

EDITED BY DEBORAH DASH MOORE
AND S. ILAN TROEN

Divergent Jewish Cultures
Israel and America

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For Ione Strauss

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*Impact of Statehood on
the Hebrew Literary Imagination:
Haim Hazaz and the Zionist Narrative*

ARNOLD J. BAND

The intimate relation between modern Hebrew literature and the development of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael, first in the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) and then in the sovereign State of Israel, is one of the fundamental, intriguing phenomena of modern Jewish history. During the pre-state period, the Hebrew literary establishment was one of the salient components of “ha-medinah baderekh,” the crystallization of interlocking institutions which grew from the First Aliya onward and were in place and operative when the state was declared. In fact, most of the Hebrew literary establishment—writers, publishers, booksellers—had settled in mandatory Palestine by the early 1930s. To use current discourse, we can say that the Hebrew literary establishment was a major agent in the formation of “the Zionist narrative,” that is, the system of narratives, symbols, and attitudes which the Zionist movement generated, wittingly or unwittingly, in its attempt to mobilize the Jewish population in both the Yishuv and the Diaspora, for actions leading to the creation of a Jewish

sovereign state in the ancestral homeland. In turn, the establishment of a sovereign state has generated a host of new circumstances that have contributed to the burgeoning of Hebrew literature in Israel over the past two generations.

While this story has often been told, the parallel between the growth of the state and the development of Israeli literature has distorted the historiographic perspective on the period. The model has been fundamentally biological: both the state and Israeli literature are described as twins growing up together. Recognition is accorded to the pre-state writing of such figures as S. Yizhar, Aharon Megeed, and Moshe Shamir, for instance, but little attention is devoted to the impact of the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state upon more established writers such as S. Y. Agnon and Haim Hazaz, in prose, or Avraham Shlonsky, Natan Alterman, and Amir Gilboa, in poetry. While it is understandable to focus upon what seems to be the new voices that gave expression to the emerging reality of statehood, the resulting picture is incomplete.

Even when writing a literary history at a distance of a generation or two, most critics choose to cluster the writers of a literary generation together and then treat writers and works separately, tracing their development from period to period in their lives. This is probably the most coherent way to present the variety and flux of artistic productivity. Ultimately, diachronicity dominates over synchronicity, because that is how we comprehend history. But if we want to understand the synchronic status of a literature in a specific decade—how writers and audiences of different ages interact in “real time,” how political and social conditions might have affected them as a group—we rarely find a synchronic marshaling of material.

These preliminary observations on the tension between the diachronic and synchronic axes in the historiography of Israel literature provide a necessary framework for the main project of this chapter: a consideration of how the Israeli prose writer Haim Hazaz contributed to the shaping of the Zionist narrative. While much has been written on Hazaz and the Zionist narrative, I have not found an adequate assessment of his central role in this crucial project. Mention is often made of his story/essay “HaDerashah” (The Sermon) (1943), but the persistent presence of Hazaz in the center of the literary stage as the normative, admired writer of the Labor Party, the

central political, hence cultural, force of the Yishuv and the state in its first twenty-five years has not been appreciated.¹ This failure stems logically from the normative historiographic bias which stresses the cutting edge in each generation or decade to the neglect of the total picture of literary production in any period. Writers are situated in the period when they first make a significant impact.

Take the most obvious example relevant to our topic: Israeli literature in its first decade. If we ask who were the leading prose writers of the 1950s, we would probably agree upon three names: Agnon, Hazaz, and Yizhar. When we study what Gershon Shaked, the leading literary historian of the period, has to say about these writers in his *HaSipporet ha'ivrit (1880–1980)* (Hebrew fiction), we will find Agnon in volume 2, Hazaz in volume 3, and Yizhar in volume 4.² This diffusion is inevitable, given the need to select and organize, to lend coherent shape to the chaos of history. The loss, nevertheless, is regrettable. Our consciousness of the loss of historical specificity becomes more acute when we peruse a study, however inchoate, like that of Reuven Kritz. In attempting to survey the prose productivity of the “Struggle for Independence Era,” during roughly the decade before Israeli independence in his *HaSipporet ha'ivrit shel dor hama'avak le'atsma'ut* (Hebrew fiction of the generation of struggle for independence) (1978), we discover scores of names and hundreds of stories which were not mentioned by Shaked, certainly because the latter did not consider them of equal importance to those he did present.³

To further focus the historiographic problem which affects not only the literary historian, I ask a very specific question: How did the creation of a sovereign Jewish state in 1948 — certainly a major event in modern Jewish history — affect the literary imaginations of such established writers as Agnon and Hazaz, Alterman and Shlonsky, writers in their prime years of creativity in 1948? By doing so, I hope to call attention to the problem described above and help rectify a distorted picture. In the process, I shall ask other questions, such as: How did writers whose imaginative and metaphorical coordinates were shaped by non-state or exilic or diasporan existence adapt to the new social, psychological, and philosophical realities of political sovereignty and all that they imply? Can one detect in their work an imaginative confrontation with this new phenomenon in Jewish history?

