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Introduction

During many meetings and conversations in the last ten years about our profession or even one could say passion – literature, we had the impression that there is much in common between our two literatures – Polish and Hebrew. We decided to put our intuition to the test and see how much truth there is to it, and we organized the conference “Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity”, which took place at the University of Warsaw in October 2009. We invited brilliant scholars from both sides, Poland and Israel, who picked up the gauntlet, offering their reflections and prompting discussion on the relations between nationhood and literature from different perspectives. This book compiles extended and revised versions of the papers presented at the conference.

During the conference sessions, discussions, conversations, as well as the social events in the evenings, we came to the conclusion that there are some very important questions and problems which both literatures address and struggle with.

The first, and perhaps most central issue is the construction of the concept of nationality; namely, the symbols, myths and images which create national identity. This question has several aspects: Polish, Jewish, Polish-Jewish, Israeli, with another important element being whether the author writes in his/her homeland or in the diaspora. Within these aspects we could recognize similarities between Polish and Hebrew literatures. Here we have to underline that, in our understanding, what defines a literature as Polish or Hebrew is the language of the work and not the national-religious identity of the writer.

In the opening article, Anita Shapira illustrates Hebrew literature’s reciprocal relations with Zionism, a complex link with a dual perspective, both encouraging and doubting. In her wide-ranging study she shows that it was common for different literatures to shape their respective national

consciousnesses. Through their works, the likes of Pushkin, Mickiewicz, Byron, Smetana, Scott, Hugo and many others formed national identities and political consciousness. Secularization played a great role in this. Instead of the Scriptures, which had lost their hold among the intelligentsia, it was secular literature that created a national-cultural community in the language of the nascent nation. The power of literature was decisive because it is literature that impacts the imagination and emotions most effectively. However, Shapira shows that it was not only Hebrew literature which shaped the Zionist mind, as by and large the highbrow of Hebrew belles-letters consisted of elitist writers who created critical, challenging, pessimistic, and individualistic works, which were by definition intended for a relatively limited readership. Shapira claims that the canon that shaped the Zionist narrative included Hebrew and translated literature, highbrow and lowbrow alike. In that light she points to the influence Polish literature had on the Zionist narrative.

A concept which appeared many times was that of the “national bard”. Undoubtedly both literatures have a national bard who is also seen as a prophet. This prophet creates the paradigm of the nation, which the following generations accept, reject, struggle with, call into question, and sometimes offer alternatives to.

There is no doubt that the Polish and Hebrew bards are, respectively, Adam Mickiewicz and H.N. Bialik – four conference participants focused on this issue. Aminadav Dykman asks the following question: What is the role played by poetry in the process of molding and fixating the figure of national poet? As case studies, he examines two national poets: Aleksandr Pushkin, and H.N Bialik. Dykman claims that the prestigious title of “national poet” is conferred upon the chosen one by his contemporaries, but must be continuously validated by future generations, with the poet’s death and its reception constituting a pivotal moment. Avner Holtzman explains that the emergence of H.N Bialik as the national poet took place amid a stormy debate aroused by and centered around the concept and content of Hebrew culture and its relations with the process of Jewish national revival. A few years after the publication of his first poems, he was unanimously crowned the genuine national Hebrew poet by readers and critics alike. Holtzman’s article examines the various meanings attached to the concept of national poet in relation to Bialik as well as to other poets. What needs did this concept fulfill, and to what extent is it still valid today? Why was Bialik the only Hebrew poet to be bestowed with this obliging title, while other leading poets, despite the obvious national content and inclination of their poetry, were not conceived as its inheritors? Holtzman suggests a few explanations,

one being that the continuous magnitude of Bialik's myth was such that it did not leave room for competition.

We can find a different approach to Bialik's poetry in Ariel Hirschfeld's article. For him, Bialik's poetry is almost completely devoid of any political iterations of Zionist concepts. In his opinion, Bialik's poetry deals with the complex emotions relating to a religious and existential identity crisis, as well as the complex emotions of adolescence, usually expressed through the image of the poet himself. Nevertheless, he saw poetry as an integral element in the formation of a new Jewish man that, contrary to the traditional Jew, will be capable of developing emotional individuality.

The Polish perspective on the national bard and prophet are presented by Aleksandra Sekuła and Monika Rudaś-Grodzka. They deal with two romantic poets but each of them offers a different concept of nationality and national identity. Sekuła presents the poet Zygmunt Krasiński. An analysis of his literary texts and his correspondence shows the evolution and interrelation of the ideas of vengeance and Christian charity. She discusses Krasiński's ideas of motherland and the chosen nation, the phantasms of purity and dirt and the conception of the fastening of the political order in the supernatural realm, which has its warrant in God. In her text, Sekuła points to the specific character of Polish conservatism. Another perspective on the role of the romantic poet in the creation of a nation can be found in Rudaś-Grodzka's article on Adam Mickiewicz. In his *Paris Lectures* Mickiewicz often discussed the issue of ancient Slavic relics, considering them original texts legitimizing Slavic identity. History, intentionally transformed by him, took on a poetic but most of all political dimension. His subjective attitude towards the past gave birth in the *Lectures* to a new vision of the history of the Slavic nations. History, consciously transformed by the poet, gained not only a poetic but also a political dimension.

