The Writer and the Critic—A Personal Testimony

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I wrote my doctoral dissertation in Hebrew Literature in the 1970s at the University of California, Berkeley, in the US. When my husband Yosi and I arrived at Berkeley, the students' protests that had characterized 1960s college towns all over the world were already subsiding. The novel *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, which is set between 1968 and 1970, is proof that also in Japan, as in other countries throughout the world, students were protesting against the government. In Murakami's novel, which was published in Japan in 1987, the protests are described as a feeble and hypocritical endeavor; however, in the 1970s in the US, demonstrations were still powerful and authentic, and they empowered the students with that "yes, we can" feeling, to quote the Pointer Sisters' song, which first reached the airwaves in 1973, hailing from Oakland, California, a city adjacent to Berkeley.

I. Agnon in Berkley

Indeed, at Berkeley, a university town that had witnessed some of the strongest demonstrations of the 1960s, the echoes of the social and intellectual protests of the previous decade were still perceptible in the 1970s, and mass "happenings" were still taking place on the streets and on the campus grounds. It was enough to walk through the campus gates and one was immediately bombarded by dozens of slogans and flyers offering a variety of ideological "pros and cons": against the Vietnam War and in favor of free sex, as in the saying "make love not war"; opposing discrimination against women, Blacks (then—*Blacks*, now—*Afro-Americans*) and Hispanics and advocating equal civil rights for all; against middle class and consumer culture and in favor of harnessing materialistic tendencies; against antiquated education systems and in favor of innovation; against The History of Greece as an undergraduate major and demanding more courses in Far- and Near-East Asian Studies; against teaching Latin, the dead language, and in favor of Hebrew, the revived language; against Israel and for Israel.

I was in my early 20s and the strong gales of multiple and contradicting views—some trivial, others truly revolutionary, as they aimed to realign old thought patterns and undermine convention—all these had a strong impact on me. It's difficult for me to assess exactly how I changed as a result

of this daily encounter with the multitude of opinions and ideas that flooded the campus; however, none of these had any effect on my love of Hebrew Literature. I had come to study this literature from a new, universal perspective, from a comparative approach, and I would do so precisely at this Western end of the distant US, specifically at Berkeley where the revolutionary flag had been gallantly flown, and it didn't matter to me whether the revolution was real or imaginary. I wanted to examine how the new-ancient literature interacted with major Western literatures, English, French, German, and Russian, to understand in what ways it was similar to these and how it differed.

My decision to write the dissertation about S.Y. Agnon's works at Berkeley, of all places—the University that supported innovative and revolutionary research, whose students aimed to uproot any conventional and conformist approach, to marginalize what was central and to center what was marginal, in short, to upset stability—was paradoxically an expression of complying with convention while simultaneously responding to the demand to ruffle the feathers of conformity. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel laureate of 1966, was considered for many years—even before receiving international recognition—the greatest of the authors of Hebrew literature in the New Age. The numerous studies written about him in Israel, some in Germany, and others in the US, as well as the number of young authors who aspired to imitate his style, (by the way, his best imitator in the sixties was none other than A.B. Yehoshua, who is here with us today), all of these created a veritable "literary industry" that focused on Agnon. Under these circumstances, to write yet another study about Agnon and at revolutionary Berkeley no less, was—as I was told by many—a poor choice. In addition, Agnon was considered a Jewish national author with a unique language of his own, which in literary jargon was called "Agnonish", a language which—according to the literary critics of the time—could be fully appreciated only in Hebrew. Let me try to describe the originality of his language and style here.

Agnon was the last practitioner of the age-old Hebrew tradition of intertextuality, that is, of repeatedly citing and alluding to the classic texts. He was the most sophisticated, innovative, and ingenious master of this intertextual style. In drawing upon a rich spectrum of Biblical, Rabbinic (the language of the Sages), medieval and early Modern Hebrew texts, he, unlike some of his predecessors, did not merely cut up verses and phrases and paste them into his narratives to create expressions needed by the newly resurrected Hebrew language or to flaunt his mastery of this traditional literature. Through a complex web of interconnected allusions, which simultaneously invoke numerous antecedent texts, sometimes with contradictory meanings, Agnon created a versatile, consistent genre which both draws upon and transforms tradition. The multiplicity of his allusions and of their possible connotations makes his work inaccessible to the stranger.

