes, a gesture of undoing. Yonas, on the contrary, seems to fail precisely where Megged himself failed—somewhere along the process of the preparation of the novel, between the gathering of materials and the composition of the actual manuscript; a repeated failure that, for Yonas, the novel’s “grotesque reversal” turns into success.

A psychoanalytically inclined reader might point out, at this stage, that by redeeming his protagonist’s failure through the novel’s structure of containment—that is, by allowing him to both fail and eventually succeed in writing the book—Megged, as the author behind the author of this book, also redeems his own failure. Thus the narrative of *The Living on the Dead* would appear as a corrective fantasy that both reenacts the dynamics of Megged’s primary failure and compensates for it by allowing this very reenactment to invert failure into success. Far from invalidating this compensatory fantasy, such counterclaims as “fiction is fiction” and “there are some similarities [but] alongside the similarities there are many dissimilarities” would only reaffirm its structure as a compromise formation (which by definition is simultaneously similar and dissimilar to reality, and distinguished from it under the guise of ontological difference). But this kind of psychoanalytic reading, being itself motivated by a logic of hermeneutic closure, might end up overlooking the interpretative invitation that the novel extends in its very first scene: the invitation to consider the dynamics of non-writing in terms of potentiality, which the next and final section of this chapter would seek to pick up again by further theorizing and historicizing the stakes of the potential not to.

As far as potentials and their realizations are concerned, another twist to the extended plot of writerly endeavors in and around *The Living on the Dead* was introduced in 1996, when the editor and documentarist Zvika Dror published, with Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad, a scholarly biography of Sadeh that relied substantively on the interview records that Megged had prepared in the 1950s.<sup>67</sup> More than four decades after he accepted the offer to write a biography of Sadeh for Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uchad, Megged’s book was finally written—by someone else.

And so, the strange case of *The Living on the Dead* seems to involve a multiplicity of books and a proliferation of writing (if not also of non-writing). As a novel—a well-defined, clearly bounded text—it seems to extend into a literary assemblage, a cluster of books, in which Megged is no longer the exclusive agent. An attempt to unpack the forces that operate in such a cluster can take its cue from Deleuze and Guattari’s remarks, at the very beginning of A

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<sup>67</sup> Dror, *Matzbi le-lo srara: Sipur-chayav shel Yitzhak Sadeh, “ha-zaken”* (The Life and Times of Yitzhak Sadeh). For the extent of Dror’s usage of Megged’s research, see his bibliographical list of sources. Megged’s notes are kept in the Yad Tabenkin Archive in Ramat Ef’al, where they are available for public viewing. In the roundtable session mentioned in note 66, Megged also remarked that his research served as “foundational material” (*chomer yesod*) for Dror’s then recently published biography (Zameret and Yablonka, eds., *He-asor ha-rishon 1948-1958*, 355).

*Thousand Plateaus*, on the figure of the book: “In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation and segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. [...] A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity.”<sup>68</sup> What Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “lines of articulation and segmentarity, strata and territories” corresponds to the Jamesonian strategies of containment; and what they describe as “lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification” is manifested in the case of *The Living on the Dead* in the baffling, thwarting effects of the desire for the neutral. Thus, implicit in the somewhat obscure terminology of this passage is a hermeneutic suggestion to read the convergences between the two kinds of “lines” in an “assemblage” without necessarily prioritizing its end points, blockages, closures, or mechanisms of containment. And whereas Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “a book is an assemblage,” here the assemblage is constructed around one book, or one idea for a book, but extended through it into a multiplication of the book, which, indeed, is not entirely attributable. It includes several books (some written, others not; some real, others fictional): the biography that Megged did not write on Sadeh; the novel that he did, *The Living on the Dead*; the biographical novel that Yonas fails to write; Davidov’s life story that Yonas ultimately composes through his “confession”; and, finally, Zvika Dror’s proper biography of Sadeh. As in a world of mirrors, all these books reflect each other. For all of them, whether written or not, are in fact variations of the same book. Together they form a series of different realizations of the singular, potential idea for a biography/novel on the subject of Sadeh/Davidov, an idea which they perform, variegated, and multiply. Yet as the normatively reigning desire to write is countered here by a persistent desire to not write, this bookish assemblage is defined as much by the neutralizing gesture of not bringing a potential into actuality as by a pattern of recurrent actualization.

## V. The Potential Unconscious

The multiple books in this assemblage, being different versions of one ideal book, complete and repeat each other but also, by virtue of their difference, comment on each other’s incompleteness. When towards the end of the novel Yonas comes to acknowledge that the confession he has been slowly drafting actually tells not only the story of his own predicament but also the life story of Davidov, he is nonetheless careful to describe it as no more than a possible “foundation for the book” (*yesod la-sefer*).<sup>69</sup> He then elaborates:

I thus bequeath it to others—if there are writers among my readers, who are better and quicker than I am, and free from all those conflicting emotions that scamper within me and blunt my pen-holding right hand—I bequeath it to them without asking for payment, reward, or gratitude. Let them take this nectar that I have gathered and turn it into honey.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Megged, *Ha-chay al ha-met*, 216; my translation.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*; my translation.

אני מוריש אותו אפוא לאחרים – אם ימצאו סופרים בין קוראי, טובים וזריזים ממני, ובעיקר משוחררים מכל אותם רגשות מנוגדים המתרוצצים בקרבי ומקהים את ימיני האוחזת בעט – אני מוריש אותו להם ללא בקשת שכר, גמול, או תודה. יטלו את הצוף הזה שאגרתי ויהפכוהו לדבש.

Yonas thus presents his manuscript as at once a realization of the plan for the book and a yet to be realized potential for future writing. By emphasizing this potential dimension of the manuscript, Yonas parallels here Megged's real-life gesture of making his own notes for the book on Sadeh available for future use through the public Yad Tabenkin Archive.<sup>71</sup> Both these gestures can be understood as conveying a sense of reluctance that seems to accompany the admittance of failure: a lingering unwillingness to let all the labor and materials go to waste unused, an insistence on getting something out of it all—even if by someone else and “without asking for payment, reward, or gratitude.” At the same time, this invitation being an open invitation not directed to any particular addressee, an invitation that may remain forever open or may take decades to be picked up—as was in fact the case—seems only to draw attention to the dynamics of suspension and indefiniteness that marks the elaborate play of potentialities and their (un)realization in and between these texts. That this complex dynamics comes to a seemingly definitive moment of actualization with the publication of Dror's book hardly cancels it out. If anything, taking place so belatedly, this publication makes us aware of the contingency of actualization, as if the passage of so much time has made the potential, at some point along the way, begin to seem less likely to ever be realized than not. On a different level, it may demonstrate how, from a philosophical perspective, impotentiality “preserves itself as such in actuality”—a point I will return to later in this section.<sup>72</sup>

With respect to the relation between content and form, then, the aspect of Yonas's behavior that betrays a desire for the neutral—his will to not write—corresponds not to the formal features of the novel per se (i.e., its conservative containment strategies), but rather to the oscillation between potentials and their realization that characterizes the assemblage of books created through and around *The Living on the Dead*. In light of this broader presence of the concept of potentiality in the textual environment that surrounds Megged's novel, I wish to return to its protagonist's unique impulse, in the very first lines of the novel, to claim the strange prerogative of the “freedom not to write”—an insistence that taints the whole dynamics of non-writing with the liberating mark of impotentiality, and that can now be read, as it were, for its political potential.

The gesture of claiming one's impotentiality, I argue, is of particular importance for a literary culture that, at that period, is deeply troubled by the very idea of accomplishment. As Hamutal Tsamir points out, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 is “the height of the national movement's success, its peak moment, but it is also, at the same time, the end of the national struggle; it effectively cancels this movement's *raison d'être* and the desire that has driven it. The fulfillment of the national movement's goals also signifies, at least in some senses,

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<sup>71</sup> This parallelism is highlighted by the way that Megged, in describing in 1996 his own notes as “foundational material” for Dror's book—“*ze shimesh chomer yesod la-sefer*”—echoes almost verbatim Yonas's hopes for his own manuscript: “*asuy hu le-shamesh yesod la-sefer*.” This simple, most likely unintentional three-word repetition not only draws together Megged's and Yonas's failures and singles out Dror's book as a kind of realization of both, but also, more broadly, reinforces the mutually-reflective connection between the books in the “cluster,” as well as the very logic of speaking about this kind of assemblage-like relations in the first place.

<sup>72</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183.

its end.”<sup>73</sup> Following Tsamir, Michael Gluzman has recently shown that the aftermath of the establishment of the state has brought with it a deflated, disappointing sense of “the morning after”: “Paradoxically, the achievement of sovereignty deprived Zionism of the desire that has driven it towards national realization. It is thus no wonder that feelings of melancholic disappointment arose almost immediately after the war.”<sup>74</sup>

Not surprisingly, given its political as well as cultural formative import, this charged historical moment is repeatedly revisited in Hebrew literary criticism. Most famously, perhaps, its formativeness is reevaluated in the post-Zionist, post-colonial critique of Hannan Hever, who exposes the invention of the category of “Israeli literature”—the literature of the people in its sovereign nation-state, both a continuation and a transformation of “Hebrew literature”—as an ongoing, always imperfect erasure of the constitutive violence of the colonial struggle for territory;<sup>75</sup> and of Yitzhak Laor, who in his seminal essay “We Write You Homeland” traces the mechanisms of sanctioned silence and controlled speech through which, under the newly established sovereignty, the state trains its literature to “think in terms of a state.”<sup>76</sup> In an important reading of S. Yizhar’s oeuvre, Shaul Setter postulates 1948 as itself “the time of return, the time that returns,” to which both the critical political discourse and Yizhar’s stories constantly return.<sup>77</sup> As part of a broader exploration of potential collectivities in Israel/Palestine—a project whose guiding questions are closely related to, and have indeed inspired, this chapter’s engagement with literary potentialities, notwithstanding significant differences in our respective mobilizations of this concept—Setter reads Yizhar’s texts for their potential counter-histories, as insistently refusing the consolidated post-1948 political and collective formations.

Not unrelatedly, for Gluzman, as for my reading here, the key to understanding this historical moment lies in the prevailing sense of achievement and its affective side effects: “How,” asks Gluzman, “did [Hebrew literature] perceive its role after the achievement of the profoundly longed-for sovereignty?”<sup>78</sup> Taking 1948 to mark an epistemic break that brought about a significant change in this literature’s national-cultural status, his astute reading of Statehood Generation poetry shows how the epistemic crisis made its way to the poetic language of the 1950s and 1960s:

I wish to read the emergence of the “I” in Zach’s poetry as a melancholic response to the loss, in sovereign Israel, of the significant role once allocated to poets and writers. It is a

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<sup>73</sup> Tsamir, “Ha-meshorer ha-navi ke-met-chay be-shirat dor ha-mdina” (The Poet-Prophet as a Living Dead in the Poetry of the Statehood Generation), 303.

<sup>74</sup> Gluzman, *Shirat ha-tvu'im: ha-melankolya shel ha-ribonut be-shirat shnot ha-chamishim ve-ha-shishim* (The Poetry of the Drowned: The Melancholia of Sovereignty in the Poetry of the 1950s and 1960s), forthcoming.

<sup>75</sup> Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om*, especially the chapter “Mapa shel chol: mi-sifrut ivrit le-sifrut yisra'elit (A Map of Sand: From Hebrew Literature to Israeli Literature), 211-38.

<sup>76</sup> Laor, *Anu kotvim otakh moledet: Masot al sifrut yisra'elit* (Narratives with No Natives: Essays on Israeli Literature), 115-70. The quote “think in terms of a state,” which may seem to rehearse a familiar current critical idiom, was in fact uttered as an explicit imperative by David Ben-Gurion in a speech delivered in December 1947, on the threshold of sovereignty: “[We need] to examine all our habits of thought [...] we must think in terms of a state (*aleyenu la-chshov be-munachim shel medina*)” (ibid., 138). See also Nurith Gertz’s 1983 historiographical study *Chirbet Chize ve-ha-boker she-le-mochorat* (literally, Chirbet Chize and the Morning After), which popularized the phrase “the morning after” in the critical discourse.

<sup>77</sup> Setter, “The Time That Returns: Speculative Temporality in S. Yizhar’s 1948,” 39; “After the Fact: Potential Collectivities in Israel/Palestine.”

<sup>78</sup> Gluzman, *Shirat ha-tvu'im*, 20.

melancholia whose expression is not necessarily thematic. The iconoclastic, discontinuous, and broken language of Statehood Generation poetry is a formal expression of that melancholic and traumatic position. Part of this position, which stems from the melancholia of sovereignty, is related to the rift between poet and audience, speaker and addressee. Zach's well-known declaration "I Sing unto Myself" can therefore be read not (only) as expressing a withdrawn individuality but (also) as deriving from a position of melancholia over the loss of poetry's national and public roles.<sup>79</sup>

In many ways, Megged's figure of the failed writer-as-watchman can be readily interpreted as an integral part of the melancholia of sovereignty. In this line of reading, the epistemic break between the literary and the national, which in Statehood Generation poetry finds its expression in "iconoclastic, discontinuous, and broken" poetic language, is dramatized in Megged's prose as a narrative of literature's inexplicable inability to fulfill its "national duty." The fictional loss of literature's ability to come into being—that is, to be written—would thus be understood as a displaced manifestation of the historical loss, in reality, of this literature's "national and public roles."

By invoking the question of the *freedom* not to write, however—that is, by turning to a philosophy of potentiality—the failure at the heart of *The Living on the Dead* can be read as a move beyond the melancholia of sovereignty. This potential of potentiality as a non-symptomatic hermeneutic concept has been recently demonstrated, with considerable persuasiveness, in Leo Bersani's "I Can Dream, Can't I?" Though his main concern in this essay is an argument for an ontology of undivided being, Bersani implicitly develops in the process his own method for the interpretation of dreams, which I propose to pursue here as a case for reconceiving Agamben's philosophy of potentiality as (also) a theory of reading.

