

## Asaf Shurr and the Critique of Postmodernism in Contemporary Hebrew Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the influence of postmodernism on Israeli literature in the last three decades or so. Fewer studies tried to look beyond postmodernism at the attempt of more contemporary Israeli works to overcome some of its limitations, especially the reluctance of so-called postmodern texts to represent “truth” or objective reality. The following chapter will address this difficulty by looking at the work of Asaf Schurr, who published five novels in quick succession between 2007-2014. While Schurr’s first three novels, which focus on the imagined worlds of single individuals, seem to parody postmodernism, his last two novels expand their social scope and express a greater realism. Read together, these novels invoke the crisis of representation in the postmodern age while at the same time offer a tentative solution to it as well. By restoring a clearer sense of self and a clearer sense of community these novels reconstruct historical subjectivity and abandon the idea of an “imagined national community” in favor of smaller but more tangible social units.

Although literary histories went out of fashion in Israel and elsewhere with the advent of postmodernism, somewhere in the beginning of the 1990s, I want to revive that old-fashioned critical tradition, which until thirty or so years ago was passionately engaged in defining and shaping Israeli culture. Much of this critical activity, which has since subsided, was part of a dynamic dialectics that created distinct cultural coordinates.<sup>1</sup>

It would be irrelevant, of course, to revive the practices of literary historians like Gershon Shaked, for instance. Not only because definitive taxonomies of the kind Shaked composed are likely to be discounted today, but also because they are nigh impossible. The tremendous expansion of Israeli literature since that time has made such attempts

impractical. And yet literary histories, like other histories, are not only useful but important for many of the same reasons they were valuable in the past. The expansion and permutation of literature does not change the reflective social and cultural function it has; it only makes the work of the literary historian today harder. A determined historian can deal with these challenges in various ways. One of them is to deliberately narrow the scope of the literature examined and choose a specific timeframe and a specific group of authors and treat them as a kind of historical synecdoche, as I tried to do in a previous study about literature between the two intifadas.<sup>2</sup> The approach I take here is an examination of one specific writer, Asaf Schurr, who between 2007 and 2014 published five novels in quick succession, *Amram* (Bavel, 2007), *Motti* (Bavel, 2008), *Sigal* (Bavel, 2009), *Thus Said Vincent, the Stupid Cat* (Keter, 2011), *The Building* (Hebrew title: *Why Fish Bird*, Keter, 2014). Both the volume of these works and their integration of content and form make Schurr representative of what looks like an emerging literary trend in Israel that tries to confront the so-called crisis of representation in the postmodern age.<sup>3</sup>

I am referring here to Lyotard's well-known critique of modernism's emphasis on transcendent and universal truths and the prolific literature on postmodernism it has inspired since then.<sup>4</sup> In Israel, Postmodernism often took on the guise of post-Zionism and its critique and counter critique frequently involved politics as well as culture. Because of Israel's history and its particular ideological makeup, these changes were wrapped up in the changing of the ideological guard from Left to Right, in attempts to reverse earlier socialist policies and in the turn toward a more blatant Jewish-nationalism since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most pronounced social manifestations of this development has been the rise of identity as the basis for civic or collective action. Instead of the grand national issues, which stood at the center of the labor-Zionist *ancien régime*, the identity of various minority groups within the state became the new inspiration for public mobilization.<sup>6</sup> In Israel, these trends have been expressed by the rise of Mizrahi politics, Mizrahi-religious politics and Jewish religious politics, as more narrowly focused causes, that sought to change established notions of a collective Israeli body politic from which these sectors were previously excluded. They have also coincided with the hegemonic rise of a populist Right that has manipulated ethnic and religious differences to fortify its electoral dominance.<sup>7</sup>

In the field of literature, these trends have often been expressed by a disengagement from an “official” or “stative” perspective of many of the grand political issues that preoccupied Israeli writers for most of the twentieth century, like Jewish communal life in Israel, immigration and absorption, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the nature of life under these pressures etc.<sup>8</sup> Instead, many writers began to explore these issues through more personal aspects of identity as an expression of political engagement. Privileging a sectorial angle from which they examined national-communal affairs, these writers engaged in the concerns of a more specifically identified self as a reaction to the erosion of the Israeli social contract, once referred to as *mamlachtiyut*, or statism.<sup>9</sup>

