The Dead Christ:
Ekphrasis in Three Turn-of-the-Millennium Israeli Novels

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Introduction

"Pituy Hazlivah Oved Alav" – "The temptation of the crucifixion works on him," writes the Israeli poet Yona Wallach in her poem, "This City Stinks."[1] In my book *Other and Brother: The Figure of Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (2013), I argue that around the 1960s the figure of Jesus, which was already quite present in earlier modern Hebrew literature, gained a different meaning. Instead of being bound up in the unpleasant history of Christian-Jewish relations, it became associated with an aesthetic world that was perceived as attractive and tempting, the world of European culture. The very same Europe that Uri Zvi Greenberg called "The Kingdom of the Cross" in his 1923 Yiddish long poem of the same title,[2] enticed a generation of writers for whom Jesus was a representative of an attractive and remote culture, in which the crucifixion served as a "tempting" symbol.[3] It was not only that for these writers, "here [in the Land of Israel] the cross does not prick," as Greenberg asserts in a later poem,[4] but, now this very cross embodies the fantasy of belonging to the "universal," of being part of the West.[5]

In the current article I will discuss a specific development of this tendency, a development which emerges in Israel at the turn of the millennium. Slightly modifying Wallach's words, I will look at how "the temptation of a painting of the crucifixion works on him"-- "him" being the Israeli novelist. To be sure, allusions to paintings associated with the New Testament can be found already in earlier stages of modern Hebrew literature, but as I am about to show, it becomes more dominant in the Israeli turn-of-the-millennium novel. Furthermore, these later novels offer a new perspective on this theme, a perspective that, as we shall see, is different from that of their predecessors in modern Hebrew and Israeli literature. I will discuss this theme in three novels: Benyamin Shviliy's, *Ha-yerida min Hatzlav* [*The Decent from the Cross*, 2000], Yitzhak Laor's *Hine Adam* [*Ecce Homo*, 2002] and *Heder* [*A Room*, 1999] by Yuval Shimoeni.

The term "ekphrasis" will serve me in my discussion of this turn-of-the-millennium trend. Ekphrasis, in its narrowest meaning, refers to the attempted imitation in words of an object of the plastic arts, primarily painting or sculpture.[6] A more inclusive definition, suggested by James A.W.

Heffernan, is "[any] verbal representation of a visual representation."[7] Tamar Yacobi suggests that ekphrasis does not have to include only literal representation of a specific work, but rather may actually represent a model – a group of works that belong to one artist, or a certain kind of work.[8] Yacobi's example for this kind of ekphrasis is the self-portrait, but we may apply her definition to paintings of the dying or the dead Christ.[9]

In his 1997 book on literature and the visual arts,[10] Avner Holtzman deals with the ways in which the literary work incorporates elements borrowed from the visual arts and vice versa. Holtzman focuses on how each art "insists" on "behaving unlike its nature."[11] As Holtzman reminds us, the distinction between the literary work as an art form in time versus the visual work as an art form in space was famously introduced in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay *Laocoön* (1767).[12] In order to represent a visual depiction of a Biblical or New Testament narrative, the fifth-century Italian artists arranged their paintings in a series of separate frames, each painting depicting a different scene. The entire series was placed in a chronological sequence in order to represent the religious narrative.[13] Holtzman notes that in this framework of presenting the story in separate spatial frames various conventions were formed, such as the story of the life of Jesus.[14]

The case of ekphrasis of New Testament paintings presents us with the reverse process. The author takes the painting which aimed at transforming the narrative into a spatial representation and brings it back, as it were, to its literary form, namely to a representation in time. In both cases, this is not an attempt to make the readers/viewers believe that they are facing a different art form, but rather that the painting or the literary work re-introduces the work in a different medium.[15]

Writing in 1998, Hefferman claims that, "the production of ekpharstic poetry has, in our time become nothing less than a boom."[16] As Hefferman argues, what is unique to modern and postmodern ekphrasis is that they "make explicit what all ekphrasis entails and implies: the experience of the viewer, and the pressure of that experience on his or her interpretation of the work of art."[17] In our case, this assertion is important, not only because the authors choose to describe or refer to a work of art in their novels, but because of the very nature of their choice. The fact that these Israeli novelists choose to allude to a Christian painting and, by doing so, to present the experience of the Israeli-Jewish viewer as an integral part of their work is crucial for our discussion. If the figure of Jesus served as an object of longing for the west and specifically for European culture as stated above, these writers' choice to apply ekphrasis to religious paintings in their novels, reflects not just the longing for a religious figure that is associated with western culture, but also the yearning for its artistic tradition through the employment of a specifically western (and ancient) literary convention.

Furthermore, in the case of these three Israeli novelists we find another important use for ekphrasis that has, I believe, a direct relation to the fact that they all place at the center of their ekphrastic act an Italian Renaissance painting. What I will try to show is that the Italian Renaissance artists attempted to depict a crucified (and dead) Christ as both realistically human and divine -- a duality that is central to Catholic theology and which was represented in various ways by the Renaissance painters. However, it is this very duality that the Israeli writers find unreconciled. The painted Christ is often not human enough for them, even when his humanity is revealed in its more aesthetically revolting features. On the other hand, when his human qualities are exposed in the painting, they question his divine nature. The problem of Jesus' humanity and its representation leads these three novelists to allude to a painting which depicts a dying or a dead Christ. It is the representation of Jesus' mortality, then, that often concerns the Jewish Israeli novelists. In the following pages I will analyze the role that an ekphrasis of a painting of a dying or a dead Christ plays in each of the novels and will point out the similarities as well as the differences between the ways in which each novelist treats this topic. I will conclude with an attempt to explain why this trend had emerged at the turn of the millennium in contemporary Israel and why it is important.