A "fairly eminent colleague" of Bersani's, so the essay begins, has been having recurrent dreams about some prosaic professional failures such as being terribly late to one of his own important lectures, bringing the wrong lecture notes, and nearly missing his return flight home from a research trip in Europe. Contra the psychoanalytic commonsense, however, which would treat these "rather nerdy academic nightmares" as symptom formations concealing repressed content, Bersani introduces a thoroughly different interpretative link between imagined failures and accomplished achievements:

We might consider his dreamt failures as having, paradoxically, a liberating effect on the actual successes. Instead of thinking of the dreams as infecting the reality with an otherwise unavowed anxiety or self-defeating desire, we might welcome them as potentializing the having-taken-place of the lectures or the trans-Atlantic flights. Having the dreams would not be the distressing reminder of a timeless anxiety corrupting the satisfaction of successful accomplishments in real time. Those accomplishments would, on the contrary, benefit from their temporal juxtaposition with accomplishment failures. [...] Dreams of failures, alternating with successful accomplishments in waking life, bring a degree of uncertainty to those accomplishments, making them less definitive—in a sense, even less necessary—after the fact. Fantasmatic failures at least partially free us from the limitations of actual success; they beneficently inject doubt into those successes, successes that the dreams move into an enlarged field of potentiality.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>80</sup> Leo Bersani, "I Can Dream, Can't I?," 32.

Opening his novel with a claim for the “freedom not to write,” Megged aligns his perspective not only with an ontology of potentiality (as the ability not to) but also with what Bersani calls its “liberating effect.” This allows for a reading of the whole narrative of failure that ensues as an “injection of doubt” into the telos of writerly productivism that clearly still drives, after all, the writing of this novel itself, Megged’s oeuvre more generally, and, on a broader scale, the all-too-successful project of Israeli literature writ large.

It is Bersani’s emphasis on the dimension of temporality, however, that lends this gesture of injecting doubt through an act of failure its most nuanced implications. The liberating effect of a “freedom not to write” (as a figure for potentiality) would consist not only in freeing one from the burden of expectations and demands for future writings, but also in freeing what has already been accomplished from the burden of its actuality. In its radical temporality, Bersani’s interpretation of dreams does not exactly bring the past into the present, but, more accurately—since it is less a matter of a temporal continuum than of the co-existence of virtualities—restores potentialities in our state of actuality.

In this context, I would like to bracket the question of melancholia and trauma as *effects* of sovereignty, and read Gluzman’s historical thesis as pointing, at a more basic level, to a culture that is haunted, in the wake of the successful struggle for sovereignty, by the very concept of accomplishment, by the simple notion of things being accomplished. Against this background, Megged’s is not a melancholic response but a potentializing one. His—and others’—fantasmatic failures are a means not of restoring something that was lost in the process of achievement, but of restoring the possibility—the impotentiality—of not achieving at all; a means of reopening literary actualities by rendering less definitive what has already been accomplished. Thus, if we take the liberty to paraphrase parts of Bersani’s argument with respect to the particularities of Megged’s fantasy of failure,

we might consider the fictional failures, such as Yonas’s, as having, paradoxically, a liberating effect on the actual literary successes. [...] We might welcome these narratives as potentializing the having-taken-place of actual novels and stories—their having-taken-place *as* Israeli literature, even the having-taken-place *of* Israeli literature. [...] Narratives of failure, alternating with successful accomplishments in the reality of Israeli national literature, bring a degree of uncertainty to those accomplishments, making them less definitive—in a sense, even less necessary—after the fact.



Even at this point it might still seem necessary, from the standpoint of ideological critique, to qualify, once again, that while *The Living on the Dead* indeed dramatizes this non-melancholic potentializing gesture in response to Israeli literature’s anxiety of accomplishment, at the same time it also appears unwilling to give up the strong, “central” ethos of responsibility and fulfilment—the ethos, to paraphrase the titles of Hever’s and Laor’s books, of the bond between the *sipur* and the *le’om*, the narrative and the nation, and of writing the homeland. Yet it is precisely the problematics of potentialities and their (un)realization that would render quite futile the familiar and supposedly pertinent critical gesture of evaluating the text according to the binary of “the subversive versus the hegemonic”; or, in our case, of attempting to determine which of the two desires, the ideological desire to produce writing or the neutral desire to not write, preponderates in the final analysis.



For even what seems fulfilled and finalized (in the *final* analysis) can be read, with Agamben, as a *fulfilment of impotentiality*, however paradoxical such a formulation may appear. Indeed, one of the most difficult aspects of Agamben's Aristotelian theory is the issue of the passage from potentiality into the act. In "On Potentiality" he introduces this problem with a straightforward example: "The actuality of the potentiality to play the piano is the performance of a piece for the piano; but what is the actuality of the potentiality to not-play?"<sup>81</sup> In other words, once the ontological intimacy between potentiality and impotentiality has been established, the passage into the act cannot be conceived of anymore simply as a positive realization of potential; for the question that then arises is: what happens, as a potential is realized, to its constitutive counterpart, the potential not to? Agamben answers this question with an idiosyncratic interpretation of one of Aristotle's most cryptic definitions of potentiality, through which he describes what occurs in the passage into actuality:

Insofar as it is not contradictory with respect to the potentiality to be, the potentiality not to be must not simply be annulled, but, turning itself on itself, it must assume the form of a potentiality not to not be. The privative negation of "potential not to be" is therefore "potential not to not be" (and not "not potential not to be").

What Aristotle then says is . . . *If a potentiality not to be originally belongs to every potentiality, one is truly capable [potente] only if, at the moment of the passage to the act, one neither simply annuls one's own potentiality not to, nor leaves it behind with respect to the act, but lets it pass wholly into it as such, that is, is able not to not pass to the act.*<sup>82</sup>

While a commonsensical view would assume that in the actualization of a potential impotentiality is negated, deserted and "disappears into actuality," Agamben insists that impotentiality is actually preserved, in the act, in the form of its own impotentiality.<sup>83</sup> Kevin Attell explains this passage in terms of a fulfilment that is at the same time a privation and a suspension:

Impotentiality is not simply annulled or left behind, but is itself also fulfilled, actualized in the act, which means that the act itself is a sort of "privative" self-suspension of the potentiality-not-to, the *impotenza* that in the act turns on itself and suspends itself in the form of a potential not to not be.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183.

<sup>82</sup> These paragraphs are part of a long passage that appears only partially in the English version of "On Potentiality"; they are quoted here from Kevin Attell's translation of this passage in his *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 96-97; emphasis in the original. Aristotle's confounding definition of potentiality in the *Metaphysics*, to which these paragraphs refer, and whose interpretation plays a crucial role in Agamben's understanding of the concept, reads as follows: "a thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" (See *Potentialities*, 183). Agamben cites this sentence in each of his three main texts on potentiality: "On Potentiality," the essay on Bartleby, and the third chapter of *Homo Sacer*. For a detailed discussion of Agamben's treatment of this sentence see Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 87-100; Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Editor's Introduction: 'To Read What Was Never Written,'" 16-18.

<sup>83</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183.

<sup>84</sup> Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 97. Similarly, Daniel Heller-Roazen writes that "the potential not to be (or do), Agamben suggests, is not effaced in the passage into actuality; on the contrary, actuality is itself nothing other than the full realization of the potential not to be (or do), the point at which, as

This, as Attell points out, has far-reaching implications for Agamben's conception of actuality:

For Agamben, in *energeia*, it is not only potentiality but also and above all impotentiality that as such passes wholly over into the act, and if this is the case, then actuality must be seen not as the cancellation of impotentiality and the fulfillment of potentiality, but rather as the precipitate of the self-suspension of impotentiality.<sup>85</sup>

The passage to actuality, which in *Homo Sacer* Agamben also describes as a “setting-aside” of impotentiality that is “not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfill it,” thus yields an understanding of the actual wherein—in the final words of “On Potentiality”—“potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself*.”<sup>86</sup> To the extent that this chapter theorizes potentiality as a figure for the neutral, the mode of what I have been describing as the neutral's persistence—and particularly its persistence where it is most out of place, as at the “correct, precise center,” *ba-merkaz ha-meduyak, ha-nakhon*—can be appreciated now as corresponding to, and in terms of, the survival of impotentiality in the act: a mode of persistence through a self-setting-aside and self-suspension, a privative rather than destructive negation.

While this dimension of the act is admittedly not easily discernible when, to go back to Agamben's example, one simply plays the piano (or simply writes a book, for that matter), it becomes much more accentuated in the prolonged, complicated passages into actuality that *The Living on the Dead* brings about. When Dror eventually realizes Megged's unaccomplished plans, forty years later and out of Megged's own notes, or when Yonas ends up producing, almost unwittingly, a version of the book that he couldn't and wouldn't write—and was not aware that he *is* writing—these moments are far from being smooth progressions from a potential to its actualization. In their intricate, defamiliarizing routes to fulfillment they seem to comment less about the meaning of coveted achievements than about the existence and persistence in them of the potentiality not to. Indeed, in such convoluted passages into the act, impotentiality does not even give the illusion of being annulled or left behind (or abandoned in the past); rather, this impotentiality seems very much still a part of the actual state of affairs—of, for example, Dror's, Megged's, or Yonas's accomplished writings—a part which the moment of actualization does not erase but rather preserves, albeit in a suspended way, as a fulfillment of a very palpable “potentiality not to not be” written. Yonas's eventual writing, then, should be conceived of in terms other than “containment” or “redeeming compensation” not only for the reasons I alluded to earlier, but primarily because in its strange passage to actuality it reveals itself as a preservation of Yonas's capacity, or freedom, not to write—a *freedom not to* that, in surviving this novel's writing, gives itself to itself, and thereby also gives itself to its readers.



Agamben's essay “Bartleby, or On Contingency” begins by situating Bartleby, as a scrivener, in a “literary constellation” that is populated by fellow copiers and scribes like Gogol's Akaky

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Aristotle writes, “there will be nothing impotential” (“Editor's Introduction: ‘To Read What Was Never Written’,” 17).

<sup>85</sup> Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*, 97.

<sup>86</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46; *Potentialities*, 184. Ultimately, for Agamben, this would mean, “a new and coherent ontology of potentiality [...] [to replace] the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality” (*Homo Sacer*, 44).

Akakievich, Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, Walser's Simon Tanner, Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, and Kafka's courtroom clerks.<sup>87</sup> In a similar fashion, Megged's Yonas can be thought of as orchestrating a comparable though localized and historicized constellation, formed in the second decade of Israeli literature. This constellation of non-writing-writers would include, for example, the history student in Yehoshua's "Facing the Forests" (1963), who, as mentioned above, takes a job as a forest-watcher with the intention of using his time in the forests as a six-month writing retreat—a fantasy of writerly seclusion that, precisely by failing miserably, that is, by *not* being fulfilled, provides the conditions for the text's involvement with the political.<sup>88</sup> It would include as well the protagonist of Aharon Amir's short story "Prose" (1961), a young man in his early thirties, referred to throughout the text only as "the writer" (*ha-sofer*), who goes on a modest one-day writing retreat: having barely written anything for seven years, he decides one morning to take a day off work, get out of the house, find a peaceful café in which he could sit all day, and finally write the story that he agreed to contribute to a forthcoming collection. But, not unexpectedly, after wasting hours to no avail he reconciles himself to "the certainty that he will not produce anything of substance in this sitting, and was almost ready to agree not to write anything else for the rest of his days."<sup>89</sup> What complicates this minor, poignant tale of writerly failure is the protagonist's striking self-consciousness of his (merely) potential rather than actual existence as a writer—which makes potentiality the essence of "Prose," if not also of Prose:

He knew well that [...] he was no longer a writer even to the minimal extent that he had been once worthy of being considered one, and that only for lack of a better definition people still called him "a writer." In spite of that he vigilantly kept his firm belief [...] that all he needed to do is decide he is available and wants it, all he needed to do is turn on the faucet—and immediately everything will flow abundantly. Neither the minimal quantity of his overall output nor its meager impression on the reading public could erase from his heart this confidence in his "*potential*," this belief in *the unique ability stored in him*.<sup>90</sup>

Though not exactly a writer on a retreat, another prospective candidate for this society of non-writing could be the narrator of Yizhar's "A Story That Has Not Begun" (1963), whose title at once posits a potential (not) to begin and, as a title for a story, anticipates this potential's imminent realization with the inevitable movement beyond the title, that is, with the coming beginning of the text.<sup>91</sup> From its title on, then, this story is informed by what Setter has suggestively described as a "preliminary" or "speculative" temporality.<sup>92</sup> Thus, when the narrator asserts in the second paragraph of this long story "here we won't be able to [do] anything. Not even tell a story" (*Kan lo nukhal klum. Afilu lo le-saper*), his "here" may be referring not only to his diegetic surroundings but also to the textual "here," and his invocation of the question of

<sup>87</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 243.

<sup>88</sup> Yehoshua, "Mul ha-ye'arot" (Facing the Forests).

<sup>89</sup> Amir, "Proza" (Prose), 25.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 8; emphasis added. In the Hebrew the last sentence reads:

לא מיעוט תפוקתו הכוללת אף לא דלות רישומה של זו בציבור הקוראים והמבינים לא יכלו להסיר מלבו את הבטחון הזה ב'פוטנציאל' שלו, את האמונה הזאת ביכולת הסגולית האצורה בו.

<sup>91</sup> Yizhar, "Sipur she-lo hitchil" (A Story That Has Not Begun).