Like some of his contemporaries, Asaf Schurr seems deeply concerned with these trends, which have changed Israeli society profoundly. His entire work to-date is an attempt jolt Israeli literature out of its postmodern doldrums, its preoccupation with overly individualized identities and with narratives that play with artistic artifice to the

exclusion of collective themes, toward a clearer and more real set of values as a stable basis for reference. It is a point of some irony, then, that most readers of Schurr's novels took them at their postmodern face value.<sup>10</sup> In fact—and this is my claim here—Schurr does something quite different, unique and path-breaking: he uses postmodernist tools of deconstruction not as an end but as a starting point that at the same time reconnects his work to some of the older but more constructive traditions of Israeli literature. As such, Schurr joins a number of writers, who as I note in the conclusion, also seem concerned with the dissolution of the Zionist metanarrative and the inability to narrate history, which such loss brings with it.<sup>11</sup>

The five novels Schurr published so far engage with this issue primarily through a constant interplay between content and form and I propose to read the novels as a series. The idea of chapters in a series is suggested not just by the rapid succession of the novels' publication, but also because of other commonalities they share, including the metaphoric quality of the narratives, as well as formal elements, like their evolving self-referential or ars poetic style.

The first three novels, as their titles suggest, focus on individuals, while the last two novels deal with increasingly wider social units, the family in *Vincent* and the community of an apartment building in *The Building*. But while the characters in the first three novels are given individual names, personal circumstances, distinct personalities and real physical environments, they remain curiously metaphoric. Time and space in these novels are vague. There are few or no historical or spatial references that can place the stories in a specific historical time, anchor them in a specific location or tie them to a

specific communal context. Lacking fictive specificity, the characters become abstracted, essentialized and devoid of literary moral value.

Moreover, this metaphoric content is conveyed through a distinct reflexive style, which attracted most of the critical attention when the novels were first published.<sup>12</sup> The first three novels especially include an intrusive authorial voice, that disrupts the narrative and comments on it with various degrees of involvement. The author makes rare appearances in the fourth novel, *Vincent*. The fifth novel, *The Building*, is the most conventionally styled in the series, lacking the programmatic foreword of the first four books and almost entirely devoid of authorial self-reflection. Comparatively speaking, and commensurate with its role as the last book in the series, it is also more embedded in a contemporary Israeli *Sitz im Leben*, rendering the narrative less obviously metaphoric.<sup>13</sup>

This evolving interplay between form and content is the means by which the series tells a very specific story. While the metaphoric nature of the narratives guided by the voice of a self-conscious author highlight the hollowness of the characters, the gradual change of that style coupled with the change in content eventually re-values the characters, gives them a clearer literary specificity and brings them closer to life, creating a literary historical subject, so to speak.

The metaphoric nature of the first three novels sets up the moral premise of the series. The first novel, *Amram*, like the two works that follow it, opens with a programmatic forward<sup>14</sup>:

Let's settle it right away, already before the first chapter, so that later on you won't carp about knowing or not knowing about it, or if it was

gripping or not. We have two people here. In some ways, they do similar things from similar motives, in other ways they do these things from different motives. They do these things with their faces covered, which means there's an identity issue here. One of them does it to fight crime. Seriously, don't laugh. You have to respect that, at least someone is trying to do something very clear, it's not a given, certainly not when everyone else around is preoccupied with proportionality (*midatiyut*). Anyway, eventually one of them will kill the other, and each of them has someone he loves. That's why they do it, from love. (7)

As we eventually find out in the last novel, the series as a whole is concerned with meaningful and enduring connections. *Amram* begins with the statement that, "you need someone to love you in order to be who you are" (9) and ends with, "you need to love someone in order to be more than who you are" (226). The book explores the distance between the two through an extreme case of love, which can be described by the paraphrase, that the road to heaven is paved with hellish intentions. For the character Amram, it is his overwhelming love for his daughter, Tikvah. His work in the archives of the courthouse and his routine exposure to all manner of human depravity, of which he learns from the court cases he files, make him anxious for his daughter's safety. Determined to protect her from every conceivable evil, he becomes a vigilante and prowls the streets at night fighting crime.

For Avichai, it is his love for his wife, Ellah. Her wish to conceive, using another man's sperm after he fails to impregnate her, sends him on a murderous search for that

man; a search that ends with his own death at the hands of Amram. This is not an accidental death because, the choices both men make at the start of the novel will make them collide by the end of it.<sup>15</sup> Relationships, then, are clearly at the center of *Amram*. Yet these are problematic relationships, to say the least, in which both men lose all sense of proportion. Unable to relate neither to the women they love or to their perceived enemies, their relations to and with the world are falsified. While they value the former too highly, they grossly undervalue the latter.

