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BETH KAPLAN

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GENNADY J. ESTRAIKHI

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THOMAS NOLDEN

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MERLE L. BACHMAN

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MARC MILLER

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of Yiddish Writing in Zionist Palestine
YAEI CHAVER

HERE
AND
NOW

History, Nationalism, and Realism
in Modern Hebrew Fiction

TODD HASAK-LOWY

Syracuse University Press
To Taal, again
INTRODUCTION
Hebrew Literature and
the Jews’ Return to History

REALITY AND HOLINESS

IN A 1900 LETTER to his close friend, Hebrew modernist U. N. Gnessin, a not yet twenty-year-old Y. Ch. Brenner denounces his friend’s literary orientation while passionately asserting the collective duty of contemporary Hebrew writers:

As to your theory expressed in that letter regarding “art for art’s sake”... I don’t agree at all. My outlook on life is completely different; in short: we have to sacrifice our souls and diminish evil in the world, the evil of hunger, slavery, idleness, hypocrisy, etc. It is necessary to understand everything, to understand and distance ourselves from mysticism and illusions; it is necessary to increase reality and holiness in the world; it is necessary to mend the life of the people of Israel so that they become normal. The great suffering of my soul stems from my doubts in general. Is there a remedy? Are we moving forward? (1967, 222; emphasis in the original)

Gnessin, whose literary work embodies the modernist turn inward, is chastised by Brenner, who believes that the grave condition of the Jews does not allow the writer the luxury of disengagement. The urgency of Brenner’s letter stems not merely from his deep concern over the condition of the Jews (and the world in general), but from his conviction that the writer can and must play a central role in the Jews’ rehabilitation. Though articulating neither a specific literary poetics nor the mechanism by which such a poetics
might cure some larger sickness, Brenner does stress the immediate objectives of this literature: *understand* everything. Brenner calls for a fundamentally mimetic poetics opposed to mysticism and illusion, one designed not just to capture reality but, remarkably, to "increase" it. Brenner’s rejection of “mysticism and illusion” signals his dismissal of traditional religious culture and quite possibly the once optimistic program of the Haskalah. Yet his deep regard, if not veneration, for understanding and his striking coupling of “reality” and “holiness” plainly show that not only has a new secular discourse replaced the old religious discourse, but a certain doctrinal fervor has survived this fundamental shift as well.

Though Brenner was a uniquely committed figure in the history of modern Hebrew literature, both the details and the tenor of his letter resonate with widely held beliefs regarding Hebrew literature’s role in Jewish society at that time, beliefs that began circulating among Hebrew writers decades earlier. Like Brenner, these writers viewed Jewish society as deeply flawed and maintained that Hebrew literature had the ability and responsibility to represent this society’s reality in order to effect positive change. Indeed, to a large extent modern Hebrew literature emerged and crystallized around this general literary ideology. How did this happen? Why did such a pronounced interest in the representation of reality in Hebrew literature come about primarily among eastern European Jews during the second half of the nineteenth century? What specific type of literary poetics was deemed to be most effective at “increasing” reality and why? What was the relationship between this literary project and the larger ideological programs of the time, especially Zionism? Finally, why would virtually an entire literature subscribe to a relationship between the literary and extraliterary realms in which the former was believed to be so capable of determining the nature of the latter? This book explores these and numerous other related questions.

For Brenner and many of his peers, immediate reality—that is, the here and now—stood as the target of their literary efforts. But in order to understand how and why this reality came to occupy such a central position in their writing, it is necessary first to describe the emergence of a related concern among Jewish writers and thinkers during the century prior to Brenner’s time. I am speaking here of a renewed Jewish interest in history, in the surfacing of a modern Jewish historical consciousness, one informed by the underlying suppositions of nineteenth-century historicist thought. The internalization of such thinking by Jewish scholars in general and Hebrew writers in particular determined not only the priorities of Jewish literature at this time but also the central role to be played by writers, especially Hebrew writers, in the solidification of Jewish politics during the second half of the nineteenth century. Before exploring, in the main chapters of this book, a series of decisive encounters between Hebrew literature and reality during the approximately fifty years leading up to the founding of Israel in 1948, we must trace the rise of modern historical thinking among the European Jewish intelligentsia.

**Reconsidering the Jews’ Return to History**

Gershom Scholem describes Zionism as first and foremost a program for “returning the Jews to history.” Scholem’s claim is predicated on the notion that prior to Zionism’s emergence, “the Jews were not masters of their own destiny,” and were thus “outside” history (1987, 506–7). Historian David N. Myers describes this widely held opinion of Jewish life from the destruction of the Second Temple until the late nineteenth century, according to which “Diaspora Jews had ceased to be masters of their own historical fate; the very faith that sustained them in their extraterritorial existence demanded submission to divine will rather than human action. Moreover, assimilation and persecution, the twin maladies of modern Jewish life, had shorn them of collective strength and creative powers. Consequently, Jews had been shunted to the margins of history” (1995, 4). Zionism’s narrative of Jewish history in the Diaspora as an essentially uniform period of persecution and suffering positions the Diasporic Jew as an object of history or a passive victim.1 Only with the rise of modern Jewish nationalism, so this narrative goes, does the Jew return to history by becoming an active subject

1. This view of history would eventually be both informed and bolstered by the Nazi genocide, though its roots would go back to the first modern Jewish historians, if not earlier. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his important study on the relationship between Jewish history and Jewish memory, comments that this view of Jewish history was “fostered by Wissenschaft historians themselves,” thus dating such a narrative back to the first half of the nineteenth century. In a related footnote, however, Yerushalmi also observes that “the nineteenth century view
in the political sphere. This essentializing, uniform account of almost two thousand years of Jewish history has, of course, its detractors. David Biale, following Salo Baron’s famous rejection of this “lachrymose” view of Jewish history, argues that although the real political power of various Jewish communities was often, even typically, limited in important ways, the Jews were rarely powerless, nor did they avoid the political arena.²

Yet despite the inaccuracy of the idea that Jews had been “outside” history for nearly two thousand years, I suggest that the phrase “return to history” can be used to describe a real and important set of transformations experienced by European Jewry in the nineteenth century. These changes climaxed with the emergence of modern political Zionism at the end of that century and the effort to acquire full-blown, sovereign political power, to make the Jewish collective an actor in the global political arena. But the collective Jewish project of acting in the national political realm first required a series of transformations that took place on the level of self-conception, transformations that involved a “return to history” of another equally telling sort. This evolution of Jewish self-perception, however seemingly abstract, was vital to the emergence of Zionism. By focusing on the new ways in which Jews began to understand and define themselves as a collective during this time, it is also possible to appreciate the centrality of the dialogue between the cultural and political realms from this period, between the ways in which the Jewish intelligentsia wrote about Jewish life versus the first active steps

of Jewish history as predominantly a history of culture and suffering was ultimately a metamorphosis of the medieval Jewish preoccupation with martyrlogy and the ‘chain of tradition,’ and may well constitute the one line of continuity between Wissenschaft and the Middle Ages” (1989, 144). David Biale remarks that even for those individuals opposed to Zionism, from Arendt to Rosenzweig, this view of Jewish life in the Diaspora has been widespread (1987, 5, 141).