Did they assimilate these changes successfully? More generally, what happens to firmly held perspectives and ideologies when they are rendered obsolete by historical events? What happens to the "Zionist narrative"?

It should be obvious that these literary preoccupations are by no means indifferent to the historical debate precipitated by the Israeli "New Historians" and "Critical Sociologists" over the past decade.⁴ While I agree that the decisions made by the founders of the state were motivated primarily by the exigencies of the period, these leaders were abundantly aware that they were involved in a momentous event in Jewish history. Furthermore, they were often shaped by the same cultural experiences as the writers who interest me in this project. All Hebrew writers of the period were deeply involved in and committed to the basic principles of classical Zionism, and their reaction to the realization of the Zionist dream is of cardinal importance.

I have chosen for my initial study the figure of Haim Hazaz (1898–1973), not that he is the best writer of the period, but because his literary career offers the richest opportunities for an examination of the questions detailed above. More than any respected writer of the first decade of Israeli sovereignty, Hazaz resembles most closely the profile of the leadership of the new state: mostly Russian or Polish Jews born about the turn of the century, those clustered under the rubric of the Third Aliyah, which, in many ways, absorbed the more prominent leaders of the Second Aliyah like Ben Gurion and Berl Katznelson. Born in Ukraine in 1898, reared in a pious home, Hazaz was old enough to comprehend the violent upheavals of the Great War and the October Revolution. Never distant from the sweep of armies and marauding bands during the civil war in Ukraine, he witnessed the uprooting and brutality which became part of the fabric of human experience in the twentieth century. As a Jew, furthermore, he experienced firsthand the ever-accelerating disintegration of the once clearly defined forms of Eastern European Jewish society. The years between the Bolshevik Revolution and his escape in 1921 to Istanbul were the formative experiences of his creative life to which he devoted all his fiction through 1931, when he moved from Paris, where he had lived for eight years, to Palestine. He returned obsessively to themes of the revolution even in the 1940s and the early 1950s, the first years of Israeli statehood. While brutality and force

are never far from the scene of action, Hazaz is more interested in the phenomenon of historic upheavals and their implications for both individuals and Jewry as a historic entity.

Like other writers who had experienced the Russian Revolution, Hazaz was obsessed with the dialectics of history. For him, however, the dialectics of history do not involve Hegelian or Marxist notions regarding the swings of universal history; rather, they are limited to the history of Jews. Within this framework, he often vacillates between two radical attitudes. On the one hand, Jewish history is history par excellence because its major theme is the striving for redemption, the transcendence of history in a messianic period free of the agonies and contingencies of history. On the other hand, Jewish history does not exist, for history implies action, extension in space, whereas Jews, after their loss of political sovereignty, have been passive and bereft of space. The first view derives mostly from traditional Jewish, perhaps kabbalistic sources; the second, from modern themes of nationalism. Given the pressure of political and social events in Russia from 1914 on, Hazaz had to confront these two complementary but radically different vectors. His personal experience led him to conceive of history not as evolving processes but as a series of radical ruptures. This tension lends an intensity to his stories, to his Hebrew style in which rhythms are jagged and the individual words are frequently thrust forward in unexpected verbal, nominal, or adjectival modes, vibrating with an excitement on the verge of the apocalyptic. The kinship to the various offshoots of expressionism is clear. And while Zionism is an option of action in these "stories of the Revolution," it is by no means the dominant, driving option. Hazaz himself apparently did not feel compelled in the 1920s to seek the Zionist solution of aliyah (settlement in the ancestral homeland), but rather spent some eight years, from 1923 to 1931 in Paris—writing about the post-revolutionary experiences of Russian Jews.

Highly regarded even before his immigration to Jerusalem, Hazaz quickly joined the literary establishment once he did settle there. The leading figures in the dominant Labor Party, MAPAI, embraced him, and he published most of his stories in their newspaper, *Davar*, and his books in their publishing house, Am Oved. He garnered many honors throughout his career: the Bialik Prize twice (1942, 1971); the first Israel Prize for Literature in 1954;

membership in the Hebrew Language Academy (1953); the presidency of Agudat Hasoferim (the Writer's Association) (1970); several honorary doctorates, including one, bestowed posthumously, from the Hebrew University. The writer was repeatedly invited to deliver what were considered significant cultural policy statements.⁵ For some fifteen years, between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, he was Labor's senior cultural spokesperson, constantly lecturing, eulogizing, commenting on cultural issues, responding to audiences who assembled to honor him, especially upon the publication of the second edition of his collected works in 1968. He was also called upon to comment on the significance of the victory of the Six-Day War and joined the Eretz Yisrael Hashelema (the whole land of Israel) movement together with Natan Alterman and Moshe Shamir. In many senses he was the quintessential establishment prose writer for over forty years.