<sup>92</sup> Setter, "The Time That Returns: Speculative Temporality in S. Yizhar's 1948."

ability (*lo nukhal*) can be read as flirting with the difference between impossibility and impotentiality, between the *inability to* and the *ability not to* tell a story.<sup>93</sup> Much more prominently, as perhaps a prototype of the non-writing-writer, we would find at the heart of this constellation the narrator of another story by Yehoshua, “The Continuing Silence of a Poet” (1966)—a self-declared “retired poet” (*meshorer be-dimos*), who, not unlike Amir’s “writer,” is still insistently called a “poet.” As its title suggests, the crux of this story can be described, in Agamben’s terminology, as an intuition that the poet “is potential insofar as he has [...] the potential to not-write poems”; and its plot as narrativizing this philosophical insight into a struggle between the poet’s insistence on holding on to this impotentiality and his son’s incessant attempts to force the fulfillment of the potential to write.<sup>94</sup>

By outlining here these short interpretative glosses, I mean not so much to offer them as potentials for future readings—in accordance with the conventional rhetoric of concluding by leaving questions open for further inquiry—but rather, as if those readings have already been realized, to point to the shared fantasmatic syntax of these 1960s texts: the threatening yet radically tempting fantasy of impotentiality. Bersani, who brings Agamben’s insights to bear on psychoanalysis, proposes, in a similar context, to rethink our conception of the unconscious—a proposal I wish to mobilize here as a potential intervention in literary theory. Describing how, in dreams, real accomplishments may be temporally juxtaposed with their own potential failures, Bersani remarks:

In this juxtaposition, the unconscious reveals itself not as a reservoir of repressed representations and impulses that aim to block the realization of our conscious projects but, precisely because the repressive ego prevents them from being realized, as the original reservoir of psychic virtualities.<sup>95</sup>

As literary parallels of Bersani’s friend’s dreams of failure, texts like “The Continuing Silence of a Poet,” “Facing the Forests,” “Prose,” and, of course, *The Living on the Dead* and its extended assemblage, may be read as manifesting a different kind of unconscious to the one usually attributed to Israeli culture. They seem to suggest a political unconscious that is less Freudian or Jamesonian than Bersanian: an unconscious that is political neither because of what it holds back as repressed content (as in the classic psychoanalytical conceptualization) nor because of the way it operates as an “absent cause” expressed in “ideologies of form” (as in Jameson’s Marxist version), but rather because it is revealed as a “reservoir of virtualities,” that is to say, of (im)potentialities, whose effect is a potentializing of established reality.

Its content “a coherent ontology of potentiality [which replaces] the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality,” or what Attell suggests to call “potentiology,” it can be described as *the potential unconscious* of a literature that, at this particular period, is troubled by the state of its own accomplished actuality as a “*chova le’umit*,” a national duty.<sup>96</sup> In this unconscious, the field of Hebrew literature is indeed reinscribed, in Bersani’s apt phrase, as “a field of

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<sup>93</sup> Yizhar, “Sipur she-lo hitchil,” 101.

<sup>94</sup> Yehoshua, “Shtika holekhet ve-nimshekhet shel meshorer” (The Continuing Silence of a Poet). In relation to the narrative framework of such texts as *The Living on the Dead*, “Facing the Forests,” and “Prose” (as well as of the non-Hebrew examples mentioned earlier), which put forward a full-fledged fantasmatic scenario of a writing retreat that turns into its own failure, “The Continuing Silence of a Poet” dramatizes only a part of this fantasy—the part in which writing already retreats.

<sup>95</sup> Bersani, “I Can Dream, Can’t I?,” 32.

<sup>96</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46; Attell, *Giorgio Agamben*, 91.

potentiality.” The fantasies of a retreat to non-writing that emerge in Israeli fiction of the 1960s thus project a view of this literature’s actuality as no more than a precipitate of its impotentialities, of its normatively denied yet potentially liberating potential to not write or be written. They promote an understanding of Israeli literature’s engagement with its own coming into being as a preservation of a desire for the neutral, even if, fittingly, by the neutral’s self-suspension. And through this persistence of the neutral they make available an image of a literature that claims, and fulfills, its freedom not to.

## Chapter Three

### Yossel Birstein's Pedagogy of Nuance

The neutral: that which carries difference even to the point of indifference. More precisely, that which does not leave indifference to its definitive equalization.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*<sup>1</sup>

To be clear: this is not about more intellectual sophistication. What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance. Now, there is a teacher of nuance, literature; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me.

—Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*<sup>2</sup>

#### I. *Der Purloined Briv*

What might a pedagogy of nuance look like? Barthes imagines it as a “discourse on the bit of difference” (*discours du peu de différence*): involving exercises with “micronetworks of words that are very similar but a tiny bit different,” such pedagogy “wouldn’t deny difference but would recognize the price of the ‘bit’.”<sup>3</sup> This chapter traces the teaching of nuance in the fiction of Yossel Birstein, arguing for an ethos of activism that distinguishes itself both from grand gestures of making a difference and from non-gestures of doing nothing, consisting rather in minimal, often nearly imperceptible yet nonetheless insistent tiny bits of difference. Barthes’s somewhat obscure reference to the “price of the ‘bit’,” which can be read to capture the challenge that nuance—that which is defined by its slightness and aspires to be no more than what it is—poses to a surplus-oriented economic logic, also surprisingly echoes the particular engagement with nuance in Birstein’s work, where everything seems to pass through the economic. Indeed, if, as I mentioned earlier, the economic paradox of the desire for the neutral is that it is nonmarketable, for Birstein nonmarketability designates not only the nature of his desire but also the conditions under which he operates as a writer. His teaching of nuance, in this sense, emerges as an ongoing negotiation with the economic crisis of his own writing.

As the notion of patience will turn out to play a critical role in this process of historical negotiation, the unfolding of Birstein’s ethos of nuance in this chapter will itself progress patiently and slowly, charting the stakes of difference and non-difference, value and non-value throughout his work. I begin with his early Yiddish story “The Letter” (*Der briv*), whose very

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 305.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 11; translation slightly modified.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

first sentence already dramatizes the kind of backwards fold that is typical of the double gesture of the neutral:

The letter that was sent to my uncle came back unopened, and on the envelope there was an additional word written in blue ink: “Dead.”<sup>4</sup>

דער בריוו, געשיקט צום פעטער, איז צוריקגעקומען אומגעעפנט און אויפן קאָנווערט איז געווען צוגעשריבן מיט אַ בלויער שריפט: “געשטאַרבן”.

The story thus opens with a scene of a letter both arriving and not arriving at its destination: having not found its original addressee, it arrives back to its sender, who has now become the letter’s new destination. Indeed, it comes back with a difference, as itself a new letter, a supplemented letter, a letter plus one word: “Dead.” Framed in such terms, this first sentence may readily invoke, as an initial (if partial) interpretative frame of reference, the heated and influential critical debate between Lacan and Derrida around Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” a debate particularly invested in the question of a letter’s arrival at its destination. Proceeding for the time being as though Birstein’s little known Yiddish story “The Letter” can be considered on an equal theoretical footing with Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”—bracketing temporarily both the politics of what makes a text susceptible to universal theorization and the by now thoroughly critiqued partiality of such universality—I wish to pursue in this section a reading of Birstein’s story in relation and as a possible contribution to the discourse of the letter, the question of its arrival, and the difference it might make.

Lacan’s seminar on Poe’s story famously ends with the assertion that “the sender [...] receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the ‘purloined letter,’ nay, the ‘letter in sufferance,’ means is that a letter always arrives at its destination.”<sup>5</sup> To this Derrida offers the deceptively naïve objection that “a letter can always not arrive at its destination.” Opposing in the name of “dissemination” what he describes as psychoanalysis’s “law of the signifier and of castration,” Derrida writes: “Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but that it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, as even the short sentence from Birstein’s story begins to illustrate, a letter’s not arriving is itself also another, different instance of arriving. Indeed, as Barbara Johnson brilliantly observes in “The Frame of Reference,” “when Derrida says that a letter can miss its destination and be disseminated, he reads ‘destination’ as a place which pre-exists the letter’s movement”;<sup>7</sup> but in fact “everyone who has held the letter—or even beheld it—including the narrator, has ended up having the letter addressed to him as its destination. The reader is comprehended by the letter. [...] The letter’s destination is thus *wherever it is read*. [...] Its destination is not a place, decided a priori by the sender, because the receiver *is* the sender, and the receiver is whoever receives the letter, including nobody.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Birstein, “Der briv,” 162; “The Letter,” unpaginated. Here and throughout the chapter, Alexandra Hoffman’s translation has been slightly modified. The story first appeared in the journal *Di Goldene Keyt* in 1959.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth,” 187.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” 248.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247-48.

Birstein's "The Letter" formulates its opening line in a way that situates its figure of the undelivered letter right at the heart of—and to some extent as a materialization of—this theoretical scene: in the scope of one simply constructed sentence, it dramatizes not only the instabilities of assigned destinations but also the reversals inherent to the roles of receiver and sender. Yet, setting thus its initial frame of reference around the problem of "the letter," the text then moves to describe not the letter's content—which, as in Poe, will remain unknown throughout the story—but rather its addressee, the narrator's reportedly dead uncle. This uncle, Mendl Kuper, lived with his wife in the back of their small, crowded grocery store, where they cleared out a tiny room for the narrator to move into when he first arrived in the country. The rather frugal and inconvenient living situation, however, turns out to be dictated not by material constraints but by the uncle's structure of superstition:

The other relatives didn't like that I was living with the old folks and they suspected that I came here to wait for an inheritance. From these relatives, I found out that my uncle had built a large building in the center of town, with many apartments, and left one of them empty. "He will never move in there," one of the relatives told me, "because he thinks that he will die if he moves, and he wants the apartment to wait for his death, just as we all are."<sup>9</sup>

די קרובים איז נישט געפעלן געוואָרן וואָס איך ווין צוזאַמען מיט די אַלטע לייט און זיי האָבן חושד געווען, אַז איך בין געקומען אַהער וואָרטן אויף דער ירושה. פון די קרובים האָב איך זיך דערוויסט, אַז דער פעטער האָט אויפגעבויט אין צענטער פון שטאָט אַ גרויס הויז מיט אַ סך דירות און איינע איבערגעלאָזט ליידיק.  
— ער וועט זיך קיין מאָל אַהין נישט אַרײַנציען — האָט מיר איינער פון די קרובים געזאָגט, — ווײַל ער מיינט, אַז אויב ער וועט עס טאָן, וועט ער שטאַרבן און ער וויל אַז פונקט ווי מיר זאָל אויך די דירה וואָרטן אויף זײַן טויט.

Lending a life-and-death import to the basic economic notion that cashing in on an investment annuls it as an investment, the uncle's idiosyncratic existential economy dictates that improving one's living conditions (by moving into the new apartment) would be tantamount to a death sentence, and, conversely, preserving the apartment as an unrealized yet always available investment would mean a potentially infinite deferral of death. To put it in slightly different economic terms, the uncle suspends both the apartment's use value (it is kept empty) and its exchange value (it is not put on the market for sale or rent) in a way that withdraws it from the normative commodity economy and displaces it into an alternative, superstitious economic order in which this commodity's exchange rate—its price—is the highest possible: if you want it, you would have to pay for it with your life.

Into this equation arrives the letter, which has the capacity to change even such a fundamentally unchangeable situation. Upon receiving the letter that has come back unopened, the narrator himself comes back from his new home at a kibbutz to the small grocery store in the city in order "to find out what happened"—only to find out that nothing has happened and the uncle is still alive. This sets the stage for the letter's second arrival, its arrival to *the uncle* as its destination:

<sup>9</sup> Birstein, "Der briv," 162; "The Letter," unpaginated.



I understood that my uncle was waiting for me to return all this time and he probably added the writing on the envelope himself. It was definitely he who did that. I felt fooled and offended. I will hand him back the letter and the envelope, I thought. [...] I took out the letter and gave it to him. I had to repeat myself twice until he caught on to what I was saying, and even after that he didn't understand what I wanted. He read impatiently, put the letter back into the envelope and his hands trembled.

“What, what is this?” he asked again. I slowly repeated everything.

“Who wrote this word?” he wanted to know.

“I don't know. Perhaps in the post office,” I pretended to guess.

“You sent this letter?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you write a letter?”

I realized from his questioning that he didn't believe me and suspected that I was the one who played a trick and added the word myself. It hadn't occurred to me earlier that he would suspect me of all people.<sup>10</sup>

שטייענדיק אין קעמערל האָב איך פֿאַרשטאַנען, אַז דער פעטער האָט די גאַנצע צייט געוואָרט איך זאָל צוריקקומען און האָט מסתמא אַליין צוגעשריבן דעם צושריפט אויפן קאַנווערט. זיכער האָט ער עס געטאַן. כ'האָב זיך דערפילט אָפגענאַרט און באַליידיקט. כ'וועל אים אָפגעבן דעם בריוו, האָב איך געטראַכט. [...] כ'האָב אַרויסגענומען דעם בריוו און אים געגעבן. צוויי מאָל האָב איך געדאַרפט איבערחזרן ביז ער האָט זיך געכאַפט וואָס איך מיינ און אויך נאָך דעם האָט ער נישט פֿאַרשטאַנען וואָס איך וויל; ער האָט געלייענט אומגעדולדיק, צוריק אַרײַנגעשטופט ס'בריוול אין קאַנווערט און זײַנע הענט האָבן געציטערט.

— וואָס, וואָס איז עס? האָט ער ווידער געפרעגט. כ'האָב פֿאוואָליע אַלץ איבערגעחזרט.

— ווער האָט אָנגעשריבן דעם צושריפט? — האָט ער געוואָלט וויסן.

— כ'ווייס נישט. מסתמא אין דער פֿאַסט.

— דו האָסט געשיקט דעם בריוו?

— יאָ.

— פֿאַר וואָס האָסטו געשריבן?

איך האָב דערקענט, אז ער גלייבט מיר ניט און איז חושד, אַז איך האָב עס אָפגעטאַן די זאַך און אַליין צוגעשריבן דעם צושריפט. אַז ער וועט מיר אין דעם חושד זײַן, איז מיר פֿרײַער ניט אַינגעפֿאַלן.

Beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion that both protagonists play out in this scene, the very gesture of handing the uncle the supplemented letter unwittingly and inevitably makes him now not only its (partial) referent but also its *addressee*, which, as if to demonstrate and reaffirm that “the letter’s destination is thus *wherever it is read* [...] and the receiver is whoever receives the letter,” would soon turn out to have far-reaching implications.<sup>11</sup> Too suspiciously occupied with the question of the letter’s authorship, however, the narrator initially fails to recognize the letter’s truly revolutionary effect on its new receiver. Only months later, when one of the relatives comes to visit him at the kibbutz, he learns to his surprise that “the old couple no longer live in the dark little rooms in the back of the store, but moved into the new apartment in the big building.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Birstein, “Der briv,” 164-5; “The Letter,” unpaginated.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” 248.

<sup>12</sup> Birstein, “Der briv,” 166; “The Letter,” unpaginated.