The textual metaphor is created not only by the rudimentary brush strokes that sketch the characters, but also through the occasional interference of the authorial voice, which breaks the proverbial fourth wall to remind readers of the fictive value of the *dramatis personae*. In one such moment in the middle of the book, the narrative flow stops, the author breaks in and confesses to readers that, “this book was already complete when it was suddenly thrown open again, a door was made in it, and in marched the editor dragging me after him to rework it as I please.” (159) This direct address to readers goes on for a while and slows the story down until the author asks readers directly to help him “jump-start this novel again by pushing it together down a steep hill.” (160)

The final comment of this kind comes toward the very end of the novel, after Amram, who just murdered Avichai, manages to return home undetected and will presumably go free:

And maybe that’s why everything began, that is, maybe that’s the reason for this wrestling match and for the death: because there’s a limit to the number of possible stories that the meeting of two people can generate...

At times I wanted this novel to be a tight coil between them, so that the distance between them on the one hand and the wish to get closer on the other will keep it vibrating. And even if I managed to do so, their encounter is still disappointing: they met, the potential was realized, and the novel was closed with a faint thud. (223)

This somewhat rudimentary narrative conceit in *Amram*, is developed further in the second novel, *Motti*, which demands a more active involvement from readers in the plot. The novel does so especially by the use of postmodern camp, a deliberately exaggerated postmodernistic style that playfully calls attention to itself. Like *Amram*, this novel opens with a methodological preface as well, which clarifies the text and provides a key for reading it:

Structurally, this book is strict. Strict and very simple. A symmetrical pyramid with a summit of clouds and a base of Euclidian geometry. Nevertheless, it's a book, not a concert or some sort of performing art.... And there's no division between the audience and the stage. You're the performers and the audience all at once, and everything is already out of my control. Therefore, I can only request that you read attentively... even with joy... From my perspective, it is all the same now. (3)

Making the discussion about literary conventions clearer still, this ars poetic opening speaks directly about the two key players of any text, without whom the act of

reading is not possible, of course: the writer and the reader. The first sentence provides a clear picture of this relationship reflected in the geometric drawing of the pyramid or triangle. While the base of the triangle is visible, real, formed by the demonstrable rules of geometry, the top of the triangle is hidden by clouds. In other words, the relationship between writer and reader create the story, which at this starting point is yet unknown, literally shrouded.

In some ways, Schurr is not innovating here at all. Both this preface and the preface to *Amram* remind us of much older literary conventions, mock-serious confessions like the ones we find in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in the early seventeenth century, in Fielding's novels in the eighteenth century, and their mutation into the conventions of the omniscient narrator in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> But the preface to *Motti* adds to these conventions by extending the reader's role and drawing attention to it as fundamental to the series' project. The preface ends with this:

And because of this the simplicity... There are almost no games here, no deception, there is no deviousness at all in this book. No manipulation. Everything is simple as can be. Everything is on the table. The cards are on the table, the tablecloth is on the table, everything is on the table, open the refrigerator, there is nothing in it, everything is on the table, everything, look underneath, nothing there either, everything is on the table and in midair the table stands. (4)

The rest of the book, much more explicitly than *Amram*, continues to do just that by providing two narrative strata, an "official" story or plot and a second meta-fictional

narrative voice that accompanies the first to ensure that readers are constantly made aware of the willing suspension of disbelief inherent to the process of reading. The characters are portrayed as more or less arbitrary whims of the author-narrator and may at any moment be swept away on a new current of his creativity.<sup>17</sup>

The opening of the book eases us into this tension:

Motti loved Menachem like a brother. That is, despite himself. Perhaps they met in the army. This is not uncommon among Israelis. Perhaps they met before that, in school. Possibly even in college. (11)

Again, this kind of literary device is anachronistic. But as we read further into the book, the increasing tension between readers and writer cracks the narrative and breaks it apart. Motti, who is a school teacher, stays at home one day because of a teachers' strike. Presently, he begins a long daydream about his neighbor, Ariella, which unfolds over more than ten pages and stirs in readers a mixture of warmth and pathos: about the two falling in love, having passionate sex, growing old together (pages 51-65).

