

Paris or Jerusalem?

The Multilingualism of Esther Raab

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ESTHER RAAB'S "PARIS O YERUSHALAYIM?"—a short prose account of her childhood published in 1952—provides a fascinating glimpse into the multilingual culture of the Yishuv through the eyes of the “first, native” modern Hebrew poet.¹ Raab was born in 1894 to Hungarian immigrant parents who had arrived in Eretz Yisrael between 1860 and 1875 and were among the founding settlers of Petah Tikvah, where she was born. Petah Tikvah often figures in Raab’s poetry and prose as a cultural and linguistic *tabula rasa*, a space free of diasporic influence; nevertheless, with its steady influx of immigrants and visitors, the town was also a major site of cosmopolitan and diasporic encounter.

In her essay, Raab describes regular gatherings of foreign-born visitors at her family’s home, including tourists, Zionist leaders, local intellectuals, and artists. Almost fifty years after the events she describes, Raab recalls: “[Mother] would wipe off the sand stuck to my bare feet and rush towards the living room [*salon*], where a mishmash of words [*belil-devarim*] in Yiddish, German, and Russian tumbled out. This was a regular event at our place.”² At such occasions Raab was summoned to entertain the guests, as she does on a particular evening with her rendition of “Esah ‘einay el heharim” (Psalm 121). This song, which Raab describes as “a selection from Psalms, to which my Russian teacher added the tune of the Ukrainian national anthem,” reflects the linguistic and cultural crossroads in which Raab finds herself immersed.² The performance is a success, and Raab takes pride in her flawless and clear enunciation of “the words of this ancient text” and the ease with

which she hits its highest notes, a feat that sets her apart from her classmates, who often finish the song “with a slightly hoarse *pianissimo*.”

The fusion of the song’s Hebrew lyrics and the Ukrainian musical score exemplifies the complex linguistic and cultural interplay that occurs at the Raab home not only between Esther, the native *eretsyisre’eli* child, and her foreign audience, but also between Esther and her own peers in the *Yishuv*. Though Esther presumably chooses to perform this piece because it showcases her seamless and effortless *eretsyisre’eliyut*, the song itself juxtaposes multiple historical, national, and linguistic affiliations. The Hebrew lyrics, for one, claim a profound historical and sacred relation to the Land of Israel, but their arrangement with Ukrainian musical notation turns the performance into an expression of nationalist desire, a surrogate anthem. Between the “empty and silent” landscape of a “new” land, and the presence of an informal congregation of delegates from around the world, emerges an ambivalent space that Esther occupies with acute awareness that among these outsiders—and insiders—her nativeness is a mark of difference, a marginalizing factor. But Esther, in selecting this particular song, also proves to be complicit in expressing her difference.

After the performance, an unnamed visitor—whom Raab’s biographer Ehud Ben-Ezer identifies as Menahem Ussishkin—approaches Esther, and with “a strange, cold stare and a harsh voice,” inquires: “Tell me, my child, where would you rather live, Paris or Jerusalem?”³ The question puzzles her. Why has she never heard of this place? And she wonders silently if perhaps Paris is “an Arab village near Gadera.”⁴ In the personal cartography of a young girl in the Land of Israel, Paris does not register as a major European cultural center but rather as an unfamiliar locality amid the growing settlements of the *Yishuv*. Esther’s naïve cartography underscores, even validates, her native status. Her personal map is radically local and either precludes any awareness of foreign landscapes or renders them marginal and irrelevant. Additionally, her spotless performance—proof of her native linguistic fluency—sets her apart from her own generation of predominantly immigrant classmates, who struggle with the same Hebrew text. Nevertheless, Raab’s nativism is not invariable: the multilingual milieu of the salon, the Ukrainian tune of a now Hebrew song, and the immigrant background of Esther’s parents and guests all bring diverse geographies and languages into tangible view.

“Paris o Yerushalayim?” not only demonstrates the ambivalence one often finds in Raab’s prose with respect to the interaction of native and foreign elements in her cultural identity, but also shows how Raab constructed the native–foreign binary in a way that entangled, rather than polarized, its terms. Although Raab actively promoted the canon’s assessment of her work as nativist, her feelings of outsidership—whether as an “outsider within” her environment or vis-à-vis the Diaspora—frame her native *eretsisre’eli* self-identity and early on set the terms of her location within Hebrew modernism.⁵ Chana Kronfeld observes that, despite the tireless efforts of the *moderna* to import a wide variety of international literary models into Hebrew, its major representatives, Leah Goldberg, Avraham Shlonsky, and Natan Alterman, nevertheless “[remained] associated quite exclusively in the canonical literary picture with modernist developments in the countries with which they had the most biographical and cultural contacts.”⁶ While these poets were invested in developing a pre-Statehood, Hebrew modernist poetics, their connection to outside international models became a normative element of the *moderna*. Early in her career, Raab acknowledged that her native status placed her in the margins of the *moderna* despite the fact that much of her early work was shaped by international modernist models. For instance, in a letter to Reuven Shoham, in which she responds to Moshe Kleinman’s negative review of her first book of poems, *Kimshonim* (1930), she identifies key differences between her background and that of her immigrant contemporaries:

Shlonsky [and] Alterman were stuck [*taku'im*] in “Russianness” — and indeed most of the writers had a foreign background [*reka' meḥuts la'arets*], I actually did not have such a burden — [I was] barefoot, in the expanse — through illnesses, under the eucalyptus trees, *in a land empty of all things* — a land full of ideas and aspirations and a handful of individuals who clung to their ideals by their fingernails, and with feverish bodies realized great tasks, tasks that became milestones — and father was — a symbol for me [my emphasis].⁷