2. Biale writes in his introduction that “from Zionists to anti-Zionists, there is a consensus on the powerlessness and apolitical nature of Diasporic Jewish history. This book is an argument against this interpretation of Jewish History” (1987, 5–6). For Baron’s “lachrymose” comment, see Baron 1928. For the rise of this view of history among the Wissenschaft and other modern historians as well as a survey of Baron’s rejection of it, see Schorsch 1994, 376–88. See also Raz-Krakotzkin 1999, 251; and Lederhendler 1989, 154. Yerushalmi, for his part, notes that “Jewish historiography has long outgrown” this view of Jewish history (1989, 100).

taken by a new Jewish leadership in order to acquire political agency and even power. Indeed, this dialogue between discourse and action might be better viewed as an interdependency, and thus an apt illustration of Benedict Anderson’s theory regarding the “imagined” character of the modern nation (1983, 6). In particular, Hebrew literature would play a remarkably formative role in the emergence, evolution, and solidification of a modern Jewish national collective. The Hebrew writer’s effort to at once capture and refashion this national collective and its ever changing reality—all as part of the larger discourse surrounding the recent past, the turbulent present, and a future newly conceived of as open-ended—is the subject of this book.

HISTORY AND THE GERMAN HASKALAH

In order to understand the radical refiguring of Jewish thought undertaken in this “return to history,” it is first necessary to discuss a related revolution among European thought in general during the nineteenth century. These larger societies themselves were undergoing massive changes, and two intertwined developments—the rise of modern historical (and, later, full-blown historicist) thought and the new hegemony of modern nationalism—came to profoundly influence Jewish thought, eventually setting in motion a host of modern Jewish political movements, including Zionism. Although the Enlightenment was hardly ahistorical, especially compared to the era that preceded it, nineteenth-century thought turned to the project of historical understanding with unprecedented sustained and systematic rigor (Reill 1975, 1–2). Eventually, historical inquiry—in contrast to abstract reason—came to be seen as the key to understanding the human condition and found

3. The century-long period of the Haskalah, sometimes also called the “Jewish Enlightenment,” is typically said to have run its course by the early 1880s. Steven Zipperstein defines it as follows: “The Haskalah . . . was characterized by the belief that the fundamental features of Judaism were entirely reconcilable with the modern world and that Jewish life could be judged by outside standards. It was pedagogic in character and optimistic in tone and tended to stress the centrality of those aspects of Jewish life that non-Jews were believed to consider positive. . . . It denounced aspects of contemporary Jewish life at variance with the beliefs of the larger society” (1993, 12). A Jewish advocate of the Haskalah was called a maskil; the plural form is maskilim.
its fullest expression in a historicist approach, which held that “the meaning or value of anything is to be found in history” (213). During the process of their emancipation, an important group of newly secularized German Jews gradually internalized their host society’s interest in historical thought, creating along the way the revolutionary Wissenschaft des Judentums, the first modern body for the “scientific” study of Judaism and the Jews.

Though memory had always been central to Jewish thinking, and though there were important episodes and instances of Jewish historiographic writing following the compilation of the histories contained in the Hebrew Bible, this strand of Jewish thinking and writing was actually quite marginal within postbiblical Jewish scholarship (Yerushalmi 1989, 16–17). The relative absence of Jewish historiography was not coincidental; rather, it reflected and even gave expression to dominant Jewish conceptions of time. Prior to the Enlightenment, history, both Jewish and Christian, was viewed as cyclical. Its primary actors were, in addition to God, a small set of divinely anointed kings and prophets (Lederhendler 1999, 308). Walter Benjamin called this teleologic view of history “Messianic time,” one informed by notions of destiny and panhistorical typologies (1969, 263). Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that “for the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history,” an approach that allowed them “to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will” (1989, 21, 17). Prior to the Enlightenment, Christian and Jews alike saw human history as a mere metaphorical projection of the true historia sancta, a metahistorical realm with a fixed ending as revealed in the sacred texts (Lederhendler 1999, 306). Within this paradigm, the value, indeed the ontological possibility of human agency interfering with history, is negligible.

As is well known, Amos Funkenstein challenges Yerushalmi’s claim that from the rabbinic period up until the Enlightenment Jews did not write or really even think about their historical moment. Offering a more nuanced model that includes the key mediating notion of “historical consciousness,” Funkenstein describes the relationship between collective memory and history in such a way as to claim that “with or without historiography proper, creative thinking about history—past and present—never ceased” (1993, 10–11). It is this self-reflexivity, this never taking the contents of collective memory for granted that constitutes a historical consciousness, which Funkenstein asserts was always evident among the Jews. Yet whereas Funkenstein writes that Jewish “fate” was never “a matter of course” (3), his general focus suggests little in the way of action-oriented thought about the past. Funkenstein himself notes that secular European historiography in general was little valued by the Jews, since they saw themselves as “political objects rather than subjects,” an observation that echoes a central claim concerning the relationship of the Jews to history among those using the phrase “return to history” (16). Moreover, Funkenstein has little to say about conceptions of time, that, for instance, even if Jews did continue to consider critically their historical moment, they did not necessarily see time as “homogeneous or empty” and thus inherently open to human intervention.

4. Reil’s study challenged previously accepted models—such as Friedrich Meinecke’s Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook—that saw historicism as a radical departure from the norms of Enlightenment thought. In light of their often muddled and contested meanings, I use the terms historicism and historicist with some reservations. I include them in this study primarily to refer to what David Myers calls “an overarching ideology or Weltanschauung that val[ues] the past on its own terms—as an interconnected series of individual historical organisms” (2003, 19). I am less interested in a second, more methodologically specific sense—the study of individual historical phenomena as uniquely evolving entities—though this approach to studying the past would certainly be adopted by many Jewish thinkers. For a brief survey of the concept as a whole throughout history, see Hamilton 1996.

5. A product of the Enlightenment, the first Wissenschaft scholars started out with an Enlightenment-informed belief in natural laws that historicism, as a methodology, reacted against. Over time, and certainly by the end of the nineteenth century, most German Jewish scholars, as well as many Russian Jewish thinkers, would be working from within some version of a historicist paradigm.

6. Yerushalmi’s brief list of rabbinic anachronisms is remarkable: “In the world of agadah Adam can instruct his son Seth in the Torah, Shem and Eber establish a house of study, the patriarchs institute the three daily prayer-services of the normative Jewish liturgy, Og King of Bashan is present at Isaac’s circumcision, and Noah prophesies the translation of the Bible into Greek” (1989, 17). Not coincidentally, Benedict Anderson, in his treatment of the changing “apprehension of time” that set the stage for the rise of modern nationalism, offers a similar list of pre-Enlightenment anachronisms, this time taken from the wider Christian community (1983, 22–24).
The use of historical knowledge as the justification for specific political programs aimed at altering the direction of human or profane history seems a more recent development. In addition, whereas Funkenstein demonstrates that there were instances of sustained historical thought throughout the Middle Ages, in the nineteenth century such thought became dominant and central in a way it had not been in previous centuries. Overall, then, I think it is fair to draw two conclusions: first, in the nineteenth century significant clusters of Jewish thinkers began conceiving of history in a new light; second, well before the end of the century this new approach to history came to incorporate new ideas concerning the relationship between historical knowledge and political action.