Moreover, Agnon was considered the greatest and most sophisticated documenter of Jewish European mentality and of Israeli life in the early years of—and indeed throughout—the 20th century. A foreigner—that was the cliché—would find it difficult to connect with the conceptual world, the religious rituals, and the unique and specific experiences of Jews.

Therefore, for decades Agnon scholars insisted that there was no point in trying to approach Agnon's works in any language other than the original Hebrew. The idea of Agnon in translation has repeatedly been disparaged; his work has been declared inaccessible to the uninitiated, even beyond the practical difficulties of translation.

Thus, it was my mission to ignore all these truisms and examine Agnon's greatness according to general literary measures. Agnon, after all, did not receive international recognition for his intricate Hebrew, which none of the Nobel Prize judges could read, but for his artistry, which can be appreciated in any language.

Therefore, I turned to investigate the psychological dimension of Agnon's work and especially to review the many and unique dreams that his characters dream: how was it that Agnon managed to weave dreams for each character that reflected the character's cultural heritage, personality, and faith? What is the background of these dreams and how do they reflect the covert and repressed layers of the character's inner world? What do the dreams tell us about the character's self-perception, about the character's relationships with others, and how do they reveal insights about life, death, and the work of art? Naturally, I researched Freud's impact on Agnon, and indeed, there are occasional allusions to Freud, but he remains an implied and often slandered character in Agnon's works. It appears that Agnon was influenced by psychoanalysis, although he ridiculed it and intended to undermine it with his own theories about the human mind. My dissertation was written in English and published as a book in English.[1] Years later, when I published a book in Hebrew about Agnon's works, I understood that despite the multiple and intricate studies written about Agnon's work in Hebrew, I was able to contribute some new insights even in my own language.[2]

II. Modern Hebrew in Global Context

After completing my doctorate, I taught Hebrew Language and Literature at Princeton University. I had many Hebrew language students, among them department chairs: for example, the Chair of Comparative Literature who was an erudite Jew who knew Greek and had translated Homer into English, and the Chair of the Department of Religion, a Christian man who knew only a little Biblical Hebrew, but wanted to learn modern Hebrew as well, having visited Israel several times because, as

he claimed, for as long as he could remember, he had always had a deep yearning to understand Hebrew.

In the early 1980s, an organization was established in the US called the National Association of Professors of Hebrew (NAPH) and I was among its founders. At that time, Hebrew language and literature were already taught at all the major universities in the US and Europe, and conventions—meetings of researchers of Hebrew from all over the world—were held every year at one university or another in the US. At these conventions I met many colleagues with whom I have maintained a relationship based on friendship and cooperation even after my return to Israel, where I proceeded to work as a faculty member in the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of Haifa, where I teach to this day.

In terms of literary creativity, Israel is flourishing. Books of poetry and dozens if not hundreds of novels are published every year, and the literary critic remains overwhelmed and helpless when faced with this rich selection. On the one hand the critic is pleased to see the fountains of creativity flowing and gushing, while on the other hand, it is clearly impossible to read such an enormous amount of books. Therefore, selecting a work becomes almost random: someone hands you—the literary critic—his or her book and beseeches you to read it, and that is the one you read and critique. In this manner, the hierarchy that differentiates between good literature and literature that is not as good is blurred and the boundaries of the canon—that major body of works that has been given the seal of approval of literary quality—are frayed.

Some literary critics solve this problem by avoiding reading and writing about contemporary literature. Instead, they turn their efforts to the past, to works that have already been determined as belonging to great authors. These critics scour the archives, read yellowed handwritten documents from numerous libraries, and write about famous and also forgotten authors. Just recently, a young investigator discovered a hidden manuscript written by one of the more interesting authors of Modern Hebrew Literature, David Fogel. The manuscript had no title or date, and so, because it takes place in Vienna, she named it *A Viennese Novel*, and tried to ascertain when it was written, which apparently was in spurts beginning in the 1920s and until the 1940s, when David Fogel was taken to Auschwitz and murdered.