The Decent from the Cross by Benyamin Shvili

In his essay on ekphrasis, Hefferman claims that "20th century ekphrasis springs from the museum, the shrine where all poets worship in a secular age."[18] Indeed, in *The Decent from the Cross* by Benyamin Shvili (1956-) the European museum serves as a sort of destination for a secular pilgrimage. The novel describes in the first-person the author's voyage to Greece, Italy, and former Yugoslavia – a voyage that Shvili describes as a journey to take Jesus down from the cross by writing life, "not imitating it."[19] More specifically, it is the crucifixion and its association with its visual representation that motivates his journey to rescue Jesus from his captivity in the churches and restore him to the bosom of humanity. After a long and rather disappointing search, he arrives at the Grand Academy of San Rocco in Venice, Italy, which houses the paintings of Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-1594). [20]

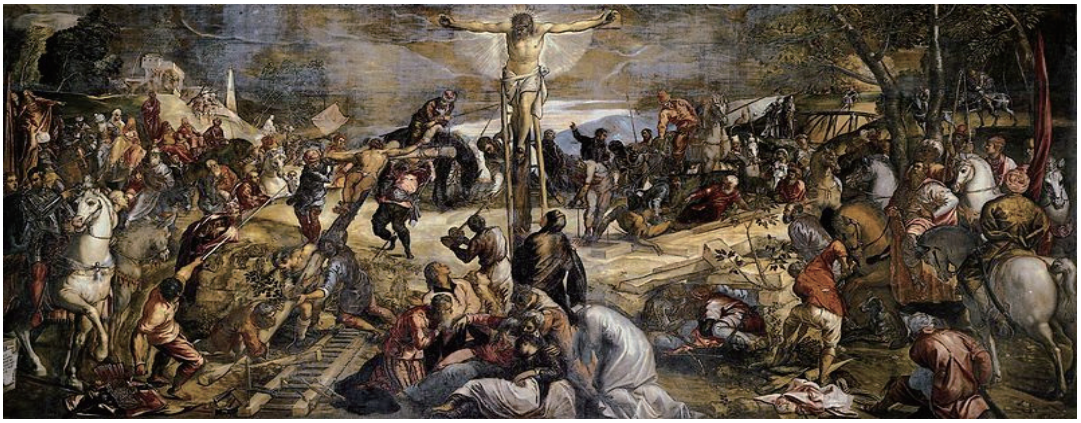

Figure 1. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Crucifixion*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice

There the narrator stands in front of Tintoretto's *The Crucifixion*, one of the largest and most dramatic scenes of the Crucifixion paintings,[21] describing what he sees:

> Yeshu'a was condemned on the cross like all the various other Jesuses, it was hard to see his face, on his right and left you could see two others who were on the cross as well, and around there was much commotion. The mother Miriam was dressed in black, she stood next to the cross and looked at her son in whose hands and legs they spiked nails, his head was bent downward, and he was neither alive nor dead. …I saw two men who were close to the cross on which Jesus was condemned, one of them held a bowl and the other climbed the ladder and attached to the bowl a pole with a sponge in its end, this is the sponge that was later placed on the forehead and lips of Yeshua who cried his last cry before he died: My God my god why have you forsaken me?....[22]

Note that this is an informative, accurate, and faithful description of the painting. However, a few paragraphs later Shvili switches the identity of the "I" from the viewer to the figure of Jesus in the painting. This shift imitates the focal point, the center of gravity of the painting, which is the man on the cross whose head bends down as if he looks at the drama that takes place bellow him:

> I looked down from the heights of the cross and saw women cry and faint, in one hidden corner two people were playing with dice and gambled over me, whether I am a messiah or a liar. I didn't twist from pain though my body ached, I couldn't twist because I was nailed to the cross by my hands and my legs, I broke in my heart though my bones didn't break, later darkness covered my eyes and I couldn't see the women who were crying over me, I didn't hear their

> voice, I was alone, God left me and so did the faith, only the tree held me from falling to the most horrible place, I cried, "God, stop.." and as if God heard me, they gave me right away vinegar and since then I can't remember anything. [23]

Shifting from the perspective of the viewer to that of Jesus allows Shvili to counter the common interpretation of the picture as depicting the figure of Christ as "still and calm on his cross -- a figure of calm amidst the chaos and turmoil below. Under a clouded sky that somehow manages to be at the same time calm and apocalyptic, Christ's body is parallel to the picture-plane, reinforcing the impression of stillness."[24] But according to Shvili, the stillness of Jesus does not derive from his divine calmness or his super-humanly muscular body, but rather from the mundane fact that he cannot twist his body because both his hands and legs are nailed to the cross. Shvili knows that if Tintoretto wanted, he could very well depict a Christ in pain, as the artist was famous for his magnificent and masterful depictions of human emotions and sensations as they are expressed in the body.[25] However, the Israeli author suggests a counter-narrative with his ekphrasis which challenges both the interpretation of the painting and the Venetian artist's depiction of a stoic, super-masculine Christ, whose masculinity suggests a divine nature in a human body. Shvili is well aware of the problem that Tintoretto and his fellow Renaissance painters faced; the quest for naturalism which at that point proved to be so successful would mean that the human features of the *New Testament* figures would risk transcending their divinity in the paintings.[26] It is this tension between Jesus' humanity and divinity that the Israeli author's ekphrasis goes against. His Jesus possesses the bodily features not of a super-masculine Christ, but rather of a mundane everyman in both physical and existential pain.

In order to diverge from the religious interpretation of the painting Shvili omits in his ekphrasis some central elements which appear in the masterpiece. For example, the radiating light around Christ's head prefigures the resurrection of the intact body according to the common (Catholic) interpretation of the painting.[27] Shvili does not include the light which is so vivid in the picture in his ekphrasis. Instead, he replaces it, as well as the apocalyptic elements in the painting, with narrative details from the *New Testament* which the painting conceals, for example that the bowl contains vinegar and not water. In addition, he focuses on Jesus' despair and loss of trust in God. In Shvili's Jesus there is no compassion, faith, or strength. In other words, Shvili does not find in Tintoretto's painting the authentic human suffering that he was looking for. Imagining a human, perhaps himself, on the cross, he is asking, how would I react to such pain and agony? Would I be as calm as Jesus?