And yet, so radical have tastes changed in the past two decades that even in Shaked's history Hazaz is accorded only twenty-four pages (vol. 3, 1993), in contrast to eighty for Agnon (vol. 2, 1983), and Hazaz is known today by younger readers only for several anthologized stories in textbooks and mostly for "HaDerashah." (Ironically, though a natural object of attack by the literary critics associated with the New Historians, he has almost been ignored by them.) Hazaz, I argue, has lost his potential readers since the mid-1970s for the same reason that he captivated his contemporaries during his lifetime: his fiction was shaped by meditations on Jewish history and, after his aliyah in 1931, by meditations on Zionism. Inevitably, he intuitively envisages each situation as a point in a broad historical framework. Even when he was not writing what we might call "historical fiction" he focused upon moments or aspects of the dynamic process of Jewish history, primarily in the twentieth century. And even when he was focusing on the past, for example, when he dealt with Shabbetai Zevi in his play, *Bekets hayamim* (In the end of days), or in his many chapters on the life of Jesus, he tried to embody in his fiction the essence or meaning of Jewish suffering, of yearning for redemption, for the Messiah.⁶ This characteristic is at once both his strongest and weakest point. When the historical resonance increases the body and depth of the realistic situation, the story vibrates with a certain excitement and scope which transcend that of ordinary realistic writing. This is fairly characteristic of Hazaz's work in the 1920s. But when the

historical import outweighs the situation itself, realistic contours are so flattened that the result is embarrassingly (to today's reader) sermonic and tendentious. This is how Hazaz developed after his aliyah in 1931. Actually, this is precisely what his audience wanted then: a literature not only engaged with contemporary issues, but offering ideological discussion and suggesting direction.

His four "Zionist" stories—"Harat Olam" (Creation of the world) (1937), "Havit Akhura" (1937), "Drabkin" (1938), and "HaDerashah" (1942)—are a case in point. In these stories he creates characters—Moroshke in the first two, Drabkin in the third, and Yudka in the fourth—who are more expositors of various Zionist positions under discussion in those turbulent years than fictive characters. In fact, these stories are major constituents of the "Zionist narrative" and are still quoted as such. Even his "Yemenite novel," *HaYoshevet baganim* (1944), finds its positive solution when Rumiyyeh, the lovely granddaughter of the pious hero, Mori Sa'id, settles in a kibbutz to work the soil in a paradigmatic Zionist gesture. These stories and the novel have supported the elevation of Hazaz the writer to an iconic status in the "Zionist narrative," a status reinforced by the loss of his son in the battles for the defense of Jerusalem in 1948. A comparison with Agnon's literary output of the same period is illuminating, for in those years Agnon published: "Sippur Pashut" (A simple story) (1935), *Ore'ah nata lalun* (A guest for the night) (1938–39), many of the stories of "Sefer hama'asim" (The book of deed) (1941), "Shevuat emunim" (Betrothed) (1943), and *Temol Shilshom* (Only yesterday) (1945). Even the last two of these fictions can hardly be considered supportive elements of the "Zionist narrative" although they are set in Palestine of the Second Aliyah.

It was only logical, therefore, that with the rapid loss in the 1970s of the hegemony of the Labor Party, which was for all practical purposes the major political and cultural establishment of Israel, its icons would also topple, among them Haim Hazaz. Though Hazaz was honored with his second Bialik Prize in 1971 and the presidency of the Writers Association in 1970, by then the shift in interest had raised such writers as Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua to critical acclaim. They, in turn, had replaced the first generation of Israeli writers—for example, Yizhar, Meged, and N. Shaham. In 1965 Aharon Meged published his *HaHayal hamet* (The living on the dead), the

most open and forceful novelistic attack on the halutzic leadership of the Third Aliyah, Hazaz's contemporaries and admirers. I have suggested since the beginning of this chapter that a more synchronic view of literary history presents a picture closer to the real time existence of the literature, its production, and its reception. By adding a few dates to those we have just given, the complexity of the picture begins to emerge: in 1963, A. B. Yehoshua's "Mul haya'arot" (Facing the forests) is published; two years later, Aharon Meged publishes *HaHay 'al hamet*; in 1966, S. Y. Agnon receives the Nobel Prize for Literature; in 1968 Amos Oz's *Mikhael sheli* (My Michael) and Hayim Hazaz's *Kol Kitvei* (Collected writings) (second, revised edition) are published. This list, spanning five years, notes significant publications in the careers of three generations of Israeli writers. The interaction of these generations is illuminating: for instance, the attitude of the younger generations toward their seniors may be one of emulation, of rejection, of parody.

