HEB 3279.001 Modern Israeli Literature in Translation

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Office Hours: By appointment

In English translation, this course surveys Hebrew poetry and prose written in pre-Statehood Palestine and post-1948 Israel, concluding with a recent and provocative Israeli film. The selections illustrate the inevitable tension between dream (ideal) and real; between the needs of individuals and those of the state or collective; between insider and outsider – Jew v. non-Jew, European Jew v. Oriental Jew; native-born Israelis v. immigrants; men v. women; religious v. secular communities and values. The readings have also been chosen to raise questions about the formation of national identity and loyalty, and about the parallel formation of literary canon and its outlier expressions; about the emergence of minority voices within Israeli writing; about the tension between particularist and universal meaning, and about the role of culture (particularly literature) in delineating, provoking, even potentially resolving these binaries.

Requirements:

- *Preparation (15%).* This means attendance, reading the assignments and coming to class prepared to discuss them. It also means coming to class with a copy of whatever we are discussing that day, either in electronic or paper form but with you. Missing more than 4 classes will justify a lowered grade. Frequent tardiness will also influence a final grade calculation. Occasional quizzes may be used to assess whether you are keeping up with the readings. Since the classes are heavily weighted toward discussion, it is also important to contribute, either by answering questions of fact or synthesis, or responding to questions that are concerned more with themes, impact, literary merit (and how we judge that), cultural context and production.
- *Short reaction papers*, 1-2 pages in length, assigned periodically (35%). The topics will be focused on specific aspects of one or more readings. They will be formulated to help you access the thematic and literary aspects of readings for further discussion in class.
- *Final paper or take-home essay final* (50%). I will provide a list of options that require you to refer to multiple works read over the term.

Readings, Texts:

The bookstore should have copies of the following:

Eli Amir, *Scapegoat*.

S. Burnshaw, T. Carmi, et al. *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (Wayne State Univ., 2002).

David Grossman. *See Under: Love* (Picador, 2002).

Sayed Kashua. *Dancing Arabs*.

Etgar Keret. *The Girl on the Fridge* (Farrar Giroux & Straus, 2008).

Savyon Liebrecht. *Apples from the Desert* (CUNY Feminist Press, 2000).

Nava Semel. *And the Rat Laughed* (Hybrid, 2008).

A.B. Yehoshua. *The Lover* (Mariner Books/ Harvest, 1993.

Atallah Mansour's *In a New Light,* which is out of print, will be provided as a pdf. Any other texts not listed here will be provided on HuskyCT.

Schedule: Please note that I have estimated the number of class sessions per unit based in part on how much reading we can manage per week. We may need to revise up or down as we go. Please let me know if the assignment is too big (or too little!) to handle; I am trying to figure this out!

I. Introduction. What is "modern Hebrew literature" and how does it emerge? An overview of the corpus. 2 classes. Introduce themes and texts of the course.

II. Pre-Statehood. Bialik, Shlonsky, Goldberg (MHPI). 4 classes. Our first readings are poems, each of which illustrates the ways early writers understood the call to abandon traditional Jewish life and re-invent "Jewish identity" in national symbols and language. The selections permit us to approach questions of collective and individual voice and destiny; the reworking of traditional religious symbols and language to wed them inextricably to Zionist language of reclaiming the Land; the tension between a past that is forfeited or abandoned and a new environment that does not yet have an identity. We also ask about the rareness of female voices (Goldberg) in this early period and the ways that the literary canon will evolve.

Amos Oz, "The Hill of Evil Counsel." S. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler " 1-2 classes. Two very different stories. Oz's story, like one of Bialik's poems, exploits the voice of a child narrator – a technique we will see again in other readings – to give an impression of pre-Statehood settlement and the hardships it imposed on immigrants who were not necessarily prepared for what their new life would entail. Agnon – the only Hebrew writer ever to win the Nobel Prize for Literature – presents a mythological, folk-tale allegory of a Jewish peddler and a (gentile) vampire as a way of representing what he understood to be the cyclic seduction and destruction of European Jewry. This is our first reading to refer to the Holocaust and yet in such an eerie, at times grotesquely comical, tale that it also forces us to ask about "fatal attractions" on the personal level as well. It's a winner of a story and fun to use to illustrate close reading and technique as well as overall theme. Like the poets in this unit, Agnon relies heavily on allusion to classical religious Jewish texts and sayings; this too is a stylistic option that will gradually fade in modern Hebrew writing.