This feature of what we might call the first stage of the Jewish return to history—an internalization and application of modern historicist thinking—reflected and served to entrench the secularization of important segments of European Jewish society. Although the various political movements that would eventually emerge from this reconception of Jewish history tend to receive the most attention in discussions of the sundry Jewish revolutions of the nineteenth century, it is worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the monumental qualities of these conceptual transformations in and of themselves. As Eli Lederhendler notes, the formulation “return to history” is shorthand for a redefined notion of history, including its essence, the forces at work within it, as well as its very purpose (1999, 308). In other words, the acceptance of this general model of history was tantamount to revising the place of the individual and the collective in the universe, as well as the meaning and even possibility of human intervention directed toward the future (Harshav 1993, 24). Once Jewish thinkers adopted this modern notion of history—a change that Yerushalmi notes occurred “precipitously” (1989, 85)—the role of history in Jewish intellectual, cultural, and political life became absolutely central: “History, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism” (86).

Although many emancipated, assimilated, or merely secularized Jewish intellectuals eagerly adopted this new historicist approach, historicism’s intimate relationship to nationalism presented a problem to these otherwise energized maskilim, since history, understood as such, had become “inextricably linked with the fate of nations” (Myers 1995, 13). In other words, nineteenth-century historiography positioned the nation as the main protagonist in history (Raz-Krakotzkin 1999, 249; Yerushalmi 1989, 88). While the assimilation advocated by these maskilim included absorbing the regnant historicist ethos of the day (Myers 2003, 9), the Haskalah also advocated allegiance to the state (Biale 1987, 103). Devoted to the project of assimilation and integration, but not wanting to raise the specter of dual loyalties, early Jewish efforts at applying a modern historicist methodology to Judaism and the Jewish past were overtly formulated as “scientific” inquiries into the Jewish religion and textual tradition and not as the history of a Jewish national community. In fact, early on the Wissenschaft aimed to demonstrate Judaism’s suitability for emancipation and integration. As David Myers puts it, “The equation of nation and history did not fit the scholarly or political agenda of Wissenschaft des Judentums” (2003, 24).

Despite their aversion to the implications of modern historical study, Jewish scholars steadily moved toward understanding themselves as working within the discipline of history. More important, with the publication of Heinrich Graetz’s multivolume History of the Jews in 1853, German Jewish scholarship had begun representing Jewish history as a history with the trappings of a nation (27). As various Jewish thinkers and leaders began to assert, however hesitantly, that the Jews were a nation in the modern sense—a view that emerged in part due to the work of modern Jewish historians—Jewish history would become the central arena for dialogue and debate over

8. Biale suggests that the maskilim’s effort not to be viewed as a state within a state in fact led to the creation of a new myth of Jewish history, one of powerlessness. Jewish existence was understood as only spiritual, religious, and intellectual, while the social and political were viewed as either nonexistent or disastrous (1987, 112-17).

9. In addition, Jean-Christophe Attias and Esther Benbassa note how Graetz insisted on Judaism’s inherent geographical dimensions, that is, its inseparability from the land of Israel. In this way, they contend that Graetz “opened the way to Jewish nationalist considerations” (2003, 123-24).
the condition and fate of the Jews. In other words, though the move toward viewing Jewish history as the history of a modern nation evolved in fits and starts, history eventually became not only the central discourse of modern Jewish thought but also the locus of Jewish political debate, a debate over the direction of the Jewish nation. As the shuttling among past, present, and future in this formulation suggests, the Jewish “return to history” was never merely a scholarly reconsideration of the Jewish past based on the latest European methodology. Indeed, as Moshe Lissak notes, being “in history” means “critically reevaluating the past, actively engaging with present adversities, and planning . . . for the future” (1999, 480).

By the time Zionism had fully emerged during the last decade of the nineteenth century, this dizzyingly multifaceted interest in history had become present in virtually all its factions. Shmuel Almog, in his normally straightforward study Zionism and History: The Rise of a New Jewish Consciousness, at one point offers an uncharacteristically complicated formulation, one that describes an ever evolving Zionism as both the subject and the object of its own historical gaze during the decade 1896–1906: “Zionism appeared to serve a double role both reflecting and forging the attitude toward the past. The result was that even as it was being made, its own history was being merged into the picture of the past and became the object of scrutiny and judgment by the following generation of Zionists” (1987, 20). Almog’s description of this “continuous flow from past to present” (“present to past” likely a more accurate phrasing) (20), from historical event to historical representation, captures a time both intensely preoccupied with understanding the past and self-conscious of its present moment’s status as the eventual stuff of a possibly epic history.

To be sure, the Zionist interest in history grew out of the initial appearance of modern Jewish scholarly historiography, and as such Zionism’s reliance on history was often expressed in the straightforward language and logic of modern historiography. Yet the full salience of this return, and the aspects of it that most interest me, can be found in the way this present- and future-oriented historicist thinking ultimately transcended the borders of history as a discipline through its mutually informative dialogues with everything from Jewish politics to Jewish literature. Indeed, by turning to the Russian Jewish case it is possible to see how this doubled sense of Jewish history—as both a representation of the past and an event in the present—found perhaps its clearest expression in a burgeoning Hebrew literature.

**RUSSIAN MASKILIM AND THE ROLE OF CULTURE**

Though modern historicist thought first reached the German maskilim, it left its mark on Russian maskilim as well, a group ultimately more central to the relationship among Hebrew literature, Zionism, and the Jewish return to history. In contrast to their emancipated German counterparts, the Russian maskilim were denied access to the sort of academic institutions that facilitated the emergence of the Wissenschaft. As such, the evolution of secularized thought in general and historicist thinking in particular among Russian Jewry was largely decentralized, typically eclectic, and decidedly uneven. The first few waves of modern Jewish scholarship in Russia were part of an enterprise called Hohemat Yisrael, which was significantly different from Jewish scholarship in Germany. As their choice to write in Hebrew—rather than in German or some other European language—suggests, their work maintained a certain reverence toward tradition (Myers 1995, 25). As David Myers notes, they did not at first “possess the same unyielding commitment

10. The internalization and application of historicist thinking toward what would become the self-representation of a newly conceptualized modern nation were not the only reasons that history so appealed to later proto-nationalist and nationalist Jewish thinkers. Faced with the project of restoring dignity to the Jewish collective, Shmuel Almog notes how “Jewish history endowed the new nascent movement with both a pedigree and a frame of reference.” Moreover, Jewish history was forced to compensate for the absence of a single sovereign Jewish territory or uniform culture. Thus, “in the absence of more tangible attributes on which to base Jewish nationalism . . . history became the crucible of Zionist thinking.” Overall, Almog claims that “Zionism expressed a far greater need for historical roots than any other national movement. Zionism turned to history to compensate for what was lacking in the present” (1987, 11–12, 14).

11. In this regard consider what is perhaps the most self-important such instance of the Zionist leadership’s awareness of its historical import: Herzl’s diary entry following the First Zionist Congress in 1897, when he wrote, “At Basel I founded the Jewish State.”
to scientific objectivity that German-Jewish scholars had absorbed through their university training” (26). Nevertheless, by the last third of the nineteenth century, many autodidactic Russian Jewish thinkers, still writing in Hebrew but now challenging Hokhmat Yisrael, had started to position some variation of modern historicist thinking at the center of their work.