There is nothing unusual, of course, in a character fantasizing an imaginary life. But what follows is less expected, as the author breaks into the story and comments directly about Motti's fantasies. "Look at this, so many possibilities one can fabricate without committing to any actual story". (64) Less expected still is the next maneuver, in which we learn that Ariella is a school girl and therefore a minor. "And so", the author turns to us again with a sly smile,

has your opinion of [Motti] changed, now that it's been made perfectly clear that she's just a kid? It's important to remember that he hasn't done a thing. Won't, either. Why, she's just a child, why, that's disgusting, the very thought of touching her like that disgusts him, no matter how much he wants to touch her when she grows up, when they're in love. (65)

This is quite literally a demonstration of the teamwork between writer and reader: we have the building blocks, their arbitrary arrangement, the multiple interpretive possibilities they can generate, and most importantly, the moral consequences that result from the combination of both: Motti's relationship to the world is so falsified, that Ariella is quite literally commodified for him, a mere object about which he can have romantic and creepy fantasies at the same time.

The series receives its most figurative shape in the third novel, *Sigal*, in which the protagonist is split into two different women who are then conflated. The result is a symbolic character that illuminates the series' concern not only with the nature of representation but also with kindness, reciprocity and human connection.<sup>18</sup> In her first appearance as the successful businesswoman, the eponymous Sigal is a derelict mother and a derelict daughter. She treats her small boy as an accessory of her success and speaks to him in cloyingly affectionate language that discloses her impatience with him: "no, my little sweetie... we're going home now, you'll play on the swing tomorrow" (31). Asleep, however, he is a perfect ornament to her perfect life: "she leaned against the doorframe and sent a soft look toward her son, who was lying in bed, his golden,

angelic hair covering his forehead and thought ... oh, my beautiful son, you'll have a beautiful life". (34)

As a daughter, Sigal is equally remiss. The nursing home she selects for her father has luxurious amenities meant to paint her as a successful woman and a loving daughter. "Amazing", she thinks to herself complacently as she is visiting her father one day, noting with satisfaction "the pleasant furniture... the purr of the air conditioners... the clean ceramic tiles, ... the warm, personal and dedicated attention, the cozy atmosphere, and the starched white uniforms" (78-79). But actually staying and talking with her father is another matter, and on her two trips to the nursing home, she studiously avoids it by arriving during his nap time. Relieved to see her father asleep, she tells the nurse that she is afraid of "alarming ... my dear beloved father" (57), and that she is reluctant "to disturb his nap, [which] must be very important to him". (59) On her second visit she is not as lucky and is caught by her father trying to escape his room.

In the second half of the novel, the bitchy Sigal somehow turns into the goodly Na'ama. Sigal is now referred to as a beast (*behema*), and her office romance with the handsome boss, Itamar, makes Na'ama sick. She hates that "slick idiot", that "piece of nothing ... he and his stupid Sigal. She is sick of both of them ... the way they spin their failures into great success, new branding they call it, the idiots". (133-4) In contrast to Sigal, Na'ama is initially portrayed as a kindhearted young woman, who is concerned about the workers who will be laid off because of Sigal's efficiency measures. She is also kind to her mother, to her former boyfriend, and especially to her dog, Nuri, which she loves deeply. So much so, in fact, that when an old resident of her apartment building

reports her barking dog to the city, she retaliates by falsely accusing him of harassing her sexually and has him committed to a nursing home. As it turns out, Na'ama is just as nasty as Sigal, if not more.

The narrative pyrotechnics Schurr employs in his work highlight some of the problems inherent in postmodern modes of writing, in which “subjectivity [can sometime] become so invaded by the image that modern identity itself is a pretense”, as Timothy Bewes writes.<sup>19</sup> The first three novels in the series draw attention to this postmodern crisis of representation in order to highlight Schurr’s critique of it and make way for the last two books in the series as a kind of alternative to it.