In line with the symbolic principle that making use of the new apartment equals death, yet effecting a reversal of this principle's directionality, the letter that carries the signifier "Dead" releases the uncle from his previous economic inhibitions: if he is already announced to be dead then nothing should stop him from progressing to the new apartment.<sup>13</sup> The uncle thus has the good fortune of occupying both positions in the life-and-death dyad: in a fashion indeed befitting one of Poe's dark protagonists—such as the character of M. Valdemar, who is alive enough to whisper at his doctors: "I say to you that I am dead!"—though in a much lighter register, the uncle is now both alive and "Dead," which allows him to utilize his investment as if his ultimate debt has been settled.<sup>14</sup> In other words, having ostensibly already paid for it with his life, at least on the level of the signifier, he can now peacefully go on with his life in the new apartment.

If in this second scene of arrival the letter that announces the uncle's death reaches its own "dead" subject as its destination, in a third scene, which follows a few months later, it finally finds its properly dead addressee. When he wishes to pay a visit to the uncle and aunt's new apartment, the narrator, who remains again one step behind the letter, discovers that they had already moved out. Back at the old grocery store, the uncle explains to him that the letter had initially arrived by error to a different M. Kuper who used to live in a similar address: "'I found everything out,' my uncle said, 'I checked at the post office and found everything out. It wasn't me—he's the one that died'."<sup>15</sup> Not being the one who is "Dead" anymore, the uncle, abiding by his own symbolic logic, had to move out of the apartment. "The Letter" thus ends with a reordering of the letter's movement under the banner of the mistake: "'A mistake, they made a mistake,' he repeated and his big head leaned to one side, like a sinking ship."<sup>16</sup>

Just as in Poe's story according to Lacan, in Birstein's "The Letter" too "we are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been *prolonged* [...] or, to revert to the language of the post office, a *letter in sufferance*."<sup>17</sup> The uncle's recognition that there has been a mistake, however, accompanied by his analysis of the mistake's mechanism, brings the letter back to its supposedly proper route, and, conceptually, to the notion of having one, proper, and predetermined destination "as a place which pre-exists the letter's movement."<sup>18</sup> Somewhat tragically, it is the uncle's desire for knowledge—his need to "find everything out," to decipher the displacement of the signifier—that brings about his own downfall through his insistence on the exposure of the mistake—that is, of truth. The mistake itself, on one level, is what originally generates the whole dynamics of the letter's circulation in the story; but on a different level, the level of analysis, the very use of the term "mistake" to account for this pattern of circulation, the idea that a destination can be either correct or mistaken, goes against the logic of the letter, and ends up reversing its structure of signification, thereby sending the uncle back to his old place.

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<sup>13</sup> Even though the uncle, like the narrator, seems initially occupied with the identity of the letter's sender ("Who wrote this word?"; "You sent this letter?"), he quickly comes to recognize the way the supplemented letter is addressed to him as its destination. In fact, it is the aunt who first picks up on the letter's promise:

"My sick aunt suddenly jumped out of bed, agile like a kitten, grabbed the envelope and started reading. Then she raised her face towards both of us, gestured with her arms, as if she was entrusting a big secret to us, and said: 'Shhh, don't tell anyone. No one should know.'" (Birstein, "Der briv," 165; "The Letter," unpaginated).

<sup>14</sup> Poe, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," 1242.

<sup>15</sup> Birstein, "Der briv," 167; "The Letter," unpaginated.

<sup>16</sup> Birstein, "Der briv," 167; "The Letter," unpaginated.

<sup>17</sup> Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" 43.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, "The Frame of Reference," 248.

“The letter that was sent to my uncle came back unopened”—read as an intervention in the theoretical routes of the letter, Birstein’s story thus begins where Lacan’s seminar ends: “the sender [...] receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form.”<sup>19</sup> But through the particular path it traces, it also takes a step further in dramatizing the relation between the letter and death, which Johnson begins to unpack toward the end of her essay. Indeed, Johnson’s first-person account of the letter’s reading by its receiver seems to articulate surprisingly accurately the uncle’s train of thought: “In any case, the letter is in a way the materialization of my death.”<sup>20</sup> Functioning for Birstein’s protagonist not only as a point of arrival but also as a point of departure, this insight itself (that the letter is the materialization of my death) is materialized—i.e., economized—by the uncle as he carries it over to the realm of his material living situation.

Death is already implied, according to Johnson, in Lacan’s essay’s famous final sentence: The sentence “a letter always arrives at its destination” can thus either be simply pleonastic or variously paradoxical: it can mean “the only message I can read is the one I send,” “wherever the letter is, is its destination,” “when a letter is read, it reads the reader,” “the repressed always returns,” “I exist only as a reader of the other,” “the letter has no destination,” and “we all die.”<sup>21</sup> If this last meaning, “we all die,” seems to resonate more immediately with Birstein’s story than with Poe’s, it is because “The Letter” explicitly posits as its subject the undelivered, returned letter, the so-called dead letter. Indeed, in its very first sentence it reanimates the dead metaphor of “a dead letter” by having the letter return as a “Dead” letter, a letter on whose envelope were added (*‘iz geven tzugetshribn*; fittingly, the verb appears in the passive voice and with no attributable agent) the letters of the word “Dead.” The poignant message that the story’s first sentence seems to convey is that an undelivered letter—any undelivered letter—always returns enveloped with death: the symbolic death of the receiver, certainly, but also by extension that of the sender, who is no longer a sender (for the receiver is gone and the letter came back) and who has become the receiver of a letter whose primary message now, its only new message, is an announcement of death. What this first sentence thus asks to remind us is not so much that a letter always arrives at its destination, and not quite that a letter can always not arrive, but, mitigating the difference between the two, that a letter always has the potential of arriving back undelivered and unopened; in this, it indeed seems to say that, senders and receivers alike, ultimately “we all die.”

Building on the conceptual momentum of the first sentence, the rest of the story, somewhat more comically, turns its attention to the paradoxical situation of being the destination of your own “Dead” letter. That this position is singled out in “The Letter” as what enables a baffling of the symbolic, as a gesture of turning the logic of the signifier against itself in order to escape its positioning power, marks Birstein’s story’s possible contribution—indeed, its supplementarity—to the discourse around Poe’s text. Already in a story as early as “The Letter,” then, Birstein begins to enact the kind of fold that is critical to—and is the critical force behind—what I have been describing above as the neutral’s double gesture of undoing, as the second scene of the letter’s arrival sees the structure of the “mistake” folded back onto itself. Indeed, it is this fortunate doubling of the mistaken signifier onto itself—its arrival to its referent as its addressee—that, at least for a little while, invites a thorough and liberating reshuffling of the economic paradigms that rule the uncle’s life.

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<sup>19</sup> Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” 249.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

## II. Economies of No Value

I'm a one dollar bill in the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange.  
What am I doing there, as a dollar?  
People want to convert me to a German mark.  
I don't want to be a German mark.  
They tell me it's worth my while.  
Because the mark will rise and the dollar will fall.  
I am standing in the corner, mumbling quietly that I'm fine with staying a fallen dollar.

—Yossel Birstein, *Dreams*, 1978<sup>22</sup>

The uncle's scheme, to be sure, is far from truly adhering to an ethos of the neutral. While “the paradox of the desire for the neutral, its absolute singularity, is that it is nonmarketable,” the uncle capitalizes on the bafflement of the market for his own good, seizing the opportunity to utilize the apartment in a way hitherto unavailable.<sup>23</sup> His gesture of undoing, in this sense, is a for-profit gesture. Nonetheless, “The Letter” can be read as an early if incomplete attempt by Birstein to imagine the kind of withdrawal—specifically, a withdrawal from the market—that in some of his later stories, as the next sections of this chapter will show, would crystalize as a withdrawal not to a different type of market (where it proves to be usable, exchangeable and profitable) but to a paradoxical state of nonmarketability, of baffling the economic injunction to be of value to a point where the value of action is barely distinguishable from that of non-action, and the political challenge (that is, the challenge presented by *le politique*) is to imagine an ethics of action irreducible to notions of influence or consequentiality.

Still, on a more basic level “The Letter” provides important insight into the primacy of the economy in Birstein's writing. In a story that seems principally concerned with the problem of the “letter” and its destinations, the relation between the letter and the apartment, that is, between the signifier and the commodity, demonstrates rather how in Birstein everything begins with, can be traced back to, and is dependent on the economic. The letter can assume such a life-changing meaning for the uncle—and such a plot-driving role in the text—only insofar as it is brought to bear on an already operative economic reasoning.

Indeed, the economy emerges as the privileged site in which the plot of a Birstein story unfolds, the primary discourse in terms of which his characters make sense of the world. Exhibiting a sort of fascination with the mechanisms of the economy, his texts keep returning to the scene of the economic transaction, often opening right into it, as the following short compilation of first sentences from Birstein's collection of stories *A Drop of Silence* (*Ketem shel*

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<sup>22</sup> Birstein, *Chalomot*, 1978 (*Dreams*, 1978), 284.

אני שטר של דולר בבורסה בתל-אביב.  
מה אני עושה שם, בתור דולר?  
רוצים להמיר אותי למארק גרמני.  
אינני רוצה להיות מארק גרמני.  
אומרים לי שכדאי לי.  
כי המארק יעלה והדולר ייפול.  
אני עומד בפינה וממלמל בלחש שאני מוכן להישאר דולר נפול.

<sup>23</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 13.

*sheket*) livelily illustrates:<sup>24</sup> “I didn’t mean to wake the beggar who fell asleep on the sidewalk, her back against the wall. To the chime of the first coin I dropped into her can, she got up” (115); “In Kir’yat Tiv’on I had a neighbor, a coachman. In the summer he sold fruit, and in the winter—oil. And all year long he collected old clothes that people threw out” (165); “Two meetings: with a store owner in Jerusalem and a beggar in Haifa” (129); “Why did the little woman call me ‘ma’am’? I didn’t mean to touch the flowery shirt she held by the shoulders and wiggled in front of me in the hope that I would buy it. When she saw what I did she held up five fingers, to let me know the price of this used garment” (17); “This story is about a felt hat with a side buckle, worn by a woman who used to come to the bank with her husband once a week to look for a mistake in their account” (163); “Unlike the other customers, the butcher Pinchastzik came to our bank in order to invest in the stock market—and lose” (153).

This small (though vastly expandable) archive of opening scenes demonstrates not only how Birstein’s protagonists are constantly buying, selling, exchanging, bartering, or otherwise engaging in economic or financial activities, but also how these transactions often carry a strange twist that makes them go awry. For all its hyperawareness of the economic dimension of everyday life, Birstein’s fiction appears not as interested in the smooth or proper functioning of the economy as in its potential dysfunctioning, in the various ways in which it might not work as planned, and, particularly, in charting moments of transition into, out of, and between different economies. Thus, the central plotline of “The Letter” is made up of the uncle and aunt’s movement in and out of the apartment, standing for the abstract and more fundamental movement of this apartment itself—as a commodity—in and out of actual and symbolic economies. Or, to take another example, the entire plot of Birstein’s novel *The Beneficiaries* (*Ha-mutavim*), arguably one of the most economic plots in modern Hebrew literature, takes place in or around a bank, following the protagonist, Solomir, in his mission to convince as many people as possible to open a bank account and invest in special stocks, so that he himself could receive a loan from the bank and fund his dream museum, dedicated to showcasing such objects that can only be described as junk.<sup>25</sup> In these economic scenarios, commodities exhibit not only use and exchange value but also what Bill Brown has suggestively termed “misuse value”—a value that inheres in the possibility of dislodging a commodity from its customary scene of circulation, of “free[ing] objects from the systems to which they’ve been beholden.”<sup>26</sup> For Brown, whose critical interest lies primarily in rethinking our relation to things, misuse value comes to designate the stakes of using an object unnaturally and uncustomarily, a practice that might recuperate our sense of the materiality of an object, its thingness as a thing.<sup>27</sup> But though

<sup>24</sup> *Ketem shel sheket*, published in 1986, was Birstein’s first collection of *ktzartzarim*—the “very short stories” that became his signature genre in the latter stages of his career. See my discussion of the development of his poetics below.

<sup>25</sup> Even though the novel was originally written in Yiddish in the 1970s, its first publication was in Hebrew in 1982, under the title *Ha-mutavim* (*The Beneficiaries*; translated by Menakhem Perry). The second Hebrew edition (1984) was retitled *Ha-bursa* (*The Stock Exchange*), before the original title was restored for the revised reissuing of the novel in 2000. In Yiddish the novel was first published only in 1985, as *Der zamlar* (*The Collector*). Fragments of the text appeared in Hebrew in the journal *Siman Kri’a* (also in Perry’s translation) already in 1976.

<sup>26</sup> Bill Brown, “How to do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” 953. On his concept of “misuse value,” partially extrapolated from Benjamin’s and Adorno’s reflections on child’s play, see *ibid.*, 952-56; and his *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, 74-80.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, for example, “forced to use a knife as a screwdriver, you achieve a new recognition of its thinness, its hardness, the shape and size of the handle” (*A Sense of Things*, 78). This value of misuse comes into play, according to Brown, in an episode from Frank Norris’s novel *McTeague*, where one of McTeague’s friends bets him that he cannot fully mouth a billiard ball. This feat—which almost fails terribly as McTeague breathlessly struggles to slip

“misuse value” is coined and conceptualized primarily against the notion of use value, its effect is also “palpable in and as irregular exchange,” in and as “dislocation from one system into another.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in one of his more expansive and evocative formulations Brown defines misuse value as “a value that resides outside (or in violation) of the dictates of use and exchange.”<sup>29</sup>

It is in this kind of elusive value that Birstein’s fiction is most invested. In “The Letter,” when the apartment’s use and exchange values are suspended, it is in favor of an existential misuse value (with a life-and-death exchange rate) that indeed resides outside the dictates of normative economy. Only after the letter plays its trick on the symbolic order, a hitherto unavailable use of the apartment is suddenly made possible, restoring the apartment’s use value for the uncle; but the great effect and achievement of the dynamics of economic dislodging in this text is that this kind of regular, customary use now feels more like misuse in its own right. Similarly, Solomir, the protagonist of *The Beneficiaries*, collects other people’s discarded items (along with their old Yiddish books) in order to reconstitute their value in his fantasized museum/library; however petty and provincial his endeavors may seem at times, Solomir emerges as a modernist collector and curator of misuse value, participating in the tradition of such artists as Duchamp (with the urinal turned *Fountain*) and Picasso (the bicycle seat turned *Bull’s Head*), whom Brown describes as “the new dealers in junk”: “just as Mary Douglas has taught us to think of dirt as ‘matter out of place,’ so too modernism teaches us that finding a new place for detritus, recycling it into some new scene, confers new value on it.”<sup>30</sup> In both “The Letter” and *The Beneficiaries*, then, as elsewhere in Birstein’s fiction, misuse value operates on multiple levels of the text: defined as “dislocation from one system into another” and “recycling into a new scene,” it captures in these works both the local relation of characters to the world of commodities that surrounds them and the broader structural logic of the narrative. And as will become clear later in this section, these plots of economic dislocation are as concerned with the movement of falling *out* of value as they are with the modernist gesture of conferring new value.