An instructive example of this rise in modern historical thinking among Russian-born maskilim is Peretz Smolenskin, whose ideologically based project stands as a telling nexus of historicism, nationalism, and modern Hebrew writing. Smolenskin, a “vociferous critic of previous generations of Hebrew writers” (30), called for a “truthfully and justly” written history of the Jewish people, as part of a “scholarly discourse based not on the glories of the Hebrew literary past, but rather on the Jewish people as a social and national organism” (30–31; emphasis in the original). Indeed, Smolenskin’s belief in not only Judaism as an “evolving national culture” but also the importance of “historiographical self-representation” led him to call for a Jewish return to history in two senses (Lederhendler 1989, 147; Myers 1995, 30). David Myers comments on the ways in which Smolenskin’s thinking, even his historical thinking, was pointed toward the present and even the future: “Smolenskin insisted that Jewish historians become the subjects of their own history. . . . The nationalist historian of a Diaspora people must arrange the experiences of diverse communities into a unified whole. . . . Smolenskin was calling on the historian to ‘make’ history in a double sense: to serve as a pathbreaking precedent, and to create, or fabricate, national unity of out communal diversity” (30–31). Smolenskin, writing approximately a quarter century prior to the First Zionist Congress in 1897, already anticipates, indeed demands, that the Jews develop the doubled relationship to history that Almeg describes as a central feature of Zionist thinking and activism. Smolenskin not only calls for an explicitly national Jewish historiography but also recognizes the real-world implications and possibilities of what from another perspective might be seen as little more than a scholarly project. For Smolenskin, this writing of a newly national Jewish history shall come to function as both representation and event, shall “make” history in a double sense.13

Smolenskin’s intellectual and ideological vision stemmed from the unique conditions of Russian Jewish life, conditions that paved the way not only for the emergence of modern Zionism in Eastern Europe but also for the central role that Hebrew literature would play in its early crystallization. Due to the fact that Russian Jews were denied emancipation,14 the secularized intelligentsia functioned as detached islands of new thinking, unable to integrate within the larger Russian intelligentsia and academy, but intentionally no longer affiliated with traditional Jewish learning. As such, their various liminal projects sought out new terms of Jewish self-understanding and self-representation while remaining, perhaps against their will, stuck within an insular Jewish discourse. Not restrained by the disciplinary demands of any academy, Russian Jewish intellectuals wrote across genres or at the least published their works in eclectic journals containing everything from poetry to historical biographies, thus providing Hebrew literature with a central position in this budding Jewish cultural and social revolution.

Forced to face inward by the barriers to their assimilation, but not closed up within an academy (Jewish or otherwise), and spurred on by the ever worsening social and economic conditions of Russian Jewry in the mid-nineteenth century, Russian maskilim thought was thus fit to tip over into the realm of the political. In Russia, the individual-oriented program of the Haskalah grew irrelevant in the face of what was aptly viewed as a collective Jewish emergency: widespread poverty and an ever increasing anti-Jewish

13. In light of his dual representation/event orientation, Smolenskin could be understood as something of a New Historicism before his time. Yet in contrast to the contemporary New Historicists, who often reassemble texts and contexts through distant, scattered traces from long ago, Smolenskin envisioned a more comprehensive project with explicit designs on the future as well as the past. I will have much more to say about the effects of assuming a representation/event approach toward culture in general and literature in particular later on in this book. For New Historicism’s belief in the doubled representation/event status of culture’s “textual traces,” see Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 15.

14. It should be noted that Benjamin Nathans recently challenged the notion that the term emancipation cannot be used to describe the Russian Jewish experience during this time (2002, 75–79).
climate. But unable to gain immediate access to real political power, the protonationalist maskilim focused their energies on novel uses of the Hebrew language in general and the emergence of a modern Hebrew press in particular. These developments would have crucial effects on the shape of Jewish political life in Russia following the pogroms of 1881, when most of these thinkers abandoned the Haskalah and its hopes for Russian Jewish emancipation.

The semiautonomous maskilic press (not all of which was Hebrew) created an imagined Jewish public space that facilitated the formation of twin concepts that would prove vitally efficacious to Zionism: public opinion and “the people” (Lederhendler 1989, 133, 112). The conceptual sleight-of-hand at the heart of both concepts—the maskilic press at once invoked and created the former while radically reshaping the latter—suggests the sort of “imagining,” associated with numerous theories of modern nationalism. Benedict Anderson is quick to note that “imagining” in this context should be understood as a type of creation, not, as Ernest Gellner argues, as another word for falsification (1983, 6). In other words, the discursive space of the Hebrew press contributed to the formation of entities, such as the Zionist movement, that would eventually function as actors in the political arena. By shaping this press and fashioning the public for and to which it spoke, the maskilim were guaranteed significant authority in the eyes of Russian Jewish society once their concerns grew overtly political. By the 1870s, a gradually emblazoned maskilic community—less isolated and further motivated by the continuing deterioration of Russian Jewry’s condition—began to assume for itself a leadership position (Lederhendler 1989, 133). Yet it was precisely the limits on their leadership that set the stage for the centrality of

15. See also Salmon 1991, 110. For a discussion of how the literary intelligentsia used the press to influence public opinion following the 1881 pogroms, see Frankel 1981, 74–75, 81.

16. In addition to the theories of Anderson cited above, see Ernest Gellner, who writes, “Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all it is not what it seems to itself. The cultures it claims to defend and revive are often its own inventions” (1983, 56). For a discussion of the related theories of Homi Bhabha, see note 20.

17. Frankel notes that the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia “did not replace the established authorities” but rather “emerged parallel to them” (1981, 2).

The appeal of Realism for the Literary Leadership

Thus, even before modern Zionism emerged as a full-blown political movement, Hebrew literature had become part and parcel of the deeply interlocked

18. Steven Zipperstein similarly comments how Ahad Ha’am believed that “in the absence of a coherent political framework . . . cultural projects . . . must take responsibility for inculcating a ‘sense of national identity’ into the Jewish people” (1993, 110).
largely devoted to change—provided these writers with a distinctly Jewish brand of authority (Miron 1993, 405–6).21

This explicit awareness of the ways in which Jewish literature would determine Jewish history in both senses—that is, write a record of its past and establish its future path—was only compounded by the great upheavals of this period. Jewish society was, as Robert Alter notes, “launching on that process of radical historical transformation we call modernization,” such that “the act of writing in Hebrew was not just an aesthetic pursuit but a programmatic renegotiation of the terms of Jewish collective identity” (1988, 3). And it is during such periods of pronounced instability that literature, due to the way its potent immediacy and creative suppleness allow it to capture an otherwise elusive reality, plays its most formative role. Commenting on a different but similarly turbulent time and place, Raymond Williams expresses the novel’s ability to provide shape and form to an otherwise chaotic reality:

The new pressures and disturbances were not simple moulds out of which new forms came. The men and women who were writing…took from the disturbance of these years another impetus: a crisis of experience, often quite personally felt and endured, which when it emerged in novels was much more than a reaction to existing and acknowledged public features. It was a creative working, a discovery, often alone at the table; a transformation and innovation which composed a generation…. It brought in new feelings, people, relationships; rhythms newly known, discovered, articulated; defining the society, rather than merely reflecting it…. It was not the society or its crisis which produced the novels. The society and the novels…came from a pressing and varied experience which was not yet history; which had no new forms, no significant moments, until these were made and given by direct human actions. (1970, 11)

21. Of course, in the original biblical context the truly prophetic Watchman is an interlocutor between God and the Jewish people. In the modern, often secular incarnation, the writer-Watchman’s visions and authority originate instead from his ability to articulate the condition of the nation. For another reading of the Watchman model in modern Hebrew literature, this one concerned with the limitations such a model places on the possibility of individual or private perspectives, see Gluzman 2003, 27.
Literature, as Williams points out, is not merely a product of its time, or even interdependent with it. Rather, it names its time, especially when that time is one of great crisis and disorder. The novel—through a creative process of discovery—intervenes to provide the form and content of this “not yet history,” defining society and composing a generation in the process. Literature intervenes at that slippery place where the present becomes the past, leaving its mark on each, as both representation and event.