More precisely, the author of *Amram*, *Motti* and *Sigal* is decidedly unsatisfied with the postmodern penchant for leaving all possibilities open and considering them all equally plausible. What he says in these novels is that after the story has been deconstructed to the point where everything is “on the table” and the table is “up in the air”, the table must eventually fall in some direction or another.<sup>20</sup> Here is where the reader enters: pushed to make aesthetic or moral decisions in order to determine where the “table” falls and filling in the gaps in the story with their own interpretations. Not just in the conventional way, in which all stories are created to some extent in readers’ minds, but more proscriptively, like computer games or those open-ended films, in which users determine the storyline and choose the ending. Concepts like morality, truth, belief, are created by the interplay between narrator and reader. Thus, out of the rubble that postmodernism leaves behind, Schurr’s novels become constructive by calling readers to participate actively in the building of new narratives and, implicitly, new realities. As it says in the conclusion to *Motti*:

And do you know what? Perhaps in the end he did meet the grown-up, perfect Ariella, and she was everything he dreamed of, even more, and they had a life together, a good, long life, and they had children or didn't have children, in any event they raised many dogs and even traveled abroad regularly, maybe adopted a cat or two as well, performed good and important deeds, their days were full of joy, why not. In the end they died, of course. When you go on long enough, all stories end in death. But there could definitely be some sort of happy ending here, I promise. The problem is just knowing where to stop.

(184)

Schurr's last two novels demonstrate these possibilities by presenting readers with fuller moralistic tales that are not only written in a more conventional mimetic style, but significantly leave the isolated and non-referential realm of individuals to dwell on larger and more complete social units, the family in *Vincent* and the community in *The Building*. The preface to the fourth novel, *Thus Said Vincent, the Stupid Cat*, announces it right away:

That's the whole story, which we come back to again and again: man is born. A helpless baby, who then becomes a child. The stories about that child are not many, only the few that we remember, though they're very sweet. And even if some of them are stories about disappointments, we still tell them to say something about innocence, revelations, beginnings.

... The only thing we can tell the child is that “by themselves” doesn’t mean “alone”... that’s why we tell children stories about things that happened a long time ago or never.

... because the single person is never the basis or the foundation, not in the world and not in thought. The first and primary unit is relationship (*zika*). Everything is a point of contact (*mifgash*)...

This last foreword in the series comments on the act and function of writing and on the general nature of fiction much more directly than the previous forewords did. It is also followed by a more formally conventional narrative, about a suburban family, a mother, a father, a sister and a brother, who begin the story alienated from one another and slowly come together as a family. The Feiver family includes a stay-at-home mom, Neta, a psychologist father, Amikam, an anorexic 14-year-old daughter, Mattie—who will make a brief appearance in the next novel—and a twenty-something son, Uriah, an ascetic who holes up in the basement of the family’s house away from the polluting world, tries to get closer to God and nurses wounded pets back to health in a sad attempt to connect and feel something in his emptied world. It also includes Vincent, the ghost of a kitten Uriah tried to save unsuccessfully.

Unlike Schurr’s earlier novels, the ars poetica of his fourth novel is kept to a minimum with very few authorial incursions. Instead, simpler narrative conventions are used to tell the story. Having previously educated his readers how to read properly,

Schurr presents the first text in the series that may be “independently” evaluated without a directing author. To facilitate this kind of reading, Uriah and his prophetic cat provide important clues that turn the text into what Omri Herzog called, “a parody on a prophesy that is devoid of either god or mission”.<sup>21</sup>

Vincent, the kitten, dies shortly after Uriah receives him. But soon after his death, Vincent’s avatar appears before the astounded Uriah and begins to speak to him in bombastic prophetic register: “I am the storm, said the voice. I am the ever-watchful eye... the beat, the sigh, the void between all things... the sea without a bottom or a shore. I am hungry and voracious.” (100) Despite his initial shock, Uriah’s recent search for God has in fact prepared him for this apparition and he soon believes that Vincent was sent to initiate him as a prophet: “I have returned and call upon you, Uriah son of Netta and Amikam, rise, rise and obey.” (102) Disconnected literally and metaphorically from the world, unable to distinguish truth from falsehood, Uriah accepts the role. To seal the covenant, the kitten tells him to seize the parrot he has been caring for, to “take his blood and pour it upon the altar and raise it to heaven before God”. (103) And Uriah obeys. In a trance, he washes his hands, goes over to the cage, takes his beloved parrot out and wrings its neck. To his surprise, the kitten reacts glibly to Uriah’s obedience: “So that’s it, eh? said Vincent. I thought it would take a few weeks to convince you. But, stammered Uriah, you told me to... So what, said Vincent, do you get up and slaughter a parrot every time someone speaks to you about God? That’s not very nice.” (104)