The barefoot child running through an empty landscape and the levity of *eretsisre’eli* belonging are motifs that pervade many of the *Kimshonim* poems, but in its imagery

the passage more specifically recalls the poem “La’av” (To the father), which Raab wrote to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of her father’s arrival in Petah Tikvah. Yehuda Raab had the distinction of being the first resident to break the ground of the new settlement, an act that the poem documents in the lines “the furrow ploughs in spite of the desert / the first to cleave a virgin land.”⁸ “La’av” begins with a blessing that takes its language from Genesis 1:11-12: “Brukhot hayadayim / asher zar’u” (Blessed are the hands / that sowed).⁹ These words pay homage not only to Raab’s biographical father, but also to all the “founding fathers” of the *Yishuv*, whom Yehuda Raab has come to epitomize in his daughter’s eyes. Like the eucalyptus tree, a British import to Eretz Yisrael, Yehuda Raab’s generation became prominent, normative inhabitants of the Israeli landscape through their tenacious dedication to the land. Their bare hands prepare—literally, “split open”—untouched *eretsyisre’eli* space to make way for a new organic expression. The father’s first furrow—*hatelem harishon*—marks the beginning of a poetic language native to the land, to which his daughter, the representative of the first native generation, gives full expression.¹⁰

Raab asserts her native attachment to this national and linguistic beginning, both in “La’av” and in the prose passage quoted earlier, by selective erasures and denials. Petah Tikvah is not only a point of arrival, but also a point of origin that replaces all others: just as the land is “empty of all things,” so, too, are its immigrants emptied of their diasporic burdens and wounds. Raab thus attenuates her own attachment to a foreign past and claims emptiness, silence, and freedom from “the anxiety of influence” as her patrimony. The poem’s reiteration of “brukhot hayadayim” in its closing line signals a return to a point of origin that the poem itself has come to rewrite.¹¹ At the same time, her claim to an unfettered beginning further entrenches Raab in the margins of the pre-Statehood literary culture.

In the introduction to his English translation of *Kimshonim*, poet Harold Schimmel aptly but elliptically observes that “[Raab] is more varied than her first book allows.”¹² Though one does come across references to foreign and urban landscapes in *Kimshonim* in the poems “Kahira, Kahira!” (To Cairo!) and “Tso’anim-Hungarim” (Hungarian Gypsies), it is apparent that these texts (see the translation of “Kahira, Kahira!” in the appendix to this article)—indeed, all the poems of *Kimshonim*—do not interact overtly with the cosmopolitan contexts in which many

of the poems were written, and it is to this “barrenness” of context that Schimmel responds. Rather, *Kimshonim* visualizes and celebrates an “empty and silent land” slowly coming into fruition through the labor of recent immigrants and their indigenous progeny; in the process, cosmopolitan experience is suppressed in favor of an unadulterated nativism. The poem imagines a speaker who is seemingly nonurban in her sensibilities.

Nevertheless, through close readings of select poems, Kronfeld shows how Raab’s daring syntactical contortions and “minimalist lexical, figurative and thematic strategies” are signs of more complex influences—both native and foreign—at work in *Kimshonim*.¹³ Specifically, Kronfeld argues that “writing in a newly revived language (as Hebrew was in the 1920s), writing as the first native poet (male or female) in that reborn language, all the while remaining a self-conscious participant in French modernism make it impossible for Raab to take anything for granted—syntactically, semantically, pragmatically, and, not least of all, prosodically.” Indeed, in the essay “Milim ketsipporim nediroi” (1973), Raab cites the German poet Walter Calé (1881–1904) and Haim Nahman Bialik as the two major influences on her early work and often refers to both of these writers, particularly Calé, in later writings and interviews. Dan Miron, who describes Raab’s poetic language as “dynamic, ambivalent, ‘open’ and fluid,” argues that the nativist reading of Raab’s work fails to take into account her multilingual background and the influence “foreign poets” (*meshorerim lo’azim*) exerted on her blank verse and free rhythms.¹⁴ While his own work on Raab focuses more on her relation to other modern Hebrew poets (particularly Shlonsky and Bialik), his observations mark a major, unacknowledged lacuna in readings of Raab.

More recent work on Raab has made reference to the status of Yiddish as her true first language,¹⁵ a subject that Raab discussed at length in her 1971 interview with Helit Yeshurun,¹⁶ but fewer observations are made of the other languages that shaped Raab’s linguistic background and literary development. The question “Paris o Yerushalayim?” serves as a point of departure for this essay, as French, which Raab had studied as a child, came to serve as a vital literary language for Raab. In the mid-1920s, she translated several works by Charles Baudelaire and later claimed that Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* inspired the title and imagery of *Kimshonim* (1930).¹⁷ French also took on a quotidian role, first

in her daily correspondence with her childhood friend Laurette Pascal (1895–1923), and later in Cairo, where it served as a lingua franca. More specifically, Raab’s interaction with the French language, and the sites at which these encounters occurred, elucidate the ways in which Raab understood and constructed her native *eretzyisre’eli* identity within the immigrant culture of the *Yishuv*. Taking into consideration both her poetry and prose, I will next focus in this essay on the role that French played in Raab’s cultural and linguistic background, showing how her prolonged encounter with this language also shaped her affiliation with a Western European modernist sensibility. Raab’s multilingual and cosmopolitan experiences in Cairo and Paris, where French was her primary language, allowed her to problematize her “native outsider” status in the pre-Statehood canon and, ultimately, enabled her to claim her own diasporic ties.