Hazaz is thus the logical candidate for the question I have posed: How did the founding of the state influence already established writers? However, a list of his works of the first decade of the state demonstrates scholarly problems that are truly formidable.

1948: "Hupah vetaba'at"

1950: *Bekets hayamim* (End of days)

1952: *Ya'ish* III, IV

1955: "Nahar Shotef"

1956: *Daltot nehoshet* (Gates of bronze)

1958: "Ofek Natuy" (Extended horizon) in *Hagorat mazalot*, pp. 7-

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Of these six works, only the first and the last were written in the period under discussion.

Bekets hayamim, the only play Hazaz wrote, was first published in serial form in late 1933-1934 but was not produced on stage until 1950, when it was also published for the first time as a complete work. A historic drama set in the period of the Sabbatean messianic upheavals of the seventeenth century, it affords abundant opportunities for monologues on the agony of exile and the glory of redemption, two of the author's favorite themes. While the play certainly fits the euphoric, almost apocalyptic mood of 1950,

the year of its production, it had been conceived and written in the months after the accession of Hitler to power in Germany. Because the differences between the early and later versions are relatively insignificant, they certainly do not warrant our characterizing this powerful play as a work written under the influence of the establishment of the state. We have, furthermore, no way to compare the reception of the play in 1934 (only as a read document), with its reception as a stage production in 1950.

One of Hazaz's two "Yemenite novels," *Ya'ish*, has an intricate publication history. The first of its four volumes was published serially in 1940–1941 under the Yemenite-sounding pseudonym "Zekhariah Uzali." The novel was then published in four parts, the first in 1947 as volume 4 of Hazaz's *Ketavim* (Writings), the second in 1948 as volume 5 of *Ketavim*, the third in 1952 as volume 6 of *Ketavim*, and the fourth in 1952 as volume 8 of *Ketavim*. Clearly, this novel was long in the works, and at least half of it had been published before the establishment of the state. It is a rambling Bildungsroman tracing the spiritual and sensual development of a young Yemenite boy, Ya'ish, beginning in his home in Yemen and ending, in the later volumes, in the Land of Israel. The book parallels Hazaz's other Yemenite novel, *HaYoshevet baganim* (1944), in that it was partially composed at the same time and follows the same broad developmental stages: the pre-modern world of religious piety suffused with fantasies of messianism; the dissipation of that world of faith and the concomitant dissolution of the hero's moral stature; a type of redemption through settlement in the Land of Israel. Because settlement in Israel is already posited as a novelistic solution in *HaYoshevet baganim*, published five years before the establishment of the state, it is impossible to attribute any of the Zionist motifs of the latter two parts of *Ya'ish* to the impact of the new reality: Jewish political sovereignty.

During the first five years of Israeli sovereignty, Hazaz invested much of his energies in rewriting two of his stories dealing with the period following the October Revolution. "Nahar shotef" (1955) is a radical recast of his first published story, "Mizeh umizeh" (1923) while *Daltot nehoshet* (1956) is a massive expansion of "Pirkei mahapekha" (1923). Although any connection between these stories and the impact of the new political reality must be speculative because both stories are detailed efforts to re-create the realities

of the immediate post-revolutionary period in the Soviet Union, two suggestions can be made. First, it is productive to develop a suggestion made by Warren Bargad regarding the question: Why did Hazaz choose, at this point in his career, to rework his early stories on the Revolution? "It may well be that certain socio-political issues of the early fifties had influenced Hazaz in this regard. Israel itself was going through the early stages of a political revisionism; it was beginning to turn away from the Soviet Union (particularly in response the U.S.S.R.'s embracing of the Arab cause) and gradually moving towards western spheres of influence."⁷

While Israel was, indeed, shifting toward a more western orientation in the early 1950s, Hazaz, it should be remembered, had fled from the Soviet Union in 1921, had lived in Paris for eight years, had never written in support of Communism, and regarded the revolution as a catastrophe for Russian Jewry. While closely associated with the hegemonic MAPAI Party of the Labor block throughout his days in Palestine, then Israel, he was more interested in Zionism than in Socialism as the redemptive solution to the Jewish problem. In the early 1950s, the Labor block was embroiled in a vicious internecine battle over this issue. The catalyst was Stalin's anti-Semitism as manifested in the "doctors' trial" and the murder of the last Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union. When one reads both "Nahar shotef" and *Daltot nehoshet* against this background, one sees how the political controversy of the years 1951-1953 energized many aspects of these texts. Unfortunately, Hazaz is so interested in recreating the realistic milieu of the revolutionary period that plot, character, and even ideology are obscured by the detail.

Second, Hazaz's concept of history, of narrative, was shaped by the ruptures of World War I, the October Revolution, and the turmoils following the revolution: civil wars and pogroms. In trying to comprehend the momentous changes in Jewish history wrought by the creation of a sovereign Jewish state, he probably found his "objective correlative" in the post-revolutionary milieu, which he knew well and which was distant enough for fictional manipulation. The daily events of the new Israel might have been too difficult for him to handle artistically.