Following Herzog, this droll parody winks at the false messages that in our post-political age stand for great truths, but are in fact hollow, utterly disconnected from life’s real problems (economic inequality, oppression, power imbalance etc.). As Timothy

Snyder has recently written, post-politics is a disturbing political extension of postmodernism, whose suspicion of the value of truth encourages various regimes today, in Russia, in the US and in Israel too, to promote their own, self-interested lies as personal and national alternative truths.<sup>22</sup> The falseness of Vincent's prophecy resides not only in the nonsense he utters—"I am the thorn that tears your flesh when you take it out, I am a park-bench that no one ever sat on" (106)—but also in the ludicrous fact that it is uttered by a dead cat. Uriah is lured by this nonsense because it panders to his identity as a Jew and to his current search for God or truth.

Moreover, the quasi biblical register authenticates and personalizes the prophecy as a Jewish/Israeli truth. This false truth is so tempting, in fact, that it overrides Uriah's natural kindness and turns him into a blind and obedient follower. By manipulating him into feeling special and chosen, Vincent easily convinces him to kill something he loves, his pet parrot. Worse still, it makes him treat his menstruating sister as unclean, at which the mother, Netta, puts her foot down. While she was respectful of her son's sociopathic tendencies during his personal search for meaning, she is not willing to tolerate his disrespect for others, not even in the name of a so-called greater Jewish truth. She is livid at his ugly treatment of his sister: "I don't accept it, do you hear me? Netta shouted.... Now, get out of here... get out ... or I won't be responsible for my actions". (174)

In the absence of great truths and fixed values, how can we negotiate a world full of signifiers which have lost their signifieds? Schurr's fourth novel suggests that we can begin by focusing on our own surroundings, in this case the family and the relations between its individual members. "This house at night", he writes, "is like a medieval castle with its silent corridors, and all its residents are but princes and princesses who are

waiting for their fucking redemption”. (64) While the social structure of the family is always at odds with the individual desires of its members, writes Omri Herzog, “a family is a prophecy: a binding contract of future relations, based on a mission of providential fulfilment”.<sup>23</sup> Put more expansively, “being human is a set of techniques, something you have to get good at... and you cannot do it on your own...”.<sup>24</sup>

The fifth and last novel, *The Building*, exemplifies the idea of connectivity by expanding the social realm further afield. This story about homecoming begins with one of several short para-narratives that are inserted intermittently throughout the book as a parallel or adjacent story that accompanies the plot and comments on it. The para-narrative that opens the book connects it to the previous book in the series, *Vincent*, which is an important point in a project about connections or relationships. The novel then continues with a visit by Omer to the apartment block (*Shikun*) of his childhood, a late return that takes up the entire book.

Initially, Omer’s visit seems depressing. The neighbors are older now, frail and ailing, and Omer himself is rendered miserable and homeless, as he moves between them seeking recognition and comfort. The saddest moment in the book comes when Omer discovers a freakish sci-fi creature, part of his old neighbor, Mrs. Saperstein’s long aborted fetus, which for the past twenty years has been kept artificially alive in the building’s basement by means of a clever contraption. Feeling sorry for Mrs. Saperstein, who suffered a series of miscarriages, the talented Mr. Greenberg, another old neighbor, built an electric aquarium that kept the brain of her last fetus alive. Trying to protect it from Omer, who stumbles upon it, Mrs. Saperstein falls and breaks the aquarium thereby killing the creature. But in doing so, she also severs the link to a festering past. At that

moment, the value of Omer's late return becomes apparent. He is the knight who broke the evil spell that trapped the kingdom in a world of empty signifiers. Since the fetus has been generalized into an abstraction of a child, a "thing" that represents what Bewes calls "a state of degeneration, a prevailing state of nostalgia for what has vanished",<sup>25</sup> it had to be destroyed and replaced with a real "child", Omer, whose return to the building and his visits to his old neighbors reintroduce a more genuine sense of community to the old *shikun*.

The final question, then, is how the five novels are connected, whether the ambitious literary call, formulated in the first three novels, is continued or answered in the last two, and if so, how? Because the last two novels, contrary to the literary principles articulated in the first three, do not ask readers to participate so much in the stories' construction and present more ready-made and moralistic tales. The answer to this question is in the very process the five novels engage with as a series. After readers are reminded in the first three books of the limitations of postmodern representation, that morality is relative only up to a point and that it is their responsibility to find that point, the last two novels provide readers with a sentimental education, "little portions of love, heartache, laughter, death", which do not only act as vaccines but also as road signs, or as Schurr puts it, 'arrows chalked by parents on the pavement in their children's games'. These arrows direct us toward specific targets or goals; goals that we actively participate in defining.