By focusing on the constitutive, determinant role played by Hebrew literature in the emergence and evolution of Jewish nationalism, this book invokes those theories proclaiming the interdependency of the nation and national culture and more generally the larger postmodern paradigm based on a belief in the social construction of reality. But the radical transformations during the fifty-plus-year period under analysis here, in combination with the way political action came to be concentrated in and around the literary arena during this time, require us to view the relationship between Hebrew fiction and Zionism as anything but just one more illustration of the necessarily “mutual embeddedness of art and history” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 7) or of the nation and its discourse.

To get a sense of the profound instability of this time, consider only these rough biographies of the writers I treat in this book. In 1896 S. Y. Abramovitz (the focus of my first chapter)—born in an observant Jewish village in Belorussia and now living as a maskil in Odessa—published a subversive Hebrew autotranslation of his 1878 Yiddish novel The Travels of Benjamin the Third, which satirizes both traditional Jewish society and the emerging Zionist movement. Just over fifty years later, in 1949, the first great native Hebrew writer, S. Yizhar (the subject of my last chapter)—born in 1916, just one year before Abramovitz’s death, into the intensely secular Zionist settlements in Palestine, and now suddenly an Israeli—published two remarkably critical short stories about the 1948 War of Independence. Between these dates, Y. Ch. Brenner and S. Y. Agnon, both born in eastern Europe but writing as Zionist immigrants in Palestine, attempted to capture the tumultuous time of the Second Aliyah (1904–1914). To call these writers liminal would be something of an understatement, as each of them passed through at least two utterly different worlds: from the religious to the secular, from the maskilic to the nationalist, from Europe to Palestine, from Yiddish to Hebrew, from Zionist to Israeli.

In light of these and other transformations, the always interwoven relationship of nation and national literature was, in the hands of the writers I explore here, urgently compounded. The immensity of Hebrew literature’s role throughout the period covered in this book turned apparently aesthetic questions of what subjects to write about and how to represent them into socially and politically charged concerns. As Michael Gluzman comments, “the extent to which Hebrew literature participated in nation-building and was politicized cannot be overstated. The literary and political worlds...
were entirely intertwined” (2003, 7). Having themselves internalized the trappings of modern historical thought, but primarily occupied by the present condition of the Jews, Hebrew writers—in particular Hebrew prose writers—hoped to capture Jewish society objectively and precisely, with the conviction that the very act of accurately representing their reality might participate in its improvement. As Benjamin Harshav observes, the long-standing absence of Jewish territory combined with the recent rejection of the traditional “universe of discourse” (that is, the Torah and Talmud) left Jewish society existentially desperate for a new universe of discourse anchored in the “real, historical world” (1993, 21).

This demand for a socially engaged literature equipped to capture reality would seem to make realism the fictional mode of choice for Hebrew writers near the end of the nineteenth century. Along these lines, Avraham Ben-Avigdor, the leader of the proto-Zionist literary movement most closely identified with the emergence of Hebrew realism—the “New Wave” (ha-mabalakh ha-chadash)—viewed literature’s role as one of “helping the nation, not just entertaining it” (Even 1972, 15). According to Ben-Avigdor, the specific literary qualities of realism equipped it to produce change in society at large. As Yosef Even puts it, “Ben-Avigdor conceived of realism as a literary movement battling with and revolting against an undesirable social reality by means of a faithful and precise description of this harmful reality” (15).

There were, to be sure, additional reasons for realism’s emergence as a central force in Hebrew fiction. For one, realism was the dominant fictional mode in nineteenth-century Europe. Moreover, it was thoroughly intertwined with the kinds of fundamental and profound transformations that had characterized the processes of modernization in Europe—transformations of consciousness that Jewish society was undergoing at an accelerated pace. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth cogently argues in her important study Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space, and Narrative, the fundamental premises of realism—a belief in the existence of neutral, homogeneous time and space as well as the uniformity of nature—can be traced back to and are in fact inseparable from the emergence of Renaissance humanism.

Ermarth demonstrates how those very shifts in historical consciousness, in which temporally continuous narratives replace temporally discontinuous typologies, marked a move from one epistemological framework to another. This shift found its expression not only in modern historiography but in realist fiction as well, two modes of writing that together are responsible for the very coherence of the modern nation (1998, 11). To illustrate her point, Ermarth quotes at length Stanley Fish, whose account of a “Christian plot”—with its lack of cause and effect, along with a similar disregard for temporal order—clearly echoes with both Yerushalmi’s and Anderson’s treatments of medieval conceptions of time. In addition, Fish overtly notes how this model precludes the possibility of meaningful human agency: “Within a Christian framework ... one reaches a point not because he chooses, but because he has been chosen, that is, redeemed” (11–12). For a society newly interested in modern conceptions of history and coming to view itself as an active national community, realism was a natural fit.

26. This is not to say that all Hebrew writers willingly participated in nation building. Indeed, Gluzman’s book focuses on those writers who in various ways “resisted ... this national imperative” (2003, 6). In other words, modern Hebrew literature has never been remotely monolithic, but it is still fair to say that overall it played a decisive and undeniable role in nation building.

27. Of course, as Harshav’s book notes, Hebrew literature and Jewish nationalism were but one of many such interlocking literary-political responses to this situation, Yiddish literature and communism being another important example (1993, 37).

28. Although I will return to and continue to define the term realism throughout the course of this study, a couple of general observations should be introduced here. When I speak of “realism” in the context of fiction, I am referring to realism as it has come to be understood in scholarship on the nineteenth-century European novel. In other words, “realism” is not being used here as a mere synonym for mimetic practice in general. Though numerous definitions of this particular realism exist, the following is a partial list of its features most relevant here: reliable narration, referential language and transparent style, characters representative of and largely defined by their historical moment and material conditions, and abundant information concerning the time and place of the narrative. In addition to the other sources to be cited later, see Belsey 1980, 74–75; and Ankersmit 1989, 20.

29. Ermarth notes that despite the long-running disagreement surrounding many aspects of the massive category that is realism, virtually all critics—from Robbe-Grillet to Lukács—“agree perfectly on this connection between realism and humanism” (1998, 3).