The dialectical tension between the emptying of existing value and the establishment of new value may help explain the prevalence in Birstein’s world of used objects. Having already been used, such objects often walk the fine line between becoming trash—being completely used-up—and possibly having a second career as a “used commodity.” Used commodities thus call our attention to the fact that things, too, have their own biographies that unfold and develop over time as these objects move in and out of the commodity state.<sup>31</sup> But their presence and circulation in Birstein’s stories also seem to indicate both the ubiquity and the openness of the economic, the potential of anything to undergo economization, as in the beginning of the story “This Week I Rummaged through the Used Books”:

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out the ball he shoved into his mouth—provokes a sense of “the size, shape, substance, and taste of a billiard ball the way that no narrative account of the game of billiard could.” (ibid., 77).

<sup>28</sup> Brown, “How to do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” 954.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 212n62. In other words, if “exchange value is the condition for the retroactive construction of the use of an object as an expression of its value” (Guillory, “The Discourse of Value,” 301) and thus “there is no use value without exchange value” (Baudrillard, “Concerning the Fulfillment of Desire in Exchange Value,” 205)—then, by extension, misuse value is always-already also a disruption of the system of exchange. See my discussion of the relations between use value and exchange value in chapter 1, section 3.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 78.

<sup>31</sup> See Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process.”

This week I rummaged through the used books on the upper shelves in the store. The area was covered in spider webs, with a thick greenish layer of scum here and there. I stuck my head in there, stretched my hand inside, and was very excited to see the book that I pulled out. As I climbed down the ladder, the store owner noticed my excitement and quoted an exorbitant price. The book itself wasn't rare, and the owner was curious to hear why I was so excited. I said to him: either money or a story. He chose the money and I kept the story.<sup>32</sup>

השבוע חיטטתי בין ספרים משומשים, על המדפים העליונים שבחנות. קורי עכביש כיסו את המקום, ופה ושם היתה אף ירוקת סמיכה מאוד. תקעתי לתוכה את ראשי, הושטתי יד, וכשראיתי את הספר שהוצאתי משם, הייתי נרגש עד מאוד. בעל החנות הבחין בכך, כשירדתי מן הסולם, ונקב במחיר מפולפל. הספר לא היה יקר-המציאות, ובעל החנות הסתקן לשמוע מדוע התרגשתי. אמרתי לו: או כסף או סיפור. הוא בחר בכסף, והסיפור נשאר אצלי.

The curious gap between the book's market value and what appears to be its affective value prompts the narrator to raise the stakes of the transaction and offer his story—the story explaining the source of his excitement—as a means of exchange. As we promptly learn, this story is itself a story of bargaining and misuse, delineating how, as a child, the narrator had once bought the very same book that he just found in the store—Spinoza's *Ethics*—and, though not understanding a thing, “read it all the way through and took pleasure in every word.”<sup>33</sup>

In the text's broader frame of bargaining, the business-like matter-of-factness with which the failure of the negotiation is reported in the last two sentences of the first paragraph—“I said to him: either money or a story. He chose the money and I kept the story”—complements formally the commodification of storytelling (and by extension, of literature) that they describe. Yet, given the engaged affective registers of the anecdotes that precede and follow it (the two episodes of buying the Spinoza book), the supposedly smooth and indifferent transition from “I said to him: either money or a story” to “he chose the money and I kept the story” can also be read to intimate simultaneously both disappointment at the failure to materialize the deal and contentment with the fact that the narrator does not have to sell his story after all (as in “I was lucky enough to get to keep the story”). Rather than strictly keeping the story to himself, however, the narrator, as though compensating for his offer's rejection, immediately turns to tell the anecdote to his implied readers, who now become themselves unwittingly implicated in the scene of the economic transaction, situated as they are at the receiving end of what was just offered as a money substitute. Within this readerly structure, more than merely drawing attention to the familiar truth that literature too can be made into a commodity, the circulation of the “story” within the story seems to record not only an initial wish to claim the value of the “story,” to prove its exchangeability, but also a strange sense of pride in finally being able to offer the readers, free of charge, a story that, according to one opinion, should be worth at least a used copy of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

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<sup>32</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 197. In the original 1986 edition of *A Drop of Silence*, each story is indicated by both a title—after the first words of the text—and a serial number. In the posthumously published volume *Sipurim me-ezor ha-shalva* (Stories from the Realm of Tranquility), some of these stories, reprinted in a new order and in a slightly revised version, have also been retitled. Throughout this chapter, I use the original titles from *A Drop of Silence* or shortened versions thereof.

<sup>33</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 198.

Such play of valuation and misuse, which proliferates throughout Birstein's world and threatens to subsume everything in it, dramatizes to an extreme, on the one hand, Guillory's observation that "the premise of our social life is *the absolute commensurability of everything*. [...] Every social relation of any kind can be reified in discourse as a value."<sup>34</sup> In this sense, for all its eccentricity, the uncle's surrealistically existential superstition in "The Letter," according to which death is construed as no more than an economic problem and, conversely, the economy becomes a matter of life and death, seems merely to ventriloquize the underlying premise of Birstein's fiction, reaffirmed time and again in its economic plotting, that everything is commensurable. Indeed, through the incessant dramatization of economic interactions, everything in Birstein's world appears to be susceptible to reification in a discourse of value—even the letter, even death, even the "story" itself.

But on the other hand, as the accumulation of examples in the previous pages hopefully demonstrates, what in Guillory's formulation is a relentless operation of discursive reification, in Birstein's work is often a disrupted, frustrated, and broken down process. Staging a similar paradox to that of the desire for the neutral according to Barthes—the paradoxicality and singularity of a desire that is nonmarketable—the premise here is the absolute commensurability of everything, except that some things (in fact, many things) simply fail to be commensurate. Thus, in their openness to "what resides outside (or in violation) of the dictates of use and exchange," Birstein's stories insist on reminding us that if "every social relation of any kind *can* be reified in discourse as a value," these relations *can* also *not* be so reified. To the extent that commensurability (even if "absolute" and "of everything") denotes a potential, a potential to be exchanged, it also denotes its own impotentiality, the potential to not be exchanged.



Birstein's gradual turn to storytelling as his literary style of choice curiously if implicitly complements his fascination with the vicissitudes of the economic. Having started his literary career as a Yiddish poet in Australia (to which he had moved from his hometown in Poland in 1937, at age 17), Birstein immigrated to Israel in 1950, where he promptly became one of the founding members of the modernist Yiddish literary group *Yung Yisroel*.<sup>35</sup> Soon, however, he transitioned from poetry to fiction, publishing in the subsequent years a Yiddish novel and several short stories and novellas, while gravitating in the process toward what critics have long

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<sup>34</sup> Guillory, "The Discourse of Value," 323; emphasis added. According to Guillory, "Because the commensurability or 'commodification' of all objects is for us the inescapable horizon of social life, every discourse of judgement must now represent its object as the expression of 'value'" (ibid., 322-23).

<sup>35</sup> The core members of the group at the time of its formation in 1951 were Rivka Basman, Avrom Rintzler, Moyshe Yungman, Shlomo Vorzoger, Zvi Eizenman, H. Binyomin (known in Hebrew as Binyamin Hrushovski, later Harshav), and Birstein. Their first two publications as a group appeared as special collective dossiers (the first of which was titled "from the young Yiddish literature in Israel") in Avrom Sutzkever's journal *Di Goldene Keyt*, before the group went on to establish its own journal, *Yung Yisroel* (active between 1954 and 1957), as well as an independent publishing house by the same name. Recent studies by Chana Kronfeld and Shachar Pinsker shed new light not only on the forgotten history of *Yung Yisroel* itself but also on the formative if suppressed role it played in the development of Israeli modernism, and particularly on its often disregarded affiliation with the Hebrew modernist poetic group *Likrat*. See Kronfeld, "*Dyokan ha-choker ki-mshorer du-leshoni*" (A Portrait of the Scholar as a Bilingual Poet); Kronfeld, "Harshav's *Likrat*: Toward a New Poetics and Politics of the 'Statehood Generation'"; Pinsker, "Choosing Yiddish in Israel: *Yung Yisroel* between Home and Exile, the Center and the Margins"; Pinsker, "'That Yiddish Has Spoken to Me': Yiddish in Israeli Literature"; Pinsker, "*Bayit yashan, erez chadasha*" (Old Home, New Land).



described as the style of a modern storyteller, a latter-day *maggid* (the traditional Jewish preacher).<sup>36</sup> This style found its fullest expression with Birstein's turn in the beginning of the 1980s to the genre of the *ktzartzarim* (very short stories)—little tales, about one page long, in which “he presented himself as a folk storyteller, or modern ‘maggid,’ who derives his materials from the simple people on the streets. The new style created the impression of an oral tale that is built on short, strong sentences, which demand the reader's attention from the very beginning and culminate with a surprising and grotesque ending.”<sup>37</sup> Around the same time, Birstein also switched to writing almost exclusively in Hebrew, and thus the critically acclaimed *A Drop of Silence*, which came out in 1986 and soon became the hallmark of Birstein's signature style, was in fact both his first collection of *ktzartzarim* and his first book originally written in Hebrew. Yet, what is often neglected in discussions of Birstein's evolution into the storyteller that he came to be in *A Drop of Silence* is the extent to which storytelling is always guided by an economic logic and conceives of itself, as Walter Benjamin famously argues in “The Storyteller,” as “contain[ing], openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.”<sup>38</sup>

In a complex mirroring of form and content, the “useful” style of Birstein's narratives thus complements (and in some sense overcompensates for) these stories' recurrent dramatizations of the impasses of misuse; and both, I want to argue—i.e., both the form of storytelling and the economic “premise” of what is being told—correspond to an external and constitutive crisis of value that haunts Birstein's fiction itself from the outset. As early as 1951, Birstein, then still writing exclusively in Yiddish, formulated this crisis as the problem of being “a Yiddish writer in

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<sup>36</sup> Many of these stories were self-translated by Birstein into Hebrew in collaboration with his friend, the writer and playwright Nissim Aloni (who himself did not know Yiddish). See, for example, Birstein, *Nesi'ato ha-rishona shel Rolider* (Rolider's First Journey). On Birstein's storytelling, see note 37.

<sup>37</sup> Pinsker, “Yossel Birstein.” The poetics of the *ktzartzar* can be seen at work even in my short and fragmentary quotations from the stories of *A Drop of Silence* above. For a comprehensive critical and biographical account of the evolution of Birstein's writing that convincingly locates it in relation to the long tradition of modern Eastern-European Jewish storytelling, see David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, 329-44. In his opening remarks to a 1976 interview published in the journal *Siman Kri'a*, whose aim was to introduce Birstein for the first time to the Hebrew reading public, Menakhem Perry was one of the first to identify Birstein as a modern-day personification of the traditional figure of the *maggid*, the Jewish preacher. In this interview, that reportedly lasted a whole day, Birstein joyfully and wholeheartedly embraced and performed the stance and persona of the affluent, nearly obsessive storyteller, associatively skipping from one tale to another, often stringing together a lengthy series of anecdotes before returning to answer Perry's questions (Birstein, “Kavim yechefim u-tslil: sicha shel Yossel Birstein im Menakhem Perry” [Barefoot Lines and a Sound: A Conversation of Yossel Birstein with Menakhem Perry]). Already on that occasion, however, Perry made sure to warn against subsuming Birstein's compositionally complex narrative techniques under the image of a carelessly associative and anecdotal train of storytelling, a concern that later became central to Perry's extensive essay “To Come Back from the End: A Reading Proposal in Birstein” (*La-chzor me-ha-sof: hatza'at kri'a be-Birstein*), which aimed to dispel the myth of Birstein the natural storyteller in favor of a detailed structuralist analysis of the mechanisms of his prose. Biographically, as Roskies notes, “the story of how Yossel Birstein became a storyteller is just as compelling as the stories he learned to tell” (*A Bridge of Longing*, 330). For my concerns here, let me just point out that his turn to the *ktzartzarim* evolved in part out of his experience in the Israeli radio, where he was invited to fill a four-minute slot in Micah Lewensohn's weekly show on Galey Tzahal; trying to negotiate the constraints of this task, he finally “hit upon a written style that affected orality, grabbed the listener within a sentence or two, and began with a chance encounter on the street” (Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 335). For fuller accounts of Birstein's career, see, in addition to Roskies's book, Pinsker, “Yossel Birstein” and Abraham Novershtern, “The Multi-coloured Patchwork on the Coat of a Prince: On Yossel Birstein's Work.”