The young researcher, whose name is Lilach Netanel, suggested that because the novel contains sensational autobiographic information, it was purposely hidden, so that only ninety years after its first version and seventy years after the author's passing it would be found in the archive, concealed underneath other manuscripts, and only then would it emerge from darkness into light. Fogel's novel, it should be noted, is devoid of any Jewish characteristics. He most likely would have

preferred to write in German, yet it is written in a wonderful, vibrant, and sensuous Hebrew, so that it is hard to believe that this language was not in daily use when Fogel wrote about an unconventional love triangle, which was at some point part of his real life.

Thus, investigators who search the archives can sometimes make amazing discoveries. Other researchers specialize in particular topics and thus choose to study literary works that correspond to a genre, category, or theme, which they have made their own and which is close to their hearts. For example, a book may belong to women's literature or be a bildungsroman, and thus it would be selected by those critics to whom these topics are dear. The same is true about books that can be categorized as historical literature, travel literature or migrant literature. Others focus on the fantasy genre, science fiction, or the detective genre, and consequently these types of works would appeal to their professional sensibilities. Still others examine literature that focuses on return to religion: in Israel, authors who grew up in an orthodox religious milieu but chose at some point in their life to become secular, have chosen to write about the transition and the process of shifting from a religious life to a life free of religious constraints, making this theme the focus of their work. Likewise, some critics, among them some who made a change in the opposite direction and opted for a religious way of life, are drawn to literature that examines this topic.

III. The Writer and The Critic

In 2006, I published a study titled *And It Is Your Praise*,[3] which deals with three authors: S.Y. Agnon, A.B. Yehoshua, and Amos Oz. The first part of the study reviews the influence Agnon had on the other two authors, Yehoshua and Oz, who since they began writing in the early 1960s and until today have consistently captured the interest of the reading public in Israel. Many investigators have tried to solve this riddle, that is, to explain how in a culture with such rich literary creation these two authors have remained at the center of the country's collective consciousness for fifty years. How is it that every book they publish immediately becomes a bestseller, and investigators rush to analyze it, as the discoverers of a great treasure? Well, in the book which I published about seven years ago, I hinted that this stable status of Yehoshua and Oz, both in the Israeli public sphere and beyond, may be related to their affinity to Agnon.

As soon as the book came out, I received a surprising email from Dr. Doron Cohen, husband of Prof. Ada-Tagar Cohen, which read as follows (and I guard this email carefully, as it is very precious to me):

> I wish to congratulate you on the publication of your book *And It Is Your Praise,* which I just finished reading. In the past I read and was deeply impressed by your book *Unhappy Loves*, which is one of the most entertaining books of literary criticism I have had the opportunity to read. In recent years, I have been living in Kyoto, but I make an effort to follow—as much as possible—all that is published in Israel, and when I heard about your book I hurried to order it and read it thoroughly as soon as it arrived. I was especially pleased about the book because Agnon, Yehoshua, and Oz are the Hebrew authors I cherish most (in addition to Haim Beer […]). I was very pleased to read your in-depth interpretations and I appreciate the manner in which you shed light on significant layers of the works you analyzed. I wish to thank you for the thought-provoking and pleasurable experience your book provided and I hope to read more of your critiques in the future.

I had never met Doron, but as soon as I understood that the person writing these emotional words to me was none other than the person who translated the novel *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami into Hebrew, the book that has become a cult novel in Israel as well, I was even more flattered. Moreover, as the letter continued, he pointed out a few things that were missing from my book, which indicated to me that he had a deep and fundamental knowledge of the works of the authors about whom I was writing. This letter was the beginning of a wonderful literary and personal friendship.

I mention the beginning of the relationship between Doron and myself, which expanded to include our families, in order to give you a sense of how relationships are formed between writers and readers in Israel, a small country where—as they say—everyone knows everyone. If we define the literary critic as a reader who reacts publicly to a specific work, then just as the friendship between myself and Doron and his wife Ada began as a result of the letter Doron wrote me (albeit personal and through e-mail) about my book, a friendship was forged in the same manner between myself and the authors A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, because I wrote (in public, through journals and books) about their works. In my book *And It Is Your Praise*, I wrote about three major authors of Hebrew literature: one from the generation of classicists, and the other two, his spiritual sons, are members of my generation. There was no opportunity to forge a friendship with the classicist who passed away before I even began writing about literature, but with the other two a relationship blossomed. They did not always agree with the interpretations I offered of their works, and occasionally they were opposed and protested, but in the end, this never affected our friendship.