Of the two works first created after the establishment of the state, "Hupah vetaba'at" (1948) was well received probably because it was published only

several months after the declaration of the state and the death of the author's son in battle, both in May 1948. Because it seemed to give expression to the emotions evoked by the momentous events of those months — the struggle for the defense of the state and the arrival of many refugees from Europe bringing tangible evidence of the ravages of the Holocaust — it answered the needs of the reading audience. The story focuses upon the thoughts and actions of one desolate widow, Mrs. Porat, who ruminates relentlessly about the death of her children in the Holocaust. The slow flow of the plot from one mournful situation to another is barely — and somewhat ironically — relieved when we hear outside her bedroom the jubilant noise of the crowd celebrating the declaration of the state. Hazaz thus fuses the two epochal events, devoting most of the attention to mourning rather than jubilation. The reader is forced to connect the two events and to dwell upon the agony and death that preceded and accompanied the public joy of the realization of the Zionist dream. The story gains additional poignancy when seen as a personal statement of the author's continued mourning for the loss of his only son who fell in the battle for Jerusalem twelve days before the official declaration of Israeli statehood.

The short novel "Ofek Natuy" (Extended horizon) (1958) deserves more detailed attention, not because it is an artistic triumph — it is far from that — but because it is the author's most transparent attempt to deal with the overwhelming historical events of the decade in novelistic form. Read today with our heightened sensitivity to both the elitist prejudices of the Labor Party and Haim Hazaz as an occasional spokesperson for its ideology, its biases are glaring and illustrative. The shift to the first-person narrative from his more customary third-person distancing makes the ideological positions even more transparent than usual. Always verging on a travelogue, "Ofek Natuy" is the account of the author's trip to the Lachish sector of the Israeli coastal plain to visit the new settlements composed mostly of Oriental immigrants. The given situation is most felicitous: the sophisticated urbanite European plunges himself into the midst of a society supposedly free from western contamination. That these Orientals are also Galut Jews, invariably so backward that they require instruction and constant surveillance by their modern, western brethren does not deflect Hazaz from his quest. And a quest it is. Superficially, the author is inspecting the

material progress of the new settlements; actually, he is searching for a new hero-type with the virtues of the imaginary pristine Hebrew. As the story progresses, however, these virtues prove to be insufficient.

The author is engulfed by Oriental Jews from the moment he boards the bus for Lachish. They are gentle but raucous in their endless bickering, their childish naivete literally charming the narrator. The vignettes depicting the new immigrants at work and at play are posed, picturesque snapshots taken by a paternalistic tourist who is always conscious of the gulf between himself and the quaint primitives. They constantly remind him of Assyrian bas-reliefs, of sphinxes, or of primitive cave paintings. Their daily activity forms the background for the experiences and reflections of the narrator and endow the novel with whatever unity it has. All the primary characters are calculated to represent various sentiments or traits which serve to shape the image of the new hero. The author's first hosts are Shimon and Miriam Zayit (Olive), the administrative heads of the area. Though middle-aged and middle-class, they had abandoned the settled life of public officials in Jerusalem to guide and educate the recent immigrants. Imbued with a sense of mission and haunted by the past, Shimon constantly quotes biblical verses. (The author, too, always carried his pocket Bible with him.) In their conversations, the degenerate complexity of city life is continually contrasted with the salutary simplicity of life on the land; the whipping boy of their jests is the public official or orator. In educating the Orientals, they and their staff of teachers who join the conversation feel a sense of personal fulfillment; they are doing a constructive act in a disintegrating world. Premonitions of the very real danger of Levantinism, which was threatening Israel, are voiced by Uri, a teacher: "in several years the children of the Oriental groups will comprise a majority in the country. And immigration continues to come from the East. Ultimately we will turn into an Oriental nation. . . . All the traits which have rooted themselves in us during the 2000 years of exile in Europe and by which we have become a European entity [will disappear]. The question is: Is it possible to deposit in the hands of an Oriental the destiny of the Hebrew nation, Hebrew history, and, more than this, the destiny of the country? . . . The East is indifferent, sunk in the routine of generations upon generations . . . anarchic, individualistic, fanatic, lazy. . . . One can't rely upon education. Primal traits and tendencies

always return, and return precisely at crucial, decisive moments.”⁸ Because the harsh realism of these views is not consistent with Hazaz’s romantic vision of the Orientals, he refutes Uri’s case by depicting its pleader as a student of sociology, a neurotic intellectual. One may wonder, in passing, why this exilic stereotype had not been redeemed by his contact with the soil—or, for that matter, what Hazaz’s personal position really is.