The restoration of a clear sense of self and a clear sense of community—a real community, not an imagined one—endows Schurr's characters with a distinct historical subjectivity that has been often missing from recent Israeli literature, but appears to be

coming back, not only in Schurr's work but in the work of other contemporary writers, as Oded Nir recently noted.<sup>26</sup> Against what he calls "the crisis of historicity" in contemporary Israeli literature, with its "[fragmented] narratives [that] no longer provide an adequate mediation between personal experience ... and the possibility of historical agency," Nir points to writers like Lilach Netanel and Yiftach Ashkenazi, who problematize it. Although unlike Schurr, neither Netanel nor Ashkenazi offer solutions to the inability to narrate history in the postmodern age, both note the loss that accrues from our failure to imagine a different prospect for ourselves going forward. What distinguishes Schurr, in this respect, is the future vistas that his work suggests. Thus, at the dawn of Zionism's second century, Asaf Schurr and other writers seem to rekindle some of the literature's old commitments to the universal values of modernism and resume, albeit tentatively, the position of literary "prophets", צופים לבית ישראל.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary literary critic, Arik Glassner, considers many of these issues in his PhD dissertation about literary criticism and the media in the postmodern era and tracks the rise and decline of popular literary criticism in Israel and its migration from daily newspapers to the academy from the 1980s onward. Available online at, <https://arikglasner.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/complete-phd.pdf>.

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<sup>2</sup> Yaron Peleg, *Israeli Culture Between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance*, University of Texas Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The formulation with respect to Schurr was first made by Meytal Sharon's in her review of his third novel, *Sigal*. See, "Don't Worry about World Affairs, Let's Get Back to What Intellectuals Really Care About", *The Shocking Real Story of* (Hasiput ha'amiti vehameza'aze'a shel) ezine, 4.10.09. <http://www.hahem.co.il/trueandshocking/?p=925>.

<sup>4</sup> Of particular relevance here is Lyotard's observation about the production of symbols through language in postindustrial societies, where services and creativity—information, knowledge, ideas—become valued forms of capital, as opposed to the actual production of goods, and lead to a new kind of cultural commerce in which the value system tends to be more relative. To deal with this instability, Lyotard formulated his idea of *petits récits*, or small narratives, based on Wittgenstein's language-games theory, which determines the meaning of words in relation to their function within a specific system. See James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, Polity Press. On Wittgenstein, See P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, especially chapter II. Rules and Grammar, pp. 41-80.

<sup>5</sup> The designation Left/Right is useful only up to a point. Labor Zionism developed distinct nationalist characteristics earlier on, as Gershon Shafir, Zeev Sternhell and others have demonstrated. For representative studies on some of these ideological shifts in Israel see, Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, TUP, 1989, Gadi Taub, *Hamered hashafuf* (The Dispirited Revolution), Kibbutz Hame'uhad, 1997, Anita Shapira, *Yehudim yeshanim, yehudim hadashim* (New Jews, Old Jews), Am

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Oved, 1997, Ram Oren, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel-Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem*, Routledge, 2008. Tuvia Freeling, *Tshuva le'amit post tzioni* (A Reply to a Post-Zionist Colleague), Yediot Sfarim, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> On the challenges of identity politics, see Kobena Mercer, "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Postmodern Politics" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. Lawrence & Wishart, 1998, pp. 43-71.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning the economic background to many of these changes, which exacerbated and proliferated them, especially the spread of neoliberalism and “the financialization of everything”, as David Harvey puts it, see *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 33. The bitter irony of the relationship between money and identity was that it fit neatly into the logic of capitalism, which identity politics set out to fight in the first place as one of the most insidious forces of the patriarchy. As it happened, identity politics proved to be the ideology par-excellence of the market when new forms of national capitalism emerged as dominant global forces, turning identity into a tool of the populist right that decried the legacies of the quest for universal values. Harvey gives a succinct explanation of how neoliberal forces coopted the social revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s in order to free markets rather than people (pp. 41-42, for example).