30. For the original, see Fish 1973, 74.
Yet despite all the reasons for realism's appeal to and suitability for an emerging modern Hebrew fiction, such a mode would be marginal at best all the way into the twentieth century. The “New Wave” movement, for instance, would never rise above its status as a minor movement in Hebrew literature, producing no writers of great reputation. More generally, confronting a variety of literary as well as extraliterary choices and challenges—from the linguistic and the generic to the religious and the political—Hebrew writers, even those affiliated with the burgeoning Zionist movement, struggled in their effort to find a viable Hebrew realist idiom. How could this be? Why, if the “real” was such a central concern not just for Hebrew literature but for Zionist culture as a whole, was Hebrew realism so elusive and rare? Was such a poetics inaccessible, or were writers simply more attracted to other fictional modes? If leading Hebrew prose writers did not employ standard realism, what type of prose did they write, and how did this alternative mode respond to the demands that literature faithfully represent reality in order to improve it?

Although in the chapters that follow I make my central arguments through, and in a sense for, extended close readings of complex fictional narratives, a few general observations can be made here regarding the elusiveness of Hebrew realism. The first factor that pushed Hebrew fiction away from realism was the choice of Hebrew itself, since the language, though not dead by any means, was in the late nineteenth century hardly equipped, as Robert Alter puts it, “to effect a sovereign illusion of reality” (1988, 5). As Alter explains, the project of writing a novel in Hebrew meant trying to “constitute a whole world in a language not actually spoken in the real-life equivalent of that world, yet treated by the writer as if it were really spoken, as if a persuasive illusion of reality could be conveyed through a purely literary language” (5). From vocabulary to syntax, Hebrew was an ill-suited medium for the construction of a realist idiom. Yiddish presented itself as an obvious alternative for Jewish writers aiming to participate in a uniquely Jewish national or even nationalist literature, but many writers were attracted to Hebrew due to their belief that only this language had “unique aesthetic dignity and a unique historical resonance” so crucial in the larger European nationalist climate of the day (13). This factor was central to the work of S. Y. Abramovitz (the subject of Chapter 1), the first writer to construct a workable Hebrew prose idiom. Likewise, the singular character of Hebrew as a sacred language would prove central to the writing of S. Y. Agnon (the subject of Chapter 3).

The second factor stems from the belated emergence of Hebrew fiction in comparison to those national literatures, English and French, most associated with nineteenth-century realism. Modern Hebrew fiction first appeared in the 1850s and became a national literature in the modern sense only in the last two decades of that century. Benjamin Harshaw describes the compressed and hurried evolution of emerging modern Jewish literatures, of which Hebrew fiction was a central component: “Within a short time, Jewish literature attempted to catch up with the developments of the European literary tradition since the Renaissance (including its flashbacks toward classical literature) and to spread out over the whole range of genres, both in original works and in translation. And, at the same time, it endeavored to break through to the contemporary trends of Modernism which were turning that very tradition upside down” (1993, 27). Harshaw's account of this literature stresses a compression of literary development that saw Hebrew literature experiencing in perhaps only a few decades what European literature underwent over the course of a few centuries. Here, despite the breakneck pace of the literature's development, Harshaw still employs a diachronic model to explain this evolution. Later on, however, Harshaw abandons this diachronic model, offering in its place an alternative spatial model, informed by a synchronic view of modern Jewish literature in which the very notion of “historical” development is no longer applicable: “The history of European literature was discovered by Jewish writers at the end of its development, when it was challenged from within. For the exulant discoverers, that history appeared not as a history but as a synchronic ‘imaginary museum’ where all displays were placed in adjacent rooms, from which they could pick models and influences with no historical order” (28). 32 Harshaw's

31. Interestingly, Ben-Avigdor would make a much bigger contribution as a publisher. See Miron 1987, 33.

32. Along similar lines, Irene Tucker considers, in her reading of Abramovitz, what it means “to read a literary text in historical context in the late nineteenth century, at the moment of the decline of the realist novel” (2000, 3).
synchronic model forces us to reconsider seriously what can be assumed when we invoke terms such as realism and modernism or any other literary period-cum-mode in the Hebrew context. Here these modes of writing no longer exist as periods that blend into and explain one another as related links in the historical chain of literary development. Additionally, the last stage of this literary history (or the last room to be added to the museum), modernism, brings with it a radical new approach to the rest of this history/museum. Modernism “challenged from within,” indeed “turn[ed] that very tradition upside down,” further complicating Hebrew literature’s encounter with European modes of writing. Even before romanticist and realist modes had significant time to become sedimented, Hebrew writers found themselves equipped with this uniquely revolutionary mode of writing. Indeed, by the time Hebrew writing began in Palestine in the early twentieth century, the brief “catch-up” program in Hebrew literature had essentially run its course, leaving its writers with the keys to Harshav’s imaginary museum. For the Hebrew writer, realism was but one of many options available for the construction of a mimetic fictional narrative.

It should be kept in mind, moreover, that realism is by no means the exhaustive locus of realistic or mimetic writing. Realism’s privileged status, especially in regards to the novel, stems in large part from the wide circulation and often uncritical acceptance of its particular conventions. But as I will show with many examples taken from modernist fiction, not all narratives that create an effect of verisimilitude are necessarily realist. As F. R. Ankersmit explains, “realism is based on a stereotyping of representative codes; and it is these codes which guarantee the ‘effet de réel’ of realism” (1989, 24). In this regard, it is less Hebrew fiction’s attraction to realism per se that is of interest here than its effort to represent reality, to apply modern historicist thinking—often informed by nationalist ideology—to the production of literary fiction. In other words, although the Hebrew case clearly departs from the standard model of the coeval emergence of literary realism, modern historiography, and modern nationalism, many of the underlying suppositions informing European historical and political consciousness, on the one hand, and cultural production, on the other, can be still be detected in Hebrew literature. An examination of the emergence and evolution of modern Hebrew fiction, therefore, not only is instructive in itself but also casts new light on assumptions typically made about literature and history in general over the past couple of centuries.

In general, my approach to Hebrew fiction parallels Ermarth’s project by striving to situate literary development within the largest possible historical context, in order to describe the ways in which fiction responds to, reflects, and even influences fundamental changes in the extraliterary arena. Because of her ability to simultaneously position the emergence of realism within the centuries-long evolution of modern consciousness and define the basic assumptions informing this realist episteme, Ermarth can speak of realism as a relevant category not just for texts and paintings but for anything—from an architectural order to a political structure—that “encodes the value of neutrality through the use of a perspective system that creates universal common denominators” (1998, xxii). Setting aside the exact details of Ermarth’s account of realism, it is her argument for the inseparability of realism as a paradigm from the larger set of changes characterizing European society since the Renaissance that is of particular relevance here. For Ermarth, realism is far more than a literary mode. Put differently, literary realism is but one expression of a broader transformation evident in the very structures of modern forms of thought—from historical consciousness to liberal democracy.

The specifics of Ermarth’s historical model, however, are of particular interest precisely in the ways they are at best unevenly relevant to the European (especially eastern European) Jewish experience. In addition to their belated encounter with modernity, the Jewish internalization of this paradigm and integration into European society were complicated by the limits placed on this integration by both non-Jewish resistance to emancipation and the intransigence of the traditional Jewish authorities themselves. By the second half of the nineteenth century, xenophobic nationalist impulses seemed to be overwhelming inclusive liberal forces. In the Russian case, the Jewish hopes for emancipation—frustrated for decades and then finally

33. For a brief summary of this trend, see Shapira 1996, 6. Similarly, Pericles Lewis, in his study of modernism as a response to “the crisis of liberal nationalism” across Europe, suggests the Dreyfus affair to be one such example of this trend (2003, 6).
dashed altogether—saw this community move “directly from a preliberal to a postliberal stage of development” (Frankel 1981, 2). Naturally, this atypical encounter with the evolution of European society and politics left its mark on European Jewish culture. In the readings that follow, I chart Hebrew fiction’s unusual approach to realism as indicative of Jewish society’s unique experience with nationalism, liberalism, and modernization.

