

The theoretic framework Oppenheimer proposes in the introduction, according to which the representation of Arabs in Hebrew literature oscillates between national and universal narratives, that is, between portraying Arabs as national and cultural others and representing their universal humanity, may be related to the inconsistencies delineated above. For Oppenheimer, the universal and the national contrast each other, and the universal narrative is privileged in the sense that it has the potential to “suspend ideological judgments and orientalist knowledge” (p. 18) and to create an “in-between space” that allows for real human interaction between Arabs and Jews. This “in-between space” appears in some Hebrew texts, Oppenheimer suggests, but is always doomed to failure as no author manages to completely avoid the national narrative that reconstitutes the borders between Jew and Arabs. If the only way out of orientalist discourse open to Hebrew writers is universalistic humanism, which in itself is a conceptual framework imbued with western ideology, then no wonder that no author can release herself from “the prison of language” (the title of Oppenheimer’s introduction).

Again, Oppenheimer’s own readings point toward different directions, as for example, his interesting analysis of Ronit Matalon’s *Sara Sara* that raises questions regarding the humanist value of the “in-between space” as it sometimes entails violent erasure of differences in the guise of empathy and good will. This reading evokes, although does not explicitly articulate, the split inherent to the humanist thought between the desire for universal sameness and the need to preserve the boundaries between self and other. The tension between these two facets of humanist universalism is pertinent both to the reading of Hebrew literature’s representations of Arabs and to thinking about the relations between modern nationalism and humanist universalism in general. Oppenheimer’s book opens the way to further theorization of these issues through the site of Hebrew literature, in which universal and national narratives do not only conflict but also overlap.

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YEHUDA AMICHAÏ: THE MAKING OF ISRAEL’S NATIONAL POET. By Nili Scharf Gold. Pp. xiii + 445. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2008. Cloth, \$35.00.

For many people, the lives of writers are more interesting as objects of our concern than the work they have done, and a remarkable number of

literary treatments these days include something about the lives of our subjects. Perhaps yielding to the temptations to become insiders, we explore our great writers for the strings of tidbits that we hope can be made into a comprehensive narrative that explains their art. Nili Gold's new book on Amichai will serve that purpose for many people, as its intense research has uncovered much about the early life of the man whom many of us view as the preeminent Hebrew poet since the establishment of Israel. He is certainly the best known by the wider English-speaking public.

There are serious aesthetic questions imbedded in the biographies of immigrant intellectuals—especially those who took on new languages in their work (think of Conrad, Berlin, Nabokov, or Wiesel, for example). In her study, Nili Gold has clarified some of these questions, and the material here may influence our understanding of the language of many other immigrant Hebrew writers, such as, Aharon Appelfeld, Dan Pagis, T. Carmi, Lea Goldberg, to name a few.

Few of us can resist thinking about what makes up a great writer, and, in the case of Amichai, there developed an irresistible pull to expand on archival evidence that supported and/or enriched what we knew of Amichai's early German origins. Gold's engagement with the Beinicke Archives at Yale (where the Amichai papers are housed) and opportunities that led her to explore outside of those archives have resulted in an intriguing, complicated, and sometimes over-determined description of the provenance of Amichai's art.

I would like to welcome Nili Gold's well researched and thoroughly intriguing exploration of the childhood and spiritual origins of Yehuda Amichai, whose existence as Ludwig Pfeuffer has heretofore been known but attended to too little. It was a pleasure—having known Amichai's Germany through artistic refraction—to learn about it in documentary detail. *Yehuda Amicha: The Making of Israel's National Poet* is an important book, even with its occasionally simplistic "cause and effect" description of the poet's art and its imputations of conscientious deception by the poet. If it were not the first English book length study since that of Glenda Abramson, the issues it has caused us to confront might be less weighty.

Nili Gold has demonstrated on numerous occasions that she is a careful reader of texts and a talented interpreter of poetic form and linguistic ingenuity. The discussions of imagery in her first book (*Lo Ka-brosht*) have enriched our understanding of the way in which Amichai composed his art, and she demonstrated there a complex appreciation of the poet's prosody and construction, along with a refined ability to trace and comment on imagery. In the current book, she has turned her considerable talent to a more developed function of close reading—a search for the linguistic and even thematic roots of this most popular poet.

Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet contains many interesting and productive readings, as many of the poems reflect either thematic or linguistic aspects of his origins. With proper cautions not to divert the reader from the main task of poetry and the difficulty of tracing artistic development through stages of maturity, one can legitimately examine the place of "second-ness" in language and culture, and this Gold has done. (As one example, she argues, among other instances, that "Half the People in the World" employ sentence constructs that emerge directly from the nature of German syntax. There are other examples, of course.) But some of Gold's arguments are simply a stretch: Amichai's confession of foreignness (p. 121) is precisely a denial of the book's premise, and her association of wailing wind with longings for the German homeland (p. 319), are just two examples of exaggerations which get in the way of the book's value.

Gold's suggestion that part of that past was intentionally camouflaged is more than a little grating, and not simply because of Amichai's iconic status. The poet does not need our homage to his integrity, but the very camouflage which she (and others like Kronfeld) early identified as an intrinsic part of Amichai's set of concerns and a quality in his technique ought not be understood in such direct psychological terms. In her earlier work, Gold had traced and enriched our understanding of tropes of hiding, *sheker* (not quite lying, not quite fibbing), and camouflage, and now she has extended that (correct, I think) reading of the poet to include a self-conscious camouflaging of his Germanic roots. It is in that extension that the warning flag waves boldly, perhaps especially so, because Amichai never denied his Germanic roots and has built numerous pieces of his oeuvre on his Germanic past.

The discoveries Gold has made in the Yale Beinicke Archives have joined with her parsing of sentences in some of the poems, and some comments the poet made to her in person have conspired to have Gold move from her earlier treatment of the camouflage theme to a belief that his camouflage theme was "camouflaging" or at least deferring evidence of a deeper personal camouflage of early origins. This view has forced Gold to stretch some linguistic insights, and to give her case more weight than it can bear. Whether some of Gold's ideas are over-stated, wrong, or simply irrelevant may be the subject of a lot of discussion in years ahead. Gold has definitely created a case which will be contended with—even as some of us who have studied that case are not convinced of its vitality. This book will probably take on a life of its own, among many people, and within many circles. Gold's case will be supported by some, not supported by others, and yet another group will question the importance of the discoveries in the first place.

Gold's rich research, her tracking of Amichai's life from Wurzburg through the early 1950s raises important questions about the particular roots

of many great literary figures in Israel. Lea Goldberg's comments about her early life loom most strongly, perhaps, and most ambiguously, in the biographical treatment of Rachel and Aryeh Aharoni: "I would like to see a student in a seminar, after my death, decipher all the 'signs' I leave behind. What would be the extent of the absurdity! Perhaps even to write a doctorate (on it)" (L. Goldberg, *Yomanei Lea Goldberg* [Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2006], p. 8). But Goldberg herself relented partially, and we might wonder if Amichai would—at some level—have enjoyed Nili Gold's conclusions enough to compose a poem about them.

In Henry James's essay about "The Tempest," the great American writer addressed the place of Shakespeare, the man, within the romance of the play. James insisted that "the man himself, in the Plays, was never touched," and is "effectively locked up" so that one deals only with the artist. James insisted that "style is the very home" of Shakespeare's mind (H. James, "Introduction to the Tempest," in vol. 16 of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* [New York: Sproul, 1907]). And while that perspective has a rigid feel about it in these days when biography meets aesthetics so frequently, it is a notion that contemporary critics must still contend with. Amichai's true home *is* his style—far more than Germany, and Ludwig Pfeuffer remains, for most of us, Yehuda Amichai. In the spirit of what New Criticism once called "intentional fallacy," one might still argue that the poet's art should not be the only doorway into his past, and the past—all the more so—ought not to be such an exclusive doorway into his art. A sense of humor, careful reading, a love of language, an appreciation of random influences, a feel for semantic nuance—all of these talents trump the trend of biographical reductionism, which fosters some other dependencies that are provided by plenty of fields without the help of literary criticism.

But Nili Gold's work is certainly going to be part of our Amichai vocabulary—whether we are advocates for its perspective or not.

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