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 86.

a kibbutz.” In a lecture by this title, “*A yiddisher shrayber in kibbutz,*” given at the first meeting of *Yung Yisroel*, Birstein analyzed the multiple challenges and implications of writing Yiddish in the Hebrew-dominated, Zionist-socialist cultural environment of Israel in the 1950s—an endeavor distinctly different and far more complicated than either writing Yiddish in diaspora or writing Hebrew in Israel.<sup>39</sup> While, as Shachar Pinsker notes, Birstein indeed “does not offer a clear-cut solution but exhibits an acute awareness of the complex predicament of Yiddish writings in Israel,” he also seems to insist, especially towards the end of the lecture, on a positive, optimistic outlook for the future of Yiddish: “this is now our first meeting, and I believe that together it will be easier for us to find our own faces in this cloud of confusion and exploration. [...] And mainly, remember that it is not on account of anybody’s favor, but by virtue of its life here, that Yiddish can have an existence in this land.”<sup>40</sup>

The cautious optimism of “*A Yiddish Writer in a Kibbutz,*” rooted in the view that this problem has almost as much to do with the approach of the Yiddish writers as with the conditions of literary production designated here by the signifier “kibbutz,” gives way to an almost elegiac assessment of the reality of Yiddish writing in Birstein’s 1956 article “*Aspects.*” The article, dedicated to the innovative conceptual poetry of Birstein’s friend and fellow *Yung Yisroel* member Avrom Rinzler, concludes by tainting the familiar modernist rhetoric of newness with the unfortunate futility of such a claim to be heard in Yiddish: “[Rinzler’s] poems are not made for journals whose average reader is sixty or seventy years old. His poems and his way are new, and therefore he needs new, young readers, who would possess all the advantages as well as all the disadvantages of youth. This does not exist (*dos iz nishto*). Not here, not anywhere.”<sup>41</sup> To the extent that Rintzler’s predicament represents a shared crisis—that is, to the extent that

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<sup>39</sup> Refusing the conventional nostalgic tropes that have become increasingly associated with Yiddish at that period, Birstein asserts, for example: “I have started to think that only here, in the life of this people, the life that I too live, am I required to look for justification for my Yiddish or for Yiddish literature. And I will not turn to apologetics, such that it can be a means for preserving the treasures of Diaspora. Yiddish, even when it adds nothing to the life of the people of Israel, is justified in and of itself, just as a man’s life is justified in and of itself” (Birstein, “*A yiddisher shrayber in kibbutz*” [A Yiddish Writer in a Kibbutz], 164, my translation). The founding meeting of *Yung Yisroel* was held in October 1951 in Kibbutz Yagur, and Birstein’s talk was published a few months later in *Di Goldene Keyt*. Positing the predicament of the Yiddish writer vis-à-vis a dominantly Hebrew social environment, Birstein, of course, also responds here to—and situates his case within and as a particular historical variation of—the long history of cultural negotiations between the Hebrew and Yiddish languages and literatures. For important work on these cultural and linguistic negotiations, see, for example, Benjamin Harshav’s classical study *The Meaning of Yiddish*; Chana Kronfeld’s groundbreaking *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*, and her recent extensive and programmatic call for bi- and multilingual historiographies of Jewish literatures in “The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish”; Naomi Seidman’s seminal study of the gendered and sexual construction of the Hebrew-Yiddish conflicted symbiosis, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish*; Yael Chaver’s comprehensive account of the repression of Yiddish in the period of the pre-state Yishuv, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine*; Dan Miron’s proposal for a new approach to Jewish literary thought, *Harpaya le-tzorekh negi’a: Li-krat chashiva chadasha al sifruyot ha-yehudim* (From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking); and Ghil’ad Zuckermann’s provocative model of linguistic hybridization, according to which the language spoken today by Israelis should be conceived of not as Hebrew but as “Israeli” (*yisre’elit*), a convergence of Hebrew, Yiddish, and other languages (*Yisre’elit safá yafa* [Israeli, a Beautiful Language]). For an account of the state of Yiddish in post-Holocaust sovereign Israel, see Pinsker, “Choosing Yiddish in Israel,” and in particular his survey of different approaches to this problem (277-79). My focus in this chapter is on reading the image of Yiddish literature that emerges in Birstein’s writing not so much in light of external historiographical or theoretical accounts but in its own terms—namely, as I argue in what follows, as an economic crisis.

<sup>40</sup> Pinsker, “Choosing Yiddish in Israel,” 288; Birstein, “*A yiddisher shrayber in kibbutz,*” 167; my translation.

<sup>41</sup> Birstein, “*Aspektn*” (Aspects), 57; my translation.

Birstein writes here about himself as much as about his friend—Birstein’s own coming into being as an Israeli writer seems to be troubled from very early on by the impasse of writing for no one.

Decades later, even though Birstein has long since transitioned to writing in Hebrew, this impasse still surfaces in the stories of *A Drop of Silence*: “I was told that I belong to the past—telling stories about old people and after many years of living in Israel still writing in Yiddish, a deaf-mute language that no one speaks and no one hears. It wasn’t said to my face. I overheard people talking about me. And I agreed. I could even add that I get annoyed when I am not pleased with a page I wrote in Yiddish. What is there to be annoyed about? Words that would not be read or heard?”<sup>42</sup> While, as I claimed in the previous chapter, the establishment of national sovereignty sees Hebrew Israeli writers turn to an imaginary fantasy of a “freedom not to write,” Yiddish Israeli writers, at least on Birstein’s account, face the reality of writing for a reading public that is already not to be found, a reading public that is simply *nistho*. In the words of the protagonist of the story “I Saw That This Business Wasn’t Going Anywhere,” to which I return in detail in the next section, “there are no Yiddish readers anymore, so what’s to point of bringing out a book?”<sup>43</sup> Yiddish literature’s dilemma of ineffectuality thus appears as the stalemate of a literary production that is left with no exchange value, if not with no market at all. Read economically, “the complex predicament of Yiddish writings in Israel” is conceptualized by Birstein first and foremost as a crisis of a vanishing marketability, of an entire literature’s falling out of value.

Thus, the obsessive return to the economic *in* Birstein’s fiction can be traced back to the economic crisis of this fiction itself. In both their content and their form, Birstein’s stories seem to manifest a will to recuperate, often excessively and compulsively, a horizon of commensurability that the text itself is lacking in reality. The deep ambivalence that informs these stories’ investment in the problem of economic participation—the seemingly equal appeal of the dictates of absolute exchangeability and commensurability, on the one hand, and of their violations and disruptions on the other—can be understood to express both a formative desire to be of value and an awareness of the inevitable frustration of this desire, the nagging feeling of futility that inheres in a text which no one can or wants to read. Yet, as I will show in the following sections of this chapter, beyond this range of affective responses, Birstein’s fiction also intimates a sense of quiet contentment with being of no value, a sense of possibility found precisely in the impasse of ineffectuality. Out of this impasse, and as its paradoxically logical conclusion, it offers an ethos of action precisely where no action seems to either matter or be possible at all.



I concluded my discussion of “The Letter” in the first section of this chapter by suggesting that the story’s privileging of the uncle’s position—the position of being the addressee of a letter that announces your own death—provides for its theoretical supplementarity with regard to the critical debate around Poe’s story. But on a more basic level, the most conspicuous supplementarity of Birstein’s “*Der briv*” to Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” seems to lie precisely in the difference between *letter* and *briv*. While the debate around Poe’s story, being a paradigmatic encounter between French Theory, English literature, and American academia,

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<sup>42</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 173.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

constitutes a theoretical scene that is decidedly English-French (following, perhaps, the text of “The Purloined Letter” itself, which, after all, begins with the words “At Paris” and ends with a French quote), for Birstein the non-marketable language of his own text poses a problem of transmissibility and readability—of a story’s capability to reach its destination. Thus, if it wishes to be true to its own critical logic, any reading of Birstein’s “The Letter” as a possible intervention in the theories of the letter—the kind of reading I have been rehearsing above—cannot not take into account this story’s own cultural-linguistic conditions of possibility, or what amounts to be, in this case, conditions of near-impossibility. Indeed, considered in a historicized linguistic frame of reference, the elaborate dramatization of the letter’s movement in this story and the text’s own scene of production may be brought to bear on each other. On this reading, the abstract question whether a letter “always arrives at its destination” (as Lacan would have it) or whether it is “capable, always, of not arriving” (as Derrida would) gives way to a more concrete set of questions, articulated in Yiddish and of Yiddish: Can a *briv*—or rather, אַ בריוו—*ever* arrive at a destination? Does a *briv*—אַ בריוו—even have a destination?

As if to reinforce this line of inquiry, the narrator of “The Letter,” writing his Yiddish letter to the uncle from his new home in a kibbutz, is himself, in a very concrete sense, “a Yiddish writer in a kibbutz.” Recreating thus the paradigmatic scene of writing outlined in Birstein’s 1951 article, “The Letter” mobilizes the full meaning attributed in this early article to the prepositional phrase “in a kibbutz” as it forms an allegorical structure in which the fate of Yiddish literature (in a kibbutz) is dramatized and reconceived as the fate of an undelivered letter. Yiddish literature comes back, unread, as a dead letter that announces the non-receptivity of its receivers, the non-existence of its audience.

This structure is duplicated on yet another level, as the text of the story is preceded, in accordance with the editorial conventions of the journal *Di Goldene Keyt*, where it was first published in 1959, not only by the name of its author but also by the location of its writing. Living at the time in Kibbutz Gvat in northern Israel, Birstein thus signs his story “Yossel Birstein / Gvat”—and so, before it even begins, “The Letter” is itself framed on the pages of *Di Goldene Keyt* as a Yiddish writing from a kibbutz:

יאָסל בירשטיין / גבת

## דער בריוו

דער בריוו, געשיקט צום פעטער, איז צוריקגעקומען אומגעעפנט און אויפן קאָנ-  
ווערט איז געווען צוגעשריבן מיט אַ בלויער שריפט: „געשטאַרבן“.

Given the layout of the text on the page, the immediate repetition of the story’s title in its first two words invites us to read the opening sentence—“The letter [...] came back unopened, and on the envelope there was an additional word written in blue ink: ‘Dead’”—as folding back onto the title that precedes it, thereby referring not only to the letter (on the diegetic level) but also to “The Letter,” as though presciently yet pessimistically acknowledging, as soon as the text begins, that it is also “The Letter” itself—the Yiddish story—that would come back unopened, enveloped with the word “Dead.”

A threefold analogy thus establishes itself, in which the narrator and his letter, the author and his “The Letter,” and the paradigmatic “Yiddish Writer in a Kibbutz” all reflect each other. Within this allegorical formation, all these Yiddish writers, writing from their respective kibbutzim, take part in the dynamics of the letter. In this dynamics, we find not only that, as Johnson put it, “the receiver is the sender, and the receiver is whoever receives the letter,” but also that literature is the letter, and the letter is “The Letter,” and, most poignantly, “The Letter” is “*Der briv*”—the kind of letter, a *briv*, that returns in a reversed form, announcing “*Geshtorbn*.” Indeed, if it turns its sender into a receiver, it is only because its intended receivers “[do] not exist. Not here, not anywhere.”

Yet, in a way that corresponds to a Benjaminian view of allegory, the coordinates of the allegorical relation between the fate of the letter and the non-marketable state of Yiddish literature offer themselves up for realignment as the story progresses. For, as my reading of the story in the first section has labored to demonstrate, the uncle too becomes the destination of the returned letter, such that the message that it carries—“Dead”—communicates not only the preclusion but also the opening up of possibility. “The Letter” can thus be read to imagine the problem of the Yiddish letter—of Yiddish literature—as overdetermined, prefigured at once in the positions of both the narrator and the uncle. It thus suggests to reconceive the question of the Yiddish writer not only as the crisis of having your letters from the kibbutz return to you as signs of a dead market but also as the provocation of discovering yourself as the destination of your own “Dead” letter, as both the receiver and referent of the message “*dos iz nishto*,” “this doesn’t exist,” the message of your own fall out of value. At least in part, then, the question of the Yiddish writer now assumes the surprisingly open challenge of responding to such a letter.

### III. On Not Going Anywhere: The Yiddish Writer as a Patient of History

“The Letter” may thus be read as the beginning of an attempt to conceptualize the stakes of writing Yiddish in Israel beyond the evaluative and corrective outlook that implicitly guides Birstein’s articles from the period, whether in the form of the vague optimism of “A Yiddish Writer in a Kibbutz” or of the pessimistic acceptance of “Aspects.” But while “The Letter” presents its case allegorically, in the later story “I Saw That This Business Wasn’t Going Anywhere” the non-value of Yiddish makes its appearance on the surface of the text as the plot’s foundation; and while the uncle is still driven by a logic of profitability, attempting to capitalize on the very bafflement of the market, the protagonist of “I Saw That This Business” acts on his own crisis of value in a manner so nuanced that his actions turn out to amount to nothing, just as intended.

At the heart of the story is one central act by the narrator (also named Yossel), which is described at the very beginning of the text:

I saw that this business wasn't going anywhere. It's been four years since I submitted a Yiddish manuscript to the A. M. Dik Publishing House and it still hasn't been published. I took it back. I secretly took it out of the closet of the manager, Shlomo Kreitzer, and he didn't notice a thing.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 139.

ראיתי שהעסק לא זז. עברו ארבע שנים מאז מסרתי כתב-יד ביידיש לספרייה על שם א. מ. דיק, ועדיין לא הוציאו אותו לאור. לקחתי אותו בחזרה. בחשאי הוצאתי אותו מארוננו של המנהל, שלמה קר׳יצר, והוא כלל לא הבחין בדבר.

Opening with and constructed around an act of taking a Yiddish manuscript out of a closet, the whole text can be read as an attempt to trace an epistemology of the Yiddish closet. This seemingly decisive act, however, would turn out to be a performance of a “coming out” that is in fact a “going in” and eventually revealed to have no influence at all and to be a mere “staying in the same place.” For in taking the manuscript *out* of the closet, Yossel in fact prevents the possibility of it ever being truly brought *out*—that is, published. As the act of publishing is rendered in Hebrew by the verbal phrase *le-hotsi la-or* (literally, “to take out into the light”), the same verb serves here to describe both the (non)publishing of the manuscript (*ve-adayin lo hotsi’u oto la-or*, “it still hasn’t been published”; literally, “it still hasn’t been taken out into the light”) and its appropriation by the narrator (*hotseti oto*, “I took it out”). And so, highlighting the lively paradox of Yossel’s liberating act, the same verb, *le-hotsi*, “to take out,” serves here twice to designate the movement of the manuscript *out*—but *out* in two different, oppositional directions.