III. Early Statehood period .

A. AB Yehoshua, *The Lover*, - will cover 2-3 weeks, depending on reading speed. This is a classic novel and a great winner with students whenever I have taught it. It is set in the period during and following the 1973 war and relies on shifting perspectives on the same events in the family of "Adam" (sic), a garage mechanic with a history teacher (aha) wife and problem teenager, the young Arab who works in Adam's garage and is brought into his home as Adam frantically tries to locate his wife's lover, the lover, and the lover's grandmother, a dying Sabra from Jerusalem. The allegorical level of the novel comments on the crisis of Israeli identity following the Yom Kippur War, the failed trajectory of old ideologies and the slimmest hope embodied in the young generation –

Dahlia and Na'im. The novel opens up discussion of the clash between ideal and real in the rise of the Israeli state, post-1967 demographics and their economic, social, and political effect, the rise of the ultra-religious, the gap –experienced in the novel as a failure to communicate – between old and new, ideology and reality, parents and children.

B. Amichai, Natan Zach, Amir Gilboa, Y. Greenberg. 2 classes. Poems that illustrate what is called "the morning after" phenomenon in post -1948 Israel, the shock that came with the realities of statehood and the price paid to achieve it, the fragility of peace, the self-absorption and self-serving politics of a solidifying state bureaucracy, the signs of tension between a universally imposed national identity and mission and the frustrated yearnings of individuals. This generation of poets also marks the beginning of a new and idiomatic use of Hebrew, the commitment to Hebrew as a spoken and not just literary language.

IV. David Grossman, *See Under : Love*, section one ("Momik"). 2 classes. We will just read the first section of this novel, which is one of Grossman's earlier works and uneven. The reading introduces the story of Holocaust survivors in Israel and the ways that their experience – and society's insistence that they suppress this experience – affected their children. The use of a child narrator permits Grossman to develop the theme of "the second generation" as it had never appeared before in Israeli literature. Momik is an appealing character and his story is gripping. We discuss the experience of survivors in Israel, the challenge they posed to the Zionist narrative of the "new Jew" and the harsh consequences this narrative had for traumatized refugees. The reading opens up questions of literary method – how does one depict trauma and catastrophe? – and social responsibility, the role of the Holocaust in the Israeli national narrative and how that has changed, the ways different characters deal with the past and its physical and psychological damage.

V. Israeli Arab writing. Atallah Mansour, *In a New Light*. Said Kashu'a , *Dancing Arabs.* 6 classes. [Eventually, I might alternate Mansour with Emile Habibi's *Pessoptimist,* Anton Shammas' *Arabesques,* both 1980s works by Israeli Arabs.] Mansour's novel, which appeared in 1965, was the first novel written in Hebrew by an Arab-Israeli; it experiments with flashback and stream-of-consciousness forms that were unusual in Israeli fiction of the time and reflect the greater familiarity of Arabic-speaking writers with French literature and trends. The novel is appealing to students because it creates a main character without a clear past (his parents were killed in 1948 but he doesn't know by whom, and he is raised by a Jewish family). Yossi wants to become a member of the kibbutz where he has lived and worked for several years without telling them he is not Jewish. He is also in love with the American wife of a couple on the kibbutz, and involved in party (Communist) outreach to the neighboring Arab village. Mansour weaves together a number of themes of identity, personal v. collective responsibility and fulfillment, the limits of the socialist ideology of the kibbutz and its rhetorical (but not actual) commitment to jettisoning religion and family. Significantly, this novel was published before the 1967 war and the acquisition of the Palestinian Territories. If we also read something by Kashu'a, we can trace the evolution of Israeli-Arab identity, the emergence of a new and more self-assertive, hybrid voice in Israeli fiction and society. What is its potential? How does it interact with mainstream Jewish literature and institutional life? What is its relationship to Arabic writing and concerns? Sayed Kashua's novels represent a new voice in Israeli fiction. Their language is a blend of

idiomatic Hebrew and Israeli-Arabic dialect, and their main characters all struggle with the challenge of living blended identities in a land where blending isn't executed easily. Dancing Arabs traces the story of a young boy from a Palestinian village who wins a scholarship to an Israeli school, and spends his school and post-graduation years in bursts of self-loathing, attempts to conceal his Arab identity and then to assert it, to reject his past and then reclaim it. His struggle affects his relationships with his parents, his wife, his wife's family, his professional identity and his psychological balance. Here, too, we ask questions of minority v. majority, gender (women represent national/ethnic choices), tradition v. modernity, the ways that individuals embody the schizophrenic and polarized narratives of the nation.

VI. Savyon Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*. 2 or 3 classes. Liebrecht's stories permit us to explore a number of themes central to this course. As with Grossman's See Under Love, she is concerned in several stories with the psychological legacy of the Holocaust among the children of survivors, and the cost of suppressing the survivors' experience on society in general. Other stories explore the gulf between Oriental and Ashkenazi Jews, or between traditional religious life and kibbutz secularism. A classic of the collection, "A Room on the Roof," is an artful and at times uncomfortable treatment of Israeli gender stereotypes as well as Jewish-Arab stereotypes, which are interwoven in the ultimately failed rapprochement between an Israeli woman and an Arab worker in her home who turns out to have a past as a medical student in Beirut. The crisscrossing lines of fear and hesitation, longing and retreat, that characterize the interactions of the protagonist and the men who surround her provide an opportunity to discuss the ways that prejudice is reinforced by perceptions of class and hierarchy, the price paid by the "ruling class" in emotional sensitivity and self-awareness (cp. the same theme in much of James Baldwin's work), the no-exit stalemate in existing conditions.