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of this, see Peleg, *Intifadas*.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see a forthcoming volume of articles on cinema and politics in contemporary Israeli culture which edited by Yaron Peleg and Eran Kaplan, “Israeli Cinema and Politics”, *Jewish Film & New Media*, vol. 6.2, Spring 2019.

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<sup>10</sup> On *Amram*, see Omri Herzog, “Hastira hamuvla’at ba’egrof” (A Smack Hidden in a Fist), Ha’aretz online, 16.05.07, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1410149>. Maya Feldman, “Milim kedorbantot (Poignant), Ynet Books, 13.02.07, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3362547,00.html>. On *Motti*, see Arik Glassner, “Mada’ei hahalom” (Dream Science), *Ma’ariv Tarbut*, 16.05.08, p. 28. On *Sigal*, see Arik Glassner, “Sigal lo matzdik et sach halakav” (The Whole of Sigal Does Not Justify its Parts), *NRG*, 03.10.09, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/47/ART1/948/316.html>. Ran Yagil, “Shuru, habitu ve’al tikre’u” (Behold and Don’t Read), *NRG*, 09.12.09, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/47/ART1/976/841.html>.

<sup>11</sup> The analysis is suggested by Oded Nir, “On the Historical Imaginary of Contemporary Israeli Fiction, or, Postmodernism’s Aftermath in Novels by Lilach Netanel and Yiftach Ashkenazi”. (accepted for publication in *Prooftexts*).

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive list of reviews, see Schurr’s entry in the online Hebrew literary lexicon at, <https://library.osu.edu/projects/hebrew-lexicon/01095.php>.

<sup>13</sup> References to an Israeli life cycle and social phenomena are more numerous in this novel than in the others, including high school rituals, like the annual hiking trip, as well as army experiences. See pages, 29, 81, 92.

<sup>14</sup> All translations are mine, except for *Motti*, Schurr’s only novel in English to-date, translated by Todd Hasak-Lowy.

<sup>15</sup> It turns out that, Eitan, Tikvah’s boyfriend, is Allah’s sperm donor. Avichai tries to run him over and when he fails and Eitan is rushed to the hospital, Eitan follows him there in

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order to complete the job. In the hospital Avichai meets Amram, who came to protect Eitan and who eventually beats Avichai to death.

<sup>16</sup> The preface to Amram acknowledges a similar influence directly: “that’s the reason for this preface, and also because it reminds me of Erich Kästner’s stories from my childhood: Chapter so and so, which tells of a pack of bills, of a suspicious man and of the real taste of marzipan...” (8).

<sup>17</sup> The paragraph is taken from a seminar paper on *Motti* by my student, Susannah Pearce, who gave me permission to use it here.

<sup>18</sup> “For Schurr, Sigal [and] Na’ama ... are not people, but purposeful metaphors ... raised from the dust of nonexistence to help him make several important points. He speaks, for instance, about the crisis or representation in the postmodern world, where readers do not believe writers anymore, because there is no truth or non-truth, and every image is necessarily a reflection, direct or inverted, of another image...[merely] pages and paper and written words”. Meytal Sharon, “Izvu otchem midiburim al ha’olam, bo’u nahzor lema shebe’emet me’anyen intelektu’alim” (Don’t Worry about World Affairs, Let’s Get Back to What Intellectuals Really Care About), *The Shocking Real Story of*, ezine, 4.10.09. <http://www.hahem.co.il/trueandshocking/?p=925>. Read in the context of the five novels, the metaphorical nature of the characters is an important part of Schurr’s project and not a problem, as Sharon argues.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 2002. p. xi.

<sup>20</sup> See Pearce, above.

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<sup>21</sup> Omri Herzog, “A Prophecy with a Tail” (Nevu’ a im zonav), *Ha’aretz Books* (online), 16.11.11. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/prose/1.1567225>.

<sup>22</sup> Snyder shows how Instead of the modern, western, liberal belief in a constructive movement forward toward a better future, the relative truths promoted by post-politicians arrest their societies by sending them into perpetual loops that are maintained by an us-vs-them tension, meant to keep these societies together. Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom, Russia, Europe, America*, Bodley Head, 2018. Harvey says essentially the same, see above, pp. 82-3.

<sup>23</sup> Herzog. Or to give it Wittgenstein’s analytical formulation, “there is no such thing as meaning independently of determination of how an expression is to be used”, Hacker, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Eagleton, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Bewes, p. xiii, p. xvi.

<sup>26</sup> See Nir, above, note 11.