He provides something of an answer to this question soon after, when he shifts to the first-person plural and, through the voice of what seems to be the dead Jews of the old Jewish ghetto which he visits in his last night in Venice, he writes:

> We descended from the upper skies so much downward, until the hands of the people could touch our delicate skin, we saw them scared, they ran away from us because we were very dark (kodrim). The hours passed, and we returned to the beloved skies, light and consoled we rose up in the air toward the heights while on our backs was a large wooden cross, nails, a crown of thorns, tefillin, tallit and the king of the Jews.[28]

This imagined collective monologue echoes Shvili's depiction of Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, but this time he adds the religious elements which he left out in his ekphrasis, only now they are Jewish and not Christian: the *tefillin* and the *tallit* that his Jesuses carry, perhaps in a subtle allusion to another famous painting, Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938) (see here https://www.artic.edu/artworks/59426/white-crucifixion).[29]

Using the apocalyptic elements of Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* and at the same time alluding to Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, he depicts the ghostly memory of the massacre of the Venetian Jews. The transition to first person plural marks an important transition in Shvili's novel. Indeed, what started as a novel which aimed at presenting a narrative of cosmopolitanism and globalism and focused mostly on the individual aesthetic and spiritual experience, ends up as a search for the author's Jewish roots. The collective history merges with the memory of his own family's history and together they form a collective victim: the Jews on the cross.

This transition occurs right after the visit to the Grand Academy of San Rocco and the description of the disappointment from Tintoretto's depiction of Jesus. It is the sense of disappointment that leads Shvili to search for a real, humanly authentic sufferer, which at the end he finds in what he defines as the real and authentic Jesuses, namely the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. This is in fact a return to a theme that was common in pre-Holocaust, pre-Israeli-statehood Hebrew literature. Writers such as Zalman Shneur (1887-1959), Haim Hazaz (1898-1973) and Avigdor Hameiri (1890-1970) depicted Jesus as a Jewish victim of Christian persecutions. However, for Shvili it is the world of visual art that provides the symbolic reference and it is the Jesus of visual art that he strives to represent in his literary journey.

As we can see, Shvili uses the ekphrasis of the crucifixion to question the naturalistic norms of the Italian painter and to counter them with his own. By doing so, he presents a figure of Jesus

that he views as solely and entirely human. Borrowing the apocalyptic aspects from Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, he places the Jewish victims of the Holocaust on the cross and reclaims the archetype of the crucified, as a symbol for Jewish suffering.

Ecce Homo by Yitzhak Laor

In the novel *Ecce Homo* by Yitzhak Laor, an eminent Israeli poet, author, and literary critic, the reference to Jesus is apparent in the title, which echoes the words of Pilate as he places the crown of thorns on Jesus' head. The phrase, the intent of which was to humiliate Jesus and exhibit him as an ordinary mortal, is used in *Ecce Homo* in reference to the protagonist of the novel, General Adam Lotam. However, the very association between Jesus and his humanity has yet another, more complex function. The figure of Jesus appears in the novel in the context of the visual representation of his image, which serves as a metonym for the novel's two main themes: the relationship between parents and their children and the grief or mourning at their death. These two themes repeatedly intersect throughout the novel by referencing Luca Signorelli's painting *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1499-1502).

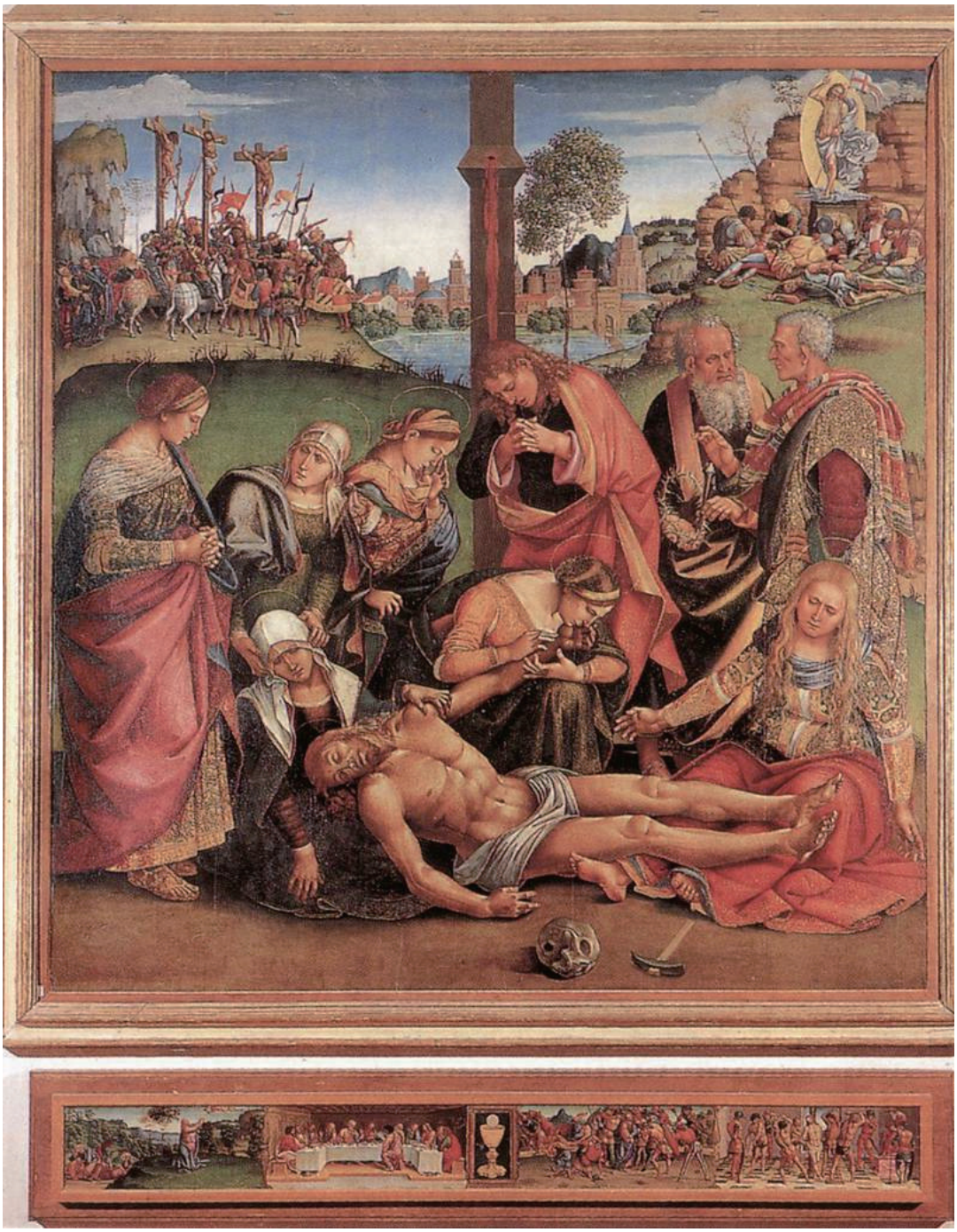

Figure 2. Signorelli, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1499-1502) Museo Diocesano, Cortona