THE GRADUAL CONQUEST OF FRENCH

In a letter dated June 1921, Raab’s cousin and future husband Isaac Green compliments Raab on her fluency in French: “I do hope that you will be able to understand me, because from what I hear you are quite well-versed in French. To my great disappointment, I cannot make the same claim about my knowledge of Hebrew.”¹⁸ Although Green had been born in Eretz Yisrael, he had moved to Cairo at age sixteen and had quickly adopted French as his primary language, using it almost exclusively. His self-effacing appraisal of his Hebrew is intriguing for its implication that, by her late twenties, Raab’s knowledge and use of French had reached such a high level of sophistication.

But how and where did French enter Raab’s linguistic milieu? Many of her early teachers were at the forefront of the Hebrew language revival, and she herself had spoken basic Hebrew prior to beginning formal schooling, thereby observing first-hand Hebrew’s development from a “dead language” to a modern vernacular. At home, however, the Raabs spoke primarily in Yiddish, the language in which Esther and her future in-laws would communicate. In addition to Yiddish, the other major Diaspora language that dominated Raab’s early linguistic experiences was French, as was required by her school’s curriculum. Although Hebrew was

rapidly winning the *milhemet haleshonot* (language wars) over Yiddish, the latter still occupied an important, albeit confined, role as a domestic Jewish vernacular. French, on the contrary, was radically diasporic:

One [of the instructors] was Mugrabi [David Chayun], and I squeezed dry [*sahateti*] his French. He added a tinge of the “outside” that only strengthened the roots of the “inside.” He was foreign to me. In all respects, he was foreign. The language that he spoke was foreign, his appearance was foreign, and his hands were foreign, as though they had been pampered, at a time when I only saw strong, working hands.¹⁹

If Yehuda Raab and his generation epitomized an emerging native identity in the Land of Israel, David Chayun, a native of Damascus, represented the opposite: the alienating and enervating effects of diasporic influence. Although Raab remarks that many of her instructors spoke a flawed and accented Hebrew, Chayun’s attachment to French and his complicity in bringing this foreign tongue into Raab’s linguistic background set the terms of his nonbelonging. Raab’s description of his hands, which contrast sharply with the “blessed hands” of “La’av,” further underscores his “strangeness.” And yet the very elements that constitute his difference—the French language, his “pampered hands” (signs of leisure), and his European and Mizrahi appearance—later characterized Esther’s experiences in the Diaspora, and in particular in Cairo. In other words, in the years predating the publication of *Kimshonim*, Raab would come to incorporate several qualities of this cultural other whom she imagines as a child, in particular an intimate attachment to French culture and language.

In his biography of Raab, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash* (Days of Gall and Honey), Ben-Ezer explains that soon after Raab’s death, letters written in French were found in her private archives.²⁰ They form part of an epistolary exchange between Raab and her childhood friend Laurette Pascal, who committed suicide at the age of twenty-seven in Petaḥ Tikvah.²¹ Pascal, who came from a wealthy immigrant family with strong ties to France, imparted a new layer to the multilingual background in which Raab had found herself reluctantly immersed. Raab later admitted

to Ben-Ezer that her friendship with Pascal had made her particularly receptive to French culture and had contributed to her early fascination with Western Europe:

Laurette, who had studied in a French lyceum and visited Paris in her youth, gave Esther a wider glimpse into the world, helped her with her French studies and had a great influence over her. She told her stories about César Frank and the dancer Isadora Duncan, whom she knew personally. Esther's dreams at this time, according to what she told me, featured her love of dance, Isadora Duncan, and the Galilee expedition [*halikha bagalilah*] into Yardenia.²²

In this passage, the juxtaposition of Isadora Duncan and the pilgrimage into the Galilee region illustrates, as in the earlier example of “Esah ‘einay el heharim,” the interplay of foreign and native elements in Raab's early cultural experiences. Like Raab, Pascal had been born in Eretz Yisrael to an immigrant father (of Romanian descent) but claimed genealogical ties to the land through her mother, a native Jerusalemite. Laurette's father, Peretz Pascal, had studied in France and returned frequently with his family for professional reasons. Consequently, from a young age, Laurette spent her time divided between France and the Land of Israel.

Pascal not only tutored Raab in French, but also maintained a daily written exchange with Raab in this language. In fact, Ben-Ezer surmises that a young Arab woman who worked for the Pascal family may have acted as a courier between the Pascal and Raab residences, thereby adding another linguistic intermediary to the correspondence between the two young girls.²³ Pascal also tutored Raab in German, a language that Yehuda Raab encouraged: “[He] forced me to read Goethe, Schiller and Heine,” Raab recalled.²⁴ After her friend's suicide, Raab made the following observation: “Perhaps it was her influence, but I began to fill my journal with mystical sayings and German poems.”²⁵ It is crucial to underscore that Pascal's affiliation with the French language and Western European culture was not native. In other words, Raab's increasing attachment to French, and later to a Western European sensibility, was mediated through Pascal's own hybridity, a confluence of native and foreign elements that Raab herself shared. Nevertheless, Pascal succeeded in elevating the status of French in Raab's eyes from an irrelevant

and strange diasporic language to one that would become deeply imbedded in her personal and cultural experiences (both in Eretz Yisrael and abroad). Additionally, the friendship with Pascal opened new cultural, geographic, and literary horizons for Raab and prepared her for the cosmopolitanism of Cairo and Paris.

