Looking for the Real: The Case of the Garden

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It might as well be a gross generalization, but it's a well-known, and quite a just one: in relation to nature the modern Hebrew literature, and culture, consist of two competing traditions. The Jewish tradition, which is hostile toward nature, because it carries the lure of idolatry, and the persisting remnants of the dominant pagan religions against which Monotheist Judaism was forged. And therefore, nature is always allegorical, or subjugated to the expression of the splendor and might of God. As evident in the great poetry of the Psalms, for instance. The mountains may skip like rams and the little hills as lambs, but in fact they only tremble before the presence of the Lord. The beautiful nature, depicted as part of the celebration of the body in the act of love in the Song of Songs, quickly becomes an allegory for the bond between God and the Israelite nation and is transformed into an array of symbols for the divine.

The second tradition is the self-professed secular national awakening of the 18th and 19th centuries, which resulted in Zionism and the foundation of the state of Israel. This tradition sought to reclaim the Israeli landscape, bridle it with Hebrew names, return it to its actuality, away from the mythical existence. It is most apparent in the writing of the state generation of writers. Suddenly the Israeli prose and fiction on the 1940-1970s was filled with descriptions of local nature, of names of flowers and birds, which are foreign to most Hebrew speakers. It seemed as if Israeli writers started using Floras and botanical guides. That does not mean that nature for them was not used metaphorically or as a mirror of their consciousness, but for it to have the potential to be used in such manner, in a personal and idiosyncratic manner, they had to diffuse the religious and metaphysical charges already condensed in it. In a way, they had to restore it to its primal, naïve mode of existence. First and foremost, nature had to reacquire its immediate physical quality that precedes any meaning imposed upon it. To be once again a thing, to have innate resistance to interpretation.

Which tradition of representing nature makes it more real in literature, one may ask. It is a good question. It would be hard to find writers who are pure practitioners of one or the other, but we can map the different mixtures unique to each writer, and we can point to writers who have extreme bias toward one tradition. I would suggest Shmuel Yossef Agnon to be the representative

of the Jewish one, and S. Yizhar to be the representative of the Zionist one. As a matter of fact, the most beautiful realization of the tension between the two traditions can be found in a novella by Agnon, *Shevuat Emunim* (Oath of Allegiance).[1] Ya'acov Rechnitz, the protagonist, is researching seaweed in Jaffa, and there comes Shoshana, whose name refers to the mystical flower from the Song of Songs, the Rose of the Sharon, his youth beloved. She shakes his sense of reality, the scientific secular one. Thus, two models of representing nature are fighting in his consciousness over the right to be recognized as the scheme of the outer reality.

And this conflict is urgent for me as well, as a writer. The main issue I have is: what constitutes anything as real? And my short answer is: Real is what one experiences as such. What is the experience of nature I'm striving to convey in my writing?

To answer that, I will turn to the case of the garden, as through all my writing it is the epitome of nature and what provokes the questions about the experience of reality. I'll try to illustrate some of my efforts to capture it.

In the beginning there was my mother's failed garden. The noun garden is misleading. The Hebrew word is *ginna*, a small garden, a patch of land, on which one tries and grows variety of plants, herbs used in the Moroccan cuisine, in my mother's case, and in some homemade medicines, and roses, bushes of roses. I think that was her dream, having a rose garden, which she was too shy to admit, and the herbs were just a test, a stage, a ruse. But her intentions were in vain. None of the bushes came to fruition, and if some roses buds did show, they were short lived.

I could understand the enchantment of roses. It is the most intricate pronunciation of the mere idea of a flower. Fully detailed yet abstract. No wonder the rose is considered by many spiritual sects to be mystical.

But I'll return to these roses later. Because it took me a while to construct my own version of them. I wrote poetry about my mother's ineffectual struggle to maintain a garden. Yet, whenever I tried to conjure a garden in my writing it always was a different sort of garden.

In my debut novel, *One Mile and Two Days before Sunset*,[2] the protagonist, Elish Ben Zaken, tells his niece a story about a garden:

A king summons an architect to build him a garden unlike any other. So, the architect toils for a year and produces one. The king enters it and finds an almost barren place. There are

[1] שמואל יוסף עגנון, *שבועת אמונים* (ירושלים-תל אביב, שוקן 1943).
[2] שמעון אדף, *קילומטר ויומיים לפני השקיעה* (ירושלים: כתר 2004).

> arrows that directs him to promising and exiting elusive areas, and the king who obeys the signs, misses the scarce wonders on the way, a simple ray of light, a weak tune in the wind, a fragile rose. When the disappointed king demands of the architect to tell him where is the promised garden, the architect only answers that the king has been roaming the garden all along.[3]

I guess the short story is Elishe's parody on parables, but in retrospect it exposes my instinct. My initial interest in an aspect of the Garden of Eden, that is being seldom discussed, and frequently abandoned in the tension between the said traditions – the garden as the birthplace of human language. In the Book of Genesis, 2:19 it's told:

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. (KJV)

A fascinating moment is described here. It raises questions: did Adam had a language beforehand, one that was lacking the names of the creatures? Did they have godly names, and for man to relate to them, he had to substitute them with his own versions? Or rather, as it is implied in the Hebrew version, naming the animals and fowls is also bestowing a soul upon them, forever after? Is this collection of names part of a knowledge that precedes mature consciousness, the knowledge that came with the temptation and revelation of sexuality?