In this painting, the dead Christ is surrounded by those grieving over him, and prominent among the mourners is his mother. Unlike Shvili, Laor places his protagonist not in a European museum, but rather in Tel Aviv University's library. Looking at the photo of the painting in a book and recalling seeing the painting in the museum in Italy, Lotam reflects on Signorelli's painting *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*:

> In short, Lotam moved between his ugliness and his inability to say something about the beauty emanating from the painting. The dark, dead Jesus; his mother's hand touches only his shoulder, another woman kisses his hand, her neck is pale, his arm is dark, his thin legs rest on the red robe of another woman. Neither of them looks into the other's eyes and Jesus' eyes are also closed. Where are they looking? Their hands touch the handsome corpse, and their eyes do not see.[30]

Through his protagonist's thoughts while looking at the photo of the painting, Laor emphasizes its beauty, countering it with Lotam's self-described "ugliness." The short sentences and the transitions from one character in the painting to the next, illustrate the author's attempt to imitate the unique dynamic between the characters in the picture and their deep sadness while at the same time describing the painting's composition. Despite the beauty of the painting, Laor, like Shvili, through his protagonist, voices his frustration by what he thinks is an artificial beauty of the dead Christ. This critique might surprise art historians who are familiar with Signorelli's reputation as a great master of painting, particularly of nude human figures, or as Giorgio Vasari, the famous biographer of Renaissance painters, puts it: he knew how to "make them appear alive."[31]

But there might be an even more significant reason for Laor to use this specific painting, as I believe that he is aware of the fact that the figure of Jesus here gained special importance to Signorelli after his son's death (in the Dark Plague) during or shortly following the completion of the painting.[32] Vasari even describes how the painter stripped the dead body of his beloved son and drew it "so he might always behold in this work of these hands what Nature had given him and cruel Fortunes taken away."[33] In this respect, not only does Laor integrate the painting into his novel, but it is perhaps the story of the **painter**, namely Signorelli, whom he mentions a few times by name, that he tries to tell here as well. The wish to represent grief is shared then by both the Israeli novelist and the Italian Renaissance artist.

At the same time, Laor differentiates between himself, the secular Jewish-Israeli author, and the Christian Renaissance painter, and he takes care to make sure these differences are noticed by his

readers. Thus, while the painting depicts both the crucifixion and the resurrection in the side scenes, Laor erases the religious-doctrinal moments, focusing only on the human aspect: the mourning. Thus, the real protagonists are the mourners rather than Jesus.

Interestingly, while the Italian painter was trying to add the dimension of time and by that to represent the New Testament narrative, namely, the crucifixion which occurred before the lamentation and the resurrection which would occur after, Laor freezes the moment of the mourning and makes it a still scene that is devoid of time. Laor's ekphrasis in this respect serves to represent not the story of the New Testament but rather to capture the emotional and universal sense of mourning and to present it as existing beyond time and space.

Laor uses then the ekphrasis to discuss the question of the representation of grief and lamentation. He then allows his protagonist to reflect on this very issue:

> I once thought that grief lacks form and figure. Now I think that I understand the removal from the cross, the hands of the mother waiting for her son after his death. The woman is God. It is not an allegory. Grief has an image (*demut*). It cannot be abstracted to the point of a pure form, such as a square or a circle, or a mathematical formula.[34]

Relating to the painting of Christ being removed from the cross enables the author to represent what is ostensibly formless and imageless, and thus cannot be visually represented. In this way, the author can focus on a single visual object (once again the mother's hand) and imbue it with the difficulty of representing a painful and un-representable moment of grief.[35] Aware of the paradoxical aspect of his choice, the author chooses an object with shape and form (i.e., a painting), and through it he represents that to which it is impossible to give form. The written word here needs visual support (and vice versa—the painting mediates by means of the written word). Thus, grief indeed takes on a shape, not that of a pure form, but rather the image of the painting depicting Christ being taken down from the cross and placed in his mother's arms.

Laor deviates here from the Christian tradition in two striking ways: first, although a number of Christian theologists have described God as both the father and mother of Christ, the very assertion that the woman is God is closer to the Kabbalistic notion of the *Shkhinah* rather than to Christian theology. Moreover, the idea that grief itself has an image (*demut*), or in other words, that the icon is in fact a human/female's emotion and not an allegory, suggests a reversal of the traditional Christian doctrine, and it is particularly important when it comes to Christian painting.

Indeed, the Israeli novelist reveals his awareness of the contrasts between his perspective and that

of Christian theology when he asks:

> And what would a Christian say? Does he not wish to be loved by the man on the cross? No. That love is already granted him, and that is the source of his quiescence, of his love of the painting. But for me there is nothing to this art other than simple, untamed, mute beauty, and there is nothing to say about it, a sublime, poignant stain, a naked back, a hand stretched out in supplication. And what he suddenly understood gradually wanes...[36]

The distinction that the narrator makes between himself and the Christian viewer of the painting contains a subtle irony regarding Christian theology and its view of Jesus as a messenger of a granted divine love. It also emphasizes the painting's status as an object having aesthetic value irrespective of its religious context. For Lotam and, I suspect, also for Laor, "this art" is meaningful not in the theological context, but in the way it succeeds in being, if only for a fleeting moment, something beyond itself, formulated in his mind in terms that relate to its aesthetic value, but which in fact reflect the emotions it awakens. As noted, the scene of the viewing of the picture takes place in the library of an Israeli university and the dead son, as we later learn, is the son of the woman who was Lotam's love in his youth. This young man will commit suicide during his army service. These additional narrative details make the "me" here not only a viewer who is not Christian, but specifically an Israeli Jew for whom the painting is at once an object of identification and estrangement. The mechanism that allows Laor to reconcile between the two is the removal of the theological aspects and the ascription of a new meaning to the aesthetics of the painting.