In its concrete economic context, Yossel’s act thus restages the familiar movement of misuse value, the movement of a commodity in and out of actual and symbolic economies, which once again proves so central to the genesis and progress of the Birstein plot. But here, the act of withdrawing the manuscript from the market, taking it out of its commodity state, is also an act of withdrawal from the very kernel of activity that makes it into an act. Committed “secretly” (*ba-chashay*) and without the manager noticing a thing, the taking of the manuscript is effectively an act of theft: practically if not formally, Yossel simply steals his own manuscript. A suggestive categorical distinction offered in Norman O. Brown’s seminal study *Hermes the Thief* between *theft* as “appropriation by stealth” and *robbery* as an “open and forcible appropriation” might help tease out the nuances of this act, as Yossel turns out to be just as sophisticated a thief as Hermes.<sup>45</sup> Theft, as opposed not only to robbery but also to other acts of taking possession, is thus a kind of appropriation that operates outside—or beside—the dialectics of recognition. In this sense, the perfect theft would remain forever unknown, and, though somewhat inadvertently, Yossel indeed seems to have committed as an almost perfect crime.

Toward the end of the story, Yossel decides to confess to the manager about the theft:

I went to Tel Aviv to reveal to Kreitzer that I took my manuscript out of his closet, and that there’s no need to bother. There are no Yiddish readers anymore, so what’s the point of publishing [literally, of bringing out] a book?<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, 5. Brown traces this terminological distinction to the meanings attached to these practices in Homeric society: “Cattle-raiding, as depicted in Homer, was a public enterprise, led by the kings and participated in by the whole people. It is described as a war—a resort to force, and open force. [...] Coexistent with this institution of warlike plundering, or *robbery*, and terminologically distinguished from it in the Indo-European languages, was another type of appropriation, called *theft*. *Theft* is appropriation by stealth; *robbery* is open and forcible appropriation” (ibid.). “Once this distinction has been made,” adds Brown, “there can be no doubt that the practices associated with Hermes are *theft*, not *robbery*” (ibid.)

<sup>46</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 139-40.

נסעתי לתל-אביב לגלות לו, לקרייצר, שהוצאתי את כתב-היד שלי מארוננו, ושאין עוד צורך בכל העניין. אין קוראים ביידיש, ולשם מה להוציא ספר?

In more than one way these two short sentences capture the gist of the story's plot thus far: While the reiteration of the verb *le-hotsi*, "to take out," in each of these sentences rehearses once more the paradoxical directionality of the manuscript's movement out of the logic of the market, the final rhetorical question—"There are no Yiddish readers anymore, so what's the point of bringing out a book?"—grounds the plot in the historical crisis of Yiddish literature, to which, as the explanatory construction that ties these two sentences together casually implies, the taking of the manuscript out of the closet seems to be the strangely logical response. But although he goes to Tel Aviv with the full intention of explaining all this to the manager, Yossel arrives there at the very last minute, getting a hold of Kreitzer only seconds before the latter gets on a bus, and the two are able to exchange no more than a couple of words before Kreitzer departs, leaving Yossel with one final, unwittingly ironic piece of advice, uttered quietly through the bus's open window: "Patience, Yossel! Patience!"<sup>47</sup> Thus, the fact of the theft and of the withdrawal—the fact that the manuscript was taken out of the closet—remains itself closeted.

Yossel's strange act, then, is doubly reversed. First, consisting in taking possession of an object in a way that prevents the possibility of ever getting anything out of it, it is an appropriative gesture of relinquishment: the seemingly straightforward "I took it back" (*lakachti oto be-chazara*) thus communicates an active, possessive, and quite prideful insistence on forgoing one's own potential claim to be circulated, exchanged, and recognized in the public scene. Second, this act itself is being done so stealthily that it is not registered at all. Since, on the one hand, Yossel steals the manuscript in order *not* to use it; and since, on the other hand, the publication of the manuscript, as he makes clear, is being continuously if not infinitely deferred anyway—the theft makes no difference whatsoever. In Birstein's epistemology of the Yiddish closet, the question whether or not the manuscript is in the closet, not only remains unknown, it also has no real significance or influence in the world, since "this business wasn't going anywhere" anyway. Paradoxically challenging the common action-centered conception of narrative, this, then, is an entire story about taking action in a situation that's not going anywhere, without any intention to make it, through this action, go somewhere. Yossel's is indeed a double gesture of undoing: a gesture of giving up one's claim and then giving up on this gesture itself.



"There are no Yiddish readers anymore," says Yossel, "so what's the point of bringing out a book?" Thus, whether it is inside or outside of the closet, the potential book—this stolen manuscript, this purloined *briv*— can never reach its destination. Rather, it makes its appearance at the heart of the story as an object of sheer impotentiality, indifferent and unopened, orchestrating the entire plot around its potential to not be published. Yet, while Yossel's removal of the manuscript from its long occupied place in the Publishing House's office seems to leave no mark as either knowledge or effect, it does introduce a sliver of a difference, however slight, into this business that is not going anywhere, a difference that pertains precisely to this object's

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

status as potential. One way to account for this difference is by noting that with the withdrawal of the manuscript from the closet, impotentiality makes way for impossibility. Put somewhat differently, this withdrawal revisits and revises the basic problem of potentiality in Birstein's fiction. I argued above that, partaking in the premise of "the absolute commensurability of everything," Birstein's stories consistently make palpable how, inasmuch as commensurability denotes a potential to be exchanged, it also denotes its own impotentiality, the potential to not be exchanged. Pursuing this Agambenian logic even further, the gesture at the heart of "I Saw That This Business Wasn't Going Anywhere" traces the impotentiality of commensurability itself: not only the potential to not be exchanged but also the potential to not be *exchangeable*.

Still, the inconsequential insistence on impotentiality here is very different from the dramatic and charged claim of impotentiality as a "freedom not to" that is put forth, for example, in Megged's *The Living on the Dead*—a conceptual discrepancy that is at least partly attributable to the political asymmetry between writing from the "correct, precise center" of Israeli culture and writing from its vanishing, dispossessed, and devalued margins. Indeed, that the "before" and "after" of Yossel's act are barely distinguishable from one another makes the problematics of potentiality, impotentiality, and impossibility—of what can, can not, or cannot be done—appear more like an exercise in pure nuance, what Barthes calls "an apprenticeship in subtlety," a lesson in the making of a difference so attenuated that it seems practically unnoticeable and all but unclaimable.<sup>48</sup> The extent to which the whole story is built around the fashioning of a non-dramatic difference that is legible only to those, like the story's narrator and readers, who already know it exists is highlighted in its concluding three words, delivered by the manager just as his bus departs, "'Patience, Yossel! Patience!'" (*Savlanut, Yossel! Savlanut!*). The glaring irony of this punchline is, of course, that in imploring Yossel to keep waiting patiently until it is time for his manuscript to be published, Kreitzer is unaware that Yossel has already acted on his impatience. But it is precisely out of this impatience that a new sense of patience is borne. Given its inherent inconsequentiality, Yossel's act does not annul the scene of patience, which remains almost intact, but rather exposes and preserves its essence as a patient waiting for something that was never going to happen, thereby elevating it from the plane of contingency to that of history, as a scene of radical patience that is not dissimilar to what Rob Halpern, writing on the poetry of George Oppen, has suggestively termed *patiency*: "Patiency is agency's inverse and complement: to actively become a patient of history is, paradoxically, to will a suspension of an agency that has been already historically suspended."<sup>49</sup> Halpern's paradoxical formulation,

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<sup>48</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 45. Discussing the poetics of the Haiku, Barthes returns to the intimate relation of literature and nuance:

The Nuance = an apprenticeship in subtlety. Example:

*The first sunrise  
There is a cloud  
Like a cloud in a picture*

(Shusai, Blyth)

Reality and picture have been inverted: agility and subtlety → Perhaps we're now in a position to understand this: *Poetry* = practice of subtlety in a barbaric world. (ibid.)

<sup>49</sup> Halpern, "Becoming a Patient of History: George Oppen's Domesticity and the Relocation of Politics," 56. My reading of Yossel's patience as patiency relies on a similar richness of meaning in the Hebrew, where Kreitzer's word *savlanut* (patience) and its root *s.v.l* echo the notions of *svilut* and being *savil*, which imply passivity both in



paralleling the desire for the neutral's own paradoxicality (as a desire that suspends its own violent and imposing possessiveness), indeed captures the sense in which Birstein's protagonists—like Birstein himself—become patients of their history, acting out a “suspension of an agency that has been already historically suspended” in the crisis of Yiddish in Israel and its reality of dispossession and non-marketability—that is, in the business that is not going anywhere, and the impasse of “there are no Yiddish readers anymore, so what's to point of bringing out a book?” This historical patience does not mean mere acceptance of history's suspensions but an openness to register and contemplate them: “Becoming-patient renders one receptive to things unavailable to the false immediacies of common sense,” writes Halpern, again echoing both the neutral's attentiveness to what exists outside and in bafflement of the “arrogance” of paradigms, and the kind of only barely—and misusefully—commonsensical activity so typical of Birstein's characters, from the uncle to Yossel.<sup>50</sup>

But precisely inasmuch as they are characterized by their activity, these protagonists do not quite settle for patience. While Halpern's formulation quoted above—“to actively become a patient of history is, paradoxically, to will a suspension of an agency that has been already historically suspended”—strikes a fine, paradoxical balance between the active and the passive, at other moments his readings of Oppen veer more towards emphasizing the passivity inherent in patience, underlining, for example, such states as “receptivity, vulnerability, penetrability,” and opening the section titled “Patience” with an epigraph by Auden whose first line reads “One must be passive to conceive the truth.”<sup>51</sup> Much more resonant with the workings of Birstein's fiction, Barthes, by contrast, insists on “*l'actif du neutre*,” “the active of the neutral,” as a way of distinguishing the desire for the neutral—as a desire—not only from a position of compliant resignation but also from one of mere receptivity.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, for Birstein's characters, and for Yossel in particular, the path to patience passes through the act.

Yossel becomes a patient of history precisely to the extent that he turns his back on the lures of passivity in favor of an act that, like this history, does not go anywhere. His radical *savlanut* (patience), as a position within and against a history of dispossession, is fashioned first and foremost as a rejection of its internal *svilut* (passivity). The all too stealthy appropriation of the manuscript, the coming out that changes nothing, is an exercise in subtlety that, as in Blanchot's epigraph to this chapter, “carries difference even to the point of indifference” at the same time that it unsettles this very indifference by “not leav[ing] indifference to its definitive equalization.”<sup>53</sup> Inasmuch as it can be read to reflect on Yossel's act, I propose to understand Blanchot's formulation as describing the introduction of a nuance so nuanced it makes nothing happen, without allowing this ineffectuality to assume a kind of indifference (or patience) whereby nothing matters.<sup>54</sup> The elusiveness of a non-difference-making difference, on the one hand, and of a non-indifferent indifference (or an impatient patience), on the other, is precisely why, as my reading of the story presumably acts out, the intricacies of Yossel's act prove so difficult to trace, describe, or account for. It is this elusiveness of nuance that finally resonates in

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practice and in language, being subjected to something else, and, grammatically, being the patient rather than the agent of a verb. I wish to thank Yosefa Raz for referring me to Halpern's article and for her insights on patience.

<sup>50</sup> Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History,” 56; Barthes, *The Neutral*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Halpern, “Becoming a Patient of History,” 55, 56.

<sup>52</sup> “The Active of the Neutral” is the title of one of the thirty figures Barthes examines in his course (see *The Neutral*, 81-86)

<sup>53</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 305.

<sup>54</sup> Thus, as will become clearer in the next section, if there is an ethical disposition behind Yossel's actions it may perhaps be this: to not allow ‘nothing happens’ slip into ‘nothing matters’.

Kreitzer's plea—"Patience, Yossel! Patience!"—onto whose structure of repetition we are perhaps invited to project a bit of a distinction between the first "Patience" and the second "Patience" as reflecting the ever so slight difference between the "before" and "after" of the story—a final nuance that as readers or critics we cannot claim in any analytical sense, except as the lesson of "I Saw That This Business Wasn't Going Anywhere" as an apprenticeship both in subtlety and in becoming patients of history.

#### IV. Birstein, or The Formula

The economic impasse of non-value that permeates Birstein's fiction is dramatized in "I Saw That This Business"—and to a lesser extent already in "The Letter"—as dictating a certain economy of activity. These texts thus articulate what might be described as a mode of nuanced activism, or rather an activism of nuance, insofar as it traces a way of acting within and against *le politique* as a response to historical and cultural conditions that hinder one's ability to make more than a "tiny bit of difference." Yet, by way of turning in this section to a story that moves away entirely from the predicament of Yiddish in Israel while still formulating a "discourse on the bit of difference," I wish to argue that, involving a choice between courses of action that are not only barely distinguishable from one another but also equally ineffectual, the activity of nuance poses for Birstein a question no less ethical than political.

The story "Because of a Mistake at the Ministry of Housing" opens into a scene of a bureaucratic mix-up: "Because of a mistake at the Ministry of Housing in Upper Nazareth we received an apartment that doesn't exist."<sup>55</sup> In what appears to be a highly economical narrative structure, the story's very first sentence introduces a moment of crisis, a fall, in narratological terms, into a state of disequilibrium;<sup>56</sup> as such—i.e., as the initiation of plot—it also typifies Birstein's broader trust in the generative power of the mistake, evidenced already in "The Letter." While in "The Letter" the formal recognition that there has been a mistake crystalizes only toward the end of the story, and the uncle's bitter concession—"A mistake, they made a mistake" (*a to'es, zey hobn gemakht a to'es*)—serves as the text's conclusion, signaling the final restoration of order, in "Because of a Mistake" the mistake appears from the very outset as the plot's motivation, the cause behind the "because" that initiates the text and moves it forward. Yet, unlike common narrative and historiographical embraces of mistakes as unwittingly productive of progression and development (as in the notion that "the history of ideas is a history of mistakes"), and unlike psychoanalytical approaches for which a mistake is never really a mistake because it provides access to a deeper and seemingly unavailable layer of meaning—and also, in the sense of the mistake's effect, unlike "the Letter"—in "Because of a Mistake at the Ministry of Housing" what the mistake generates amounts to almost nothing, and the acts and speech acts it gives rise to cancel themselves out in a way that produces no surplus—neither of action nor of meaning—but, at most, only nuance to what there already is.