This stage of the story occurs between Adam being created and Eve appearing in his world, as if it were his brief childhood, his rapid coming of age. Therefore, my first written gardens are of this kind. In the novel *The Buried Heart*,[4] the protagonist's heart is buried deep in a magical garden, providing life to many fantastical animals and plants, each one's shape is singular. Each creature is an embodiment of a word in a forbidden, ancient language that had been wiped out from human memory. The language was conjured by mages trying to copy the language of creation.

[3] Shimon Adaf, *One Mile and Two Days before Sunset*, Translated by Yardenne Greenspan (NY, NY: Picador, 2022), 210–211.

[4] שמעון אדף, *הלב הקבור* (תל אביב: אחוזת בית, 2006).

This is a simple iteration of the lingual story of Eden. Another, more sober iteration, is brought forth by Ori, a protagonist of the novel, *Sunburnt Faces*.[5] She writes to a friend:

> They say that God created the animals and their names separately, and He gave Adam the job of matching them. And Adam, his hands full of names, ran among the animals, asking: "Lion? Are you the lion? Donkey? Are you the donkey?" And he was answered with an unintelligible sound, a bellow or a bray or a grunt or a roar or another voice. In the end, in his despair Adam decided to give out the names randomly.
> So, it's quite possible that the sounds embracing the essence of the name 'lion' are in fact 'donkey', while the true meaning of the set of consonants and vowels, 'lion', is actually the animal we call 'elephant'. That's language. It gives us a sense of attaining reality, of grasping it, but all the while it's doubtful whether it indicates the right places.[6]

In Ori's version, reality and language do not correspond, proper names fail to signify the natural creatures. And this failure reflects Ori's own mental state. She's haunted by childhood, and mainly by a revelation she had on the verge of adolescence: she heard God calling to her through the TV set in the living room. She's roaming her adulthood, writing young adult fiction, and looking for traces of her out-worldly experience, for echoes of knowledge taken from her, but might be preserved, in mature twisted forms, in three aspects of existence: the mechanism of applying meaning, the manners of conforming death, and the workings of carnal desire.

Knowledge is erotic in all its forms, but the knowledge of the flesh is intoxicating. The odor of the primal scene, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, and their eyes opening to the presence of the body, is clinging to many gardens in literature, especially when they serve as meeting point for lovers. The magical quality of the place stems from it being a pocket of nature with the urban landscape, an autonomous ex-territory, with rules and costumes unto itself. Yigal Schwartz, in his seminal work, *The Zionist Paradox: Hebrew Literature and Israeli Identity*,[7] analyzes different scenes that are taking place in this reminiscence of the Garden of Eden, the

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[5] שמעון אדף, *פנים צרובי חמה* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 2008).
[6] Shimon Adaf, *Sunburnt Faces,* Translated by Margalit Rodgers and Anthony Berris (London: PS Publishing, 2013), 430.
[7] Yigal Schwartz, *The Zionist Paradox: Hebrew Literature and Israeli Identity*, Translated by Michal Sapir (Waltham, MA: Brandies University Press, 2014).

pleasant place. Though it's not his aim, Schwartz creates a catalogue of such loci; in all of them love flourishes. The only question is if it's able to survive outside, socially, culturally, genetically, as in the novels of early writers, or sour into revenge and hatred, as in the works of later writers.

I, for all my good will, have never succeeded in manufacturing such a functioning pleasant place. And I've tried. The closest I got was in the novel *Take up and Read* [Tolle Lege],[8] in which Nahum and Dalia, the narrator and one of the protagonists, go to a clearing in a thicket of eucalyptuses on the fringes of Sderot, a site known to Nahum to have peculiar properties.

Nahum is hopelessly in love with the girl. He thinks he could appease her by talking about his plans to be a poet. He clings to the concept of the lingual Eden, while in the natural reverberation of the image of Eden, a male and a female, naked, and the words are bringing them together, they are the vehicle for intimacy.

Dalia, on the other hand, craves the stage of maturity, the sexual one, to leave off the lingual and bathe in lust. She claims that poetry doesn't hold any significance for their generation, for their time, that they should try another way, starting with the body. Their different aspirations of intimacy are futile. In the thicket, in which these two rival concepts of Eden, the symbolic (lingual, though, a pre-sexual one) and the literal (the body, a gate to the Real), turns out to be unsuitable to actualize any of the two.