Like Shvili, Laor thus uses the Renaissance painting to offer a new and different perspective to that of the Christian doctrine. Unlike Shvili, he is not that interested in the representation of the figure of Jesus, nor does he care about the representation of Christ' death. Instead, Laor focuses on the representation of the grief over the dead, as a universal emotion that the Christian painter placed within the context of the story of Christ and the Israeli novelist aims to use as an archetype. Admiring the beauty of the painting, Laor through his protagonist uses this admired aesthetics to reflect on the difficulties of representing an emotion that has nothing to do with beauty. In this, he shares with Shvili the sense that beauty and real authentic agony might not go hand in hand.

A Room by Yuval Shimoni

As we have seen, it is not the crucifixion itself, but rather the sorrow over Jesus' death that Laor is most interested in. It is only three years earlier that Yuval Shimoni made a similar choice and placed at the center of the second part of his novel, *A Room*, a different painting of the *Lamentation over*

the Dead Christ. In Shimoni's novel we find an abundant use of ekphrasis, which might not surprise us given the fact that the main protagonist of this second part of the novel, titled "Drawer," is an Israeli art student named Schechter[37] who lives in a foreign city (most likely Paris) at the end of the millennium. What is interesting for our purposes is the fact that the student is interested, perhaps even obsessed, with the figure of Jesus, in particular with his death. It is specifically the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1475-1501) by Andrea Mantegna that stands at the center of this obsession. As part of a course project in which the students are asked to create a tribute-painting to an earlier painter, the student sets out on a mission to restage Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, using three local homeless people with whom he breaks into a local hospital's mortuary and uses it as the set of his reproduction of a live model of the early painting. Here, unlike in the other two novels, a photo of the painting appears in the text, inviting us to broaden our consideration of the relationship between the painting, its photographical representation, and the literary text.

Here is how Shechter describes (in the second person) the painting:

> The picture that you chose was CRISTO IN SCURTO, and the son of God was painted in it from the level of his feet, and did not look heavenly at all but as a total corpse (peger gamur).

Figure 3. Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1475-1501), Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

> He was already taken off his cross, and still has not risen from the dead as a winner: he was left tossed on a plank, and the perspective shortened his body and underscored only his feet. The nail wounds were not gates for a new era, small they were as if he was injured by the nails of his shoes….In the far end of the board you could see his face, and the sorrows were sketched on their features with a brush of one hair: restrained and quiet sorrows of someone who already knows that in this whole world there is no one who will hear him.[38]

Shimoni's ekphrasis focuses on that which both Shvili and Laor miss in the Christian paintings: the unadorned humanity and ugliness of Christ's death. It is the immaculate skills of the Italian Renaissance artist in imitating in a realistic manner the dead body that so impresses Shechter, especially Mantegna's famous use of foreshortening, that creates the illusion that the body of Christ is realistically short given the perspective of the artist and the viewer who are placed just in front of Jesus' feet, perhaps too short as a result of a mistake in calculating the proportions of Christ's legs in relation to his head. (According to a more generous theory, Mantegna reduced the size of the figure's feet, which, as he must have known, would cover much of the body if properly represented).[39] Contemplating the painting, Shimoni's protagonist reflects back on the image of the dead body and on its mundane humanity, in which everything associated with holiness is presented as no more than the trivial signs of a decayed body, a body of no one in particular, just a man who once walked in old shoes and whose sorrows attest to his realization of the fact that no one in the world (including God) will hear him.

Reenacting the painting in his novel, Shimoni transcends the boundaries of both ekphrasis – his protagonist not only describes the painting in words but also re-creates it – and challenges the theological meaning of the painting. In his reenactment of the painting, Shimoni, through Schechter, introduces two important revisions to the painting: the models are "kloshers" – homeless people – drinker-beggars (one of whom is a whore), perhaps the last group one would have chosen to pose as the New Testament figures. Moreover, while the original painting does not reveal the location of the scene, Schechter places his models in the mortuary of a Parisian hospital. Indeed, this is perhaps the most defiant and clear deviation from the original painting as well as from what Shimoni assumes (I believe) was the intention of its painter. As Shecheter sarcastically asks (in regard to Jesus):

> Wouldn't he [Jesus] have gotten at the end to the mortuary's refrigerator? And on his big toe, a few centimeters from the hole of the nail in his feet – a tiny hole like a blister that broke from too much walking on water or on clouds – there will be a small robber with a carton label, as on the big toes of all the rest of the corpses. And in a plastic bag there would be the few things

> that would be taken from his body… one loin cover, one crown of thorn, three nails: a body of an un-identified male which was found with signs of violence.[40]

This recreation of the painting within the novel's narrative offers a unique form of ekphrasis which subverts not what appears in the painting but what is assumed by its Christian viewers: that Christ is unique as he is human only in body, and that this dead body will soon be resurrected.[41]

As Batia Gur suggests, the first section of *A Room* embodies the essence of Israeli reality,[42] and though the second part takes place in a city outside of Israel, the assumed identification between the character of Schechter which appears in the first section and the student artist in the second, does not allow a complete break from the Israeli perspective of the painting. While Shimoni does not seem to be explicitly interested in the Israeli perspective of his protagonist, he does express through Schechter's acts and thoughts, a sentiment shared by many Israeli writers toward the figure of Jesus, namely defiance of the paradox of a figure which is all too human and at the same time embodies the divine. A common theme among many of the 1950s through 1970s Israeli writers, such as Pinchas Sadeh, Nathan Zach and Meir Wieseltier is a focus on the tension between Jesus' human and divine nature. However, these writers are rarely interested in the Christian tradition of the representation of Jesus and for them his humanity is often seen as a source of identification.[43]

Shimoni, like Shvili and Laor, responds in this respect to the Christian doctrine, and like them he defies the artificiality in the representation of Jesus' suffering and death. At the same time, Shimoni's protagonist echoes the character of Mantegna, the man and the artist. It is commonly assumed that Mantegna made this painting for his personal funerary chapel – it was found by his sons after his death and was used to pay his debts – and since Schechter himself often alludes to his own death, the revisions that Shimoni/Shechter makes in the painting might be understood as pointing to the artist's choice to depict death through the figure of the dead Christ.