The mistake, as the clerk at the Ministry of Housing explains, was virtually inevitable; apparently, too many institutions were involved in the process of allocating an apartment to the narrator's wife, Marganit, who as a teacher was eligible for subsidized housing: not only the

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<sup>55</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> On narrative as a movement between states of equilibrium and disequilibrium, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 163-64.

Ministry of Housing, where the mistake originates, but also the local high school, the Ministry of Education, and the governmental company for public housing, Amidar. Having searched in vain for the designated apartment according to the conflicting instructions given by all these institutions, the narrator and his wife return to the housing ministry only to have the clerk confirm, upon rechecking his listings: “it’s not there.” The problem, however, is promptly solved, as the narrator proposes what is rather comically and hyperbolically described as an “advice”:

My advice, so it seemed to him, conforms to common sense. I said to him: “You gave an apartment that doesn’t exist. Give an apartment that does exist.”<sup>57</sup>

העצה שלי, כך נראה לו, מתיישבת עם השכל הישר. אמרתי לו: “נתתם דירה שאינה קיימת. תנו דירה קיימת.”

Through its twofold, nearly symmetrical construction, the narrator’s advice summarizes the text’s narrative structure and demonstrates its neatness: the temporal progression between the two sentences—from the past-tense *netatem* (gave) to the future-oriented imperative *tnu* (give)—marks also a transition from *disequilibrium*, in the problem of the *non*-existence of the apartment (*she-eyna kayemet*), to a newly established equilibrium, in which the apartment simply exists (*kayemet*), and which, as in Todorov’s account, is “similar but not identical” to a prior state of equilibrium that preceded the mistake.<sup>58</sup> This neatness of form only highlights the utterance’s absurdly obvious content, if not its utter emptiness thereof: as a solution it is practically included in the very definition of the problem, being its mere reversal; and thus as an advice it seems almost too immediately commonsensical to even qualify as real advice. That this kind of absurd advice nonetheless functions here as the dynamic moment of narrative transformation (the clerk, judging the advice agreeable, manages to find an alternative, existing apartment) infuses the whole affair at the Ministry of Housing, the whole story in fact, with an atmosphere of dramatic blandness. Underscoring this sense of comic dullness with which the plot reaches its *dénouement*, the clerk is then required to conduct a lottery in order to determine who will be allocated the new apartment—a lottery, as he is quick to reassure the narrator and his wife, in which she would be the sole participant.

The polite, plain common sense with which the mistake in the Ministry of Housing is corrected appears to sum up “Because of a Mistake” as no more than a harmless tale of institutional ineptitude, a deflated drama fondly mocking the clumsiness of the Israeli socialist bureaucracy, which by the mid-1980s has already been regarded as a thing of the past. Not quite closing off the text, however, the mistake’s correction turns out to leave a minimal narrative residue, in the form of a both literal and conceptual afterthought to the plot’s settlement, that produces two additional short paragraphs, and, by virtue of its very minimality, completely revises the story’s ethos of action. As he shakes the narrator’s and Marganit’s hands to mark the successful resolution of the problem, it suddenly occurs to the clerk that the new agreement, revoking the allocation of the already assigned but non-existent apartment, might disrupt the listings in the other ministry, the Ministry of Education. He thus quickly scribbles a short official

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<sup>57</sup> Birstein, *Ketem shel sheket*, 126.

<sup>58</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 163.

note and asks the couple to take it over to the Ministry of Education and request that the situation be rectified. Once outside, however, Marganit, still confused, inquires of her husband what exactly they are supposed to ask from the clerk (*pkida*) at the Ministry of Education. The narrator then sits down on a bench at a bus stop, puts on his glasses, and reads aloud the single sentence written in the clerk's note, with which the story ends:

The Ministry of Housing asks the clerk at the Ministry of Education to ask the Ministry of Housing, in the matter of the teacher Marganit, to cancel what they already canceled because it didn't exist.<sup>59</sup>

משרד השיכון מבקש מן הפקידה, שתבקש ממשרד השיכון, בעניין המורה מרגנית, לבטל את מה שכבר ביטלו כי לא היה קיים.

The ingenuity of the clerk's request lies in the way it seems at once both perfectly consistent with the story's plot and utterly idiosyncratic. To put it simply, in order to set the records straight the Ministry of Education is asked to file an official appeal to revoke the allocation of the original apartment, the one that could not be found. But by allowing it to assume the formal properties of the neutral's gesture of double undoing, Birstein formulates the clerk's letter as a request to take action that only provides instructions for the self-cancellation of any action. On the level of speech acts, the clerk's note issues a request that doubles and reverses itself, and, taking the form of "A asks B to ask A to...", asks its addressee to do nothing more than return the request back to its issuer, who has now become also its destination. On the level of action, what A asks B to ask A to do is to carry out an act that has already been done, which means, effectively, doing nothing. On a more concrete level, this act (that has already been done) is itself an act of cancelling a previous action. And finally, the thing that has already been canceled, which A now asks B to ask A to cancel, never existed in the first place.

Promoting acts and speech acts that take away their own thrust of activity, the clerk's "formula"—to borrow the terminology of the discourse around "Bartleby"—produces nothing and asks for nothing: no real action is expected in response to the request, and no change is projected to take place through either its fulfillment or its unfulfillment. Like Bartleby's *I would prefer not to*, which, as Deleuze shows in "Bartleby, or The Formula," despite being grammatically correct functions as a nearly-agrammatical limit to such common constructions as "I would prefer this. I would prefer not to do that. That is not what I would prefer..."—so Birstein's formula, in spite of its internal and contextual coherence, seems to trace the non-productive limit of any request of the ordinary, consequence-driven form "A asks B to do X."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I am quoting and translating this sentence from the revised edition of the story that appeared in the posthumous collection *Sipurim me-ezor ha-shalva*. As far as this sentence is concerned, its later version seems both more accurate and more elegant, in a way that may become clearer as my discussion progresses. The original sentence reads (*Ketem shel sheket*, 126):

אנו מבקשים מן הפקידה, שתבקש ממשרד השיכון, בעניין המורה מרגנית, לבטל את מה שכבר ביטל, ולבטל שלא היה קיים.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze, "Bartleby; or The Formula," 69. Deleuze follows here both Nicolas Ruwet's analysis of e. e. cummings's "he danced his did" as the agrammatical limit of the normal expressions *he did his dance*, *he danced his dance*, *he danced what he did*; and his own French example: "Someone who wants to hang something on a wall and

One major functional difference between the two, however, is that Bartleby's formula "bourgeons and flourishes" throughout the text, "ravaging, devastating, and leav[ing] nothing in its wake";<sup>61</sup> in the words of Jacques Rancière, "the formula erodes the attorney's reasonable organization of work and life. It shatters not just the hierarchies of a world but what supports them: the connections between the causes and effects we expect from that world."<sup>62</sup> Birstein's formula, by contrast, emerges not in confrontation with its surroundings but rather as their surprisingly logical result. Consistent with the neutral's suspension of the conflictual, Birstein treats the bureaucratic organization of the world not as occasioning a "ravaging," "devastating," or "shattering" response but as providing the conditions of possibility for experimenting with nuance. By pursuing rather than rejecting the force of the "because"—"the connections between the causes and effects" renounced by Bartleby's formula according to Rancière—Birstein allows the world, instead of the individual, to perform its own conceptual and formulative work. "Because of a Mistake" thus turns out to be invested not so much in the dynamics of mistake and correction, problem and solution, interrupted equilibrium and its restoration, as in eventually generating, because and through the mistake, the clerk's short, one-sentence note. In this sense, its plot can be essentially summarized as follows: Because of a mistake at the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Housing asks the clerk at the Ministry of Education to ask the Ministry of Housing, in the matter of the teacher Marganit, to cancel what they already canceled because it didn't exist.

This kind of schematic presentation highlights how the logic of causality is both initially celebrated and eventually checked within the dynamics of "Because of a Mistake"'s formula. For, introduced into the plot only as its afterthought—it "suddenly" (*pit'om*) occurs to the clerk that the records of the Ministry of Education need to be taken care of—the formula itself has no "after": not only because compositionally it forms the last line of the text but also because it invites no action to follow. Nothing is expected or projected to happen *because* of the request. This afterthought thus supplements what seemed to be an already neatly closed narrative structure (the structure of "You gave an apartment that doesn't exist. Give an apartment that does exist") with a self-cancelling formula whose value it is hard to make out. As such, and in offering as the plot's surplus instructions for action that only preclude the possibility of any action, the clerk's address, just as Yossel's act in "I Saw That This Business," operates like the "open secret" on Anne-Lise François's account, finally constituting the text's economy of action within and in terms of "a mode of recessive action that takes itself away as it occurs."<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, the open secret of this whole chapter may well be the extent to which it draws on François's *Open Secrets* and tries to learn from it, to the best of my abilities, the patient unpacking of an ethics of inconsequence that inheres in non-emphatic actions that make very little happen. Thus, from an ethical perspective (i.e., considered as concerning the question of choice), while for the Ministry of Housing and for the narrator and Marganit the issuing of the clerk's letter only reseals what is an already settled matter, we might ask after the meaning of such an empty request for its addressee, the Ministry of Education. Having not taken any part in the drama of the mistake and its correction, the Ministry of Education now faces the strange

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holds a certain number of nails in his hand exclaims *j'en ai un de pas assez*"—the limit of the correct "*J'en ai de trop, Je n'en ai pas assez, Il m'en manque un...*" (ibid., 68-69).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 70. At each of its occurrences, says Deleuze, "there is a stupor surrounding Bartleby," "a madness around him, notably that of the attorney" (ibid.)

<sup>62</sup> Rancière, "Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula," 146.

<sup>63</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, xvi.

decision of how to respond to an address that is completely indifferent to any sort of response. For, to be sure, despite this indifference, the formula—as a call that comes from the outside, from the other—does request something of its addressee, however minimal and inconsequential: it asks that it ask the Ministry of Housing to cancel what they already canceled because it didn't exist. Devoid of any practical implications, this decision can be either easily—and normatively—dismissed as essentially unimportant because it is of no consequence; or, much more elusively, taken seriously as the rather baffling task of making a choice in conditions of inconsequentiality.

Through the form of the request—the kind of speech-act that expects but does not demand response, that asks but does not command its addressee to take action—“Because of a Mistake” demonstrates how the tracing of subtle differences might indeed be, in Barthes's words, “transposed to the ‘ethical’ level” and constitute an “ethical project” of nuance, one that circumvents the familiar moral logic that measures actions solely by their results and effects.<sup>64</sup> The call addressed to the Ministry of Education thus exemplifies the ethical problem to which Birstein's fiction keeps returning, the problem out of which it emerges: how to act in circumstances that take away the significance of action. In this sense, “I Saw That This Business” begins with the same ethical dilemma with which “Because of a Mistake” ends. Yossel's insistence there to act on his desire for nuance (“I saw that this business wasn't going anywhere. [...] I took it back”)—precisely in such conditions of dispossession that allow his acts no traction or value—can now be read as exemplifying the ethical stakes of the inconsequential choice, as it proves to produce the all but imperceptible moral difference between historical indifference and historical patience.

Like the open secrets in Madame de LaFayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, which, on François's reading, “resists its own generic thrust—the novel's propulsion toward the end of desire—and redefines action as precisely that which leaves off questing and turns aside the agon of plot,” and like the “lyric inconsequence” in poems by Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy that “record only to set aside narrative gain,” Birstein's construction of his stories around recessive, inconsequential, and virtually unnoticeable nuance sidesteps storytelling's formative investment in its own value and its generic telos of providing, in Benjamin's words, “something useful,” “a moral,” “some practical advice,” “a counsel for [its] readers.”<sup>65</sup> For, the great achievement of “Because of a Mistake” consists not only in ingeniously articulating the ethical dilemma of ineffectuality through the clerk's address but also in allowing this address to remain open. Introducing the formula no sooner than in its last sentence, the story leaves the choice faced by the Ministry of Education unattended and undecided; or rather, turns it over to the reader. Indeed, the reader's position, in this sense, is eventually aligned with that of the Ministry of Education, in having to decide what value or meaning, if any, to attach to a final speech-act that both promises and asks for so little.

It is through this interpellation of the reader into an ethical yet inconsequential subject position that the story both fulfils and thwarts its own mission as storytelling. What may appear to function structurally as a neatly packaged moral is revealed to be so far removed from any notion of “usefulness” that it becomes the epitome not even of uselessness but of misuse; if the text does seem to articulate some sort of an advice with its semi-aphoristic closure, this advice—

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<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 7, 11. In the introductory session of the course Barthes also writes: “The general field of our reflections will be: ethics, that is, the discourse of the ‘good choice’ [...] or of the ‘nonchoice,’ or of the ‘lateral choice’” (ibid., 8)—to which we can add, in the name of Birstein's Ministry of Education, “or of the inconsequential choice.”

<sup>65</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, 133, 136; Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 86.

emerging in stark opposition to the narrator's "advice" (*etza*) earlier in the story—immediately takes itself away as such, ridiculing through its form (that is, through its formulation) the very idea that anyone could act on it as one would on an advice. It is in this context that Barthes's insistence on pedagogical terminology, which I have been referencing rather loosely throughout this chapter, crystallizes as most relevant to Birstein's project, offering a "discourse on the bit of difference" so as to counteract any pathos of usefulness that may be attached to literature: "Now, there is a teacher of nuance, literature; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me." Storytelling's grand promise is infused in Birstein's fiction with a desire for the neutral that turns it into no more than an apprenticeship in inconsequential nuances—because for Birstein, it seems, as for Barthes, "nuance is one of the linguistic tools of non-arrogance, of non-intolerance: [there is a] civic imperative to teach nuance."<sup>66</sup> Yossel Birstein's pedagogy of nuance thus operates "*à côté*" or "beside-the-point," outplaying the very idea of making a point, teaching its readers not something useful but, perhaps, only something misuseful.<sup>67</sup> At most, and at its best, it trains us to notice both the insistence and the futility in a gesture of taking back what's ours that at the same time only takes it away from us; to hear both the despair and the hopefulness in the suggestion to cancel what was already canceled because it didn't exist.

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<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 130.

<sup>67</sup> I am alluding here to Barthes's figure of "*réponses à côté*," translated as "beside-the-point answers"; see *The Neutral*, 109-14.

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