Dalia proves to Nahum what she felt intuitively – that lovemaking of any kind in that earthly wonder would be a transgression. It's impossible for them to go back to the state of innocence about to burst, because no one is ever innocent when entering the garden of adulthood. At least none of my characters are. They already lost something. They already are marked by the knowledge of loss, and passion, in consequence. Nor is the garden pure when they enter it. It is infused with previous meanings. The discovery awaits in it is of the past. For Nahum, entering the clearing is the final stroke of a process that began early on: a tacit and denied self is breaking through, breaking out.[9]

Thus, the garden of adulthood has the structure of adult consciousness. There's always another, concealed garden within, beyond reach, that undermines it. In her reflections on the young adult genre, Ori ponders:

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[8] שמעון אדף, *קום קרא* (פארק חמן: דביר/הקשרים, 2017).

[9] Shimon Adaf, *Take up and Read*, Translated by Yardenne Greenspan (NY, NY: Picador, 2022), 408–409.

> [...] as adults we often believe that Wonderland is a manifestation of childhood itself, of its essence, and at times childhood appears in our memory as uninterrupted expanses of tranquility and pleasure. We are mistaken. If we remember childhood itself as a Wonderland, why then do we need another Wonderland to which children depart? What is this need for an enclosure within an enclosure, the holy of holies of magical kingdoms? In my youth I came across a version of the Ten Martyrs: The High Priest Rabbi Ishmael Ben-Elisha ascends to the heavenly Merkaba to inquire and ask about the source of the decree issued by the Roman Empire against the People of Israel – the execution of thousands of scholars. Rabbi Ishmael encounters Metatron, or Surya, the Prince of the Presence, and demands to know whether the source of the decree is Divine, in which case it cannot be rescinded. And Metatron replies that he heard an echo behind a curtain screeching, "Ten Sages of Israel will be given to the empire." It was this curtain that intrigued me. And I wondered why there, too, in the depths of the heavenly palaces there are partitioning screens and curtains? Why is there a place, even in the exposed heart, to which entry is blocked even to Metatron, not to mention everyone else?[10]

Ori points to the recursive nature of the garden, a garden nestled within a garden. This is also the corkscrew pattern of the rose flower. The helix of petals, ring inside a ring ad infinitum. My version of the rose is the focus of my "Rose of Judea" trilogy. The tomes in it unfold many lives that had been touched by the secret history of the Rose, the yearning it invokes.

Once, two millennia ago, a minor sage in Jewish lore, Shimon ben Zoma, entered, with other three sages, into the orchard, that is, the deepest mystical layer of existence, the heavenly courts. He peeked at it and was hurt.[11] He went mad, according to common understanding. But what is madness in the context of consciousness altering experience?

In my trilogy, his followers claim that he had been given understanding of the cosmos that threatens the mainstream of Judaic thought and authority. The impression of his transcendence is encapsulated in the design of a rose called the Rose of Judea. Yet the knowledge achieved stays

[10] Shimon Adaf, *Sunburnt Faces,* Translated by Margalit Rodgers and Anthony Berris (London: PS Publishing, 2013), 298-299.
[11] The Babylonian Talmud, tract Chagigah, 14b.

hidden, and alluring. In addition to all the conceptions of the symbol of the rose, there is another, undisclosed one, that evades everyone, a shadowy notion that escapes any grasp.

There is only one garden in the whole trilogy, an actual site. In the concluding tome, *The Infernal Cities,*[12] Tiberias, a young woman, whose biography the mystery of the rose darkens, finds herself living in Brooklyn's botanical gardens, the ideal form of the secular, tangible, garden. Trees and plants have their names attached to them. They are covered by the official scientific lingo. She roams the different sections of the grounds and meets a man, who becomes her lover inexplicably. She keeps a candle near the bed at night, so she could learn his identity. When she finds out he is an angelic entity in disguise, he disappears and with him fades the sense of things, the connections between them. The huge estate, and the world by extension, becomes a heap of discrete phenomena for her. The unseen plane of being is what turns the rose, the garden, the world, real, but the unseen is nothing but a whim if it is not anchored in a physical manifestation, embodied, reached by the senses.

For Tiberias is aware – according to the lore of the Rose of Judea – that in every world, there's a person, a Name Master, that keeps, within their consciousness, the essence of another world, and in that world, there's once again a Name Master, that holds the crux of yet another world, and all the worlds are linked, reality becomes cognition and mind is incarnate. The whole chain is captured by the figure of the Rose.

Finally the framework of the mind, the matrix of the garden, and the mold of inducing meaning for me are uncovered: they, my gardens, are arena for the drama of the real; they aspire to be factual, but only them being haunted by ineffable past and hidden entities, gives them sense, alleviates them to a phase that merges the physical and symbolic, and makes them perceivable, but their newly acquired experienced reality insinuates a spectral layer of memory and revelation, a promise of a far more tangible reality, which simultaneously empties them of realness, and so on, and so forth, in that endless swirly pattern of the rose petals.

[12] שמעון אדף, *ערים של מטה* (אור יהודה: כנרת, זמורה-דביר, 2012).