A comparative perspective is presented by Shoshana Ronen in her article on O.J. Thon. Discussing the notion of national literature, Thon asks what its character should be, what questions/problems it should struggle with. Thon finds the paradigm for the longed-for revived Hebrew literature in Polish Romantic literature. One can identify in Thon's writing the substantial influence of Polish Romanticism with respect to the place and the role of the poet. His model for the national bard was Mickiewicz the prophet. Great literature, alleged Thon, is one that is directed at the public, at the community, at a nation in distress, awakening hopes and aspirations. It is a literature of vision which does not avoid ornamental language and sublime desires. It is a literature which aims at salvation. Great literature is magnificent,

constructive and optimistic, it lightens the way to the nation and inspires hope. Bialik is the Hebrew model of such a poet.

Another common issue was the connection between space, fantasy, and identity. According to Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, the process of nation-building involves not only national narratives but also representations of national territory. The perceived national community is intertwined with the perceived national territory. In her paper she describes Polish inter-war national fantasy and the geographical awareness of what actually makes up Polish lands. She examines the various forms of geographical representations in the literature of different genres and the symbolic landscapes key to national identity. Nitza Ben-Dov also writes about images of space. She claims that three sites create the setting, the subject, and the impetus in the writing of S.Y. Agnon: Poland, the Land of Israel, and Germany. Poland serves as the setting for stories from the middle of the medieval age until the time between the two World Wars, a span of eight centuries. She analyzes the cycle of short stories entitled *Tales of Poland (Polin)*, written in Biblical Hebrew. This language is intended to create a connection between the settlement of the tribes of Israel in the Promised Land in the days of the Bible and Jewish settlement in Poland. Taking account of the intimation that Poland is also a kind of choice land, she examines the relations between Jews and Poles, which in these stories involve an ambivalent, nostalgic expression shot through with conflict and reconciliation. Dan Laor deals with the same stories. Agnon's *Polin* cycle includes 14 legendary tales – some of them being revised versions of existing folktales – relating to Jewish existence in Poland, illuminating various facets of the life and lore. As a native of Eastern Galicia, Agnon was deeply immersed in the history and tradition of the Jewish community in Poland, and it was his intent to expose its narrative the way it had been conceived by the community itself. *Polin* provided the Polish-born Jewish writer an opportunity to present a Hebrew text, written outside his native country, in which he tries to come to grips with the experience of his own people, thus telling a story that belongs, in a way, to the course of Polish history but is patterned, by and large, within the boundaries of Jewish collective memory.

Poland also plays an important role in the Hebrew literature of the last decades addressing the relation between Israeli-Jewish identity and the land of Poland. Iris Milner presents Yehudit Hendel's novella *Near Quiet Places*, which describes the author's journey to Poland in the 1980s. This novella is an expression of an ambivalent identity, containing both Polish and Israeli components. Hendel writes about the emergence of a secret "Polishness" in her individual life as well as in the life of the Israeli collective. Her subject matter is acutely conscious of a symbiosis between Israeliness and Polishness,

and she seeks liberation from this dual, non-integrative existence. She returns to Poland, from which Jewish Poles had been chased away, in hope of escaping its imprints, which haunt her more and more deeply.

Another common issue that was frequently discussed was stereotypes. Stereotypes concerning the “other” but also self-stereotypes. Małgorzata Domagalska, dealing with Polish literature at the turn of the 20th century, examines the image of assimilated Jews in Polish anti-Semitic novels. She shows that genuinely assimilated Jews do not, in fact, exist in anti-Semitic novels, except in the imagination. The remaining ones, regardless of who they are and what they represent, work to the detriment of Poles, or are so alien to them that no relationship can be feasible. The reasons behind their otherness are not merely economic, religious or cultural, and are thus not modifiable. A new category is superimposed on them – the category of racial otherness, which precludes any transformation whatsoever. A Jew, even a converted one, remains unchanged: foreign, different, hostile. Thus, early 20th century anti-Semitic writing tends to express the wish to expel Jews entirely from Polish society. Within the anti-Semitic stereotype, one of the means of weakening the Polish nation is demoralization, the undermining of Catholicism and of the patriarchal model of family. This is why in anti-Semitic novels emancipation movements are represented by Jewish women, who take on different roles to be more and more successful in demoralizing. However, in the Polish literature of the last twenty years, Jewish women can create, according to Kazimiera Szczuka, an opportunity for a departure from the homogenous vision of the community of Catholic Poles. In her essay, she discusses second-generation literature in Poland. She chose works which deal with the guilt of the Jewish mother survivor in the eyes of her children. The Jewish mother survivor raises her children in complete ignorance and silence concerning her experiences during the Holocaust. But that which is repressed inevitably returns and the survivor is perceived by her children as abnormal or crazy. The silence engulfing the family and the eventual disclosure of the shameful secret leaves the second-generation with an identity complex. The Jewish mother who has survived the Holocaust emerges out of the dark cocoon of her symptoms as a guardian of memory; a madwoman who is brutal and cruel and isolated from reality, but who carries within her the truth about the coexistence of the world of slaughter with the world of everyday activity, with dreams of normality and with linear time.