**WHY CLOSE READINGS? A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY**

Among other things, this book is a response to dominant trends and styles in Israeli scholarship on modern Hebrew literature, scholarship that, for obvious reasons, greatly influences English-language studies of this same literature. Facing a comparatively small literature with a relatively short past, Hebrew scholars have been able to conduct wide-ranging surveys, undertake exhaustive inventories, and draw remarkably vast maps of this literature in its entirety. Gershon Shaked’s authoritative five-volume treatment of Hebrew narrative fiction, *Ha-Sipuret ha-Yivrit*, is perhaps the best-known example of this scholarly tradition. And although Shaked’s work stands as an impressive accomplishment and an invaluable resource for the scholarly community as a whole, its limitations are nearly as evident as its virtues. In short, what it offers by way of breadth, it lacks in depth. Extended close readings of individual texts are quite rare in Shaked’s study. In the end, one leaves Shaked’s survey with a detailed, precise map of an intriguing site that has yet to be visited. If Shaked’s project is the most extreme instance, such an approach can be regularly detected in Israeli scholarship, especially that scholarship conducted by its senior members. Intriguing readings of individual texts and authors are often cut short in the name of reviewing or slightly amending the text or author’s precise location in the big picture. Although such scholarship has many virtues, this book is an attempt to offer an alternative of sorts, to investigate at length the results of a different approach that conducts a finite series of sustained, close, deep readings in lieu of a vast but ultimately superficial survey.

This study emerges, moreover, from a belief in the profound richness of both fictional discourse and the larger relationship between literature and reality or literature and history. Although I do not advocate a return to the perhaps naive days of the structuralists, of daunting narratological typologies and ambitious semiotic taxonomies, I do believe strongly in the value of extended close readings that resist invoking and falling back on various poststructuralist and deconstructionist generalities and clichés. However accurate as generalities, they often serve merely to neutralize the text, to curtail its local possibilities. The present cultural studies climate rightly analyzes cultural products in order to describe their significance within a larger network of signs that is essentially synonymous with the culture and even with society as a whole. But simply because everything can be read as a text does not mean that all texts operate the same way. Narrative fiction, especially those texts that combine numerous, seemingly incompatible narrative modes, is remarkably intricate and unusually illuminating, especially when read in the context of its rival narrative genre, the modern historical narrative.

It is in this regard that the present study distinguishes itself from a New Historicist approach to describing the relationship between culture and history. Whereas in general I agree with the New Historists’ interest in “treating all of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 7)—thereby making everything from a painting to a potato fair game for analysis—here I intentionally restrict myself to the perhaps more conservative study of literary fiction. The crucial and unique role of Hebrew fiction, especially in the first few decades of modern Hebrew literature and the Zionist movement, should deter us from viewing it as just one more instance of what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call “both representation and event” (15). I suggest viewing Hebrew fiction as representation and event in a much narrower sense, one closer to the way these two terms might be understood in more conventional historiography. In light of the radical newness of modern Hebrew literature, in light of the way this literature’s very growth was considered a vital element in the project of national revival, and in light of its role within the intense debates concerning the nature of Jewish history, the condition of the Jews toward the end of the nineteenth century, and the proper program for their rehabilitation, Hebrew fiction functioned explicitly as both remarkable happening and vital record, as both telling document and highly authoritative chronicle of its time. Put simply, these texts should not be confused with previously ignored traces that might be used to construct, say, a counternarrative of Zionist history and culture.
Against the background of modern Hebrew fiction's early familiarity with modernism, as well as with an expanded notion of realistic writing in mind, we can make one additional case for the value of studying this literature for an understanding of both the Jewish internalization of a modern historical consciousness and the Jewish effort to acquire political agency at the national level. The multilayered qualities of narrative fiction allow writers not merely to represent the present, the recent past, or the present-soon-to-be-past but also to highlight and thematize a whole cluster of issues related less to any particular reality than to how this present-cum-past should be represented, understood, remembered, and narrated in the first place. In stark contrast to standard historiography, fiction can at once narrate an event or represent a society while simultaneously questioning or drawing attention to its own modes of representation. This is especially true for a literature informed by the techniques and larger sensibility of modernism. Though modernist writers were “deeply concerned with a particular historical moment, with the very nature of historical process,” their fictional work also shot through with “an artistically manifested self-consciousness about the processes of fiction-making the like of which had not been seen in the novel since the end of the eighteenth century” (Alter 1975b, 139). The writer of fiction, while documenting any given reality, can question within the text, however subtly, the genre, perspective, and even language he employs in order to frame, narrate, and write his narrative. In this way, while contributing to the doubled present-past or event-representation tension at the center of the discourse revolving around Jewish history and the Jewish condition, the Hebrew writer also comments on the very terms of this debate. As these writers understood it, their task was always to be true to the reality they hoped to capture. They also understood, however, that this project was never a simple one. No single poetics was neutral or without consequences. It is this multivalent quality of Hebrew fiction—its ability to at once construct a narrative, often a historical narrative, while directing the reader to reconsider the virtues and limits of its own narrative strategies—that marks one of Hebrew literature's unique, and to mind my largely unrecognized, contributions to the larger discourse aimed at understanding Jewish and Zionist history, culture, and society.

Indeed, although all the literary texts addressed in this book are highly canonical, I read them as equally ambivalent when it comes to their role in the formation of a national narrative, something I address at greater length in my epilogue. In this regard, the writers here articulate a national ambivalence prior even to the one suggested by Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the pedagogical and the performative. Bhabha argues that the nation exists in a double time: as the historical object of a national pedagogy, on the one hand, and the subject of a performative process of signification, on the other (1990, 297). Invoking deconstructionist theory that posits the “‘emptiness' of the signifier that punctuates linguistic difference,” Bhabha argues for the inherent alienation of the nation from itself (299). But though his theory is important to understanding the need for counternarratives and the necessarily heterogeneous nature (perhaps to the point of incoherence) of national identity in general, the texts in this present study point to something else. Although these Hebrew narratives have long been understood as central ingredients in the pedagogical, they in fact profoundly complicate this category, by interrogating extensively both the form and the content of the very “pedagogical” national narrative that they participate in and even construct, all this prior to any consideration of the performative whatsoever.