In July 1921, at age twenty-seven, Raab traveled to Egypt to visit the Green family, her paternal relatives. She married Isaac later that year and settled in Hilwan, an industrial suburb of Cairo, where she lived for about five years. In 1990, *Ha'arets* posthumously published a piece by Raab titled “BeKahir” (In Cairo), which she had composed in about 1970.²⁶ She describes the city as follows:

An abundance of vendors filled the street, and the produce of the Nile’s wide, surrounding girth flowed through the streets, with a tune and rhyme I did not understand but which was tender and soothing. Large and impressive mangoes filled straw baskets made of beautiful, braided palm fronds—and fresh, black dates shine from push-wagons, teeny mandarins the size of nuts, fragrant and sweet as honey, and narcissus from the wide banks of the river . . .²⁷

These sensual observations of urban Cairo echo the imagery of the *Kimshonim* poem “Kahira, Kahira!” that Raab had written in 1926. As in “BeKahir,” Raab revives Cairo in similarly descriptive language:

חַתָּנוֹת וּמֵתִים בְּסֶף יַעֲבֵרוּ	weddings and the dead pass in procession
בְּחֻצוֹת קַהִירָה הַמְקֻשָּׁטָה,	on streets of decked-out Cairo,
צְוָחוֹת וְהֶעָוִיּוֹת	screams and grimaces
וּשְׁלַל גְּוִנִים	and myriad shades,
וְרִיחַ מוֹשֶׁק מְקַהֵה חוּשִׁים...	a whiff of musk stupefies the senses . . .

[lines 21-25]²⁸

In the poem, Raab portrays Cairo as a dissolute woman (“Cairo! Cairo! / Worn and tattered whore!”); it is a city in which death and putrescence both produce and commingle with an intense, erotic vitality (“from your dark recesses / aroma of the good coffee / rises”). “Kahira, Kahira!” is, arguably, the only poem in the otherwise

pastoral *Kimshonim* in which the cosmopolis makes a pronounced appearance. It is also the only poem, even among others that Raab wrote in Hilwan, that interrupts the empty and illusory spaces in which many of the *Kimshonim* poems are located with a densely inhabited and cacophonous cityscape. As Schimmel notes in his introduction, “Cairo lends depth and difference . . . to her Middle-Eastern-Mediterranean-ancestral landscapes.”²⁹ In Raab’s poem, the cosmopolis emerges as a dissonant, modern Babel:

תרבושים תרבושים,	Tarbooshes, tarbooshes,
ברברים, כושים,	Berbers, blacks,
הה, תררח, לילי!	beat, tarrarum, trilli!
תפים, הלילים	Bass-drum, reed-flute
אולי אולי, יללות וצוחות	ouli ouli, wails and screeches
המקוננות השחורות:	black female keeners:
	[lines 14-19]

The rhythm of the words in the Hebrew original is strikingly percussive, onomatopoeic, and incantatory. Although the speaker submits to this atmosphere with a measure of revulsion, the poem’s language engages intimately in the sensory experience of this foreign city and is compelled to reproduce the fullness of Cairo’s cadences beyond the limits of comprehensible language. Notwithstanding the poem’s orientalist outlook, this palpable engagement with the foreign is even more striking in a collection that otherwise gives primacy to a monolingual, undifferentiated landscape.

The generalized treatment of place in another poem, “Tso’anim-Hungarim,” offers an example of how language is able to neutralize foreign elements. In this enigmatic poem, for instance, the speaker invokes the image of wandering Hungarian gypsies in order to speak of his or her own transience and uprootedness. Unlike “Kahira, Kahira!” which imagines a Diaspora rich in sensory experience, “Tso’anim-Hungarim” emphasizes the empty desolation of the “abandoned” diasporic world.³⁰ The dense, sensuous language of “Kahira, Kahira,” by contrast, illustrates what Michael Gluzman has described as Raab’s “[rejection] of the highly figurative and abstract language of her male predecessors and mainstream contem-

poraries.”³¹ In striving for a poetic language that can convey Cairo’s cultural and linguistic atmosphere, Raab opens a literary space in which foreign elements are permitted to disrupt “the natural flow of language” and create their own hybrid cadences.

On the one hand, Zionism’s rejection of the diaspora spurred the revival of Hebrew as a national language to the exclusion of diasporic tongues (e.g., Yiddish, Russian, and German), but on the other hand, this rejection meant that the experience of exile and immigration would remain intimately bound to the specter of these languages, as was the case with the poetry of Avot Yeshurun. Gluzman notes that Yeshurun’s rejection of “pure Hebrew” — that is, Hebrew untouched by foreign influence — in favor of his own “fusion language” represented a major transgression of the Hebrew canon’s rules and norms.³² Yeshurun’s use of neologisms, bilingual puns, and multilingual expressions (at times in the Roman alphabet) consistently challenged the canon’s linguistic strictures and threatened the illusion of a seamless, monolingual Hebrew. Whereas Yeshurun’s marginality in the canon is more clearly delineated, the difficulties that arise in locating Raab, even within the canon’s margins, are compounded by Raab’s own tendency to camouflage or rewrite key elements of her own background. For Raab, one of the great paradoxes of the pre-State Hebrew canon was the primacy it gave to nonnative writers while marginalizing native speakers; however, in asserting her native status as a mark of difference, Raab arguably consigns her own work to the native reading. For instance, her comment on “the foreign ‘burdens’ apparent in the works of” Shlonsky and Alterman glosses over her own multicultural and multilingual origins and traces their presence in her poetic work. Close readings of her autobiographical prose, “Paris o Yerushalayim,” for instance, reveal that her location in the linguistic and cultural contexts she describes is far more unstable and heterogeneous.