A Room can therefore be read as a meta-poetic novel, and as such the use of ekphrasis plays an important role as it allows Shimoni (similarly to Shvili and Laor) to deal with the very act of representation (in visual and literary art).[44] To further support this claim it is important to point out that Shimoni's ekphrasis serves as an allusion not only to Mantegna's painting but to an earlier and very famous ekphrasis, figuring in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.[45] In *The Idiot*, the dying young man, Hippolyte, is bothered by the figure of Jesus as portrayed in Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*:

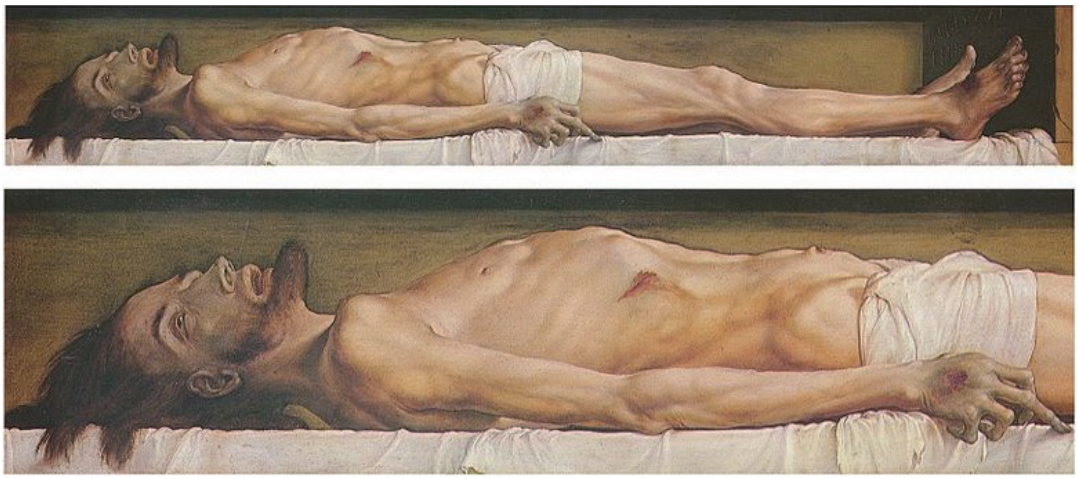

Figure 4. Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche unstsammlung, Basel

> There was nothing artistic about it but the picture made me feel strangely uncomfortable. It represented Christ just taken down from the cross. It seems to me that painters as a rule represent the savior, both on the cross and taken down from it, with great beauty still upon his face. This marvelous beauty they strive to preserve even in his moments of deepest agony and passion. But there was no such beauty in Rogojin's picture. This was the presentment of a poor mangled body which had evidently suffered unbearable anguish even before his crucifixion, full of wounds and bruises, marks of the violence of soldiers and people, and of the bitterness of the moment when he had fallen with the cross, all this combined with the anguish of the actual crucifixion.
>
> The face was depicted as though still suffering; as though the body, only just dead, was still almost quivering with agony. The picture was once pure nature, for the face was not beautified by the artist, but was left as it would naturally be, whosoever over the sufferer after such anguish. […] It is strange to look at this dreadful picture of the mangled corpse of the savior, and to put this question to oneself: 'Supposing that they saw this tortured body, this face so mangled and bleeding and bruised (and they must have so seen it) – how could they have gazed upon the dreadful sight and yet have believed that he would rise again?[46]

Through the allusion to Dostoyevsky's ekphrasis with his own ekphrasis, Shimoni presents the differences between the Christian (Russian Orthodox in the case of Dostoyevsky) and the Jewish (and Israeli) perspectives on the representation of Jesus' agony and death. While Dostoyevsky questions

the iconoclastic tradition in the face of Christ' suffering on the cross, Shimoni puts forward the question of representing humans as Christ. Dostoyevsky's Hippolyte is troubled by the thought that the dead Christ was portrayed in such striking realism, because he cannot reconcile the image of the savior with the cunning humanity of Holbein's Christ. Shimoni's Schechter echoes this tension, with his remark on the small size of the nail wounds on Christ dead body as not being "gates for a new era, small they were as if he was injured by the nails of his shoes."[47] But this thought also demonstrates how Shimoni's protagonist differs from Dostoyevsky's in his observation of the painted dead Christ. Shechter does not engage himself with the theological problem that bothers Hippolyte, but with the artistic question of depicting what he believes the crucifixion is all about, namely, the everyday and everyman human experience. Shimoni places his protagonist in front of a painting of the dead Christ, in order to introduce what he sees as a secular humanistic view of Jesus' dead body.

For Shimoni, or his protagonist, the cross is the mundane burden of carrying one's own body, day in and day out, on feet stuck in an aging pair of shoes, with no hope for salvation, let alone resurrection or eternity. Yet, the artist (Schechter as well as Shimoni) cannot but hope and aim to resurrect, if only with a brush and words, the great Renaissance painting, knowing that this act of resurrection will bring them no closer to redemption.

Shimon's ekphrasis is then more than an attempt to depict a painting in words. It is an attempt to reflect on the western tradition of representing the dead Christ from the point of view of the Israeli author/artist and on the ekphrastic act itself, as a western tradition which he both embraces and revisits.