VII. Nava Semel, *And the Rat Laughed*. Semel's work is a blend of Holocaust fiction and sci-fantasty. It's a great read and illustrates the way a new generation of writers is willing to play with stock themes and bend classic genres. The novel explores questions of memory, repressed memory and distortions of memory produced in repression and transmission; the way fragments of the past are misunderstood and recalibrated for use in later times; how institutionalized representations of collective trauma also repress and censor certain types of (female, sexual, individual) experience; how resilience may be linked to silence; how newer media and forms of social control attempt to regulate individual memory.

VIII. Etgar Keret , *The Girl on the Fridge*. 3 classes. Keret is a darling of the contemporary postmodern literary scene who specializes in very short stories, a sort of Israeli flash fiction. Often dystopic, the stories feature characters (usually but not always male) who are failures in domestic, social and professional settings. Subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, they represent a repudiation of the collective destiny and identity imposed on generations of Israelis by the Zionist national narrative. Keret's characters struggle with mundane or fantastical situations and rarely come out on top. Although I personally am not a fan of this author, students tend to like him, and it is possible with enough stories to speak of themes and characterizations that appear in different costumes. The almost total absence of religious characters or motifs, the absolute secularity of Israeli society as it appears in Keret's work, the dominance of Tel Aviv over Jerusalem and Ashkenazi characters over Oriental or African Jews and Israeli-Arabs, also lets us ask about canon and literary market,

the appeal of certain types of writers to English/American audiences, the relevance of Keret's themes and for whom.

IX. Poetry – 1960s to 1980s. T. Carmi, Zelda, Yona Wallach, Dan Pagis. 3 classes. Wallach is really in a class by herself, and I use a few examples of her poetry to talk about "the sixties" Israel-version, the challenges faced by women writers and the very different ways in which women like Zelda and Wallach surmounted them. Zelda I like because she is a rare illustration of a religious voice in modern Hebrew poetry, and her themes are unique in their embrace of traditional religion. Wallach is a rebel, socially, linguistically, poetically, sexually. Students sometimes find her work shocking but always engaging. Carmi and Pagis form another subgroup, both richly immersed in traditional Jewish texts and language but not religious themselves (Pagis was a Holocaust survivor and some of his poems treat that subject, too). Both men frequently use biblical or traditional images that they invest with modern irony (e.g., Carmi's "Eve knew what was in that apple./ She wasn't born yesterday"). These poems let us ask about the different directions writing was taking in this period, and what relationship the writing had to actual social and political life.

X. From Minority to Minority: Arab Jews in Israel. Eli Amir, *Scapegoat*. 2-3 classes. This is an autobiographical novel that tells the story of an Iraqi Jewish boy's arrival in Israel in 1950 and his subsequent struggles and adaptation to Israeli life. The novel emphasizes themes that are by now familiar but adds the twist of Arab v. European Jewish culture. How did the Iraqi (and other Jewish immigrants from Arab lands) make the transition to an Israeli society that disdained traditional religion and anathemized Arabic language and culture? What was the experience of Arab Jewish émigrés in the 1950s and what were the longer-term consequences of Israel's policy failures and anti-"Oriental" discrimination? How do we understand the phenomenon of Jewish minority within a hostile Jewish majority?

Erez Bitton, Jacqueline Kahanoff. Bitton, a Moroccan-Jewish poet who emigrated to Israel as a child, and Kahanoff, an Egyptian-Jewish writer, offer different perspectives on the experience of "Oriental" Jews facing the discrimination and disdain of Ashkenazi Israeli society and institutions, and the loss of mooring to the music, architecture, foods, and language that defined a past they had left behind. Different perspectives, different voices – a good way to amplify the themes of the discussion following Amir's story.

XI. Avi Forman, "Waltz with Bashir" (film). 2 classes. The film, a big hit in Israel and among international audiences, traces the attempts of the film maker, a veteran of Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon, to recover his memory of his war experience. The film is animated and superbly done; it begins with a flashback nightmare and follows the dreamer (Forman) as he tracks down old friends from his army unit, seeks psychiatric counsel, and slowly reconstructs what happened. The film is a powerful entrée to discussion of the existential questions that confront Israel today, the price of ongoing militarism and war, the failure of the Zionist dream – and by extension, asks viewers to think about other settings and other wars and other ideologies, violence and trauma, the difficulties faced by soldiers returning to civilian life, national or collective memory in conflict with personal truth, memory and forgetting.