The antithesis of Uri is present in Yuval, the regional supervisor who is rarely seen without his jeep. Youthful and vigorous, efficient and business-like, he possesses a reserve that bespeaks stability and, technically, allows the author to indulge in interim mystical reveries on the broad fields they are passing: reflections upon the freshness and force of raw nature, the distant Israelite past, the bond between the ancient Israelite and the modern Israeli farmer. In several remarkable passages the author describes his exhaustion after hours in the open fields at the mercy of the crushing desert sun. The terrain, itself, assumes symbolic value: the “outstretched horizon” (ofek natuy) reaches back to the past and forward to the future. The naked force of nature is identified with the natural past when the Hebrew was a farmer and closer to nature. This is a specifically Zionist category of naturalism, for coupled with the adoration of naked natural forces and a flight from civilized sophistication is a yearning for an imaginary preexilic Hebrew past and a possible future.

At a second encounter several months later, the taciturn Yuval is discovered to be effusive, even sentimental concerning the education of the immigrants and the dignity of farm labor. Similar sentiments are expressed even more emphatically by the rabbi of Mesharim (rightness or directness), one of the villages in the sector: “We have at our disposal three cures which are effective for every disease and plague—and they are: Torah, loyal citizenship, and tilling the soil” (p. 88). The reader will perhaps find it a bit disingenuous that the rabbi holds a law degree from the Sorbonne and is an expert marksman with a pistol. His talk of missionary work and universal religion coupled with his earthly bearing preclude any possibility of identifying him with a rabbi of the Galut.

The narrator becomes personally involved in his story upon meeting Rehela, a fiery Moroccan maiden whose desert beauty enchants him. Embarrassed at his infatuation with an adolescent yet unable to resist her

charms, he lingers in the sunbaked fields to catch a glimpse of his beloved. In his mind she obviously symbolizes the legendary Hebrew beauty who seems to be at home in a primitive setting. Her name, in fact, is a derivative of Rachel—a name which her literary cousins often bear. And though she spurns him, he cannot forget her.

In his wandering through the fields, the narrator meets Binyamin Openheim. Binyamin's characterization is a realization of the views he represents. Tall and handsome, Binyamin is a young American rabbi who has come to tour Israel. But he cannot simply be an American: actually, Binyamin, the last of a long line of distinguished European Jews, has survived the concentration camps and spent four years in Israel before migrating to America. He looks and acts like an Israeli. Though a product of the Galut, he has already been partly redeemed. In their conversation Binyamin verbalizes many of the leitmotifs of Hazaz's literary creations with the significant exception that here the Galut is evaluated more objectively.

Although it is posited that the Galut is drawing to a close because of its inability to sustain itself, Binyamin regards its passing ruefully because "it was a mighty deed, one of the greatest things that happened in the world" (p. 124). The Jewish people accepted Galut voluntarily, even proudly: the ancestral land was not of prime significance; God was. God was the center of the universe and his adoration, the sublime purpose of all life. The Galut, therefore, was the peculiar ennobling characteristic of Jewish experience. In its transcendence of temporal interests and its devotion to God, it pointed the way to the salvation of mankind; "in it was hidden the secret of the redemption of humanity" (p. 126). But now that the Galut is drawing to a close, all that is left is a national state. "The land of Israel is a decline, a submission, bankruptcy and despair. It is not for this that we have struggled among the nations for two thousand years from one end of the world to the other and have borne all kind of harsh and evil afflictions, and have been killed in all kinds of harsh deaths, and have suffered for the sins of all of them—so that finally we will return to the Land of Israel. Folly! Absurdity! A thing which makes no sense. This is as if . . . as if . . . Jesus, let us say, after they lowered him from the cross and he rose from the dead, returns to Nazareth and works at his carpentry" (p. 125).

As the discussion ends, Binyamin parts with the narrator, each continuing

on his own way through the fields. Had the story ended here, one might imagine that Hazaz regretted the alleged end of the Galut and feared for the future of the State of Israel. The ending of the story, though abrupt and artificial, seems to indicate, however, that Hazaz had not changed his position. Visiting a kibbutz in the Negev a year later, the narrator meets a pregnant woman who turns out to be Rehela. She rushes into the barn to summon her husband, who, of course, is none other than Binyamin. The reader is led to understand that he, too, has undergone the transition from Galut to complete redemption particularly through his love for Rehela, the primitive Hebrew beauty. Their child will naturally be the new ideal hero.