The presence of a poem such as “Kahira, Kahira!” in a predominantly “native” text provides a vantage point for reconsidering Raab’s cultural and linguistic identity and the ways in which she frames the foreign and native elements that constitute her background. In response to Helit Yeshurun’s question, “Was Hebrew your first spoken language?” Raab replies as follows: “No. We spoke Yiddish — Hungarian Yiddish, I am from Hungary. Later Lithuanian Jews came to the *moshava* and the entire house received that wonderful Yiddish from Białystock. And even today,

when I speak Yiddish, people ask if I am from Białystock. I answer—Yes.”³³ Raab’s response not only discredits the assumption that Hebrew was her first language, but also shows that from an early age, her background accommodated more than one cultural and linguistic affiliation; later, these affiliations informed her self-portrait.

Ultimately, French would become not only the language of her epistolary exchange with Pascal, and later Green, but also the lingua franca of her life in Egypt. In “BeKahir,” Raab recalls:

I curled up, lifting my knees to my chin, turned on the fan, [the air] was cool, and read in French—monthlies, newspapers, books, and I could hear the neighbors around me speaking in French. For the first time I began to speak a language that I had only known from reading. I simply opened my mouth and the words came out effortlessly, naturally—I mastered French and [had] a surplus of words at my command. I chose them deliberately in a way that felt completely natural—this conquest [of language] came over me suddenly and placed itself inside of me. And *Hebrew almost vanished from my lips*, I only spoke some Yiddish with the parents. With Izak I spoke French, and he absorbed my words, praising my excellent style—this, of course, raised my spirits, *and the country very slowly lost its strangeness in my eyes*.³⁴ [my emphasis]

The difference between Raab’s childhood introduction and adult exposure to French is remarkable. Once reluctantly “squeezed out,” French now comes “effortlessly” (*beli koshi*) and “naturally” (*be’ofen tiv’i*) to the adult Raab. She remarks in “BeKahir” that the general lifestyle of Cairo favored lassitude and indulgence, reflected in language that recalls her description of Chayun’s “pampered hands.” But in the scene described above, Raab no longer observes the effects of this lifestyle as an outsider. Through language, Cairo becomes familiar at the expense of Hebrew. This change occurs through a process that Raab does not resist but rather understands as the natural effect of living elsewhere: in order for her to be “at home” in French, Hebrew must become a stranger. Her very fetal posture, “curled up” [*bitkappalti*], illustrates this process of linguistic “conquest” as both a submission and a rebirth.

Becoming at home in French and in a new diasporic landscape allows Raab to cast off the ambivalence of the “native outsider” to assume a cultural position more in line with that of her immigrant contemporaries. If this is the case, one could read her return to Eretz Yisrael in 1925 as a form of *‘aliyah* that allows her to stake a claim in exile, an experience that had become one of the conventions of the emerging national canon. While immigrant writers in Eretz Yisrael were asserting their belonging through intensive self-Hebraization, Raab’s asserted her native identity by becoming, for a brief period, an immigrant. It is also important to emphasize that Raab’s newly acquired linguistic belonging did not imply her full assimilation into a foreign culture, as the more orientaling moments in “Kahira, Kahira!” indicate. Both Raab and her immigrant contemporaries were struggling to achieve a normative status in a culture where both linguistic and geographic belonging remained in flux but where being an immigrant was, at least initially, a prescription for belonging. And although Raab did not sever her ties to Eretz Yisrael during those years, it becomes apparent from her own accounts that this period abroad allowed her to problematize the very elements that constituted her nativeness and to acquire the immigrant sensibility that she had lacked as an *eretisyisre’eli* native.

According to Raab, one of her conditions for marriage was the opportunity to study in Paris, a plan Green readily supported. At some point during their ten-year marriage, Raab traveled to Paris and attended classes at the Sorbonne. Ben-Ezer refers to the Sorbonne period as a “puzzle.”³⁵ The absence of official documentation that could place her at the Sorbonne, and Raab’s own tendency to confuse the itinerary and dates of her European travels, leads him to doubt the veracity of her account. Within the current parameters of my reading, Raab’s description of university life in Paris is an important document if only for revealing the ways in which she inscribes herself—as a natural element—in this foreign milieu:

I identified completely with the atmosphere of young elite students from all over the world who gathered at the university—I may not have been young but I was young in my knowledge of things—and aside from the Second Aliyah, this was the most important experience in my life, the entire atmosphere exuded culture and excitement, simple people full

of beauty and humor, the most avant-garde theater, I met great actors, geniuses like Louis Jouvet (on the stage), I heard the young and lively opinions of ascetics, painters who fought for a slice of bread and later became famous, creating schools of painting before my very eyes, I felt as though France were my second homeland (with respect to the people) and I always said: there is a connection [*zikka*] between the French and Jewish people, both are universal. . . . One of the [female] students once said to me: you are French and Jewish and that is a very beautiful and humane combination.³⁶

In her account of Parisian university culture, Raab reiterates the theme of the “adopted homeland” found in the essay “BeKahir.” Raab admits that her relationship with Pascal, more than her compulsory French lessons, made her particularly receptive to French culture. Pascal succeeded in dispelling for Raab the strangeness of the French language, and, in part, of the Diaspora, because she embodied the cultural fusion praised by the anonymous student in the passage above. Whereas David Chayun’s utter strangeness (underscored by his Mizrahi background) had a centrifugal effect—further entrenching Raab in her nativeness—Pascal’s influence imparted a “wider glimpse into the world” and catalyzed Raab’s desire to venture outside Eretz Yisrael. Pascal’s close contact with the Western European cultural trends of her time also gave her the kind of sophistication that Raab associated with the writers of the Second Aliyah; and it is to this lack that Raab may be referring when she writes, “I may not have been young, but I was young in my knowledge of things.”³⁷ Raab saw in Paris a necessary, even imperative, opportunity to expand her cultural horizons beyond the native frame, the only one she had ever known. When the anonymous student remarks, “You are both French and Jewish,” her words validate a fusion of native and foreign elements that is not only natural but also preferable to being mired in one—and one’s own—cultural, linguistic, and national affiliations.