Connected to the role of stereotypes is the problem of double identity. What does it mean to be a Jewish-Pole or a Polish-Jew? Is this a combination of the stereotypes of a Jew and a Pole, or is it an entirely new creature? What is the relationship between self-identity and national belonging; what

kind of Jew writes in Polish? We have four articles dealing with this problem, before, during and after World War II.

Alina Molisak presents one of the influential figures among Polish-Jewish writers of the first half of the 20th century – Jakub Appenzlak. She focuses on his various-genre texts. The issue of identity – the complicated relationship between Polishness and Jewishness – is what the different forms, such as poetry, prose, journalism and manifestoes, all have in common. Appenzlak, though deeply involved in Zionism, claimed that Polish culture is naturally close to Polish Jews. He considered the Polish language to also be the language of their literature and daily lives, as well as a system of signs and symbols which constitutes the imagined Polish-Jewish community so close to the hearts of Polish Jews. Those signs and symbols, which mainly come from a Romantic heritage and which serve as the means of identity-shaping in Appenzlak's vision, can also be models for shaping the modern Jewish national awareness. Maria Antosik-Piela shows the unknown face of Roman Brandstaetter, who was, above all, known for his post-war literary work influenced by the Christian current in Polish literature. He is also one of the most colorful figures in inter-war Polish-Jewish literature. The article focuses on an analysis of Roman Brandstaetter's literary works from the 1930s. The most important issue analyzed is his transformation from a very Polish poet into an artist influenced by the ideas of the Jewish national movement, and later into a journalist engaged in the fight against anti-Semitism. It seems that the pre-war period in Brandstaetter's work is an interesting example of an "identity about-face" – a transition into a person engaged in the Jewish national movement when being a Pole of Jewish origin turned out to be a total failure.

Tomasz Żukowski focuses on a text which was written during the war. Discussing Polish literature written by Jews, he analyzes a confessional text by Calem Perechodnik. Żukowski looks at how a Polish-Jew speaks from the inside of Polish culture, uses its symbols and images despite knowing that the culture he considers his own excludes him as a Jew. Conditional permission to join the community is a never-ending test in submission. The Jew must not speak with his own voice or utter what he is experiencing. He is supposed to remain a perfect reflection of his image, created by the dominant group. Perechodnik recognizes these mechanisms and is able to oppose them. His irony reveals symbolic violence. It is no longer the Poles who are watching the Jew, now the Poles are the ones being watched. They have to face the truth about themselves, expressed from a perspective which is not governed by the power of the Polish collective. The last text dealing with double Polish-Jewish identity in our times is by Andrzej Zieniewicz.

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century saw the appearance of texts, mostly memoirs, which portray processes of assimilation and a return to Jewishness. The desire to participate in Polish culture and an ambition to take part in shaping it, combined with the feeling of the impossibility of assimilation, create the framework for reminiscence tales in which the crucial issue is the difficulty of creating a coherent definition of representation. These texts don't represent reality but re-create reality as a certain story. In her article, Bożena Umińska-Keff, concludes, after an analysis of current Polish literature, that "Jew" is a synonym for every person who is excluded, and his character is used to represent other queer identities. Jew means those aspects in one's identity which can be repressed, which are not respected and are degraded. The Jew – the traditional Polish "other" – becomes a symbol for every kind of "otherness".

If in Polish literature the "other" is the Jew, then in Israeli-Hebrew literature it is the Arab. Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoni deal with post-trauma in Israeli films and literature; a trauma resulting from the Arab-Israeli conflict and the contradictory narratives concerning the 1948 war and the establishment of the state of Israel. They show that in different works of art, whether it's the novella *Khirbet Khizeh* by S. Yizhar (adapted into a film by Ram Loevy) or the film *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman, a mud puddle recurs and re-emerges as the repressed memory of something terrible that occurred in the past, the signifier of the traumatic events of 1948.