Conclusions

We have seen that what these three Israeli novelists do with their ekphrasis is mostly to reflect on the ways in which the Christian painters represent the sacred as embodied in a human figure. Vasari writes in his introduction to the third volume of his *Lives of the Artists*: "These masters sought with great efforts to do the impossible in art by means of labor, particularly in foreshortening and in things unpleasant to the eye, which were as painful to see as they were difficult for them to execute."[48] Similarly, a poem written in praise of Mantegna's work celebrates his talent in painting figures which appear "truly life-like and real."[49] This attempt at natural realism was not neglected, and at times was even perfected when it came to paintings of the crucifixion. The belief in the *imago dei* made it acceptable in Christian art, unlike in Jewish or Islamic tradition, to represent the deity as human.[50] However, theology restricted this representation in various ways, in particular following

the 1563 Trent Council which was closed with a decree on the invocation, veneration and relics of the saints, and on sacred images. According to art historian Marcia Hall, "the problem for the painter became how to make the divine separate and distinguishable, but as vividly real as the human."[51] Among the artists that Hall mentions as exemplifying a successful combination of these antithetical principles, which Ronald Thiemann calls "sacramental realism,"[52] is Tintoretto. But the Israeli novelists whom we have discussed are not convinced by this sacramental realism which pushes them to question the Christian artistic representations of Jesus as human. What bothers them is not what bothered the iconoclasts, namely that the divine would appear as resembling human beings, but that a supposedly realistic depiction of a human would seem to resemble the divine. To be sure, I am not of course suggesting that there are no depictions in modern Hebrew literature of mankind resembling God. In fact, as I show in an article on theomorphic depictions in modern Hebrew literature, this was a common theme among twentieth century Hebrew writers.[53] However, it seems that at the turn of the millennium, the notion of a divine man intrigued these Israeli novelists, and paintings of the dead Christ prompted them to question both the representation of the sacred in the mundane and the aesthetics that such representation entails. Paradoxically, they are doing so by borrowing a literary device, ekphrasis, which is very much part of the tradition they resist. Ekphrasis serves for these Israeli novelists as a meta-poetic mechanism, bringing to the fore questions of representations of human sorrow, love, and the mundane reality of death. Yet, for all three novelists, the Christian painting involves something that they seem to long for: an eternity, not of a human's life, but of the life of a work of art, a masterpiece.

It may not be a coincidence that three novels featuring a similar theme were published in the span of four years, specifically around the turn of the millennium. I suggest that the view of the transition to a new era may indeed have brought with it a renewed interest in Christianity and in the figure of Jesus as part of a shared sentiment across the western world of looking both back at the history of western culture and ahead to the future of this culture. For these three Israeli novelists, the interest in the ways in which their own writing functions within and against the western religious and artistic tradition is significant, in a moment in history which they see as appropriate for reflecting on their place in this tradition. Furthermore, each of the three deviates from his predecessors in Israeli literature by responding to the artists and to the artistic dimensions of the painting they depict rather than to the figure of Jesus itself. At the same time, they are interested in the naturalistic realism that the painters aspire to and question it in light of the only way they can perceive and conceive of the figure of Jesus, as a mortal human, a Jesus, not a Christ. In this they continue a long tradition in modern Jewish representation of Jesus, both in the visual and literary arts. However, in the spirit of

the turn of the century Israeli literature, they are more interested in the representational means of metaphysical questions and less in the historical origin of Jesus or the historical relations between Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, despite taking part in the ancient western tradition of ekphrasis, they distinguish themselves from the Christian artists and offer a new, perhaps uniquely modern Jewish-Israeli perspective of the representation of the dead Christ.

*The source for figures 1-4 is Wikimedia Commons.

Notes

1 Yona Wallach, *Ir zo masricha* [This City Stinks], *Tzurot* [Forms] (Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985), 67.

2 Uri Zvi Greenberg, "In Malchuth Farn Tselem," *Albatrus*, 3-4 (Berlin, 1923), 15-24.

3 Neta Stahl, *Other and Brother: The Figure of Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Greenberg, "Yerushlayim Shel Matah" ["Earthly Jerusalem"], in: *Kol ketavav* [All of his Writing] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990), 62.

5 Amnon Raz-Karkotzkin discusses the "universal" being associated with the Christian myth in his article "Ha-shivah el ha-historia shel ha-ge'ulah" [The Return to the History of Redemption, Or What is the 'History' to Which the Return Occurs in the Expression "The Return to History?"], in *Ha-Zionut ve-ha-hazarah la-historia: Ha'arakha me-Hadas*h [Zionism and the Return to History: A Re-Evaluation], eds. Shmuel Eisenstadt and Moshe Lisk (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 1999), 249-276.

6 Murry Krieger, "The Problem of Ekphrasis: Image and Words, Space and Time – and the Literary Work," in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (eds.), *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, (Amsterdam: VU University, 1998), 4.

7 Hefferman, in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (eds.), *Pictures into Words*, 191. In an article that presents a comparative examination of the meanings of the term 'ekphrasis' in the ancient world and in the modern era, Ruth Webb argues that the first to coin the definition of ekphrasis as a poetic description of pictorial or sculptural work of art was Leo Spitzer in 1955. See: Ruth Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre," *Word & Image* 15 (1999), 10.

8 Yacobi, in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (eds.), *Pictures into Words*, 23.

9 In my discussion of crucifixion paintings I also include paintings of the lamentations over the dead Christ which, as I shall explain shortly, from the point of view of the Israeli writers, belong I believe to the same category as the crucifixion paintings.

10 Avner Holtzman, *Sifrut ve-Omanut Plastit* [Literature and the Visual Arts] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Ha-me'uchad, 1997).

11 Holtzman, *Sifrut ve-omanut plastit* [Literature and the Visual Arts] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), 61.

12 Holtzman, *Literature and the Visual Arts*, 59. *Laocoon. An essay upon the limits of painting and poetry: with remarks illustrative of various points in the history of ancient art*, translated by Ellen Frothingham (Boston, Little, Brown, 1904)). This distinction was discussed, developed and debated in the following centuries by countless thinkers and scholars.

13 See: Charles Hope, "Religious Narrative in Renaissance Art," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 134 (1986), 804-806.