In *Yamin shel la’anah udvash*, Ben-Ezer describes Raab’s linguistic background as follows:

Esther grew (*tsomahat*) with the burgeoning (*tsmiha*) of Hebrew as a living, spoken language. *Hebrew is the sole prism through which she understood herself and her childhood landscape.* The poets of her generation came to Hebrew from another language, from other cultural horizons and landscapes, and therefore their [artistic] poverty and wealth flows from other sources and different processes.³⁸

The repetition of the root ח-מ-צ in Ben-Ezer's statement emphasizes the organic and symbiotic relationship between Hebrew and the Land of Israel, the lens through which Ben-Ezer filters most of his analysis of Raab's work. But this observation, in particular, invites further scrutiny because it follows rapidly on the heels of the following observation: "It is true that in her childhood there were still those in the *moshavah* who spoke a great deal of Yiddish and a bit of Arabic. And in her home: Hungarian Yiddish, which then stepped aside for Lithuanian-Bialystockian Yiddish."³⁹ The sections I have extracted from Ben-Ezer's biography and Raab's own writings reveal that she filtered her experiences—in the years preceding *Kimsbonim*—through a more complex and variegated linguistic and geographic prism.

In his postscript to Raab's translations of several poems by Calé, Ben-Ezer writes, "Esther knew German from her childhood; her father had been raised in German culture in his Hungarian youth, and for many years had a subscription to a German periodical. He used to exchange books with his friends, German Templar farmers from Wilhelma."⁴⁰ In his daughter's eyes, Yehuda Raab was a paragon of the late nineteenth-century Zionists who had settled in Ottoman Palestine and laid the foundations for an organic and normative *eretsyisre'eli* existence. Yet elsewhere, Raab recalls another side of her father: "He was like a goy. They called him 'Yehuda Goy.' He came wearing fancy clothing from Europe. He was pedantic in his way of dressing. And he had greenish-blue eyes which I inherited."⁴¹ In fact, Yehuda Raab's penchant for German literature had been the grounds for his divorce from Hadassah Hershler, his first wife. Resisting a life of religious study, Yehuda had taken to spending long hours in a Templar library, reading German periodicals and literature on the sly.⁴²

THE DIASPORIC WOUND

A 1935 excursion to Salzburg provided the material for the story “‘Ahava beZaltsburg” (Love in Salzburg), a rare example of Raab’s fictional prose, which was published in *Ha’arets* in 1936.⁴³ In this story, a young woman from Eretz Yisrael has a magical, romantic encounter with an unnamed stranger during a Mozart concert. As in the essay “BeKahir,” “Ahava beZaltsburg” begins with the protagonist’s arrival in the city by train, which allows her to observe in some detail the verdant landscape and slow curve of the River Salzach. In keeping with Raab’s style, the speaker pays considerable attention to the landscape and singles out its key elements. She describes her trip in terms of a pilgrimage — *‘aliyah leregel*—that unites “all those whose spirit is tied by a true bond to the world of theater and music.”⁴⁴ This love for the arts, the protagonist argues, is a bridge between all nations: “They are of one heart and one mind, these individuals: whether brown, clear, white, or swarthy of complexion—in this temple they bow *to him* (i.e., Mozart) alone and pray in *his language*” (emphasis in original).⁴⁵ This “divine language” of art renders moot the cultural, national, and linguistic differences between individuals. In an autobiographical essay written in the same period, “Oley haregel beZaltsburg” (Pilgrims in Salzburg), Raab, as is the case with her protagonist, attends a Mozart concert and marvels at the diverse audience that gathers to honor his music: “This is no standard audience, originating from the same place, [they are] delegates of all peoples and all nations, of all those who cherish art.”⁴⁶ In other words, art does not catalyze a homogenizing fusion of cultures; rather, it creates a common ground in which difference can be present without being divisive. In this sentence, the shift from singular to plural—from *kahal* to *tsirei kol ha’aratsot*—further emphasizes this plurality.

Raab’s protagonist soon discovers that even this common ground is an illusion. During the concert’s intermission, a stranger strikes up a conversation with her in French and immediately discerns that she is a foreigner. The possibility that he too is a foreigner to this place—a subject that is never addressed—adds a touch of irony to their dialogue. “Mademoiselle, from your dress,” he remarks, “you have come from a faraway place, haven’t you?” The protagonist replies: “Yes, Monsieur, I am from the Land of the Hebrews.”⁴⁷ To this, the stranger responds, “You are very strange—and familiar.” Though he has marked her as a stranger, her refusal to acknowledge him as an “other” seems to validate her connection to a more universal

perception of belonging. Nor does the language they speak allow the reader to decipher the man's nationality. Within the framework of the story it is possible that they employ French as a common language that belongs, so to speak, to neither one. Later when she receives his calling card (*kartis bikkur*), she quickly glances at it but stops short of reading his name.