Another issue is the relationship between nationhood, religion, and religious tradition. David Fishelov presents the way Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky re-wrote the biblical figure of Samson in his book *Samson*, creating a modern, Jewish national hero. The novel transforms a religious story into a secular one, and the heroic deeds of the biblical "loner" into the acts of a leader. Through his re-writing of the biblical story, Jabotinsky outlines a desired relationship between the Jewish people and Europe's contemporary imperialistic nations, and addresses the issue of Jewish assimilation. Fishelov shows the impact the novel had on the Zionist revisionist movement and point out some ideological complexities that can be found in the novel but were probably lost when the novel was embraced by followers of the revisionist movement. A different perspective, in which a secular novel turns into a religious one, is presented by Hannan Hever. Dealing with Moshe Shamir's historical novel *The King of Flesh and Blood*, Hever explores the link between theology and nationality, Jewish religion and Zionism. He shows that theology never ceased to be an active force of Zionism, and that all Zionist movements, regardless of their socialist, secularist claims, were in the end rooted deeply within Jewish theology. At the center of the duality of

statehood and theology stands the eternal symbol, Jerusalem – both a religious center and the state's capital. The novel determines the relationship between socialist class-ideology and nationalism as a combination of the universal class system with the particularity of national Zionism. Yet, theology (religion) acts as a mediator between these two poles. But it is not unbiased: in fact, theology acts to subject the universal to the particular.

In both Polish and Hebrew literatures there were also attempts at deconstructing national images and myths. The widely implemented tool for this process is irony and grotesque. It seems that distance from the motherland can be helpful in this process. It is no wonder then that such literature is written in the diaspora. Stanisław Obirek focuses on the greatest Polish deconstructionist of Polish literature – Witold Gombrowicz. In his *Diary* published by Kultura, the Polish cultural institute in Paris, Gombrowicz made during the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century a radical re-evaluation of the basic concepts and values which define Polish identity. His rebuke of the heritage of Romanticism (Słowacki), and neo-Romanticism (Sienkiewicz), and his own notion of identity, based on a personal responsibility, are still waiting to be carried out by the Polish intelligentsia. Particularly intriguing is his debate with Polish Catholicism, in which Gombrowicz sees the source of intellectual and cultural regress. Mieczysław Dąbrowski describes three models of immigrant behavior which are linked with nationality. The first is when nationality is viewed seriously and as constituting the existential self. Gombrowicz, and particularly Bobkowski, serve as good examples of this kind of model. The second is when nationality plays a role in stereotypes in which the subjective self is shaped dialectically by the concept of mine/not mine and which functions as an *object* (see: Kristeva). Literary works of J. Rudnicki and K.M. Załuski serve as good examples. The third kind of model is the *buffo* nationality which is evident mostly in language. Dąbrowski focuses here on texts written by M. Gretkowska, Z. Kruszyński, I. Filipiak and others. He shows the erosion process of nationality understood at its core, which is in a sort of conflict with the still quite strong Polish chauvinism.

When it comes to national symbols and myths, deconstruction is not the last stage. We can observe the phenomena of new myths being re-constructed, or elsewhere, old myths and symbols used to create a new national community. Elżbieta Janicka presents a comparative analysis of two works by the author J.M. Rymkiewicz: autobiographical stories about childhood in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. Her analysis of *Umschlagplatz* and *Kinderszenen* are an attempt to answer the question of whether and in what sense one may speak about symmetry between these narrations, which significantly differ in content and in historical and symbolic context. The subject of reflection is the construction

and functioning of the myth of the Warsaw Uprising in the texts of the author, who became one of the *mentors* of Poland's revived conservative nationalist movements. Janicka tries to find answers to three questions: How was the threat, which requires the projection of national identity as an aggressive-defensive strategy, defined? What might be the reasons for the desire to be a victim? Can the categories of post-traumatic culture be applied to the most recent form of the Warsaw Uprising myth? The wish to see oneself as a victim is represented also in the Hebrew literature of today, as is shown by Yael Shenkar. Her article portrays a literary process that took place in Israel during the early 1990s, in which more and more artists identified with the "national religious public" turned to artistic and cultural endeavor. These artists are all intensely preoccupied with the same question: What is the essence and what are the boundaries of religious creation? Shenkar names it, following Deleuze and Guattari, a "minor literature", yet in the opposite sense. Not as literature which challenges the boundaries of the national community, but a "minor literature" that perceives itself as the "authentic hegemony" of Jewish nationalism.

The conference and its final result in the form of this book are only the first step for further comparative discussions about the changing Polish and Jewish identities; about synchronic and diachronic processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of collective self-perception and consciousness, and how the individual constructs his/her own identity with or against it. Another interesting issue is to examine the dialectic between minority and majority groups in creating images, symbols and myths which are the foundation for their own existence.

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