The search for a new hero-type is not a new phenomenon in modern Hebrew literature. By the 1880s authors rejected the stereotype of enlightened Jew battling the forces of darkness and sought heroism in romanticized portrayals of pious, often Hasidic types. Toward the end of the century, this type gave way to the *talush*, the uprooted, almost "superfluous man," common in late-nineteenth-century European literature. In Hebrew literature created in the Palestine of the Second Aliyah, the *talush* was often replaced by the *halutz*, the pioneer rebuilding the ancestral homeland. (The many deracinated heroes of Yosef Hayyim Brenner are perfect examples of *talushim* even when they seek to root themselves in the ancestral soil.⁹) The highly idealized swamp-drainer and desert-reclaimer always volunteered — as some did in real life — to undergo severe hardship and danger to realize the dream of Zionist redemption. He felt fulfillment through self-sacrifice and an unflagging devotion to this vision of personal and national salvation. But by the 1950s the *halutz*, too, had outlived his capacity to focus and personify the moral issues of the day. The creation of the State of Israel predicated the realization and hence the dissipation of an inspiring dream; and the formation of an organized policy based on prescribed duties and rights robbed pioneering and volunteerism of their appeal.

Since the creation of the state, therefore, the Israeli novelist has confronted a new cultural and artistic problem. Ordinarily, the individuality of a created character, his decisions and actions, should bear some relationship to an accepted set of values and an identifiable social group — but the coordinates of Israeli society became more and more tenuous. The identifiable outlines of the Palestinian community on the eve of statehood were blurred

by the successive waves of immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The much discussed "return to normalcy" precipitated a moral crisis among writers not habituated to "normalcy." To what society or set of values could a hero be related either as a reflector or a rebel?

Although this quandary was shared by writers of fiction in many western countries throughout the postwar world, historical circumstances particularized the experience of the Hebrew writer. The disintegration of the mold of western society during the past two centuries was exacerbated in the instance of the Jewish community by extraordinary circumstances: violent geographical displacements, partial extermination, and the shift from a unique situation and concept of exile to landed statehood. However, the situation was temporarily assuaged by the application of interim ideologies, most of which proved fruitless. The astounding material success of political Zionism both de-energized it as a moving ideology and, now that the uniqueness of the exilic situation had been eliminated, confronted the Hebrew writer in Israel more squarely with the problems which had been besetting his colleagues in other countries. He now had to face the enraging fact that the "normalcy" which he had been taught to equate with social health—even with salvation—often implied precisely the opposite in the twentieth century. Problems of the spirit are not necessarily solved by the valiant reclamation of barren wastes or even the creation of a welfare state. The Israeli writer, indeed, had to return to the universally human questions which had obsessed those of his predecessors who did not succumb to the temptation to reduce all human situations to an obvious personification of the plight of Jewry in the Galut—for example, Agnon. His quest to redefine the human condition, furthermore, must necessarily be conditioned by the wealth of the historic associations which his language constantly evokes. He had to decide, for instance, whether the redemption he often writes of is that of normative Judaism or of Herzen and Bakunin.

Hazaz's shift from the third to the first person, I have noted, both uncovered and unleashed the obsession with ideology which was always present in his previous works. But this alone does not explain the grotesquerie of "Ofek Natuy." The ideology of his earlier stories was less verbalized than felt, emerging, as it did, from actual situations in a definable society. But in "Ofek Natuy" everything is invented, even prefabricated. The new hero, as

yet unborn, is a product of will and not of the imagination — an artificial harlequinade of disparate elements. Born of Binyamin and Rehela, educated and trained by the likes of the Zayits, Yuval, and the rabbi, the future hero will stand entrenched in the ancestral soil of Lachish and scan the “outstretched horizon” beckoning towards the future. Bereft of truly imaginative creations, the story disintegrates into a secular morality play from which God is absent, Satan is the decadent Galut, and Everyman is the unwritten result of an ideological equation.

In December 1955, probably shortly before he began work on “Ofek Natuy,” Hazaz wrote one of his first major articles on the mission of Hebrew literature in the newly created sovereign state of Israel.¹⁰ He lamented the failure of Hebrew writers to capture and express in their fictions the majesty of the momentous events of the period viewed from a broad historical perspective. After centuries of exile, the Jewish people had returned to their ancestral homeland and created there a viable sovereign state. The descriptions of these events are always couched in messianic rhetoric, however secularized Hazaz might have been. One of the aspects of the Jewish messianic dream has always been the ingathering of exiles, the return of Jews from all the corners of their exile to their homeland.