As they walk silently along the River Salzach, a feeling of weightlessness comes over the protagonist: "the stones of the street rolled imperceptibly under my feet, as though I were walking on water."⁴⁸ The dream universality that the silence (like the Mozart) has enabled shatters the moment that the stranger begins to speak; his hoarse voice (*kol tsarud*) breaks apart the seamless fluidity of the music and silence. He declares his love and begs the protagonist to remain with him. "The man did not hear what he was saying," she observes, ". . . And all that divine music fled from my heart as though it had never been there." Speaking hurriedly in terse and disjointed phrases (another breaking apart of this illusory flow), she gives him the primary reason for her refusal: "for just a moment ago I was tangled in this dream . . . now that the dream has ended—and, you see, the entire point of this encounter is the magic . . . so, good night, Monsieur!"⁴⁹ As the protagonist walks away, she looks back and sees him "stuck in his place (*taku'a bimkomo*), his eyes looking ahead without seeing me."⁵⁰ The word Raab employs to describe the stranger's paralysis—*taku'a*—also appears in her characterization of Shlonsky's and Alterman's Russian ties, which Raab perceives as a "burden" (*mit'an*). Likewise, the barefoot child, a figure Raab frequently invokes to illustrate her freedom from tradition and foreign influence, resonates in the image of the story's protagonist, who walks along the river with a feeling of weightlessness.

Levity ultimately proves to be a fragile solution to the weight of national, cultural, and linguistic burdens. Where Raab's protagonist differs from the "barefoot child" is in the protagonist's violent realization that ideal belonging—that is, belonging not predicated on language and place—is an illusion, "a dream": "And, you see, the entire point of this encounter is the magic," she says.⁵¹ As she walks away, the weight of her shoes against the pavement crushes her toe, a sign that the gravity of place has taken over the magical weightlessness. Though it dispels the evening's charm, this weight generates a momentum that allows the protagonist to escape her admirer's hold (his insistence that she *belong* to him) and return to her hotel. But what kind of return is this? The enig-

matic closing phrase — “I rushed to my room so that I could extricate [my foot from the shoe]”⁵² — suggests a repudiation of the diasporic burden. At the same time, this literal “becoming barefoot” retains the mark of its encounter in the inextricable memory of a “sharp pain.” In venturing beyond the native frame, the protagonist/Raab has come into an awareness of her own burdens and, in the process, has acquired her own diasporic wound.

Raab’s multilingual and cosmopolitan influences offer a critical, though still neglected, lens through which her work may be reassessed. A more comprehensive study of her interaction with French and German, for example, could elucidate further the syntactical and linguistic virtuosity of these early poems, which were written in what Kronfeld describes as “a jarringly new and ideologically charged rhetoric of ungrammaticality, the likes of which mainstream Hebrew modernism has never seen.”⁵³ An inquiry into the implications of multilingualism on Raab’s oeuvre not only exposes the shortcomings of native readings of her work, and in particular of *Kimshonim*, but also problematizes the terms of her native status within the modern Hebrew canon. The publication of *Kimshonim* may have marked the first appearance of a native, modern Hebrew poetic expression, but a closer look at Raab’s own background and influences reveal the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity underlying many of its poems — as well as the various “burdens” and “myriad shades” that fill its empty spaces.

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APPENDIX

קהירה, קהירה! זונה בלה ופרומה, שוא יקטרו שייכיה מר, וממחבואיה האפלים ריח הקהנה הטובה תעלי, בצל מסגדיה-הוד	Cairo! Cairo! Worn and tattered whore in vain her sheikhs puff out myrrh, and from your dark recesses aroma of the good coffee rises, in the shade of your mosques’ splendor
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אללה עצל	Allah sits,
קפול־רגליו ישב,	lazy, cross-legged,
כתבת־זמרה שחוקה	like a ragged music box
חזנה מראשי מגדלים יגעגע	your changer years from tower-tops
ותפלתו עם כרוזים	and his prayer blends
בשוק תתערב.	in the souk with criers.
תרבושים תרבושים,	Tarbooshes, tarbooshes,
ברברים, כושים,	Berbers, blacks,
הה, תררח, לילי!	beat, tarrarum, trilli!
תפים, חלילים	Bass-drum, reed-flute
אולי אולי, יללות וצנחות	ouli ouli, wails and screeches
המקוננות השחורות:	black female keeners:
הך חזה וילל;	breast-beat and wail;
חתנות ומתים בסך יעברו	weddings and the dead pass in procession
בחוצות קהירה המקשטה,	on streets of decked-out Cairo,
צנחות והעניות	screams and grimaces
ושלל גונים	and myriad shades,
וריח מושק מקהה חושים...	a whiff of musk stupefies the senses . . .
והיה כי יצופו פני אדם:	and sometimes a face floats:
עינים, מצח –	eyes, forehead—
ונשאה העין לאה, שכורה	and the eye wanders exhausted, drunk
חותרת לשוא בין אדים חמים.	striving in vain among hot vapors.
	(1926)
	—translated by Harold Schimmel ⁵⁴

NOTES

- I would like to thank Barbara Mann and Michael Gluzman for graciously reading and commenting on earlier versions of this essay. I also thank Anastasia Graf for several essential last-minute suggestions and Shiri Goren for her invaluable help with the finer points of translation.