14 Holtzman, *Literature and the Visual Arts*, 77.

15 This is an important point in Hope's article as he claims that the Italian artists used various methods to make the viewers aware of the fact that they were facing a **picture** of the religious narrative. See: Charles Hope, "Religious Narrative in Renaissance Art," 805-808.

16 Hefferman, in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel, *Pictures into Words*, 191.

17 Hefferman, in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel, *Pictures into Words*, 202.

18 Hefferman, in: Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel, *Pictures into Words*, 192.

19 Benyamin Shvili, *Ha-yerida min Hatzlav* [The Descent from the Cross] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2000), 19. All the translations are mine.

20 Shvili follows the footsteps of writers such as Henry James and Jean-Paul Sartre who also wrote about Tintoretto's works. See: Jonathan Goldberg, "Conversions: Around Tintoretto", *The Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 163-91 and Tim Huntley, "'Grace Revealed and Erased': Sartre on Tintoretto's Modest Plenitude." *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 1 (2012): 49-65.

21 Loren Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Venice 1400-1600* (California: Okland: University Press, 2015), 171.

22 Shvili, *The Descent from the Cross*, 120.

23 Shvili, *The Descent from the Cross*, 122.

24 http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-paintings/crucifixion-tintoretto.htm. Quentin Blake remarks that "the nails piercing his [Christ] hands and feet are visible, but there is little here about agony or suffering. The light radiating from Christ's head almost has physical substance, like wings, and though the head leans forward it is not drooping with exhaustion but rather looking". See: Quentin Blake, "The Crucifixion, Tintoretto", in: Christopher Dell ed., *What Makes a Masterpiece* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 192. Loren Partridge explains that "with the bottom of the cross obscured, Christ appears to loom against the picture plane, in a close proximity to the viewer, while in fact he is in the middle of the ground". See: Partridge, Art of Renaissance Venice 1400-1600 , 173.

25 For discussions of Tintoretto's interest in developing convincing realistic depictions of motion in the human body see: Claus Virch, "A Study by Tintoretto after Michelangelo", in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 15, no. 4 (1956): 111-16.

26 Perhaps not accidently, the front cover of the novel features Masaccio's *The Expulsion from Paradise* (1427), which is considered the first instance of naturalism in Renaissance painting. I am grateful to my student, Giacomo Loi who illuminated me in regard to this painting's relation to my argument as well as many additional comments and information that he generously shared with me.

27 Partridge for example remarks that "Tintoretto raised Christ above the horizon, silhouetting him against the setting sun with a circular aura of divine radiance, thereby evoking Christ's declaration: I am come a light onto the world: that whosoever believeth in me, may not remain in darkness (John 12:46)". See: Loren Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Venice 1400-1600* (California: Okland: University Press, 2015), 173.

28 Shvili, *The Descent from the Cross*, 123.

29 For a discussion of The White Crucifixion see: Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "The White Crucifixion", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* vol. 17, No. 2 (1991), 138-153+180-181. For a discussion of the figure of Jesus in Chagall's paintings, see: Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall Dedicated to Christ: Sources and Meanings", *Jewish Art*, vol 21 (1995), 68-94.

30 Yitzhak Laor, *Hine Adam* [Ecce Homo] (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad 2003), 23.

31 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptures and Architects* (New York: Random House, 2006), vol. 2, 213.

32 Philip Jacks notes that some scholars infer that this was the inspiration for the figure of Christ in the painting and that the *lamentation* was meant as a personal commemoration of the tragedy. See: Philip Jacks, "Introduction", in: Giorgi and Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptures and Architects* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), fn7, 532.

33 Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptures and Architects*, translated by Gaston du. C. de Vera, 216.

34 Laor, *Ecce Homo*, 152.

35 It is worth noting that representing the suffering of Mary in the face of the agony of her son is a relatively late tradition, since the three synoptic Gospels do not mention the mother's suffering at all. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, however, a tradition of reconstructing the suffering of Mary developed through the attempts of pilgrimages to follow the footsteps of Jesus as he walked down the Via Dolorosa. It was through Mary's grief, maintains historian and scholar of Christianity Marina Warner, that many believers were able to empathize with the pain and sorrow of the New Testament story. The theme of the grieving mother mediated abstract concepts and accessible human feelings, making the crucifixion scene and the theme of self-sacrifice real, a human experience involving emotions with which one could identify. See: Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex – The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 210-221.

36 Laor, *Ecce Homo*, 26.

37 The name of the student is never mentioned, but a character with that name appears in the first part of the novel. Based on the narrative details of both parts of the novels, we may assume that this character is indeed Schechter.

38 Yuval Shimoni, *Heder* [A Room] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), 294.

39 Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2009), vol. 2, 620.

40 Shimoni, *A Room*, 297.

41 Perhaps not surprisingly, while the crucifixion is a prevalent theme in modern Hebrew literature, the resurrection is almost entirely absent from it.

42 Batia Gur, "Ba-derech el ha-tzlivah" [On the Way to the Crucifixion], in *Without Skipping a Page: A Collection of Essays and Articles*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2008), 382.

43 See Stahl, *Other and Brother*, 101-107.

44 Gur suggests that Schechter might mirror the novelist's wondering about the artistic act. Gur, *Without Skipping a Page*, 382.

45 Only six years prior to the publication of *A Room* a new and contemporary Hebrew translation of *The Idiot*, translated by Nili Mirsky appeared in Israel (Ha-sifiyah ha-hadashah, Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1993).

46 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, translated by Eva M. Martin, (Digiread.com Publishing, 2018), 375.

47 Shimoni, *A Room*, 294.

48 Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 224.

49 See: Ronald Thiemann, "Sacramental Realism" in: Tomas F Mayer (ed.), *Reforming Reformation*, Farbham: Ashgate, 2012), 72.

50 Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art*: *Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci, El Greco, Caravaggio* (Yale University Press, 2011), 44.

51 Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art*, 44.

52 Thiemann, *Reforming Reformation*, 71

53 Neta Stahl, "Theomorphism and Modern Hebrew Literature's Search for the Divine: Brenner and Shlonsky as a Case Study," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 22 (2015): 62-85. I discuss this issue more at length in: Stahl, *The Divine in Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York and Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020).