In “Ofek Natuy,” Hazaz is clearly attempting, however feebly, to realize this authorial aspiration. He yearned to write the great Israeli novel. In order to fully appreciate the ambitions and failures of the novel, however, one must view it not only as a late novel in the author’s career but also as an integral part of the literary effort of the decade, a proposal I made at the beginning of this chapter. At about the same time, Yizhar, a generation younger than Hazaz, was deep into his expansive novel on the Israeli War of Independence, *Yeme Tsiklag* (Days of Tsiklag) (1957), certainly the most impressive novel of Israel’s first decade, and A. B. Yehoshua, a generation younger than Yizhar, published his first short story, “Mot Hazaken” (The death of the old man) (1957), an ironic elegy on the death of a Zionist hero. While Hazaz’s “Ofek Natuy” is a paean to the Zionist achievement, Yizar’s novel and Yehoshua’s short story both raise questions about this grand human project and suggest areas of failure or disappointment. Although I do not claim that any of these writers, however talented, has succeeded in meeting the high demands that Hazaz established in his essay on the mis-

sion of Israeli literature—Yizhar and Yehoshua would question whether Israeli literature should have any such mission—I do suggest that a synchronic comparison of these three more or less contemporary works would open new, extensive horizons in our understanding of the dynamics of literary change in the first decade of Israel's existence. We would also learn that many of the ideas that find articulation among the “New Historians” and “Critical Sociologists” of the 1980s and 1990s were already evident in the fiction of the younger writers of the 1950s. The disenchantment with the myths and ideals of Zionism and declared Israeli public norms was already present in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the work of such influential writers as Yehoshua and Oz in prose, and in Yehuda Amichai and Natan Zach in poetry. The student of Hebrew literature often wonders why this realization has come to political scientists and sociologists so belatedly.

NOTES

1. Haim Hazaz, “The Sermon,” *Israeli Stories* (New York, 1965), pp. 65–86, reprints the *Partisan Review* translation.

2. Gershon Shaked, *HaSipporet ha'ivrit: 1880–1980* (Tel Aviv), vol. 2, 1983; vol. 3, 1988; vol. 4, 1993 (in Hebrew).

3. Reuven Kritz, *HaSipporet ha'ivrit shel dor hama'avak le'atsma'ut* (Kiryat Motzkin, 1978) (in Hebrew).

4. The emergence of the “New Historians” and the “Critical Sociologists” in Israel over the past decade has generated a broad literature in both books and periodicals. For a tentative summary and bibliographies see *History and Memory* 7:1 (Spring–Summer 1995) and *Te'oria uvikoret* (Summer 1996). For literary criticism in the light of the “New Historians,” see Yitzhak Laor's *Anu kotevim otkha moledet* (Tel Aviv, 1995). This collection of essays has been critiqued by Gerson Shaked, “Aher — al 'Anu kotevim otkha moledet' (1995) me'et Yithak Laor,” *Alpayim* 12 (1996), 1–72. See also Hannah Hever, *Paytanim uviryonim* (Jerusalem, 1994).

5. For a listing of Hazaz's articles and speeches see Rafael Weiser, *Annotated Bibliography of the Writing of Haim Hazaz* (Jerusalem, 1992), items 250 ff. (in Hebrew). All these items were collected by his widow, Aviva Hazaz, in *Mishpat hage'ula* (Tel Aviv, 1977). In general, Weiser's bibliography is an indispensable source for the study of Hazaz's writings because it organizes in coherent form one

of the most chaotic publication careers imaginable. Many of Hazaz's publications were revised and republished or were parts of novels, many unfinished, and published serially. During the 1940s, Hazaz was writing some six novels simultaneously and published at least two items per month in *Davar*. For a less complete, yet eminently serviceable English bibliography see Warren Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction: The Works of Hayim Hazaz* (Providence, 1982), 133–36. For the sake of clarity, I have simplified the bibliographic complexity.

6. As indicated in Weiser, *Bekets hayamim* was first published serially in 1933 ff, but was actually finished in early 1932. The full play, adapted for theater production, was revised in 1950 and published as a separate volume that year. Many chapters of Hazaz's novel on the life of Jesus were published in the late 1940s but were never collected.

7. Warren Bargad, *Ideas in Fiction: The Works of Hayim Hazaz* (Providence, 1982), p. 117. The obvious, often contradictory ideological statements which I and Bargad find so troubling are justified by Nurith Gertz in an article dealing with Hazaz's fiction of the 1930s: "Ideology versus Literature in the Stories of Hazaz," *Prooftexts* 8:2 (May 1988). Gertz claims that this ideological confusion is deliberate, actually the result of a "poetics of contradictions" which is the author's response to the "heavy pressure exerted upon writers to express a political ideology and be mobilized in the Zionist national struggle" (p. 194).

8. All translations of "Ofek Natuy" are mine. The Hebrew text of "Ofek Natuy" used is the original 1958 edition, published in *Hagorat mazalot* (Tel Aviv, 1958); quotation on p. 29. All future citations from this work are noted in parentheses in the body of the text.

9. See Joseph Hayyim Brenner, *Breakdown and Bereavement*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Philadelphia, 1971), and *Out of the Depths*, trans. David Patterson (Boulder, 1992).

10. "HaSifrut ha'ivrit bazeman hazeh," *HaBoker*, Dec. 16, 1955. Republished in *Davar*, Dec. 23, 1955; and in *Lamerhav*, Dec. 23, 1955; and in *Daf*, vol. 11, pp. 3–5.