This book traces the ongoing contact between fiction and history in modern Hebrew fiction. Each chapter operates on two interconnected levels: while addressing an episode or period from Jewish, Zionist, or Israeli history as it is reconstructed in a fictional text, I simultaneously analyze representational, narratological, and even linguistic challenges and problems highlighted within the fictional text itself. Indeed, postmodernist critiques of historiography have led many to view modern historical writing as a fundamentally literary practice and subsequently to reconsider, even affirm, fiction's ability to produce a valuable, alternative strain of historical knowledge. Yet in considering the latter, little systematic effort has been made to describe how, for instance, self-conscious and unreliable narration, irony, multigenre novels, and experiments with chronology can be used to represent the historical past and

34. See White 1973, 1978, and 1987. For a nearly exhaustive survey of postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques of modern historiography, see Berkhof 1995. For a summary of these issues by an Israeli historian, see Mali 1999.
to what effect. My project investigates Hebrew fiction as an alternative historiography, asking not only how fiction portrays the past but also how its varied modes have taken on ideological and political salience in the ongoing contested struggle to represent and respond to reality and history in contemporary Israel. In chronicling this multifaceted imaginative discourse I address the following questions: How did literary fiction participate in the project of a Jewish return to history? As a Zionist community emerged in Palestine, how did fiction make sense of its new reality, as well as formulate literature’s role to reflect and perhaps imagine its particular character? How did writers respond to the violence that accompanied the realization of Zionist objectives in 1948? Though fiction is often treated as a supplementary, secondary discourse when discussing Zionism and its past, I hope this book demonstrates fiction’s unique contributions to and ultimate inseparability from this chapter in Jewish history.

_Here and Now_ is organized in the following manner. The first chapter focuses on S. Y. Abramovitz (1835–1917), often known by his pen name, Mendele the Bookseller, and widely considered the father of both modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew fiction. For much of his career Abramovitz overtly called for a critical Jewish confrontation with reality, and, indeed, his body of work is often viewed as a comprehensive portrait of nineteenth-century Russian Jewish society. Yet as I show in my reading of what is perhaps his best-known novel, _The Travels of Benjamin the Third_, Abramovitz’s writing is hardly realist. I argue that Abramovitz sacrifices realism—with some remarkable exceptions—in order to simultaneously pursue the other two central agendas of his combined social-aesthetic project: refining his Hebrew prose idiom and advancing a critical treatment of Jewish society. This chapter also analyzes the evolution of this narrative—from its original Yiddish version in 1878 to its later 1896 and 1911 Hebrew autotranslations—against the radically changing historical contexts into which it was published. Here I reconsider standard theories regarding Abramovitz’s stance on Zionism. Ultimately, I suggest viewing Abramovitz not just as the father of modern Hebrew fiction but as the father of this literature’s deeply ambivalent and complicated relationship to realism as well.

The second chapter addresses Y. Ch. Brenner (1881–1921), perhaps the foremost fiction writer in the generation following Abramovitz. Brenner’s influential but elusive and often misunderstood poetics are teased out of two texts published in 1911, when a Zionist society in Palestine was beginning to form. At the center of this chapter is a reading of Brenner’s perplexing and controversial novel _From Here and There_. On the one hand, this novel engages the specific, pressing ideological questions of the Zionist project at the start of the twentieth century by offering a detailed, realist portrait of Jewish life in Palestine at this time. On the other hand, the novel also provides an intense elaboration of the interiority of its protagonist narrator, thereby obscuring the chronology and even causality of the realist narrative. By reading this novel against Brenner’s influential essay published the same year, “The Land of Israel Genre and Its Accoutrements,” I illustrate the deliberate character of Brenner’s hybrid realist-modernist poetics. In this essay Brenner expresses a longing for the type of stable society necessary for the construction of wide-canvas, comprehensive realist fiction. At the same time, Brenner demonstrates his familiarity with, and possibly adherence to, a modernist paradigm that views reality as necessarily fragmentary. In the end, Brenner imports to Palestine both Abramovitz’s pessimistic view of Jewish society and his ambivalent approach to realism, by at once maintaining a belief in realism’s ability to rehabilitate the Jews and a modernist skepticism that doubts both the possibility and even the prudence of its eventual realization.

In the third chapter I turn to S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970), widely considered to be the greatest of all modern Hebrew prose writers, and indeed the only writer from this literature to have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Agnon’s 1945 novel, _Only Yesterday_, stands not only as one of his most celebrated works but also as a remarkable realist-modernist hybrid narrative. Halfway through the six hundred-page novel, the narrative shifts from a rich panoramic realism into a multivalent modernist mode. Although the
novel in general and this shift in particular have received steady critical attention ever since the initial 1945 publication, little notice has been paid to the role of language in this novel, even though the narrative revolves around a dog, Balak, upon whom the words mad dog are written. I argue that Agnon’s thematization of Hebrew resonates with this historical novel’s larger critique of the Zionist ideology of the Second Aliyah. Only Yesterday illustrates the myriad ways in which the intended newness of the Zionist project was continually haunted by that which it sought to reject, in an extended treatment of the return of the repressed. The novel’s realism satirizes this ideology through its ironic rendering of life in the new Zionist settlements, where religious impulses, unproductiveness, and a longing for the Diaspora still reign. The modernism of the novel employs the same mechanism but focuses on the deeper level of language. Agnon’s thematization of language in Only Yesterday addresses the project of secularizing Hebrew, through the enactment of a macabre return of a repressed sacred Hebrew. Agnon seems to ask what may be lost by secularizing Hebrew and what is at risk in treating a sacred, mystical language as a mundane vernacular. Throughout, this chapter situates Agnon’s novel within theories on the interdependence of nation and narration in order to demonstrate the unique ways in which the relationship between Zionism and Hebrew literature departs from these larger theoretical models.

The fourth chapter treats S. Yizhar (1916–2006), the first great native Hebrew writer. Born in the ideologically driven Zionist Yishuv in Palestine, Yizhar represents a radical departure from those European-born writers treated in the previous chapters. Yizhar’s early stories typically position a largely passive sabra, or young, native Zionist “pioneer,” participating in a scene from the national drama, only to have, in modernist fashion, the deeply subjective account of his experiences overwhelm the external plot. These narratives expand in two intertwined directions: inward, through a documentation of the protagonist’s consciousness, and outward, to an exacting representation of nature’s expanse. Near the end of Israel’s 1948 War of Independence, Yizhar published two famous short stories, “The Prisoner” and “Chirbet Chiz’ah,” that rework his earlier techniques by combining them with seemingly straightforward depictions of abuses of power and their associated moral dilemmas. These stories are rightly often read as the earliest signs of protest in Hebrew literature over the Israeli treatment of indigenous Palestinian Arabs. Yet I argue that these stories simultaneously rethink and subvert Yizhar’s earlier intertwined treatment of identity and territory. These stories expose the ideological blind spots at the center of pre-1948 Zionist perceptions of the “pioneering” subject and his place within an idealized landscape. Like the writers treated in earlier chapters, Yizhar emerges as a writer not only concerned with understanding and capturing a complex, and in this case newly Israeli, reality but also convinced that the full meaning of this reality can best be represented through a poetics that ultimately transcends realism and its focus on external reality.

In my epilogue, I address the meaning of these writers’ position at the center of the modern Hebrew canon. Here I argue, in contrast to many recent studies analyzing the dynamics of center and margin in this literature, that the texts at the heart of Here and Now articulate a highly self-critical national narrative that has at its center a decidedly ambivalent national subject. With this in mind, I offer some preliminary answers to the question of whether these writers enjoy canonical status because or in spite of these aspects of their writings. In the end I argue for viewing modern Hebrew fiction as a nearly schizophrenic literature, that is, a literature that at once imagines and interrogates the coherence of the national community with which it possesses a remarkably intimate relationship.