Let me give you an example from my latest book, in which I chose to write about works that correspond to a particular category. In this case, I had chosen to focus on autobiographical novels. To tell the truth, more than I chose the topic, it chose me, since over the last two decades, a wave of autobiographical novels has flooded Israel's literary scene. Veteran and experienced authors as well

as new and uninitiated authors began writing and publishing autobiographical works; in some cases they publicly acknowledged the personal source, in others they only hinted at it. In some works, the curtain was raised for all to see: the author, who was usually also the protagonist, used his or her real name and the names of family members and friends. In other works, the curtain was not raised, but fluttered from time to time, alternately revealing and concealing the identities of the protagonist-cum-author and the people closest to him.

The eleven chapters of my book, which is titled *Written Lives: On Israeli Literary Autobiographies*,[4] do not take a uniform approach to analyzing the autobiographical works reviewed. I was guided by the work itself and its artistic significance, rather than by the extra-literary information I had about the author I was reviewing. In fact, I do know most of the authors reviewed in this book personally and I could have highlighted the connection between events, characters, experiences, opinions, beliefs, and impressions and their transformation as they were rendered in the artistic context; however, I chose to focus on the product, the resulting hybrid, rather than on the fundamental experiences that led to the literary creation.

Except, perhaps, in the case of my analysis of the latest novel by A.B. Yehoshua, which is titled *Spanish Charity*,[5] and which is a literary autobiography in the sense that in it Yehoshua comes to terms, on both a personal and a literary level, with his earlier works. In this novel, the author does not appear as himself nor is he an author. Instead, the protagonist is a film director, and also those involved in the author's life have different names and play different roles in the protagonist's life. And yet, the protagonist is an artist surrounded by other artists (scriptwriter, cinematographer, actress), who all worked together in the 1960s to make their first movies, which are easily recognized as formed in the image of the earlier and highly successful works of A.B. Yehoshua, from the sixties. In other words, not only is the author himself split into multiple artistic selves, appearing as several film industry artists, fractioned and in various costumes—but also his first stories have been transformed and rendered as films.

Can such a novel, which contains autobiographical material that has undergone such a deep transformation, be included in the genre of autobiographical novels that was the subject of my book? I debated this question for a long time and finally I did include it in the category that is the focus of my latest work. A.B. Yehoshua himself was ambivalent, not about having his latest book appear as a chapter in my work—indeed I believe this pleased him—but by having the book labeled as an autobiographical novel.

In a private conversation I had with A.B. Yehoshua recently, I told him about an incidental meeting that my husband and I had with a prominent public figure at a private party given by our

friends. I mentioned that I was both baffled and impressed by this person's openness. Although this was our very first encounter with this person, we learned what he likes to eat, where he exercises, when he goes to sleep and why he gets up early. I asked my friend A.B. Yehoshua, who is known among his friends by the nickname *Bully*, "And what about you writers? You are so closed and secretive, afraid to disclose anything about your lives". His response was: "we disclose things in a different manner and, in fact, you wrote an entire book about it". At that moment I knew my latest book *Written Lives* had been authorized even by the one author who had been most reserved and conflicted about his place in that work.

Notes

1) Nitza Ben Dov, *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Leiden and New York: Brill's Series in Jewish Studies, 1993).
2) Nitza Ben Dov, *Unhappy/Unapproved Loves: Erotic Frustration, Art and Death in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1997; in Hebrew).
3) Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ve-Hi tehilatekha: Studies in the Works of S.Y. Agnon, A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2006). [Hebrew]
4) Nitza Ben-Dov, *Hayim ketuvim* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2011). [Hebrew]
5) A. B. Yehoshua, *Hesed sefaradi* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011) [Hebrew]; in English: *The Retrospective* (translated by Stuart Schoffman, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013). The English title chosen for the translation testifies to the autobiographical nature of the novel.