- 1 Esther Raab, "Paris o Yerushalayim?" in *Kol haprozah* (Collected Prose), ed. Ehud Ben Ezer (Hod Ha-Sharon: Astrolog, 2001), 119–22. "Paris or Jerusalem?" first appeared in April 1952 in *Ha'aretz*. All English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Ibid., 120. The current Ukrainian national anthem originates from an 1863 arrangement by Mykhailo Verbytsky. Verbytsky, a composer and Catholic priest from Western Ukraine, wrote the original score to accompany a patriotic poem by Pavlo Chubynsky (1839–84) titled "Sche ne vmerla Ukraina" (Ukraine, you have not yet perished). The poem first appeared in the magazine *Meta* in 1862 and immediately caught the attention of Vibetsky, who felt that it expressed the desire of many Ukrainians for territorial sovereignty. In 1917, the renamed "Hymn to Ukraine" became the anthem of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic and was officially reinstated in a modified form by Ukraine's Parliament in 2003. See Xing Hang, *Encyclopedia of National Anthems* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 645–47.
- 3 Raab, "Paris o Yerushalayim?," 120.
- 4 Ibid., 120.
- 5 See Esther Raab, "Ne'urei hashirah ba'arets lo zeru'ah" (An interview with Esther Raab), *Hadarim* 1 (1981): 101–18.
- 6 See Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 59.
- 7 Ehud Ben-Ezer, *Yanim shel la'anab udvash* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 1998), 396. In my translations of Raab's prose, I have retained the punctuation of the Hebrew original in most instances.
- 8 Esther Raab, *Kol hashirim* (Tel Aviv: Zemorah, Bitan, 1988), 17.
- 9 Genesis 1:11–12.
- 10 *Hatelem harishon* is the title of Yehuda Raab's autobiography. See Yehuda Raab (Ben-Ezer), *Hatelem harishon: zikbronot 1862–1930* (Jerusalem: Hasifriyah Hatsiyonit, 1956).
- 11 I am indebted to a translator's footnote for these insights: "[The Latin word *versura*] indicates the place (and the moment) where the plough turned round at the end of a furrow. It is from the term *versus* (furrow) that the English word *verse* derives." Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 40. The relation between the work of settlement

- and poetic craft pervades much of the poetry of the *Yishuv*; the works of Raḥel Bluwstein and Avraham Shlonsky come to mind, among others. With respect to Shlonsky, the “road-building bard in Israel,” Michael Gluzman argues that “the boundaries between the nationalist project and the literary one seem to fall down when Shlonsky asserts that the writing of every good translation into Hebrew and the writing of every good original poem is Zionism . . . the rebuilding of the land and the writing of modernist Hebrew poetry are perceived by Shlonsky as synonymous.” Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 51.
- 12 Harold Schimmel, “Introduction,” in Esther Raab, *Thistles: Selected Poems of Esther Raab*, trans. Harold Schimmel (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2002), 30.
 - 13 Kronfeld, *The Margins of Modernism*, 71–78.
 - 14 Dan Miron, “Neharot me’avshim: Ester Raab veshiratah” in *Haadam eyno ela . . . hulshat-hakoah, otsmat-hahulshah: ‘iyyunim beshirah* (Tel Aviv: Zemorah, Bitan, 1999), 259–307.
 - 15 Cf. Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 28–29.
 - 16 Esther Raab, “Siḥa betiv’on,” *Hadarim* 1 (1981): 115–19.
 - 17 Ben-Ezer relates that Raab celebrated the publication of *Kimshonim* in Paris. Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash*, 333. For Raab’s Hebrew translations of Charles Baudelaire, see *Kol haprozah*, 463–68.
 - 18 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash*, 296.
 - 19 Esther Raab, “Siḥa beTiv’on (December 12, 1980),” *Hadarim* 1 (1981): 117. See also Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash*, 82.
 - 20 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash*, 117–18.
 - 21 The poem “Leahyotai ha’anivot, hanis’arot” (To my poor, agitated sisters) appears in *Kimshonim* with a dedication to Laurette Pascal and Shoshana Bogin, both of whom committed suicide at a young age. Ben-Ezer includes an unpublished poem titled “LeLoret” (To Laurette) in *The Collected Poems*. See Esther Raab, *Kol hashirim*, 35, 248.
 - 22 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’anah udvash*, 116.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 118.
 - 24 *Ibid.*

- 25 Ibid., 365.
- 26 Raab, "BeKahir," in *Kol haprozah*, 302-8.
- 27 Ibid., 303.
- 28 Raab, *Kol hashirim*, 20-21; Raab, "Cairo, Cairo!" in *Thistles*, 50-51. In this instance, I have used Harold Schimmel's translation of this poem.
- 29 Schimmel, "Introduction," 14.
- 30 Raab, *Kol hashirim*, 39.
- 31 Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 126.
- 32 Ibid., 143.
- 33 Raab, "Ne'urei hashirah ba'arets lo zeru'ah," 109.
- 34 Raab, "BeKahir," 303.
- 35 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'anah udvash*, 343-44.
- 36 Ibid., 384.
- 37 Many early Modern Hebrew writers, among them Shlonsky, Alterman, Yonatan Ratosh and Raḥel, can claim a "Paris period" that postdates their arrival in the Land of Israel, but in many of these cases the cultural experience of Paris is also motivated (or perhaps justified) by the need to acquire certain practical skills for the *Yishuv*'s benefit (agronomy was a common field of study).
- 38 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'anah udvash*, 420.
- 39 Ibid., 420.
- 40 Ibid., 462.
- 41 Raab, "Siḥa beTiv'on," 117.
- 42 Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'anah udvash*, 32.
- 43 Esther Raab, "Ahava beZaltsburg" in *Kol haprozah* (Collected Prose), ed. Ehud Ben-Ezer (Hod Ha-Sharon: Astrolog, 2001), 343-47.
- 44 Ibid., 343.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Raab, "Oley haregel beZaltsburg," in *Kol haprozah*, 338-42.
- 47 Raab, "Ahava beZaltsburg," 344.
- 48 Ibid., 344.

49 Ibid., 347.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 73.

54 Schimmel, *Thistles*, 50-51.